

Why I Hate Raisins

Natalie Diaz

*And is it only the mouth and belly which are
injured by hunger and thirst?*

-Mencius

Love is a pound of sticky raisins
packed tight in black and white
government boxes the day we had no
groceries. I told my mom I was hungry.
She gave me the whole bright box.
USDA stamped like a fist on the side.
I ate them all in ten minutes. Ate
too many too fast. It wasn't long
before those old grapes set like black
clay at the bottom of my belly
making it ache and swell.

I complained, *I hate raisins.*
I just wanted a sandwich like other kids.
Well that's all we've got, my mom sighed.
And what other kids?
Everyone but me, I told her.
She said, *You mean the white kids.*
You want to be a white kid?
Well too bad 'cause you're my kid.
I cried, *At least the white kids get a sandwich.*
At least the white kids don't get the shits.

That's when she slapped me. Left me
holding my mouth and stomach—
devoured by shame.
I still hate raisins,
but not for the crooked commodity lines
we stood in to get them—winding
around and in the tribal gymnasium.
Not for the awkward cardboard boxes
we carried them home in. Not for the shits
or how they distended my belly.

I hate raisins because now I know
my mom was hungry that day, too,
and I ate all the raisins.

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For the Love of Avocados

Diane Lockward

I sent him from home hardly more than a child.
Years later, he came back loving avocados.
In the distant kitchen where he'd flipped burgers
and tossed salads, he'd mastered how to prepare
the pear-shaped fruit. He took a knife and plied
his way into the thick skin with a bravado
and gentleness I'd never seen in him. He nudged
the halves apart, grabbed a teaspoon and carefully

eased out the heart, holding it as if it were fragile.
He took one half, then the other of the armadillo-
hided fruit and slid his spoon where flesh edged
against skin, working it under and around, sparing

the edible pulp. An artist working at an easel,
he filled the center holes with chopped tomatoes.
The broken pieces, made whole again, merged
into two reconstructed hearts, a delicate and rare

surgery. My boy who'd gone away angry and wild
had somehow learned how to uncloset
what had once been shut tight, how to urge
out the stony heart and handle it with care.

Beneath the rind he'd grown as tender and mild
as that avocado, its rubies nestled in peridot,
our forks slipping into the buttery texture
of unfamiliar joy, two halves of what we shared.

Once, While Disemboweling the Chicken

By Isabella DeSendi

readying it for my lover's dinner, I remembered
my abuela slashing the rooster's throat. I was four.
Held the wet blade in my hand and cried. For days
the carcass hung like a cross over the red front door
until it shriveled and stunk, turned gray as dried petals.
Abuela said don't cry. She said be fearless & god-fearing
as any white man, so I became just like guajiros
carving the air with bright machetes.
At home, in school, in America, razors slept
in our socks like small slick moons and hydrangeas
bloomed despite the heat while I became a woman.
For twenties, my tíos chopped weeds with green machines
spinning big metal mouths filled with hot blades.
You must praise the Lord with your body, Abuela said.
You must give yourself over as santeros do, without doubt.
At every ceremony for Dios, I held the white cloth
in my hands like a soul. Abuela slashed the bird
like a man unbothered. I thought the trick to surviving
this country was to be good or beautiful
or merciless like its people, but choosing didn't matter—
soon I'd be pinned on a bed like an animal
while someone else's hunger made a sacrifice of me.
Of course I tried to fight him off, but Abuela's birds
taught me when your arms are pinned behind your back
there's no chance of breaking free. *Across the neck*,
she motioned, *like this*, as she slid the blade
and prayed and ate. How can I forget
the hen's throat now—her pulse ablaze with fear
as I combed her feathers neat, placed her gently
on the altar. *Mira Isa, you must kill the bird.*
This is how we speak with saints.
This is how we prove our worth.
The knife was light. Blood ran through my hands
like a storm. I shouldn't have been surprised;
it was easier than I thought—replacing fear
with numbness, cleaving the bird's breast in two.
Stilled, her wings bent back the way my wrists bent
when he cooed me quiet, squeezed my neck.
Hands warm and strong as a god's.

