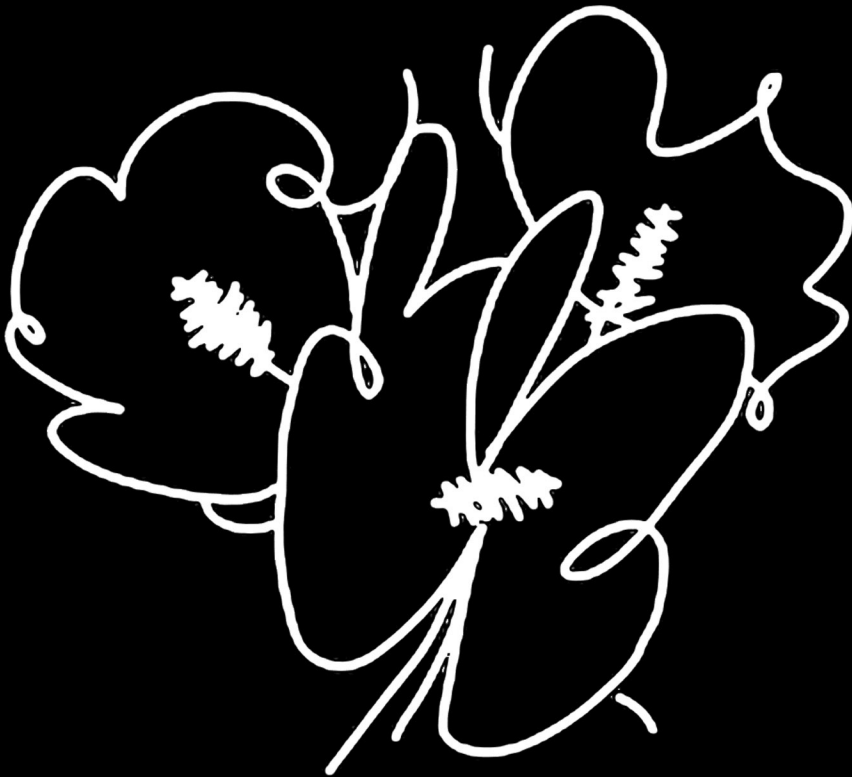




by MICHAEL HIRSCH

Location:



FLOWERS OF VIETNAM

4440 Vernor Hwy,
Detroit, MI 48209

Disclaimer: this piece contains language spoken commonly by people in back of house and blue collar situations. Some readers may find it offensive.

Fritz's fraternity was forcibly removed from the IU campus mid-rush. I don't and won't understand fraternities. At McGill, if you were in one of those it's because you were either autistic and French or a loser and Canadian. In the Big10, I guess it's totally different.

I don't think he ever really wanted to go there, and after visiting me in Montreal his eyes opened a bit. He left IU and got an internship back in Detroit. Kind of takes balls, all your friends acting a fool in their freshman dorms while you go back to your parents and work for a bank, for free.

The internship meant more time in the city, which meant more time exploring Detroit, which meant more dives into the bizarre.

2016 was Detroit's moment. Nobody could shut the hell up about the comeback city. Back from the depths. Something that COVID ultimately fucked up, AGAIN.

People were taking risks, putting ideas out there, making art and food and music in the city because there'd always be an audience eager to see how it played out.

Fritz would tell me about a Vietnamese restaurant that was cooking food out of a dilapidated Coney. I would half-listen because I was a snob who thought he knew more than anybody. When I returned home, we went and it became one of the more important moments of my entire life. Immediately below getting cancelled and a few notches above my bar mitzvah.

