

Blancmange with Almond Milk

Chantal Thomas

Alphabet

I had great difficulty with numbers, and I didn't do much better with letters. Those alembicated marks, which it didn't suffice to contemplate or even to spell out one by one, but which still needed to be tied together in order to end up signifying something, displeased me. Was it their gregarious side that I found antipathetic, that need to couple in order to form a superior unity (like in the Platonic theory of love, which, founded on incompleteness, never gave me cause to dwell there)? Or rather their school-bookish character? For it was in school that these two scourges fell upon me: the need to read and to count. At least I had the true foreboding that I was at the point of being caught in an infinite mesh of gears, and that if I gave in to one letter that would be it for the rest of my life. . . Letters represented for me an obscure, insistent menace; that is why the alphabet soup that my mother regularly served for winter dinners caused me intense sadness. I leaned over my plate and considered that round whitish puddle crawling with letters. Some letters were more recognizable than others, but that changed nothing of the global impression of chaos emitted by this soup—a soft and tasteless chaos. It was served burning hot, but I waited so long to decide to swallow that it was hardly warm when I finally slid in my spoon.

But who could have had such an idea, I asked myself while swallowing a spoonful (once begun, I had only one concern: to finish as quickly as possible) of c, d, u, w, h, n, v, a, p. . . ? A letter soup? Made of those ridiculous, inconsistent elements, ones that tormented with incredible ease? And what if they suddenly formed words within my body? Developing their incomprehensible messages inside me? It was worse than the terror that seized me when, having swallowed a seed, I imagined a lemon tree or an orange tree beginning to grow inside me. But it was too late to spit everything out. Besides, the context didn't lend itself to such an act.

Blancmange with almond milk on a strawberry coulis

Going to restaurants was not one of my family's habits. We went to a restaurant only while travelling or for an important celebration. It was, consequently, an event that put me in a state of mad curiosity. How? There were families other than mine who didn't behave in a very different manner than my own, but when I went to eat at the home of a friend, it

was the differences that affected me and filled me with a strong impression of exoticism. At my house the food (like the alphabet soup in all its glory) was put in front of you and it was out of the question to express a wish for anything else. Elsewhere, one asked what you would like. I understood that I could not choose anything whatsoever, but there were alternatives nevertheless. That is how one day, in a Bordeaux restaurant, I found myself stupefied by the variety and the bizarreness of the desserts on the menu. It was a baroque confusion. Everything was mysterious to me on the list that was read out, except the ice-cream dessert that bore the name *blancmange with almond milk on a strawberry coulis*. Far from being troubled, I chose it without hesitation. It arrived in the form of a beautiful ring of opal, freshly turned out of the mold, and set on a deep red sauce. A coral isle set in a sunset. I feared spreading the sauce on the almond jelly. I waited a long time before I dared touch it, first with my tongue, then with my teeth. Its milky, silky smoothness and melting contact thrilled me, while the coral isle became a phantom isle, preciously conserved by my memory.

Cauliflower with Vinaigrette

I prefer them raw, doubtlessly because that was how they were most often served at lunch by my maternal grandparents. The oil rendered them brilliant (like water the nacre of seashells). It pleased me that they were raw, that there were so few differences between the round, fresh, voluminous cauliflowers—sorts of blind, angelic heads—displayed at the market and the one, thinly sliced and lightly ivory, set in the porcelain of my plate. It was a spring-like surface, which appeared to me to entirely evoke the energy of beginnings. The term, *entrée*, first-course, in its most open form—where the wish of *Bon appétit* resonated like a foretaste of good omen and in the simplicity of shared familiarity—was identified by me, par excellence, with cauliflower and vinaigrette. For in the cauliflower it was not the caul that one ate, but the flower. Pink radishes and black radishes also pleased me, and they too constituted preferred entrées of my grandparents. But they held the risk of bitterness, and thus disappointment. This danger existed for pink radishes. They were more common than black radishes, which fascinated me even more because of the surprise of extreme whiteness caused by the transversal cut. I often asked for black radishes because of this contrast between the so very black envelope and the so very white, so very secret, flesh. It wasn't serious when there unexpectedly came the displeasure of a too bitter taste or a slightly cottony flesh, one without hardness (another fault of the radish), for I still had before my eyes the beauty of those rings of snow circled with ebony. But, let's admit it, as much as the raw cauliflower with vinaigrette that I ate at

lunchtime, during the recreation break between morning and afternoon classes, thrilled me, that's how much cooked cauliflower depressed me. They were not served with vinaigrette (insolent, acidic, malicious, sly), but with mayonnaise (fatty, yellow, capricious; the mayonnaise either thickens or it doesn't, and in the latter case, bad humour reigned in the kitchen and readily overflowed into the other rooms). With cooked cauliflower the nacre disappeared. The cooking not only softened it, but also took away its glow. The freshness of spring disappeared. The vegetable stagnated in a white-gray November morning. And when I bit into it, the joy was not there; the caul swept away the flower.