The Travelling Onion

Naomi Shihab Nye

“It is believed that the onion originally came from India. In Egypt it was an object of worship — why I haven’t been able to find out. From Egypt the onion entered Greece and on to Italy, thence into all of Europe.” — Better Living Cookbook

When I think how far the onion has traveled
just to enter my stew today, I could kneel and praise all small forgotten miracles,
crackly paper peeling on the drainboard,
pearly layers in smooth agreement,
the way the knife enters onion
and onion falls apart on the chopping block,
a history revealed.
And I would never scold the onion
for causing tears.
It is right that tears fall
for something small and forgotten.
How at meal, we sit to eat,
commenting on texture of meat or herbal aroma but never on the translucence of onion,
now limp, now divided,
or its traditionally honorable career:
For the sake of others,
disappear.

Ars Poetica: Ambulthiyal Abecedarian

Janiru Liyanage

A pound of
Bruised mangoes
Cleaved into halves, chilled and salted like the heads of
Dead fish, which my mother also made, and made us
Eat, our jaws slick around their jaws, a kind of kissing
Fruitful desire, sucking the yolk out of their bright eyes,
Giant moons blooming on our tongues, & the pupils pulsing like syllables— look at your unbearable,
Hollow, hallowed hunger. You have to eat the whole head, even the bones, especially the marrow rusting
Inside. You leave nothing on your plate, spit-shine the sides
Just in case. අමුල්වියල්, the meal my new mouth calls *sour fish*,
Kneading the English slow and precise as a
Long-range missile. Somewhere, miles and decades away, someone's
Mother is
No longer a mother, only dusty bone and moon-bloomed syllables like the carcass of a good dinner. When my
mother sees the video of the orphaned child begging for milk, she says, *See. This is what real hunger looks like.*
Be grateful.
Once, I shouted at my mother for packing අමුල්වියල් in my bag, its stench of
Piss strapped to my back like a
Quilt, a heavy one only a mother could sew. The
Reek it slaughtered in my classroom, what the other kids called *horse shit*, and what I parroted
Straight back at my mother— *You made me horse shit, horse shit*, though I didn't know
The meaning of the words, only the lush of its language, the arrow it folded of my tongue: pulling back at *horse*,
Unfurling at *shit*, curled and wet as a fishhook. The only way I can describe my mouth is a
Vengeful weapon: missile, arrow, hook. If I say my mother didn't know what the
Words meant either, does it make things better? Once, she told me that the root of *song* is *son*, and all I did was
correct her, taught her useless etymology while
Xanthan gum simmered her stew into sinew. I was a wicked song, pearled in perfect syntax. I translated forms,
Yelled her long relentless name at the customs officer when he thought he smelt piss in her suitcase, asked if she
had anything to declare and she didn't know how to respond. I chorused all her pity into poems,
Zeroed in on her suffering like a shark, chasing a fish for miles; and the corpse I'd leave, cleaned to the bone.

Rutting

Arundhati Subramaniam

There was nothing simple about it
even then –

an eleven-year-old's hunger
for the wet perfection

of the Alhambra, the musky torsos
of football stars, ancient Egypt and Jacques Cousteau's

lurching empires of the sea, bazaars
in Mughal India, the sacred plunge

into a Cadbury's Five Star bar, Kanchenjanga, kisses bluer
than the Adriatic, honeystain of sunlight

on temple wall, a moon-lathered Parthenon, draught
of northern air in Scottish castles. The child god craving

to pop a universe
into one's mouth.

It's back again,
the lust
that is the deepest
I have known,

celebrated by paperback romances
in station bookstalls, by poets in the dungeons
of Toledo, by bards crooning foreverness
and gut-thump on FM radio
in Bombay traffic jams –

an undoing,
an unmaking,
raw
raw –

a monsoonal ferocity
of need.

