

Texture Immersion Therapy: A Dinner For One

“Please, right this way.”

Footsteps echoed off of the floor as I was led away from the entrance. The concrete floor was beginning to sweat from the rush of humid air which had followed me in through the front door of the restaurant. It added a dampness to the dining room; a smell distinctly like the inside of a fridge - an array of indeterminate food smells and wetcold mingling together.

The overhead lights were bright. Obnoxiously so. They erased what should be heavy shadows to graphite, and all but snuffed out the stubby end of the pillar candle spluttering for life, attempting not to drown in its own liquid wax. The melted wax had run over, drip drip dripping steadily through a crevice on the side to pool on the table. It hardened as tallow.

“Madame.”

Gloved hand gestures to a loan chair at a small square table. The tinnitus of fluorescent bulbs masks the scraping of chair legs on the floor. The noise makes my throat itch somewhere between my soft palate and my spine, a location which is tragically unitchable.

I settled into the chair provided. The seat is just too short for lounging, and the back just too short to support me in sitting up right. I slump forward to try to get comfortable - elbows on the table are always a bad habit, but one that's hard to break. I was using my index finger in an effort to squish out the fluorescent noise and itch the back of my throat through my ear canal. A resounding failure.

The whispered swish of doubleswing doors is followed by the efficient and quiet steps of a waiter. The first course has arrived.

I

Thud. (I am sure that usually the waiter is not so aggressive in his putting down of plates, but in the quiet of the empty dining room, the plate's delivery sounds like a sudden anxious heart palpitation.) The plate lands on the table. The bare ceramic rim scrapes against the wood grain as it is maneuvered into the centre of my gaze. The waiter takes three brisque steps away to hover near the edge of the room. This dish is meant to be a one shot wonder: over in a matter of seconds, so there was no point in him travelling very far.

The appetiser is squatting low to the plate, quivering in its own slime. *I know you are alive down there.* Maybe it hopes that if it doesn't move, I won't see it either.

The shell is mottled; the colour of a hacking smokers cough and miserable slate grey. Inside, it is surrounded by its own leftover water, and swims milky in its shell, blurring the edge of the flesh into pearl and bone. It has been nestled between chipped ice to keep it both cool and stable.

The urge was irresistible. I plunged the index finger of my right hand straight in between two of the wrinkled folds near the centre of the shell - straight into the thickest part. Looking at the way the smooth wet flesh hugged the tip of my finger, I pressed down further, allowing its folds to suck me in. It felt grainy - the striations of the muscle gave texture to the lustrous surface. I rolled my finger back and forth, enjoying the feeling of resistance it was met with travelling over these striations, like the grain of a wood. The harder I pressed the more liquor seeped out. I pulled my finger back, a half moon indent left behind by my fingernail. I skimmed my finger over the surface membrane, coming to rest on the taupeish lips at the wide end of the shell. They were a little dry compared to the rest of the skin, and wrinkled. The edges caught on my finger as it moved across them, dragging the rest of the flesh with it off to one side. A new plume of pearl liquid was burped from underneath due to my disturbance, coming to rest near the surface of the liquor, turning it more opaque still.

I stuck my finger into my mouth. I'm not sure why. I knew I wouldn't like it. The cold tip of my finger met my warm flat tongue in an explosion of saline sputum and seaweed.

Feeling the waiter's eyes dangerously close to burning a hole through the side of my cheek, I take my finger back out of my mouth and lift the shell from its icy bed with my left hand. Choosing to use my left hand was a mistake, as I am right handed and my left hand is awkward at everything. Immediately upon picking up the appetiser, nervous heat began radiating from my hands; condensation began to collect between the soft ridges of my fingers and the stoney ridges of the shell. My hand shakes. One violent tremor that sends a thick briney tear leaking down the edge of the shell, my thumb, my palm, and then to collect at the wrinkled base of my hand/wrist where it is slurped up by the cuff of my jumper. *I will now smell of you for the rest of the day.*

I raise it to just below eye line, the shell mouth barely a hair's breadth away from my own lips. I am cross eyed from the effort of staring you down at this distance.

You currently smell of nothing. Just cold.

The waiter is still staring. Impatiently.

I rest the wide end of the shell on my bottom lip. The salty exterior begins to pucker the skin of my lips, wicking the moisture away as a last act of defiance.

I suppose there is nothing for it. You are all waiting on me.
Open wide. Bottoms up.

The shell's contents slipped into my mouth all at once. Flesh and liquid together. I gag. It is an ex-lovers kisses. Turgid tongue forced into my mouth, fresh lager cold and unmoving. Slick and fleshy. It sits there - inexperienced, waiting for me to make the first passionate move. I wont.

