

MOUTHFUL OF SALT

LITERARY JOURNAL



ISSUE 03 // SPRING '26

SAVORY



Mouthful of Salt — Issue 03: *Savory*

Published April 27, 2026

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Content Warning:

Some works contain material that may be triggering, including mentions of eating disorders, self-harm, and violence. Please read at your own discretion and take breaks as needed for your mental well-being.

Editors' Note

Dear Readers,

It's crazy to think that we've been on this ride for a year now. When *Mouthful of Salt* first launched last April, it set out to be an accessible, welcoming, and deeply affirming journal for voices who've been unheard or dismissed. In the time since, our community has grown in ways we couldn't have imagined. So many of you read the words we share and come back for seconds and thirds, and even more of you have been brave enough to submit your work to find a home within us. We are so grateful for the care, community, and creative energy you've brought to our small journal, and to the vision we're continuing to build together.

As we began shaping issue three, countless ideas came and went, but one lingered that called us back to our roots. *Mouthful of Salt* is drawn to work that is raw, unyielding, and leaves an aftertaste. We amplify writing that lands with force and keeps you wanting more. This is at the heart of who we are and we thought what better way to celebrate that than with a collection of work that is both piquantly pleasant and rich with texture. Work that harmonizes on the palette and that maps the intricate landscape of our suppressed desires and how we navigate them—like the warmth of your favorite homemade dish, or the lingering taste of a past love you didn't realize you still remembered. The voices throughout this issue are deeply appetizing, rich with wit, decadence, and unprocessed edge, and the stories they tell are equally satisfying.

As you read this issue, we hope that its umami notes pique your interest and that these pages bring you both familiarity and surprise. Above all, we hope it offers you something to sit with, return to, and let unfold slowly over time.

Dig in.

Yours in writing,
Imani, Kaci, Will, Kevin, Joe, Mariam, and Kaycee

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Meet the Artist: Mindy Kober

For our savory-themed Issue 03 cover, we had the privilege of featuring *Offshoot* by Los Angeles-based artist Mindy Kober. Rooted in the sensory memory of childhood meals, Kober’s work explores what “Savory” can hold beyond taste.

In *Offshoot*, she draws from the floral patterns of mid-century Pyrex dishes, reimagining them as layered soil. The strata reflected both nostalgia and concealment, echoing the way memory compresses difficult experiences. Though her childhood meals were nourishing, they were often marked by tension, and the bright patterns became a place to escape. Here, there becomes something else entirely: a record.

From these layers, a poppy grows. The offshoot is not just a continuation, but survival. It is something new emerging through what has been buried.

Rendered in gouache on paper, the piece carries a storybook quality that feels both familiar and unsettling. As a cover, *Offshoot* invites us to consider “Savory” not just as comfort, but as complexity. Its flavor is shaped by memory, history, and what it endures.



Offshoot

Flesh // Beck Reynolds

I caught a deer lounging in a ditch
on the way back from your flat last night—
her nakedness

mirroring mine, pale and soft
her legs in the headlights.
Like Velázquez's *Venus*, almost a woman

slumped into bed after too many wines.
Alive again in the morning,
snoring into a spit-starched pillow.

Did she drag herself to sleep
or was she discarded?
I wish I'd stopped to cover her side

but she doesn't want me to apologise:
her bright flank mocks
my embarrassment.

When I'm naked it's only to sweat
or be made clean, for as long
as necessary. I dive straight

into a waiting pile of clothes,
wrap myself up in so much decency
I forget what I come from—where I end.

Does Lust Rust? // Avery Graham

I think I'm the only one that experiences
the wrong emotions the right way. I want
to count the vertebrae of your spine. I
only come alive under your gaze. I want
to gut myself at the altar of your feet. I know
the iron taste of self-sabotage on my lips.
I bloom in love. Only I deserve this bliss.
I wither myself. I know I feel everything wrong.
I loathe my skin; my desire is the only animal
living in this meat sack—it evicted me from
this vessel when we met and metastasized.

I'm going to cut it out of me.
Will you look in my eyes as you hand me the knife?

To Starve a Memory on Decayed Skin // Kataru Yahya

You are a mosaic of things you have tried to scrub away
Your mother was right—
You do not have a lot of mercy inside you
& your will has the hardness of bronze
But what she never got to see—
Her daughter sticking two slender fingers down her throat
To dredge up the cruelty she has been told she got from her father's kin
The nucleus of your sainthood is precise sin, one with unknown origin
And with the hidden usefulness of an appendix
Or a fossilised memory
This nucleus is a wound covered with sea salt instead of crust
You have mastered the art of starving yourself of feeling—
You tell yourself you do not need love
But you also know if love had the face of your mother
You would let it claim you without a second thought
You remove stitches from your mouth, you do not need them anymore
There is dried blood and your voice feels like
You just dragged your vocal cords across gravel
There is a reason 'your lord has not forsaken you' is your favourite verse
Your veil of purgatory is a relic
It reminds you of blood clots and hurried prayers
Is it damning?
Does God approve?

a weekend in May // David W. Janey

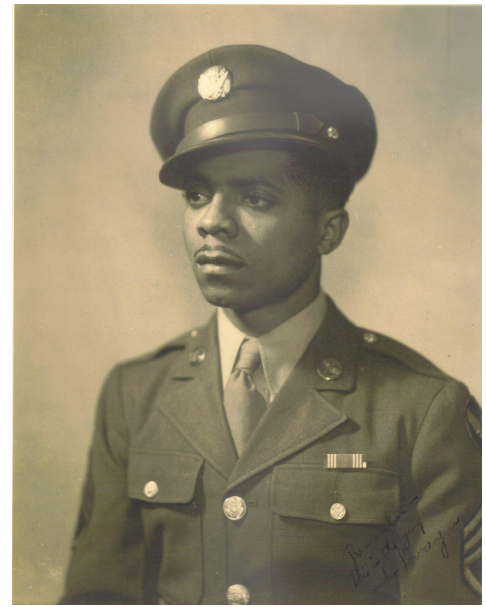
it was a Friday afternoon
my dad was matter-of-fact
“I’m going to Washington DC—
you want to come?”
I was fourteen—full of fire
we back-packed for an overnight leaving Boston
after dark on a fully booked Greyhound

got a second row seat opposite the driver
dad was a few rows back with an eye on me
someone barked “New York City”
door opened to a cool night air breeze
that woke me—some got off, others got on
cigarettes were allowed on buses back then
my burning eyes watered angry in protest

my parents had taken me to many protests
though I’d never been to the nation’s Capital
I don’t remember flowering trees
just mid-May heat, ice dumped from a cooler
on the sidewalk, crowds moving like cattle
on TV westerns, and the army vehicles, soldiers,
dad pointing out snipers on rooftops

two decades earlier dad wore the same uniform
helping drive Nazi fascists out of Italy
two weeks earlier Nixon invaded Cambodia
one week earlier soldiers killed students at Kent State
if I was afraid, I don’t remember it
if dad was afraid, I never saw it
I was safe in the cocoon of his self-confidence

on the way home we opted for a night
in a hotel—New York was familiar to dad even
more than DC
an Italian couple stepped onto the elevator
dad rattled off tourist tips in perfect Italian



Kenneth L. Janey, Sr. (1920-1982)

I could understand the words only through the look
of surprise and delight on their faces

as a Tuskegee Airman dad fought two wars
one world war and one to prove Black soldiers were good
enough—looking back I wonder what he felt
about the soldiers in his uniform on rooftops looking down on us
about soldiers in Ohio killing four college kids
about the Black soldiers in Vietnam good enough
and dying for no good reason

the wet centre is bottomless // PS Conway
after Heaney

the road splits
the blanket bogs of Ballycroy, but not the reek

it seeps the air
with uncut peat,
nary a sleán in sight
to circumcise the land,

cut into lots,
damp lungs,
our carbon footprint
eating the grass like sheep,
the last praties shipped
'cross gray seas

my clan has sunk
in its thick, black butter;
names etched in Ogham,
our cairns grown green,
gorse and heather
mark our bootprints

our horse's unshod hoofprints
our final bits
to eat.

my husband's affair was as much with the city as his co-worker // Arden Arias

he worships her sharp angles, high beam eyes,
graffiti sleeves, neon highlights; overlooks
the smoggy scum and perfume piss
enchanted by her sunset bruise halo,
art deco earrings glinting dangerously,
palm frond bangs and smudged liner,
stiletto nails in stoplight red.

she winks and he follows into smoky bars,
throws back overpriced tequila, swallows her
tongue chaser in a corner papered over with ads:
missed connections, lost dogs, scams,
one-night-onlies, underground bands.

they stumble upstairs to her apartment laughing,
moaning, struggling to unlock the door with a
mouth on her neck, a press of teeth. she shoves
him down, palm to throat, a chorus of honking
like crickets as they grind in the electric heat
of late summer-cum-autumn, thick with humidity.

spell and spotlight fade: she likes him,
but in a noncommittal way; her night fever
breaks by business dawn and she has many
paramours; he wants to be more than a lay,
walk the boulevard of her clavicle and navel

but he leaves by train counting her ribs
in the curves of union station thrumming
with busker songs and footfalls; worries
the heavy white gold of his wedding ring
aware he abandoned a home for a fantasy,
but if it's only a dream, it's a nice one.



Calling in the Reinforcements II Mindy Kober

ruminati0n // Arden Arias

my first therapist encourages me to decompress,
regulate my nervous system, try a soothing routine;
suggests her own sacred space: a hot shower,
time alone at last with fragrant suds to wash away
the days hurts and aches.

shower spray scalds my back, pelts plastic evergreen canopies, and gurgles down the drain. i heave acoustic sobs doubled over in vanilla fog. divorce, a numb refrain: plan of escape, on the phone conspiring, pacing, assuaging it's nothing you're just tired and want to go back home, change of environment. but nothing comes to mind when family asks why you stayed with me as long as you did. i scrub at my scalp failing to exfoliate your confessions, the unfamiliar shriek catching in my throat as i begged you to fight for me, the whites of your eyes as you stood with one hand on the doorknob ready to leave, a halfhearted apology tumbling from your lips: 'i'm sorry, i love you, forgive me.' a decade down the drain in the foam of rinsed suds perfumed with apple blossoms. my hair has never been cleaner as our timeline streams plastic as polaroids across the shower tile, faces distorted in a soap bubble filter: your hand shielding my eyes in golden hour light on our college commute, sleeping sprawled on the floor of our first apartment with plush toy pillows and jacket blankets when we had no bed but a first taste of freedom, sleepless nights editing my dissertation together amidst cups of coffee and piles of library books smothered in post-its, the quiet fall of novel snow dusting evergreens, the pink of our cats noses and toes, the arguments and spirals shredding every precious past compressed into familiar failure. 'our separation is indefinite. i can't see myself coming back.' too alone, losing the fight, nails trimmed to nubs so i can't leave crescent question marks in my palms, hands lather my back in a numb fog. were you planning this the whole drive down the coast? are you cheating on me? did you ever really love me? 'i think i loved you once. at least, i wanted to.' no sacred home returns to my lips, distorted by acoustic confessions inhaled by the exhaust fan overhead. i ache and ache and ache.

Seersucker // Scott Burau

The small matter of your leaving
got me thinking of Key West,
several winters ago

how you packed a seersucker suit
so you could propose on the beach, with
tourists filling out each photograph.

We fell asleep in humid sunshine
and woke to sheets of rain
bucketing over our bodies.

Could we ever live here, you wondered,
and we imagined pointless days
bicycles and *cafecitos*,
midnight swims,
the trade wind doing its small work.

Your suit still cradles sand
in the pocket bottoms,
and the right forearm is torn
where you tripped down the lighthouse stairs.

I thought of stitching it
the way we used to mend things:
small, careful, late.

Petition to Put a Jollibee in Tennessee // Bethany Rose Datuin

because there are people who need to know
how fucking good Filipino fast food can be.
It's bad enough that my family's planning
every single vacation based exclusively
on where it's located. As if on a pilgrimage,
we trek to where they are, each restaurant
and pit stop an untouched site of worship.