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चार शब्द by Narayan Surve

रोजीचा रोटीचा सवाल रोजचाच आहे
कधी फाटका बाहेर कधी फाटका आत आहे
कामगार आहे मी तळपती तलवार आहे
सारस्वतांनो ! थोडासा गुरणार करणार आहे

थोडे साहिलेले, पाहिलेले, जोखिलेले आहे
माझ्या जगाची एक गंधवेनणाही त्यात आहे
केव्हा चुकलो, मुकलो, नवे शिकलोही आहे
जसा जगत आहे मी तसाच शब्दांत आहे

रोटी प्यारी खरी आणखी काही हवे आहे
याजसाठी माझे जग राजमुद्रा घडवीत आहे
इथूनच शब्दांच्या हाती फुले ठेवीत आहे
इथूनच शब्दांच्या हाती खडगे मी देत आहे

एकटाच आलो नाही युगीची साथ आहे
सावध असा तूफानीची हीच सुरुवात आहे
कामगार आहे मी तळपती तलवार आहे
सारस्वतांनो ! थोडासा गुरणार करणार आहे

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Four Words by Narayan Surve

Translated by Jerry Pinto

I'm run ragged, in and out.
My daily bread is my daily doubt.
I am a worker, a flashing sword,
Set to slash through the literary horde.
Don't you quiver, don't go 'tut tut',
My sins will be venial, Mr Saraswat.

I've watched, I've heard, assessed it all.
I turned it into what you'd call
my signature scrawl.
All those learnings, losses, all that mess,
As I live, I write, so I confess.

Bread is dear but I need more.
I burn my brand into your door.
To my words, I offer flowers.
I give them swords, release their powers.

I'm not alone; our time has come.
Beware, what follows is the storm.
I am a worker, a flashing sword,
Set to slash through the literary horde.
Don't you quiver, don't go 'tut tut'
My sins will be venial, Mr Saraswat.

FROM Breakfast Time at Kala Ghoda

Arun Kolatkar

5

In Bandagere
in Andhra Pradesh
or maybe somewhere else in India,

thirteen high-caste Hindus
are forcing four dalits to eat
human excreta,

which is to say
shit,
right now,

for letting their cattle graze
in the jowar fields
of an upper-caste landlord, say,

if not for
some other
reason.

6

Nearer home, in Bombay itself,
the miserable bunch
of drunks, delinquents, smalltime crooks

and the usual suspects
have already been served their morning kanji
in Byculla jail.

They've been herded together now
and subjected
to an hour of force-fed education.

One unfortunate wretch
has been made to stand, book in hand,
in front of a captive audience

interested more in horseplay,
fisticuffs and insider trading
in cigarettes and charas pills

than listening to a one-page biography
of Jawaharlal Nehru
in a tattered highschool text book.

All attempts the reader makes
to decipher the text before him
and string syllables into words

(Ja Ja Ja Ja Wa Wa Ja wa Huh Huh Huh Huh Ruh
Ja wahar La La Lala)
get lost among the more fluent Ma Chudaos

and other obscenities, until
the class is not so much as dismissed – it collapses
as soon as the morning inspection is over.

7

They're serving khima pao at Olympia,
dal gosht at Baghdadi,
puri bhaji at Kailash Parbat,

aab gosht at Sarvi's,
kebabs with sprigs of mint at Gulshan-e-Iran,
nali nehari at Noor Mohamadi's,

baida ghotala at the Oriental,
paya soup at Benazir,
brun maska at Military Café,

upma at Swagat,
shira at Anand Vihar,
and fried eggs and bacon at Wayside Inn.

For, yes, it's breakfast time at Kala Ghoda
as elsewhere
in and around Bombay

– up and down
the whole hungry longitude, in fact;
the 73rd, if I'm not mistaken.

14

The tight lid
of the jumbo aluminium box

opens

with the collective
sigh
of a hundred idlis

waiting to exhale,
followed
by a rush to exit

– a landslide of fullmoons
slithering
past each other,

to tumble in a jumble,
and pile up
in a shallow basket,

an orgy
a palpitating hill
of naked idlis

slipping and sliding
clambering over
and suffocating each other.

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