

Memory Food

I am female, so a meal made from three courses: my conscious, subconscious and something in between, is a meal peppered with hormonal spice, dark and strong. My work demands to be fed with memory. It insists that I turn myself inside and out, to feel and feel again, in and under the skin of me. The work is hungry. I try to make a meal of me. I stir memory in a big pot; sweat me out, letting it all simmer. It is a bittersweet process, which begins with bringing my brains slowly to the boil. I dredge and sift the shallow swill of my mind, to translate, poach meaning from the monkey chatter. Skimming this broth brings forth some solid fatty cerebral matter, my Known Known's. I try to baste these together as some kind of narrative, bound with an egg or woven together with threads.

The meaty tissues and sinews of my body are still more resistant to offering up their share of my memories. They keep the Unknown Known's, those innocent every day repetitions, minor strains and major uncelebrated pleasures of the flesh. I am strung out like a cello. Plucking my breast and rump elicits visceral notes and chords, which are familiar, to me. I resound with memory but only echoes. But these memories were felt in flesh and need fleshy instruments again to play true. There is no flesh on the bones of these echoes of memory and I am no butcher. I seek and harvest materials with a tactile physicality. Skin like, visceral, lived in, they might have a kinship to my flesh. They take a fingerprint like I do. Playing memory music, re-enacting through empathetic materials soothes. I can mimic the original vibration or pitch felt by flesh, but fabric is no meal and catches in my throat. Still hungry.

I put the hunger to bed. In sleep my unconscious self will shift and twitch and wash up all manner of partially digested ruminations to feed off. All my Known Unknown memories doubtless keep me company and dance in the hollow space in my stomach. Awake, they and our dance are forgotten. My shoes are just a little more worn each night. The soles flap but tell no tales, and I am famished. I practice shutting off the monkey chatter, the Known Known's. I make pliable my body to unlock the blocks and granthies that stuff up the Unknown Known's in pockets and gristle. I get close enough to the knots to examine but not unpick them. I get refrains of the Known Unknowns from remembered dreams. I catch distant whiffs of Unknown Unknowns on the breeze as I look over my edge. I breathe in and out, but both elude me and are beyond grasping. I move away to take a lung full of clean air away from myself. I cleanse my palate. My work is still hungry for memories, and mine alone will never be enough and makes me sick from too much.

I rifle the drawers and wardrobes of female archetypes and literary predecessors and try them on for size. I tread in their shoes along lines of perfection. I fall as they did. I am caged and corseted. I burst out, rupturing stitches, sampling their emancipation. How else can I inhabit their memories and taste them? I press the notes of their lives to form chords with mine. Somewhere in the major and minor scales there may be notes that others can hum, that resonate in their bodies too. My palimpsest of silenced voices now awake and filling me up with memory and experience. An empathetic sisterhood, they emerge in number from the yellowed wallpaper in a locked attic, and march from the wood where chaos reigns. I am a banquet, a smorgasbord of shared female memory through cycle upon cycle of gestation, birth, gynaecology, and mothering.

Oh, but this feast memory is too rich. It escapes my pot and bubbles over. To devour all those woman and their memories whole is monstrous. But memory is so delicious. I go back and pick at it. Memory cannot be gobbled whole. I must control my urge to disgorge memory all at once. The subtle flavour of each will be lost. A single meal will not satisfy, as no two palates are the same. My work has many to feed, will be distasteful to many. Better to select morsels from the memory pot like a fondue or scatter a fragmentary banquet to be grazed upon with rests in between. Each person comes to dine in different states of fullness with a belly full of their own. My memories may not mix well. The best cooking techniques let the individual flavours sing. I must find a way to let each ingest as much as they wish. Each must be allowed to play with their food, get down from the table and return as they wish. I can only hope that my work stays with them, repeats on them a little as I belch forth digested memories, the fibres that catch in my throat with the threads that weave them together.

Enough, my larder is empty, my meat hung. All is ripe. My curator is chef and sommelier tonight and must now control the menu and devise the method of feeding.

Catherine Linton, February 2012