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A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

A LITTLE DINNER MUSIC

POEMS BY STEPHEN MURABITO

STEPHEN MURABITO is an associate professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh's Greensburg campus, where he teaches in the undergraduate writing and composition programs. He was a National Endowment for the Arts grant recipient in poetry in 1992. His poems have appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Mississippi Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Bellingham Review*, and *5AM*; his short stories have appeared in *North American Review*, *Antietam Review*, *Brooklyn Review*, *Cake Train*, and *Pittsburgh Quarterly On-Line*. His composition reader, *Connections, Contexts, and Possibilities*, was published in 2001 by Prentice Hall. In 2004 Murabito was awarded the University of Pittsburgh's Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching Award. He lives in Saltsburg, Pennsylvania with his wife, April, and their four children, Angelina, Estella, Antonia, and Sebastian.

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A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K

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Poems by
STEPHEN MURABITO



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These poems are for my wife, April.

From the first day that I beheld her face
in this life till the vision of her now,
I could trust my poems to sing her praise.

Dante Alighieri
Paradiso, XXX, 28-30
Translated by Mark Musa

She peels the spuds. I clean the coffee pot.

“James, the salt,” she says.

“Yes, m’lord, and the pepper besides,” I say.

We are having a good time. It does not take much for a couple of hungry stiffs to have a good time. The spuds that begin to sizzle on the hot plate are enough. The pot of coffee that fills the room with its smell is enough.

Tom Kromer
Waiting for Nothing

Invocation

But we two, sitting here in the shelter, eating and drinking, shall entertain each other, remembering and retelling. . . .

Eumaios to Odysseus
Homer's *Odyssey*, 15.398–99
Translated by Richmond Lattimore

Oh, stranger, come, taste, hear, and see,
And don't be strange any more.
I've prepared a setting for you:
The everyday plates,
The muted earth tones,
The burnt oranges,
The deep reds and browns
And golds of hot bowls.
Come, the steam is rising
As I lift off these lids.
Yes, listen, for I have more
Than food to pass:
I have something to tell—
Look, our reflections fill these plates
As a sleep of snow falls
Like apple blossoms
Over the bags of leaves.
I long to sing to you
Through all I've gathered.
Oh, it is good and fresh and warm.
Come, and bless me.
Sit, and tear
This hard-crusted bread.
It is all that I have,
The heart of my house,
Going deep to the blood.

A Little Dinner Music

Ethnic Poem

(In Memory of My Grandparents)

*Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are
laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.*

Joy Harjo, "Perhaps the World Ends Here"

Here it comes
Through ruby glints
Of Uncle Leo's Chianti
And across the airspace
Inside this burning skull:
Bodies ascending stony Sicilian hillsides,
Spirits abundant as Catanian holy parades,
It's a flight, a flight: All of the lost relatives
Rise from the dead and surge now to the new world.
They are the songs of *pane*, Asiago, and olives on my breath!

Their hands shake, passion itself resurrecting their flesh.
They breathe Vivaldi through their eyes, exhale Dante in my ears.
And their children squirm with the small fires in their souls.
They're being held and told, *Hush, hush. Stay close, stay close.*
It's time now. We are returning, returning to his aching heart.

They want to cook and live and eat with their new friends;
They want to fill our faces with the blood of their smiles;
They want to touch us through the sauce and Romano we twirl
And twirl into yet another explosive dinner-table story.
Oh, let the world end; it'll begin again in bread sweet as this
As they pass their lives into our veins, defy death, and sing,

Everyone, everyone, it's ready: Come, sit, eat, eat, eat!

The Kielbasa Ghosts

Syracuse is losing two west side meat markets, the last in the city specializing in freshly made Kielbasa and hams using age-old recipes brought over from the Old World.

Syracuse Post-Standard, May 1, 1997

Polish kielbasa no longer hung in butchers' windows.

Saul Bellow, Humboldt's Gift

All across America,
The small Polish stores are closing
Down—no more kielbasa, sweet hams,
Kiszka, brown breads, or quarts
Of succulent beer
Inside the old sliding doors.

We are a blood-deep people:
Life doesn't simply hit us
And then go fading away.
We love kielbasa; we're fighters.
And so, like a legion of the sleepwalking starved,
We will descend our porch
Steps and float out
To fill the early morning streets
With the wandering parts of ourselves
That will never rest.
Like flocks of wayward white eagles
In search of the skies themselves,
We will fall on unsuspecting Polish festivals,
Razing the pierogi and golabki tables,

Inhaling the homemade kielbasa and kiszka,
Drinking in the cold beer
Until we are born again
In spinning flesh and blood
And soul on a polka floor,

Where ghost on ghost
We refuse to leave,
Surrounding the son of a son
Of a son of a sausage maker,

Whirling like a crown above his head

Until he moves in the ticking sawdust quiet
Behind a Monday morning meat counter
To say hello to his first customer coming in,

The bells of a thousand tongues ringing at the door.

