

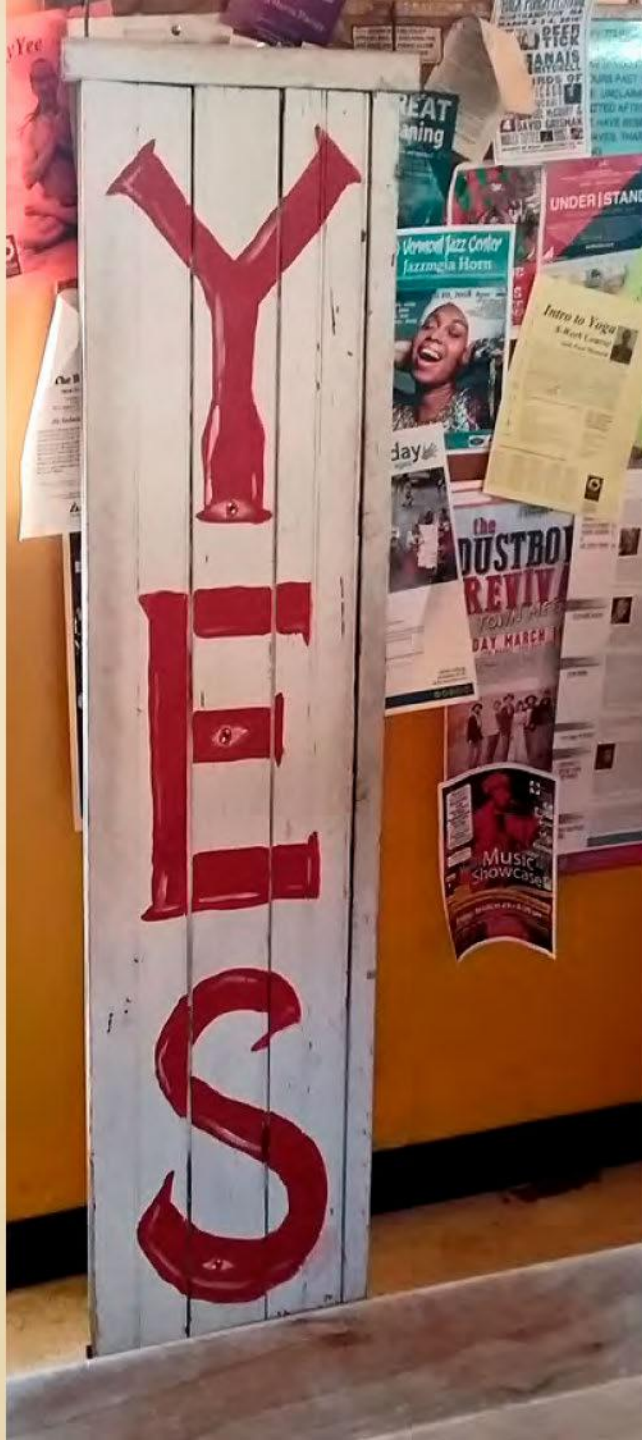
A close-up photograph of two round, golden-brown breads, possibly challah or similar braided bread, resting on a light-colored wooden surface. The breads are positioned diagonally, with the larger one in the foreground and a smaller one behind it. The lighting is dramatic, coming from the side, creating strong highlights and deep shadows. The text "BREAD POEMS" is overlaid in a white, handwritten-style font on the smaller bread. In the background, a wooden chair with slats is visible, and a white object with a large letter 'S' is partially seen.

BREAD POEMS





by Jonathan Stevens



Bread Poems
Jonathan Stevens

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BOOK DESIGN:
Lisa Carta

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my co-workers and to our customers.
May their indulgence be (almost/always) *voluntary*.







