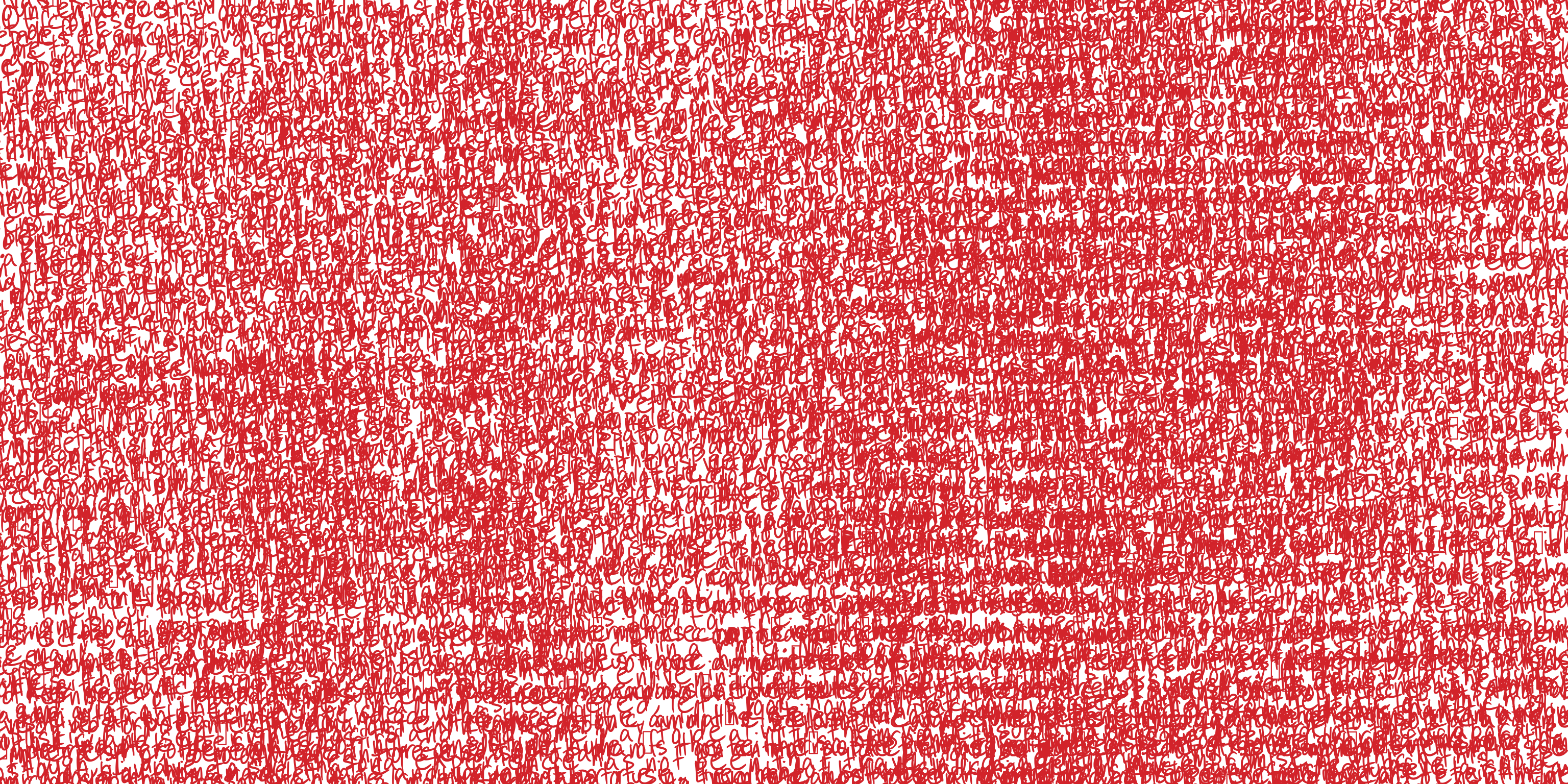


Consider the Lobster

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE



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The enormous, pungent, and extremely well marketed Maine Lobster Festival is held every late July in the state's midcoast region, meaning the western side of Penobscot Bay, the nerve stem of Maine's lobster industry. What's called the midcoast runs from Owl's Head and Thomaston in the south to Belfast in the north. (Actually, it might extend all the way up to Bucksport, but we were never able to go farther north than Belfast on Route 1, whose summer traffic is, as you can imagine, unimaginable.) The regions two main communities are Camden, with its very old money and yachty harbor and five-star restaurants and phenomenal B&Bs, and Rockland, a serious old fishing town that hosts the Festival every summer in historic Harbor Park, right along the water[1]. Tourism and lobster are the midcoast regions two main industries, and they're both warm-weather enterprises, and the Maine Lobster Festival represents less an intersection of the industries than a deliberate collision, joyful and lucrative and loud. The assigned subject of this article is the 56th Annual MLF, July 30 to August 3, 2003, whose official theme was "Light-houses, Laughter, and Lobster." Total paid attendance was over 80,000, due partly to a national CNN spot in June during which a Senior Editor of a certain New York City magazine called the MLF as one of the best food-themed festivals in the world. 2003 Festival highlights: concerts by Lee Ann Womack and Orleans, annual Maine Sea Goddess beauty pageant, Saturday's big parade, Sunday's Wicwag G. Atwood Memorial Crate Race, annual Amateur Cooking Competition, carnivals, rides and midway attractions and food booths, and the MLF's Main Eating Tent, where something over 25,000 pounds of fresh-caught Maine lobster is consumed after preparation in the world's largest Lobster Cooker near the 1000 pounds north entrance. Also available are lobster rolls, lobster turnovers, lobster saute, Down East lobster salad, lobster bisque, lobster ravioli, and deep-fried lobster dumplings. Lobster Thermidor is obtainable at a sit-down restaurant called The Black Pearl on Harbor Park's northwest wharf. A large all-day booth sponsored by the Maine Lobster Promotion Council has free pamphlets with recipes, eating tips, and Lobster Fun Facts. The winner of Friday's Amateur Cooking Competition prepares Stiffon Lobster Ramekins, the recipe for which is available for public downloading at www.mainerlobsterfestival.com. There are lobster T-shirts and lobster bobblehead dolls and inflatable lobster pool toys and clamp-on lobster hats with big scarlet claws that wobble on springs. Our assigned correspondent saw it all accompanied by one girlfriend and both his