

THE DINNER PLATTER

We arrive with nothing on the platter. All we know is mother's milk.

fruit

1.

The fruit of our mating is an infant whose head is an orange, mouth a marionberry, eyes two salal berries, nose a salmonberry, body a slender watermelon, arms and legs four petite bananas, hands two tiny apricots, fingers a line of gooseberries, fingernails ten pomegranate pearls, feet two plums, and toes ten champagne grapes. And we love this tender and perfect fruit more than we could ever imagine loving.

2.

Each afternoon when I had finished teaching English, I walked out the door of the American English Club in Cuernavaca, Mexico. I strolled past the cathedral and the Palacio Cortés to arrive at the Zócalo—Cuernavaca's central plaza. I waved at the shoeshine boys and skirted the bandstand to arrive at my beloved licuado stand. The señora—a short energetic woman—greeted me with the fruit report: *Hay muy buena piña y plátano*. I have very good pineapple and banana. Or mamey and mango. Or starfruit and strawberry. The señora tossed chunks of the chosen fruit—the sweetest, ripest, most recommended fruit—into her blender along with a splash of milk and a sprinkle of sugar. She whirred it all up and poured it into a glass. I sat on a bench and sipped. The sky turned magenta, and swallows chattered as if electricity buzzed right through them. I felt as suspended as the fruit in my licuado, very temporarily perfect.

3.

David calls himself an old fruit. "On a scale of one to ten, I am a ten," he tells me. "I was never bi, never had a girlfriend, never had a doubt." David's face is round and his beliefs are solid. As we walk through my place, he fingers the edge of a pillowcase. "I hate your sheets. Even if you ironed them, they would look terrible. Thread count does not mean a thing. It's the quality of the cotton that counts." David sighs. "I miss the old percale sheets." David was born wealthy. His mother ordered their things from Nieman Marcus. Now, at sixty-six, David lives in a one-room apartment, puts wax in the space where a tooth is missing, and gets by on air, opinions, and dog walking. But he celebrates the grand opening of the Bravern Shops in Bellevue where he spends a day visiting Hermes—which he correctly pronounces "air may"—Louis Vuitton, Salvatore Ferragamo, and of course Nieman's. David gushes as he speaks of supple leather, of feathery cashmere, of the drape of silk twill. The sales help see instantly that David knows more than any of their high-tech, high-end clientele. They serve him wine and buttery shortbread, chat him up. They give him samples of fragrance and color swatches—the lagniappe reserved for a favored customer—and catalogs, which they place in brand-name shopping bags. David is giddy.

4.

“My aunt has tumor in her abdomen the size of a lemon,” my friend says, cupping her hands around an imaginary lemon. We measure malignancies in fruit: a tumor the size of a grape, a plum, an orange, a grapefruit, maybe—God forbid—a melon.

veg

1.

I hated carrots when I was a baby. A neighbor—an as-yet-childless Hanford scientist—got a new movie camera and came over to film Mom feeding me. Mom got out a jar of applesauce. “No,” the man said, “It’s color film. Feed her carrots. They’ll show up.” “But she doesn’t like carrots,” Mom said. “Just for the movie,” the man insisted. So Mom opened a jar of Gerber carrots and spooned some into my baby mouth. I promptly spit a bright glob of carrot onto my bib, and the camera captured it all in living color. I have this film in my possession. I like carrots now, proof that palettes change.

2.

The Vegetable Orchestra of Vienna is a group of up to eleven musicians and one cook. Before each Vegetable Orchestra concert—and they do twenty to thirty concerts per year—these musicians first go to the Naschmarkt. At this 16th century farmer’s market in Vienna, the musicians select the raw materials for their orchestra: carrots, celery, peppers, leeks, radish, cucumber, or—as any shopper will choose—whatever looks fresh. The musicians arrive at the concert venue and begin cutting and drilling, turning vegetables into musical instruments: a carrot recorder, a red pepper horn with carrot mouthpiece, a long white radish flute, a cucumberphone (think xylophone), a leek violin played with a leek bow, and a pumpkin drum. The musicians test their vegetable instruments, then use a paring knife to adjust tone and pitch. The cook gathers the leftover veg and begins simmering a soup that the audience will eat after listening to the Vegetable Orchestra play everything from hip-hop to Philip Glass to jazz on veg.

3.

Some of us are tense, tight, wound up, stressed. We are told we must learn to veg out. We close our eyes, breathe deeply, and imagine we are a limp stick of celery, a lumpish radish, a slothful asparagus, sluggish spinach, mellow mâche, a laggardly eggplant, a drowsy zucchini, a torpid turnip, a somnolent shallot, a snoring parsnip, a yawny yam, a slouchy chard, an indolent cardoon, a lethargic leek, a listless lettuce, a languid arugula, or a cool, cool cucumber.

starch

1.