In New York City, my dad and I walk a block
for mango peach pies to eat as breakfast.
Tucked between brownstone and bodega,
we pull the hot desserts apart and pass
the honeyed halves to one another, our
fingertips melting. In Las Vegas, my mom
and I devour Yumburgers in a casino booth

still sticky with the lunch rush's last mess.
She shares her gravy with me, and the smell
of the patty stays fried into our clothes for weeks.
In Los Angeles, my sister and I scrape bites
of adobo rice out of paper cups for dinner.
We spar with our spoons for pork, but I always
fork over my leftovers without meaning to.

It's the first meal we have when our plane
touches down, and it's the last meal we have
when we're sad to see ourselves go. We try
foods from all over when we travel, but
nothing compares to the tear of chicken
with my teeth, crunch of spiced skin against
my cheek, taste of searing hot meat. And the

spaghetti is surprising, each noodle running thick with savory sauce, ripened with tomato but sweetened by banana. Down it with a cup of pineapple juice, and it just feels right. I want the memory of that forever, that home away from home, big and bright red and yellow bumblebee statue, a relic of my religion.

The flashbacks are enough to convince me. I withdraw this petition. I don't need a Jollibee in Tennessee, if it means I get to eat with my family and forever meet them in memory.

Unique Names Are Worthless When the Tongue Stumbles So Easily // Christian Hanz Lozada

“because the electric cattle prod turns anyone into a prolific storyteller” –Eduardo Galeano

I have trouble discerning the priest’s mumbles
in front of me and Brown Dad and Uncles’ gossip
behind me as the sounds racquet ball off marble,
wood, and wax. I can hear surface tension form
and break just before my niece cries with her new
name and clean soul dressed in a generations-old
baptism gown my mixed-race skin can’t touch.

My nephew, Langston, was born tongue tied;
it troubled his eating and promised to trouble
his speech as if God dictates how well and who
can hold the word on their tongues at birth,
or it’s as if we dictate the shape of acceptable
mouths and bodies from the beginning.
An 80 year old doctor, now retired,

snipped the knot just right to free his voice,
but future tongues might not be so lucky.
My White Brother called me *Tris* and not
nanoy or even the correct *manoy* until he built
pathways around hydrocephaly but never around
a culture that wasn’t his. I only know the baptism
happened because of the smiles and shuffles.

Like a good Catholic, I cut out the side
and avoid the congregation
while my White Brother never showed.

While the Cha Cha Slide Plays in a Near-Empty NOLA Courtyard // Christian Hanz Lozada

The toddling hostess sits us in the bad seat triple-crown: near the bathroom, exit, and kitchen, but her coworker equitizes more than any training or workshop ever could, saying:
“She’s pregnant and her feet hurt. I’ll take you the distance she can’t.”

My face, warm from a pregame Sazerac at Carousel Bar, grows hot as my hurricane drains.
The White couple next to me raise their hands and twist with the song’s instructions.
The White family exiting side-step and clap when directed

while our server stands straight against the wall, waiting for them to pass or request.
He turns his head to sweep the room, taking in all the customers nodding and taping
to the beat, and then he looks at our table, seeing the only paying POC

not trying to dance. He nods at us for knowing. I nod back for knowing.
We then look away, not dancing, because we know what it means
to catch the beat and join a line, and we know what we lose, too.

Bussa // Shon Mapp

After Lucille Clifton, "harriet"

i am you
in this first defeat over
silky haired sweet stalks.
a tortured onyx dissident,
an always-afterthought.
i will not forget this
end's beginning
nor the other ends
nor their beginnings.
easter's baptismal blaze.
i razed Bayley's
fields. bled ferritin
into ash. set the stage
alight for Demerara
for you, Jack
for you, Quamina
& dear Samuel
who sought peace
& protest to
consummate change,
saw hundreds
manifest their trinity—
amniotic liquid,
possessed solids to
anonymous dust.
i am you, Bussa
with no last name

Souse // Shon Mapp

After Kamau Brathwaite's "Bread"

Still after years, the omnipresent incubus rises
with each daybreak. Having taken from us. Taken,

even us. A plunder-path to the west indies. Salt
pickled plasma in sour veins. Our ships' jettisoned dead.

Their swine's discarded bowels and rubber flesh. Starve,
lest we learned to feast and forget. Fete and move

forward. Fret and press parsley into graying meat. We've
ceased to soften, cook or succumb to the vinegar

of their raids and replacements. Obstinate resolve did not
relax under the chemistry of fermentation. We found a way

to *mek it taste too sweet, nuh, sweet fuh days*, the leftovers
entrails, ears, and feet. Be brine nobody's Bimshire. *Nuff*

astringent pithy limes pucker pallid lips, coax beige bodies
to sizzle under noonday suns. We, sons of Tainos. Caribs.

Arawaks. We, daughters, mixed and mated. Fated us,
to a preservation foretold by their own hubris. A Colony.

Constitutional Monarchy. Republic. We saved ourselves, offal
et al. Saved the cucumbers, onions, limes, and scotch bonnet

peppers. Saved the abandoned blood for steamed pudding
and obeah. Saved the breadfruit, for the un-bold, the too-skittish

to eat the gristly souse.

Buggery // Shon Mapp

as a bygone era boils
away, bodies
materialize
from its simmer.
Bajan stew–scraps
of humanity, lives & loves,
reduced. unconsidered.

indecent
our needs, pleasure
besieged, leaves
survivors of laws–
de facto yet de jure,
cursed by dead letters.

an empty bowl
may still be filled
with meat. lingered utility
resurrects in ethos.
in the recipes we bequeath.
it is the reason
to keep inactive things
beyond active use.
just in case.

in the morning, i drink too much // Abigail Cain

coffee and lips on ceramic cups think of you
in an imagined town where the trains no longer pass
nor the cars, nor the bikes.
alone, you eat vegetables plucked from the moon.

you are listening to your star soup to simmer
and you are reading ginsberg by candlelight
and watching me walk over an imagined hill
with imagined meteors falling in the back of me.

when i arrive, we kiss and fuck
and the broth is boiling over the pot
and onto the stovetop burner and
we shower digging our fingers into each other's jupiter bones,

water trickling down backs is tangled vines or roads or train tracks or hiking trails out of here.

still we do these things exactly as we always do:
in rainstorms of saturn's dust,
but this time our mercury joints are imagined
and we drink imagined moonshine while we await imagined death
between imagined here and imagined venus

grape-fruit // Abigail Cain

gods and children eat fruit the same way and it's probably because neither of them have learned how to be judged so i'll buy myself more grapefruit and sit beneath the sun with it because i was a child and i was a girl and well that's close enough to god.

i'll eat all of my grapefruits in one sitting—the whole sack of 'em—until my head falls off.

A Chinese Buffet in France // Xing Zhang

On Mother's Day in Toulouse, France, I stood in line outside of a Chinese buffet on the outskirts of the city. As the line slowly inched further and further ahead, I entered the gleaming restaurant with its marbled, tiled floor, massive crystal chandelier, and koi fish pond at the entrance. I was greeted by the Chinese French hostess, who instantly spoke to me in Mandarin:

"Duoshao ren?" (How many seats?) She asked.

"Liang wei. Xie xie." (Two seats. Thanks.) I replied.

I felt relieved that I was immediately recognized as Chinese and spoken to in my mother tongue without hesitation. For the first time in weeks, I felt like I belonged. As a Chinese Canadian American woman in France, I was used to people being shocked that I could speak French. They usually spoke English to me right away or spoke French and then asked if I could understand them. My perfectionist tendencies made my anxiety worse; I constantly practiced responses in my head and hoped that my French was understood whenever I sparingly spoke it during my daily trips to the boulangeries, grocery stores, and cafés.

The Chinese French hostess's instant recognition of my identity felt like I belonged at the Chinese buffet after weeks of feeling lost and out of place in Toulouse. After submitting my tenure application for promotion to the Associate Professor a few weeks earlier, I was looking forward to spending six summer vacation weeks in France to rest and let go of chasing



academic achievements. I had never been to Toulouse, also known as the "Pink City." I imagined a quieter city compared to Paris, where I had studied abroad in my twenties. I anticipated romantic strolls along the Garonne River at night and purchasing fresh produce from open-air markets. In the first few weeks, I was mesmerized by Toulouse's beauty, with its winding, cobblestone streets, burnt orange buildings surrounding the Place du Capitole, towering emerald-green Plane trees lining the Canal du Midi, and cotton-candy pink sunsets over the Garonne River. I did not expect the depth of loneliness I felt four weeks into my trip, and I refused to name it. I had not seen or talked to friends or family over the phone due to the nine-hour time difference with my home in Phoenix back in the states. Feeling guilty,

I kept wondering why I couldn't just feel lucky to be in France.

My loneliness sharpened when I realized how rarely I saw other Asians in Toulouse. I was more likely to be stared at walking along the streets and felt more out of place. In my fourth week there, out of feeling homesick, I found a desperate need to search for my Asian food staples—Lao Gan Ma chili oil, Lee Kum Kee Guilin chili sauce, Shin Ramyun Black Beef flavor, and bok choy. I went to the two Asian grocery stores closest to Toulouse's city center and felt disappointed by the selection offered. Continuing to feel homesick, I googled all the Chinese restaurants in Toulouse, specifically searching for a Chinese buffet. I found multiple locations of *Royal Buffet* and saw sparkling video advertisements—the gleaming marble floors, brilliant chandelier, and water fountain in the lobby. Seeing how lonely and isolated I felt, my husband immediately declared that we were going to the buffet at that moment.

Chinese buffets have always been an important place in every city that I've lived in. Growing up in Guelph, Canada, the only restaurants my parents would take me to were Chinese buffets. My parents came of age during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, often reminiscing about their hunger due to meager government rations. Chinese buffets represented the antithesis of famine, where they could get good value for their limited money as new Canadian immigrants. Once a month, we would drive to Mississauga to go to *Buffet King*. There, I would be delighted by the huge expanse of Chinese food the size of a large art gallery. Seeing rows of steaming dishes felt like eating anything was

possible—indeed, a meal fit for royals. There, I would stuff my stomach and drift into a food coma on the car ride back home.

At *Royal Buffet*, I was escorted to the table by another host, passing by crowded tables of senior French couples and families. I saw some Asian families and felt relief, knowing that I was not completely alone. I got seated at a table next to an elderly white couple about two feet away and could feel their stares as I sat down. Navigating the crowded buffet's varied spread, I overloaded my plate with lobster, mussels, dumplings, shrimp, chow mein, fried rice, sweet and sour chicken, egg rolls, and beef and broccoli. I was thrilled to be eating Chinese food again after being in France for three weeks and mostly subsisting on baguettes, croissants, and cheese. Back at the table, I cracked open the lobster shells and shrimp with my hands and desperately tried not to make eye contact with the senior couple to my left, who were using a fork and knife to eat their sparse plates alongside glasses of champagne. I worried if I was not being “civilized enough” by not using a fork and knife to eat my food.

After filling my stomach to the brim and satisfied with all the delicious food at the end of my meal, I made my way back to the lobby to leave the Chinese buffet. As I waited for my car ride back, the Chinese French hostess came up and sat next to me. Speaking in Mandarin, she apologized for how crowded it was for Mother's Day and asked me if I enjoyed my meal. She asked me what I was doing in Toulouse and where I was from. She offered me an espresso as I waited. Though I didn't have enough time to

ask her, I wondered about her experience living in Toulouse as a Chinese French woman and how she ended up there. Though the encounter with the Chinese French

hostess was brief, her kindness made me feel seen and appreciated in a place where I was both hypervisible and invisible.



Harvest, originally published in III Anthology II Mindy Kober

Embraced by Bread // Julia Clebsch



In 1967, my grandmother, Juju, brought kitchen lusciousness outside with her as she stepped into Tennessee summer, water-laden air, welcoming my sister and I. Her embrace folded our small bodies into the smell of bread baking and fried chicken. We could have rested against her rounded belly, and sagging breasts for...ever.