own parents—one of which parents was actually born and raised in Maine albeit in the extreme northern inland part, which is potato country and a world away from the touristic midcoast[2]. For practical purposes, everyone knows what a lobster is. As usual though, there's much more to know than most of us care about—it's all a matter of what your interests are. Taxonomically speaking, a lobster is a marine crustacean of the family Homaridae, characterized by five pairs of jointed legs, the first pair terminating in large pincerish claws used for subduing prey. Like many other species of benthic carnivore, lobsters are both hunters and scavengers. They have stalked eyes, gills on their legs and antennae. There are dozens of different kinds worldwide, of which the relevant species here is the Maine lobster, *Homarus americanus*. The name "lobster" comes from the Old English *lappestece*, which is thought to be a corrupt form of the Latin word for locust combined with the Old English *lōppe*, which meant spider. Moreover, a crustacean is an aquatic arthropod of the class Crustacea, which comprises crabs, shrimp, barnacles, lobsters, and freshwater crayfish. All this is right there in the encyclopedia. And an arthropod is an invertebrate member of the phylum Arthropoda, which phylum covers insects, spiders, crustaceans, and centipedes/millipedes, all of whose main commonality, besides the absence of a centralized brain-spine assembly, is a chitinous exoskeleton composed of segments, to which appendages are articulated in pairs. The point is that lobsters are basically giant sea-insects[3]. Like most arthropods, they date from the Jurassic period, biologically so much older than mammalia that they might as well be from another planet. And they are—particularly in their natural brown-green state, brandishing their claws like weapons and with thick antennae awhip—not nice to look at. And it's true that they are gargamens of the sea, eaters of dead stuff[4], although they'll also eat some live shellfish, certain kinds of injured fish, and sometimes each other. But they are themselves good eating. Or so we think now. Up until sometime in the 1800s, though, lobster was literally low-class food, eaten only by the poor and institutionalized. Even in the harsh penal environment of early America, some colonies had laws against feeding lobsters to inmates more than once a week because it was thought to be cruel and unusual, like making people eat rats. One reason for their low status was how plentiful lobsters were in old New England. "Unbelievable abundance" is how one source describes the situation, including accounts of Plymouth pilgrims wading out and capturing all they wanted by hand, and of early Boston's seashore being littered with lobsters after hard storms—these latter were treated as a smelly nuisance and ground up for

