

# Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

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Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 19

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June 2007

## Bottomless

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### Recommended Citation

Rothenberg, Pir (2007) "Bottomless," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 19.  
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol7/iss1/19>

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## Rothenberg: Bottomless

BOTTOMLESS  
Pir Rothenberg

He met her on his first visit to Mistura, the small Roger's Park restaurant where she waited tables and I tended bar. She wore a frock patterned with piebald birds, and lusterless army boots that looked as soft as soot. Her pale hair was up, wrapped loosely around the V of chopsticks, and her face and long bare arms were glazed with moonlight, cool and marble-blue. On the silver tag pinned above her small left breast, Mr. Brow thought he saw the words "Oh no," but her name was Oona.

The restaurant, a snug dark cellar with windows at street level, was small enough for Oona to handle alone during the week, but on the weekends Lydia, a college girl with red hair and dimples, shared the tables and hosted. When Mr. Brow came in on a Friday it was too early for the usual crowd of regulars. A mazurka played softly behind the milky steam coming from the kitchen, and the cook's dog groaked for food at the table of a few old, smoky men bent over a card game that Mr. Brow couldn't identify. He smiled when Lydia sat him, and his eyes chased the strings of her waist-apron as she withdrew to the kitchen. But when he pulled his nose from the menu, it was Oona who stood over him, without ledger, pen, or pleasantry, her wrists crossed like a barb behind her back.

Like most newcomers, especially those who were not immigrants from one of the countries in which the dishes originated, Mr. Brow was having difficulty making a selection. He drummed the edge of the menu with a finger, met Oona's eyes, and said with poise, "I haven't eaten here before." Andre, owner and head cook, had designed it so as to give little hint, besides the exotic languages in which the dishes' names were written, as to where any item came from, or what any of it was. He said it would add to the mystique of the restaurant. Oona preserved that mystique too well by offering Mr. Brow nothing more than cold patience.

"What's *duvec*?" he asked. "German?"

"No," she said. Her face stayed impassive.

Mr. Brow leaned back in his chair, grinned and flirted for a suggestion.

She raised her chin and showed him the white of her neck. She asked if he ate meat. Of course he did.

"Then I'll bring you *ko hjerte*," she said. "It's beef. Very traditional."

It was a simple thing to see that Mr. Brow was unconcerned for what was coming, melting as he was like a pad of butter in a warm kettle for her. As she glided toward the kitchen to relay the order, she flashed her eyes at me, and I saw a curl sprout in the corner of her mouth. When I was young, still in Turkey, an involuntary gnashing of my teeth always foretold any mischief I was planning. My mother would see the little muscles of my jaw bulge and deflate, then keep me in for the day. Such was Oona's smirk the sign of her own vengeful preparations for any customer she felt had crossed her.

She returned with Mr. Brow's dish, set it before him—"Dig in," she said—and left him gazing down in the warm, odorous air of his *ko hjerte*, a quarter-inch-thick slice of crimson flesh, darkly glistening and shaped vaguely like a Valentine's Day heart. He tested it with his knife, then unsettled one of the purplish mushroom blooms that sat adjacent to a pile of pebble-grey beans. His face paled at the first bite as the flavor, gamey and sweet, spread across his tongue. He choked back a cough, then gulped from his wine.

I continued to watch him eat from my station behind the bar, and all the while he watched Oona's haunches weave their way through the oak chairs and tables as if her work was a dance, a servant's ballet. She settled against the bar, pale and detached, the long symmetry of her face like a Byzantine Madonna's, and her steady pale-moon glow interrupted only when she clawed for cubes of ice in her glass to mash between her teeth—a habit of hers, among others that were less winsome.

"How do you think he likes it, Simi?"

I tossed my head back to please her, forced a quiet laugh.

"I'll get a doggy bag ready," I said, but Mr. Brow actually seemed to be acquiring a taste for the *hjerter*, steadily taking in each bite with no sign of slowing.

What worried me at that moment was the idea I already had of Mr. Brow: I knew him from a place in Lake View where I worked three years ago. We had never met or spoken, but he dined there each night, alone. He was wealthy but unassuming; his suits were somber, and the generous cash tips he left were always tucked deeply inside the receipt book. One girl, Monica, became something of his personal waitress, and then his lover. From the gossip in the kitchen, it wasn't the first waitress he had dated. Ten years tending bar, I had known others like him, not connoisseurs of food, but of the girls who served it. Such a man visited the same restaurant night after night, asking each time for the same waitress until he didn't have to ask anymore, until she came to him, blushing, smiling, the way I remembered Monica had for Mr. Brow. A thrill roiled softly in him as he watched her labor, talking to one table and moving for the next, cradling plates too hot and too full, hauling the dirty ones away: the lipstick-smudged mugs and dirty ashtrays, the balled-up napkins, the remains of cold food bled together, dried or still dripping. It was the juxtaposition of it that I thought he, and other such men, found beautiful, secretly knowing the contours of his lover's nakedness as she stood politely laughing with a family of four, being reminded with every dish she brought him of the passion of their lovemaking hours before, and knowing that for all her skill at pleasing a roomful of patrons, her servitude to him was of another level.

Such men were predators: gracious, generous, kind while the thrill lasted, but quick to pursue new services and another poor, pretty creature to render them. Perhaps this is what rankled Oona about Mr. Brow; perhaps she sensed right away that he was looking for a new girl, and with a cruel joke hoped to jar the thought from his head.

When Oona returned to check on Mr. Brow, she asked if he enjoyed his *hjerter*, though she paid less mind than before to the foreign stress on the word; it rolled lazily from her lips and must have sounded somewhat familiar to him.

"I'm sorry?" He wiped his mouth with his napkin.

"Your *heart*," she said, and her pupils caught the candlelight. "How did you enjoy your cow's heart?"