This Is My Ode

We weren't allowed to let Uncle Ted into
The kitchen, just bring him a new beer
Out in the living room: Oh, this is my ode
To the sweet, foamy head of sixties psychotherapy.
But, no, a cook on early retirement, he'd
Lose his balance, "go astray," as Cousin May said,
Like the time he tried to clean fresh clams
By washing them in hot soapy water:
Oh, this is my ode to sudsy yawners,
My ode to the utter perversion of soapy grinners,
My ode to the trigger inside of us all, moved by
What, the mention of pastrami or a dead wife's name?

I saw it when Uncle Ted was behind the deli,
The Fire Department on 4th had ordered pastramis,
And someone mentioned my late aunt's name: Oh, this
Is my ode to heaping mayo on corned beef
And my father storming out of his own store,
Bells howling at the door. Ted didn't even appear
To like the thing he'd made. He simply stood
On the sawdust and regarded it at arm's length,
Eyes saying, *No, this isn't the peace*
I thought it would be. But if I flee the world
Far enough. . . . Oh, hear me now, this is my ode

To a man setting a sin of a sandwich down
And calmly walking away, not one white hair
Out of place, eyes glazed with ardent hope.
This is my ode to cold and entombed pain,
My heart's raspy ode to Ted in the intersection
Of West First and Main that day as DON'T WALK
Flashed to him to freeze in his steps, the world
Blowing its horns of forced stillness and outrage
At the man whose wife fell dead in her chrysanthemums,
And he said that over and over to the cops in the cruiser
As the people paused, their hands up to their mouths,
Their *Palladium Times* folded under their arms.

This is my ode to the biggest pastrami sandwiches
I'd ever seen, gaping smilers with tongues hanging
Out like the exhausted runners that we were, all the way
Downtown with our layers and layers and layers
Of meat and hot mustard, and the fished-out
Dortmunder pickles, how I carried the Campbell's
Soup box into the station, and we fed the cops,
Who said not to worry about it, maybe give him
A beer, that they knew him for years from over
At Vona's, where he made the best white clam sauce,
And he and his wife would take the back booth,
Sharing a hot pastrami on Friday nights.

Oh, this is my ode to the one cop in all of his
Simple logic with the mustard on his chin
And the sighs the rest of them made as their teeth
Sunk into those monstrosities as we walked out
Of the police station into the hot August afternoon
Of 1966, my Uncle Ted holding my hand like a child,
How such strange flesh can engulf your soul,
How we finally got him back home, how my father
Turned at the front door, looked cold and confused
At my mother, then went back to his orders.

This is my ode to those eyes, those wordless eyes,
To my handing my uncle a Genesee in the cool, doiled
Darkness, to the way he took the brown bottle,
Then tipped it slowly, his head up, his head down,
To the way I stood looking at my mother and my Cousin May,
Who themselves stood looking from the dining room,
To the way the sun burst through the latticed
Venetian blind, igniting their colorless work clothes,
Igniting their dark arms, igniting their paused,
Pondering faces, igniting for me, for the first
Time, *more* than those resilient olive faces.

The Lost Digits of My Ancestors

(For Ed Ochester)

I

Uncle Tony P. was brave
Around the cans of anchovies—
What the hell?
He had nothing to lose,
Having already lost most
His fingers a digit at a time
Down at Imperial Wire.

Inside their closet,
I found his bowling ball
And held the crooked grin of holes.

Aunt Mayme
Shouted at him,
But it was useless
Because he was half-deaf.

She yelled each syllable:
Pa eee no! Pa eee no!
She said the salty, rich food
Would surely make me sick.

But he hummed Sinatra,
Chomped his White Owl,
And mixed the anchovies,
Capers, salami, peppers,
And black olives together.

I sat and smiled
And felt whole
With a hunk of provolone
In the small kitchen,

All yellow
And a pink flamingo out back.

I copied him,
Reaching as he reached,
Dipping the bread as he did:
And our bellies bulged
As he clawed out
The oily, sweet seconds.

II
Cousin Monk
Pulled Billy McGuire
Out of the Presser
Down at Whitlock Shadecloth,

Pulled him right
Out of his clothes—
Set him bare-assed
On the concrete floor.

Monk said
Billy wept
And bled
And swore
All shaky
That he saw Jesus
Sittin' on the bolts
Of new cloth.

Monk lost three
Digits on two
Fingers of his left hand
And lost the tip
Of his right
Forefinger.

He said they popped
Off like corks.

He lifted us up
High off the ground

But then left the room
On Thanksgiving
When Uncle Angelo
Opened the Burgundy.