There's a comprehensive native app the gm: "Camden by happy at 66. Rockland and the small"

W.D. All the seasonal food and drink from the lobster festival. Like a lobster, you can't be too big about in this article.

Camden's native lobster is, in fact, "bop" as in "come around this Sunday and we'll cook up some bops."

Factoid: Lobster traps are usually baited with dead herring.

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It is emphasized over and over in presentations and pamphlets at the Festival that Maine lobster meat has fewer calories, less cholesterol, and less saturated fat than chicken[5], and in the Main Eating Tent, you can get a "quarter" (industrial short-hand for a 1/4 pound lobster), a ounce of butter-melted butter, a bag of chips, and a soft roll w/ butter-pat for around \$12.00, which is only slightly more expensive than supper at McDonald's. Be apprised, though, that the Main Eating Tent's supper room is Styrofoam trays, and the soft drinks are iceless and flat, and the coffee is convenience-store coffee in yet more Styrofoam, and the utensils are plastic (there are some of the special long skinny forks for pushing out the tail meat, though a few savvy diners bring their own). Nor do they give you a napkin, though napkins, considering how messy lobster is to eat, especially when you're squeezed onto benches alongside children of various ages and vastly different levels of fine-diner development—not to mention the people who've somehow smuggled in their own beer in enormous aisle-blocking coolers, or who all of a sudden produce their own plastic tablecloths and try to spread them over large portions of tables to try to preserve them (the tables) for their little groups. And so on. As one example is no more than a belying convenience, of course, but the MLF turns out to be full of irksome little downers like this—see for instance the Main Stage's headliner shows, where it turns out that you have to pay \$20 extra for a folding chair if you want to sit down; or the North Tent's mad scramble for the 1/4-cup-size samples of finalists' entries handed out after the Cooking Competition; or the much-touted Maine Sea Goddess pageant finals, which turn out to be excruciatingly long and to consist mainly of eddles, thanks and tributes to local sponsors. What the Maine Lobster Festival really is is a midlevel county fair with a culinary hook, and in this respect it's not unlike Tidewater crab festivals, Midwest corn festivals, Texas chili festivals, etc., and shares with these venues the core paradox of all teeming commercial demotic events: It's not for everyone. 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Chitinous arthropods grow by molting; rather the way people have to buy bigger clothes as they age and gain weight. Since lobsters can live to be over 100, they can also get to be quite large, as in 20 pounds or more—though truly senior lobsters are rare now, because New England's waters are so heavily trapped. Anyway, hence the culinary distinction between hard and soft-shell lobsters, the latter sometimes a.k.a. shedders. A soft-shell lobster is one that has recently molted. In midcoast restaurants, the summer menu often offers both kinds, with shedders being slightly cheaper even though they're easier to dispatch and hence is allegedly sweeter. The reason for the distinction is that a molting lobster uses a layer of seawater for insulation while its new shell is hardening, so there's slightly less actual meat when you crack open a shedder plus a recalcitrant gulf of water that gets all over everything and can sometimes jet out like a cannon and eaten a tablemate right in the eye. If it's winter or you're buying lobster someplace far from New England, on the other hand, you can almost bet that the lobster is a hard-shell, which for obvious reasons travel lighter. As in a la carte entrée, lobster can be baked, broiled, steamed, grilled, sautéed, stir-fried, or microwaved. The most common method, though, is boiling. If you're someone who enjoys having lobster at home, this is probably the way you do it, since

