

A Day at the Lake with Gertrude Stein

It's a morning of sailboats,
 a morning of Gertrude Stein,
and I'm reading her words,
 lounging with her sentences.
It's August, not hot,
 even cool on the point,
the point where dozens of sailboats
 glide easy.
Sky colors the lake,
 precious blue, blue
sails, billowing petals.
 Boats bouquet
drift apart
 while I sit here alone,
alone with Gertrude Stein.
 Leaves flutter green,
green branch swaggers
 swaggers like Picasso's brush—
clouds part to blue,
 roses can't compete,
no rose can compete,
 even a rose can't compete with this.

Defitato

My husband dreams I've won an award
for inventing a word I defined as: "absolutely,
the epitome of being positive." Fitting

since he knows my favorite word is "Yes."
He says we arrive in a limo, I'm wearing
a black sequined dress and he, a tuxedo.

We both look *defitatably* cool. Later, I dream
he's won an award for revising the Fowler
phrenology head—citing a new part of the brain

he calls "the epicurean center" (area of epic cures).
Makes sense since he's a chef who loves science.
At the podium he theorizes: what if everything

we eat turns nutritious in our bodies, inciting
a reaction that would cause our metabolism
to reset itself so that we'd always be

at our ideal weight. Our waiter would ask
if we'd like seconds because eating makes us
epicurious. We'd say, *defitato* Arthur, or Bobo,

and while you're at it, another *obsequikoi*,
my good man (word for the ornamental carp
that resemble flowers swimming). But this genus

is servile, uses flattery as a means of protection
from predators. Example: A barracuda
approaches and the koi says,

Wow, you're looking fabulous!
Your scales shimmer, and your eyes
are not a bit cloudy.

You really think so? says the predator.
Oh, de-fi-tato, Cuda, Koi says. *You smell good too.*
And what if in this epicurean center,

these koi protect our immune system
from turning against itself, and why not
reboot our brains to erase past sorrows,

create a true state of defitato
where dreamers are always welcome
in each others' dream.

Fish Feel Pain

I. ALLERGY: REVENGE OF THE LOBSTER

I'm trying to remember
lobster, its sweet meat,
since I can no longer

consume it. It turned
on me near the shores
of Cape Cod, crept
under my skin—

phantom claws
and spanking tail,
pushing up hives
of spume and spindrift,

the itchy red stigmata—
for all those times
I slipped them
into the boiling pot,
told they really couldn't feel it.

II. TROUT TRAUMA

Today I read that scientists
discovered fish feel pain.

Injecting the lips of trout
with bee venom, they watched them
rock, rub their lips against gravel
for relief. Years ago, fishing

on a cool, clear lake
in the Colorado mountains,
I hooked an 8-pounder;

landed it on the bank, watched
as it flopped and lurched
toward water—

I grabbed a branch to club it,
keep it from getting away
from the dinner table,
thought without a nervous system
it wouldn't feel anything.

III. HUMAN TRAUMA

I've been to the E.R. a few times
with ichthyophagous reactions.
A fillet of haddock turned
my body snapper red,
left me gasping like a fugu
victim at a sushi bar,

and wondering if fish *do* feel
the pain of a baited hook,
walleye, bluegill, and pike flailing
on *Michigan Great Outdoors*,

hanging from the hook of
a finger above the blue-gray pulse
of Lake Erie. And me, gasping,
the release of histamine—
the smother of thin, thin air.

When Chefs Have Nightmares

Not the usual soufflé falling or someone clouding the consommé he'd been clarifying for hours—no, this time my husband, Lou, dreams of a grotesque giant—fungi growing on a bulbous nose, bloodshot eyes, and Goliath strong. He breaks into our house and demands Lou prepare him a warm glass of milk, says he's taking over his kitchen.

Lou, a graduate of The Culinary Institute, starts to reach for his Jaccard chrome-plated meat mallet with interchangeable discs, each specifically designed for maximum effect on various cuts, but the monster grabs him, paralyzing his arm—his stirring arm, and forces him to return to the stove.

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Lou wakes up, mumbling, terrified, but says he must return to the dream and wills himself to fall back asleep. He reaches into the drawer for a Laguiole steak knife, razor sharp, with a distinctive steel bee—symbol of Napoleon's imperial seal. One awarded to the town of Laguiole for courage during battle. The monster grabs it

from Lou, attempting to stab him like an hors d'oeuvre on a toothpick, prodding him with the tip, toward the stove to finish warming the milk.