My grandma’s ringer washer sat on the back porch of her house in McPherson, Kansas. She cranked shirts, sheets, dresses, pants, and tablecloths through the ringer, then hung them to dry on a clothesline near the honeysuckle. Once the laundry was dry, she set up her ironing board. She mixed cornstarch with water and poured the mixture into a squirt bottle. She squirted starch onto khaki shirts and khaki pants, then pressed that khaki to perfection. The starch held that perfection for the first couple of hours of my grandpa’s workday in the gas field.

2.

Skagit tribal elder, Vi Hilbert, treats us to a week on Maui. One evening we decide to eat a traditional Hawaiian meal. Not a luau. Just a simple meal of fish steamed in banana leaves and a wooden bowl of poi, the Hawaiian carb made from taro root. The poi is a glistening purple. You are supposed to eat poi with your fingers. I take a spoon and scoop some into my mouth. The poi is thick. It tastes like sour, slick paste. I mush the poi in my mouth, hoping to break it down so it won't plug up my esophagus. Finally, I swallow, relieved to be done with this Hawaiian tradition. Vi puts her spoon down in a way that says she, too, is done with poi. We order coconut shrimp and Mai Tais.

3.

My piano teacher, Mr. McRae, had perfect posture. He was tall and thin and could easily have become curved. But he sat straight at the piano on a bench that he lowered to accommodate his long torso. Mr. McRae taught me the precision of Bach, the two-part inventions that start simply, then grow, two voices lapping over each other in mathematical and musical perfection. It was as if Bach required us to play from that place of the strong, starched spine.

meat

1.

Robert "Zip" Zuber opened Zip's—a homegrown, hometown burger joint—on Avenue C at the edge of downtown Kennewick, Washington, in 1953. My family moved to Kennewick a year later when I was three years old. I can't say for sure that I remember going to Zip's when I was three, but I don't remember when we did not go to Zip's—at the end of a Sunday drive, when Mom was too tired to cook, or when summer heat overcame us. We ordered the basic Zip's hamburger, a single beef patty on a toasted bun with ketchup, mustard, dill pickles, and chopped onion. Later a McDonald's opened on Kennewick Avenue up near Angus Village. McDonald's was closer to our house. McDonald's was cheaper and we were a frugal people. But a hamburger at Zip's tasted of meat.

2.

Dad bought a side of beef from a cattleman who raised and butchered his cattle. We drove out to the cattleman's cold storage and loaded boxes into the back of our white Rambler station wagon. At home we pulled out packages wrapped in white paper and taped with white tape. And each package was labeled: T-bone steak, stew meat, roast, ribs, and hamburger. Enough hamburger for a year. Dad was tolerant when all four of his daughters, for various lengths of time, stopped eating meat. He waited out our vegetarianism as one waits for the cows to come home. That is, as one who believes that cows do come home.

3.

Feminists protested the 1968 Miss America Pageant with a poster of a nude woman. Seen from behind, the woman sits on her heels. She wears a cowboy hat and turns to

look over her shoulder at the photographer. Her body is a butcher's diagram with the cuts of meat labeled in black ink: shoulder, loin, rib, rump, round.

sweet

1.

Burnt sugar fills the air at the Benton County Fair, sugar spun into fluffy pink clouds, sugar a sweet bouffant. I carry my cotton candy torch aloft as if guiding Dante Alighieri past the ring toss, duck shoots, and the Tilt-A-Whirl. But when I pinch a tuft of the cloud and put it in my mouth, I discover that cotton candy is fiberglass insulation with a fruit aftertaste. In the end I wish I had selected the candied apple.

2.

Dogabetics in Tacoma, Washington, trains dogs to detect changes in the blood sugar of their diabetic dog owners. Dog and owner are matched up and train together. For life. The dog's keen sense of smell detects a dangerous drop or rise in blood sugar with an accuracy that surpasses glucose tests. When sugar becomes a danger, the dog urgently and unignorably licks his owner's hands and face with a life-saving alert.

3.

When I have a migraine, sugar—along with coffee—is my friend. Sugar fuels the migraine drugs. Sugar shifts my brain. So I keep ginger cookies in the freezer for head emergencies. But sugar is addictive. The next day I want sugar again—just a biscotto. The following day, I study the pastries on display at the French bakery a block from my office; I point to a blueberry tart. I deserve pastry for working on business taxes or clearing out our very messy workshop or shredding documents or balancing accounts. Soon I am giving myself a sugar treat just for washing the dishes or walking the dog.

4.

At bedtime, we tuck in our children and wish them sweet dreams, dreams of red velvet cupcakes with sprinkles, dreams of Grandma's Christmas kitchen full of cookies: peanut butter, chocolate chip, oatmeal raisin, and snickerdoodles rolled in cinnamon sugar. We wish sweet dreams on our sweetheart, maybe sharing a mousse au chocolat at the end of a perfect date where love aligns to the moon. Or, as the years pass, when we have simply made it through another dinner platter day, eaten our Häagen Dazs rocky road, crawled into bed, pulled the covers over our tired bodies, and turned out the light, we still say, "Sweet dreams."

At the end, sweetness settles over our memories and eases our slide off the platter.

"The Dinner Platter" first appeared at *Aforementioned Productions* (2012)