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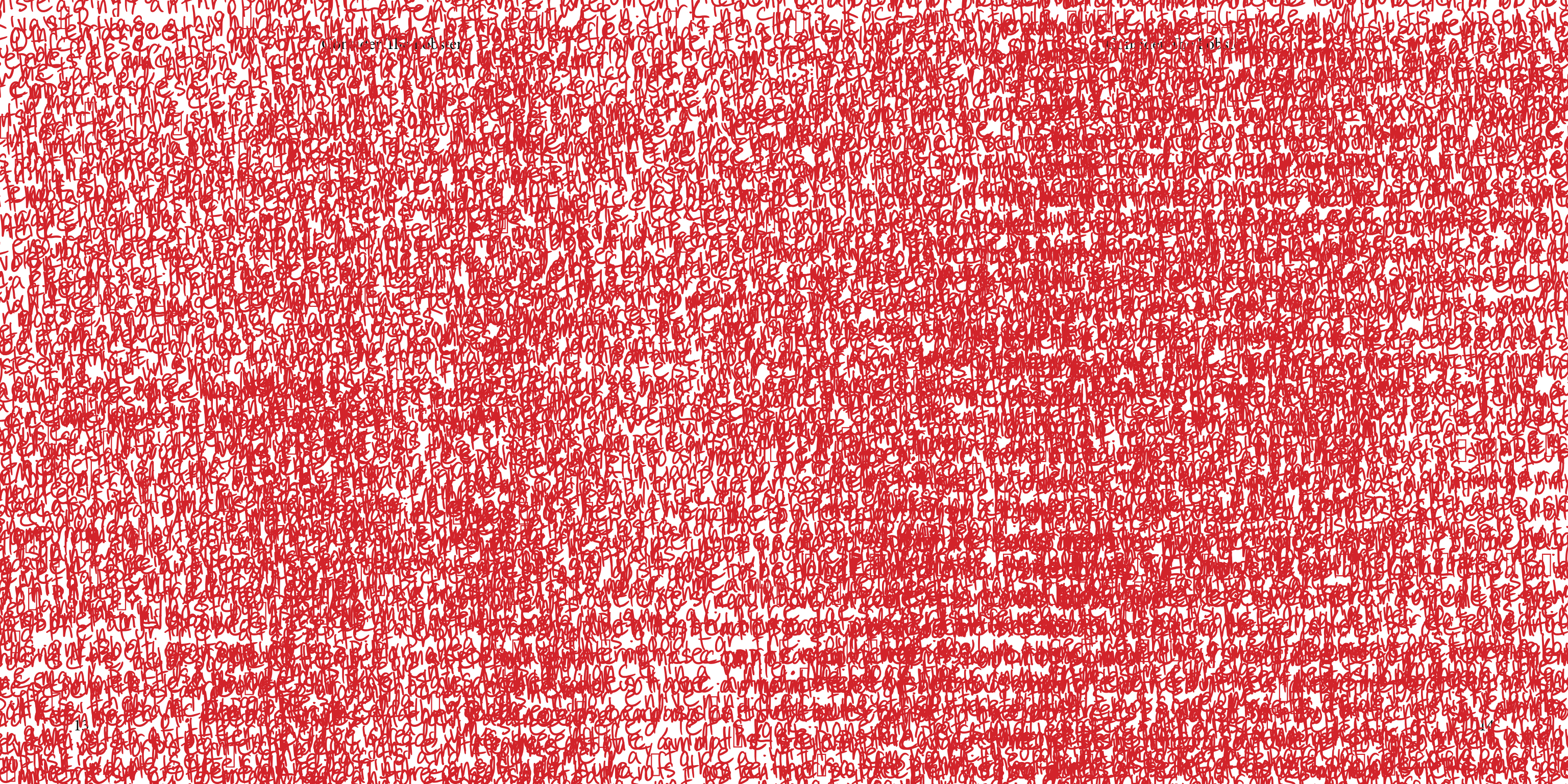
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ing the sides of the kettle as it thrashes around. The lobster, in other words, behaves very much as you or I would behave if we were plunged in boiling water (with the obvious exception of screaming[16]). A blunter way to say this is that the lobster acts as if it's in terrible pain, causing some cooks to leave the kitchen altogether and to take one of those little lightweight plastic oven timers with them into another room and wait until the whole process is over. They happen to be two main criteria that most ethicists agree on for determining whether a living creature has the capacity to suffer and so has genuine interests that it may or may not be on moral duty to consider[17]. One is how much the neurological hardware required for pain-experience the animal comes equipped with—nociceptors, prostaglandins, neuronal opioid receptors, etc. The other criterion is whether the animal demonstrates behavior associated with pain. And it takes a lot of intellectual gymnastics and behaviorist masochism not to see struggling thrashing, and lid-clattering as just such pain-behavior. According to marine zoologists, it usually takes lobsters between 35 and 45 seconds to die in boiling water. (No source could find asked about how long it takes them to die in superheated steam, but rather hopes it's faster. There are, of course, other fairly common ways to kill your lobster on-site and so achieve maximum freshness. Some cooks practice is to drive a sharp heavy knife point—just into a pot just above the midpoint between the lobster's eyes stalks (more or less where the Third Eye is in human foreheads). This is alleged either to kill the lobster instantly or to render it insensate—and is said at least to eliminate the cowardice involved in throwing a creature into boiling water and then leaving them to die. In that case, the more violent and more efficient of the knife-in-the-head method, the idea is that it's more violent but ultimately more merciful, plus that a willingness to exert personal agency and accept responsibility for stabbing the lobster is a good thing for the lobster, some how and entitles one to eat it. (There's often a vague sort of Native American spirituality of the hunt flavor to pro-knife arguments.) But the problem with the knife method is basic biology: Lobsters' nervous systems operate off not one but several ganglia, the nerve bundles, which are sort of wired in series and distributed all along the lobster's underside, from stem to stern. And disabling only the frontal ganglion does not normally result in quick death or unconsciousness. Another alternative is to put the lobster in cold salt water and then very slowly bring it up to full boil. Cooks who advocate this method are