

Enchanting the Angels

In this world, anything is possible.
Isak Dinesen, "Babette's Feast"

With the first sip, the touch to lips
of the Hearty Soup at Hy Vong,
mercy and truth have met together.

With the first bite of the mouth
sensation that is a pork rolling cake,
righteousness and bliss have kissed

one another. These are General
Löwenhielm's words at Babette's
feast to the sated brethren seated

before him. At a certain moment
in our journey, he assures them,
our eyes will open, and we will see

grace is infinite. What I learn
at Hy Vong with a tender calamari
ring, the green butter that is

an avocado slice, sauce no spoon
can convey well enough so that
in a warmly crowded restaurant,

I lift the shallow bowl and pour it
directly into my mouth, each drop
so vibrant I wonder, what art, what

alchemy of rice vinegar, apple,
lemongrass, and scallions can transform
lettuce into transcendence? No wonder

a star chef had her wedding catered
by the artist in the kitchen and customers
who missed the first seating and watch

us eat, for hours, are compelled
to ask, what soup? What crispy duck
with black currant sauce whose aroma

they taste from five feet away and we
can't stop raving about? One bite
of cellophane noodles with braised scallops

and a celestial string section tunes
then plays in my mouth, intoxication
spreading through bloodstream.

I look at my husband next to me,
at our friends across from us and
I love them more. I love you more.

How I Lost My Vegetarianism

As I brush thoroughly picked clean carcasses of barbecued chicken breasts off plates and into the trash, I wonder how a twenty-year vegetarian could fall off the wagon so completely, how five

years ago I wouldn't even have read the beautiful Giada's recipe for marinating *pollo frito* and used it to render the free-range, hormone-free fowl the most tender, juicy, succulent breast meat I've

ever tasted. Maybe it was the chicken, bought from our favorite local farm store, Giada's family marinade, the care my husband took to not overcook. How quickly I've turned from tofu,

the salmon burgers I once took to a friend's barbecue more suitable for street hockey than human consumption. How much I let myself miss, I think, sucking on one final perfectly charred bone.

Having a baby changes your life, you're told, but never exactly how, and I was pregnant when Angelo sent his incomparable meatball appetizer to our table, suddenly satisfying a primitive craving

only the perfect melding of ground beef, pork and veal with no bread crumbs smothered in marinara can reveal. (Veal? Hadn't I ceased and desisted eating caged calves in sixth grade?)

The next week I found myself in front of a deli counter, giddy with mouth-feel nostalgia for the last meat I'd given up two decades before: Genoa salami, peppery, greasy, sublime.

I stopped telling waiters in Cuban restaurants to hold the chicken in my chicken soup—for protein, or was it for pleasure? Over the years, I'd cheated—who could have foregone the *foie gras*

at Café des Artistes in Key West or Café Maxx
in Pompano Beach, but now I had no qualms
dipping into the chopped liver at a bar mitzvah,
taking a bite of my husband's porcini mushroom

and gorgonzola topped filet mignon, reminiscing
about the fatty pastrami sandwich my father and I
gorged on at a Collins Avenue cafeteria in Miami
Beach in the '70s. I was bothered when a friend

didn't like a homemade soup with fennel and
eggplant because it had pancetta in it. I kept to
myself favorite while-making-dinner appetizers:
paper-thin prosciutto valentines my husband tucks

into my mouth or chorizo coins on rosemary crackers
I plant in his. Was I hiding my rekindled affair
with meat? What if my mother made her lasagna,
the one that spoiled me for all others with its luscious,

slow-simmering meat sauce? I could see the I-knew-
you'd-come-back-around expression on her face.
I still don't order steak or chicken out, don't cook
red meat for myself. I won't use beef broth, more

enamored of fresh berries, organic greens, pastas
and risottos, my husband's French herb roasted
potatoes and honey glazed sweet potatoes, and
I never gave up fish, but every now and again,

okay, more often than I would have thought
possible, when I've made my girls grass-fed beef
hamburgers spiced with a splash of Worcestershire
and minced garlic, I can't resist sneaking a bite.