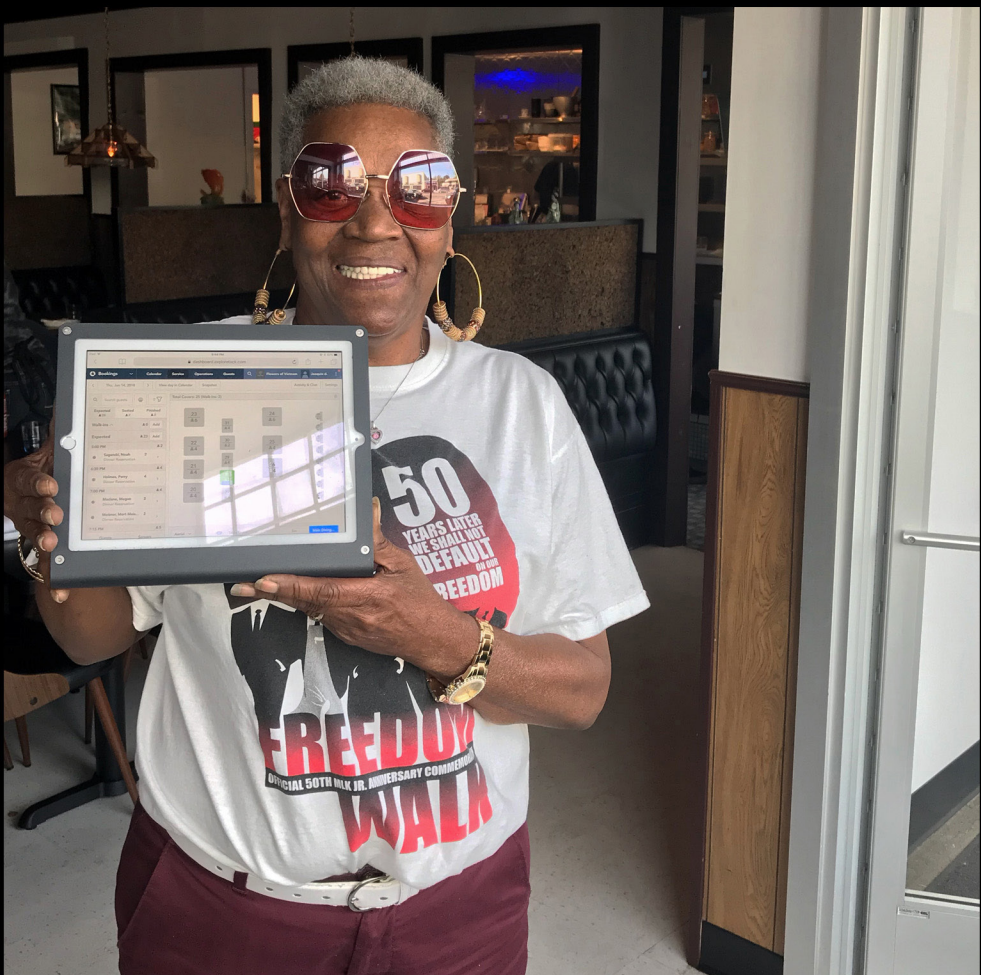


Walking into Vernor Coney Island, the windows pasted over with Vietnamese newspapers sourced from grocery runs at Kim Nhung Super Foods, we're greeted by The Gap Band and Miss Vera. Vaguely retirement age. Maybe not? They call her Vera from the Eastside, a title that comes with the 3 packs of Newport Menthols in her purse.

As a hostess she cackles and antagonizes and gives warm affection and slick shade to nearly everybody that crosses her eyeline. What would happen if you hired The Joker (from Batman) to be a maitre'd?

I have the answer to that question. Now you do too. She's also allegedly Allen Iverson's cousin.

We didn't know her at this point, which didn't stop her from giving us a big hug. Years later this woman and I would get hammered in the front seat of her car and attend multiple hardcore punk shows. I'm not sure if she'd remember most of the details. Placing her at the front of a restaurant feels quite... subversive.



She sat the three of us; Robbie (a freshman on the Michigan State soccer team, terminally goofy, engaged to be married 10 years later), Fritz, and Me. Maybe a fourth guy too, but he's probably not very important.