going mostly on the analogy to a frog, which can supposedly be kept from jumping out of a boiling pot by heating the water incrementally, or at least the water for a while. I'm not sure how that the analogy between frogs and lobster turns out not to hold. Ultimately, the only certain virtues of the home-lobotomy and slow-heating methods are comparative, because there are even worse/crueler ways people prepare lobster. Time to turn to lobster on the menu. Lobsters are usually killed by putting several extra vent holes in the carapace, which is a precaution most shellfish-microwaver learn about the hard way. Live clammerment on the other hand is big in Europe. Some chefs cut the lobster in half before cooking; others like to tear off the claws and tail and cook only these parts in the pot. And there's more unhappy news respecting suffering-criterion number one. Lobsters don't have much in the way of eye-sight, hearing, but they do have an exquisite tactile sense, one facilitated by hundreds of thousands of tiny hairs that protrude through their carapace. Thus, in the words of J.M. Brudde's industry classic About Lobster, "it is that a hough encased in what seems a solid, impenetrable armor, the lobster can receive stimuli and impressions from without as readily as if it possessed a soft and delicate skin." And lobsters do have nociceptors[17], as well as invertebrate versions of the prostaglandins and major neurotransmitters via which our own brains register pain. Lobsters do not, on the other hand, appear to have the equipment for making or absorbing natural opioids like endorphins and enkephalins, which are what more advanced neryous systems use to try to handle intense pain. From this fact, though, one could conclude either that lobsters are maybe even more vulnerable to pain, since they lack mammalian nervous systems' built-in analgesia; or, instead, that the absence of natural opioids implies an absence of the really intense pain-sensations that natural opioids are designed to mitigate. I for one can detect a marked upswing in mood as I contemplate this latter possibility. It could be that their lack of endorphin/enkephalin hardware means that lobsters' raw subjective experience of pain is so radically different from mammals' that it may not even deserve the term pain. Perhaps lobster are more like those frontal lobotomy patients one reads about who report experiencing pain in a totally different way than you and I. These patients evidently do feel physical pain, neurologically speaking, and don't like it, though neither do they like it; it's more that they feel it but don't feel anything about it—the point being that the pain is not distressing to them or something they want to get away from. Maybe lobsters, who are also without frontal lobes, are detached from the neurological registration-of-injury-or-hazard-we-call-pain. Just the