Lou resists again, this time grabbing a large Santoku knife with a granton edge—the one used to chop cabbage, parsley, and slice tomatoes cleanly without crushing them. He uses it to chop the monster's hand

which resembles the thick, warty rind
of fingered citron, fruit that symbolizes long
life. The monster charges toward him again,
but Lou, like an Iron Chef carving a fresh-
caught squid for calamari al Forno,
finishes him off, returns to his kitchen
to warm the milk— and drink it himself.

Ingratiating the Monster

It may be hard to earn his trust, but
I've seen worse. Men flaunting perfect
abs and smooth complexions yet hideously
empty inside. Become his Franken-Freud.
Analyze his Faustian childhood: controlling
father, hand-me-down body parts, soul-
wrenching rejection.

“Dear Frankie, big, beautiful-
hearted Frankie, I know, I know Darling,”
you say stroking his chartreuse skin, careful
not to snag your sweater on his hardware:
thick metal bolts, umbilicus that gave him life

through a pair of rusty jumper cables. Ignore
his scent—the scent of tires skidding on tar.
And know that he's self-conscious about his gait,
legs that move like trees uprooting and rerooting.
Remember not to stare at his griddle-flat head,
or the quilt of scars that stitch his blank

yet poignant expression. At night when the clouds
have turned to suede, bring your soft touch to his
bedside, read to him—*Beauty and the Beast*
or *Prometheus*. Pull his patchwork head to your bosom,
and should you notice a murderous rage in his bloodshot
eyes, a quiver in his thin black lips, know that for some,
love can be hard to bear on top of all that wanting.

What Would Hitchcock Do?

I have been notorious for pleading with my husband,
*Put the caramels and cupcakes away! Don't let me
fill this old void with ersatz love.* We leave the house,
head North by Northwest to an idyllic vacation spot—away

from haunting temptation. He rips off the rear window mirror
cautioning *Don't look back.* Instead we travel to a cottage on a bluff
overlooking a gemmy cobalt sea. A woman with the dreamy eyes
of Kim Novak slipping in and out of her dead great-grandmother's

persona invites us in. She has a birdcage. We don't consider it
a harbinger. But there's a white clapboard bell tower in her yard
that resembles a tall wedding cake. I look up and my head swims,
like the hot fudge on a Sander's cream puff sundae. Reminds me

of the vertigo of childhood when my father, as if spellbound,
became a victim of jealousy around my pretty mother,
forced to leave like some stranger on a train. With his absence,
the emptiness became a neon sign on a cheap motel flashing

VACANCY, VACANCY—a door left open for cravings.
At sunset the bell tower looks dark as chocolate ganache. I try
to imagine the cedar shake roof as something reptilian—alligator
skin, but inevitably it morphs into sugared almonds and praline.

The woman, as if to sabotage what little willpower I have, says
she enjoys drinking espresso with a slice of tiramisu on the porch,
pointing to the parapet. She urges us to follow her up the winding
staircase, which I see as the perfect swirl on a red velvet cupcake.

I hesitate but she reaches out, says, *Are you coming?* Her eyes
have the innocence of a creamy blue sky before a dizzying flock
of birds congregate to destroy an entire town. I remember a line
from a poem: *There are impulses in nature that can't be trusted.*

I cannot be trusted to climb to the summit of a tower that,

come to think of it, reminds me of one of those Harry & David stacks filled with truffles and petit fours. But then I ask myself, is all of this merely heavy allegory about a heroine caught

in a psychological struggle over the nature of obsession— or just a control issue? The woman offers us dessert and like some psycho, I lose it—grab a knife from her hands, plunging it into the cake, again and again and again.

