

Village Voices

In Our Own Words

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FICTION

TOM HUBBARD'S BONY BIRDS by Gaby Kopelman

“Lemme have them shoes!” Matt Hubbard snatched the child’s shoes—lace-up boots, new and clean, out of his wife’s hands, and stormed up the rickety stairs, two at a time.

“Tom!” he bellowed, chest heaving.
“Tom!”

In his room under the eaves, Tom looked up from where he was kneeling before the bed. Spread out on the counterpane before him, were the bones of two grouse and one small quail, some still in tangled heaps, others already assorted as to length and width. More bones lay bleaching in a pan on the floor. In the still air of the attic, the sharp odor of Clorox mingled with the smell of mice and mildew.

The room was a small one, more cubbyhole than room. On the walls, amidst

newspaper clippings of the Wright Brothers and of Theodore Roosevelt in full hunting regalia hung some of the skeletal reconstructions Tom made for Mr. Weatherston at the inn, where, boxed and glassed, they were sold at the front counter as souvenirs. Mr. Weatherston supplied the cardboards and the fine needles and silk to thread all those little bones together, and Tom got a dime for every one sold; there were weekends during the hunting season when he made as much as a dollar.

The boy got to his feet, his hands hovering protectively over the treasures on the bed. Sometimes his father didn’t just holler. Once he’d thrown a whole mess of little bones out the window.

Matt Hubbard paused in the doorway and hurled the shoes at his son’s bare feet. “Now, dammit, you put those right on, you hear?”

Tom looked down at the boots, not moving, his mouth compressed. He hated those boots. His father had bought

them that time he had gone into Brattleboro for groceries and not come back for two days. They were too large in some places, too small in others. Tom hated those boots worse than he hated anything.

“Dammit, put ‘em on! Who the hell do you think you are, anyway!” shouted Hubbard. He tumbled back against the door, as though suddenly winded. For a moment, father and son stood facing each other. Hubbard was a large man, with the same round face and butter-colored hair as his son. Two peas in a pod those two, people used to say; like the boy had no Ma. Hubbard’s glance traveled from the child’s face down to the boots, and then over to the bed. He took in the bones, lavender and blue-knobbed, lying on the thin mattress like nests of whitened twigs, his eyes coming to rest on the pan of Clorox water on the floor.

The balance had shifted. The boy knew it. Once Hubbard had yelled a bit, he usually calmed down, sometimes even got remorseful, lachrymose, wanting to make up. Tom looked at his father, unafraid now, but still guarded.

Hubbard’s large foot nudged the pan standing on the floor, causing it to rock gently back and forth; the water sloshed about, but nothing spilled. “Phew!” Hubbard’s face screwed up as if in pain. “How can you stand that stink!” He lift-

ed his head and searched the rafters for an answer. Having found none, he seemed to lose interest, his eyes flickering aimlessly around the room.

In front of him, his son stood waiting. “Oh, what the hell,” Hubbard mumbled and turned away. “Mind you put on them boots for church!” he called over his shoulder, as he clattered down the stairs.

Tom moved over to the window and pushed the curtain aside. Down in the yard, his mother was sitting on the bench near the pump, all dressed, ready. She had her head down. Standing where he was, he could see the flat bow on top of her hat, and the back of her large-knuckled hand kneading and twisting the edge of her coat.

Tom turned from the window and took down a large book from the shelf above the bed: *Der Knochenbau Amerikanischer Wildflugel*, The Bone Structure of American Birds of the Wild. Some of the books on that shelf were brand new and shiny, won in school for good marks, or in church at spelling bees and bible quizzes. But this one was a present from Mr. Weatherston, one of that odd assortment of books left behind over the years by the guests of Otter Creek Inn. It had been the meticulously detailed illustrations in this crumbling volume that had inspired Tom to start constructing what Mr. Weatherston always called

Tom's "bony birds." Holding his breath for fear of breaking the brittle pages, he slowly leafed through it, once more going over the illustrations, taking in the infinite attention to detail paid by that long-ago craftsman. But by now Tom knew those pictures by heart. They no longer made his heart leap.

