words

Genichiro Takahashi
Sayonara, Gangsters
(Vertical)

Chip Kidd's design for the first English translation of Genichiro Takahashi's award-winning 1982 debut novel *Sayonara, Gangsters* seems unusually telling: The book itself is covered with random black letters, which only cohere into a title when viewed through strategically placed holes in the book jacket. It's an apt metaphor for the book's content, except that Takahashi doesn't provide such a convenient decoder device. *Sayonara, Gangsters* is a series of absurdist, near-nonsensical vignettes, effectively a block of seemingly random letters. Takahashi makes these vignettes colorful and entertaining, but as with Rorschach blobs, their analysis may reveal more about any given reader than about their creator.

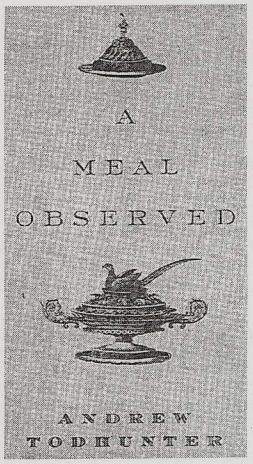
In the postmodern fantasy dystopia of *Sayonara, Gangsters*, virtually all things are conceptually tangible and capable of independent acts. Names battle and kill their owners. Dreams deride the people having them. Abstract ideas travel on conveyor belts through factories. Sunlight blows away in a high wind. A Ferris wheel commits suicide. Meanwhile, the nominal plot follows the narrator, a poetry teacher named "Sayonara, Gangsters," and his lover, "The Nakajima Miyuki Song Book"; they conceive and birth a daughter, who later obediently dies in response to a governmental death-alert postcard. Afterward, she chats with Sayonara, Gangsters as he disposes of her body, while Song Book goes on to a strange death of her own. Death is the most common of the many metaphors in *Sayonara, Gangsters*—it's ubiquitous and final, but its effects are unpredictable, and its scope isn't limited to corporeal, tangible, or even living things. It's easily read as forcible change, an unwelcome passing from one state into another, variable depending on its victim and its perpetrator.

But death is only one of *Sayonara, Gangsters*' broadest and clearest symbols. Other images are more opaque. At times, it's tempting to suspect that Takahashi is engaging in specific wordplay and cultural reference that gets lost in translation. At other times, he just seems coy, playful, deliberately dense, or simply goofy. In each mode, though, *Sayonara, Gangsters* is a light, poetic, enjoyable read, full of crafted imagery that can be emotionally devastating even as it lacks a coherent story-center.

And sometimes, Takahashi's message transcends any linguistic or imagistic barrier. In one beautifully executed scene, Sayonara, Gangsters and an old woman attempt to describe a creature that keeps defiantly changing form in reaction to their analysis. Ultimately, the woman finds a solution, by describing it in a way that cannot itself be described. Her method seems to sum up Takahashi's own approach to giving mutable, shifting moods a concrete form: He blithely writes his own rules. **—Tasha Robinson**

focus | understanding food

Andrew Todhunter
A Meal Observed
(Knopf)



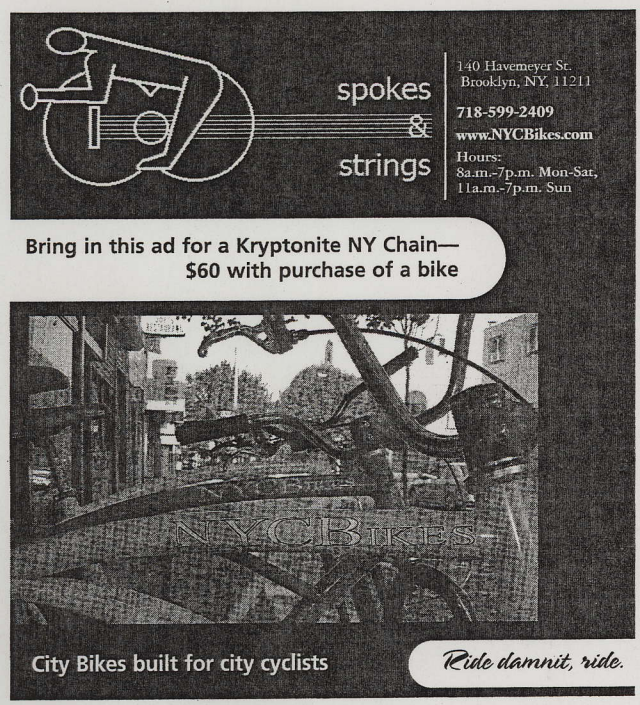
A Meal Observed becomes more than just another clever foodie book right around the time that author Andrew Todhunter orders his first round of drinks, and encounters his first disappointment. Todhunter is a participatory journalist who typically covers rugged outdoor sports, but for *A Meal Observed*, he considers the more civilized adventure of dining in a three-star Parisian restaurant. Todhunter writes about what he eats, where the food came from, what food means to the larger French culture, and how the fine-dining experience has changed in the home of nouvelle cuisine. He even abandons straight reportage at times for a more diary-like approach, as he describes what his wife is wearing, and how the evening out becomes a bit stressful when the lightweight Mrs. Todhunter gets an aperitif so potent that she can't stomach it.

