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I Want to Eat Bugs With You Underground

The scientist on the radio said that humans will survive, and, at first, I was buoyed, but she meant only some of us, the ones living in tunnels, eating crickets to survive when the rest had died from mass starvation after droughts lasted longer and seas rose faster and wars killed bigger because everyone wanted what little was left. I'd be fine with being one of the billions dead unless you were still alive. Under a down comforter or by a trash fire, I want to be where you are. You know how poorly I dig holes, how angry I get when I'm cold, how twice I've accidentally maced myself, and still you'd take me with you down into the earth, give me more than my fair share of caterpillar. Few believe we're in the middle of the end because ruin can happen as slowly as plaque blocking arteries, and only later feels as true as your hand resting on my hip, both of us quiet as roses waiting for the bees to arrive.

Lounging on the Couch on My 39th Birthday in Pink Flannel Donut Pajamas

Surely birds would love to peck
at the dozens of donuts adorning
my arms and legs: the glazed, the jellied,
the vanilla frosted scalloped at the edges
like the worn lace tablecloth in Sito's
tenement apartment where my mother
father sister aunts uncles cousins
would cram in Sundays, post church,
and I'd eat the frosting off two, return
the bottoms to the box while Sito frowned
and Gido insisted I should disfigure
as many donuts as made me happy. After
he died, she pulled the walls around her
like an afghan and didn't leave. Sundays,
when I delivered the church bulletin
to her recliner, she'd clasp my face
in both hands, grateful. It's been decades
since I sat in a pew, but I brought my mother
to the last church hafla, where she won
these pajamas instead of what she wanted
(the platter of walnut baklawa). And maybe
I've lived too long to be lounging in pink
flannel donut pajamas, but I love how they
rub against my legs like a cat's head,
love that someone spent time dreaming up
improbable donuts, like this one here
frosted blue-green, then crosshatched
with piped white stripes, topped with pink
and red sprinkles, a sugared inner tube
floating the middle. How can't I be hungry?
In the next room, my birthday cake sits
on Sito's old table, mine since the day
we emptied her apartment and I opened
dresser drawer after dresser drawer to find
hundreds of crocheted dishcloths, stacked

as neatly as cash for a ransom. We knew she must have made them in her recliner by the window on those days none of us were there. It's almost noon and I'm still in pajamas, waiting for my daughter and husband to march into the room and play me the birthday song they wrote, her on toy guitar, him on mandolin. I hear them practicing and it's so sweet my teeth ache. Sito, was it once like this for you?

Erased de Kooning

Robert Rauschenberg wanted to know if unmaking art could make art. This idea seems too much for me, having just seen giant irises blooming out of a wall, a painted lower intestine, a woman's bust sculpted from soap. But I'm standing before his canvas, his *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, and, like much art, its title tells me what to see. If you were here, how you would praise this, how we would argue over whether this was true, over what, if anything, was. Rauschenberg erased a de Kooning that de Kooning reluctantly gave him because he appreciated the idea, and it was, Rauschenberg said, all about the idea. He erased the painting in celebration, just as you (I wish I could believe) erase me. Not that I'm art, or you're art, but weren't we ideas of each other? If you were here, you'd make your point, walk away before you saw that Rauschenberg erased for a month and still there are ink spots, de Kooning's violet crayon; there are even eyes, still looking. My love, Rauschenberg lied. The idea, yes. But how his arms must have ached afterwards.

Jenny Perowski Is Ahead of Me in the Grocery Store Line

If an Amish family can forgive the man who burned their land, surely I can say hello to Jenny Perowski, who used to call me “fattie fat” in seventh grade math and had boys call my house, pretending to ask me out. That was twenty years ago. Now Jenny, if not fat exactly, is puffy as a slightly overstuffed chair. I'm thinner than her, and my pleasure feels more whiskey than cream, makes me want to pour out her Kors bag to rifle for candy, then slowly eat it in front of her like she once did to me. I know her cruelty was, at best, a misdemeanor. But anger is like a peppermint in a pocketbook—everything inside takes on its smell and taste. I could break it in my teeth, make it disappear. Instead, I savor the mint, let the sugar line my mouth like fur, linger far past what can be called pleasure. How good it would be to be better than this.