Downstairs the screen door slammed shut with its usual whine and a bang, and the boy's head went up. Putting the book aside, he went over to the window, and stood there watching as his father came out into the yard and sat at the edge of the bench, where his mother was still sitting looking down, still fiddling with the hem of her coat. What was she thinking, sitting there seemingly unaware of his father's heavy form beside her, of him, her son, standing up there by the window, of the sharp bones bleaching? Tom thought of throwing the window open and yelling down, "Ma! Ma!" To remind her, to make her turn around and look up at him. But why? And then what, when he had really nothing to say?

Tom bent down, reached under the bed, and brought out a large cardboard with a finished skeleton already sewn onto it. It was not a bird like the others—the tiny body, that of a quail, was topped by the skull of a dead rat Tom had found in the barn, its jaws open and rapacious, every tiny tooth in place. The flying span of this creature was as extravagant as the rest of its skeleton. Composed of the

wing bones of two small bats laid end to end, it spread diagonally from the lower left-hand corner of the gray cardboard clear up to the right-hand one on top. Tiny vertebrae had served for the tightly coiled, scorpion-like tail, to which Tom had attached a sharp thorn cut from the withered hawthorn out in the yard.

Tom had labored over that particular bony bird, off and on, for weeks, trying this, that, and the other. But now it was perfect; there was nothing more to be added, not a bone to be changed or taken away. He got down the pencil box from the shelf and with a slick of pink tongue wetted the tip of his favorite crayon, a blue one, the color of flowers that only grew in the wild. Kneeling in front of the bed, Tom bent over the cardboard. Slowly, with infinite care, in that beautiful cursive script he had been taught by Miss Mathilda Baker, for thirty-seven years the English teacher at Otter Creek County School, he wrote:

April 22, 1921,

Seen by Thomas Mathew Hubbard, age 13 1/4, while walking in the woods:

Avis Maximus Hubbardensis,
Habitat—Otter Creek, Vermont
The United States

Still kneeling, Tom propped the cardboard up against the wall. He leaned back, rocking gently on his heels. His bird, his alone, no other like it.

HOPE

by Pete Jaques

The dead of winter
A hard north wind scours my field
And hurls dry snow shards
Through bare thorns, across stony
ground, and into my face
Burning, stinging, drawing out tears that
promptly freeze
Establishing unquestioned hegemony
Unbearable, all conquering
But for the improbable bluebirds
Along the cedar line
All hope is not lost.

PIZZA MEMORIES

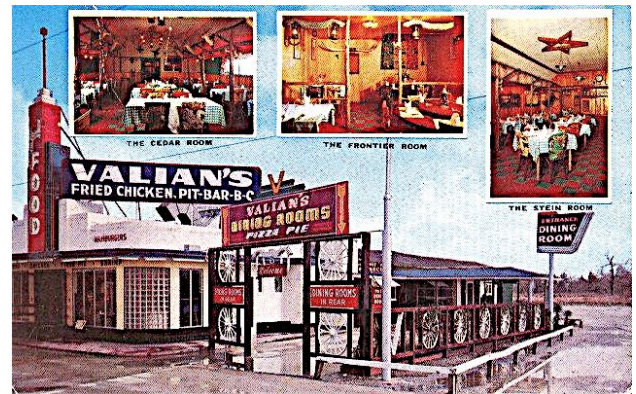
by Howard Arons

On a Sunday evening in September of 1955, I was part of a small group of Rice juniors debating where to have dinner. This was a weekly chore, because there was no college food service on Sunday evening. We wanted something special to eat, because the Institute's food during the week could be described charitably as mediocre.

Our problem was that Houston in the 1950s was not a foodie's paradise. Don't misunderstand, there was always steak, Gulf seafood, Tex-Mex, and even authentic Cajun food like crawfish étouffée. There was no fine cuisine,

except perhaps at the Houston Petroleum Club or its like.

For each place someone suggested, there was an objection, usually along the line of "Not again this week!" And then one bright adventurer said, "Let's go get a couple of pizzas at Valian's." Puzzled silence. "What's pizza?" There were no Italians in our group, and this pizza thing was completely beyond our experience. It turned out that Valian's was close by, and they served beer. We were on our way.