He watched her for signs of a joke, but his horror was only momentary, a wrinkle that smoothed into a cool smile.

"It was delicious," he said, and leaned back so she could remove his empty plate.

This is when I felt in my stomach what my mother must have felt, a vague and queasy premonition that Mr. Brow, having just proven himself game for the challenge, would not be gotten rid of so easily.

When he returned the next night he told Lydia, when she greeted him at the door, "I'm looking for the other waitress."

Of course he was. It was busier this night; Slavs sat in running suits along the bar, forking up sausage and onions. The sausage was made of cabbage and lamb brains, the onions actually tulip bulbs fried in ginger, and I wondered if Oona would make this Mr. Brow's next surprise. At his table he craned his neck to find her between the slump-shouldered patrons around the bar. Her legs strode from one table to the next, to the kitchen and back out, her arms languid, her long neck liquid. She noticed him and he tried to make his eyes sparkle, but she disappeared too quickly behind the spring coats and umbrellas of a departing table. After thirty minutes, Lydia came by his table and murmured an apology for his wait, but Oona appeared just then with a plate of food. I smiled to myself; she hadn't even brought him a menu.

"Since you enjoyed the *hjerter* so much last night," she said, setting down the plate with exaggerated delicacy.

On his plate were fiery twists of peppers and small, flesh-pink petals upon a bed of kasha. She had delivered duck tongues instead of sausage—not that she offered to tell him.

"Like a flower," said Mr. Brow, and she rewarded him with a smile.

She stood by as he tried one of the tongues and made a noise of approval, his teeth working the rubbery texture.

"Now a pepper," she said, and with her fingers she plucked one off his dish and began to suck it like candy, her lips pursing, her cheeks dimpling.

The drink order I had just taken vanished completely from memory.

"So, you remember me from last night," he said, sounding pleased and a little smug. He tried giving his name but she interrupted, leaned in closer and implored him once more to try a pepper. He smiled, put one in his mouth. "Oona," he said, chomping, "how long have you worked? . . ."

His face splashed with sudden heat, and I could see his eyes well with tears. He tried to speak again but the breath in his lungs had already ignited and no noise escaped. Oona pulled slowly away and looked down on him with cold eyes as if to say, there, now let this game be finished. He reached for his drink, but there was none and his hand stopped in mid-air. He wheezed a desperate smile up at her.

Oona rolled her eyes. "I'll get you something," she said, and left.

I watched from the bar as his face grew warmer, redder. Oona was the only one on the staff who could eat those peppers with no water or dairy on hand. He shoveled some rice into his mouth, hoping to dull the burn, but I knew the heat was spreading like brushfire along his lips and turning the fingers he had used to pick up the pepper into cherry-tipped tinder.

He waved for Lydia, who was skittering by, and breathed, "Please . . . Is there any water?"

She glanced around warily for Oona. "I'll let your waitress know."

Struggling with his tie, he got up and elbowed his way between the other men at the bar, beckoning for me now and rasping something I couldn't understand. He was a handsome

man up close, even while his rosy face expanded—dark hair, light eyes beneath articulate brows, a sophisticated mouth and jaw. I had just then set down a double vodka for another patron. It would have been possible, I admit, for me to prevent Mr. Brow from snatching it up and draining it with two swift chugs, but at that moment I was keen that he should take the hint—leave and do not return—that Oona felt was somehow below her to vocalize. The entire restaurant seemed to pause; Mr. Brow's eyes closed into slits at the shock of the drink and, to the explosive hoorah of several drunken men aside him, his whole body grimaced. He wasn't so handsome anymore.

Most men who crossed Oona did so by flirting too aggressively, by overstepping their role in the brief love affair that was every contact between servant and served, those men whom I had watched bolt for the door with her corkscrew grin twisting in their backs. Such men made trite innuendoes or blurted offensive suggestions; they reached for the small of her back as they gave their order, or clasped her wrist while they handed back the check. Oona managed them easily by tricks similar to those she used on Mr. Brow—an enchanting glance, an exotic dish. But Mr. Brow didn't stay away even a day to nurse his wounds, physical or otherwise. Nor had he transgressed his role like those cretins. Maybe it was this combination that so infuriated Oona, the fact that he played his role of patron so earnestly and so well, and yet so obviously wasn't there for the fare.

Mr. Brow sat at the bar this time, perhaps wary of another pepper. He ordered vodka, perhaps wanting now to master the taste of it. When Oona saw him—casually reading a magazine in his casual suit, hair swept back—the light in her face flickered like a faulty bulb.

"Let Lydia," I said sternly in her ear, wiping dry a tumbler.

Her eyes darted at me, then back to him. And then that grin, disrupting all the darkness. I watched her move swiftly toward him, and I would have had mortal fear for the man, appearing as she did ready to drive a corkscrew into his skull, if I hadn't been

stricken with the far worse suspicion that she was beginning to enjoy his visits. It wasn't that I feared her falling for him, but the distance she might go in happily punishing him for his cool perseverance. I had felt the hints of her temperament before, and they were like those brief, icy currents along the lake-bottom that snake around your ankles and then vanish.

As for lovers, I had seen Oona with only one, a short-lived affair with an older man when she started on at Mistura. He would wait for her each night in his car behind the restaurant, staring straight ahead, blowing curls of smoke against the windshield. I was hauling out trash when I saw them near the garbage bin kissing. It looked like a passionate kiss; although her arms hung listlessly by her sides, her lips moved as if to devour his. Partially obscured on the steps that ascended from the kitchen to the back lot, I watched, then made to turn so as not to disrupt them. But as I did I saw her jerk away from the man and belch a noise of disgust. I couldn't hear the murmuring words they shared before she kissed him again, and again jolted back, this time spitting on the ground—not the way Mr. Brow had drooled into a napkin, trying to ease his burning tongue, but as if a wasp had flown into her mouth. The man recoiled, struck her face. Before I could think, I made myself visible and let the bag of trash fall dramatically to the ground. The man eyed me, then got into his car. Oona, clasping the side of her face, walked past me without a word. I never saw the man again.