People looked and looked,
But not even Maintenance
Found those digits.

III
Aunt Yolanda was tipsy
At the family reunion.
We were steaming clams
And grilling sweet sausage.
She was a live wire.

Uncle Willy bossed her around.
She stood up in the shady yard,
Told him to eat shit,
Said she'd been his cookin' slave
So long that she could do
A damned travelin' magic show.

I laughed so hard
That my salad fell
Into my lap,
And oil and vinegar and piss
Ran down my legs
And over my sneaks.

But he took her up on it,
Bet her twenty bucks
There and then
She couldn't chop a lemon
Into two perfect halves.

Like some crazy pirate lady,
She raised that curving blade,
And before I knew it,
They were all off
And yelling their ways
Down the hill
To the hospital.

But with her waving hatred
And spitting Sicilian,
The half-thumb
Flew out the car window,
And they were all
On their knees
By Dinkie's Arco,
In front,
In the weeds,
Searching.

IV
My father moved slowly
Over the fresh sawdust.
His fingers were red,
Always red: He'd been
Boning-out pork all night.

I soaked the salty ropes
Of hog casings in water.
I threw a little worm of it
To the purring cat.

Soon, the sausage
Came to life in his hands,
Curling in the pan.

But my *Playboy* girlfriend
With her raised skirt
Would understand the lump
In my throat.
With breasts like melons,
Her eyes like chestnuts,
Down in the basement,
She would come to life—
Flesh on the flashlight pages.

The happy grinding behind me,
I creaked down the stairs.
These magazines
And women
All opening,
And God:

Imagine
That the world
Is so damned big
That *this* is
Going on somewhere.

Through the smile
Of my girl
Offering a light
For my candy Camels,
There was the cry—
High-pitched like brakes.
They had to put him out
And amputate,
Cutting the digits
Clean at the joints.

V

Tonight, in Pittsburgh,
The talk is
Some school kid
Down on Atwood
Found a hand
In the snow.

I don't know why,
But it seems like
I've grabbed my bourbon before
And followed the same crowd.

The cops send us home.

And everyone's wondering
Where on earth
The lost hand came from.

Someone says, *Mafia*.
Someone says, *Maniac*.

I chug my booze
And cling to the air.
I burst to Mrs. Pascal
That all the way from my hometown,
Down through the old wires overhead
And the bowling balls and buried weeds
And the lemons and sausage
And pots and pans
Of all the houses
In this city,
The lost digits
Of my ancestors
Have come together
As a hand that reaches
Out for me, reaches.

My wife makes my apologies,
And Mrs. Pascal simply says,
Sometimes, the little things in life
Upset some of us, Sweetie.

You're getting too old
For that kind of shit!
My wife's breath clouds, fades.

I sit on the porch,
Watch the snow fall,
Drink the warm bourbon,
And feel myself
Turning forty.

But they are all dead,
Those leaving unwhole,
And their digits
Have been relegated
To the places of the lost,
The scattered
And wandering
Endless shards of the world,
Crowded, weeded, and snowed-over,

Whiskey breath
And memory
And oil cans
In the lots
And alleys,

Where one hand
Holds another
On a Tuesday night,
And no one else
In Pittsburgh
Is praying.

The Cook at Catalone's Loses His Mind

(Or, *Pilgrimage with the Bronzed Jo Jo Annunziata Sausage Sandwich*)

Employees at Bongo Java, a coffee and pastry shop in Nashville, Tennessee, have "shellacked and enshrined" a cinnamon bun which bears a striking resemblance to Mother Theresa.

Greensburg *Tribune-Review*, December 29, 1996

At first, I thought, I'll be damned
If I make a pilgrimage to Nashville
To gaze at the face of Mother Theresa
Emerging from a shellacked cinnamon bun.

But then I heard a voice.
Maybe it was only Connie Angelucci,
Next door, cursing out her husband:

*Yes, you will be damned,
You heathen bastard!*

I don't know, though; all night,
I'm thinking about the timing.

Then I have this epiphany:
There must be hundreds of faces
In all of the foods we cook and eat,
But we're not stunned by them
Because they're not famous faces
Or faces we know.

For example, maybe *my* face is on a veal scaloppine
Out in, say, Portland, Oregon.
Ok, I mean, Joe Schmoe, he says,
Hey, Grace, looks like a face here in my scaloppine!
But he wouldn't recognize me,
So he eats the veal—no problem.

Then, guess what? I'm seeing faces everywhere:
Now, I've got a bronzed Jo Jo Annunziata sausage sandwich,
A laminated manicotti that looks like
Celeste Desantis from over on Sixth Street,
And a varnished dish of ziti and meatballs
That's the spitting image of Sister Marie,
My fifth grade catechism teacher,
Who used to pray the lessons
At us, whispering us closer
As the silent chalk blossomed
Into words on the old blackboard.