From the outside, Valian's looked like a typical lower-tier Texas restaurant. Pizza was so new to Houston (and Valian's) that it barely got mentioned (as "Pizza Pie") on just one outdoor sign. Otherwise the usual local comfort foods were featured. The interior was a different story. The fragrance of garlic and oregano, and the sight of waitresses carrying steaming, round pans to the tables seemed very promising. We ordered a pitcher of beer and three pies, one plain cheese, and two cheese and sausage. When our pizzas were served, what we saw was a toasted bread base topped

with tomato sauce, melted cheese, and chunks of browned sausage. We could hardly wait to start eating.

Today, of course, so-called “pizza” is everywhere. You can find pizza rolls, pizza bites, barbecued chicken and pineapple pizza, cauliflower crust non-dairy pizza—you get the idea. I’ll admit that I don’t have my college-age appetite any more, and memory is indeed a zesty seasoning, but it’s hard for me to find a pizza now that’s as good as Valian’s was. Something is always missing, whether the browned, crispy crust, or the whole milk mozzarella, or the slightly sweet, spicy sauce.

The Valian family finally closed their restaurant in the early 1980s. I was pleased to find a postcard a while ago showing Valian’s as it was. As soon as I saw it, I realized how much my memory of the place had dimmed since those college days. However, I still recall clearly the camaraderie of our group, and that wonderful day I had my first taste of pizza at Valian’s.

REMEMBERING TURKEY

by Peggy Pollock

My mother bent over the oven with her turkey baster, her face flushed, blue-and-white striped apron tied in a bow. It would be my brother Larry’s job to carve

once he was old enough. “He has the hands of a surgeon,” she said. A potholder in her left hand to steady the pan, she used her right hand to pump the rubber bulb, squirting golden liquid over sizzling skin. My nostrils flared with pleasure long before I could understand words like *poultry seasoning* or *sage*, *rosemary*, or *thyme*. I wanted to wear that apron and squirt pan juices all over the breasts and legs of that plump, thirsty bird, making it glow and filling the house with an aroma that could only mean one thing: Thanksgiving. I understood before I had words that cooking used heat to change the color, smell, taste, and texture of food. I wanted to cook, to feed, to nurture, to transform by cutting, chopping, mixing, and heating.

Today, roasting and basting, my nose knows when the meat is done; I know by the color and tautness of the skin, the sound of the sizzle. I bend toward the hot oven, face flushed, and feel there are two of us lifting the heavy pan, Mom and me. Now, I cook twenty-one meals a week for John, each one a new creation, a transformation.

The kitchen in this rented townhouse is a cook’s dream. A farm sink so big you can wash the biggest stock pot and twelve-inch cast iron skillet at the same time. A reliable gas range with one big oven, four burners, and a microwave. Ample counter space with room for my Cuisinart (without which there would be

no mashed potato pie, cranberry orange chutney with ginger and raw honey, or julienne strips of carrot and zucchini for my cucumber-avocado slaw) and a small toaster oven for toasting almonds.

Don't Google ways-to-cook-a-Thanks-giving-turkey unless you want to get lost in a rabbit hole. Over the years, I have tried everything. High heat. Low heat. Brining. Smoking on a grill. With and without basting. Wrapped in foil. Injecting butter under the skin. Miscalculating cooking time while the green beans got soggy. Dry, dry, dry. It turns out: *turkey is dry*. The issue is in the tissue.

This year, I know what to do. Make everything in advance; *be prepared*. Make everything you know how to make, tried and true. Above all, the turkey. Just roast it, cavity stuffed with aromatic herbs, a lemon, and an onion. The day before. Let it take as long as it wants to reach an internal temperature of 165. Let it sit, and then carve everything off the bone (except the drumsticks) and refrigerate it covered in a good, rich broth, mixed with the pan drippings. Reheat in the oven just before serving and pour off the broth for tender, juicy, flavorful meat, and voila! There it is on my kitchen table, flanked by a spinach-broccoli souffle, oven-roasted sweet potatoes, cranberry chutney, cornbread with room temperature grass-fed cultured butter, and sizzling mashed potato pie. Mushroom gravy simmering on the stove top next to

the sauteed green beans amandine. Everything is perfect. Everything is ready. I am relaxed and confident.