We took the same train home, Oona and I, but her stop was three earlier than mine. Although we'd often arrive at the platform at the same time, I was too shy, and she too disinterested, to make any effort to sit by one another, or even in the same car. But that night I took the seat across from her.

"I'll walk you home," I said. "In case he's waiting."

She looked over at me and smiled, the fluorescent shadows gliding across her teeth.

"You speak English better than you let on."

The tremor of the train buzzed though my body and I was as happy as a boy to be received by her, but I also felt the muscles



of my jaw begin to make knots. It was true; I spoke English quite well. I was born in Ankara, where both my parents had taught English; my father, an American, brought us back to his hometown of Chicago when I was eight. I was raised and educated there. I became a lawyer, the youngest to be hired at the firm for which I worked. I fell in love with the woman who sold and maintained our office plants; we married the same year in the city's botanical garden. We bought a home and a car. We visited my parents on Sundays, and hers, who lived on the beaches of Delaware, every summer. We began trying for children. Eventually we went to the doctor's, where we learned that it was not she who was barren, but me. At that moment my entire life, and everything I had blindly accumulated around me, sat stagnant, a sour taste in the back of my mouth. The taste crept up from the sudden and vast emptiness I felt inside me, and from the emptiness inside my wife. It didn't go away. I realized that I had never wanted anything before, had never even known what it was to want, but now I was hungry, voracious, yet had little idea as to how to feed myself, or even what it was I thought I craved.

My wife and I divorced. I quit my job and went back to Turkey for the first time since I was a child, but there was nothing I wanted there. When my money was gone, I came back to Chicago and began tending bar, where all day and night I was surrounded by the conversations of other people who wanted things. They wanted a new job, a new television, a new car. They wanted a better husband, a friend they could trust, more children, or less. They wanted a raise, a word of compliment, another chance, another shot of bourbon. How articulate they were about all the things they hungered for, and yet the more I listened, and was called upon to describe my own wants, the more I realized that what I had earlier taken for hunger was only a pit in my stomach turning over like a loaf of lead. I desired nothing more than to desire anything at all, because a lack of desire for a thing precluded my ability to search for it, and then to know that thing when I found it.

Life with no appetite, I decided, was bland, and for a long time I was jealous of those I served. To avoid being drawn into their lives—their wants, their searches, their failures—I withdrew behind the affectation of a Turkish accent stronger than I had ever had. I ignored plurals and blundered tenses. I whistled a song from my youth that my mother sang; I had forgotten the words, but I imagined the melody conjured for them strange, fog-laden landscapes. If a customer tried to draw me in too close, tried questioning me of my own life, I'd blurt out something nonsensical or rattle off a long tale from my childhood that had no bearing on the conversation. But the better I became with my act, the more my customers eased their guard and revealed to me all the more private matters; they stopped asking for anything in return, no longer demanded anything from me but my ear, which they never assumed could understand half the secrets they spilled.

Secure in my role, I still found it necessary to move quickly from one bar to the next, from upscale dining establishments to sooty pool halls. The only remnant now of any personal desire I had was to be around people who at the very least wanted things that were different, and wanted them in ways that might rub off on me. This was how I found Mistura. The menu itself foretold of alien appetites, otherworldly cravings. And this was how I found Oona, the hungriest girl I had ever known.

After we spoke on the train, I escorted her home each night, down the dark, narrow sidewalks, hemmed on either side with thin chains that drooped from post to post, protecting all the miniature night gardens of the city. These walks were the happiest time of my day, the only reason I stayed at Mistura, for alongside Oona the long flat world seemed to bend with surprising contour, and things I had never seen in the once bland darkness began to sparkle with life. The maples and oaks lining the street dripped lamplight, and figures far ahead appeared and disappeared, and shapes in storefront doorways stretched and yawned, and couples sharing a swing in the park laughed into each other's arms. We'd walk quietly, nothing but

the sound of her army boots on the pavement, and the queer nocturnal music of chattering birds. Along the way I'd think about that kiss I saw her give, or rather take like it was a food, and how odd it was that she could spit out a kiss, as if the taste of this man affronted her. Finally, at her building, I'd bid her goodnight and wait until the door closed all the way behind her. She trusted me: I had given up my secret to her. Sometimes I stood by her building a while longer, watching for a new light to come alive in the dark windows and show me which apartment was hers. I waited for it like a secret she would return to me, but the building always stayed dark, and eventually I would move on, mildly disappointed, but increasingly aware of something rumbling to life in my soul.

On that third night, Oona faced Mr. Brow, each on either side of the bar; she shifted her weight onto one leg, locked her arms over her chest. I waited for her to hiss, to tell him to leave.

"What do you recommend today?" he said, looking up at her, cool as ever.

They regarded each other, neither faltering.

She shifted to the other leg—a sign of weakness that Mr. Brow wouldn't miss—and said, "What do you like?"

Ah, even worse! Don't engage him in conversation!

"I like filet mignon and chicken Kiev." Confident, like he'd rehearsed it.

"We haven't got any of that," she said, hardly before he finished.

"Shrimp," he said, "lamb shank, potatoes au gratin, veal—"

"No."

Nice. Say as little as possible.

"Soft-shelled crabs. Asparagus. Swordfish—"

"This isn't Red Lobster. Do you have any food allergies?"

A good move, make him afraid.

"I'm . . . lactose intolerant."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Thank you."

That arrogant grin—he's calling your bluff.