Don't chew, just swallow.

If I bite down it will be as though I have been punched in the face by the brownish sea. But the mucosal remnants of somethinglikeflu sits globbing at the top of my oesophagus, freshly salted.

I cannot swallow. My own body is fighting me to keep this thing here. Keep it here until it warms up to the temperature of my own mouth. Keep it here until it overtakes my own tongue and threatens to take its place.

I am gagging. My own tongue and this new borrowed tongue, both gagging. Both jostled around by the contractions of my gullet. Both stretching in unison with my bottom jaw. Both salivating and salinous. My own tongue is shrinking, I am sure of it. This new tongue is winning.

Don't chew, just swallow. But it feels too large to swallow now. It will not fit. I will choke. Here in the middle of the dining room, in the middle of this restaurant, observed by the waiter's inscrutable gaze, I will choke.

I can't even breathe anymore. I am being drowned in this pickling liquor sea. The salt has plugged my nose, crusting it over. My mouth is no longer my own, so that I cannot even spit you out.

And so I muster all the muscles in my face and neck, and demand of them that they are my own once more. Demand that they help me swallow this pulsating thing held captive in my mouth by my own teeth.

Gulp. Not quite enough. You only sit slightly further back, dancing half in and half out of my oesophagus. Gloating. 'Try harder' I'm sure I heard you say, your flicking flint flesh licking the roof of my mouth in doing so. Gag. you slip forward once more.

Gulp. I tried again. Still not quite. I'm sure I was swallowing my own tongue instead. I felt the webbing underneath wrench. You are both indistinguishable from each other now.

GULP.

I feel every muscle contract at once. Forcing this evil thing down my throat. I have won. You have been swallowed.

You slip down, thickly. This is taking an age. You are enormous and press against my heart and lungs on your way. The pressure in my chest is almost painful. Everything you touch becomes brackish. You land heavily in the acidic pond of my stomach. I'm sure it was audible. At the very least it was to me. The gagging which followed was certainly audible.

Three swift steps from the waiter. The bare ceramic rim scrapes against the wood grain as it is swept off of the table away from me.

The next course is arriving. I watch as the gloved hand glides across the dining room with it. A shallow stone bowl is pinched expertly between the waiter's finger tips, and placed in the dead centre of my table. The contents tremble minutely upon impact with the table top.

The sloping edges of the bowl are a bare expanse; freckles in the ceramic and pockmarks in the glaze catch the too bright light above me and create white spots in my vision. (Usually this is a precursor to my fainting.) This leads down to the belly of the dish. In it, wobbling on its end, my next course sits plump and red.

The skin is stretched. So stretched it looks fit to burst at any moment. I lean down closer to the table, ear dipping into the bowl to listen to the almost imperceptible creaking of the membrane about to split under its internal pressure. It shivers with every movement in the room.

I pick it up, pinching it between my index finger and thumb. There was nothing left on the plate, no hidden garnish, only a sweaty imprint from the food.

I squeeze a little, watching the tendons in my hands flex; the dense red flesh remains the same, pressing back on the tips of my fingers to flatten them instead, turning my finger tips a waxy lemon pith yellow. The red flesh turns from bright cherry to crimson.

It is only one bite.

I lift it further away from the safety of the bowl, holding it up to the light on the way to my mouth. The skin catches fire. It's colour becomes hot and angry- the colour of blood spewing from a new open wound. It almost glows. Internal structures become visible: optic nerves? Blood vessels? Locular gel? They show up peachy against the outside skin. A queasy sensation starts to overcome me.

Do it before you think anymore about it.

The faster you eat it, the quicker you can leave the table. I hadn't heard those words for nearly 20 years, but it was still my father saying them.

I purse my lips in preparation. The cool smooth skin resting against my lips. I suck in. My lips smacked together having inhaled the thing into my mouth whole. It sits there behind my bottom teeth, just too large for my mouth causing my bottom jaw to drop a little and give the look of an underbite. My tongue is crested over the top, the very tip nestled into the dimple where a stem should be.

This skin is too smooth. It is almost alien. This is uncomfortable - I flick my tongue over and to the side, moving the object over into my left cheek, stretching it out. The smooth skin squeaks against my molars as it moves past them. I can feel it attempting to press my back teeth out of the way in order to return to the centre of my mouth. I keep my jaw gritted tightly to prevent any further movement whilst I decide what to do.

It can't just sit there forever.