I think of the *Bhagavad Gita* from my yoga teacher training days—the injunction to let go of outcomes. I sniff the air. Turkey bones are simmering in my stock pot this morning after Thanksgiving. I lift the lid, peer inside, and find liquid gold: all the love I threw into planning and cooking what would be this last Thanksgiving dinner in our home, this transformation by knife, heat, and turkey baster.

Next year we'll be at Pennswood.



MR. BROADWAY by Stan Wright

My interest in the performing arts began when I was about 12 years old. My mother had taken me and my brother to New Haven, Connecticut and dropped us off at the Shubert Theater to see a performance of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. That was it. I was hooked, and I began a life-long interest in live performances.

My next experience with live theater occurred when I was about 14. It was one of our auto day trips to New York City to go for dinner and a show at a night club. In my father's mind, it was a

big deal. That first trip was to the Latin Quarter. At last I had made it to Broadway. The dinner was fine, but the show was a challenge. When the show girls came out in their scanty costumes, I turned to my mother and said "What's this all about?" There was no explanation. Was this their idea of alternative sex education? My brother was with us and remembered much more than I did. He claimed we had seen Sophie Tucker and Mae West perform. A future trip took us to Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe. Here the only thing I remembered were the tall show girls, or was it just the low-ceilinged lobby below street level that made them look that way? The glitter and the glamour captivated me, and my interest in the theater continued to grow.

The next phase for me was getting educated in New Haven. We lived six miles out of town, near the Shubert Theater in where lots of shows did their pre-Broadway tryouts before going to New York. From 1947 to 1956, I saw more than ten shows. The first was Rogers & Hammerstein's *Allegro* and the last was *My Fair Lady*. During this same period, I got involved in The Milford Playhouse. It was a summer theater doing eight shows in the season. The first year I was in *Lady in the Dark*. The show was one I had seen in summer stock in 1949. The next season I was in their production of *Roberta*.

The next phase of my life was spending 18 months in France fulfilling my military obligation. I was stationed in Fontainebleau, 40 miles from Paris. That distance did not stop me, and I made many many trips to Paris for the opera and other diversions.

Back in the States, I moved to New York City to pursue my career as an architect. And what an opportunity for access to all sorts of performing arts! It was all there. I have seen a lot of performances: it is not the quantity but the quality that counts. Not forgetting which songs came from which shows is all part of it. You remember the things you loved.



LOST by Richard Coe

Returning from a Friday afternoon walk, a small tree branch poked my ear.

I hurried home. My immediate concern was that my bloody ear would stain my shirt. Upon arriving, I realized that my hearing aid was missing. I hurried back to the offending tree with my wife, Anne, to search. Armed with my iPhone with the "Find My Hearing Aid" app, we searched in vain for ninety minutes. I retraced my route on Saturday morning without success. Resigned to my fate, I gave up the search. With regret, I faced an expensive loss.

On Sunday morning, Anne and I met our neighborhood friend, Alicia, for our regular early morning golf game. Alicia, unaware of my loss, shared that as she was walking home on Saturday, she met a dog walker who extended her hand to show Alicia a small object she had found on the ground. Alicia, a hearing aid owner, immediately identified the object as a hearing aid.

As Alicia was talking, I could hardly contain myself. "Alicia, that is my hearing aid!" Fortunately, Alicia had the presence of mind to encourage the unidentified dogwalker to return the hearing aid to our homeowners' association office. I was so excited that this unlikely chance encounter would lead me back to my hearing aid.

I spent the better part of Sunday searching for the mystery dogwalker. No luck with that.

With much hope on Monday morning, I called the homeowners association office to relate my story. An hour later I received a return call from the office that my hearing aid was there for me. What a relief!

In addition to Alicia and the dogwalker, not enough can be said about the sympathetic and helpful neighbors who tried to assist me. Regrettably, I never identified the dogwalker who returned my hearing aid to the office.

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

by Rufus Hallmark

July 6, 2023: I wanted to go for a "longish" walk at Tyler State Park. I parked in the lot near the dam across Neshaminy Creek. I left my cell phone in the car (my first mistake) and walked to the creek. The place was alive with folks enjoying themselves in the cool water, waist high in places. I crossed the creek to the other side.

