In California children don't sell food to adults, except from Kool-Aid stands on summer lawns. In Chinatown sometimes you'll see a girl hawking garlic on a corner, but most kids here do chores at home, dig weeds or wash the Ford, for an allowance. This changes when you step across the border.

Driving through Guerrero once, I stopped at a cantina. It was the standard Mexican adobe hut, and the only signs of life inside were flies chasing a slow fan on the ceiling, and an old patron asleep behind the bar. I woke him up and ordered a Corona. He had trouble prying off the rusty cap. Then as he was filling up my glass, the skylight out the window clouded over with enormous flocks of orange-winged butterflies. They swarmed into the flame trees in the courtyard, settled on my pickup parked outside, and landed on the red dirt road in squadrions. At once a gang of boys raced through the street, taking up the things in huge sombreros. I watched them light a fire of husks and weeds, wave the insects over it on sticks, shake salt on their wings and start to eat them. The bald man at the bar saw my amazement and kindly took the trouble to point out that these were monarchs, not the bitter viceroyos, and that they only passed through once a year. Kids caught and toasted them, he said, and peddled them as snacks, usually to truck drivers who liked them. He set a bowl of taco chips beside a cup of salsa on the bar top. Gradually, the sky cleared up again. I drank my beer and paid him. Stepping out into the lot, I found a dozen boys around my truck waving little plastic bags of monarchs. Before I left, they forced a sackful on me for six pesos.

Later, down the road, I passed a man thumbing a ride and picked him up. His face was no more Mexican than mine, but when he saw my sack he said, Let's try them. I agreed to split one with him, but the brittle texture overwhelmed the flavor, if there was one, and it wasn't hard to toss the others out.

Another time my girlfriend and I were sitting out the winter in Tangier. Our flat which faced the street became so damp that every month we scrubbed the walls for mildew. One morning after weeks of rain, it hailed. She and I had argued over breakfast, and as the sky grew dark, she fled the house. The stones began to fall an hour later. They hit the roof like coal dumped down a chute and slammed the windowpanes until one shattered. Hundreds of them bounced over the sill onto the carpet, but I couldn't bring myself to sweep them up. To drive her from the house in this depressed me, I sat on the m'tarrha with my arms crossed and watched them turn to water at my feet.

When the bell out in the courtyard rang, I sprang up from the couch and rushed down with the keys to let her in. A lime tree had blown over in the garden. I felt relieved that she would try to make it home, despite the storm, and thought that things must be all right between us. I was mistaken. A child stood waiting at the gate instead, staring gravely at me through the bars. She wore a ragged caftan. I remember. Her tiny feet were bare and blue, and in one hand she clutched a paperbag. Stray kids were always begging on the streets here. They all looked more or less alike to me. Probably the hail blowing sideways like a curtain lessens the dream-like aspect to her ordinary face. Maybe it was something else that made me want to help her. When she pressed her little bag against the bars, I took it in my hand without a word, drawing it between the narrow grillwork. Then she fixed me with her eyes and said, Three dirhams. I guessed she had a pound of dates to sell me. The air was cold enough to see your breath. The gate stuck to my fingers when I touched it. The fruit inside the paperbag felt cold. As I weighed it in my palm I said, One fifty. Everybody bargained over food here, even tourists. It was her turn now to make a counter bid. Instead, she laughed at me and ran downhill. Her feet splashed as she vanished at the corner, then the hail turned to rain. I snook my head and brought the dates inside. Even on the couch I didn't get it, till the bottom of the bag split and slush spilled through my fingers to the carpet. Penny came in late that night, but I was fast asleep and didn't hear her.

Michael Wolfe
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Bolinas, California
The doctors said: “We cannot explain the fatal outcome in this case. Perhaps the message is that doctors should not insist on a therapeutic manoeuvre if the patient does not agree to it.”