

LYNNE NUGENT

EDITOR'S NOTE

We don't usually have themed issues here at TIR, as each table of contents is shaped mainly by the happy randomness of the couple thousand unsolicited submissions we read each year. We choose what we love rather than what fits a predetermined theme, and hence any given issue may sandwich an essay about pet rabbits between a short story about a novice nun and a poem inspired by a modernist sculpture of an empty frame.

Despite this seeming lack of a design, there are always strange coincidences in each issue: during proofreading we'll realize there are references to Wal-Mart in four different pieces, or three instances of the word "moniker," or two cameos by barn owls. But in this issue, it was more than that. Meenakshi Gigi Durham's essay, "Hunger Pangs," which we accepted early on, documents the author's sojourn in a "food desert" of graduate-student impoverishment. Soon afterwards, we took Ayşe Papatya Bucak's short story "Iconography," a tale of another foreign student who fasts, this time on purpose. Then came Elizabeth Cullen Dunn's "A Gift from the American People," an anthropologist's account of the symbolic value, or non-value, of food aid given to South Ossetian war refugees. Capping off a remarkably thematically tight group of submissions was Naomi Kimbell's essay "Bounty," which recounts the author's walk of shame leading to the door of her community food pantry.

For most magazines, the idea of a Food Issue conjures up sumptuous color spreads, aspirational recipes, accounts of treks around the world to sample the most exotic repasts. But since TIR isn't mandated to promote the quest for consumer bliss, but rather given the freedom to seek out and present a much wider slice of human experience, our Food Issue could perhaps more accurately be called the Non-Food Issue. Or the Hunger Issue. And our answer to the lavish four-color spread is Erin Carnes's photographic series *Digesting Dystopia*, in which idealized images of plants, animals, and agriculture roost amid more disturbing views of the modern food production and consumption industries. Yet, despite the dark themes one would expect from a Hunger Issue, each of the pieces mentioned above also hints at the plenitude of Kimbell's title: a spoonful of honey that provides a taste of home for war refugees, a bumper crop of Roma tomatoes at the food bank,

the “chicken-butt soup” Durham’s future husband teaches her to cook as they fall in love.

In such company, even brief references to food in the rest of the essays, poems, and stories we accepted for this issue started to stand out. The smoked salmon dubbed “Blackfisk” in Wendy S. Walters’s imagined account of a mass African-American migration to Norway. The Tennessee butcher shop where Kimberly Elkins memorably sets a scene of adultery. The sunflower, pumpkin, and cantaloupe seeds that reveal Mehdi Tavana Okasi’s otherness in his native land. Talk about migration, lust, belonging, or almost anything else, and often you end up talking about food. And even the pieces that mention nary an edible could be seen as grappling with other kinds of hungers—for perfection, for possession, for meaning—and thus seem perfectly at home.

As the issue took shape, I found myself keeping track of our own little food world, the snacks that appear on TIR’s conference table where submissions are read and discussed. Highlights included apple crisp made with apples from the tree in Jenna’s yard; Korean “hallabong”-flavored chocolates sent by Hannah’s mother after a trip there; miniature challahs from the Co-op that appeared during Rosh Hashanah; and, on Valentine’s Day, sugar cookies displayed under a Post-it from our intern Sarah reading “Attack of the Iowa Review Cookie Fairy!” We freely admit to being an office obsessed with food. Perhaps it is the fact that we work in a converted 1960s classroom, where the minimal surroundings—narrow windows and bare brick walls—attempt to encourage abstract thought and shut down sensual distraction. In this less than stimulating environment, what we’d turn our noses up at elsewhere—neon-pink frosted cupcakes from Hy-Vee in a plastic clamshell—becomes the Holy Grail in the spare environs of the English-Philosophy Building at 4 p.m. on a Thursday.

Even in one tiny office, the food eaten tells a story of community, of the seasons, of tradition, of friendship and family. All food does. Food lures our staff and volunteers into the room to read, discuss, reject, champion, and accept manuscripts, but it also creates personal bonds. It helps us identify with the disparate lives our authors write about, as food is a common denominator. The pieces in this issue, whether about food or other human hungers, remind us of privation and unmet desires but also of unexpected sources of abundance, including the ones in our own lives.