

Kunapipi

Volume 28 | Issue 2

Article 4

2006

Poems

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Recommended Citation

Braune, Bev; Freiman, Marcelle; and Bobis, Merlinda, Poems, *Kunapipi*, 28(2), 2006.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol28/iss2/4>

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Poems

Abstract

Run Dun / Ren Dang

Food-talk with Pramuka

The factory

In our house

Dwell

Bev Braune

‘RUN DUN’ / ‘REN DANG’: FOOD-TALK WITH PRAMUKA

My palms are red hot
 from rolling dumplings, for Pramuka,
 though they seem like witchity-grubs during a dry season
 the soft kneaded, rolled flour grubs plump up my stew
 for the Indonesian beauty smiling for her new Haekal
 born under a lucky star and warm as summer in winter
 when he sleeps near her breast to remember her milk.
 Tonight, though, is for Ibu and I,
 to fill our vocabulary with more than the common pot
 we had before we met ‘run dung’ / ‘ren dang’
 of garlic, black pepper, vinegar, eschallion, thyme,
 mackerel, onion, Jamaican country pepper,
 tomatoes and four cups of coconut milk
 the fish to be soaked for half-an-hour,
 washed, de-boned; the milks boiled too
 for half-an-hour until oil crests the edges of the pot,
 seasoned to sweeten and simmer
 till the aroma fills all of the house.
 Tonight I will send her this plough of red beans,
 garlic, coconut milk, thyme, black pepper and mixed spice
 for its white Asian bed of jasmine rice grains
 reaped, winnowed, heaped sailing past the shores she called home
 to reach me 20 thousand miles from the place I was born.
 Tonight, I return, full, to Ibu, the plastic containers
 she wraps lovingly with “I cooked too much, take this home”
 that we exchange through our first born,
 now women with their shaping grace and full-bellied laughter.
 I will fill my glad-wrapped boxes saved from the Chinese take-away
 so we talk with tastes that binds us to each other’s tongues.

Maccaback Soup

INGREDIENTS

*pimento,
thyme,
salt,
black pepper,
Jamaican country pepper,
1 kilo fresh Maccaback fish,
10–12 green bananas.*

METHOD

- 1. Clean and wash the Maccabacks and immerse them in a pot of cold water. Put that on a medium heat and boil for 15 minutes.*
- 2. Remove the Maccabacks from the boiling water. (Do not throw away the water.)*
- 3. Remove the bones from the Maccabacks and break up the flesh into small pieces.*
- 4. Return the fish pieces to the pot and add thyme, pimento and Jamaican country pepper.*
- 5. Add salt and black pepper to taste.*
- 6. Peel the green bananas and add the peeled bananas to the pot.*
- 7. Your Maccaback Soup is ready when the bananas are soft.*

*[Acknowledgement: Adapted from Teresa E. Cleary's *Jamaica run-dung* (1970).]*

Marcelle Freiman

THE FACTORY

I remember him in his study, a photograph
 of Albert Schweitzer at his shoulder,
 or sitting on the veranda at the end of the day,
 sweet caramel smoke of his pipe,
 stars of an African night,
 tears of dew caught in the wool
 of his cardigan, the wool of his hair, like pearls.

My father's factory,
 smell of burning oil, workers shovelled coal,
 the boiler boomed for the cooling tower
 steel pylons vast against the sky,
 an industrial plant to manufacture food:
 great steel vats fermenting nutrients
 for *Puza Mandla*, sour drink made from maize.
 In warehouse stores its white dust peppered floors
 of corridors between piles of sacks, danced
 in dawn sun-shafts through the windows —
Protone, a soup of soya, mixed with water
 to feed a starving child
 for a penny each day.

How many children stayed bright eyed, their skin firm
 against *kwashiorkor* in Rwanda, the Congo, Transkei?
 Did the boy later become the soldier,
 or remain white-shirted schoolboy, then teacher
 in a green village near a river? Was the girl who held
 the tin cup of soup in her hands,
 belly filled with proteins,
 later the mother lying killed, her baby still tied
 in a blanket on her back, its cries by a dusty road?
 Or does she still teach her daughters
 to pound maize in a wooden vat,
 sit waiting at sunset for the children to return
 along the dust road,
 leaving their footprints in the red sand?
 And what of the prisoners in their island jail

drinking *Puza Mandla*, who awaited apartheid's end,
waiting for their freedom?

How to implicate one's heart
beyond the borders of apartheid?
My father dreamed of life
while hunger was everywhere.
Just one man, he willed to subdue it —
the factory pumps and wheels
echoed his heart-beats,
thundered against the horizon,
filled stomachs and returned the light
to hunger-dulled eyes.

