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## FARM TO TABLE

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# FARM TO TABLE

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April Bernard

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## Table of Contents

The Crooked Mouth .....	3
Io .....	4
Fresh Salt .....	5
The Fish; The Chef .....	6
The Bear Pelt .....	7
The Past is an Old House .....	8
Wet Bread .....	9
The Tapped Well Run Dry .....	10
H A S H .....	11
Thank You Come Again .....	12
The Scarab, Rolling in the Dirt ....	13
The Boar .....	14
The Boar Head (Mounted) .....	15
On the Farm .....	16
Chickens in the Coop .....	16
Potatoes in the Patch .....	17
Sally in the Well .....	18
Sweet Corn .....	19
Yeast .....	20
Wet Paper Found, John Doe .....	21
Oysters on a Tray of Ice .....	22
Nomni .....	23

## THE CROOKED MOUTH

It waits covered in darkness,  
trapped and gagged  
but still I can hear it, gnashing its teeth.  
*I can hardly breathe in here.*

Every so often it spits blood,  
hot and dark.  
That's when I feel it smile at me.  
*See that? See what I can do to you?*

With a handheld mirror I can see it,  
that crooked mouth that lurks at the apex of my legs,  
see it open its lips and sneer at me,  
*Do you understand yet?*  
*I own you.*

**IO**

Under cloud-cover they meet.  
Protected from the yellow burning eye of the sun  
in the moment they unite, he pets her blonde  
and shining hair and coos in her perfect  
leaf-shaped ear. He sees no shame in their unity  
under the steel armor of cloud, that which he has  
pulled across the sky to protect her, to protect him.  
She smells a sweet reek in their love-making.  
She kicks him once as his hands are strange and buzzing,  
and she does not recognize her own body, her own limbs,  
but when he pulls at her soft velvet breasts she surrenders.  
The pull and release of his glowing fingers on the pink  
and swollen teat releases a flow of white froth  
in a thin sharp hiss down to the milk-made mud.  
She lies curled on the grass below the sky,  
yellow hair glowing moon-like,  
and he, the universe, lies besides her.

**FRESH SALT**

Exposing my teeth with his thumb  
I taste the fresh salt of skin:  
this is what a man tastes like.

In between my wettish lips,  
my spit eases the odd finger  
to slip decisively behind yellow-white teeth.

It taps on the back wall of the row of bones  
and when my tongue raises to meet it,  
the thumb presses hard, pinning it down.

And I could bite but I won't  
as the thumb holds firm on my tongue,  
pushing the slick muscle

about my sepulchral mouth,  
roaming expanse of the cavern  
as if I were speaking

but there is only quiet wet.  
A voice says hot in my ear, *suck*  
and this is what a man sounds like.

**THE FISH; THE CHEF**

The Sea Bream still smells  
like salt, ocean,  
even as it lies  
here on the cold steel table.  
My knife scrapes back the scales  
chipping away opaque flakes,  
the sound like metal on metal.  
It takes two cuts across  
from the front fins  
to the center bone  
penetrating the stone of its skin  
to reveal the lean pink muscle  
that once pulled the fish  
through the shallow temperate waters,  
which now I slice through fully  
exposing the back of the head,  
and that is when it bleeds.  
I remove the head and spine  
and place them in one piece  
on a square tray of ice  
to save it for the stock.  
It leaks red.  
I pull the thin bones from the slab,  
as the pile of ice grows  
increasingly bloody by my side.  
For a moment my hand slips,  
cutting the tip of my finger.  
The head sits atop  
of the curled and flesh-less spine.  
The fish watches me from the ice bed,  
catching my eyes like a hook.

## THE BEAR PELT

The pelt lies in the dead  
center of the living room  
awash in the throbbing heat  
of the fireplace.

With the talon of her stiletto,  
the hostess pins the hide  
to the hardwood floor.  
She gestures with her glass  
resting in her palm, in the nest  
of a damp cocktail napkin.  
*We just love being out here in the woods,*  
she says, *among nature.*

The bear pelt chooses not to hear her.  
Its claws lie still on the floor  
and, glass eyes fixed on the coals,  
hears only the sound of the  
gas-burning flames and the wood  
screaming on the hearth.



**THE PAST IS AN OLD HOUSE**

with other folks  
living in your rooms.  
The unlatched back door will one day  
be latched.  
You will rattle the handle  
but you will not carry the key.

**WET BREAD**

The rain has made it wet.  
The halls ooze wet  
and the front porch sags wet  
and there's not a dry spot to be seen.

Momma gives me a piece a toast for breakfast  
with a little margarine on top.  
There's scattered crumbs stuck  
all over the kitchen table.  
I pick at them with my fingernail.

I eat the toast slow  
and Momma says, *Quick.*  
*Before the bread goes old.*  
and the mold creeps in on the ceiling.

**THE TAPPED WELL RUN DRY**

That woman's  
breasts hang limp like  
the plastic bags  
from the corner store  
where we buy  
toilet paper.

I watch her  
from the fire escape  
as she tries to feed  
her newest baby  
but the child cannot

latch and the milk  
from her breast  
will turn sour  
until gradually  
it thins to water.

**H A S H**

I grated my  
knuckle making  
hash browns,  
the chunk  
falling among  
the shredded heap.

When I ate,  
I could not taste  
the difference.

**THANK YOU COME AGAIN**

A bag is caught by a tree.  
The branches gouge through  
the round plastic face which rasps  
*Thank you come again.*

On the street below a box has been split  
open in the gutter, noodles gathering  
like worms— greasy, wet, crawling.

