

## *Modes of Squash*

*September 1: Factual*

It is a squash. Or perhaps a gourd. It is approximately the same shape and size as my six-month-old son's head. However, the gourd—or squash—is lopsided. My son's head is not. If my son's head were as lopsided as the squash, we would've called the neurologist a long time ago, and our son likely would be wearing one of those soft, skull-correcting helmets that resemble the headgear amateur boxers wear. I suspect the squash—let's call it a squash—also weighs about as much as my son's head. The average adult's head weighs eight pounds (although I suspect my own noggin—wide and heavy-jawed and dorsally ridged like some head-butting dinosaur's—likely weighs more than eight). My guess is that the squash weighs less than eight pounds, although how much less I'm not sure. (Shifting the squash back and forth from palm to palm, I'm reminded of Harrison Ford at the beginning of the first *Indiana Jones* movie, trying to gauge the weight of the Aztec [Incan? Mayan?] relic resting atop some sort of spring-loaded, weight-sensitive trap, then filling a small bag with what he hopes is the same weight of silt. He estimates the weight incorrectly. Things go poorly after that.) Fortunately my son's head, unlike the squash, is not topped with a brief, desiccated stem. If it were, we would have more than just a neurologist to call, and the paparazzi would be perched in the trees outside our house with their long-snouted cameras, looking to snap a photo of "The Pumpkin Baby." By the way, the gourd/squash in some respects resembles a pumpkin more than it does a squash or gourd (hence the name ambiguity): it doesn't have the long-bellied, curve-necked shape of gourds, which I don't think you're supposed to eat, unless you're into flavorless pith, and it doesn't look like a thick-skinned cucumber, which is more or less my mental image of squash; rather, it's the sort of cute, softball-sized objet that sells for a quarter the day after Halloween (which is, by the way, in exactly two months, All Saints' Day, at which point I suspect the squash/gourd will look more or less exactly the same as it does today, yet another reason to be suspicious of eating it: nothing you eat should last unshrivelled, unrotted, and unrancid for two months—see *Hamburger, McDonald's*). Were the squash orange, I would, despite my skimpy knowledge of botany, be confident in calling it a pumpkin, but instead, it's a variegated, two-toned green and cream, ten

thousand blanched bits burbling up through a pine-colored sea, along with a few hundred larger blotches, ranging in size from BB to pea.

The squash has no smell.

A handful of vertical ridges like longitude lines divide the squash into wedges, each ridge extending from one of the stem's feet. The ridges are the darkest portions of the squash, unoccluded by the set of larger cream splotches, while the palest portions are near the nadir of its southern hemisphere, the squash's Antarctica. Perhaps the green is a sort of vegetable melanin, and the squash's unsunned Southern Hemisphere is ironically the same color as the skin of the northernmost Europeans. The only other ungreened swath is a tennis ball-sized patch along the equator, scarred with a few rope-colored slashes. It reminds me of the bald spot at the back of my infant nephew's head, the hair worn away by his mattress. (Pediatricians warn you not to put babies to sleep on their bellies. My wife does not listen to pediatricians, which is perhaps why our son has no bald spot. Then again, he has little hair to lose.) The bald spot is quite common with babies, and, if my memory serves correctly, also with vine-grown, ground-creeping fruits: squash, gourds, watermelon, pumpkins, each of which always seems to have a frog-bellied patch underneath.

As with a watermelon or cantaloupe, one of my first urges after picking up the squash (particularly after noticing its pleasing density) was to rap it with my knuckles, which makes a reverberant thonking (not a pediatrician-recommended technique with the heads of small children). I've hit it a hundred or more times, testing the higher-pitched polar caps and the lower equatorial tones. All of it seems to suggest there is more inside than outside, and so I knock on, as though telling the squash: *Let me in.*

### *September 2: Aspirational/Inspirational*

The squash wishes it could be green all over, all over green, the green of a Christmas tree farm seen from above, but it's flaked with paleness, awash in pimples and wens, a bleached rosacea, the same sour-milk shade it boggles the mind to think people choose to paint the walls of office buildings. It longs to look like the acorn squash, clothed like an Army officer in virile hunter green, but at a distance, it's a watery yellow, the color of an untended fish tank.

But all things are more interesting close-up. The mind and eye would quickly tire of the unbroken green of an acorn squash. Uniformity is not beauty. Hopkins wrote, "Glory be to God for dappled things," and in the dapple of the squash are the bubble-trails of scuba divers, the freckles

of an arm more freckled than not, the Marin County landscape muscly with hills, its golden slopes lovelier for the stipple of wizened trees floating atop them. Not sour milk, but the Milky Way.

*September 9: Sonic*

Squash. Feel the word in your mouth, that first *s* whispering like the head of a match against the striking strip, just before the ignition that is the back of the tongue impacting the hard palate, sparking the combustion of the central vowel, filling the mouth cavity so fully that it forces your jaw further open, only for the sound to collapse back on itself, fading into the shush of the *sh*.

It is the sound a can of Coke makes when you open it.

On a grander scale, it is the sound track of the tide: the hiss of a hundred million tiny bubbles bursting (the sound of Rice Krispies when you pour in the milk, if the bowl was the Pacific), the hard *c* of the cresting, the vowelly wind howling in the hollow under the wave, the soft crash of water on sand.

The verb form is an almost perfect onomatopoeia, conjuring the image of a child pancaking an overripe tomato into a tabletop. Merely saying it gives a similarly textural pleasure, like digging your hands through a bowl of popcorn kernels.

It is unfortunate we relegate to toddlers and poets the mouth-pleasure of our language.