"Do you need some time with the menu?"

Don't offer him that!

"No," he said, "I can't make heads or tails of it."

". . . Then what would you like?"

"I'd like for you," he said, moving his brows to the height of their charm, "to bring me some dinner."

And then it happened. A ritual was born: he came every evening, and every evening she served him our most exotic dishes, ones no one ever ordered, ones even Andre wouldn't eat and prepared only with great reluctance. She served him an array of tongue dishes: our calf's tongue in cabbage, potted tongue and ginger, and pottage of larks—beef tongue in lambs' broth and lemons. He ate poached sturgeon and sprats for her, sweetbreads, sevruga caviar and cod-liver pâté. He devoured haggis and horse meat for her, and the heads of lambs, stuffed with spiced brain; and rolled pigs' spleen, ox tail soup, and deep fried tripe; and blood-red Russian borscht with black eel, and squirrels sautéed upon wilted greens with a side of devilled kidneys. Oona and I often had a drink after the restaurant closed, and being in closer proximity to him, she'd ask me how Mr. Brow fared with the meal, and what I thought she should serve the next night. Having grown bored with the menu, she sometimes asked Andre for things that weren't on it. Not that Mr. Brow ever saw, or even asked to see, the menu again. He took all his meals at the bar now; sipping expensive vodka, he, like so many others, soon found it relaxing to burden me with the details of his life. There was his work, which I didn't understand and which sounded to me very dull and lonely. Other times, when he thought we were sharing a moment of camaraderie, he asked about Oona, but I always answered evasively, with feigned stupidity. Him: "Simi, who's that man she's speaking with? I've seen him before. . . . Is he her boyfriend?" Me: "She like boys. Or maybe girl, who knows?" Him: "Did she say anything last night after I left?" Me: "She say you must be hungry. Ha-ha. Much of the crazy food in here, yeah? Special today: piranha!"

Sometimes I asked him questions, too.

"Why come here so much?" It was the second week. He was having difficulty with the *kokoretsi*, a Greek recipe of sheep's liver, heart and testicles, cooked in the sheathe of intestines.

"I like the service," he said with a wink.

I had already told Oona what I thought of Mr. Brow, of how I believed he preyed on waitresses, but this only strengthened her resolve to play the game, to serve him something he could finally not eat. So I began to devise ways of shaking Mr. Brow from his perfect rendition of a kindly customer. All he had to do, I thought, was take a step over the line—by taking her hand in his, by asking to see her outside of the restaurant. Then Oona would snap; the pot would boil over in a maddened white rush and extinguish its flame.

"You take her out to date?" I said, slyly. "Take her to *nice* place, ha-ha."

But Mr. Brow had too much expertise in this form of seduction to act on any of my suggestions.

"In good time, Simi," he'd say with an air of wisdom, as if I were his apprentice.

As well as he played his part, finishing each meal she delivered, never breaking his role, it was obvious he could barely stomach some of the foods. The plate of fried pigs' snouts, for instance, took him two hours to consume, and the ground dog-flesh in betel-nut leaves was an agonizing three. Still, each time she arrived before him, his dinner on her arm, he greeted Oona with that smile, like a prince who affords the occasional gesture of deference to his inferior. And she'd beam a smile back that he must have known was exaggerated. Sometimes she said nothing to him the whole night; other times she coddled him, bringing him endless small dishes of jellied meats and seafood, watching him eat from a distance with an almost clinical interest that greatly unsettled me.

To my astonishment, Mr. Brow did not conceal from me his passions: all the girls he could remember dating, he said, had

been waitresses. They waited in greasy-spoon diners, in cool Italian cafés, and in family-style chains. He found something “very sad and very sweet” about watching a young waitress work. The way they’d flirt for the businessmen downtown, powwowing over lunch, and graciously answer all the women in suburban bistros who wanted to know where the coffee was grown. He liked how they flayed the foil from those dark bottles of wine; how quickly they could calculate tips and totals in their heads; how they cursed in Spanish with the cooks by the kitchen doors. He liked watching them wrap silverware in napkins and wipe greasy menus in the slow hours, and then through the dinner rush be pulled in every direction by a hundred greedy desperate hands. He hadn’t planned such a pattern of dating, he said, but confessed to knowing it wasn’t a coincidence that he dined out each meal, nearly every day. His dates were usually younger than he, and comparatively poor. He liked to pamper them, opening doors and opening his home, paying for everything they did—operas and ballgames, cocktail bars and art benefit shows. He painted an image for me: he and his lover racing toward downtown along the curves of Lake Shore Drive—she in the passenger seat watching the high rises loom taller and taller and feeling the spray of the choppy lake against the break-walls; and here he described how a blissful confidence would spread warm through his body with the assurance that his lover had forgotten, if only for a moment, that she was a waitress, and might well be one the rest of her life.

“There’s some poetry to it, isn’t there?” he asked, perhaps to himself.

All this I would report back to Oona on our nightly train rides home together. I repeated the things he’d said, laughing softly so as to better hear her own, yet all the while I was increasingly troubled by the fact that Mr. Brow didn’t seem close to backing down, and that Oona, conceiving grander methods of torture, was becoming too invested in the game, perhaps to a dangerous degree. She began asking me less what to serve Mr. Brow, either because she thought I wasn’t much help to begin

with, or else she feared that my disapproval—which I began expressing to her—would get uglier, or get in her way. But I could see well enough that the dishes she brought for Mr. Brow were increasingly moving away from the restaurant's normal offerings. Some portions were larger than normal, others far too skimpy. The peacock seemed spiced beyond the limits of human tolerance—it burned my nostrils as she passed me with it. I began noticing the pink of meats and organs that should not have been that color. His fish and seafood dinners arrived with shreds of scale, a random fin. I could hear his teeth mash painfully down on a bone someone had missed—or perhaps added. I'd see him chew endlessly on the gristle from a poor cut of meat that should have gone to Andre's old dog, or inspect with his fork inedible chankings hiding in a thick broth or gravy. She had no doubt reeled in Andre's support, but this was not much of a surprise as he had always been fond her: when most waitresses would eat only bread and water the duration of their employment at Mistura, she had sampled the cicadae, fried chickens' feet, and marinated whale blubber her first day.