Herded into the kitchen, her knife would hesitate at the crust, then slice down to reveal a tight, uniform crumb that arrived out of the chaos of Juju's baking. Oh! The smell didn't disappoint. And, there you are—a flawless slice begging to be slathered with creamy butter. The flavor, a bit yeasty with an elusive sweetness, of perfect southern white bread. A staple at meals of fried chicken, and food from her small garden: crisp smelling burp-less cucumbers soaked in white vinegar, pale green butter beans cooked soft, and sliced red tomatoes leaking juice. She's been dead and gone since 1971, my memory makes the flawless bread synonymous with the sustenance of her embrace.

The divorce was in 1973. My father, a professor of botany, moved out of our house into an apartment. Was it the loss of

his mother, freedom from wife and children, or a whim? Never knew. Never having baked bread, he wanted to learn. Barely a teenager, I knew how. In the small, tight, bachelor pad kitchen, I began instruction with an easy bread. In what was a cautious closeness, we smushed bananas, mixed ingredients, baked, and then lapped up the smell of butter melting on the warm bread. Unleashed and exploring without me, he successfully baked moist, sweet zucchini bread. Baking bread became more than a fleeting attraction. He found it an unbroken passion, which held him longer than my mother did. He went on to learn yeast breads: white, wheat, Swedish rye with anise, traditional German holiday stollen, no-knead breads, and every year he baked 2 loaves of spot-on raisin bread for a family friend. Dad set a goal to bake his way through Beard's Book on Bread. He achieved it as meticulously as he measured—using a knife to even a cup of flour to be exactly a cup. After all, he was a scientist.

Chaotic, kneading, pushing, slamming dough with a puff of flour. I am almost face down into the dough to smell the alchemy of yeast and flour. Always flour on my cheek, forehead, nose. Bread is the staff of life, isn't it? Juju provided it; Dad learned it. Neither my father nor I ever created a loaf like Juju's perfect bread. Trying to channel my grandmother's bread, perfect is something only to strive for and never my reality. I am lesbian, dyke, radical, bi-polar, ADHD, and cognitively compromised. Knowing these things, there would have

been no embrace of her bread, no folding
into her warm soft body. I'm glad she held
me when she could.

But, my father, he knew, and held his
flour-dusted child.

Banana Bread – one loaf

A stick of butter, softened

1 cup sugar

2 eggs

2-3 very ripe bananas

2 cups white flour

1 teaspoon baking soda

1/3 cup milk

A little squeeze of lemon juice

1/2 cup chopped walnuts or pecans

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Grease a 9 x 5 x 3-inch loaf pan.

Cream the butter and sugar. Add the eggs and mashed bananas. Blend until smooth (the bananas might be a little lumpy and the color lovely).

Combine the milk and lemon juice. The juice will curdle the milk.

Sift together the flour and baking soda.

Fold the wet ingredients into the dry. I begin with the banana mixture, then add the milk.

Blending after each addition.

The chemistry of the curdled milk and baking soda will cause the bread to rise.

Stir in the nuts.

Pour batter into the pan. Bake for 45-50 minutes, or until the bread springs back when lightly tapped in the center.

Cool until just warm, not hot. Cut and butter, letting the butter melt into the bread. Smell. Eat.



Photo courtesy of João Manita

Fernando Antunes looked the same at eighty as he had at sixty, waving his arms back and forth like a traffic controller in the crowded arrivals area at the Lisbon Airport. He squeezed me in a vigorous hug, and congratulated me on my six-month-pregnant belly.

“It is so fantastic to see you again,” I said. I introduced my German husband, Uli.

“*Muito prazer*,” (It’s a pleasure) Uli said.

Senhor Fernando’s jaw dropped. “You speak *Português*?”

Uli raised his pinched fingers together, a little.

“He knows more Portuguese than he should, mostly when I don’t want him to understand,” I said, winking. Hiding behind my loose jumper, our four-year-old daughter stuck her head out. She fixed her gaze on S^r Fernando. “And this is Anna Rosa.”

He cupped her face in his tanned hands like a priest anointing a child.

“You are beautiful,” he said in Portuguese. His eyes flashed. “We’d better

move it. I parked in a restricted lane.” Some things never changed.

Uli beat him to the luggage cart. S^r Fernando locked his arm in mine and asked nonstop questions. How were my parents? My sisters? Their husbands? Their kids? Uli loaded the trunk.

“We appreciate your picking us up,” I said. He zipped out of his lane and slammed on the brakes. A taxi blared his horn and raced past.

“*Burro*,” he yelled at the taxi. I stifled a laugh.



He unlocked the creaky entrance door to their building. The cool air, trapped between the marble floor and stucco walls, felt like a fresh towel around my pregnant body. I climbed the steps, my grandmother’s solid low heels echoing in my head, wood meeting marble, like the percussion section of a band. Wisps of sautéed onions and garlic wafted from the apartments, an aroma that kept me in tune with my heritage.

D^a Ana waited on the third-floor landing, her arms outstretched. I bent down to kiss her on both cheeks and embrace her in a hug.

“You look the same,” I said.

“I’ve put on a few pounds.” She stepped back and patted my belly, “and so have you.” Her face showed a few more laugh lines from her husband’s jokes.

Their apartment turned condo had barely changed. I walked past the galley

kitchen, the source of tender *rissóis de camarão* (shrimp rissoles) and the cramped room their son had shared with D^a Ana's seamstress business. Like my mother, she had worked full-time while raising a family. She did the shopping, cooking, and took care of children, elderly parents, and above all, her husband. The only help she had was a housecleaner. Back then, a mountain of clothes to be altered, and fabric to be stitched into dresses and suits covered the sewing machine, a favorite hiding place for us kids. Now, a vase of plastic flowers adorned the closed machine.

In the bedroom their daughter had shared with her grandmother, they had pushed the two slim beds together and added a cot, leaving ten inches of open space.

"It's still small," D^a Ana said, "but we thought Anna Rosa might like to stay with you."

"It's perfect," I said, wondering how I was going to maneuver myself in and out of the room, never mind over the beds. But maneuver I did, crawling over Anna Rosa to open the windows for fresh air, crawling over again to shut out the noisy trash trucks that came around at midnight, crawling over Uli to squeeze through the half-open door to use the bathroom.

We went downtown and walked the cobblestone path up to St. George's castle, perched high above Lisbon's painted and tiled houses topped with terracotta roofs, each house separated by parking-space-sized gardens planted with lemon trees and bay leaf shrubs. When the Antunes offered to babysit in the evening, we seized the opportunity. We took a taxi to Adega Machado and joined the line standing

outside the narrow building covered in blue and white tiles. At a table for two, Uli drank port wine, and I snacked on small black olives, not as bitter as Calamatas but sweeter than Greek olives, and *tremoços*, yellow lupini beans that you bit into lightly, then squeezed the soft outer shell with your fingers to pop the solid disk into your drooling mouth. This salon had hosted Portugal's greatest *fado* singers. *Fado* is like a rich, soulful Port wine sung into a vessel of *saudades*, a melancholic yearning for, and remembered savoring of places, people, and food—a piece of Portugal.



Sr Fernando and D^a Ana drove us up the coastline, stopping at Ericeira, an international mecca for surfers and the scene of the end of Portugal's monarchy, where King Manoel II and his relatives escaped the gory consequences of a coup d'état by defying the rough seas in a modest boat to board a waiting yacht commandeered by an uncle. The mounds of gold that paid for the royals' luxurious lifestyles were collected from their subjects, bound in poverty. But the following series of coups and thirty-six-year dictatorship deepened the reign of oppressive poverty and political retribution. Which one was worse?

Toward noon we arrived at Vivenda Ana, the Antunes' summer house in Santa Cruz. My feet burned with the memory of walking barefoot on the sun-cooked cobblestones. I'd never seen the house with closed shutters. S^r Fernando unlocked the back door and ran around the house opening the windows.

“Do you still come out here?” I asked.

“Eh, not so much.” D^a Ana said. “When the kids and grandkids come, then we do, too.” She pointed to a plot of gangly plants in the yard. “But he still planted the beans.”

We walked past the naked clotheslines that used to sag with inside-out bathing suits, revealing armor that produced the pointy-boob fashion of the day—pads with stuffed tips, plastic cones and even Styrofoam shapers. S^r Fernando once grabbed a set of removable cones and paraded around the yard saying, “I can have boobs, too!” followed by raucous laughter from his audience.

Anna Rosa ran down the walkway that led to a henhouse, empty except for the echoes of a morning rooster and squawking chickens. I doubted she would ever see a chicken being slaughtered, defeathered, rubbed with piri-piri—an African spice that found its way into Portuguese cuisine from Angola and Moçambique—and grilled until the skin crackled with crispness. D^a Ana fetched a wicker basket. We helped her harvest the *feijão bagudo*, (Borlotti beans) light green with maroon blotches that looked like port wine stains, to be cooked later in a soup garnished with cilantro.

S^r Fernando gave us a tour through the musty bedrooms furnished with double beds and folded cots.

“The house was always full,” I told Anna Rosa and Uli. “When the bedrooms were packed they chalked long rectangles on the living room floor for sleeping areas.”

“We had such good times.” S^r Fernando’s eyes misted over. Mine did, too.

D^a Ana came in from the garden. She suggested getting lunch.

At Casa Glória, the waiter led us to a round table. Sr Fernando waved the menus away.

“Four orders of *bacalhau ao murro*.”

“What is that Betty?” Uli asked.

“Boiled potatoes smashed with a mallet, seasoned with salt and a thick drizzle of olive oil. The dried codfish is sautéed with the usual ingredients—”

“Onions, olive oil and garlic?”

“Yes,” I said. “And lots of black olives and parsley.”

Sr Fernando continued. “Sumol, (a carbonated fruit juice we craved as kids) for this *menina*,” pointing to Anna Rosa. “Mineral water for us. Uli, how about a *cerveja* (beer)?”

“Okay. I’m not driving.”

“And I’d like an order of fried potatoes for our daughter,” I said.

Anna Rosa skipped around the pots of geraniums on the terrace, waving at us. S^r Fernando returned the greeting, flapping his arms.

“I hope I have half his energy when I’m sixty,” I whispered.

The waiter brought the drinks, a tureen of steaming soup, and a basket of *papsecos*, crusty bread rolls dusted with flour, with a still-moist marble of dough in the center. S^r Fernando took over, ladling the chickpea-kale soup into six bowls. He asked if Uli liked soup.

Uli nodded. “Betty makes good Portuguese soups.”

“*Que bom!*” D^a Ana marveled, pleased that I’d kept the soup tradition. I beamed from the compounded praise.

I stirred Anna Rosa's soup, letting the steam escape. I tried mine and let out a sigh of recognition. These chickpeas didn't come out of a can. They were dried in the sun, roasted, soaked in water overnight, and boiled. Then came the main course.

"The potatoes are delicious," Uli said. "They almost have a sweet taste."

"I told you the Portuguese have a sweet tooth," I replied.

Anna Rosa chugged the Sumol and ate some of our *bacalhau* with her fried potatoes, golden wafers of thinly-sliced potatoes, fried long enough to crisp the outer edges, but leave a soft white center.

"Mama, these are the most best French fries in the world."

"Portuguese fried potatoes," I corrected her.

After a flan and coffee, we piled back into the car.

"Should we stop at the beach?" S' Fernando asked.

"Oh yes, please." I said.

I could already feel the ice-cold waves hurtling sand and shells at my ankles and taste the salt I lick off the back of my arm when I lay in the sun. I remembered the card games we played in shaded cabanas, and the canoes we dug in the sand with rows and rows of seats. As kids, we bodysurfed the smaller waves for hours and searched for sea glass and ocean treasures. When we were teenagers, my father eagle-eyed us no matter how far away we were, making sure nothing but friendships developed.

We pulled into the parking lot. Uli opened the door for D^a Ana. Anna Rosa ran barefoot on the sand. I walked her to the very edge of a receding wave.

"Whoa," she screamed, racing away. "Freeeeezing."

S' Fernando scoffed. "It's still just as cold, isn't it?"