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THE BAKER BARLEYCORN

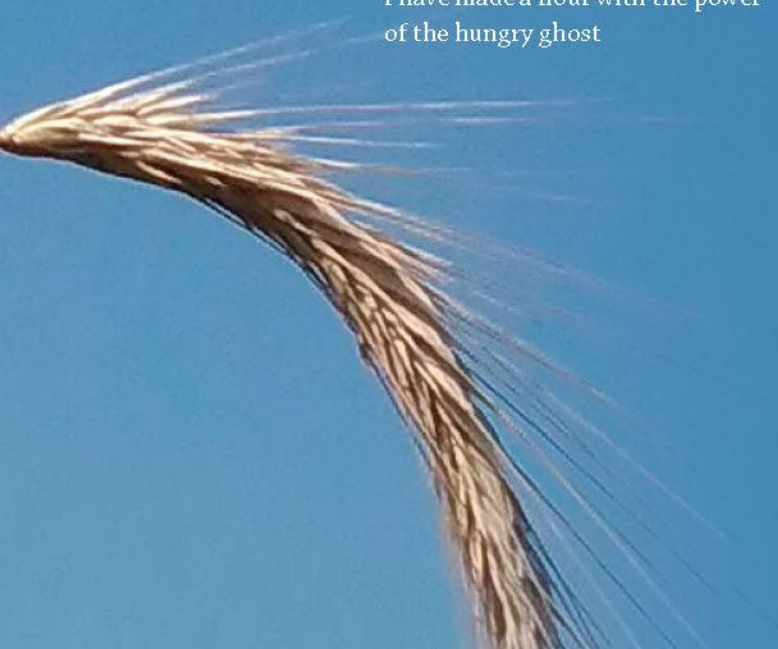
there's a ghost inside the wheat that grows
hungry for the sky
straining with his brothers all
for the light that falls on high
reaching up, past the clouds
sun is the finishing post
desire is the fire
fueling the hungry ghost

there's a ghost inside the old grist mill
hungry for the grain
grinding off this mortal coil
loose the seed again
water turns the well-dressed wheels
-then you can boast:
I have made a flour with the power
of the hungry ghost

there's a ghost inside the mixing bowl
hungry for the dough
start with bubbling sour,
pour it in just so
borrow some water longing for the sea
and salt stole from the coast
busy hands making demands
shaping the hungry ghost


there's a ghost inside the oven too
hungry for the loaves
with a mouth of brick and a tongue of fire
eating in its stoves
shroud of smoke, blessing of the mist
preparing the host
altar of offering, reborn hungry ghost

there's a ghost inside the baker now
hungry for the bread
haunted by missing words
rising in his head
clad in white, a dance with the peel
buttering your toast
trading loaves for love and
food for the hungry ghost





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POLLEN-NATION

how the buckwheat's buzzing:
flower petals and improbable wings
flutter together in the honeyed breeze

making their mead, stumbling from stamen
to stamen, shooting their pistils
how did they know this half-acre was here?
What did the dance of directions look like?

Sucking up the sunshine into their small stripped
sacks, these bumblebees are bagging the booty and
heading back to the hive. Hear the hum of the mis-
named herb: this Kasha cries her joy.



COMBINE-NATION

kind-of-backward, running from my baking shift down to the farmer's in Easthampton. Harvesting the winter wheat today, down by the Manhan River. Bottom-land—so bottom spots got flooded out this Spring.

combines combine a reaper and a thresher. This one's as old as I am—cost \$2000, with shipping—from somewhere in Upstate New York. Has a big steering wheel like a school bus, but a seat right off a tractor. Ron looks happy and confident up there. I jump on and it's a bumpy ride. The tines are twirling on their octagonal arms and the clippers are clipping the straw. Behind us the wheat berries are spat out of the auger into the hopper. This augers well.

you can tell it's organic farming, what with the proliferation of horsetail, not to mention daisies. Beautiful wildflowers—I guess we'll eat them. Overhead a hawk is circling, hoping we'll chase a rabbit out into the field. Two white moths fly unharmed through the rotating mouth of the machine. Ron shouts,

"This is pretty good! I thought the rain would never stop!"

my flour-covered shoes have gained a coating of chaff. After gobbling the acres, we shudder to a stop.

Can't stop running your hands through it. Picking out Japanese beetles. Biting down on a seed, it's pretty dry and hard. This is good.

Still moving backwards, we're pouring scoops into used flour bags. Paper's good for storage now. What's the name of this variety?

Zorro.





CALLUSES

Yesterday, I became a farmer.
Hand-planting half-an-acre of Spring Wheat
was the easy part, that took only 30
minutes. Raking it under took 5 more
hours. Filling the furrows, muddying
my knees, I kept wondering: is this
too deep? Will the birds eat all
the seeds? Will the rains come soon
enough? My learning curve is steeper
than a stalk of straw. Ignorance is a weedy
thing, and perennial. Eventually, knowledge
is threshed, wisdom winnowed out. I'll have to get
myself a mail-order scythe, because Death is
not the reaper we imagine. Time is.