Whisked into a vinyl-lined coney booth, linoleum tables. Songs jump between Young Thug's Barter 6, Evelyn "Champagne" King, and Jeezy. Preston came by.

A buddha shaped gourmand who refuses to let himself leave Detroit. He probably could. He'd probably do well, but he won't do it. Behind his ZZ Top beard and vintage Pistons snapback he articulates a menu in perfect detail. Everything was a story, high level. He asks for our drink order, it doesn't matter we were only 19.

Sickeningly sweet rambutan vodka beverage. Korean fried caramel chicken wings. Crunch of the batter compounding the crunch of the umami caramel, shattering like sweet glass and rock candy between your teeth unloading fish sauce, rau mau, and maillard reactions.



Second rambutan vodka beverage. A third. Other foods arrive and get devoured and get cleared away.



Thit Ko – Clay Pot Pork Belly. *Bo Luc Lac* – Shaken Beef.



I dismissed myself to the bathroom with no intention of using the bathroom. Fritz, Robbie, and the third guy shoot over a loose thumbs up and I wander into the kitchen.

A wok. Vietnamese Andy manning a wok. His mom taught him how to do that.

A flattop. A white dude straight from the gutter, that's Thomas manning a flattop. He met George when they worked at the rotating restaurant on top of the RenCen.

A grill. A bespectacled Arab who will not shut the fuck up, George, manning a grill. He talks in code and rhythm, at this moment he has no idea what he is or where he is but kind of knows who he is.

Four rambutan vodka beverages deep, immovably confident in a way only a 19 year old can be. Fresh off a single semester of university. The galley is open and there are no physical barriers.

“Who the fuck made the chicken?”, the question floats in space. Sardonic, woof.



“Who the fuck let you back here?”

I’ve been out-sardonic’d.

This is approximately how it happened.

“I just walked back here because I’ve never had anything like that. What did you do? What was that sauce? It was green.”

I was genuinely in awe. At this point, the flavors were totally alien to me. I’d just started eating pickles the year before and graduated to lettuce on my burgers the prior year.

The rebuttal is a 3 minute explanation on rau mau, the specific buddhist grocery store it was sourced from, and a genuine thank you. I’m at the door of something more exciting than ECON 201 and PHYS 138. I’m not the type to leave the table after winning a couple of hands, I start prying with questions, lying about my credentials, and possibly sounding insane.

Thomas Keller on his resume along with Grant Achatz’s Alinea, names I knew from the cut-outs of their quotes on the wall of the suburban bistro I bussed tables at in high school. I don’t even remember the quotes, just the names. Something stupid enough to make the mom’s from Oakland Hills Country Club comfy as they pushed the boundaries of their palates with... aioli?

I look back at Fritz and Robbie salivating over coconut custard and I feel George needing to work. We exchange Facebook info and leave it at that.

There wasn’t much more to do. I was living in Gardner, Upper Rez at McGill. The only stove on our floor was bullshit and some french dude with soccerball slippers was always using it to boil canned food. I kept the chicken wing moment in my back pocket as I got drunk and experimented with deep web DMT imported from Germany and learned how to study for the first time in my life.

I was back in Montreal with Rocky over the summer to set up my new apartment off campus and attend Osheaga. My new Canadian girlfriend to fit my new Canadian lifestyle – informative and ultimately irrelevant – I ended up tanking that relationship 3 months later.

All my friends had their fancypants internships, something I literally could not compute. Why would you want to work somewhere boring for so little money? How naive. I thought you could make money by being cool.

I was stuck at the suburban bistro, gaining none of that valuable corporate experience, instead getting paid \$30 an hour to work in a pirate ship serving “kung pao bowls” and “spaghetti” and meatballs” (yes spaghetti is in quotes, in quotes, it was zucchini) to geriatric and lululemon MILFs who are too scared to go to Europe.

