

WHITE
FOOD

POEMS BY TONI MERGENTIME LEVI

MAYAPPLE PRESS 2016

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Published by Mayapple Press
362 Chestnut Hill Road
Woodstock, NY 12498
mayapplepress.com

ISBN 978-1-936419-65-4

Library of Congress Control Number 2015960993

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank the following artist communities for inspirational residencies that contributed to the creation of this book: VCCA/Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, The MacDowell Colony, Djerassi Resident Artists Program, Ucross Foundation, Millay Colony for the Arts, Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts, and Konstepidemin (Gothenburg, Sweden).

Sincere appreciation also to Judith Kerman, Jane Mushabac, Jean Lithgow, Melissa Goodrum, Lois Kagan Mingus and Chocolate Waters for valuable suggestions and support.

Cover art by Rebecca Levi. Cover design by Toni Levi and Judith Kerman. Book designed and typeset by Amee Schmidt with titles in Minion Pro and text in Palatino Linotype.

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Dedicated to My Family, Past and Present

MILK

Milk arrives like a blessing in my dreams—
blue-white as a glacial waterfall from a far-off thaw.
In my most joyous dream, a precious rare appearance,
I am old—old as I am now. But suddenly, my breasts
are filled with milk again and waking I remember

the neonatal ward, where my full-term bilirubin baby
looked like some blue-ribboned, beefy best-in-show.
In reality, of normal size, my jaundiced giantess
dwarfed the pink wrinkled heartbreaking preemies
riddled with tubes and sensors in their Isolettes.

They sent me home in tears, bereft, without my baby—
blindfolded in her fish tank under therapeutic light,
without *me* (impossible!)—her only known universe.
For two unrelenting days at home, my milk dripped,
useless as my love. For two years after, she drank her fill.

Milk courses through my dappled world of dream.
My breasts are swollen, tender, nipples tipped in red.
My milk is a river flowing to the land of tiny babies.
All—now *all* can emerge from their boxes, alive.
Those who said I wouldn't have enough were wrong.

WHITE FOOD

When I was four, I saw the light:
all the colors in the world make white
and all the foods make potato.

I wouldn't spend a nickel to buy vanilla.
Couldn't the jerk who made it
even think of banana?

Fish is holy and I hated how it smelled.
It might have been a sin for us
to eat it anyway, not being Catholic.

Spaghetti was the guts of a corpse
passed around in the dark on Halloween.
Screaming highly encouraged.

Pearl onions slip out of their slimy skins
over and over, but you never get to the good part.
And it just ruins the peas to try.

Our Brownie troop leader let us toast marshmallows
on coat hangers at her kitchen stove. She said
the goo looked like milkweed. *That was Nature.*

Mom said cauliflower grows behind the ears
of kids who don't dry thoroughly. She hinted
that's why cousin Sandy wore his hair long.

Granny Rose made lemon meringue pie.
The meringue floated like a toasted cloud, but
the gummy lemon was a problem. Like improper fractions.

My sister pocketed her chicken skin and ate it after supper,
while watching horror on TV. Until the day Dad found it
dissolving like the Mummy in the washer with the socks.

Sugar cubes, said Mom, were reserved for company.
Too good for us kids! We built little houses with them
and steps that led stealthily up the silver sugar bowl.

When no one's looking, press a soft piece of white bread
against your face, nibble a hole that gets bigger and bigger,
then eat the crust like a dangling snake.

Salt is for flavoring blah food and catching birds.
Shake it on their tails and they can't fly away.
Neither can stinky white cheese. If only we had Velveeta!

PS—Butter is really almost as white as milk.
They put the yellow in to make it look like butter.

ENGLISH: THE REAL, RIGHT LANGUAGE

Mother, champion of culture in Rockaway,
decided I should study French at five,
against my will. Madame Z, my Polish tutor,
shunted her two smudgy children to the side
to teach me from a sleepy orange text.

La souris est sur le toit, I learned to say
with an excellent accent, longing to please
my meticulous Mom. *The mouse is on the roof*.
I hoped that sentence would prove useful
later in my life. But really,

I wanted Mother to let me spend the money
I had to hand to Madame Z on baby dolls.
I wanted my mother to let me stay at home with her.
I wanted my mother not to spend the heavy hours
of my lessons taking my little sister out to play.

Troubled by the presence of *two* words
(French and English) for *mouse* and *roof*,
I went to Mom for explanations.
“But English is the *real, right* language,”
I whined and begged her to agree.

She was making creampuffs. “No my dear,”
she answered. “There can be two.
Just as I love you and your sister equally.”
Stunned with horror, I knew the truth:
She could not be my real mother, *mère* or *maman* after all.

SHOEBAG / ROOKERY

In dusty brown nests,
pocketed like baby birds,
the shoes wait for mother.

Mouths agape, laces drooling,
they hunger not for food but feet,
delectable from heel to toe.

One shoe can never exit on its own
or get mother's sole attention.
That pesky twin must always come along—

That mirror image
mother obviously loves equally.
(The left one plots the right one's death.)

And when two step out,
the others can go hang,
wondering where the chosen pair went.

But the travelers never bring reports
either of adventure or
the dumb, heavy work they do.

Oh their silent patience!
Shoes are the reason why
we close the closet door.

So we can make up stories:
They are singing quartets four across,
bows tied neatly beneath their chins.

We shut away thoughts of
empty gullets, immobile tongues,
and eyelets that can never cry.

TUNNELS

for Lois

When the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel (presumably lit with batteries) opened in 1950—the longest tunnel in the country, maybe the world—two little sisters happily began years of nagging Daddy to take the boat-and-tunnel route from home in Rockaway to Granny in the big city. Not wanting to pay thirty-five cents, the high-priced toll, he usually refused and chose some boring road, but sometimes (yay) we took the thrilling, hold-your-breath, neverending underwater tunnel, praying the tiles sometimes missing from the ceiling wouldn't let the river in.

My sister and I loved tunnels. Our favorite indoor game: making a tunnel with ratty table pads, green felt peeling like old moss—
creeping together through the dimness into sudden light... and lo: the wondrous appearance of our living room! But we often argued about who would be the leader and who had to crawl with a *tushie* in her face.

We fought a lot over *Whose Fault Was It?!*
Over who would be the queen that day and who her slave.
Who'd get Mom to cuddle on the bed with her the longest.
And who'd get the prettiest paper doll with the cutest cut-out clothes.
Sometimes we wrestled for possession of the silver grape shears,
which held the power to rule the universe.

But on the beach, perhaps calmed by the shushing of the waves,
or because we knew the older kids would laugh to see us fight,
or perhaps because we felt the shared danger of the undertow,
we made a silent peace.

Together we built up drippy castles,
searched for silvery sand crabs with golden eggs,
popped the rubbery bubbles of washed-up seaweed,
and best of all carved tunnels under the sand.

We would start from two spots far apart
and dig straight down til the sand felt cool,
then try to steer toward one another,
through the darkness beneath the shimmering beach,
fearing collapse—clawing, scooping, tossing damp sand,
until by some joyous miracle our fingers touched,
down deep, where the eye of envy did not reach.