SCYTHING SONG

swing you scythe
a swath so wide
winging through the wheat

snath is bent
swingle set
heads up in this heat

whetstone dipped
blade well kept
dancing heel & toe

a beard & ring
a tang, hafting
nogs where hands will go


sucking straw
into its maw
the sickle of the harvest

strickled chine
'til peening time
berries ready to rest

season's ladle
time's own cradle
honing in the field

making hay
in our way
yearning for the yield





MAN WITH A SCYTHE

Do I look like Death to the
overgrown grass? The motorized
mower just chuckles. With swinging snath &
wet whetstone the evening sharpens its
sighing. A curved blade slices straight
through the nascent field, converting this
chaos into lawn. The quiet cutting heals the
hot day, rain on the blades helps the metal
to meet them. So horizon serrates the sunset, then put
up your heavy hood and head home.

CANDLES AT BREAKFAST

candles at breakfast seemed
so decadent at first, then a
necessary prayer:

not of thanks, but
in hopes of a day worth giving thanks
for. The Anarchist Calendar stuck on
the fridge lets us know whose
death-day it is
—a hagiography for atheists—
and today is Jack Kerouac's turn

driving back from day-care drop-off,
the radio news described water,
flowing,
on Jupiter's third moon
—a sure sign of potential life,
they say

down here on Earth, I
practice the baker's alchemy: tossing
logs into my top-hat of an oven
and pulling out fresh loaves a mere
three hours later

this trick amazes no one

today, the baker would rather be bread
than baking it,
rather be news than
battered by it

where is the radio astronomer to
split & chop me, burn & bake me,
slice & butter me
to find those dim springs of primitive
life forms? A candle at breakfast
is my only transmitter.







SWIMMING THROUGH THE WOODPILE

Head down, hands in the broken orchard, my
back to the shed that is empty as ebb tide. Tossing
applewood behind me, chopped and split, rising like
whitecaps on the pile. Reaching over to the right, then
over to the left, racing the ruinous rain. Every third log or
so hits the back wall with a bull's eye splash. Skin sweat and
cloud spit trickle to a finish line. Splinters do their Aussie
crawl. A knotted limb does its butterfly. By the end of
this lap a fire can be lit, and this whole pool could be
easily boiled away.

S-WEEET

Trowel-handed, mason Lombardi
builds a globe with cubes of clay.
Vaulted, corbelled, buttressed and stepped,
this square-edged model of the earth will
be a vessel of fire, a cathedral
of choralling heat. Apprenticed
with the Cosmos (headstoned, now) and
tutoring the splattered Queen, he says:
“Mix the mortar like dog shit, Regina, that’ll
butt the bricks together til doomsday.”
Centered off a ceiling string, orbiting
the plumb bob with stolen chunks of Mars
Rock telling smoke where to rise
Sand, holding heat so long it forgets its master,
Light. That’s when we can bake the bread.
His secret handshake is with stone
His conspiracy with mud, His physics ruled by
level—Not a bad way to go, when you’re stacking
the world back up for something solid to lean against.

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GETTING TO KNOW AN OVEN (thanks to Rich, Joshua & Denis)

not her passions, but her structure
and function
letting her cool off for four days, damper
and doors wide open
thermometer unwinding like a clock
running backwards
with the fever gone, a body can
be tended:
clean-outs vacuumed without haste,
no hoses melting
raising the hearth up to clear out
accumulated crumbs—like turning a
toaster upside down

reaching in to pry at the cracks
in the concrete...in 2 hours the baking stone
is gone, peeled like a satisfying scab off a
proud work wound

then there's climbing in the 'cloaca,'
the firebox door just wide enough for
a busman's holiday, an Oliver-Twisting, Mary-Popping
baker-with-a-hazmat suit on
such as I. Amid the respirator and the goggles and the
headlamp up the ramp to the churchy nave where the
flames lick and heat the bread dough up
in heaven. Steve McQueen in the Great Escape had
to plough through dirt like this. Swimming dark through the ash,
pushing it behind me in a space too small
for shovels

"Refractory Castable": aren't we all? More
dangerous as dust then mixed with water? Hoed into
submission, mixed like mud and rushed
to the *paisan* to trowel before it sets. Thirteen
bags, it took, plus another 2 hours to fill and screed

Curing time—my sinuses could use the same. A day
for the pour to weep and then we fire,
gradually. Bringing her back to life, one degree at
time, 'til she's ready to receive her loaves.