It felt like falling behind, like I wasn’t taking my adult future more seriously, but who the fuck needs to be thinking about all of that at 19? I wasn’t going to work at a bank, my aunt didn’t really want me to work at her advertising agency because structure “isn’t really my thing”. I hated that the bistro brought on Madison, a hot intern I went to high school with and even made out with a couple of times. I hated how I wasn’t able to use the power dynamics of “being a cool person” to gain any upper hand.

Pacing nervously in my Montreal apartment I messaged George asking if he needed help with the restaurant. Re-reading the facebook message there was a LOT OF CAPS LOCK and MISPLACED CONVICTION ABOUT FOOD AS ART.

“Food is not art.” Flatly over direct message.



“We gotta stop calling it that. Art is for the affluent. We don’t eat, we die.”

I was nervous. I was messaging a self-actualized creative 8 years my senior. It felt like asking out your crush in high school. I was giddy and texting with a tinge of desperation.

In hindsight I don't agree with his assessment of art being for the affluent and I don't know if he'd agree with that now.

"Food is a necessity." is my mustered response. Painfully obvious, noncommittal.

"I just want to observe and learn" double texting.

"Where do you cook now?"

I responded with lies about passion and the bistro.

"Passion dies... it's like when you find a new love interest. In the beginning it's lit, then the fire dies. What keeps the relationship going?"

This was a pop quiz on philosophy and an assessment on if a white kid could cut teeth in Southwest Detroit. I responded with tons of ellipses and a tangent about necessity being inspiring before he cut me off, "Servitude... That's what keeps the relationship going"

"We serve people food and we're obligated to make them feel like they slammed a rail off a fresh pack that you heard someone almost overdosed on."

A level of intensity that seemed antithetical from the dude who just told me passion dies.

"I do everything. I want to be where I'm able to express myself." I surprised myself with a shocking moment of clarity and truth.

"We can talk. Week after next".

That conversation turned into an hour and a reluctant invitation to a pop up at a now defunct test kitchen in Hazel Park. The pop up attracted the attention of some investors, namely Paul Saginaw of the legendary Zingerman's Deli and a father-son duo George grew up around (both fatally out of touch).

When I show up for day one of my internship, one thing becomes obvious to everyone involved: I can't cook. Nobody has taught me how, I do not know anything. I was asked to pulverize peanuts in a Robot Coupe (Row-Bow Co), not realizing it was a french-branded food processor. I stood staring slack jawed at a row of gadgets while everyone worked around me.

"The little retard needs to move" came out from the choir of chefs and they were right. When George went on a shopping trip I was sequestered in the dining room and told to wait.

Thomas and Andy weren't instructed on what to do with me, they were closer to Hamburglar and Grimace than babysitters, so I sat staring until George came back. Nervous, excited, and feeling utterly useless. I never feel useless, but now I did and sat with it and surrounded by real adults, it sinks-in and permeates my psyche and triggers my OCD and I sit harder.

Jeezy's 101 Thug Motivation blasting off the Sonos means George is back from his grocery trip. He moves through the kitchen with precision, keeping his nose over everyone and fingers in everything. "Where's the retard?"



I didn't move.

"So what, are you, like, crying or something?" George prods, a little icked out.

"No?? What?? Why would I be crying?!" I was genuinely pissed by his inquiry. Like dude, why would I be crying? I'm just a retard who doesn't know anything.

He came back with "It just seems like you're crying, sitting here alone and sad."

I wasn't crying.

"I robot cooped some peanuts, now I don't have anything else to do and they," I'm waving vaguely towards the kitchen, "didn't have anything else for me to do."

“Robot Coupe” (properly pronounced).

I’m smart and not used to being humiliated. “I can’t cook”.

“We know” cracking himself up, breaking the fourth wall “you need to pick these herbs”.

At the prep station I’m taught how to wash, dry, neatly pick the leaves off, and roll herbs including but not limited to; mint, rau mau, rau ram, thai basil, and perilla. Each with their own distinct smell and function.

One at a time, by hand only. The bistro in Bloomfield had an Indian guy getting paid sub-minimum wage to do this kind of thing for them. But here I am, doing it for free, as an internship?