He could not see the Parkinsonian worm
that crawled into his heel,
turned his legs to fibres, his back to a frozen arc,
it would steal from him the pillars and pylons,
the cooling tower's wide embrace,
the fire in the boiling belly.

Kwashiorkor — disease of malnutrition

Nutritional Foods Pty Ltd *is the company founded by my father and his partners in
Industria, Johannesburg in 1954. It is still operating, under different owners.*

IN OUR HOUSE

She sang while she swayed
polishing the parquet,
her tongue-click voice like a bell,
I'd crouch beside her warm hip
my knees knobbly on gritty floor,
piney wax-polish in its tin

*my nanny, her back where I rest my face is cotton, so clean and washed I
breathe sunshine and a hot iron*

afternoons she sat on the concrete path
beside the house in the sun, legs straight out,
she'd push her white *doek*
to the back of her head, and I was shy
to see her naked ears, hair soft as combed wool,
her lunch on the cream enamel plate,
brown bread, peanut-butter
tea in the blue mug

afternoon was her tired time
her back against the wall

*she'd bathed and dressed me, ironed shirts and pants and underpants,
peeled carrots and potatoes, sliced paw-paws and oranges, dusted
venetian blinds, stirred pots of beef and chicken, folded sheets, swept
verandahs, dusted bookshelves*

she'd hold me when we crossed the road
my life in her hands
her life in our house.

Baked Pumpkin

These recipes correspond particularly with the poem 'In Our House' where I write about the domestic world of a young white child growing up in South Africa under apartheid during the mid-1950s. Our family life at home, at the slightly-later time of the 1960s recalled in the second poem 'The Factory' when my father became involved in producing nutritional food products, had similar features. The recipes are for the kind of foods cooked by our African cooks and nannies who were negotiating between European and African cultures. In our house, politics was intimate and domestic: it was in every moment, space and action of our lives — meals, child-care, cleaning, laundry, gardening — because living in a white suburban household in Johannesburg meant living with African servants who did the work of childcare, cleaning, cooking and gardening.

This was the place of my childhood — it was rich with the comfort of close contact and friendship with nannies and gardeners who, in my recollection, were certainly more attentive to the children in their care than our parents were. I have only a few memories of my mother's cooking because servants learnt quickly how the family liked food to be prepared and they were often very good at cooking.

My nannies and the male gardeners (there were several, as often they did not stay in the job for long, though sometimes they did) were kind, caring and most of all, physically affectionate. They cooked delicious food both for the family and for themselves; food that was European for us (in our case, specifically Jewish), while their own food was different because the economic access they had to food was limited — an obvious manifestation of the inequities of apartheid. The food they prepared for themselves was also far more African than the food they prepared for us, although they would creatively introduce African tastes into our dishes, such as black pepper or cinnamon or cayenne — spices that were part of the Malay and Portuguese influences in African culture. For the most part domestic 'separation' meant that there was a difference between the food consumed in the house and in the backyard — even though, paradoxically, the relationship between house and servants was so intimate.

Although my family was humane and enlightened, it was also part of the system. So it was the case that at that time food was supplied by the employer to the domestic workers as portions of mielie meal, sugar, jam, tea, coffee, brown bread, 'stamp mielies' (crushed dried maize kernels), meat and oranges, though they would also take the surplus from the cooking done for us. The servants would cultivate vegetables in our backyard and garden, and this is where I learned how to germinate seeds and grow beans, mielies and pumpkins. I also learned the taste of the food in the backyard — thick slices of brown bread with apricot jam, sweet tea, dry mielie pap (maize porridge) with peppery meat, tomato and onion sauce which was delicious and different and which they would happily share with we children. I was young and experienced all this as just another part of our home life, although from very early on

I was also aware of the difference in the living conditions of those who cared for me. As I grew up I could not tolerate the system, but it has also formed who I am.

The recipes are for pumpkin dishes — do not forget to save the seeds, as our cooks always did. Dry them in the sun and either eat them shelled, as snacks, or use them for planting.

Baked Pumpkin I

- 1. Place slices of peeled or unpeeled seeded pumpkin in a single layer in a shallow baking dish or tray.*
- 2. Season with salt and pepper, dot with butter.*
- 3. Sprinkle with cinnamon and a tablespoonful of golden syrup or brown sugar, and bake in a medium-hot oven 180C (360F) until soft and somewhat caramelised.*

This is eaten as a vegetable with a main course.

Baked Pumpkin II

- 1. Slice butternut pumpkin lengthways in half, scoop out pips and fill the hollows with diced onion, green pepper and mushrooms which have been sautéed in butter and seasoned with salt and pepper.*
- 2. Put the two halves together again, wrap in foil and bake in a medium-hot oven 180–200C (360–400F) for 1–2 hours until tender, depending on the size of the butternut.*