

## Shattering: A Compendium

## White Bread

“Most of us accept bread in much the same spirit as we breathe—without any thought as to the good it does us, or what we would do if it were taken away. However, since people eat bread 365 days in the year, and many of them three times a day, we wish to say something about its great value as a life-sustainer.

“As a matter of fact, white bread made from GOLD MEDAL FLOUR is more nearly a perfect food and will sustain life much longer than any other single ration because its tissue-forming constituents and its energy-yielding portion are more nearly in exact proportion demanded by the human system.”

—*The Gold Medal Flour Cookbook*, 1914

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*“During the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century, assembly line techniques for mass-producing flour and bread were developed. Grinding stones were not fast enough for mass-production. High-speed, steel roller mills were invented to produce flour very rapidly. Grain mills thus earned higher profits. High-speed mills do not grind the germ and the bran and they are rejected. Much of the most nutritious portion is taken out and sold as “byproducts” for animals. . . . Since the late nineteenth century, white bread, biscuits and cakes made from white flour and sugar have become mainstays in the diets of industrialized nations. That diet is much less nutritious than in former times and new types of disease have become common. Tooth decay, once rare, is now epidemic.*

—Elmer M. Cranton, MD. October 1, 1999:  
[drcranton.com/nutrition/bread](http://drcranton.com/nutrition/bread)

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“The workman demands and always has demanded white bread because he has found, by experience, that he ‘can work better on it.’ Public opinion has always endorsed the white loaf, for good reasons. It is the great life-sustainer. It is clean and pure.”

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*“To make bread a brighter white . . . flour is treated with chemical bleach, similar to Clorox. The bleaching process leaves residues of toxic chlorinated hydrocarbons and dioxins. . . . The bleaching process destroys many vitamins (those not already destroyed by the high heat of milling). . . . When grain is made into refined white flour, more than 30 essential nutrients are largely removed. Only four of those nutrients are added back in a process called ‘enrichment.’”*

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“We are anxious that you should know the great satisfaction and saving to be had by using GOLD MEDAL FLOUR. In order that there may be no question that the next flour ordered for your home is GOLD MEDAL, will you please endeavor to impress the name firmly in your mind by saying out loud, five times, slowly and with careful emphasis, thus—“Washburn-Crosby’s

GOLD MEDAL FLOUR, GOLD MEDAL FLOUR, GOLD MEDAL FLOUR, GOLD MEDAL FLOUR, GOLD MEDAL FLOUR.

“That’s a very good lesson to learn. It means highest quality in baking—greatest economy, and all around household contentment.”

## Fences

Behind the fence, the parking lot, its illuminated emptiness. Always the McDonald’s, behind the fence, whose grease floats through the neighborhood. And though they cannot be seen, the things behind the fence, the things the fence was built to hide—line of idling cars at the drive-thru, ugly overflowing dumpster—like a long sadness, slight, insult, they are present whenever you look at the fence.

## Bells

The Presbyterian church bells ring out the hour. But the bells are actually tones shaped by electronic carillon and digital tape, and thus the hymns resounding now are intervals measured, staked as evenly as street lights along the parkway at dusk. The bells are pleasant enough as I’m walking and the tunes discernible, even if one is unfamiliar with the hymns, as I am. Each note is separated from the next, distinct in its articulation, unlike real bells where each tone must be struck into the preceding one’s echo, so a wash of sound resembles the song, refers, really, to prior knowledge of the song. The wash is a kind of affirmation, a recollection that gathers you in, so you can say to yourself after a bit, “oh yes,” and pick the tune from a great collision, because the bell-ringers are pulling like mad, it’s Easter, it’s Italy, the fourth century, matins at six in the morning, the bell ringers in shirtsleeves, their hands raw, the bronze bells lifting them up, their feet off the ground as they pull their ropes in rigorous pattern. Their bells are named, their vocation inscribed at the rim—“*Laudo Deum Verum*” (I praise the true God), “*Vivus Voco*” (I call the living), “*Fulgorun Frango*”(I break the storm clouds). And the ringers work to bring forth the sounds of a more perfect place. But here the tunes come easily—two hymns, at one and five o’clock, and the hourly chimes. Encoded. Programmed. Here are the forty-nine electro-mechanical, Flemish-tuned bells. Here is the song with no pause for breath, no death knell over the thatched roof cottages, no *couvre feu* to alert us to cover our fires before turning in, indeed no bell at all at the heart of the word *curfew*. These are speedy, dependable bells. Dutiful bells doing their job. Ringing in cleanly, ringing on time. Ringing to get it over with. Bells like cheery waitresses on late shift at the diner.