I asked her one night in a tone as severe as I could use with her, "How far will this go?"

"As far as it will," she said.

As for Mr. Brow, he never complained. After he finished his meals, he'd lean back in his stool and watch Oona with her other customers, watch her as if she were something he'd devour next. I didn't blame him. Some nights I found myself ashamed to discover I felt a bond between him and me, for as beautiful as she was, it was an alien beauty that took a keen eye to recognize. Men were initially drawn to her because of the way her legs carried her gazelle-like, because she looked frail, because although she wore no jewelry on her ears or thin wrists, five golden freckles dotted her milky chest. But these men's infatuation was brief, the way they might feel the allure of strange colors and shapes on a canvas before realizing, with shame and anger, that the thing depicted could not be reconciled to their sense of things in the

real world. Men who loved her from a distance got nothing from her up close except perhaps a wintry blast of oceanic current. It wasn't because she had nothing to give, but only because her true person existed under different pressures, in darker pools. I myself had seen only a fraction of this true Oona—and this was perhaps more than anyone had ever seen. If Mr. Brow could see it, or could even suspect it, then in this way we were linked.

All that this realization inspired in me, however, was greater trepidation for his chances of succeeding with Oona, of winning her and continuing, as he had continued with the others, their game outside the restaurant, to extend her servitude into his daily life. Such servitude, it went without saying, would be demanded in the bedroom, and this, as gruesome a thought as it was, calmed me, for I was confident Oona would never let it go that far. That Mr. Brow could and certainly did delight in fantasies of peeling off the girl's thin, damp garments, of inhaling from her stomach the salt of her labor, was reason enough to be assured that we had no connection. Only the basest mind could look at her and think such things, and such minds couldn't see in Oona the untouchable beauty I saw.

"Do you know, Simi," Mr. Brow said, "what she told me last night?"

I shrugged.

He put his fork down and picked up his drink.

"She told me that your spleen swells when you're in love."

"Peasant-talk," I said. "Silly girl."

"No, it's scientifically proven."

Walking Oona home that night, I told her, "He is in love with you, and he thinks you're in love with him."

I couldn't see her face, but I imagined it creased, just as the entire night seemed to crease and miss a beat.

The next day she started with the insects. Dragonfly nymphs and locust stew. Water bug eggs and broiled grasshoppers. Wasp salad and agave worms in wine sauce. For seven days the man ate bugs. For seven days, stink bug pâté and mealworm spaghetti, until Andre grew fed up with preparing it. Once bugs were off



Mr. Brow's private menu, Oona demanded bats' head soup. Andre conceded, if only for the change, but even he was growing weary. That night I left the bathroom window propped open, even moved the small trashcan out of its usual corner and set it below the window as an invitational aid to escape. But out he came, refreshed and eager.

He made a thunderclap with his hands and sang, "What's next?"

Oona and I used to roll our eyes at the halfwit; now she just got that grin and brought dessert.

After a month, Oona sat down next to him at the bar. She put her chin in her hand and watched him. It was late, the restaurant was nearly deserted and quiet enough to hear the toenails of Andre's dog as it wandered about under tables snuzzling for scraps. She yawned, he smiled. She took the chopsticks out of her hair and clawed at her scalp; her hair fell, crimped and coldly flaxen.

"Can I buy you a drink?" he said, taking the cue.

"Don't be an idiot," she said, then asked me for Mezcal on the rocks, which I knew she liked only for the worm wafting on the bottom.

"Nice," he reflected, "you sitting here with me."

"It's nice to sit," she said.

I slid her drink over, but she kept her eyes away from me.

"Your legs must get tired," he said. "I go to a professional masseuse. Have you ever been?"

She sipped her golden drink while he informed her of orthopedic shoes designed for people on their feet all day, if, he added, she *had* to be on her feet all day, and weren't there other careers she'd like to pursue? I went to take out the garbage and when I returned, some strange white vegetation had sprouted up between Oona and Mr. Brow, a long stalk of milky flowers, each hanging loosely in petaled clusters. I assumed it was a present from Mr. Brow, but when Oona plucked off a petal and placed it on her tongue like communion, I knew the gift was from her. She sucked on the petal, and her face eased, smooth and

sleek. She ate the rest of the flower, first the remaining petals, the sepals, the chalk-blue stigma, and the snowy-white stamen. He watched in amused awe, and Oona smiled radiantly back at him as she chewed.

This was the one real thing I knew about Oona, not a secret she had given up to show herself to me, but one I had discovered. We used to keep a flower in the restaurant, an orchid in the window up front. I began finding the stems stripped clean, but there were never any petals in the soil. I thought it was a mischievous child who came in with his parents every week, but then, a few months after Oona began working at Mistura, something happened. We had received a shipment of truffles, packed in soil, and Oona was told to wash them for that night's special. By the kitchen sink with her back to me, I saw her hand bring something to her mouth; through a curtain of pale hair I saw her jaw working. I crept up to her, took her arm and turned her around, ready to admonish her for eating the delicacies. But it wasn't the truffles she was eating. It was the soil, smeared across her lips like frosting. She stared at me hard, her chest rising and falling; I could feel the pulse of her arm in my hand. I let her go. We never spoke of it, of course, but since that time Oona was not shy around me when she had one of her cravings. And she had many besides orchid petals and soil. I saw her eat clay, and swallow pebbles left in the lobster buckets. She sucked on matchsticks until they dissolved into a sulfurous pulp, coating her teeth, and for a while I suspected that she was gnawing upon her own hair, though, for the sake of her appearance, she curtailed that. She'd eaten slivers of soap, and all sorts of cooking staples—starches and baking sodas, cocoa and vanilla extract. Oh, the sampling she did when Andre's back was turned—the meats, raw and cooked, the oddities, the scraps and snippets to be thrown out—while I fell so willingly into the role of her loyal lookout.