"Funny," I said. "It never felt cold when I was a kid."

He said our next stop would be Belém.

"What's in Belém?" Uli asked.

"Oh, ho, ho," he chortled. "You haven't eaten a *pastel de nata* (custard pastry) until you've eaten one in Belém." I swore Uli's eyes turned into sparkling sugar cubes.

The ornate square tower of Belém, a ubiquitous image on postcards, stood guard in the Tejo River, surrounded by a fort with artillery openings for moveable cannons. We walked to the Monument of the Discoveries, a concrete memorial shaped like the prow of a caravel, the explorers' ancient ships. Prince Henry the Navigator stands at the bow. He's flanked by statues—his mother Queen Filipa and thirty-two men who are embedded in Portugal's history, including the mathematician Pedro Nunes, the painter Nuno Gonçalves, the poet Luis Camões, and the explorers Vasco Da Gama, Pedro Cabral, and Ferdinand Magellan, who left Portuguese imprints all over the globe. Uli pointed inland to a cathedral-size building and asked what it was.

"The Jerónimos," I said, "It's a cloister where mariners prayed before and after their voyages."

"You mean, if they were lucky," he said, "they prayed on their return." How true.

The men strode across the white and black tiled sidewalk. The female contingent

walked through the park. Barricades of red and yellow marigolds, orange dahlias, and white carnations dimmed the traffic noise of the main boulevard.

D^a Ana held Anna Rosa's hand and pointed. "*Flores.*"

Anna Rosa glanced up. "Flowers?" I nodded.

"I don't want *flores*," she grumbled. "I don't wanna walk."

But when she spotted the towering marble fountain, she tore loose and circled around and around. She ran back and hugged me, her dress and braids damp from the mist. I turned away from the fountain and let the gentle spray cool my neck. The men had rested their lanky frames on a bench. They scooped over to make space for us.

"The café is just around the corner," Uli said.

Around the corner. Did all men attend a secret school to learn coded euphemisms?

Rule One: Don't Ask For Directions.

Rule Two: Never Say You're Lost.

Rule Three: Everything Is Around The Corner. My father's boilerplate answer became a family joke, when around-the-corner turned into one-or-two-hour walks in circles in Rome, Athens, and Munich.

Tourists streamed out of the Jerónimos. "Don't tell me they're closed," Uli said.

My calf muscles loosened. He was disappointed but I was not. This baby and I had walked enough. Inside the café, the Antunes placed our order, and we sat at a table on the covered terrace. A waiter soon

delivered a dozen custard pastries, two Sumols, and three dark beers.

"*Cerveja?*" Uli asked.

"That's what the monks drank." D^a Ana raised her glass.

The *pasteis* were warm and dusted with cinnamon. I bit into the thin, flaky layers of buttered pastry, filled with a heavenly custard, and baked until the top layer burned ever so slightly. Those monks knew how to live.



On our last day we drove to Estoril, my hometown for the first five years of my life. At a small restaurant we ordered grilled sardines, boiled potatoes, and a Portuguese salad—tomatoes, cucumbers and raw onions dressed with olive oil and red wine vinegar. The waiter delivered an oval platter piled high with sardines that glistened in the sun like the granite boulders striped with quartz and mica that lined the northern coast of Portugal.

I snapped off a crispy tail and popped it in my mouth. "It's like a fish potato chip."

Anna Rosa did the same. "Mama, I want a sardine with more tails." She inherited my genes.

During Anna Rosa's pregnancy I had craved salty things: capers, olives, avocados with lemon juice and salt. She loved to eat all of those. I wondered if our next baby would be asking for sardines and *pasteis de nata*.

The ocean glistened with sunlight, reflecting the colorful fishing boats anchored to their moorings. I felt a gentle

rhythmic beat. Our baby was hiccupping. I placed my hand on my belly and felt the tiny thumps. I prayed to the sea gods and sea goddesses that our lives with the new baby would be filled with *alegria*, a Portuguese word for a deep joy,— a joy that is earned from experiencing the depths of every emotion, a joy that transfigures laughter, happiness, and contentment. I thought of my

Portuguese grandmother giving birth to three first-generation daughters in the U.S. I thought about my mother, giving birth to three daughters in Portugal. My life continued an enriching circle of American and Portuguese culture. My body, mind, and soul filled with a slow, satisfied glow. I felt as if I had swallowed a piece of the radiant Portuguese sun.

Slow Garrote // Jonathan Daniel Gardner

By the third day awake, my heart was doing outreach. My jaw worked overtime, grinding down whatever was left. The inside of my cheeks was shredded. I couldn't stop tonguing them. My body stopped believing there had ever been a plan.

Everything had become an instruction. Sit. Stand. Drink water. Don't drop what you're holding. Every action arrived with a caption. My mind no longer trusted intuition. Time had collapsed into a series of over-lit tasks. Each one demanding completion before the next.

I stood in my bedroom with my bag open on the bed. Shirts went in and came out. Pants felt like commitments I couldn't afford. I folded and unfolded the same sweater until it lost all association with warmth. Socks accumulated in the corner, waiting.

We were going upstate in a few hours. Two days. A house on the river. Friends I loved. Children who noticed everything. The occasion, misplaced.

I checked my phone.

Nothing new.

I checked it again.

Nothing.

At some point, checking became a reflex with no result attached. The motion itself felt stabilizing, like touching something familiar.

I showered because it felt like something a person would do. The water hit my shoulders hard. I leaned my forehead against the tile and let my arms hang. Negotiations began.

You should get out now.

Okay, just another minute.

You've been saying that for days.

I turned the water off abruptly.

At the counter, I did what I'd been doing all week. The ritual barely registered anymore. My heart surged like it had somewhere else to be.

For a few minutes, I felt fixed.

I packed quickly. Confidently.

Toothbrush. Charger. Notebook I wouldn't open. Book I wouldn't read.

The speed felt like competence.

My phone buzzed.

Pia: I'm leaving early. Can you be ready by two?

I typed *yes*.

Pia's car was already idling when I came downstairs. She looked rested in a way that I was not.

We drove through the city in fragments. I watched storefronts blur, people crossing streets, entering buildings that recognized them. Pia talked about work, about leaving early, about a meeting that went places she hadn't expected. I answered when it seemed right, careful to sound present without sounding manic.

My body was loud. My mind was sharp in the wrong places. I kept adjusting in my seat, trying to figure out how to sit inside myself.

In Harlem, Winn was waiting with the kids, already fully himself. Bear climbed into her seat with authority, narrating the process like a documentary. Mika slept, face placid, like he understood his role as a newborn.

Alex wasn't with them. She'd take the train up later. Alex moved through the world without needing to explain. A trait I admired.

The car filled with backpacks and soft voices. Bear asked why the sky looked different. Winn explained confidently that he didn't have an answer. She asked why after each response until Winn was searching his phone for meteorology classes.

We crossed bridges. Neighborhoods gave way to nature. Trees don't expect performance. Rivers don't care how fast your heart beats.

By the time we reached the house, my edge had gone brittle, like glass stretched thin.

The place sat close to the river, a modest and open yard between them. The kind of house that assumes you'll behave. Light everywhere. Wood floors worn smooth. The water moved steadily in the distance.

Bear ran through the rooms narrating discoveries. Winn handed me a beer and nodded toward the kitchen.

"Birthday dinner," he said. "She wants steak."

I froze for half a second.

"Right," I said. "Of course."

I had forgotten. Completely. The reason for the trip.

The cold passed through my chest again, sharper.

Alex arrived an hour later. We hugged. She smelled like soap and transit and calm.

"Good birthday," I said, too loud.

"Thank you," she said. "You look... alert."

"I've been in difficult negotiations with sleep," I said.

I slipped over to the bathroom and got myself right. Morale boosted.

The kitchen was unfamiliar but legible. Gas range. Pans hung where you'd expect them. Drawers that resisted at first and then gave in. I rolled my sleeves and washed my hands longer than necessary, the water too hot, the sink deeper than mine.

The steaks were already out, waiting on a cutting board. Thick ribeyes, marbled enough to feel like a hallowed responsibility. I patted them dry with paper towels until they stopped shining. Salt. More salt. Black pepper ground aggressively.

Winn moved around me easily. He chopped potatoes. Olive oil glugged into a bowl. Rosemary stripped with his fingers. He didn't rush anything.

I found a cast iron pan that felt right. Too heavy to be decorative. I set it on the burner and turned the flame up. The kitchen filled with anticipatory heat. I dropped oil in and watched it thin and shimmer. When it started to smoke faintly, I laid the first steak down away from me. It crackled the way it was supposed to.

I didn't rush. I adjusted the flame down a hair and let the crust happen. Butter went in later, a whole knob, then garlic smashed with the side of a knife, thyme bruised between my fingers. I tilted the pan and basted. The smell spread through the house.

I flipped the steaks. I pressed them lightly to feel their give and moved them to the cooler side of the pan to coast. I rested them on a plate, lightly foiled.

When it was time, I sliced against the grain, long strokes. My hands shook just enough to register, not enough to interfere.

Alex sat at the counter minding Bear and watching.

“You’re shaking,” she said.

“The price of being awake,” I said.

I wiped the blade on a towel and set it down carefully. Plated the steak, passed it to Winn. The potatoes came out crisp and dark at the edges. Everything made it to the table hot.

I sat last. My hands were steady by the time I picked up my spoon.

Birth year wine came out. ’87.

Garnacha. A mixed vintage. I drank civilly.

“Athletic wear as an outfit is fine,” I said. “But only if you’re within striking distance of exercise or despair.”

“And you have to be willing to exercise immediately if called out,” Winn said.

“Absolutely,” I said. “I knew you would understand.”

The conversation stayed familiar. Easy. Safe.

Eventually, Winn freed Bear and started the bedtime process. Alex, Pia, and I stayed at the table.

“We think dignity means staying upright,” Alex said. “Staying verbal. Composed.”

I nodded. “Big fan of upright.”

“Sometimes staying upright is just pretending nothing is happening,” Pia said.

“Exactly,” Alex said. “You know how everyone gets embarrassed when their bodies do something without permission.”

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve built a personality around preventing it.”

She smiled. “Right, bodies don’t care if this is a bad time.”

“No,” I said. “They’re very rude that way.”

“What I mean,” she said, “is that we treat it like a failure when the body shows up. Crying. Shaking. Needing help. As if the respectable thing would have been to ignore it.”

“Not being in control is scary,” I said. “I would ignore it if that were an option.”

“It is scary,” she said. “And ignoring it doesn’t actually work. It just delays the moment.”

“The moment of what?” Pia asked.

“Of asking,” she said.

There was a small pause.

“I think,” Alex went on, “that some people mistake self-respect for self-sufficiency. Like if you need anything at all, you’ve failed some test.”

“So falling apart publicly then?” I said.

“No,” she said. “That’s not what I’m saying. There’s a difference between falling apart and letting someone see that you’re human.”

“That feels like a narrow distinction,” I said.

“It is,” she said.

Outside, the moon caught the river moving.

Later, the house went quiet in a way that made my thoughts audible. I excused myself and went outside. The night air felt prescriptive. I did what I needed to do quickly, guiltily. The relief came with a heaviness that lingered a little longer each time.

Back inside, I felt sharper and smaller. The conversation had shifted. Alex talked about teaching, about how students mistake certainty for rigor. Winn argued gently. I listened and felt the rare sensation of being steadied by other people's clarity.

When my body finally gave up, it did so without ceremony. I slept for nine hours.

Morning arrived quietly. Coffee was already made. Winn nodded at me like we'd survived something together.

The day unfolded without incident. Pia went hiking and vanished. Alex and I sat on Adirondack chairs while Winn let Bear throw a ball at him.

She asked me questions that didn't feel like traps. We talked about writing. About fear. About coping and choosing.

"There's a point when you don't need the person who helped you in the same way," she said.

I stared at the river.

"It's hard to set new boundaries," I said. "Especially with old friends."

"They're the hardest ones," she said.

The afternoon passed quietly. I slipped away when I needed to and came back steadier. Winn and I talked about wine and music.