In the Suburbs

Hunched over a sidewalk table at Starbucks,
a bony man in dark glasses and grimy cap
stares out at a parking lot, cars, none his,
pulling into tight spaces, neat rows, at people

who emerge and return with coffee cups double
insulated to keep hands from burning as they drive
away, attentive to traffic rules, insurance laws,
school and work schedules, lives that pay notice

to bank accounts, faint rattles, dull headaches,
a change in mood. The man shuffles inside,
causes a woman he nearly brushes to grimace.
He stinks of stale urine, alcohol, unexpected

in the fresh ground coffee scent of a café. In line
he steps from side to side on sneakered feet,
as if to the world music pumping up the air,
the blood, as if he's deciding between a green tea

frappuccino or a pumpkin spice latte, as if he fits
in among laptops, books and spiral notebooks
splayed open, the noisy chatter soundtrack, coffee-
making-machine whistling, clanking for friends

meeting at appointed times, business associates,
uniformed school children who laughingly drag
moms to the counter, hair bands and backpacks
in coordinating colors of superheroes or princesses,

to order from baristas calling out mocha lattes,
herbal teas, double espressos please, poured
to measure with or without sugar. Whole, skim
or soy milk? You want whipped cream with that?

Without ordering, the man wends his way to
the condiment bar, grabs a handful of napkins,
stirrer straws, and casual as keys stuffs them
into his pants pocket. Back at his table outside,

he unwraps a half sandwich, chews it and some
noodles from a tin takeout container, sips drinks
collected from abandoned tables. He talks to
blackbirds alighting for crumbs on chair backs,

smokes a cigarette butt, dozes off, head back,
mouth open, as if surprised. His head rolls forward
and back on his leathery reddened neck, forward
and back, up and down, like one of those plastic

toy birds that perched on the rim of a glass dips
the tip of its beak into the water, not drinking,
barely touching the water's surface, over and over,
up and down, back and forth, to keep it moving.

Sweet Basil Toad

The sitter saw it first, a mottled brown toad asleep in the soil of our herb-garden-in-a-pot, a clump or clod with eyes. When she made out its outline, my three-year-old

leapt back, then drew near, crouched low, curving her compact form forward into a question mark. Let's get the magnifying glass, she said. The big-as-a-fist, flat-headed,

warty toad swelled beneath sweet basil leaves, wide ones intended for a fresh tomato sauce. He was touching the curly parsley, the fragrant oregano I chop into

a shrimp and cannellini bean summer salad, breathing on the dill, for salmon. I gave the pot a little kick. My daughter squealed. The toad shifted and dug in.

Milk

Today it's the hot, microwave-boiled milk of my morning *café con leche*, more often it's two cups of cold, keep-my-increasingly-porous-bones-from-breaking milk on cereal at breakfast or with a peanut butter on Akmak crackers snack or before bed because I missed my calcium quota from cheese or yogurt, and it's best absorbed naturally, not as a pill. Let's face it, real drink milkers, milk drinkers are thin and possibly taller: My brother at thirteen, he of the daily vanilla ice cream and milk milkshake, grew a foot in one year. When we were kids, my mother swore, *I'm going to buy a cow and keep it in the backyard.* Mother's milk I didn't get, not hip to breastfeed in the early sixties, even in Cuba—we were deprived, fellow late boomers, of colostrum and a lifelong defense against certain allergies, disease, but also, having nursed my children, of an intimacy and warmth so fine.... Sorry, Lover, but that's milk under the bridge now, spilt milk we can't cry over, best drunk straight from the beast, but most often, inside the frig door, cold air spilling, cold milk flowing, glass optional, quenching the thirst, chilling the throat, chest pipes, belly, comforting hunger, nourishing cells, the milk-fed soul.