

John McPhee

and cut and trimmed (and edited and touched up in the minor ways that I would edit and touch up the final draft of any new piece of writing) and sewn together as if it were an album quilt." Developed in Baltimore in the 1880s, album quilts were custom-made for individuals and often commemorated technological innovations, but also dealt with personal histories. This is an excerpt from McPhee's *Album Quilt*.—*Lee Gutkind*

Dinner at Uncle Boris's

CHARLES SIMIC

Always plenty of good food and wine. The four of us at the table take turns uncorking new bottles. We drink out of water glasses the way they do in the old country. "More bread," somebody yells. There's never enough bread, never enough olives, never enough soup. We are eating through our second helping of thick bean soup after having already polished off a dozen smoked sausages and a couple of loaves of bread.

And we argue with mouths full. My Uncle Boris would make Mother Teresa reach for a baseball bat. He likes to make big pronouncements, to make the earth tremble with his political and artistic judgments. You drop your spoon. You can't believe your

* *

CHARLES SIMIC is a poet, essayist, and translator. He teaches American literature and creative writing at the University of New Hampshire. He has published sixteen collections of his own poetry, five books of essays, a memoir, and numerous books of translations. He has received many literary awards for his poems and translations, including the MacArthur Fellowship and the Pulitzer Prize. *The Voice at 3 A.M.*, his selected and new poems, was published by Harcourt in 2003.

ears. Suddenly, you are short of breath and choking as if you swallowed a big fly.

"Is he kidding?" I hear myself say, my voice rising to a falsetto.

I am the reasonable type. I try to lay out the pros and cons as if I were a judge making a summation to the jury. I believe in the calming effect of an impeccable logical argument. Before I can get very far, my brother interrupts to tell me that I'm full of shit. His philosophy is: The more reasonable it sounds, the less likely it is that it's true. My father, on the other hand, always takes the Olympian view. "None of you know what the fuck you're talking about," he informs us, and resumes slurping his soup.

Before we can all gang up on him, the pork roast is served. The skin is brown and crusty with a bit of fat underneath. There are potatoes and onions in the pan soaked in the drippings. We are in heaven. The new bottle of wine is even better. Nuits-Saint-Georges is my father's favorite wine since his name is George. That's the only one he buys when he is flush.

For a while we don't say anything. We just grunt with our faces in our plates. My aunt is carving more meat while my uncle runs into the kitchen to get those hot little red Mexican peppers he forgot all about.

Unfortunately, one of us starts on politics. Immediately, we are arguing again. In the last few years Boris has become very conservative. He loves Barry Goldwater. He loves Nixon. As for Bobby Kennedy, he's a Russian agent, if you ask him. Boris even warned the *New York Times* about that, but they didn't print the letter, of course. Tonight he shouts that I am a Communist, too. He has suspected it for years and now has had his final proof just two minutes ago.

I have no idea what I said to make him think that, so I ask him to please repeat it. He's appalled. "No guts," he says. "Feigning

innocence, backtracking. Jesus Christ!" He calls on the heavens to witness.

"It's what you said about Hoover," my brother says, guffawing. Both he and my father are enjoying themselves, while I'm debating whether to punch Boris in the mouth. He's really pissed, too. He says I even look like Trotsky with my wire-rim glasses. "Get me the FBI on the phone," he yells to my aunt. He's going to speak to J. Edgar personally about me.

It's hard to tell with Boris if he's entirely serious. He loves scenes. He loves opera. It's the third act, we are all dead on the stage, and he is caterwauling. Without histrionics life is boring. This is bliss, as far as he's concerned.

Watching him rant like that, I get an inspiration. I rise from the table, walk over, and solemnly kiss him on the top of his bald head. He's stunned speechless. It takes him some time to collect himself. Finally, he smiles sheepishly and embraces me in turn.

"Forget about the FBI," he yells to my aunt in the kitchen.

She comes out with enough different cheeses to open a store. We eat and drink and converse politely. The old guys are reminiscing about the war.

Is it true that one grows nostalgic even about the horrors as one grows old? Probably. I'm nostalgic about an August afternoon after the war. My mother, brother, and I were being escorted at gunpoint and on foot from one prison to the other. At some point we walked past an apple orchard, and our guard let us stop and pick apples. Not a care in the world. Munching the apples and chatting with the guard.

As for my father and Boris, it seems, when they were in Trieste they used to pull this stunt. My father would invite friends to a fancy restaurant, but when the time came to pay the bill, he'd send Boris to break the news to the unsuspecting owner that they were completely broke.

"You were very good at it," my father assured him.

Boris, when he's not raving, looks like an English gentleman and has the appropriate clothes and fine manner to go along with his face. The owner of the restaurant would accept his apologies and his promise to settle the bill expeditiously, and would even permit his financially strapped guests to order another round of brandies before going off into the night.