I stopped boosting morale that night and slept. We left in the morning.

The drive home was quiet. Everyone was tired in the good way.

Back in my apartment, I dropped my bag and lay on the rug.

I felt it coming back. I stayed on the floor.

It had never really left.

Gastronomic Gaslighting // Sara Baughn

“Jerry, I’m just saying the gravy could use a little less salt.” I needed this job at Sweet Mae’s Diner, but tips were dwindling.

The line cook’s face turned borscht-red as I handed him the ticket for table six. “Who’s the chef here? You or me?” He thrust plates of food through the service window. “Take this and stop telling me how to do my job.”

Calling himself a chef was a stretch.

I couldn’t see the menu or the tips improving anytime soon, so I signed up for a medical food trial to help cover this month’s rent. After arriving at the modern concrete and glass facility on the outskirts of town, I registered at the front desk, signed the waiver, then was escorted to the testing area.

The lab area didn’t look like a place that researched cutting-edge culinary marvels. The soft glow of a chandelier illuminated a table with a crisp, black tablecloth set for one. A silver cloche dome covered the plate.

Five researchers entered by another door, all wearing lab coats. Sandra, the woman in charge, invited me to sit, while another set up a video camera.

A third lifted the dome, revealing a pink cube of gum resting on the plate before me.

“We want to know what you think about this diet product,” Sandra said. “It contains a delicious four-course meal without the calories. It should leave you feeling full. Please describe everything you taste.” The rest of the team nodded, each

holding a tablet to record notes. The taller one in the back pushed his thick glasses farther up his nose.

I worriedly stared at the little cube. Would it alter my sensitive palate and leave me unable to parse a meal down to its base ingredients? But thoughts of my diminishing bank account had me shoving the doubts away.

I popped the experimental gum in my mouth and started chewing. Saliva flowed as the first flavor blossomed on my tongue.

“Prosecco,” I said, surprised. “Light and fruity with a hint of pear. A lively perlage of bubbles is cascading over my tongue, opening my senses and expanding my palate.” I closed my eyes as the feeling of bubbles vanished and was replaced by something else.

“Crab bisque.” I could almost feel it slide down my throat and warm my belly. “Creamy with a whisper of Old Bay spice and sherry lingering in the background.” I heard someone’s stomach rumble.

The soup reminded me of my early days in the Carolina Lowcountry, toiling in sweltering kitchens while mastering the secrets of southern cuisine.

As the taste of the delectable soup faded, new flavors emerged.

“Fresh romaine and peppery arugula with the added sweetness of roasted beets. A nutty, earthy characteristic is coming forward.” I paused, savoring the taste until the profile of the particular nut became clear. “Toasted walnuts. Also, crumbled feta with

a drizzle of olive oil and lemon for dressing.”

Memories of the Mediterranean surfaced when I wrote for an international food journal. It was also where I met Nico.

I switched the gum to the other side of my mouth. Next, should be the main course.

“Filet. Warm and tender, seasoned with Himalayan pink salt and cracked black pepper, topped with a creamy blue cheese balsamic reduction. Paired with garlicky new potatoes and...” I smacked the gum, “...roasted asparagus with a trace of lemon.”

A slight moan escaped someone's throat. I tilted my head back, sighing as the final course settled on my taste buds.

“Velvety chocolate cheesecake with tart raspberry sauce and white chocolate shavings.”

No one did cheesecake like Junior's in New York. I worked there while attempting to patch up an already failing relationship with Nico. That cheesecake was my only solace during the chill of heartbreak and the feeling of being adrift.

I finally opened my eyes, stomach growling in protest at the gastronomic gaslighting. “I'm starving.” I spit the gum into the napkin on the table.

“Me too,” complained the petite researcher in the front.

“Can someone order Thai?” sighed another.

Sandra handed over my payment, plus a bit extra. “Can you come back? The next iteration will have beef bourguignon.”

I smiled, pocketing the cash. “Sure. Guess the appetite suppression needs a little work.”

She laughed. “No kidding. But your descriptions didn't help!”

After getting back to the city, I headed to my favorite local grocery, intent on making ramen for dinner. Settling into doing what I loved most soothed the prickles of frustration with my current predicament. I sat at the battered kitchen table and enjoyed the spicy notes of chili oil and savory umami. Then spent the next hour browsing the job listings on my laptop.

One caught my attention.

Chef wanted: Sweet Mae's Diner - references required. Must be able to cook.

I smiled and clicked the link. It looked like Jerry's dictatorial reign with the salt shaker was over.



Buried Artifacts, originally published in Wildroof Journal II Mindy Kober

One Night With the Dragon // Ryan Douglas

I glanced at my gas gauge. I had just enough to get me to the Annex, the neighborhood where I used to buy heroin. I locked my doors and checked my mirror as Marlene's words crept up like an eclipse in the daylight.

"What's my problem? You're my problem!" she said as she whipped around to face me. "Did you tell my friend that my mom was drinking again?"

My mouth opened, but no words came out.

"You come home. You barely say hello to me, and then you sit on the couch, dead to the world. I don't need this. I was fine until you came along!"

"Oh, like you're so wonderful!" I shouted. "I hear you sneaking into the living room at night, calling your ex-boyfriend. I know how he treated you. Go back to him if that's what you want."

"I'm *not* going *back*." I could hear the fillets sizzling on the stove. "At least he didn't kill his best friend," she muttered.

I felt the blood run from my face. I'd had it! I stood up, tossed the remote, and left, slamming the door behind me.

I looked out my driver's side window. Nights with Terrance were better spent than time with my girlfriend. What did she know? I put my car in drive, spun the wheel, and headed toward the highway.

My heart beat faster. *This is it. My first relapse in one-and-a-half years.* Feelings of getting high flooded my brain: the longing for old times, the rush of adrenaline, the excitement of the street.

I turned onto the entrance ramp and hit the gas. I couldn't return to being an addict, I thought. I'd do it once, and that'd be it.

Anger fueled my exploits. I didn't have to listen to Marlene. I didn't have to listen to anyone! I was sick of the normal things: spending time together, showing up at my job every day. I jumped into the left lane and passed a car. *I have work in the morning, I realized. I'll show up tired. Everyone's entitled to a bad day.* Marlene might kick me out, but I'd find somewhere to live.

I moved over and slowed down as my exit came up. *Who would even find out? No one would know. It'd be just one night.*

Spring brought the neighborhood outside while the last commuters rushed home. I felt a calm urgency as I pulled into the gas station on Main, and I started to sweat. I parked, went in for an energy drink, and looked for familiar faces with nowhere to go.

Inside the store was the usual: people buying scratch-offs and vape cartridges, but no one lingering. I paid for my drink and stepped outside. The place was dead, so I hopped in my car and came back towards East Shore Park.

The hunt for drugs eased the gravity of the situation. I knew I shouldn't be there, but the urge to get high overpowered rational thought.

Just ahead was a faded yellow house. I doubted anyone was still running the same trap. As I passed the house, I fell into a trance. Was I sure about this? I drove the last

mile with my hands tightly clung to the wheel as a fog rolled over me. I pulled into the park and sat by the baseball field.

“Do you want to get high?” I asked Terrance. We were days out of rehab.

He shook his head and then looked at me. “Already?”

I knew he wanted to stay clean, but this wasn't our first stint in treatment. “I can't go straight. I need dope.”

Terrance paused, and the weeks of therapy fell away like days on a calendar. “You're fucked up,” he said, and a willing smile reached his face. “Let's do it.”

I had plans to go to technical school after I graduated. I was selling mobile phones and wanted to get into computer networking, but late nights with friends led to getting high, and having a good time became a nightly routine. Once I tried heroin, I fell in love.

Terrance dropped the baggies on the coffee table. “I couldn't get needles. There's an extra lighter in the drawer,” he told me.

Neither of us needed a syringe. It had been over a month since we used, and we destroyed our kits before leaving for detox. In the kitchen, I grabbed a straw and some aluminum foil. “The first high is always the best,” I said as I snipped the straw into pieces. Terrance took one and tore a rectangle from the foil. I poured three bags onto mine and lit up.

Rain started to come down at the park. If there were any dealers here, they'd be flushed out in the next few minutes. I took a hit from my vape. I loved the moment of getting high; your blood was pumping; you had a warm feeling over your body, but right now was different. I didn't know if I

could find anyone, and as the rain poured down, I didn't see anyone leaving the park.

“What am I doing?” I said out loud. I had one-and-a-half years clean! Is this what I wanted? I thought about Marlene. *How could she say that to me like it was my fault Terrance died? She didn't even know him!*

Deep down, I knew it was true. Terrance dying was my fault. I felt like my world was collapsing, and I was the piece of shit everyone said I was. I put my car in drive and left the Annex.

I miss my mother's funeral because I have to bury my raccoon. She wanted me to go, but I had to make a choice and hey, she's alive. Plus the last funeral she threw had mourners galore. She's only sixty-four and it's funerals of the very old that draw the sparse crowds. Witness, Pal. Pal was my raccoon. He died at fourteen years of age, on the old side for a raccoon. Sure enough, the mourners are only me, my neighbor Kathleen, and my neighbor on the other side Reino, and Reino didn't even like Pal, who always rooted around in his garden, though Reino acknowledged he was cute.

As Reino digs a grave in the hard clay, I lay Pal's curled-up body on flowered teal barkcloth and wrap the fabric snug around his limp fur. Kathleen lowers Pal into the deep hole. He looks small down there, as though he deflated when the wild and moody took off. We shovel dirt onto him and Reino tamps it down good. He says, "I defy any other raccoon to dig him up." Kathleen adds a few words to bless his nomad soul. I thank them. They leave.

I wheel up the ramp into the house and think about lunch. My phone buzzes. It's Mom.

Hi Honey

Honey? She doesn't call me "honey." The last few weeks, she's been after me to test run an automated text app called *Afterlife* and this must be it. I've refused—it's creepy—but her funeral has me thinking about how I've been an expensive child. I owe her. So I give it a try.

Hi, dead mom

I love you

I love you too

How's Pal?

Still dead.

Sorry. Memory degrades in the afterlife.

No one tells you that.

I feel lexically pressured to respond, but AI is just a neat trick so I set my phone on my kitchen counter.

I live alone. I'm not lonely. I talk to real people every day: Reino, Kathleen, Daryl and her wife, whose name I didn't learn right away and now too embarrassed to ask. But right now I *am* lonely, because Pal's gone.

I look at the clock. I can make lunch at the Senior Center with Bill. I'm decades too young to qualify, but Bill talked them into letting me eat with them because I'm in the wheelchair. Bill's a gay Vietnam vet. I think now I should have had food for Reino and Kathleen, some kind of thank you. My helper Maria could have made something yesterday, but I didn't know Pal would take such a sharp turn for the worse in the night.

I think about Pal's foot as I roll downhill toward the Center. I brush past a bushy lantana and it releases a spicy perfume, red and yellow flowers bright in the sun. The first tumor I noticed was in Pal's foot. I assumed it was an abscess. I should have had that leg amputated immediately, an option the vet offered when I took Pal in—hissing and batting his claws—but by then it had spread.

Christ, I don't want to mull. I already sobbed a bit when the vet put Pal down as I held his little body. He tried to take Pal—the city requires vets to cremate—but it's hard

to say no to a crying guy in a wheelchair in a living room with catheter boxes stacked in a corner. Also, he had asked me earlier what happened, meaning why am I in a chair. It had taken me by surprise, since people rarely ask, but maybe the vet's closeness to death lowers his social boundaries. He was maybe late forties, some older than me, and athletic-looking so I said, "Hang gliding." I'm fit enough to sell that, so he let me keep Pal, despite paperwork problems. I didn't feel manipulative, because all I could feel was "I killed my friend." The tears were real.

I run into Bill. He's with his young husky, Malcolm, who stands on his hind legs to give me licks and nips. Malcolm loves that I let him bite. It's a payoff from living with a raccoon who kept trying to train me to be as wild as he is. As he was. The licks are sweet, but Malcolm's presence means that Bill's already eaten lunch, and without Bill, I don't want to go to the Center. We talk about losing pets. Before Malcolm, he had Molly Two and before that, Molly One. Before Pal, I had a cat who, come to think of it, also enjoyed using his claws. Wild things and I get along, I guess. I always did take too many risks, causing my parents sleepless nights. Bill gives me condolences and resumes his trek uphill.