## Complicity

Old woman on the check-out line, reading a tabloid: “Oprah Beau Calls Off Engagement Again.” Oprah is O-mouthed in the picture which could have been taken anywhere: on the occasion of an award, at the sight of a new baby, the sight of a new O-emblazoned plane in her fleet, if, indeed, she has a fleet. The old woman, white, says “she should give up on him already.” Another woman, also white, says “he seems like a nice enough guy.” Old woman says “yes and she’s a very nice girl.” At that phrase the cashier, black, jerks her head up, looks at me, glares at

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the scene. I smile back, confused for a minute. “*Girl*” I realize, too late. It’s too late. I was thinking “old lady—we’re *all* girls to her” while the cashier heard “girl.” And there I am, smiling, missing my moment. The moment gone. The smile fixed and fixing nothing.

## True Green Chemlawn

The little signs are stuck in the ground warning the families with big houses that kids and dogs should not play on the lawn. The signs are all over, child-and-dog-ciphers in black encircled by red and slashed by a line, meaning: *No. Not here.*

At least *not here* until the stuff dries. Which takes an hour, the woman tells me when I call.

The gloriously white dog on the gloriously green lawn. Sleeping, its face in the clipped, soft shade while the gardeners sift the dust down.

The way the mother held her child’s hand in the jewelry store today, pulling the kid up higher on one side, his little legs skimming the ground, because there was the sign after all—“you break it, you own it.” Then, on my walk that afternoon through the neighborhood of big houses and signs, there was a kid getting off the bus, being met by his mother in front of his own big house. And she held him the same way, high and tight, as they hopped on little slate stones across the vast, treated lawn.

Green lawn she already owns.

Child she tried to keep whole and unbroken.

## T-Shirts

The kid has been working with his father. It is bright and hot and we are standing in the parking lot of the Olympia Custard Stand in Carney’s Point, New Jersey. The 44 flavors. The choices narrowing. The kid looks tired and, covered in dust, turns to his father. They talk ice cream, wear matching shirts, lean together to form a dusty arch with their bodies. Father smiles and slaps the kid’s back, “time to take a break, huh?”

“*Pave the Earth*,” their t-shirts read.

## Genealogy

The old man has a lilting, musical accent. He chuckles in a sort of high-pitched way to punctuate his sentences, after he thinks he’s said something funny. The tic is disarming, annoying, forgivable. He is traveling alone, back home to North Carolina, talking to me about his name and about wanting to write a genealogy. (What do *you* do? he asks. *A writer?* Small world. Chuckles.) He tells me his three names, all family names. Tells me his story: years ago when he wanted to research and draw up the family tree, Daddy said “Now *you* don’t want to do *that*—find too many *coons* back there.” Looks at me for recognition, that I know what he means. “I guess that was *his* language?” I say. It’s a little hook I offer, so he can chin himself up and away. “Yep, yep, his language—’course I never did that research. Heh, heh. Yep. Never did.” Tells me his wife died of emphysema, ten years ago, though his voice makes it sound like just last week. Says when he was little, he’d smoke straight tobacco leaves, just roll ‘em up, like in the Uncle

Remus stories, what did we know, he says. Small world he says when the flight attendant tells him she's from West Virginia, where he went to school. When I say yes, I know Uncle Remus. Huh, girl from New York? Small world. Chuckles.

## Avoidance

As I rounded the corner I saw him about two blocks ahead of me. He seemed far away enough that I would not catch up and could finish my walk alone. He was new in town, didn't know anyone yet and seemed hard to talk to, but I was thinking about the few groceries I'd just bought and how my neck was stiffening as I angled uphill and the weight of the pack pulling uncomfortably on the straps. I was thinking about—not much really. It was already hot and I planned to talk to my friend with a car to see if she wanted to go swimming. Soon, though, I realized I was getting closer to him; at first I wasn't able to tell for sure, the distance between us lacked depth. I couldn't quite tell if I kept on at this pace whether I'd catch up too quickly. I could see the slight turn out of his feet and I tried to match my steps to his. How slowly he walked! I would have to adjust my pace considerably if I was to maintain the distance between us. I slowed my breathing which helped the pace some. Drifting is entirely familiar to me, but right then, right that minute I wanted to get home, unpack my food and supplies and get to work. I was careful not to scuff my shoes and, though I tried to hold myself back, I was gaining on him. I did not rustle the bag I was carrying and when I needed to cough, gently swallowed instead. Gravel had washed out onto the road from a driveway after the night's rain and I made an effort to step around it so nothing would crackle underfoot. His thin shoulder blades moved below his gray shirt and held the shirt out a bit from his body so the two folds worked like long wings skimming along, easily, gracefully. To keep my distance I had to take slower steps still.