It would be overwrought to suggest that *A Meal Observed* is about "eating" as a concept and an obsession, but though Todhunter's style is breezy and pleasantly digressive, this slim volume is fairly substantial. Todhunter's main topic is the restaurant Taillevent, a Paris institution for more than 50 years. Todhunter spent several months apprenticing in the kitchen before having his big dinner, which enables him to report knowledgeably on the tension between the restaurant's owner and its staff—a tension due in part to the peculiar pressure created when creative people are required to prepare the same meals day after day, and due in part to the way one of the cornerstones of French society has begun to crumble as rising generations show less interest in $500 dinners.

Todhunter writes with refreshing openness about the economics of the meal. He clarifies early on that neither he nor his wife has expensive tastes (or the means to indulge them), which makes him especially sensitive to the evening's minor flaws, such as a less-than-ideal table or a less-than-stellar fish course. But Todhunter also savors and eloquently describes the meal's sublime delicacies, contrasting the sensual delight to his own relatively austere upbringing in small-town America, where food was strictly functional and pleasure was eyed with distrust. In *A Meal Observed*, Todhunter doesn't just play food critic for a day; he shows how relationships to food can be altered by expectation and context, and he makes a yeoman effort to understand himself by breaking down his reaction to every chew and swallow. **—Noel Murray**

Neely Tucker
Love In The Driest Season
(Crown)

In 1997, journalist Neely Tucker was stationed in Zimbabwe, covering conflicts all over sub-Saharan Africa, when he lost his heart to a baby girl. Believing that he and his wife had a chance to provide the round-the-clock care needed to pull Chipo back from malnutrition and disease, Tucker struggled to rescue the child from an orphanage filled with abandoned, dying children.

But Tucker hadn't reckoned with the amazing stubbornness of the Zimbabwean bureaucracy. Official policy is dead set against foreigners (especially white foreigners) adopting native children; the country's fears about what rich Westerners could want with African babies are annoyingly unspecific, but that doesn't make the bureaucracy any less effective a barrier to the already-complicated process of transferring guardianship. In *Love In The Driest Season*, Tucker's passionate memoir of Chipo's deliverance, he and his wife try every tactic their international savvy has given them. They dot every "i" and cross every "t" on the reams of paper they're required to file—and then the file gets "lost" in a sea of folders in a chaotic sorting room, where they must find it themselves. They chase down every European, American, or Canadian who's ever successfully adopted a Zimbabwean child, only to hear everyone say that their quest is impossible. They offer to equip the state-run orphanage with modern appliances, basic sanitation, and food, only to have their generosity interpreted as bribery or attempts to intimidate with their relative wealth. They sit all day outside the offices of the officials whose approval they need, but who keep no regular office hours and don't take appointments. Finally, desperately, they make contingency plans to spirit Chipo out of the country illegally; the alternative, in their eyes, is to sentence her to death by returning her to the orphanage, where child after child, including two the Tuckers try to foster, succumbs to the officially denied AIDS epidemic.

Current-events reporting often exploits children for easy sympathy or cheap tears, but there's nothing easy or cheap about Tucker's wrenching story. Sure, it's impossible not to feel for Chipo (and for the 22 fellow orphans who die during the Tuckers' efforts), but it's the author's frustration, anger, and righteous obstinacy that twist the viscera and scratch insistently at the memory. As a bonus, the book provides an accurate yet personal account of the devastation wreaked by AIDS on the African continent. Lessons in world affairs are rarely so tragic, or so triumphant. **—Donna Bowman**