One at a time, snapping off the leaves, essential oils painting the inside of my nose in a totally different palate.

One hour.

2 hours.

They’d finally kept me busy. Then George stops me. “We’re done with that, watch this now”

Pulled up from his station with the shittiest filets from an entire ora king salmon he’d just broken down and dragged me to sautee. Knobs of butter foam up in a hot pan. I think the spices were star anise, celery seed, peppercorn, some other seed and something else. I think garlic cloves, smashed. They perfumed the butter and the air. Nuttiness and fresh earth and licorice and garlic. Flesh side down 1 minute and spatula flipped onto the skin 3 more minutes, scooping puddles of butter over and over onto the flesh and onto a plate with a pinch of fat salt flakes.



I don't remember what I thought about salmon before that moment. I wasn't thinking about salmon. Actually, it was pretty much irrelevant to my life but now I knew frying it in butter created texture that didn't need batter or breading. It carried the spices into the fish which carried flavors that lounge all over me in the conversation pit of my mind.

Then George walked away, to work on something or yell at somebody or chainsmoke Peter Stokkebye Danish Export in his car.

The popup was successful, NPR even gave a fuck and talked about the Vietnamese pop up called Flowers of Vietnam run by the Palestinian guy, which meant enough attention to pay for renovations. The rest of the summer was filling gaps between weed smoke and helping at various popups, hanging out in the then-demolished Vernor Coney, holding guns, and thinking about Montreal.

An economics degree couldn't satiate what I'd just experienced, like what the hell? Was I going to work at an investment bank after "working" for a chef? Was I going to work for an investment bank anyways? Highly unlikely.

Before the semester started I would hop over to the huge Indigo or Renaud Bray in downtown Montreal with lists of cookbooks that'd been recommended or researched and I would fill a backpack with them and leave the store. Nobody steals books, like can you even steal a book? That's knowledge and something about stealing knowledge feels antithetical to the reason it's even there.

I would sit in my Plateau apartment reading Julia Child, Charles Phan, David McMillan and Fred Morin, and a fattest newest edition of Larousse Gastronomique. Hooting, hollering, cheering as I learned and chainsmoked. People must think I'm crazy, nearly nutting over hypothetical remoulade. I would total the amount of money the books would cost, one month it was \$500, the next \$1200, the next \$1700. Insatiable. I would cook, poorly, with terrible equipment. A group of hot girls from my dorm would come over to the apartment so I could cook for them – I would approximate the flavors and flail at the execution. I had no fucking idea what they were doing, I had no concept that I wasn't ready to be taken seriously until that moment when it shrunk me and I had to apprehend the truth; I didn't know shit, still.

George and I would call throughout the winter term and talk about potential internships at potential firms, banks, or agencies. He teetered between this idea that he should push me into something responsible while alluding to restaurant work. I'd gotten offered an internship at a record label after telling them "Brian Eno is totally my fave ever" which seemed like an ideal situation for a kid like me. George floated the idea of me helping him at the newly rebuilt restaurant. Vaguely helping with the business, vaguely an internship, vaguely me doing the monotonous things nobody else wanted to do like "learn Quickbooks" (WHICH I DID NOT).

The record label wanted me in LA and they wanted me for free. George wanted me at \$673 a week, which was dramatically more appealing from a financial standpoint, plus, fuck Los Angeles.

After finals I showed up to the restaurant and met Joaquin, a densely built man with densely built hair fresh and chewed up fingers off a long stint in Chicago managing a series of high end restaurants. A friend of George's from hospitality school who would spend childhood summers in Spain. Dude wanted to return to Michigan so he could finally create something of his own. Absolutely over the idea of working for other people, absolutely hot on the trails of any woman in her late 40s.

One month in, I watched my Miss Vera give my sister an honorary employee of the month (fake award) when she visited because her mere presence made the narcissistic hate sink of a bar manager quit while Lisa (someone whom I love but haven't bothered to introduce) taught me how to be Vietnamese, like in a hoodrat way. Or maybe she taught me how to be a hoodrat in a Vietnamese way.