I didn't fully understand her cravings, but I knew that Mr. Brow, as he watched her devour the flower, was too dense to suspect he was witnessing a miracle. Because to me Oona was

a Madonna, and she could feed the entire world by making the world into food. The more I had thought of it on our nightly walks, the more I was convinced that this, at heart, was what drew me to her. I knew there was nothing she wouldn't serve the hungry, nothing she wouldn't devour herself. She had the hunger that I wanted, that I never suspected could exist; a hunger that was infectious, and so edacious that it awed me. I began to crave like she craved, but it was only for her—for her appetite, for her body and her soul. But more than this, I wanted her to crave me, for her to wolf me down like it was her last feast.

Mr. Brow followed suit with the flowers; he picked his own from the stalk, tore a petal and put it in his mouth.

"Spit it out," she said, sticking out her hand.

"What?"

"You ate a piece of the stalk—anything green will make you sick."

He let it fall from his mouth into her hand like a child.

This time she tore a petal off for him. "See? You have to twist it right here."

I caught her eye and dropped it coldly. On cue, the pint glass I was drying slipped from my hand. I heard the glass shatter, felt the shards explode against my pant leg. A taste, foul and acerbic, welled up from beneath my tongue.

He began to bring her jewelry, bracelets with gleaming opals, and turquoise necklaces; it was not overstepping his role or crossing any lines, for Oona had herself initiated this current phase. For her part, she brought him tablespoons of plant soil, soggy piles of tea leaves, uncooked grains of black rice, flecks of pigs' hooves, dollops of hand-soap, carbonized crisps scraped from the depths of the oven. I was losing Oona fast, and could think of only one crushing regret: that perhaps all those nights standing by the kitchen door as Andre counted the receipts, making sure he wouldn't see Oona pick at the meats marinating in the coolers, or suck on bats' eyes, or guide the long grasses and weeds that grew around the parking lot into her mouth like noodles, perhaps

those nights as I eyed her through the gap between the swinging doors, and as she eyed me back, were each an invitation to me. All I had to do was join her.

Clearing the bar that night, I took a crushed and blackened cigarette from an ashtray. I looked around for anyone else, could faintly hear Oona talking with Andre in the kitchen. I brought it to my nose and winced at the stale odor. I dabbed it upon my tongue as if to prepare for the taste, then let it fall into my mouth and gnashed down upon it. Bits of salty carbon gathered in my teeth, shreds of soggy tobacco slid along my gums, and the taste was overpowering, burnt and toxically sour. I cringed, gagged, spit the thing onto the floor, wretched into the basin and guzzled at the water splurging from the faucet. No, I did not have Oona's voracious appetite, could not work her kind of miraculous. I went home, more hungry than I had ever been.

She was bending toward him, like a solitary stiff reed in a steady wind. I could feel it. Mr. Brow could feel it. She sat with him, let him stay later into the night, after the restaurant closed. I tried speaking with her on our train rides home, but she wouldn't listen, eventually lashed out, accused me of being overbearing—paternal, of all things! She shut me out completely, and finally began allowing Mr. Brow to drive her home so that each night I rode the train alone. More than once, mechanically, I got off at her stop. Oona's resistance to him weakened as she ran out of new things to feed him. His tongue had become a strip of metal, his teeth like a piranha's; he had grown the stomach of a dog; but there was still a dish he had not sampled. He awaited it patiently, just as, I believe, she bided her time in serving it, prolonging the anticipation, stretching out what began to feel inevitable. And when she finally served it I was coming through the kitchen doors from the wine closet, three bottles to a hand. She was on her stool with her head back while Mr. Brow, standing against the bar, lowered himself to taste her lips. When they parted, she straightened herself and seemed to consider the flavor as if it were a sip of wine. She didn't seem to mind the flavor at all.

"What do you want with her?"

I had never spoken so directly to Mr. Brow, and I feared the edge in my voice had dismantled my simple-minded immigrant act. I was put at ease when his answer came slurred.

"I'm in love with her," he said, his whole face beaming. "Can't you see that?"

Several days had passed since their kiss, but at the end of each day they kissed again, and each time it renewed my anger. This night I had been pouring his drinks generously and leaving little time between them. I suspected now that I was trying to get him drunk so I could drop the charade and be angry for a moment.

"Why?" I said. "She's a . . . a *garbage*-mouth." I nearly spit the words, and I felt a wave of nausea at the hate I heard in my voice.

I cranked on the faucet and the water drummed in the basin with a hollow murmur.

He looked at me quietly, with more sincerity than I had ever seen creased into the wrinkles on his forehead. His eyes screwed up, his lips twisted into a euphoric smile.

"She has strange tastes, Simi," he said, then deflated and laughed. "She's looking for the right one is all. Look at this, Simi," he said, pulling a slim jewelry box from his suit-jacket pocket.

I peered down with disgust as he revealed a turquoise ring he meant to slide upon one of Oona's once bare fingers.

"Did you know, Simi," he said, gazing at the ring, "that she is very close to saying yes?"

My heart plummeted. "Saying yes?"

"To a trip to Italy," he continued. "She's never been. I go every summer."

