

its homeland and upstart elsewhere. Knowing where a meat is from means knowing something about its preparation, how it is cured and seasoned, how it is traditionally served. The peppery meat I tried is called *speck*: it is from Northern Italy, it is flavored with juniper berries, which explains why I didn't like it as much, and it is both salt-cured and cold-smoked. With cured meat, as with wine and cheese, you can learn to expect certain qualities and flavors when you learn its origins. You can anticipate how it will behave under certain circumstances, how well it will pair with other foods.

But I am not a slice of meat. I walked home with my three dollars worth of smoked ham and three dollars worth of produce, gnawing on the rest of the speck, and wondered what strangers hope to find out about me by asking where I come from.

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# this OYSTER

BY SUSAN HARLAN

This oyster knows everything.

Once, this oyster lived in the sea. He had an idyllic childhood and a challenging adolescence. Such a craggy little thing. Now, he lives in Grand Central Station, on a plate of shaved ice on a bar. His company is a lemon wedge and eleven of his fellows. Crackers in a clear plastic bag.

I don't know what this oyster is. He might be a *Beau Soleil* or a *Beavertail*.

This oyster knows everything. He knows the men in suits who order another round so they can take a later train home. He knows the tourists who look over the menu at their tables and then lay it down on the red-and-white checkered tablecloths.

This oyster knows that I am having my second Manhattan. He knows the old men sitting on either side of me. He knows the pictures of ships on the wall. So many ships, their masts tilted by storms.

This oyster knows the train station: its hidden rooms and corners, its elevators, its many levels and platforms.

This oyster did not come here the same way I did. I walked past card stores and chocolate shops and down the sloped floor to the lower level and the rainbow sign *OYSTER*, and then I passed through the room with cafeteria counters. The tiled tomb of a pharaoh.

This oyster came here another way, but I don't know how. He came through secret passageways.

This oyster knows everything. He knows the bartenders in their short black jackets and the ladies who laugh and sway in their heels. He knows the vinyl bar stools. He knows the word *mahogany*. He knows that he is alive. And he knows that he is gray, and grave, and done.

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