"It's his smile," we all agree. Boris has the sweetest, shiest smile when he's happy. Old ladies, especially, adore him. Nobody knows how to bow and kiss their hands like he does. It's hard to believe he was once a guard in a maximum security penitentiary in Australia. Come to think of it, none of us, individually or collectively, make much sense. We are all composite characters, made up of a half dozen different people, thanks to being kicked around from country to country.

Boris, for instance, right now is singing. He studied opera singing for years, tried to make a career of it, and failed. Now he sings only when he's happy. He has a huge, beautiful tenor voice, but no ear. When he starts hitting the high notes, you have to run for your life. It's no use. He can be heard across the street. He has the world's loudest voice, and it's off-key.

He sings for us an aria from *Otello*. We survive that somehow, but he's not through yet. We are going to hear Tristan's death scene. Across the table my father looks grim. My brother has vanished. I am lying on the floor at Tristan's feet, trying my best to keep a straight face. Boris paces up and down conducting the Berlin Philharmonic as he sings. From time to time he stops to translate for us. "Tristan is going mad," he whispers. No doubt about that. This Tristan is ready for the loony bin. His tongue is lolling, and his eyes are popping out of his head. He's standing on the sofa and leaning against the wall, arms spread, as if he is about to be crucified.

"*Verflucht wer dich gebrant!*" he shrieks.

"Stop it, Boris," my aunt says calmly, coming in from the kitchen with the cake.

"Please let him sing the death scene, Auntie," I say, and now even my father has to grin.

You have to admire the man's love of the music. Boris confessed to me once that he could never sing in the real opera house. He'd get so excited on the stage, he'd jump into the orchestra pit at the conclusion of his aria.

Now we applaud him. We are thirsty and hungry again, and so is he, luckily. My brother has reappeared.

"I'm going to bed," my aunt announces after she brings back the cheese and cold cuts. She knows this is not going to end soon. We are on our favorite topic, the incredible stupidity of our family.

I don't know if all large families indulge in such orgies of self-abuse, but we make a specialty of it. I don't think it's pretense either. I mean, it's not like we believe secretly we are really superior and this is just talk. Our family is a story of endless errors of judgment, of bad situations made even worse by bickering.

"Imagine this," my father says. "There's a war on, the Nazis, the Ustashi, the Hungarians, the Romanians, the Chetniks, the Italians, the Bulgarians, the Communists are killing us, and even the English and the Americans are dropping bombs. So, what do we do to make things really interesting? We all take different sides in that war so we can really make life miserable for each other."

We are silent with the weight of our drunkenness and the sad truth of my father's last remark. Finally, Boris looks up and says, "How about a really great bottle of wine?"

We all look at Boris, puzzled, but he explains that this wine is supposed to be very special, very old, very expensive.

"What is it?" we want to know.

He's not telling. He's going to decant it in the cellar so we can blind-taste it and guess its origins.

Very well. Off he goes, and he's gone so long we are beginning to think the bastard sneaked off to bed. Instead, he returns with an air of mystery, carrying a bottle wrapped in a towel. The last time Boris had a bottle of expensive wine he had us sip it from a teaspoon. He went around the table pouring drops of a fine old Margaux into a spoon and making us all in turn say "Aaaaaahh" like a baby doctor.

This time we just get clean glasses, and he pours everybody a little taste. It's red wine. There's no doubt about that even at three in the morning. We twirl it in our glasses, sniff it like real pros, and take a sip. I think it's a Chianti, my father says it's a Burgundy, my brother mentions Spanish wine, but is not sure.

Boris is triumphant! Here's the final proof! Serbs as a people, and the members of this family, especially, are all know-nothings, show-offs, and the world's biggest phonies.

Then, to rub it in, he tells us how he found out recently that the Sicilian who pumps his gas in Brooklyn makes his own wine. "Probably in the same bathtub where he washes his ass," he adds for effect. Anyway, the man gave him a bottle for Christmas and this is what we are drinking.

It still tastes pretty good, but on second thought, we have to admit, we made complete fools of ourselves. Of course, we can barely keep our eyes open. The day is breaking. For the moment we have run out of talk. We just look at each other, yawning occasionally. The house is quiet. The city is quiet. Even the cops are catching forty winks in their patrol car on the corner.

"How about some ice cream?" Boris asks.

CHARLES SIMIC ON "Dinner at Uncle Boris's"

"Dinner at Uncle Boris's" conveys a sense of what our family gatherings were like. As for my original goals for this essay, I don't remember what they were. I'm in the dark. It's been a dozen years since I wrote this, and since I don't keep drafts, I have no idea. I'm a poet. I like to move quickly, make collages of different realities and not spell everything out.

Personal essay has always been a part of American literature. I was just reading some of Hawthorne's sketches and had that view confirmed. Some experience cannot be done properly in either poetry or fiction, so this kind of writing will always be around.

My advice for new writers: Read a lot of books, and keep your eyes and ears open.