

## **BANANA NUT BREAD**

I bit into a memory today,  
a warm, delicious memory  
buried deep in my cells  
all these years.

The 1930's red-brick courtyard  
apartment building on Granville;  
the small, cozy kitchen  
in winter-time, with the  
little, round breakfast table  
looking out onto the fire escape  
and the alley below.

We weren't really happy together –  
in fact, I was sad almost always;  
and he took it personally,  
and was angry and jealous  
and put me down  
in retaliation.

But that winter we went  
through a phase –  
we took up vegetarianism,  
a new trend back then.  
And we found ourselves cooking and  
baking together,  
trying out recipes in that tiny kitchen  
in our dingy single apartment.

Now there were sweet and savory  
smells enveloping us, gustatory joys  
awaiting us,  
relieving the tension,  
bringing us closer.  
We found some happiness  
stirring and chopping and  
donning oven mitts.

It was the banana nut bread I made  
that cold Chicago winter day,  
dense and moist, soaked in  
melted butter.  
Its aroma made our troubles  
lay down their arms;

its taste restored whatever love we had.  
 The simple joy of eating  
 made sense of us.

And today I tasted that memory  
 most unexpectedly, vividly,  
 at a café in Los Feliz,  
 upon biting into a luscious piece  
 of banana nut bread.

And I felt the isolation and solitude  
 vanish for a brief moment;  
 I was together instead of alone,  
 and that fleeting but real happiness  
 rose up from its hibernation  
 in my cells,  
 as real as it was over four decades ago,  
 in that little, warm kitchen,  
 in winter,  
 with him.

### **MOCKINGBIRD CONCERT**

There's a madcap tweet-freak  
 outside my bedroom window.  
 A little feathered wolf  
 Howling at the moon.  
 A maniacal songster  
 up on the eaves, singing all night  
 in an endless obligato.  
 An avian insomniac  
 mocking his fellow birds,  
 and my attempt at sleep.

I listen to the mad frenzy of birdcalls,  
 the theme with infinite variations --  
 no repetition, no pause.  
 A cadenza of nonpareil virtuosity,  
 mellifluous and lyrical,  
 schizophrenic and satirical.  
 Ebullient melodies ricocheting  
 throughout the neighborhood  
 in the deep of the night.

In his vast repertoire are:  
 Squeaks and squawks,  
 chirps, chips, chatters and chortles,  
 warbles, whistles and whoops,  
 caws and cackles, peeps and pips,  
 trills and tremolos,  
 tweets, twirps and twitters,  
 hoots, honks and hisses,  
 giggles, gurgles and glissandi.  
 And that's not counting the encores!

I yawn and settle in for  
 the nocturnal concert.  
 After all, I have front-row seats.  
 Surely some of my neighbors  
 are cursing him and yelling,  
**SHUT UP, YOU CRAZY BIRD!**  
 But I smile and laugh  
 and wonder at his musical antics,  
 unable to pull myself away,  
 no longer interested in sleep.

## **BODY**

I am a body.  
 That's all I am.  
 That's all I want to be.  
 Just a body.

Bones and skin,  
 organs and limbs.  
 Blood racing the Grand Prix  
 through my veins,  
 a metronome beating away  
 in my chest,  
 thumping out life's rhythm,  
 never failing –  
 at least for now...

I am a body,  
 just a body.  
 With a brain,  
 an intricate, complicated mess  
 of channels and gullies;  
 a fantastic machine  
 working overtime.

A cerebellum that defines  
my human-ness –  
a weighty crown indeed.

I am *not* the thoughts that live  
in that brain,  
the rambling, incessant thoughts.  
A battalion of thoughts  
forever on the march,  
day and night,  
using my head  
as a battleground.

And I am not the emotions  
emanating from that brain:  
The worries, the fears, the doubts,  
the dreams, the expectations,  
the disappointments and despair.

No, I am not that wild, unruly beast  
living inside my skull.  
That is *not* who I am.  
I don't know who that is.  
Some interloper,  
some trespasser,  
an unwanted guest who  
has taken up residence behind my eyes,  
where I can't see him,  
and refuses to leave.

I'm just a body,  
pumping blood,  
with a perpetual, persistent  
will to survive –  
*L'élán vital* that is determined  
to keep me ALIVE,  
even when the imposter  
between my ears  
doesn't care,  
doesn't even try.

The heart thumps,  
the organs labor at their  
prospective jobs,  
the nerves fire and twitch,  
and life goes on.

Until it doesn't.  
 Until one day the machine  
 breaks down,  
 and it all stops.