WRESTLING WITH FIRE

Everyday is Ash Wednesday with her:
that smudge of sorrow on her brow.
A junkie for embers, she is, with
burn marks on her arms. So the chimney
is the smoke's ladder and at its base
she wrestles, like a true oven Jacobin
pinning down the Angel of Heat. Fanning
flames with pages torn from combustion
theology, shepherding the logs with her
lambing hook made of ringing copper.
An alchemist, turning wood into bread
with the blessing of a spark, forging the
bellowed gospels into a baked piece
of heaven.





THE GODDESS OF THE FIRE (THIS TIME)

She begins with the Business Section, crumpling
the heads of corporations into their flammable
numbers. She makes a pile of these.
Then she becomes an architect of kindling, stacking
the Lincoln Logs into a model of Atlanta that
will soon suffer Sherman's March.
Mill ends she weaves in, and double-
split oak, setting the place for a feast
of fire, the table and the meal one and the same.
Born at the sulfur tip of May, she is
herself a light green flame
tossing off her Diamond matches to spark the world of trees.
So, she speaks its language, and through her
solar plexus: Black smoke is slander
shimmering heat waves flatter her skill.
Her brow and cheeks smeared with soot
her asbestos hands conducting air
to its place in the pyre. See her footprint in the
ashes, see her fingers in the flames, feel her
message in the heat.



PAN-AMERICAN POEM

the baker begins
with practice loaves of clay
—the most flour-like of rocks—
then bound with straw, wheat's
discarded stalk. Using his feet, like a vintner,
to knead them together and
shape the earth-bricks that
form such ovens. Wriggling through the
iron door-frame into the oven's
womb, smoothing out the uterine walls,
he inscribes his sons' names there way in the
back. Lying with his spine on the
hearth, he imagines himself first
as fire, then as baking
bread. Staring up at the cool, damp
ceiling, his feet sticking out like a
peel's handle, a thought begins to
ferment: his work becomes his life. These
hands will sculpt dust into
food and branding poems in the
crust.

GONE GARIBALDI

through the sunspot flare of a
brick oven door, you tend the
hot coals and the muscular
pizza crusts. Armed with a peel
taller than your father,
front knee bent, back heel
raised, face flushed with the
mirage of a feast

“You’ll get a temperament of a
steelworker standing like that,” she
said, then lowered her Italian eyes to
grate more cheese
and complete her tricolor with
tomatoes and basil:

this is a flag
you dare not burn.





LEAVING THE STONE IGLOO


yes, we have a hundred different names
for fire: blue, orange, red and yellow-flamed.
Long-tongued, smoky, fast or hissing.
We built this snow cave with a dog-team mason,
one winter when the bannock needed baking.
We crossed the Bering Straight of Breadlessness,
into the white blizzards of broken flour bags. We slept
in banks of dough, we dreamed of sweet thin crusts. Rub your
noses on our gifts just now. We'll pave a new hearth with
pieces of tumble-down cairns, the ones they call *Inukshuk*.

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BABYSITTING SOURDOUGH

it befits a baker to
start New Year's with feeding
the starter—at home. This college
drop-out has homework to do:
don't kill the science
project. Is it amoeba or
volcano? Are these chemical bonds
resisting my spoon? It's slightly parental,
pouring in the tepid water, followed by some
pure white flour. But now this is definitely
child-like, breaking up the lumps
by hand, making mud cakes with
primordial ooze

a little later, scrubbing dough off knuckles
and wrists, this wheat-paste tacks a billboard
to my brain: that what we call "The Mother" is Glue-times-ten!
—binding us all together. Tongue to field to hand
to hand to hand to hand to
hand to hand
to hand
to
mouth

multiplying the architecture of the grain, no end
to this endosperm
lofting the crumb of all-us-kind. Sticky business,
feeding people and their ghosts.



YANKOU GO HOME

as dis-
oriented as a noontime fox on
West Street,
there we were, surrounded by a
ceremony of Taiwanese Buddhists
half-way through a whole-day chant
our throats burning from the incense
our stomachs growling at the sight of
the food-heavy altar
the dye from my son's Halloween hair
staining my yawning chin
we need your percussive compassion
we need the ambrosia of awareness
rebuild this mountain of ignorance with
a few blessed grains of rice
and then feed them to a rabid red head
who is caught in the sudden headlight
of the Sun.

