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The Tin Lunchbox

Feed Your Brain

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National Road

Vivian Wagner

It wends through villages,
past brick inns and injection
wells, under interstates,
whispering of history, of
when it was the main show.
Now it's a side affair,
hardly mentioned, but
still traveled by farmers
transferring tractors between
fields, SUVs filled with
kids going to soccer
practice, and jacked-
up, coal-rolling trucks:
all of them just trying to
find their way home.

The Opening

Thomas M. McDade

Four o'clock flowers
Get time right once a day
Pistil holds the works
Filaments dainty hands
Sphinx and hawk moths
Hear that tick even
In watercolor as does
A sexy dame in oil
High skirt, hue daisy
Or sunny yolk
She's slick as butter
Eyes exploding iris blue
She lures like lily pollen
Yet canvases soon go
Begging, tire guest eyes
Miserly gallery owner
Vinegary wine is likely
Vintage four o'clock

A Bee-ku

Gideon Asche

Protect me Diligently
Without me there is NO you
My Job to Feed You

More Bee-ku

Gideon Asche

See My Gentle Eyes
The Buzz of Honest Labor
No Beez Means No Weez

Hyacinth Awakens

Meg Smith

Dawn rises
with the call
of red and blue macaws.
From the rail,
they preen their feathers.
Was this the dream
to which you spoke,
and now, walking,
gripping a cane,
amid the silence --
like leaves, fragments,
everything --
fallen.
The purple sun,
their only cover.
Can we kneel
in this hour, together.
The flock is calling,
singing the refrain,
of no greater love.

Bird Regrets

Vivian Wagner

I'm sorry, thrush,
for wishing your song
had been quieter at
5 a.m., when I hadn't
been sleeping anyway.
My apologies, baby
wrens, for missing
your maiden flight.
I'm sorry, cardinals,
that I've run out of seeds;
I'll refill them as soon
as I can, but I know
that's never soon enough.
And please forgive me,
crows, for still not
knowing your language,
though you keep trying
to teach it to me.

The Importance of Listening

Howie Good

I went on my own because I couldn't get anyone to come with me. What had once been an orchard was now a graveyard for old tires, sprung mattresses, rusty paint cans, even broken microwaves, scattered over the slope like the indecipherable wreckage of some puzzling event. The trees, untended for years, had long since stopped producing apples and been twisted into painful shapes by time and storms and then overwhelmed by creeper vines and opportunistic birds and insects. I just stood with my head cocked to one side as if trying to catch every single word the crows said.

Gibbet Hill

Meg Smith

In the warm haze
of June,
you and your father
are walking,
climbing, to the tower,
to the view.
Green, and green,
and blue,
all space for talking,
photos, kindred.
Oh but I know --
this crossroads,
to a place
I once found a blanket
among shadows.
Oh, but you cannot know,
the cuts, the scars,
in crossing.
Go to quiet.
It is yours.

Guacamole Heritage

TAK Erzlinger

I hide the recipe tucked in the folds
of the left side of my brain where

las sílabas salsa off my tongue,
the context and meaning reverberations

of a generation gone by. The flavours
are like salty kisses, like tropical sunshine

in the middle of winter. I place each
ingredient into my bowl of secrets,

I slice, smash, mix, my hands a fervent
extension of a complex family tree.

The result, the zing of lime, a dash of
cilantro and an ample dose of my buried

heritage. I lead my guests on an expedition
armed with tortilla chips. They dig in,

they pile their little shovels high,
their mouths like vacuums, suck up

each mound of this cultural treasure,
which reveals only a taste of their mysteries.

China and Metal

Thomas McDade

Fifty years ago, a lecture topic
was Homer's *The Lee Shore*:
incensed waves threaten to yank
a ship full of sail into peek-a-boo
rocks flamed with red lichen.
The professor veered off course,
showered praise on the ritual of
high afternoon tea and I heard
the tinkling of delicate cups,
crusty algae hue pattern pitted
against a storm's brawling pewter.

New Vrindaban, West Virginia

Vivian Wagner

At the Hare Krishna
temple we see swans,
listen to chants,
admire the gold palace,
eat a *prasadam* lunch,
walk the sloping green hills
past deities forever
smiling on the landscape.
We don't believe
anything in particular,
but it feels good to leave
space for belief in the stride
of our legs, the openness
of our eyes, the everything
around us and within.