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same way. There is, after all, a difference between (1) pain as a purely neurological event, and (2) actual suffering, which seems to qualitatively involve an emotional component, in awareness of pain as unpleasant as something to fear/dislike/want to avoid. Still, after all the abstract intellectual, there remain the facts of the frantically clanking lid, the pathetic clinging to the edge of the pot. Standing at the stove, it is hard to deny in any meaningful way that this is a living creature experiencing pain and wanting to escape the painful experience. To my lay mind, the lobster's behavior in the kettle appears to be the expression of a preference and it may well be that an ability to form preferences is the decisive criterion for real suffering[18]. The logic of this (preference p suffering) relation may be easiest to see in the negative case. If you cut certain kinds of worms in half, the halves will often keep crawling around and going about their vermiform business as if nothing had happened. When we assert based on their post-mortem behavior that these worms appear not to be suffering, what we're really saying is that there's no sign that the worms know anything bad has happened or would prefer not to have gotten eaten in half. Lobsters, however, are known to exhibit preferences. Experiments have shown that they can detect changes of only a degree or two in water temperature; one reason for their complex migratory cycles (which can often cover 100-plus miles a year) is to pursue the temperatures they like best. (I don't mention the red-bottomed divers and do not like bright light: If a tank of food lobsters is left in the sunlight or a store's fluorescent, the lobsters will always congregate in whatever part is darkest. Fairly solitary in the ocean, they also clearly dislike the crowding that's part of their captivity in tanks, since as I also mentioned one reason why lobsters' claws are banded on capture is to keep them from attacking one another under the stress of close-quarter storage. In any event, at the Festival standing by the bubbling tanks outside the World's Largest Lobster Cooker, watching the fresh-caught lobsters pile over one another, waving their horrible claws impotently, huddle in the rear corners, or scramble frantically back from the glass as you approach, it is difficult not to sense that they're unhappy, or frightened, even if it's some rudimentary version of these feelings. ...and, again, why does rudimentariness even enter into it? Why is a primitive, inarticulate form of suffering less urgent or uncomfortable for the person who's helping to inflict it by paying for the food it results in? I'm not trying to give you a PETA-like screed here—at least I don't think so, I'm trying rather, to work out and articulate some of the troubling questions that arise amid all the laughter and saltation and community pride of the Maine Lobster Festival. The point is that if you, the Festival attendee, permit yourself to think that lobsters can suffer and would rather not, the MZF can begin to take on aspects of something like a Roman circus or medieval torture-fest. Does that comparison seem a bit much? If so, exactly why? Or what about this one: Is it not possible that future generations will regard our own present agribusiness and eating practices in much the same way we now view Nero's entertainments or Aztec sacrifices? My own immediate reaction is that such a comparison is hysterical extreme—and yet the reason it seems extreme to me appears to be that I believe animals are less morally important than human beings[20]; and when it comes to defending such a belief even to myself, I have to acknowledge that (a) I have an abhorrent self-interest in this belief, and (b) I have no way to retain the moral and will to be able to keep doing it, and (c) I have not succeeded in working out any sort of personal ethical system in which the belief is truly defensible instead of just selfishly convenient. Given this article's venue and my own lack of literary sophistication, I'm curious about whether the fact of my curdling up with all these reactions and acknowledgments and discomforts. I am also concerned not to come off as shrill or preachy when what I really am is confused. Given the (possible moral) status and (very possible) physical suffering of the animals involved, what ethical considerations do come into play that allow me not just to eat but to savor and enjoy flesh-based viands (since of course refined enjoyment, rather than just ingestion, is the whole point of gastronomy). And for the sake of the worms who've had to buck with my line of rationales and who regard stuff like the previous paragraph as just so much pointless navel-gazing, what makes me feel okay inside to dismiss the whole issue out of hand? That is, is their refusal to think about any of this the product of actual thought, or is it just that they don't want to think about it, or they even think about their reluctance to think about it? After all, isn't being extra aware and attentive and thoughtful about one's food and one's overall context part of what distinguishes a real gourmet from a gourmet's extra attention and sensibility just supposed to be aesthetic, gustatory? These last couple queries, though, while sincere, obviously involve much larger and more abstract questions about the connections (if any) between preferences and morality, and these questions need to be addressed in a different venue, not here, that it's probably best to stop the public discussion right here. There are limits to what even interested persons can ask of each other.



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