("Yankou": literally, "burning mouth," Chinese name for hungry ghosts)

NOTES OF A NURSERY SCHOOL DROPOUT


Snakes:

White dough snakes I'd roll out every day on the tabletop of my un-imagination. Slithering invisibly through the Eden of edible creations: Lions, lambs, dragons, unicorns that the teacher would praise. I'd command my creature to speak, to tempt my Eve-less mind, to rise up and eat the others in the dark heat of the oven. But this yeast was not magic, and one gets tired of eating the same crusty reptile day after day after day: This was my genesis of expulsion from the Peaceable Kingdom pre-school. Now, when I uncoil in the morning and breathe life into my own little bakery, when I braid the strands of challah and weave diamondbacks of eggwash and poppy—I press rattle tail and tongue together and hide them underneath. Then seduce them onto the peel and into that steaming paradise. My loaves like me are late-blooming, graduating slowly from thin skin, still awaiting the tap of a heat-singed Hand.









RETRACTABLE BLADES (for Bobby & Hawk)

I apprenticed with a sheetrocker, becoming a splattered butler. Ready—but waiting—with utility knife, screw gun, T-square, circle cutter or tape measure whenever the concentrating hand reached out. Tell a joke when it's needed—or shut up, or change the channel on the dusty boom box. Now I'm a master baker, the dust has turned to flour. I remember to say "please" and "thank you" to my apprentice, but I need them to anticipate more. The dough knife, the scale, the flour scoop, the peel: these are the tools that smooth out my plaster. Dough divides the rooms of these days up. I have enough French to fake the accent of two different trades. Thank you, my teachers, for marking the studs. I know where the loaves will lead me.

HEGEL'S BAGELS

yes, it's the w/hole that counts:

working the dough with flour-
dusted fingers, shaping the soft ring
to crown a simple space of nothing
at its center: like the pause-filled silence
at the heart of a good bass
solo. Jimmy Garrison, that musical baker, is waving a
wand over the sound hole proving that
half of taste is indeed
texture

the teeth and tongue a team that
plays all the edges against the middle and
won't give up 'til they've
broken through to the
core of this question's apple

that is, what is more than a bread
donut and cousin to a pretzel, soft
sweet-ish but not sweet?

expropriate a gallon of New York's
reservoirs, collectivize Montreal's all-
night ovens. Seize the peels! Boil
these commodities! Add a dash of
Coltrane's Classic Quartet and voila, here is the
edible circle, the self-swallowing serpent,
the still-warm chewable conflict of
dialectical materialism, plain.

A Love Reunion
JOHN COLTRANE

impulse!

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OPTICAL DIGITAL OUTPUT



ST DOMINIC'S PREVIEW

the Pope's loss is my gain,
it seems:
this old dough mixer
pulled out of a boarded-up church
(St-Dominic's) up on State Street
in Portland. I imagine a 40-year
apprenticeship making sacramental wafers
and dinner buns for bingo night socials. Definitely a
pagan machine, trade name Vulcan, biding its time
'til the old congregation dies off, the building
de-consecrated, so it can find fulfillment in the
oily-sweat work of ball-bearing muscled shoving around
our super-slack dough. Only a half-mile from
the hospital where our first-born popped, that belfry, and just blocks
from where Grandmother Bridges sang in the Mikado,
summer of 1926...

in view of the harbor, so the sea level and salt air
have their particular influences on the outcome
of the loaf. Oh, these little bits of sweet & sour, the un-
avoidable spores of places and people & the things they used, we'll
toss it all in the 80 quart bowl, set-up the hook and throw her in
first gear. That's how we get the rise and flavor. That, and putting
on some Van Morrison while the air gets dusty.

DOUGH, SEE: DOUGH!

in the square dance of *facinage*,
where the sawdust-dance hall is the
flour-flecked bench top

and the scaled-out, turned-out
hunks of dough

are folded in on themselves
in gluten'd *plies*

then spun in wind-wheat *pirouettes*,
placed in pavannes of basket formation

quadrilled onto pans in rows of pairs

to obey the unseen caller through
refrigerator nights

to *allemande* left to your corner!
in proof of being round-and-getting-rounder

of having no front or back, no corners,
no *dos* to see at all

only baker's hands to choreograph
us into structure
and *Kazachstania Humilis*
to promenade
us there