Burnt Fingers

Joan Leotta

It starts in the market
where I press down on each pepper
picking only the firmest, freshest,
shiny specimens. Sharp scent of greens,
contrast with sweeter accents of
riper yellows and reds.
Home, wash each, place three at a time
on tray under the broiler
rods in my toaster oven.
As the skin chars,
I turn them and wait until all
sides are blackened.
Aromas of fresh garden goodness
greet me when I pull them out,
scorching my fingertips as
I move them to a bowl.
My mother-in-law told me:
“Pull out each pepper as it darkens;
pinch one bit of hot, darkened skin,
then tear gently to release the soft
insides. Cut those into strips,
place into another bowl with
olive oil and salt.
She had strong calloused fingers
from years of sewing leather gloves—
impervious to heat.
Mine are soft,
encountering only keyboards
in my daily work.
Plucking peppers from the broiler,
scratching hot skins from
steaming innards makes my
fingers ache.
But that sweet aroma...the fresh clean
taste of homemade pepper strips
on salami sandwiches—
Burnt fingers are a small price to pay
for such edible excellence. Fingers?
I lick each to keep them from peeling.

Languid Lusciousness with Lemon

Joan Leotta

Languid lusciousness
lines the tables at the peach vendor's
farmers' market stall.
Rich with juice, the red
peaches wait
on the side
to be sliced
imparting Eliot's
immortality
with each bite.
Yet, my cook's instinct
notes those slices will need
a squeeze of lemon
to retain their color
when I fan them out
on the dessert plate.
Life's sweetness stands out,
oft best preserved
when accented with tart.

Pink Shit

Frances Mihulec

As a matter of being truthful, Pink Shit came from an actual recipe and not something my mother concocted on her own. I've met people as an adult who also grew up with it made as pink and with calling it Pink Shit their entire lives without softening it to Pink Stuff. But it was never originally intended to be pink; instead, the initial recipe replaces fruit cocktail with mandarin oranges, and red gelatin for orange. It looks like vomit and while I am sure it tastes just fine, my mom and others like her, did the recipe a favor by turning it pink.

At that time, it was *pink stuff*. I didn't know the word *shit* yet as a nonbinary kid living in the South, mislabeled as a tomboy and still called 'she will grow out of it.' But if I think of summer days colored idyllic by nostalgia, filled with those obligatory family reunions and church potlucks on lulling hot Sunday afternoons. But through all that, *pink shit* was a cooling, comforting, recipe –although I use the term loosely – that presented a welcome staple in my household and at any of those mandatory functions.

I should clarify – no doubt a significant number of you have family reunions where you know the relations involved or at least know of them. I, in turn, am referring to those stressful situations where hundreds of people show up to pay homage to some matriarch or patriarch encroaching their late 80s or early 90s. A single family invades the entire picnic area in a distant park surrounded by forest. No matter how far you traveled from, you brought food. Pink shit in the Igloo cooler packed by ice made from freezer trays pressed against my legs and I was so happy to feel cold.

It was almost exclusively my mother's side of the family, as best I can recall, that had these large events. The family had stretched far and wide, but there was always a call to return to northern South Carolina or southern North Carolina near the tail-end of the Appalachian mountain range. I met one family member who had traveled from Texas, worked as a lawyer. Ran into him again later, in Kansas a good two decades after the fact. We didn't really speak of anything that mattered on either location. I never felt unsafe around my mother's people, at least. And there was always a tree to hide behind.

Sadly, that wasn't always the case with these obligatory outings. My father's people were rarely good people. There's always the admonishment not to speak ill of the dead, but the dead can't shoot you or gut you with a kitchen knife. So, when else should you speak of their misdeeds? Monsters wear human skin and I will leave it at that. See? I didn't completely air the dirty laundry. I still have the weight of the South on my shoulders, keeping me looking at the ground and not the stars. Move along, there's nothing to see here.

Depression and other negative effects of trauma drove me to sneaking down the stairs, pulling that chilled bowl of pink shit out of the fridge, cradling it in my arms, and sitting on the kitchen floor to devour. Because I need to feel something softer, kinder, and cold. Because summer is cruel, and the sun and the heat only burn away things that matter, leaving you with empty husks. A dead field not even worth plowing.

I can talk about these things, at least somewhat. And I can cry or scream or rail against old ghosts of hidden memories without worrying about how I might be perceived. But in the end, I am still a nonbinary, queer, kid trying to figure out how to eat all the pink shit one might want to bandage old wounds without getting diabetes.