He went on about summer villas, but I had stopped listening to him. A cold sweat had broken out upon my forehead and for a moment my head swam; but then, as the ring came back into focus, I remembered Monica, Mr. Brow's waitress and lover I had

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known three years ago. I thought of the jewelry he had brought her, and then I thought of the last time I saw her. It was a few months after I quit, a frigid and sunny winter day downtown; she was crossing Michigan Avenue and I wouldn't have recognized her, buried as she was in a fur coat, if she hadn't called after me. She had quit the restaurant, too; Mr. Brow had gotten her a job downtown—not another waitressing job, but something with an advertising firm where he had a friend. To be polite, I asked after Mr. Brow, but she told me she had left him.

Standing before her on that salt-white corner, I took note of the fur coat and the shopping bags filled to the brim with the wares of ritzy stores. I thought Monica was lucky to have gotten so far ahead on Mr. Brow's shoulders. Now, standing before Mr. Brow himself, it struck me as odd, and an outright contradiction, that a man who thrived on young, working women would be so unwise as to help elevate them from that lowly position to a bough from which they could alight and leave him. I chuckled in front of the man as he prattled on about Italy, thinking of all the servant-girls who must have left him, the endlessly served, and thinking that perhaps there was some justice to it all.

I decided to take another risk and mention Monica, to plant this ugly little memory back in his head. He was drunk enough, I hoped, not to recall he had never mentioned her by name. I leaned in close and asked him, "What is that 'right taste,' Mr. Brow? *You*? What will you do for Oona? I'm curious. You're going to take her from the restaurant and bring her to Italy? Get her a real job? Like Monica? Didn't she leave you, Mr. Brow, as soon as you opened your hands?"

His face was surprisingly close to mine, his head hovering inches above the bar and his eyes weary and red but locked on my own. His silence began to panic me—perhaps he wasn't as drunk as I thought. I felt sick at my words, but sure I had to keep up the ruse lest he realize, reach across the bar and throttle me.

"These girls," I continued, motioning around with a hand, "you've got to keep the cage shut. Let them sing, right? But never fly."

He sat back suddenly, saying, "No, no, no," and released me from the train of his eyes. "Monica? I left her. Monica Martinelli! I got her a job, I bought her a car. I was done with all that. What do I want with a girl like that?"

"You mean a girl who took your money?"

"No, you misunderstand. I mean a girl who has everything. What else can you give a girl like that?"

I laughed now. "So that's what you are, Mr. Brow? A saint? You give, not take?"

He stared at me with patience and sympathy, as if he had just delivered the news of a terminal disease I had in my stomach. Indeed, something did swell in my gut, and even as I grew aware of people beckoning me for drinks, I could pay no mind to anything but this expanding feeling inside, as if what Mr. Brow had said was a truth that would tear through any moment. I tried to push the notion away, chuckling, shaking my head at him, snorting like a horse.

"Fucking Saint Brow of the Weary Waitress!" I said, then immediately left him, went to the kitchen and leaned, hidden, against a freezer. Across from me, near the back door and upon a small table, was a bouquet of flowers of the same variety Oona and Mr. Brow had shared two weeks earlier. I swiped at it like I would an insect and they crashed to the floor. What I had thought of Mr. Brow was, despite my convictions, slowly taking a new shape. If he didn't prey on poor and pretty hungry girls with the purpose of chaining them, then it was to feed them. Monica was, in the end, but a heavy, steel drum who, because he could no longer fill her, could no longer fill him. It didn't mean that Mr. Brow was any less of a predator—the useless Monica might as well have been a drum of spent grease by the time he was through with her. To grow fat on the fulfillment of others seemed more ensnaring and deceitful, more corrosive and corrupted. And yet, Monica was no longer a struggling waitress, no longer scraping by. As for Oona, the famished Oona, Mr. Brow wolfed down the endless scraps she delivered not as part of an elaborate flirtation to own her heart—what did he care for

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hearts? He had consumed hers completely on the first night—but because each bite he took—and Mr. Brow knew it, had known it from the start!—fed *her*. And this was all he wanted—to sate her, to fill her up. But how could a girl with infinite appetite ever become full with love? Only one thing mattered though, one thing I knew for certain: the restaurant had grown too small for their appetites, and Mr. Brow surely had every intention of taking Oona away from Mistura, and from me.

Andre called to me sharply and said, “Bring that out for Oona, will ya? She’s buried.”

I collected myself, saw the plate of food to which he referred and, though I felt I didn’t have to, asked, “Where’s it going?”

“It’s his,” Andre said.

I took the plate with both hands. It was the special of the night, a fairly simple dish of quail and rice with a glistening raspberry sauce. Something inside me turned off. My legs carried me, along with the plate, to the back of the restaurant, where my hand retrieved the flowers from the floor. I began stripping the stems of their petals, letting them fall one by one into the food on the plate, and all the while a muted voice in my head wanted Andre to see me, or for Oona to appear behind me. I put the bouquet down on the table and stared at it, as if waiting for it to speak. It did not, so I retrieved the ladle from the pan of sauce on the stove and covered the petals in crimson.

I took the food back to the bar and placed it in front of Mr. Brow. I told him, quite evenly, “You will never fill her. She is bottomless.”

His gaze floated down from the ceiling where it had been dreaming and settled on my face. There was a dull and dangerous intoxication in his eyes.

I left him to wait on others at the bar, but kept my eyes on him. He began to eat. When he noticed the first petal on his fork, he looked about for Oona with a wry smile, but the front door was presently flooding with customers. He put the bite into his mouth, and at that moment my teeth ground together so hard that one customer nearby glanced around for the source



of the noise. I tried to calm myself. Anything green will make you sick, Oona had told him. So there might be some green left on the petals, so he might fall ill. As remarkable as it was, he hadn't once been made ill eating here, or if he had, he was discrete about it. Surely he suspected, as did I, that any sign of rejecting the food Oona would take as a rejection of herself. The spell would be broken, she'd cast him aside.