FEEL FOR DOUGH

When you've got to bake your bread
When you've got to feed your head
would your axe be in the shed?
You know where to go...
Go and get a feel for dough

Tell the teller down at the bank
All that herb from the mint just stank
Coin and currency will tank
Get beyond that show...
Go and get a feel for dough

(bridge)
Knead what it knows
Know what it needs
Start with the starter and free what it feeds

So much more than female deer
Think of it as solid beer
Flour'd up from head to toe...
Go and get a feel for dough

STEP/DAUGHTERS

They're part of the dowry she brought: girls
whose shoes glide on our shop floor
with its film of flour and
cornmeal. Fluttering in through the bell-
hung door, shedding book bags and boas,
polishing the movie dialogue in the sparkle
of nose studs. The line dance starts then,
if we've played the radio right. Stretching
and folding their limbs like we do
to the adolescent dough. Their gluten strong
and extensible, their wild yeast blessing Vesta's
hearth. Mother in her apron keeps the
customers at bay, I turn up the dial. Now every loaf
is a model of their oven-sprung hearts: dodging pan
racks, vaulting bins, ducking under the diving peel
all to the beat of a baker's lame. "First cut is
the deepest," indeed. Virgins' heel & toe have kicked this
place awake while scattered white tracks are already gone,
and out the door.







THE GREATEST THING SINCE

a bread knife slipped and
mistook my finger for some
crust. Gluten of skin torn, red
flag of doughboy hoisted up, above
the stupid heart. After she helped me with
the band-aid, after the dam repair, I saw
her on her hands and knees, wiping up the
stains. My daughter, my drops of blood: it made
me feel old and loved all at the same time. An over-
baked loaf with a soft inside. My Nia, in her apron,
cleaning up the crumbs.



WHEATCAKES

we make our mud out of
grass and rain
and bubbly bacteria, anchored
out of air

patty-cake, patty-cake: aprons
all a-splatter

sticky hands, floured feet
ghosts growing up from Roman ruins


when the kitchen weather turns hot and
drowsy, while the magicked dough
naps and grows

—that's when you stoke the sacrificial pyre:
The altar in the chamber of Ceres' sacrament

this is a Transubstantiation Station, here!
Demeter's dream deposits these loaves
into hands that play out what others merely
hunger to believe.







THE ANOINTED ONE

Her hands, like figure skaters,
gliding one after the other on
the smooth worn wood. A weekly chore
(happily done) to scrub the altar free of
dough, then reaching for the olive oil. Extra
virgin, they all seem, the maiden on the label
too. Flour streaks on apprentice cheeks: her
white play war-paint. Even in Unitarian Sunday
school they know that "Christ" is Greek for
"Anointed One." Long before wine and even before
bread, there was this sacrifice of sacred fruit. Better to
bear the libation than to be it, don't you think,
once-near-almost-daughter?

WAITING FOR THE DOUGH TO RISE (song lyrics)

The grain-field's in a huge downpour
Add some salt & knead some more
Glue ten benches to the floor
Wheat wishes to be wise
Waiting for the dough to rise

Can you pick up on these crumbs?
Sometimes slowly culture comes
For mentation of our tongues
Proof of such surprise
Waiting for the dough to rise

Scales are scraped, Mother's fed
Loaves are couched there in their beds
Flour clouds around my head
Boules will burst their sides
Waiting for the dough to rise

Fire's banked & ashes swept
Sifter sits & steam is set
Reach for where the blades are kept
Peel that hunger from your eyes
Waiting for the dough to rise

We're all bastards in our way
Little bits of dough like clay
Heading for the heat they say
Oven spring, and then it dies
Waiting for the dough to rise









COUSIN JONATHAN SQUINTS SOUTHWARD

When September Sun crosses the
crosswalk at State & Center
and through my south-faced screen
—I know it must be the 21st.
Dodging between turning maples,
glancing off the deli's parking lot
hugging the skirt of the therapist's
mansard roof. She's way wide
of Edward's brownstone church,
his Great Awakening bells un-tolled
his clock ticking off the unfading uses
of Christian architecture.

No: this is keeping time,
my Stonehenge light on the baker's table
my little druidic pieces of dough
shadowing this tiny wooden Salisbury Plain.
Dawn angle of autumn light
to leaven cooler morning's proof.

Equinox rolls
are in the oven,
ever so slightly lopsided
orbiting near the flame's
echo.