Since Pal's in the ground, I decide I can make Mom's post-funeral reception if I get some caffeine in me. I order a coffee and jalapeño bagel via an app and roll one more block to Castro Street to pick it up. I'll book a rideshare straight from there; I don't need to let Pal out to pee, now do I?

One thing you learn when you have a raccoon for a pet is that if you tell anyone,

they will inform you it's illegal to keep a wild animal as a pet in San Francisco and that raccoons do not make good pets. They're not wrong—I can show you my arms, scarred, scratched and bruised right up to the end if you don't believe me—but what are you going to do when a baby ball of fur mews hungrily at you in your yard, days go by, and no adult raccoon shows up to claim him? By the time I realized none ever would, he was already "Pal" and I couldn't surrender him to any authority. Mercifully, I didn't know how much work he would become.

I learned to let him out into the backyard three times a day or so. It's all mine, with high fences and magnolia thriving in the middle. I fed him, he grew, and one night he taught himself to climb and I could only watch him go. Bye bye, Pal.

But he came back. Once a month or so he'd go adventuring, but he always returned. He had guaranteed food, the magnolia, and a house for a den, so why not, right?

The automatic door at the café opens for me. I pick up my coffee, put it in the cup holder, and park near the door. I chew the toasty bagel, sharp with cheese that fights the fierce bite of pepper. My phone alerts me I've received a text.

Hi Sweetie

Sweetie, that's nice. It's also what Mom calls her car, but still, it feels good.

Hi, dead mom

I worry how you'll be with me gone

I have a lot of friends, Mom

You always were a sunny kid

Is it true? Probably. I liked home. I liked school. I always expected everything to work out.

Was Dad there today?

I wonder what the AI will do with a factual question.

Of course he was.

I admire the confidence: the AI can't know that Dad was there and I was not. Can it?

I don't mind that you didn't make it. I understand.

Yikes, that's really like Mom. This is still the app, right?

A woman in mauve yoga-wear with a rolled blue mat under her arm is wanting to get by me. I hadn't seen her or realized my chair was obstructing her path. How long has she been standing there?

"Sorry," I mutter, putting away my phone and rolling to the side.

"No problem," she says. Then, in a whisper, "What happened?"

Two *what-happeneds* in one day? People don't ask such personal questions much. I sometimes detect a desire to ask—eyes that linger on the chair too long—but it's unusual for someone to go for it. Maybe by blocking her path I gave her too long to think.

"Car accident," I whisper back.

"Oh." She hurries on to the register to order. I watch her go, or rather, I watch her legs go. Once a week I go to a local adaptive yoga session for disabled people. It's satisfying and feels good, but still, yeah, I'm jealous of her ambulation. My big fear is that I will someday stop going out. Leaving home is an undertaking.

I roll outside. The day is perfect and there's a free table. It bears a square blue sticker containing a white line-drawing of a person in a wheelchair. That's me. I book the rideshare. Three minutes. I swallow the last bite of bagel, but I can't drink hot coffee that fast and I can't manage a full paper cup without help, which not every driver wants to provide. A café regular, Ricardo, looms over me. I never realized how big he is.

"Sorry about the car accident, man."

He overheard? I feel unsettled. I've never noticed him checking out my chair.

"Wasn't a car accident. I just wanted her to go."

"Oh." His eyes show surprise. A question hangs in the air.

"Drive-by," I say.

His eyebrows shoot up. "Oh!"

Now no questions hang in the air, or rather, too many do. I don't clarify and Ricardo leaves. My phone shows the rideshare arriving. I take the coffee from the holder, remove the lid and blow on the dark liquid. The rideshare pulls up. I dread having to negotiate the drink with the driver, but wheel toward his car, lidded cup in the holder. He takes in that I'm his customer and drives off. It's far from the first time, but fuck.

So, no funeral, then. I return to the table. I nurse my coffee, strong, powerful. I want to get sun and air before I go home. Once I'm back inside that will be it for today. I'm spent.

The coffee ends and the sun gets hot, so I start the return journey. I take a slightly different route back. It starts with a modest incline, then it's flat for two short blocks, then I get a slight downhill before rejoining

my earlier route. The trip home is always a workout, and I am grateful for the fresh yellow curb cutouts, despite their nibbly bumps.

I'm in pretty good shape, all things considered, but today I need a breather. Halfway home, I stop outside the supermarket.

A young guy comes out of the market, sees me, and reaches for his wallet. Oh no. If I someday need to beg, I'll beg, but that day is not here. "I'm just resting," I say, a little too loud.

He leaves his wallet in his pocket, thank god. If I wanted anything out of him it wouldn't be money. He's handsome, with really sexy legs. And no, I am not particularly into legs, but he's wearing shorts and his calves look like he could jump ten feet into the air. I want to touch them.

"What . . ." he says, and makes a hand gesture at the chair, like, "what is all this?"

Goddamn. Do I have dead-pet-face, inviting invasive questions? "Meningitis."

He nods. "Right on, right on."

Right on? "Yeah," I reply. I think that's a reply. He bounds off. I resume my trek uphill.

A nanny pushing a stroller checks me out.

"Spina bifida," I say. I speed up. "Slipped in the bathtub," I say at the next person who looks. I speed up more. "Fell off a ladder," I bark at another. I'm racing uphill now. My shoulders are aching.

The hardest block is the last and I should rest but I want to sit by Pal's grave feeling the swaying shade of our leafed-out tree. My shoulders are screaming. I can't

afford an injured shoulder, so I concentrate on good form, and in my distraction a rock, a piece of wood, I don't know what—or how—spills me forward onto the sidewalk.

I'm dazed. I think about calling Mom, or Dad, or Maria. I can't bear to call Reino or Kathleen, maybe because you can't go to the same well too often, maybe because they saw me cry. It would be too much.

I lie there. After a few minutes, I notice I don't hurt. My shoulder is tired, not injured. Overhead, I get my gentle sway of leaves. It's a perfect temperature. I can get myself back up into my chair. It will be a process, but there's no rush. As Dad says, if we weren't doing this, we'd be doing something else.

Maybe five minutes later, I hear, "Are you all right?"

I turn to look. Yep, it's Daryl.

"I guess not," I admit. I really can get myself home. You should see how fast I get into a rideshare backseat and fold the chair for the driver to stow, given the chance. "I'm out of gas."

"I'll help you."

Daryl rights my chariot, locks the wheels and holds the chair steady.

"Thanks."

I'd raise and scoot myself around, but my legs are in the way of everything. She maneuvers them for me with no hesitation, a big help.

"You scraped your face."

"And this time I can't blame Pal." I chuckle, remembering past times I've used Pal as a convenient excuse.

"Sorry I couldn't make it this morning," she says.

“I’ll do a little thing for him in the backyard on the weekend.” I’m committed now; but it’s good. I love my neighbors.

“Great! Kath has Saturday off.”

Kath! Her wife’s name! I’m absurdly happy to get this knowledge without having to ask, but then again, why *didn’t* I ask? It’s not like asking someone why they’re in a wheelchair.

Daryl wheels me to my backyard door. I feel better than I have all day. Her quiet company eases the road.

“Thanks, Daryl.”

“No worries, mate.” She’s from Melbourne.

The phone rings as I roll into my kitchen. Like, it’s an actual phone call. The screen reads *Mom*. I answer.

“This really you? The real-live you?”

She laughs. It’s her all right. “Didn’t like the app?”

“Meh,” I say. “It’s no substitute. How was the funeral?”

“Better. The things people said about me ten years ago made me realize I wasn’t as nice as I thought. Today I feel I’ve made progress being human.”

“You have.”

She pauses. “If I do another in ten years, will you come?”

“If you’re actually dead, sure. If not, probably. If my raccoon doesn’t die that morning.”

I invite her to Pal’s weekend memorial. I’ll invite Dad too.

“You’re not thinking of getting another raccoon, are you?”

I look at my arms. Short scratch here, long one there, a big-ass scab haloed by an oval bruise in etiolated yellow and purple-black. The other arm’s worse.

“Hell no,” I say, but I picture Pal’s crinkly black nose in my mind, and think, Maybe.



Photo courtesy of Geo Lightspeed7

Ákos and I arranged to meet at five thirty. That would allow me enough time to get there after work and, if we drink a couple of beers and have an oniony snack, to get home without her noticing that I was in a pub. I don't really know why I'm hiding it, there is no longer any need. Yet, instead of the snack, I usually have a toasted sandwich because that doesn't smell as strong. Of course, I don't even remember the last time I got close to my wife, or when she touched me. It doesn't matter, I should have no trouble getting home by seven after a couple of beers and a sandwich. The children are big by now and don't need much supervision, yet the old reflexes still kick in. Perhaps she has them, too.

But Ákos is late. I check the time on my phone again and again; I won't be able to get home by seven this way, or we would only have time for one beer, and what's the point of that? I have no choice but to ask for a beer because the waitress has been at my table once already and asked what I wanted then. A few minutes later, she pointedly

passed by again. When she approaches the third time, I call her over and order a beer, just to ease the situation. For a second, it occurred to me to ask one for Ákos as well, but then changed my mind. I know he doesn't like it when his beer is warm and has no head. Soon it turns out that I made the right decision: I call him, and he starts apologizing that it had slipped his mind because he didn't write it down, and now he has something else to do. We should meet another time. I try to believe him. I ask him when, to which he replies that we should correspond about it. Fine, let's do that.

Ákos is fed up with me because I'm always harping on the same things. He's right. It would indeed be better to let go of certain things and not hang on to something that stopped a long time ago.

The beer arrives. Now that Ákos is not coming, I have plenty of time. I can gulp down this beer, even though I no longer feel like it. There is no place I need to rush to. I slowly slurp the foam when I spot Tibi. He's about to sit down at the table next to me with a man I don't know. They don't notice me, or at least Tibi pretends not to. Without thinking it through, I suddenly get up and walk over to them. Tibi's face shows shock and surprise when I greet him. He has the same expression he had the time I spotted him with my wife in the underpass. This time, however, he tries to switch to a benevolent smile.

"Hi, how nice to see you. How well you look."

I know I don't look well at all. My eyes have bags and dark circles around them, my shirt is crumpled, my trousers stained, my shoes worn out, and I can feel my blood pressure rise and my heartbeat increase. In any case, I try to smile back. Tibi introduces me to his buddy and asks whom I'm with. When I reply that I'm alone, after some hesitation, he invites me to join them. I thank him but decline, saying that I'm about to leave, which is true. I drink my beer even faster now. In the meantime, I keep pressing my phone, reading my old messages and deleting some of them. I had recently reset my chat so that it wouldn't show when I was available. My wife had adjusted hers a long time ago.

I finish the last gulp and head for the door. Tibi jumps up and confronts me. I try to get out of his way, but he clumsily hugs me and asks me when we'll have a drink together. I tell him, "Sometime, let's email each other or something. Do you know where my wife is going to sleep tonight?"

"Excuse me?"

"Is my wife going to sleep at home tonight or at your place?"

Tibi looks at his buddy imploringly, who raises his eyebrows.

I leave them. I write to my wife while I'm paying. I ask her what I should pick up on the way. Within seconds, she replies that she doesn't need anything since she was just at the store. It occurs to me to write to Ákos to tell him what just happened, but then change my mind. I'm also fed up with my old stories. Besides, what else could Ákos say in addition to his polite reassurance that he didn't like Tibi, even though they have never met?

My younger child is at home, the older one hasn't arrived from his practice yet. My wife and I move around in the kitchen without saying a word. While putting away the groceries, I could see her disapproval, even though I only had one beer, and I tried to turn so that she wouldn't be able to smell my breath. Now that we only exchange brief sentences, I don't know if she's angry because I left the shopping and carrying to her. She puts some of the items in the fridge, the buns in the breadbox, and lines up the rest on the counter before taking them to the pantry. One of them is a jar.

