

A Cut of Meat

Shortly before the New Year I was invited to a dinner party at a friend's apartment. One of the guests, a man I'd never seen before, was introduced as a sous-chef from a much-lauded restaurant. He offered me his hand to shake. I felt his firm grip, and then glanced up at the circular conduit of muscle between his shoulder and neck. His head was small and seemed to bobble amongst his corporeal mass. It was only later, seated next to one another in a circle with the others, that I gazed upon his large, mangled hands. One, his left, was bouncing nervously on his knee; the other was sitting placidly, flatly, heavily, upon his right thigh.

His nails were clipped, which seemed logical for a chef, yet they were too short, and nearly circular, rising above his fingers like thick translucent disks. Atop nearly every knuckle were glazed-over burns; wounds with a shallow red center, and a circumference of flaky skin. There were also more superficial cuts and jabs moving across the face of his hands and upwards from his wrist to his forearm.

I later noticed both hands pounding on top of his knees, miming the thrum of a more distant party. He and his conversation partner were discussing where to buy pills. What struck me wasn't the quality of his injuries, or the signs of his labor, but the pure consistency and size of his hands. The way he had moved them perpendicular from his body in the flow of conversation, floating there in mid-air, they were erotic, as though at any moment he might materialize a piece of meat or a piece of fruit—from under his shirt, from within his pocket—and pound it to bring the inside out.

The room started to thump loudly with the noise of conversations, and I was sitting on the edge of my chair thinking about the image of pasty juice, thick paste and juice running across the chef's hands. I saw other bodies in movement: some were curved in; others hunched over, or anchored to the ground like pseudo-pods of drink and spirited talk. I drank my wine and rubbed my thumb, cold and dry, along the ridge of my index finger. It's not that this party was too loud or too ordinary, but rather I wished those battered hands might wield more prominence in the room, might gesticulate with authority, tell a story.

From amidst the social stirrings an object from my childhood started to take form in my thoughts. This was a life-sized mannequin of an Edwardian housemaid, with a burlesque bodily tilt and expression. The figure was carved from wood and shellacked with a thick layer of paint. Her molded face was painted into a surprised smile with red daubed on the cheeks and tip of the nose, as though she had been drinking. The maid belonged to family friends, and her role was to welcome guests to their home, in our case for Hanukkah, Passover and after the Jewish New Year. She was always waiting for us. Kitsch but self-possessed, standing several feet from the front door, continuing to occupy this space once everyone dispersed. I anticipated her and she horrified me. The darkened tile foyer, echoing with life elsewhere, formed a ritual space where she came close to me. When no one else was around I would approach the mannequin and press my lips against hers, to let myself materialize in this vessel. I dared not touch her spindly white hands, which reached outward in bidding. Even as a child I knew I should be cautious of this supplication, even though she was always there, her hands were always there.

There was creek that flowed through the backyard and when we children were shepherded into the basement to entertain ourselves, I could sense its moisture rising up from the carpet. Moisture and density: a good cut of meat should contain both. The basement walls, dug deep into the earth, formed a mineralized shell, a scrim that showed water damage when the lights were turned on. The chef's hands were dry but they hid pockets of bursting cells. He eventually noticed my staring, then shifted in his small upright chair, and crossed one hand over the other to break my gaze. His hands were mobile, they had been disrupted, they moved. Maybe they glowed in the dark. The maid was the projection of a body, an extremity thereof, of my body very likely, and wore a layer of masks. In the ambient darkness of the entryway, I could summon the removal of one mask and the appearance of another. The hosts would hit the lights and one party replaced another. Together we would say prayers for bread, wine, protection.

The living room was full of people, and nobody seemed to care about the noise or the cigarette smoke that had started to amass. I was once a child left alone with other children in a fluorescently lit basement playroom, where above us passageways from one space to the next were left dim and uninhabited. My parents accompanied their hosts into the kitchen in order to prepare gummy noodles with sweet spices and fatty beef.