I'm just a body.  
 That's all I am.

## **PENISES**

Penises are self important.  
 Penises think they rule the world –  
 and they kind of do.  
 Penises take men  
 and turn them into fools.  
 Perfectly decent, intelligent men  
 succumb to the tyranny  
 of their penises and become  
 brain-addled slaves,  
 blind devotees of their  
 Commander in Briefs.

From the minute a young boy  
 discovers he has a penis  
 to the day that penis  
 follows him to the grave,  
 his life is one long sentence of  
 penile servitude.  
 The despotic penis  
 will force him to do its bidding.  
 It will distract him,  
 and cause him to obsess.  
 Everything will be about  
 whether it's getting enough attention,  
 whether it's getting enough action,  
 whether it's big enough,  
 or impressive enough.  
 Penis, penis, penis.

Penises are upstarts,  
 mischief makers,  
 enticing their henchmen  
 into all sorts of bad behavior.  
 We women have to deal  
 with a lot of skulduggery

on behalf of penises.  
 Lying, deception, manipulation,  
 whining, begging, pleading, pestering,  
 prodding, poking, nudging;  
 even prowling and predation.  
 But we kind of like them  
 in spite of it all.  
 Sometimes we actually like them  
 a LOT.

Penises are pretty funny looking,  
 when you think of it,  
 especially their fellow gonads.  
 At ease they are silly and effete,  
 but when called to duty  
 they definitely command attention.  
 They can be intriguing –  
 Imposing even.  
 A striking homage to Eros,  
 the object of men's idolatry.  
 Men are in thrall  
 to their penises.  
 They're like hostages  
 who fall in love with  
 their captors.

We think that we're better than the animals,  
 that we're rational, logical, elevated beings.  
 But penises do their best  
 to turn men into beasts  
 and deprive them of all reason.  
 Penises want men to  
 endlessly breed until the earth  
 creaks under the weight of humanity  
 and suffering and starvation  
 and environmental degradation ensue.  
 Penises don't care.  
 Penises are ruthless megalomaniacs  
 parading as Gods.

And later in life,  
 when the penis finally  
 goes into retirement  
 and leaves its captive in peace,  
 the man panics and mourns  
 and takes drugs in an attempt

to revive his beloved dictator,  
 so great is his attachment.  
 And then, behold!  
 The Emperor rises again,  
 and the loyal subject cries,  
 “All Hail the Penis!  
 Long Live the Penis!”

## **FUNERAL**

Playing with my Mariachi band  
 for a funeral in Boyle Heights  
 at Our Lady Queen of Angels Catholic Church.  
 We're in the historic chapel, built in 1784,  
 with its brilliantly painted ceiling  
 and altar gilded in gold;  
 Crucified Jesus looming above us.

The Latino priest struggles  
 to read the scripture in English,  
 Matthew 11:28-30 –  
 “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden,  
 and I will give you rest.  
 Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me;  
 For I am meek and lowly at heart:  
 And ye shall find rest unto your souls.  
 For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”

I listen carefully to these words,  
 more carefully than the priest who's  
 trying to say them,  
 and more than the congregation  
 who never really listens,  
 but just allows itself to be lulled by the cadence  
 of Bible verses being read aloud,  
 monotonously and mechanically.

But I listen, and I hear,  
 because it's not routine for me –  
 I don't take this for granted.  
 It's profound and moving;  
 and I yearn for that easy yoke and light burden  
 of which the Good Book speaks.

I gaze at the portrait of the deceased,  
a smiling, pleasant-looking old lady,  
who apparently was quite a character in life  
and had endless energy and joie de vivre,  
with curiosity and a lust for learning  
right up till the end.  
They sing her praises and recount  
stories of her life,  
and all agree the earth will be  
a poorer place without her.

I study the grainy,  
blown-up photo of her on the easel,  
next to the coffin adorned with Mother Mary icons,  
draped with a white cloth,  
a crucifix laid lovingly at the center.

I'm slightly repulsed at the thought  
that she's in that casket right now,  
pumped with formaldehyde  
to stave off rotting,  
just till they can get her in the ground.  
A dead body only a few feet away from me.  
I try not to think about it.

And I catch myself looking at her photo  
and envying her that she's dead.  
She's clocked out and gone home.  
That thing in the box isn't her.  
It's an empty vessel, a decaying lump.

And although she was apparently a happy woman,  
who I'm sure didn't want to die at all,  
I envy her her death. Her peace.  
Her setting down the yoke,  
heavy or light,  
and resting now in the arms of her Lord –  
or wherever she may be.  
Maybe nowhere.