I would later discover that what I had so carefully avoided was shyness and that he could not bring himself to speak to anyone at first. I would come to see how, at a local diner, he stared at the salad as if he might be called upon to explain a joke that failed. His joke. And that he was really only at ease with one person at a time. And then was terrifically funny.

## Character Traits

“The Carroll County commissioners voted yesterday to embrace a character development program lauded by a fundamentalist Judeo-Christian group, becoming the first locality in Maryland to promote traits in county workers it deems critical to good citizenship.

“Each month, county government employees will be asked to extol a specific ‘Character First’ trait: kindness or loyalty, obedience or self-confidence, responsibility or gratefulness. In all, 49 character traits will be promoted.

“The county commissioners envision flags waving above Carroll's tree-lined main streets and posters in classrooms and at the county office building, reminding employees and their families of the trait they should be emulating in a particular month.

“‘The Board of Education is already doing this,’ Commissioner Robin Bartlett Frazier told her colleagues. ‘We could follow their lead. That way, a child goes to school and gets a character trait at school, a parent goes to work and gets a character trait at work, they come home and share it as a family.’

“At the rate of one a month, it will take around four years to extol all the character traits

promoted. And then they can start all over again.”

—May 4, 2001, *Baltimore Sun*

## Pain

“The push to end logging in the old-growth forests has won some converts among locals. One is Vern Ably, 52, the former logger turned conservationist. . . . ‘The last few years of logging, I’d walk through some of the old-growth forests, and look at the moss, the little creeks; it’s a world all its own. It’s very fragile’ said Ably, wearing a black beret and thin ponytail and walking through a part of the Tongass with massive, centuries-old trees of the sort that he used to cut. ‘Then I’d come back a couple of weeks later, and it was all slaughtered, laying there on the ground. It looked like a war zone. Everything was smashed and broken. . . .’

“(Ably) grew up in logging camps in Washington and Oregon, and worked as a logger in Alaska as an adult until he fell on a job site in 1988 and broke his back. . . .”

—May 9, 2001, *Baltimore Sun*

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## Being Sorry

One afternoon, while searching in a cabinet for a vase, I let my son, who was three at the time, hold this elaborately decorated Ukrainian egg we were given as a wedding present. The egg came with a little gold stand and lifting it carefully off, I held it out to my son and asked him to be careful, in my careful voice. The longer he held the egg, the more excited he became, and soon he’d squeezed the egg so hard it broke. There went the deer and the little scratched houses, the deertracks like stars, the pointed, snowed-upon trees, the town—all collapsed into the center.

I think I must have said “I *asked* you to be careful” as I took the egg away. I remember him being sorry-sorry-sorry. Soon, of course, we got over it. But I kept the egg around for weeks. Half of it was still intact. I don’t know why I kept it, except I thought I might try to fix it. Maybe it showed about consequence. Maybe I forgot what it felt like to have an oddly light egg fill your hand completely. To hold the question of it in your hand. To test its strength, incrementally, bit by bit, until yes, *that* much is too much, that is, the experiment worked, and for a minute, so happy, so buoyant, you *know*.

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## Self-Esteem

What I hear at the park: “Good running! Good pumping! Nice hanging Emma/Jeremy/Sophie!” It begins to sound surreal, all those action verbs precisely defining, all those adjectives full of praise. All the favorable evaluation. Where has the blankness of childhood gone? The singular finger in the dirt world, spit rain, spit sea and the close-up haze, abstracting everything else away? Your world to collapse, and people and trees and roads to revive. Sandstorms. Pits. Your own shadow as night falling over the ants. The story coming, faces sidelong, in knots of wood on a panelled wall. There’s snapping the improbably long legs from their sockets. Pulling the heads off, snipping the hair down to the scalp. Turning the stubble green with detergent. Lighting it. Melting it. Watching the pink pool on a counter. And what then? “Good rage? Nice twisting? Nice evil ruler?”

## Being Wrong

“Authorities say (Joseph) Ferguson (20), began killing people Saturday night because he was despondent over getting suspended from his job at Burns Security. . . . In the video suicide note he made, before killing a supervisor, he said ‘I put on a hell of a show. . . . I’ve taken four victims, this should be good enough to last about a week on the news.’”

—September 10, 2001, *Baltimore Sun*

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