

Favorite Roads, Streets and Places¹
Frederick DeBoom Witzel
Second Draft, ca 1980

As long as I can remember I have had a penchant for certain favorite streets and places. These are roads, alleys, lanes, and even residential squares and avenues, that meet the qualifications for four star restaurants in the Guide Michelin – “worth a journey out of your way to visit.” They are in many places around the world – San Francisco, Cambridge Mass, Ross Valley in Marin, London Mayfair or Belgravia, and Roehampton in England, Shanghai, Kauai, Stockholm and the road between and in Damariscotta and Camden, Maine. And there are others.

The significant characteristics of these places are a sense of naturalness and scale, compared with their surroundings, a softness in the light, and relative quiet. Most are tree-shaded and wear that combination of shadow and sunlight in which each complements the other. Other streets, mainly urban, particularly in China and in Italy carry a vibrancy, a joyous mélange of signs, colors, cheerful noises and pleasant smells that reflect the excitement of the life therein. A stroller absorbs it all silently.

It is perhaps straining a metaphor to describe the visual impact of these places as a statement similar to the basic theme in music, and the accompanying melodic variations that give the basic theme its intellectual interest, complexity, and flavor. In streets and places the basic themes are the fixed features of the landscape, the trees and the plantings, the architecture of the buildings, and even the texture and design of the stone pavements, as in Paris. The variations on the basic theme occur as the day passes, first in sharper morning light and then softening as the afternoon shadows lengthen. In the cities, the changing aspect of light on the facades of buildings, and the impact of moving crowds and people create a harmonic that enhances the effect of the basic theme. In the country, the animals in the fields, the birds, the occasional vehicle - a mechanical interloper – that stirs the air: these are the changing notes, the quavers, and the rhythmic embroidery on the permanent face of the landscape theme.

The first place that I remember is the area at the entrance to Golden Gate Park around Haight and Stanyan Streets in San Francisco. Somewhere else I have noted that, being born within a city block of Haight and Asbury – the center for flower children – has given me a certain status among younger friends. Where Haight Street ends at the entrance to Golden Gate Park there was a marvelous meeting or conjunction of big trees, gravel paths, stone bridges, tunnels and arches, lawns and a small pond, then graced with ducks and water lilies. It is still there.

¹ First and second drafts, handwritten in black ink on lined pads of paper, were found in his briefcase. The second draft has occasional editorial comments (“good!”) in Mother’s hand.



Feeding the ducks, Stow Lake²

Tante Camille, known as "Mimi," is to the left in a 1911 studio portrait.

The best time of the day to visit and enjoy this scene is in the late afternoon. As the sun drops into an evening sky, its rays at a fixed point on earth, must pass through an ever widening cross section of the earth's atmosphere. The increasing refraction of these rays causes a gentle blurring of the edges of shadows and creates a less harsh aspect than is created at noon time. (This concurrence of light values was said to be greatly sought after by Turner, Corot and the Impressionists.) The westerly breeze begins to die down as the sun's heat dissipates, and the air becomes calm and quite. The day winds down, uniquely in my memory, at Haight and Stanyan, the first of my favorite streets and places.

It was in the ambiance of this scene that Claude in his carriage and I tagging along afoot would go for our afternoon airing under the watchful eye of Maman and sometimes, Tante Camille. These sorties were a rewarding adventure. I launched wood scraps as fantasy small boats in the pond, fed the ducks and chased the doves, played hide and seek with new found friends, and returned home tired and satisfied.

As time went on these late afternoon scenes were repeated many times in other locations. Walking home in Cambridge through the array of red brick Georgian buildings, paths and lawns all shaded by elderly elms in Radcliffe College and on Linnean Street was a delight of charming relaxation after a day of case studies.³

In Ross Valley rounding up the turn to Shady Lane from the station to Aunt Fanny's house was an exciting experience. The tall trees on each side of the road (elms again, I think) met overhead and formed a leafy arch much like the nave of a cathedral. The contrast with the dusty sunlit fields, particularly on the western side, was so bright that, in my memory, they seemed bathed in a soft hazy blanket of shimmering gold.

A similar planting can be found on the island of Kawai on Route 52 from Lihue to Poipu Beach. There the trees, eucalyptus or fern oak, form a two mile long tunnel and are in an even more dense arrangement than in Ross. Yellow and green sugar cane grows in the fields on both road sides and warm colors clasp the dark shaft of the covered road in an easy embrace.

² 'Feeding the ducks, Stow Lake²,' taken by Tante Camille, probably during the summer of 1905.

³ The US Navy sent Dad to Harvard Business School in the late 1930s to study management science and logistics.

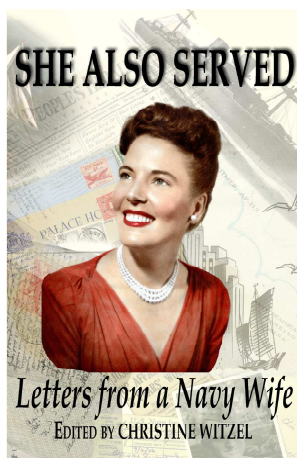
Again in Roehampton, a suburb of London on the road to Portsmouth, in a county park there is a half-mile leafy horse and footpath scarcely wide enough for two riders abreast. In the fall the magenta reds, oranges and yellows of the trees in this lane splash out in commanding elegance, compelling attention. The path is lined with maples, locusts and birches, and their insistent presence insures a second look as if a pretty girl danced across the fields. This curving path winds away from a cricket pitch where, on a warm and lazy fall afternoon, the bowlers and batsmen, in all white, play leisurely matches at the shire or town level of skill. Most of the spectators sit on camp chairs around the wide lawn, clapping decorously when well-placed hits are made. All hands enjoy occasional refreshment with the gentlemen players at appropriate tea breaks. Classical good taste seems to cover the Landseer landscape like treacle over scones. Bored by the slow pace of cricket we saunter down the path absorbing the drifting whiff of burning leaves, the smell of horses, and the occasional dark and mossy aroma of wet earth and dank ferns.

A distinctly urban scene, with an odor uniquely Oriental, was a lane in Shanghai, probably known only by a number attached to a local district designation. The area was known as Fu-Tse-Me-Oao. In our first few months in China, again in the fall, we would drive about Shanghai, *en famille*, in a motor pool jeep; Joanna was then ten, hanging on the hand holds in the rear seat. This lane was but a quarter mile long and wide only enough to permit two rickshaws to pass if the old gentlemen, sucking their pipes in doorways, and the young mothers suckling their babies, tucked in their feet.

The lane served a gaggle of houses and shops two or three stories high in a crowded and swampy section of the city. The lane was like a small canyon with a wide ribbon of sunlight at its top. Fresh clean laundry on bamboo poles flew like signal flags from upper stories. Everywhere there was a flow of noisy people, tame white ducks and chattering children. Shops selling an immense variety of food, medicines and hardware lined the street level. The windows on the upper stories were opened out to the limited view of neighbors. Old grandmothers sat at the windows chatting with their contemporaries across the lane or staring at the noisy action below, and occasionally screaming at some child some yards down the lane.

We had been directed to a particular shop carrying furniture said to be pre-war and it was a minor victory when we found it. This shop was found by an enterprising collector of old furniture in our group and we were let in on the secret of its location only after the fifth martini in an evening libation at our hotel – The Broadway Mansions.

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You can read more about living in Shanghai on the Bund in [She Also Served, Letters from a Navy Wife](#) , letters written by Virgilia Witzel and edited by me.