Angling off to the right, I felt confident that I'd arrive back in about sixty minutes. It was a beautiful sunny day, rather hot, but I figured much of the path was wooded and shaded (second mistake). Off I went.

I noted wild raspberries growing beside the path and even some tiger lilies here and there. Catbirds hopped along on the asphalt until my proximity was too much for them, and they flew off.

It was quite warm, and the path was unexpectedly more often in sunlight than in shade. I was wearing jeans, whereas most of the other walkers were in shorts and with visored caps or hats, and they carried water bottles. I had neither (third and fourth mistakes). After about twenty minutes, I paused. Shouldn't the path be turning back toward the creek by now? I looked

ahead. I could see the straight path extending through two more hillocks. After that, I confidently told myself, it would turn back. But when I reached the far rise, the path simply continued on and on, more or less straight. I decided I'd better cut my losses, turn around, and retrace my steps.

By now I was very hot, and my energy was beginning to flag. My legs felt heavy, and I walked more slowly. I had been out more than 45 minutes. I looked at my hands and arms; they looked as though they were reddening. I needed to pee. I looked forward and backward and saw no one coming, so I stepped to the side of the path. That felt a little better.

Soon a pair of walkers were heading my way. I stopped them and asked how far it was back to the creek and carpark. "About half an hour," they said. Then they noticed how I looked. "Are you all right?" "Well, I'm very tired and hot. I underestimated the circuit path." With concern in her face, the woman told me I ought to sit down. She gave me her hands and held onto mine to help me ease down, which I didn't think my exhausted leg muscles would allow me to do without falling. She suggested I just lie back, which I gladly did. It felt wonderful to stretch out and relax. Luckily, the spot was in the shade. Her husband said they would call someone. At first, I said that wasn't necessary; I'd be all right in a few minutes. But he insisted. His

wife took a few steps away to phone, and her husband and I just chatted.

The couple stayed with me until a state park pick-up truck arrived. A rather handsome, friendly faced, uniformed young man with long, dark blonde hair climbed out of the cab and walked over to me. "Would you like some water?" "Yes!" I blurted. He went to the truck and came back with a kid's lunchbox. He handed me a paper cup and poured water from a thermos. I gulped it down and asked for another. Then he pulled out a baggie of watermelon slices. "Would you like one of these?" "Yes!" I took one, and then another, and munched them down hungrily. I recounted to him what had happened. I acknowledged the help of the couple, who were about to take their leave, and thanked them profusely. The kindness of strangers!

The ranger drove me back to my car, and after a few minutes sitting in my idling, air-conditioned car, I felt revived. I drove home, but didn't confess my foolishness to my wife until later.



THE JOYS OF PENNSWOOD

by Mea Kaemmerlen

Pennswood's always full of fun.
It seems the day is never done.
Events, meetings, dates, and chores,
We're always booked, in and out of
doors.

There are dinners with friends
And discussing new trends.
There's therapy and health aid,
Clay pots to be made.

There's a time to sing,
Study birds on the wing,
Bridge and mahjong to play
And tough workouts each day.

But one thing I need at this wonderful
site,
Something I need to get things right—
You see, I'm going here—when I should
be there,
And I'm in the gym when I should be—
Where?

I'm in Tai Chi when it suddenly dawns
I should be in the restaurant eating
prawns.
I've arrived at *The Barclay* to meet friends
quite new,
And I'm told they're all in 1382.

Then I'm in *Seasons* buying biscottis,
When I realize I should be off in pilates.
I'm in a meeting discussing the snow,
My phone rings—I forgot the trip to
Trader Joe!

Pennswood gives us all such support
From plowing roads to great transport,
From landscaping to first responding
And help for that someone discovered
wandering.

But what I really need, as a newby here,
Then of my datebook I'd have no fear,
Then no more a week early or a day late
I'd like a Social Secretary to keep me
straight!



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Founder and Editor Emerita:

Paulina Brownie Wilker

Editor: Anne Baber

Assistant Editors:

Howard Arons, Henry Baird,
and Kathy Hoff

Typist: Sara Pollock

Distribution:

Lisa Williams, Nina Moyer

Layout: Henry Baird

Contributors:

All Pennswood Residents

Email your contributions to

HB@HenryBaird.com

or place typed hard copy

in our open mail box.

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