How to make Pink Shit:

Mix together a regular container of Cool Whip (or more likely, the off-brand version), a tall container of cottage cheese, a can of fruit cocktail - drained, and a package of cherry (or other red) instant gelatin into a glass bowl until combined into a pleasingly pink concoction that pretends to be a healthy fruit salad rather than dessert. Cover with plastic wrap and shove it in the fridge for a few hours. Serve chilled. Please do not serve with a side of obligation or abuse.

I Want to Stay in Bed

Alec Solomita

I want to stay in bed and read
but my eyes are as tired
as if I'd smoked some boring dope,
or talked to one. So I'll laze until
I slip into a good dream where I
bake little treats with melted cheese.
Or, more likely, a bad one
where a long-dead friend taunts
me with sins so deeply buried
only a loved one can shovel up
the shame, and only in my sleep.

Postcard from America

Howie Good

The smells of old cooking fires cling to their clothes and hair. I've been warned not to look too closely at their faces. "Let us in," they beg. They swear for the ten thousandth time that they're deserving. We like to think we're like peace-loving Switzerland, just without all those cows and Alps, but after dark, it's a whole other thing. Gates are locked. Wayward bombs fall from the sky on hapless civilians. Babies get sent to prison. This will continue. This will be allowed to happen again. Even the dog remains asleep despite the unnerving whine of sullen engines.

Salsa Fresca

TAK Erzlinger

Tell me what's the flavour,
They'll say it's a fruit not a veg.

The squeeze, the slice, against the counter
hard top, spread open

spilt, drips its seeds
body to board. Decisions deliberate

mixing up the labour of ancient
gods, claiming stolen treasure

sun-kissed flesh dressed in
cumino, strong, in reprisal;

a dash of salt sprinkled
curing what was bruised,

stripped and diced cilantro
lands like gulls on a sea of red

swilled in lime and brimming in garlic.
Chips cut its surface

like those galleons piled high,
delivering a forgotten taste

of famine and plenty, spiced with
cultural appropriation in every bite.

Tasting Lucca

Joan Leotta

*Humming Puccini, we
walk the wide path on top
of Lucca's circular wall
until we reach the market steps.
I descend to buy red beans, farro,
Parmigiano, tomatoes, pancetta.
In our apartment,
I blend and magnify
flavors with a bit of thyme.
As our soup simmers,
the aroma transports us from
modern Lucca to its days as a
conquered Etruscan outpost of
Rome, soldiers marching
in the old piazza—
sandals slapping on stones
in coordinated stoic rhythm—
likely the local Luccan
battalion heading north
to conquer Gaul for Rome.
Probably fortified by
Lucca's farro soup,
accompanied, of course,
by warm bread,
Rome's gift to all its people.*

Bonded I

Thomas McDade

The caravan ignored the stooping willow
The screams oozed on the bark
Mud gleamed in the sun and whips
Lashed through sultry reminiscence
Oxen heaved and halted to drink
Geese honked and tots played cat's cradle
Salvation ambled up the lane
Catching the sun in the pocket mirror
Signaling the believers
A bonneted woman nipped her baby
and mentioned that
One sun was Goddamned well enough

Bonded II

Thomas McDade

The nomads ignore
A stooping willow
Bark oozing and steaming
Sun glimmers mud
Whips lash through
Sultry reveries
Oxen heave and halt
To drink
Geese honk
Tots play cat's cradle
Salvation ambles up
The rocky trail
Captures high noon
In a compact mirror
And signals believers
A young woman nipples
Her baby before crying out
Who in hell here
Reads Morse Code?

The Blue Forest

Meg Smith

Mirror on mirror,
the sky
and river
close in.
Islands of moss
lie whole.
I have come
to this place,
Stars sift
through the leaves,
flashes of time,
and light.
Shadow of woods,
I'm falling.
Shadow of dreams,
I breathe,
and believe.

If Your Breaths were Angels

Alec Solomita

If your breaths were angels
and your tongue was sweet
and your lips were brown and full
I would be complete.

If your legs were dark and long
and your breasts did sway
and your cunt was savory,
I could die today.

Let me breathe your breath my dear,
let me lick your tongue.
Let me kiss your full brown mouth,
let me rest among

your raspy middle curls,
your swelling nether lips,
my face gently rocking
in your rocking hips.