

Chowder

6-11-2021, 3:44 pm

At the time, I didn't know that San Francisco was famous for their clam chowder. What I did know was that I had a sourdough bowl full of it. The soup seeps into the cracks of the bread, and the top is for dipping. I sit at a plastic-slatted table, the family camera and full backpacks to my left, the chowder shop to my right. My memory of that moment is fading, so I don't remember the name of the shop, the colors, or the permutations of the string lights that hung over the picnic tables. What I do remember, however, are the sounds. All around are the murmur of people, unmasked people. Music flows too, dampened by the wooden boardwalk that extends down the line of neon-lit magic shops and candy dispensaries.

It's hard to believe, as many of those moments remain rather sharp, buoyed by my generous picture-taking, that my visit to California was two years ago. We spent ten days there, and the first day I became very close to being awake for 24 hours. In the pile of childhood trinkets that flow from one of my bedroom drawers is an old alarm clock from IKEA, its alarm hand still set to 3:13 am. We drove down deserted, retroreflective highway roads to catch a 5am flight to Newark. The strobes of our airplane, from my view behind the wing, lit the ground with a dazzling white, but only for an instant, before surrendering to the blue-tinged, darkened sky. I watched with an irrational amusement, watching as we pulled away from the lazy morning glow of the city.

We made that trip because my family thought it would be the last time I could enjoy the terra-cotta buildings of Stanford University before I would feel awkward among its sweeping palm trees and grass humps, as a rejected wannabe. Of course, I was later accepted, but it was our collective mindset that I probably wasn't getting in. So that's why, on the first day, we met with two faculty from the CS department and asked for some summer courses I could sit in on, because I might as well experience life as a Stanford student. We had Panda Express at Union Square for lunch, although I didn't know it was called Union Square at that time. That night I wrestled with the Stanford application essays I had drafted on the plane. We bought a bottle of concentrated cherry juice from a small russian mom and pop shop and chocolate coated bananas, like the ones my neighbor used to give me. I drank and ate and wrote and edited, until it was around 11pm PST, or 2am, home time. So 23 hours, not 24. But close enough for my record book.

What would I say to a roommate? Name one thing you are looking forward to experiencing at Stanford. Imagine you had an extra hour in the day—how would you spend that time? The questions seemed to beckon to a happier world, a world where college essay drafting was a foreign concept and I could just lay down on the sun-brushed sand beaches next to Golden Gate and watch the clouds roll over its catenary arches without thinking about how I would be spending an extra hour in the day that didn't somehow involve drafting more college applications.

Before I had that bowl of chowder, I watched a street performer teeter on an aluminum cylinder and board. I captured his nervous giggles on my phone, the way he threw his shirt in to the crowd while swinging this way and that, and the roars of laughter after he yelled "your mom's a bitch" to a little dog that had the audacity to bark in the middle of his trick. He yawed back and forth in his balancing act, cups, cylinder, shirtless body in a shining, fickle equilibrium.

The hardest thing I struggled with during the pandemic was loneliness, the cavernous, exhausted, dejected feeling that happens after I hit "exit" on yet another zoom lecture. In the winter we had a class with an "away from keyboard" room that had a video of the ocean on repeat. I would often sit and stare after the lecture was over, and I'd think back to these imperfectly romantic nights I spent in San Francisco, watching the real ocean slap against the floating docks, remembering the fishy smell, the way that the sea mist clings to my fleece. Then, there would be an awkward cross-dissolve and the magic was over, and I'm back at home in a dry fleece hearing nothing but the tapping of the heat register.

What would I say to my roommate? At the time I wrote about my singing Tesla coil and the mexican yams that inspired oral contraceptives. Now, i would write about the swish of the weed whacker, the smell of spring evenings, the songlike crackle of bonfires made with sticks from around the yard.

Name one thing you are looking forward to experiencing at Stanford. I wrote about the clock tower. I wanted to be in that glass booth and gulp down every last mechanical detail. I still do, now. But I also want to talk to people. I've been stuck, isolated behind walls for fifteen months now.

Imagine you had an extra hour in the day—how would you spend that time? I wrote about making more YouTube videos. But I think my demands have shifted somewhat. Perhaps, with this extra hour, I might find myself back in the flowing hills of San Francisco, with another bowl of chowder. There is a time and place for tinkling silverware, muted bass, and above all, the twittering melody of human voices. That time, I hope, is soon.