ASCENDING MT BAKER

on leaving Base Camp, the
piles of empty flour bags were
a bit of a disappointment: we edged
them over a ravine

slippers snug, aprons gleaming, we
trudged on. The wet dough fields were
tricky, what with the spinning mixer
arms and loose salt you didn't want in
your eyes or cuts

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reached the bench and rested 20
minutes, scrapped the scales off. Then
finally the valley's oven came into view, peak
after peak of caramelized ridges on into
the distance

the snow at this altitude is very
fine and powdery, slippery too, when
wet

turns out Mt Baker's really an
active volcano! Steam pours out of the
summit's cone and fogs up our goggles. The
view is ruined, though I think this lava may be
edible, once it has gotten a chance
to cool down.









HINDU TOAST W/ BUTTER

the baker is a pair of lungs: he breathes in flour and breathes out dough. The wheat is oxygen, his loaves are CO₂, his oven is a big brick belly pre-digesting bread for us.

Hindus have it right: this world *is* a sacred cow, a giant ruminant and we are passing through her stomachs now, transforming from grass into fertilizer, from food into food, chewing our own cuds and milking the moments.

DESCENDING MT BAKER

even Everest's top grows stale, the
brain's bread knife dulling in high,
thin air

brushing off those crumbs of climbing,
laying cairns in the compost of over-
proofed and cavitared loaves

arm-scarred, emphysema'd, we
switch-back at cliff-side crosses
for Mallory and Poilane

broken peels get tossed on tomorrow's
woodpile, sweepings baked into German
pig bread

soak your hungry memories in water
for an hour, then roll them down
this hill

by the time you've sliced this adventure
up, they will taste fresh enough.









THE LAST LINZERTORTE (for Susanne Naegele)

by the time we had bitten (into) it,
you were already gone: as dusty as pastry
flour now, that so often stuck to your
skirt. A swan song crust, flown back
from Valhalla, stolen from the dead. Susanne
from Silesia, soldiers trample through the
filling, leaving boot marks in your jam. Slicing
some rye against your ample bosom, the knife
pointing skinward: it scared not a few. Your
eyelid chandeliers are sending smoke today, but
your sweet little crumbs as yet unswept.

THIS LOAF FOR PRESIDENT

this loaf does not boast
this bread does not need
a press secretary
or a chief of staff

even at its Greatest,
this bread will soon be eaten
—or end up on the compost pile

This bread won't build walls,
drop bombs, sell fighter jets
or make secret deals with Russians

this bread cannot lie
this bread will not exaggerate
how many people it feeds

its list of ingredients
is gratifyingly short

this bread will not play golf
instead of waiting on your table

this bread is smarter than you think:
it will teach your tongue around the Fertile
Crescent
it will move your mouth with a song of
scythes
its crust will crunch like the furrow on a
miller's
brow
—a little like his stones

this bread believes—with gut
feeling—in Universal Health

it gives a heel to chew on
a crumb to sop up sorrows

never half-baked, never bromated
fresh—but cool
tune-in to a farmer's broadcast:
what prairie populism meant

it must be time to re-invent
what was once
Commonweal









THE KID, UNSADDLED

when the baker scores his loaves, it's
like a rancher branding calves. Out on the range,
deep in the oven, it's hot, sometimes dusty and they're
fattening up for the slaughter. Does it hurt them, this
marking? I don't think so. I need to tell Bessie from Elsa, Rosemary
from Spelt. Herding cattle in & out of the chute, riding the rodeo of
wild fermentation: it's a cowboy's occupation. The campfire's
always lit, the doggies always git, the songs make you sit
and whistle. Steam from a distant iron horse, or a nearby
coffee kettle. Grub for the welcome stranger. Nothing has changed,
the frontier is near if you hold it
there.

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Fenceless vistas in this window, endless yodels over cookies, an aproned
corral is OK with me.

TOLSTOY'S BREAD

what then must we chew?

Peasant loaves.

when good toast falls

jam-side-down, eat it

anyway. Share it with the

bringers of gravity, though that

be yourself

know your own grain, scythe it

yourself

use your brain as a mixing bowl, a

proofing basket, a wood-fired, ash-swept,

steam-filled brick baking

chamber

tear into days with practiced teeth

masticating thoughts

swallow as slowly as a resigned

Russian prince might do.