## THE SCARAB, ROLLING IN THE DIRT

I have formed the most perfect orb of dung,  
rolled it carefully into its shape,  
delighting and enticing the envy of others.

The sphere will inspire conflict,  
given its sheer size and brilliance.  
But in a fight, I surely will win,

as I have the horns of a beast,  
tossing aside the weaker lot  
whose shit cannot compare to mine.

The orb will feed me.  
I will crawl into it, maneuvering  
a home under the shining ochre surface.

Eventually it will be my breeding ground.  
The next generation will crawl out  
and will continue my lineage

of perfectly sculpted spheres.  
And as I have been named sacred,  
as I have been worshiped god-like,

so too will my progeny.  
With this perfectly formed orb,  
constructed with the finest of materials,

the bloodline will continue,  
will continue worshiped,  
revered as holy,

as we have always been.

## THE BOAR

He nuzzles at the base of the tree,  
turning the dirt with tusk and muzzle.  
The wealth below the tendon-like roots,  
now exposed by the long hairy snout  
which furrows in the mud.  
Eating the pulverized mouse  
and the single and rugged truffle,  
the boar does not notice  
the slightest difference between them,  
he is only happy to be eating.  
He does not know which  
is of value, which one is sold  
out of locked and armored cars  
to those at the top of the restaurant  
empire, and which one is merely  
owl pellets, spherical excrement.  
The Boar does not mind, regardless.  
He gnashes his crooked teeth,  
pushing the pulpy matter to the back of his throat  
with his pointed and warty tongue.  
When the boar hears the snap behind him  
he does not mind it,  
does not notice the hunter cock his gun,  
when the boar hears the pop  
he does not mind at all.

**THE BOAR HEAD (MOUNTED)**

The Boar Head is in the den.  
It hangs on the wall  
above the couch.  
Mother told me the color of the paint  
is *Elk Tongue*.  
I believe the Boar Head does not mind  
what the color of the paint is.

When this year is over  
I will enter my twelfth year  
and all I can think of is  
the Boar Head.  
Twelve is the Year of the Boar,  
and the last year of the cycle.

Mother told me the Boar was a gift  
from my Uncle  
when I was born.  
So when I will be twelve  
the Boar will also be twelve.

The hair on the animal  
is sharp and when I was younger  
I ran my hand across the snout  
and the barbs stuck deep  
in the surface of my palm  
and when my mother plucked them out  
and my skin bubbled with beads of blood,  
I saw that they were the same color as the walls.



## **ON THE FARM**

### **Chickens in the Coop**

The chickens screech  
when storms are  
brewing.

When you hear  
their wild squawking,  
take cover.

They know more  
than you can think  
to know.

**Potatoes in the Patch**

The potatoes have eyes.

When you remove  
the spud  
from the dirt  
do not look  
too closely.

They have many eyes,  
you know.

Do not let them  
look into your own.

**Sally in the Well**

Do not remove the iron bar  
that hold the lid in place.

Those sounds you hear  
coming up from far below  
are surely just the wind.

We keep it covered

for protection.

**Sweet Corn**

If the silk  
is wet  
and red  
then leave  
it on the stalk.

An unripe ear  
should not  
be picked.

**Yeast**

This yeast is old  
and hungry.

You must  
feed it  
so it may bubble

and belch.

**WET PAPER FOUND, JOHN DOE**

Cambrai 1917

No tanks found  
 on the route from  
 camp to camp. The split between  
 Porky and me grows.  
*Porky cant, Porky's tired.*  
 What piss.

We pour our guns  
 out faster along the walk  
 veering north then  
 east. The route  
 is flat but we see  
 no tanks.

Since Porky never shaves  
 or eats peaches past midday,  
 he saves me his razor blades.  
 I keep my face clean.  
 Porky writes menus to distract himself  
 and we keep seeing  
 no tanks.

Porky was wounded  
 on the way  
 that me  
 and Porky.

**OYSTERS ON A TRAY OF ICE**

The slurp is audible  
when she slips the slug-  
like mass between her lips.  
The man across the table  
can hear her rolling it  
around her mouth  
with her tongue.  
Almost chewing, almost not.

She feels the cold muscle  
pass through her body,  
drop from her throat  
and land at the apex  
of her groin.  
She shivers then  
and leans over to him,  
pressing her lips to his ear.

Hours from now,  
the man will slowly peel  
her underwear from her body.  
He will see a white soggy mark  
in the palm of the black fabric  
and will remember the oyster,  
but will not recall what it was she said.

After she swallows  
she turns over the shell.  
*These ear-shaped rocks,*  
*do you think they can hear us?*

**NONNI**

I knew my grandmother was a witch  
ever since I saw her stirring  
that tall pot on the stove top,  
with that long, crooked, wooden spoon,  
the steam climbing up around her  
like ghosts. Wreaths of garlic and peppers  
hung besides the kitchen windows,  
I wondered what she could do with their power,  
she who understood their nature best.

We call her *Nonni*, which means  
“Grandmothers” in Italian, because *Nonna*,  
the singular, is not enough.  
I imagine she swallowed all  
the rest of the grandmothers.  
After folding them carefully into  
the flesh-colored polenta  
she would bring the spoon to her lips,  
tasting the flavor of those other  
mothers of mothers,  
what flavor they brought to the pot,  
saying, *still needs salt*.