Missing Ingredients

I. CABLE GIRL

Surfing through the channels I stop to watch a girl with badly dyed yellow hair pulled into a ponytail, blackened eyebrows, teeth uneven, and her tongue studded in silver. She's sitting on a bed in her own bedroom showing viewers her "wacky finds" for the day. I'm more interested in her quirky imperfections, how she speaks with a pronounced lisp, and how she's packaged what may have been unattractive features into something oddly fascinating. Today there are back-to-back episodes of her show, and my husband, overhearing her, joins me. We follow the host to a tiny kitchen where she holds up a box of Duncan Hines Pineapple Cake Mix. She claims to know nothing at all about baking but thinks it would be fun to make. Searching through her spare cupboards she finds most of the ingredients, is missing the oil, and decides rather than mess up several dishes, "I'll just mix it in the pan," adding an extra egg to make up for the oil. Studying the box again she notices the actual pineapple on top of the cake, removes the soggy rings from a can and lays them over the batter, and then proceeds to bake it, or broil it, at some unknown temperature but one that will severely burn the surface and give the cake an appearance of having attacked itself. When the cake comes out of the oven it matches her dark eyebrows and yellow hair, but she is not dissuaded as she peels away the charred surface, proudly holding the cake alongside the box to show the "amazing similarity." Upon slicing it, the undercooked center oozes a little before it reaches her mouth, as she gushes with a Martha Stewart "*yummm*." My husband's brow freezes, resembling the Gateway Arch when I sigh, "Wish I could be like that."

2. COVER GIRL

My mother blazed her own trail, called the shots. Working to support our family in the late fifties after my father was gone, she saved to buy a modest home in Detroit, and later homes in the suburbs. Mom possessed a wind-in-your-face air, a red-convertible glamour she earned at a job formerly reserved for men. I remember standing in front of her closet, imagining myself going to work in the polka dot dress with matching coat. I marveled at her neat rows of stilettos and pumps, jewelry boxes of pop beads and pearls, and the way she applied her makeup—back when rouge was an art. Each morning she created a flawless image that seemed

“perfect,” a word she used to describe how things should be done. Yet smart as she was, there were moments she fell into a quirky Stepford trap. A place where the lipstick line smudged in the sand. It made me wonder, what’s a cover girl covering up? Her yellow cake with peanut butter frosting was the best thing I ever tasted, but each time she prepared any of her delicious dishes she’d tell us what was missing, how it could have been better, ignoring the praise— as if cake perfection was unattainable. I was confused by these Betty Crocker wanna-be moments. Betty was real to millions. The ultimate cover girl whose picture on the box was a combination of women of all ages and backgrounds so that everyone could become her. My self-image grew to include my father who was interested in how things worked more than how they were packaged. But even now, when Mom says, “Why don’t you put on a little red lipstick?”—I struggle, trying not to feel like a cake that can’t rise.

Grape Leaves

My grandmother, Sittu, took me for walks down the alley
behind our home in Detroit. There flanking the gravel paths

were old fences that became trellises to grape vines.
She taught me to look for young, tender leaves,

pick them with a delicate touch. Here we'd cross
the divide between us, the clash of cultures

and what it means to be a woman. Her girlhood plucked
early, marriage arranged, femininity was a hard green

grape yanked from the vine. I'd pinch the leaves
using the tips of my fingernails, careful not to yank

or tear as we stacked them midrib to midrib. For her,
so much depended on the meal, the carnal affection

of the dinner table, an intimacy she could enjoy
without shame. Translated from Lebanese, *waraq areesh*

means paper of the vines—unschooled, this was a paper
she could read, the way she read the dandelions she'd pick

for salad mixed with *kishk*,* or tall grasses she'd dye
with red onion peel, weave into baskets. I helped her

blanch the grape leaves to make them pliable, smoothing
the shiny side down, spooning ground lamb, rice, and spices

into the center. She taught me to fold the sides over,
tucking them in as she rolled them into wine cork shapes,

* A mixture of cracked wheat soaked in yogurt and dried in the sun.

watched me do the same. We nestled them in the pot
on a rack of lamb riblets, let everything simmer together,

the warmth of those moments, food, our common language
as we reached across fences where the most tender leaves

seemed to say, *pick me, pick me.*

The Meaning of Life

In the Clorox commercial
there's a stream
of washing machines,
one after another
morphing from practical
white to candy apple red,
folks doing laundry
in a continuum from 1913,
long before I was here, back
when Clorox came in amber
bottles, before the white plastic
jug, before trash became
ecological and green.
Aproned mothers—later
men and women less defined,
all part of this strange
but comforting continuity.
And the washing machines,
from wringers to dials
to touch pads but all with
the same purpose—get the dirt
out. It makes me feel a part
of the great pajama drawstring,
a long thread that I've held,
and after I'm gone,
will have been a part of.
It comforts me to know
that Clorox bleaches
out stains, even the ones
left behind.