In my family (and I will never know why) cooked cauliflower served with mayonnaise was a holiday dish. Like canned crab, which astounded me because of the Russian name on the tin and because of the abyss which my imagination never managed to bridge between this pale, compact condensation veined with red, and the dull green crustacean that lived its life at the bottom of the ocean, and which occasionally came to pinch one of my toes when I went out to swim.

The Froth of the Waves

"Stop playing with the foam," shouted Sonia's grandmother, tired of seeing us endlessly return to her, our faces covered with froth, all in tears because of the salt that burned our eyes. We looked as if we had just escaped, right in the middle of a shave, from a demon barber. We weren't sorry. All we wanted was that she get rid of all the foam, sometimes mixed with fine strands of seaweed, that clogged our noses, mouths, and eyes. Her grandmother sighed, left her knitting, took out a towel, and wiped us with a brusqueness that made us laugh. Once cleaned off, we ran again along the seashore. And the game recommenced. We walked the length of the beach in the frothy water, scooping up that weightless whiteness, chatting innocently, then suddenly one of us would dump it all on the other's head. The announcement of a furious combat. The first one to cry "uncle!" was the loser. She had swallowed too much water, and she could neither breathe nor see. She had bitten the froth of the waves.

Lemon Sorbet

After dinner, in summer, we didn't go out just to go out. We went out to have sorbet. That was the formula and ritual justification. The ice-cream shop was at the corner—a rounded corner—between the Boulevard de la Plage and the Rue du Casino. I chose *lemon* and Sonia chose *raspberry* or *strawberry* (she wasn't bothered by the little seeds, which really annoyed me). To the question, "With or without whipped cream?," we shouted, "Yes," jumping for joy under the counter and reaching out for the cones,

while our parents rustled their purses. We savoured our pleasure in advance. "We're going to lick the froth of the waves," said Sonia. Older boys and girls slowly strolled in pairs on the boulevard. Some of them walked in the shadows on the beach. They also could have eaten ice-cream, but we guessed that they hadn't gone out for that.

Intuition altered nothing of the perfection of the moment, the miracle of the coldness in the mouth, on the lips, with the sea wind and its smell of iodine that blended so well at that point with the lemon, with that sensation as pointed as it was rapid. The sorbet didn't last. And that transience formed part of my pleasure. It was the exact antithesis of cotton candy. I detested cotton candy. That pastel cloud that stuck to your face occupied too much space, lasted too long and ended up dissolving into pure sugar in your mouth. A stupid cloud that appeared every autumn at the country fair. There we also ate bright red apples dipped in caramelized sugar. Their glow stopped you right in your tracks, but they were better to look at than to eat. The fruit inside was dead, tasteless. And when during catechism I heard the story of Eve for the first time, that horrendous disaster of being exiled (she, Adam, and their entire progeny, us included) for having bitten into an apple, I dreamed: let's hope at least that the fruit had some taste, that it wasn't one of those spongy things in a crunchy envelope, that mummified fruit stuck on a stick, offered to us by the merchants of the country fair. But perhaps the same apple was indeed at the origin of that misfortune... We then made a thousand detours to avoid the merchants of temptation. As the fair was not big, we ceaselessly found ourselves before their cart; and they brandished their overly red apples with a laughter that frightened us.

The Host

"Open your mouth wide," said the priest. "Stick out your tongue, and the instant you receive the Sacred Host pay *very strict attention* so that It doesn't touch your teeth. Listen carefully: your teeth must not even so much as graze the body of Our Father." Marlene, who had a large set of braces on her teeth, was terrified, and I, even without this handicap, was filled with anxiety. Each Sunday I prepared to take communion with the idea that something dreadful was going to happen. "Imagine," I told Sonia, "that I bite into a Son of God and that he begins to bleed in my mouth, like he bled on the cross."

"*The Son of God,*" she corrected me.

"Whether or not he is an only child makes no difference at all concerning the blandness of the thing."

"Who knows. But it's true. It is bland."

"It's so that nobody refuses communion under the pretext that he

doesn't like the taste. Or inversely, to avoid gluttons who sneak back in line several times to have their fill."

"I like that blandness. The manner in which the host gets soft and dissolves, without one's encountering any substance at all."

"Shut up. You disgust me."

Sonia was fanatical about that white glue that tasted like almonds, with which she stuffed herself. She also delighted in Nestlé's milk, but especially because of the tube. As for me, I didn't like any of that. On the other hand, I loved to leave communion, hands joined, eyes lowered, all my senses keen to feel the insipid and divine pellicle vanish against my tongue. There existed a perfect moment, when I turned my back to the altar and begin to walk down the central aisle, just as I imagined the host still intact, a minuscule moon at the opening of my throat, gently bringing light to the depths of my body.