Mr. Brow began to cough. His face flickered, his hand went to his chest. He took another bite, dropped his fork and gagged. The patrons aside him inched away, exchanged glances with each other. One to his left asked if he was alright. Mr. Brow, his face sallow, did not reply. He picked up his fork, tore at the breast of the quail and shoveled another bite into his mouth. The man to his left told him to stop eating, pleaded with him to take some water. He tried taking away the plate, but Mr. Brow caught his hand with alarming speed and eyed him so severely that he backed away. Then Mr. Brow turned to find my eyes.

"What's going on?" said Oona. She was suddenly pressed to my side, her breath coming quick. "What's he eating?"

I shrugged. "What did you order for him?"

"Simi, what did you do?"

I tried moving away but her fingers dug into my arm. "Simi!"

"It's the flowers," I said.

"The stem? Did you give him the stem?"

"He thinks *you* gave him the stem," I said. "So what? He gets sick—"

"He dies, Simi! *Dies!*" And here I saw her face flush red with true concern.

I stood firm, felt the light caress of her breasts as they rose and fell along the side of my crossed arms, felt her breath touching my neck. Mr. Brow was hunched over his plate. The other customers had moved away a considerable distance now and watched him with amusement that bordered on disgust and fear. He took another bite, chewed it slowly.

"You'd better take it from him, Oona," I finally said.

"You served it, you get it."

"You said he'll die," I said, looking over my shoulder at her.

"He might." Her face had mellowed, its paleness had washed away the color.

I tried piercing her with my eyes. "Oona . . ."

She said nothing, just kept watching him, eyes heavy, lips parted. And then I knew that in her trancelike state she was experiencing something like awe, lust and terror combined, and that she would not move to stop him, not now or ever. Mr. Brow had won; she knew that, and yet had she been allowed to watch him gorge until he keeled over dead, she would not have done so with malice or contempt for him, or even with the shame of her loss. In those brief moments we watched Mr. Brow eat, shoveling in his own death, she felt rather the opposite; she felt the possibility of love, and I was sure of it because suddenly the beautiful, bottomless stomach of her soul did not feel infinite to me anymore. Falling through all her darkness—falling since the moment I met her—I had just caught sight of a rapidly approaching floor, and it appeared as black and solid as basalt.

I snatched the plate from under Mr. Brow, unsure whether my aim was to prevent his death or her love, and threw it in the sink, and in the same movement picked up the telephone to dial for an ambulance. Seconds later, I and several men had Mr. Brow, who seemed hardly aware now of what was happening, slung between our arms; we rushed him to the restroom whereupon he evacuated the night with horrific noise.

Mr. Brow did not come back to the restaurant, although I suspected he waited in the lot to drive Oona home, since she now left through the backdoor each night. But there was no reason for him to come inside anymore. The days and weeks began to blur and I felt as if I was hiding from the sight of Oona—and the world—using my own body as a cave from which I peered out through portals, and from some quiet operational room directed my hands to pour drinks, and my mouth to issue utterances. Oona was happy, a different sort of creature. She lost her grace

in the restaurant, tripped over her boots, dropped plates, burned auburn scars on her wrists upon the oven. And whether she continued to sneak all the morsels of her strange cravings into her mouth, I don't know, but I never saw her do it again.

Mr. Brow never implicated anyone in his poisoning. He led the medics to believe it was a flu he caught from a friend, and the drinks he unwisely took. The night he was taken to the hospital, after the restaurant was closed and deserted but for Oona and myself, she came by the end of the bar and watched me. I was wiping down the liquor bottles. Her eyes flared at me angrier than the cigarette tip she was just then making glow between her lips.

"I'm going to the hospital now," she said.

"Do you love him?"

I had to ask, had to know for sure, but instead of answering me she began to tell me where in the restaurant they had been making love after Andre and I left each night. Back there, against the stove, she said, in the pantry and on the booths, and here, upon your bar.

I kept my eyes on the bottle I was cleaning as she hissed these things to me. I said, as steadily as I could, "So, you do."

She said nothing, and for a moment I thought she was merely gathering silence to add to the effect of her outburst, but no outburst ever came.

"Then he'll be done with you shortly," I said, almost tenderly.

She stood frozen, an impossible length of ash bending from her cigarette. She left, and we never spoke of Mr. Brow again.

Oona stayed only a few more weeks at Mistura. One night she left and the next morning a new waitress came in, a slovenly, middle-aged woman who called the customers "honey" and "doll," and asked them why they wanted to eat such things. And then after many months, in the middle of white winter, at midday, I felt the icy tendrils of air wind around my neck as Oona came once more through the door. She perched upon a stool and ordered Mezcal on the rocks.

We watched each other in silence. She smiled, brought the glass to her lips, smiled again. Her face seemed to ripple then, and after a moment, crack. Her eyes and brows twisted, her lips glistened cherry-red, her jaw shuddered and bulged. It was like watching fire bleed through from the back of a painted portrait.

"Simi . . ." She said it softly, brokenly.

But I felt suddenly hardened; it was a dumb sort of brutality that wanted to preserve at all costs the memory of the idol on whose sooty boots I had worshipped—that pale-faced mother who had room for everything and all in her depths, who had taught me how to hunger, and for whom I now starved. When I spoke, all I could say was,

"Much crazy food in here."

I began wiping a bottle. I cradled it, wiped until the label began to peel. I felt her watching me, but I didn't return her gaze. I started to whistle that song from my childhood, tried to remember the words, but couldn't. I felt the cool air of the door again and looked around. She was gone. I took up her glass, empty but for the sodden worm coiled between the ice cubes.