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The Turmoil the Quail Hath Wrought

Emily C. Howe
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

A poem describing domestic emotional abuse through the lens of a meal's preparation.

Keywords

poetry, domestic abuse, domestic violence, emotional abuse

Disciplines

Poetry

Comments

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The Turmoil the Quail Hath Wrought

I am heating grapeseed oil in the largest pot Mom owns.

“Take the birds out half an hour beforehand to warm to room temperature.

Season the quail on both sides, then when the oil is good and hot,
sear them in the pan, but only flip them once.

Only once, you understand? You have to only flip them once.”

I’m heeding my orders,
I’ve rubbed the birds with pepper and salt,
and now as the fat in the pan starts to glimmer,
in go the birds, with a quiet hiss.

When the fowl have barely begun to crispen,
they arrive home early.

Mom greets me.

He says nothing.

Mom goes to examine my handiwork, and he moves to stand over her shoulder.

“Where’s the butter?” he asks, accompanied by a faint noise,

(a rattling,
a warning)

“Was I supposed to use butter?”

Mom replies, jumping in front of the train for me

(the train that was never going to hit me,
because it’s not a train, it’s a viper, and I am not a squealing, terrified mouse.
but she is.)

“It needs butter to glaze right. And where’s the garlic?”

His voice is calm, decibel low.

It’s the venomous strike, swift and unexpected,
as he takes over the quail preparation,
nearly silent except for the faint buzzing that began when he looked in the pot.

“Do you even have rosemary? Where did you leave the bouillon?”

He never utters a vulgarity,

never says a mean word,

nothing aggressive enough to turn a single head on a sidewalk.

But to my trained ear, the intention

to devastate

to humiliate

is clear.

Mom is running back and forth to the pantry
for every spice he could possibly want,
and I’ve faded into nothingness, sitting in a chair not six feet away.
Observing.

As nature takes its course.

Predator and prey, and I wonder

if the quail had a similar moment of frantically trying to appease their captor

before their untimely end.

The tension in the kitchen is far too thick for any of the knives at my disposal,
but I do send my mom a pitying grimace,
and she casts her eyes downward,
brow furrowed,
too ashamed of her undignified scurrying
to meet my glance.

He tells Mom to put the quail in the oven for ten minutes
(she had told me the dish needs 15)
and returns to his den, the recliner with the TV much too loud.

And though Mom would typically tell me,
“It’s fine, I’ve got it, baby, don’t worry about it,”
when I begin setting the table,
(with real napkins, never paper towels when he’s here)
she only mutters a quiet, “Thank you.”

Covertly, Mom gives the quail 13 minutes in the oven,
rushing to act as though she were already taking it out
as soon as he returns to the kitchen.
And I’m still pouring drinks when she asks how to deglaze the pan like he does,
and he tells her,
“It’s no use, you used too much oil.”
And though I was the one who poured the oil, the grapeseed oil,
I feel her shame as it blankets the room.

We sit down to eat, and I don’t even reach for the serving spoon,
knowing that Mom will insist he’s served first.
As we each fill our plates, Mom stammers, ostensibly to me,
“I should have poured out half the oil before baking it,
I should have deglazed the pan, you know, but I didn’t pour out the oil...”
she has on a tremulous smile that doesn’t meet her eyes,
and I wonder if my mother will ever stop trying to explain herself,
stop trying to justify
the nuisance of her continued existence.

She doesn’t take a bite, she waits, and watches, and doesn’t allow her hands to shake,
while he cuts into his quail.
I try not to care, but I find myself anxiously awaiting the verdict as well.

After the first bite, there’s a second, and he calmly announces,
“It’s good. Not as dry as last time.”
And we both breathe a sigh of relief
as the rattling quiets down.