Milk

Was it good, or wasn't it good? I never quite decided. But I adored looking at it in a bottle or a glass. The sight of milk rendered me silent, putting me in a particularly peaceful and contemplative state, as do the waters of a lake for certain people. I examined that white opaqueness, that screen of innocence. It seemed that there was something to discover on the other side. Sometimes I was sent to the grocery to buy a bottle of milk. It was a task that I took very seriously. I loved to bring that precious liquid home.

One summer, when we were in the Charente, I became friends with a young girl who kept cows. She was called Louissette. I sat in the fields alongside her under the big umbrella that protected her from the rain and the sun. She opened her songbook and spent hours mouthing the words as she read. I begged her: "Sing so that I can hear something." She shook her head and continued to murmur the words of popular tunes. A cow moomed to underline the silence of this mute concert. "Idiot," I said to the cow. Louissette was too dear to me for me to get annoyed with her. One evening, perhaps to console me for all those unsung songs, the young girl let me go with her to the stable to witness the operation of milking the cows. She sat on a small wooden stool and, mute like an automaton, with an absent look, began to pull on the udder with a regular movement. Did the cow like to be milked or not? Her face, which I saw from below and a bit in profile, was without expression, like that of Louissette. Her huge eyes with long lashes reflected the most perfect indifference. I asked myself whether she felt concerned about it all. No, it was rather that the cow was the pretext for a phenomenon that did not concern it. Louissette asked if I wanted to try. I attempted a trembling gesture and quickly returned to being a spectator. Louissette made fun of me and filled a pail

with hot and frothy liquid. I carried it to the house, careful not to trip on a pebble or a clump of grass. I walked with eyes lowered, and when I knocked a knee against the milk pail it made the sound of a bell. I was conscious of having witnessed something marvellous. But that still didn't help me decide whether I liked milk or not.

I had to await a winter voyage to London, during my student years, to understand that I liked it. I had bought a small carton, which I opened outside, on the sidewalk, and drank it with a straw. It had the same effect of coldness and surprise as a lemon sorbet. I found it delicious, but perhaps it was necessary to have asked for it in English to find it so. Such was the magic key that revealed to me that milk was good.

Squid

Sonia and I lived in Arcachon. We spent all our vacations on the beach. Without being blasé, far from it, we took some breaks from the frantic rhythms of our quests. We then spread out our towels and lay down. We played at taking sunbaths. We imitated the grownups. It was great boredom. Corinne couldn't permit herself that luxury. As she only spent one month of the summer at Arcachon, she didn't want to lose a minute, and never stopped exploring. She observed the smallest hole in the sand, the smallest shell. She was forever with her nose glued to algae. Once, very excited, she showed us something white and light, a sort of thin strip cut in a strange manner.

"We know what it is," we said. "It's the bone of a squid. We make boats out of them, and the birds stick their beaks into them." "A squid bone!" mused Corinne. "Squid is really good. At home, my mother cooks it in its ink, and it's tender and delicious."

"In its ink," guffawed Sonia. "Your mother cooks it in its ink? Does she also serve stuffed notebooks, fried erasers, and glue sauces?" Sonia took on her mocking tone, but I knew, remembering her passion for white glue, that she wasn't totally scoffing.

Yoghurt of Grated Stone

My mother, for whom the kitchen was always the site of her most awful anger (she sometimes hurled pots and pans against the opposite wall, the wall of Sonia's house), had for some time been equipped with a bizarre round thing that was supposed to make yoghurt. It was clear that she controlled it poorly. Since the arrival of this machine, the only thing I ever got for dessert was liquidy and granulous yoghurt. I would ingurgitate it in one big mouthful and then quickly leave to play outside, where Sonia, Michel, and Frédéric, the neighbours from the house facing ours, awaited me.

A white and tender stone was needed. We scraped it against the concrete floor of the courtyard. When we had a sufficient quantity of scrapings, we gathered it together in a small heap and spooned it into a yoghurt container. We added water and stirred. We drew lots to see who would taste it. The chosen one fled at top speed. The pursuit could last a long time, but in the end the victim was always caught and condemned to submission. Vanquished as he or she may be, the victim, mouth tightly closed, seemed resolved not to submit to the vile brew. And too bad if we spilt the yoghurt all over the victim's face, hoping that this would force the mouth open. Which is precisely what would happen, such that a few drops of ground stone yoghurt were swallowed. The unlucky one trembled with disgust and always found the force to be liberated from the tormentors. Then it was their turn to flee and to run with all their might. But sometimes it happened that one of them slipped on the puddle of yoghurt and fell down. What followed was atrocious.

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