"They're jalapeños" she says, "I bought them for you. Tibi told me you liked them. I didn't know."

Actually, I do like jalapeños. A while back, when I used to drop in on Tibi, we ate them to go with homemade sausages. They soaked up the beer and the hard stuff well. But it never occurred to me to buy some for home. I always associated them with Tibi and his apartment. By the way, they were the same type of jalapeños, in the same jar, with the same label. It's even possible that she bought them at the same place that Tibi did. Could it be that they bought it together? I try to figure out how much time I spent in the pub with Tibi and whether he could have been shopping with her before that. Not likely. It is better to imagine this scenario than some other one.

I had absolutely no intention of dropping in on Tibi in the near future. But at least now I can eat jalapeños at home as well. Come to think of it, my wife should know that I like them: when our family went out for pizza, sometimes I ordered jalapeño pizza.

"Thanks", I say, "by the way, are you going to sleep at home tonight?"

My wife glances at her phone on the kitchen table before answering. The screen is dark.

"I don't know yet", she says.

I'm thinking of making a toasted sandwich, and I might as well open the jar of jalapeños to go with it.

Correspondence // Frank Brinker

The jar sat in the back of Angelo's refrigerator for two weeks, pushed behind a wedge of queso fresco and three varieties of rocoto he was testing for the fall menu. He knew it was there. Every morning when he reached past it for the cream, his fingers grazed the cold glass, and he pulled his hand away as if the contact meant something he wasn't ready to decide.

Katia had pressed it into his hands at the reception after the funeral, still in her travel clothes, smelling of an airplane and the particular grief of someone who had flown four thousand miles and arrived too late to say goodbye.

*This is what I eat, she'd told him.
This is what Peru tastes like to me now.*

He nodded. Set the jar on the counter. Later, he moved it to the refrigerator without looking at the label.



Verde occupied the ground floor of an old colonial house on a side street in Barranco, twelve seats arranged around a single marble counter where guests watched Angelo and his two cooks move through service like a slow, deliberate argument. No printed menu. Each course was delivered with a note card describing the dish by its primary ingredients and origin: *papa amarilla, Huancayo. Trucha, Lago Titicaca*. The sourcing notes were Angelo's theology. The agrarian reform expropriated his abuelo's hacienda in the Mantaro Valley when Angelo's father was still a boy,

parceled it out, and though Angelo had never lived there, the story had grown in him like a root system. He cooked only what Peruvian soil produced. He treated the ingredients as a form of testimony.

Critics celebrated his *radical terroir* and Angelo's refusal to let anything foreign contaminate the conversation.



On a Tuesday, two weeks after the funeral, he opened the jar.

The smell arrived first, unmistakably ají amarillo, with the high citrus-pepper brightness that loosened something at the back of the throat. But underneath it something slower moved, a smokiness that didn't belong to fresh chili, and below that something almost floral, green-herbal, the ghost of huacatay dried and concentrated into a single sustained note.

Angelo stood at his kitchen counter at eleven in the morning and put a spoon in the jar. Ají amarillo dipping sauce, named from its principal ingredient and often further defined by crema or salsa, was the caution in the stoplight of dipping sauces he served at Verde: Ají Rocoto, Ají Amarillo, and Ají Verdi—the namesake and most popular sauce.

The paste was smoother than anything he had made. A small wave of heat surged forward, just to ebb earlier than expected, letting sweetness bloom in the calm. The sweetness came not from added sugar, but from the patient work of reduction. Water cooked away until only the

chili's own sugars remained, caramelized and folded back into the heat. The finish stretched long, warm, faintly nutty from what had to be a fat he couldn't immediately place.

He ate three more spoonfuls, standing over the sink.

It was not his grandmother's ají. His grandmother's ají was blunt and bright, turmeric-yellow, built for the potatoes it dressed. This was something that had traveled—not just across a border but through years of iteration in a kitchen that was not Peru and was not-not Peru. He tasted the drift in it. The way a word changes when it moves into a different mouth, and the new mouth isn't wrong, just different, and the word becomes two words, both real.

He called Katia.

"Describe the kitchen," he said. "At El Inti."

"Angelo, I'm working."

"The kitchen. Describe it."

She laughed, that full, exasperated laugh she'd had since they were kids. "You're lucky they treat me like a daughter and let me into their kitchen."

The owners were a couple from Trujillo; she told him, been on Market Street twenty years. The wife ran the stove. Commercial equipment, fluorescent lights, the kind of place that started with jarred products because there was no other choice, because dried mirasol didn't grow in New Jersey, and ají amarillo paste didn't come fresh. But the wife added things. Her mother's things. She dried the huacatay in a ceramic container on the windowsill. A reduction she did every morning before

service, cooking the base paste low and slow until the kitchen smelled like somewhere else.

"Why are you so serious about a jar of paste?" Katia asked.

Angelo didn't have an answer that fit inside a phone call.



He drove to Surquillo market that afternoon and bought the ají amarillo he had bought a hundred times before, from the same woman in the same stall who grew them in the Rimac valley. Bought dried mirasol from the spice vendor two rows over. And huacatay, a fat bunch of fresh huacatay along with the dried variety. The flavor profile required the dried version, concentrated and altered by time.

In the Verde kitchen, alone, he started the first attempt at four in the afternoon.

Over the gas flame, the ají amarillo roasted until its skin blistered and blackened, the flesh softening into something yielding. After scraping and blending the pulp with a touch of oil, the kitchen filled with a scent so thick he could almost taste the roasted pepper in the air. Next came the dried mirasol, bloomed in a dry pan until it released a low, raisin-dark perfume that rose in a thin column of smoke. Between his fingers, he crumbled the dried huacatay, letting the herbal dust fall into the mix before finally beginning the reduction.

The paste thickened at the edges of the pan first, browning slightly where it touched the copper, and he scraped continuously, the spatula drawing slow figure eights across the bottom, watching the

color deepen from orange to amber. His grandmother stood at a similar stove forty years ago, her elbow moving in the same motion. Katia, at fifteen, sneaking a pinch of sugar into the pot when their grandmother turned her back, laughing when Angelo caught her and threatening to tell. He'd never told.

The first attempt tasted like the idea of the paste, but not the story. The heat was right, but the depth wasn't there. Something in the fat ratio pulled it thin at the finish.

He wrote every measurement before he scraped the pan clean.



The second attempt, three days later, he added lard and reduced longer. Richer, almost too rich, the sweetness now edging into something cloying. The third attempt, he pulled back on the lard, added a pat of butter at the very end, and reduced less aggressively. Closer. The finish was there, a warm amber note that spread across the back of the tongue and held. But the front heat came up too hard and fast, aggressive in a way that wasn't what he'd tasted in the jar.

He picked up his phone to call Katia, but his face reflected in the dark window reminded him of the time, and he didn't want to disrupt her kids' bedtime routine. When Katia had left for school in the States decades ago, they had lost touch. A missed call from her, which he had not returned, had turned into something with gravity. He'd been in the middle of staging, and he'd told himself he would call back, and then weeks passed. They reached a point where calling felt awkward, then eventually stopped

feeling like an option at all, replaced by the ordinary attrition of separate lives. Kids have a funny way of bringing families back together, and it has been nice reconnecting with her.

He started the fourth attempt.

He took the ají amarillo and instead of roasting it; he sweated it raw, low heat, in a covered pan with a little salt, letting it release its water slowly over twenty minutes. The flesh went translucent and soft with no char. He added the dried mirasol early, letting it steep in the water until the ají released, and he tasted this liquid before he added anything else. Mild, almost sweet, with a vegetable quality that he'd cooked out of every previous attempt by using heat.

He reduced everything together this time, all at once, low flame for forty minutes, stirring every few minutes, and the kitchen filled with a smell that was not quite his grandmother's kitchen and not quite the smell Katia had described and not quite anything he recognized from his own history. Newness was simply the clever reassembly of things already known.

At the end, he added a small knob of butter, turned off the heat, and put a spoon in.

The heat edged and faded before it peaked, and in the space it left behind, the sweetness arrived. After the sweetness, a low green note, the huacatay, dried and long-traveled. The finish held for several seconds before it released.

It was not the paste in Katia's jar. But something new, as if he had just translated a new version of the Bible into his own language. A translation of a translation. A

third version, with its own lineage, its own set of decisions, its own set of absences.

Angelo found an empty jar under the counter, filled it, and wrote the date on the lid with a marker.

Angelo kept the first jar to himself, savoring it with his meals. He shared the second batch with his cooks. After months of consternation, he served his first meal with the updated sauce. During a Wednesday service, a woman in seat four asked the server about the pale yellow sauce pooled beside the causa on her fourth course.

"Ají amarillo," the server said. "Barranco."

The sourcing note on the menu card read: Inspired by a jar from Paterson, New Jersey.

The woman ate the causa, requesting more sauce. She didn't ask about the inspiration.

Celeste Vargas, food critic, on her third visit to Verde, waited until the other guests had gone. She sat on the marble counter while Angelo wiped down the

stoves and asked him about the sauce. Her notebook opened and pen clicked. She wanted the provenance of the chilies, the sourcing chain, and the drying process.

He told her the whole story. The funeral. Katia's jar. The market in Surquillo, the four attempts, and what he'd found on each one.

Celeste wrote it all down. Then she tapped her pen against the notebook.

"So it's a diaspora dish," she said.

Angelo set down his cloth.

Katia's life flashed in his mind: her third-floor apartment in Paterson, two kids, the commute, El Inti on Market Street every Friday, eating something that tasted like home from three thousand miles away, a version of home assembled from what was available and remembered from being passed down across generations. A real flavor, with a real history. A lineage that existed entirely separate from his, as the one who stayed.

"No," he said. "It's a correspondence."

[1]

It was raining, a slow, soggy drizzle. And Max knew from the moment he climbed off the B57, popped open his rainbow umbrella, and began slogging through the streets of Brooklyn that this would not be his night.

He'd been coming to this party for years, starting when he was just an anxious baby bi with big dreams and a lot to prove. Working at a bakery, then a print shop, then a vegan BBQ joint. Hoping for something that better fit his talents—a paid internship at *The Advocate*, or maybe a gig with the HRC. Hanging out most nights at Happyfun Hideaway, chatting up hes and shes and theys while sipping a sixteen-ounce Paloma. Trying to talk them across the street to his apartment, though few ever came. But one of them had told him about Kiss and Tell. Said he'd have a better time there. And he had.

Now, passing a paused construction site and a suspiciously bustling massage parlor, he thought back to all the good times he'd had there and told himself not to count tonight out. Aware that the biggest factor was his state of mind. After all, nothing cockblocks you more effectively than your own doubts. He stepped off the bus, then fumbled with the building's battered wooden door. Clambered up the warped wooden stairs. Pushed through a heavy black velvet curtain. And found himself face-to-face with Jake, The Loft's

beloved head bartender, who never normally worked the door, but was working it tonight.

“Hey!” Jake said, signing Max in. “First one here!”

Max grinned. “What do I win?”

Jake shrugged. “You get to stand alone in the middle of the room and hope that someone else shows up?”

All month, the city had existed in a state of uncertainty. An area the size of Staten Island had been cordoned off upstate, ground zero for infections on the Eastern Seaboard, but the governor still sounded confident they'd caught the disease in time. While the UN issued press releases that instructed people to brace for disaster, the mayor insisted it would blow over, that people should celebrate the near miss by treating themselves to dinner and a show.

And in the depths of Brooklyn, the city's only pansexual makeout party forged ahead.

Before Max had headed out, his roommate and sometimes lover, Greg, had questioned his decision, emphasizing the gravity of the situation by listing off cities: Wuhan; Tehran; Milan; Madrid. But while technically something like that could happen here, Max didn't feel like it actually would. After all, what made this plague different from SARS or Ebola or swine flu? Did he really need to upend his plans over some vague possibility?