Process Inspiration for the Final Piece

Sculpture by Carles Piera Claramunt

From *Inner Light: An Art and Therapy Experience at the End of Life, Barcelona*

More than fifty lightbulbs without light
hang from the gallery ceiling, not from wire
but varying lengths of string, knocking

lightly against our faces, arms, even knees,
no matter how carefully we slip between.
Inside each, in place of the filament,

a feather. The blue-eyed peacock
fills its space like a gas. Others take up less:
the glossy crow shadowing a curve,

the narrow brown and yellow (finch?
sparrow?) straight down the middle,
like a jumper with arms at her sides.

A hundred years ago, this very room
was part of Barcelona's hospital,
where people came to be saved, or try

to be saved, and now we stand here
amidst bulbs with no glow, no heat, useless
except for their glory, the way they bell

off our bodies, their feathers like tongues
either silent or ringing
at a register that's too high to hear.

The Subway Doors Closed

after my husband and daughter
but before me, and she began screaming
on the platform as the train lurched
the length of a few cars, then stopped
hard, the crowd surging forward,
reaching over and in front of me,
trying to force open the doors,
when shouting came from the back:
“Someone’s fallen on the tracks!
A child!” I was confused.
My girl had been the only child
on the platform. Panic came on slow
as air bubbles in the water before it
boils but it must have been just milliseconds
before I turned and said, “A child?”
and a woman yelled, “That’s her mother!
Get her mother off this train,
this woman needs off the train!”
All went still as they stared at me,
and it felt like the time I flipped
over my car, hitting every side,
then wasn’t sure if I was dead
or alive, because I’d been looking
at my child a minute before
and they’re saying she’s on the tracks
with the rats and the electricity and the trains
charging this way. Had she run toward
the car when it started to move and
slid over the edge? She’d had on
Mary Janes and a polka dot dress.
I pressed myself against the glass,
frantic as a pinned moth, its wings
still beating. I tried to see down
to where she’d been as the crowd
murmured like a receiving line,

a few people laying their hands
on my back as, suddenly,
they appeared, my husband waving,
my daughter still screaming.
It was a grown woman who fell.
Not in, but next to, the tracks.
She was drunk, trying to get
the doors open for the rest of us,
so my husband had no idea why
everyone on the train was looking
at the two of them, why people started
hugging and congratulating me
as if she'd just been born.

It's Terrible What's Happening There

people say, if it comes up I'm Syrian
when my daughter mentions her "Sito"
or I'm microwaving my kibbe at work.
And it is. But I don't need to tell you.
You've heard the numbers of the dead.
You've seen the mothers turned grey.
I never know what to say because I'm Syrian-
American, and I know only as much as you
of the city that bombs are skinning
down to concrete and bone, where children
are sleeping alone in the rubble, where Haddads
and Imondis and Nourys are still living
if they haven't fled or been killed.
When my father's grandparents left Aleppo,
they carried their stories like gold
sewn inside clothes, but no one since
has pulled hard at the stitches. So
my horror is that of a woman who looks
at the sky and expects only blue—a luxury
my ancestors passed down to me.

The Museum of Broken Relationships

Of course bears, wedding dresses,
letters for Johns. But also the axe
with butchered bed. The vet's
prosthetic leg. In Sarajevo, Belgrade,
Berlin, they've harbored relics
of soured affairs, sent thousands
touring through loves gone bust:
the Murano glass horse (later
the divorce), the garden gnome
(thrown by the spurned). Here,
you'd think empathy would rise
easy as desire, for who hasn't felt
the ground's cold smack, the ache
of the mornings after? Yet love
folds like laundry, the same story
over and over. The woman who gave
the box made of matches may be
hand in hand with another man.
The man who gave the bowl may
be kneading bread for his new wife.
In the end, there's no marvel
in how we suffer, only in how
we build skyscrapers out of rubble.