Last week I pulled up feeling manic because a hot girl DM'd me on instagram. Slinking around, minding everybody's business, I kiss cheeks and throw winks at anyone who looks, baby. I may or may not be doing cocaine to prepare myself for a night that could end anywhere. I ask the new and beloved bar manager for 2 Miyozakura Junmai Panda sakes, which he does not have. No worries, kisses kisses, all love. I report the news of the 86'd sake to Joaquin who's dodging with Quickbooks and unfortunately NOT doing cocaine in the office.

“No, 1800 is garbage and Patron is overpriced,” his mouth slightly open as his brain does the complex computation of which tequila he was trying to get turned off “Hornitos” laid down with confidence.

“Añejo or reposado?”

Joaquin poking his tongue in disgust finally looks up from his spreadsheets, “Blanco, duh”.

I say “Gotchu baby boy” halfway slipped out of the office before he stopped me.

“And a roll of Tums!”



“Gotchu, and a roll of Tums.”

I popped into the liquor store across Clark St. real quick, rapping in Spanish to the guy behind the counter who only speaks English and Arabic.

“Da nos Hornitos blanco porfa, una botella pequeña porfa”

“Um, this one?” the grey skinned and haired cashier pointed at the right one.

I pay and walk across Vernor to the Speedway across the street from Flowers bursting through the doors like a saloon. I make eye contact with the cashier “Lemme get a pack of trojan bareskins and a roll of tums” his eyes roll, for some reason the dude behind me is gasping for air, I make my purchase, and across the street into my homestead.

Past Vera, who peaks in my brown paper bag and asks me to save her some. Up to Lisa who I ask “Can you do me the biggest favor and put in an order of the Chao Ga chicken skewers for me pweaaase” making my eyes as big and pouty as possible.

“Of course, Michael. Where you want them? The bar?” she asks while vaguely slapping at my shoulders.

“Send ‘em to the office babygirl, imma be chillingggg” and honestly I think 4 g’s is not enough g’s considering how I said it. I’m on a health and fitness journey and this felt like the healthiest option I could make.

I maneuver my way through the dining room and make eye contact with George, posted up in the corner of the bar chatting with 2 soignee guests, certainly rich, presumably of good taste. We make eye contact and he starts calling plays, signalling with his hands, err maybe they're gang signs? I get it now, he's gonna meet us in the office in 10.

Back through both sets of doors I'm sitting next to Joaquin who's telling me "these are the tiles I'm ordering and you need to kind of shut up because I need you to know I am working on important things" which made me not want to prod further.

I pour us 2 shots, country club pours. I crack open a Sprite.

"Who's the Sprite for?" shot like an accusation.

"Uhm, me?"

Joaquin said "It better be, I'm not drinking that shit" before polishing off approximately 1.75 shots.

My turn. Then it was my turn a couple of times in a row.

A plate made out of a slice of a tree materializes in front of me. Chicken ground with lemongrass, herbs, and fish sauce skewered and grilled on fresh sugarcane surrounded by daikon radish, rau ram, mint, shredded and pickled carrot, some star fruit, and lettuce. I'm expected to assemble all of these components and dip them in a spicy and sweet fishy sauce.



Low fat, high fiber, solid protein. This will get me some macros and some micros. A gust of air, George bursting through the door and into the office, we shuffle positions and now I'm stuffed into the corner next to a 30 under 30 printout I placed in that spot 8 years earlier.

"Yo that couple fightin' at the bar"

"Thoughts on these tiles?"

I slide my fingers around the Juul in George's hand while everyone else is distracted and get caught immediately.

"Michael's acting weird," said Joaquin.

I butt back, "It's called being in a good mood."

George says "He just gets like that whenever a pretty person validates his self worth," while flipping through a packet with tiles and color swatches.

"I was literally just saying that."