Its insides are getting warm, too warm, inside of my mouth warm, bodily warm. *It could be a body part; oh god it could be a body part.* And I'm starting to dribble. And my stretched out hamster cheek is starting to hurt. And I'm sure I can't swallow it whole.

I move my tongue between the slick surfaces of the inside of my cheek and this glowing red skin. Slick wet on slicker wet on slickest wet skin.

One little flick from my tongue and it is sandwiched between my back teeth. I hold it there, clenching my jaw slowly to test its mettle and try to decide who I think is going to win. I flex and it flexes with me - spherical edges bow out and become flatter, more oval, but not breaking. I bite harder. Edges flexing further. Sphere becoming oval then becoming flatter. The tension rippling over the skin feels like fabric just before it tears; I can hear the microtears coming up through my teeth. Bite hardest. It must have squashed to a flat plane before the membrane gave up.

The snotty contents has been flung all over the walls of my mouth. It is jellified and fresh. It drips down from the roof onto my tongue, slipping backward to my gullet. I retch immediately; the convulsions cause the vitreous to jiggle wherever it has landed. The acidic contents has made my eyes smart with the sudden appearance of tart vinegar in my mouth.

I can't not think of eyeballs. More retching.

Do I spit it back out onto the plate to check? I'm sure it wasn't an eyeball when I put it into my mouth, but suddenly I am not so sure. *Do eyeballs have seeds in?* My brain is too busy swimming in citric acid and slime to think.

Some of the seeds have settled in the craggy surfaces of my teeth. They might grow there in the damp dark like a plant, and I'll have a whole mouth full of eyeballs, all liable to explode with a little too much pressure from my jaw.

The limp flat flesh is still pinned between my teeth - hanging lifelessly over the edge of my molars when the waiter sweeps my plate away. He's so fast I can't ask to check that it wasn't what I thought it was.

III

"And finally, your dessert" A slate slab is placed onto the table near the edge - first one side and then the other (it's easier this way). I can hear the displaced air woosh out from underneath. The slate is slid across the table's surface toward me.

The waiter is gone again.

At the centre, an amber blob. Wrinkling and puckered, the flesh dips in at the centre. It is the shape of a blood cell, or at the very least the blood cells I drew in my science books in school. The depressions are a deep marmalade, and everything is covered in a sheen of glucose perspiration.

Atop this, sitting in the dip, and streaming down and over the side - spittle (in gastronomy this is known as espuma). White and frothing. It is sea foam; the tide is coming in - differently sized bubbles cling together as they slip down the edge of the amber lump and onto the slate. They collect near the bottom - I watch as smaller bubbles are squashed by their larger

counterparts coming down on top of them; membranes burst and individuals are absorbed into the whole. It all looks wet.

But this is the last thing. Only this and then I am full and finished and can leave. Only this and I am cured.

I reach down to the plate to collect the meal, plunging my fingers straight through the sea froth saliva and onto the orange flesh. This flesh has no resistance, not until you reach the centre. It crumples almost entirely. What appeared solid on the plate is now a sagging sack pinched between my finger and thumb. It is wrinkles on wrinkles; furrows furrowed. The newly popped bubbles return to liquid and drip off my finger and thumb to splash down on the plate.

One sharp inhale, and put the thing into my mouth.

An explosion of fructose. Everything is sweet and I begin to salivate profusely. Syrup/saliva coating every surface of my mouth. It begins coagulating at the top of my throat, thickening steadily. And yet simultaneously, something putrid cutting straight through this sweetness. A kind of acrid cream, coming in new waves with every burst of a bubble - each tiny splattered pop renews the taste over and over. The two together make a puddle of something like brandy.

My tongue twitches, brushing over the wrinkled surface. The skin is velvety soft and covered in tiny downy hairs. It is my Great Grandmother's cheek the last time I kissed her.

I bite down. There is even less resistance to my teeth. They may well be biting nothing at all, I cannot feel it - perhaps the flesh is flinching away from me as fast as I am biting down, and we are now in a race. But it can only shrink so far, folding itself into its biconcave centre, and so I found it. As my teeth came crashing down like a guillotine on the marmalade dimples, it cleaved them in two. The orange lump had shrunk so small in fear, become so dense, that this soft skin made an almost audible crunch.

A new wave of sickening sweetness. A new wave of saliva.

Let me be free of this thing I think. Let this be over.

And so I swallow, resolving to suffer the indigestion rather than continue to chew on Great Grandma's ancient sweet skin. The two halves fight me on the way down.

The legs of my chair squeak on the floor as I push back. I don't want to wait for my plate to be cleared. As I make my way back through the dining room I wonder vaguely how I might rate this on TripAdvisor.