[2]

But on the way over, things had started to feel different. Flushing Avenue had been deserted, the storefronts gated hours earlier than he'd ever seen. The traffic was thin for a Friday. The B57 flew between stoplights, shaving ten minutes off his usual journey, making him feel like an astronaut in deep space, hurtling toward an uncertain future.

When Diana, Max's primary partner, arrived twenty minutes later, she told a similar story. "So, the F was pretty busy when I left Roosevelt Island; not crazy or anything, but only a little less packed than normal," she said as they stood by The Loft's rickety bar—careful not to lean on it, having learned the hard way that it was just resting on its base, that nothing connected it to the floor below. "But at every stop, half the train would get off, and practically nobody got on. So when we got to 14th Street, it was just me and this one older guy in a dirty tracksuit." She shivered. "And maybe he was doing this the whole time and I just couldn't hear it over the crowd, but I swear when we hit Brooklyn, he just started coughing again and again. I mean, I was on the far side of the car...but it was still pretty scary."

"Poor baby," Max said, squeezing her gently. "Try to relax, okay?" She nodded, nuzzling his shoulder. Not saying what they were both thinking—namely, that something was wrong. That they'd never seen the space so empty.

The Loft wasn't big, just a bare-walled box, sixty feet by twenty. A bar. A stage. A row of couches. A small balcony. And a dance floor the size of a tennis court. But when Kiss and Tell was hopping, it

could fit nearly 300 people — singles, couples, triads, and labyrinthine polycules so complex that it could take ten solid minutes to fully grasp their contours. All milling around in weird or campy or aggressively queer outfits, looking for someone new to kiss. On a normal night, the party was bustling by 9:00 and slightly overwhelming by 11:00. Couches filled with nervous newbies playing sexy Jenga. The dance floor began to sizzle. And, at the center of things, a massive game of spin the bottle.

It was a Kiss and Tell rite of passage. Watching from the dance floor as a circle of two dozen people clustered there, waiting their turn to kiss and be kissed. Some limiting themselves to a short little smack. Others diving in, feeling the heat of another body, a tongue twisting against theirs. Going until the arousal became too much—or until another player impatiently cleared their throat. You'd see the occasional jealous partner, their dagger-eyed distress manifesting later in the night as a drunken argument on the street below. But mostly you saw nervous, excited people getting kissed over and over. Melting into the other person. Then sitting back down. Grinning, a little dazed.

Until you finally felt that you had to try it; after all, why come to a makeout party if you're not going to at least try to make out? Getting up the nerve and joining the circle—only to learn what hundreds of others already knew. Namely, that the stage's pronounced tilt caused the bottle to point to one side of the circle practically every time. So while those lucky folks got kissed repeatedly, you experienced a

drought of biblical proportions. The next time, though, you knew better. Biding your time until a coveted spot opened up. And suddenly, it was on. You spent your evening kissing countless men and women and enbies, then walked to the bus stop, your lips happily bruised, feeling sure you must be glowing.

Tonight, however, was different. Not just quiet, but dead. Zlata, The Loft's proprietor, had taken over the door; so bored that she was reading a Bulgarian edition of *Eat, Pray, Love*. Behind the bar, Jake was showing a trainee how to make a Ramos Gin Fizz. Over by the crooked stage, Max and Diana, the venue's only other occupants, sipped their drinks and placed playful bets on whether anybody else would show.

"Maybe the door will open," Diana said in a stage whisper, "but then a tumbleweed will just roll on in."

"Maybe. Or maybe it'll be Jesus, finally coming back."

"Sure, why not. Seems like his kind of party."

They had almost finished their cocktails when the door actually did open and someone—though, admittedly, not a tumbleweed or their lord and savior—stepped inside. White. Male. In his forties or early fifties. Looking nervous, lost. They appraised him with an anthropologist's zeal as he paid the entrance fee and haltingly recited The Loft's consent policy from the big poster by the door. Stepping inside. Then, slowly, reluctantly, making his way over to them. "Hi," he said, voice wavering. "I'm Michael." "Hi, Michael, I'm Diana." A pause. "Come here often?"

"No, not really; actually I live in Philly." In fact, Michael was a super-commuter, taking Amtrak daily to his job in Midtown—but rarely staying to experience the city. Intrigued, Max asked why Michael didn't just live in New York. Michael looked at him, then said: "Money."

After an uncomfortable silence, the three of them began making small talk about the plague. Michael said he'd heard the hospitals in Northern Italy were full, that if you had a heart attack, no ambulance would come. Diana said she'd heard people in China were locked in their homes, that the military was patrolling the streets. Max didn't say much of anything, thinking how normally he'd object to unsexy chitchat at a makeout party—but that these, obviously, were special circumstances.

Instead, he went to use the bathroom. And found, upon returning, that the party's attendance had nearly doubled, thanks to a new, twentysomething couple.

The two of them stood by the bar, looking nervous, as though afraid they'd stumbled into the wrong party. She was white and pint-sized, with a half-razored haircut. Dressed in a fishnet body suit that showed her whole body—from her soft, hanging breasts to her downy pubes. He was South Asian, broad-shouldered, and tall, very tall; he had at least four inches on Max's respectable height. Blazer clearly repurposed from a work suit, pants covered in layers of purple sequins. A faded scar bisecting one eyebrow, making him look like a villain from a children's cartoon.

As he stared, Max felt a sudden flash of recognition. This was a new couple—new not only to Kiss and Tell, but to this whole open world. College sweethearts, maybe, or newly married squares looking to live the erotic dream. He was in finance or tech or corporate law. She was a gallerist or prep school teacher or postdoc. The two of them whispering fantasies night after night in the comfort of their pillowy bed. Trying to read in the other's expression if this was just fantasy, or if they, too, *actually* wanted to explore, however slowly or nervously or incompletely.

Now here they were, in the lion's den—maybe a little disappointed at how few lions this particular den seemed to have. Wondering silently if The Loft was still a going concern. And even though they'd dressed up and Ubered in from Murray Hill or FiDi or Williamsburg, it was clear that one loud noise, one awkward interaction, would send them scurrying off, never to return.

"Hey there!" Max called out. "Welcome! We're about to grab some drinks; mind if we join you?"

Her name was Sophie and she was a hugger. His was Killian and he had an aggressively firm sales guy handshake, the kind where you wonder if his wrist muscles got their own day at the gym. Both of them were very nervous, though trying hard not to show it. "I mean, yeah, we're a little new to this," Sophie said, laughing seemingly at random. "But we heard about this place—maybe in *Time Out*?—and figured, well, no time like the present."

"Do you all, uh, come here often?" Killian asked, anxiously gripping his upper arm. "How does it...work?"

His gaze landed on Michael. "Don't ask me, I've only been here a few times," Michael said, hands raised in mock surrender. "These two are the real experts."

"Think of it this way," Diana told them, her voice a confident purr. "It's like you're in high school, at a huge house party, and not only is your crush here, ALL of your crushes are here, and, like, half of them keep eying you over the punch bowl and chewing on the straw of their drink and laughing at everything you say. And because there aren't enough bedrooms, you can't do...everything. But nobody's going to care if you find a quiet corner and do a little kissing. Feel each other up. Maybe grind a little bit. And if the gods of luck are with you, sometimes you get to fool around with each and every person you have your eye on. Kiss them, talk to them, maybe make plans to see them again. Or not, if that's too scary to start."

"Sometimes, though," Max interjected, "the gods of luck are NOT with you and you end up chilling with your partner and your friends. Have a couple drinks. Listen to some chill music. Watch cute people kiss. Which isn't ideal, but it's also not so bad."

Killian nodded, like he was starting to understand. "And if we're not ready to do more, we can just take it slow?"

"Of course," Max told him. "Everybody has their own speed. I've seen people kiss ten guys their first time, and

I've seen people take a dozen parties before they even talk to someone. If it works for you, it's all good."

Killian was ordering a particularly complicated cocktail that included Lillet and a dash of Chinese black vinegar when Sophie bit her lip, looked Diana square in the eyes and asked, shyly, "So...how does the kissing work?"

"Well," Michael began, convinced that he'd found his opening. But Max shook his head—there was no way he was letting this out-of-towner horn in on someone his partner was vibing with. "I mean, since Michael's only been here a few times, maybe Diana should take that?" A pause. "Babe?"

Diana nodded, eyes locked on Sophie. "There's a few different ways it can go down. Spin the bottle. Sexy Jenga. Truth or dare. But sometimes there's just chemistry from the moment you meet someone—and all you need is someone to say the words, to make the first move." "Oh," Sophie said, almost whispering.

Diana smiled, her expression wicked. "Come on, get over here. You know you want it."

Sophie nodded, eyes wide. A little shiver running through her. Moving forward until their faces were inches apart. Until Diana could feel the other woman's warm breath on her neck and the underside of her jaw. She cupped Sophie's face in her hands, angled her chin upward, and, eyes blazing, leaned right in.

As he watched their lips meet, Max felt himself pulled backward into a sea of charged memories. Remembering that first kiss at The Loft, locking eyes with a tall

Central Asian woman with multiple nose piercings as she silently dared him to lean forward, to finish what spin the bottle had started. His skin is all goose bumps. Her hand came to rest on his arm as he was still leaning in. Her grip relaxed as their mouths opened, as her tongue moved against his. Finding a connection, a rhythm. Lips adjusting again and again; breaths coming out as sighs, as soft little groans. Feeling his chest tremble, feeling himself grow hard. Startled to find his hand was on the back of her head, that she was grinding insistently against him. Wondering for a half-panicked moment if he might actually come in his pants for the first time since high school—and then, the sensation building, whether that would really be such a terrible thing.

[3]

"Hey!" a voice called out. "You two! What are you *doing*?" Max's eyes flicked suddenly open, pulled from an idealized past into the present. Next to him, the women jerked apart, startled. Diana panting. Sophie, mouth covered with Diana's smudged lipstick, staring dazed across the room to where Zlata stood. Forehead furrowed. Paperback tucked under one arm.

"Don't any of you read the news?" the proprietor said, exasperated. "You can't just go around kissing everybody you meet!" "You...can't?" Diana said, her eyebrows raised. Max could imagine her internal monologue, could hear her wondering why, exactly, Zlata would throw a kissing

party if you weren't actually supposed to kiss anybody.

"I'm not saying never," Zlata allowed, "but be smart!" She pointed at Sophie. "You! Any symptoms? A cough? Light fever? Anything like that?" Sophie shook her head, a little hurt. "No," she said. "I wouldn't have come if I thought I was getting sick."

"And you!" Zlata barked, eyeing Diana. "Don't you work at a *hospital*?" Diana frowned. "I mean, it's a dermatologist's office..."

"Same thing," Zlata said, shaking her head. "It's not that you can't meet people here, but things are different now. Kissing somebody without asking what their exposures look like, if they're feeling ill? That's just reckless?"

"I mean, reckless?" Max interjected. "Isn't that a little...harsh?" "Look, pal," Zlata said, voice booming out of that little body, "this is my party, and I make the rules. So, new rule: everybody stays at least an arm's length apart." A long pause. "Go!"

The room was silent as everyone digested this, as it became clear that Diana and Sophie's kiss was the only one happening tonight. Finally, reluctantly, they all shuffled backward across the scuffed floor, expanding the middle of

their rough circle.

"So," Diana said after a minute. "That was nice." "Yeah," Sophie told her with a sigh. "It was. Maybe we can do it again sometime." Then, looking nervously at Zlata, who was still watching them from the check-in desk, "I mean, when all of this is over."

Diana nodded. "I'd like that."

Unaware, of course, that it would be two long years before there would be another edition of Kiss and Tell, that it would take place in a different loft, on a different street, the space packed with top-of-the-line air purifiers. That Max and Diana would split up midway through the pandemic but stay friends, then get back together, break up once more, and stop talking altogether. That the idea of meeting in a darkened room to kiss a stranger would feel, for months—or years—like the most reckless thing you could possibly imagine, the sexual equivalent of randomly firing a pistol in the air. And that, as the days piled up, things would slowly begin to change, their memories of tonight no longer portentous or erotically charged, but joyous, almost wholesome. A symbol of how things had once been...and how, god willing, they would someday be again.

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