WHISKERED WHEAT

a grass domesticated us
10,000 years ago:
we've been cutting down trees
and breeding seeds to serve her
ever since

Goddess Ceres is *all*,
atop a pedestal of straw
she conducts her catechumen, her votaries,
her acolytes: we call them farmers,
millers, bakers even

her acres cover half the earth, and
we take communion three times
a day (sometimes out of the toaster).

Some stray Egyptian cats
chased the Granary mice
straight into this cult. Then the
awns attached themselves to a
feline face and the temple guard
was born

keeping the vermin
out of the crop
is clearly a sacred service
—and that's why they're so revered.

And so this grain business keeps
purring along, we're pets to masters
subtler than ourselves. At least we're fed
and kept company, and know the name of our
Triticum church.



PERSEPHONE'S SONG

your father was a farmer
a real charmer, and then alarm:
he was a Greek god in disguise
we planted wheat,
it was so sweet, they felt the heat
up there in the skies
then you wed
king of the dead, tears were shed
oh, how I cried:

*Persephone, stay with me
until the season's turning
and then I'll weep, I'll toss in sleep
while you are with the dying...*

picking flowers
with the others, oh my daughters
you were lost
earth opened wide
and there inside, Hades lied
your heart was tossed
but roots are growing
while it's snowing, the border's showing
it will be crossed

*Persephone, stay with me
until the season's turning
and then I'll weep, I'll toss in sleep
while you are with the dying...*

spring is sad
when you've had a winter clad
in such sweet love
but I know
that you must go from down below
to up above
let it be said
of the dead, they give the bread
their bones are made of

*Persephone, return to me
when the season's burning
til then I'll weep, I'll toss in sleep
while you are with the living ...*

BEING AND BECOMING (a baker)

Saccharomyces farming
means culling the herd
into a bowl of
cold, clean water
and some local wheat

fermenting the
farm-milled
flour

and feed
the fire-stoked
stove

brick-glowed nexus
of wood and rain
of salt and grain

you can call me
Al-
chemist

for the gold I hold
right here
inside these iron hands

72





73



BAKER

Chet blew bread-notes
through a kneaded trumpet

smacked against
the side of the mixing bowl

then scarred at the mouth
of the gig

heat & steam are a helluva
rhythm section, plus oven spring
will give you "ears"

just sing when your loaf collapses,
live your life on a wooden peel

let's get lost
on the way to the toaster, crumbling in
to some sweeter jam.





TENDER HEART BAKERY

barn door open to the
sunset-versus-thunderhead
battle. Wine bottle and pizza crusts
lost to a table-top
game. Eyes all around, crossed
in open-mouthed harmony. Growing
older in this garden just might go
backwards, faces calm to gathering
loss. Candles arrive on wedges of melon: the
weather and I both blow them out.



WHO WAS THAT...?

the variety of wheat we use in this recipe is actually named “Zorro.” It must have been the 26th in a series of breeding tests. Anyhow, we mix some its flour with starter and water and salt. Added some sage and cooked pumpkin for this one too—there was some extra hanging around. It’ll be a flatbread, so there’s no structure or shaping needed. Keep it loose, maybe add a little olive oil. When the dough’s ripe enough to bake, flatten a hunk of it on a dusted peel. Form it into a circle: looks like a pancake, right? Now cut a mouth on it with your baker’s blade. Suddenly, it’s human & can speak. Cut eye slits and it is staring right at you. Like a pie-plate Rorschach, we behold exactly what it is we hold: our faces. Even tiny infants do this. Now spray a little water across the eyes and sprinkle on some poppy seeds, so that now he’s got a mask, a black eye-mask just like Zorro in the movies. Throw him in the oven so he can fall like all well-heeled aristocrats. Serve him with his own serrated sword. Wash him down with Spanish wine—and please don’t mistake him for the Lone Ranger.









KNEADING LOAFER'S GLORY

borrowing back a little land
from the sumac and poison ivy
—what is the history of agriculture after
all, but the breeding of one set of weeds
over another? Fishing broken bottles out
of the seasonal stream, dueling the wild rose
thorns with a friend's machete. Saved six wooden
pallets from the bonfire pile to build a compost bin. Uprooted
some strips of grass to plant its cousin rival, wheat. Under the grey
March sky, tickling the dirt to wake it up, we fumble with rakes, spades
and the wheelbarrow with a newly patched-up, pumped-up tire. A red-tail rises on
a thermal towards April and down below, without wings, we use the only tools we
have: Each other.