I've even shellacked a gnocchi and pork chops
That looks like Connie Angelucci herself,
God bless her with the fat on her arms
Bouncing all over as she's pulling her husband
Onto the dance floor this Saturday night
When Augie Augustine and his boys are playing.

Oh, bless them all,
Out there twirling, laughing,
Their faces turning to rigatoni,
Linguine, cacciatore,

Or the sweet shrimp scampi.

Sonny Rollins Dances with His Sax, and It Leads

(For Jack Giles)

Sonny Rollins comes walkin out
On stage, tall, gives a smile,
A nod, time in the shoulders,
Bobbin neck, breathes in, out,
Says *two*, shake, tap a foot,
Says *one, two, three, four*:

And Sonny Rollins starts to blow:
He doesn't just *play* his sax,
He *dances* with it, and it leads:
In the knees, walkin, movin all
Over, a squint, a shudder, a grimace,
Turn it sideways, bend way over,

Give a skip, roll and weave, toes,
Heels, bop and sway like a possessed
Man with a bronzed broom: Sweep it up,
Lift it up high overhead to Godjazz up
Like a golden question mark blowin
The answers in runs, trills, blasts,

And shake it, shake it, flutter it
On home: Band winding on down, we're
All shouting in the dark: Sound now solo,
Pure, street, nightbridge New York solo
With the band's last walk down the scale,
Song endin: Sonny, Sonny, Sonny Rollins:

Three squawking rips to the last goosehonk toot.

A Little Dinner Music

Music is feeling, then, not sound. . . .

Wallace Stevens, "Peter Quince at the Clavier"

I

April finishes her make-up
Under the big Bartlett tree;
My father puts the hedge trimmers away
And calls for a two-beer lunch.

We've spent the morning pruning
The Red Delicious, the Rome,
The older Cortland trees.
So happy to be home from Pittsburgh,
April and I danced
Backwards again and again,
Stopping, turning, gaining perspective.

And I tangoed with a rake,
Working through the fallen McIntosh:
They were old fists, imperfect
As the shady orchard itself
With its patches of burnt grass,
Its twisted lines of branch shadows.
But in my country frenzy,
Breathing Hesperides in the apple air,
I didn't care that my fingers blistered
Or that my hands stung
Like the half-ripe Granny Smith
I couldn't help biting into.

II

The tomatoes have been late this year,
But so have we: We're lucky
To make it to Oswego in August,
To pick our lunch from the garden,
Waltzing the small basket of ripeness
To the kitchen cutting board.

I chop and assemble
With the Dutch College Swing Band.
Cucumber, radish, celery:
Charlie Parker blows fresh garlic to pieces.
Lettuce, tomato, fresh basil:
Oil and vinegar glisten like the sweat
On the faces of the dancers
Who bop and twirl to Turk Murphy,
*Live, from the only
Red-carpeted saloon in San Francisco!*

A little dinner music, my father says,
Having turned up his stereo.
He layers provolone, Genoa, copicolla.
The hot mustard is spread faster,
The knife tapping the bread.
My salad finally arrives
Like something blossoming
To Louis Armstrong's gargled joy
Of "Bourbon Street Parade."

You eat lunch like this all the time? I ask.
But he's promising April
The first dance after the second beer,
And I don't ask again.

The soppressata
Blesses us:
We savor
Dina Washington's
"Unforgettable."

Then he squints,
Points, and praises,
Hey, Stevie—Duke Ellington!

The olives become oiled jewels.
The old Apollo Theatre rises like a phoenix.

III

After lunch, we sit in the parlor.
My father sleeps through Anita O'Day,
Eddie Condon, and Woody Herman.

But I picture tomorrow's breakfast:
He'll show us Wild Bill Davison trumpeting
The sun into the steam of our coffee.

April takes my hand,
And we dance to Gerry Mulligan.

Artie Shaw, Oscar Peterson,
And we dip slowly by the front door.

Miles Davis,
Someone blows "Twelfth Street Rag,"
And we do a perfect "Kansas City Stomp"
Under the big Bartlett tree.

And through the bay window,
We can see my father,
The gray head falling further,
The hands unwinding into sleep.

And only if we're silent,
Beyond our slowed breathing
And the empty, stretching highway,
Can we hear at last
The slightest guitar or clarinet
Like something imagined
Across a great distance
Coming finally to us

As another song begins.

Communion of Asiago

*For the olive
will sing with the wine:
the ripening light will inhabit us.*

Pablo Neruda, "In Praise of Oil,"
Translated by Ben Belitt

This fig will save you

If you close your tired eyes
As you pull the Kalamata
From its hemp string.

Time stops in your palm.

Understanding is the light,
Ancient aroma under the cellophane.
It grows to certainty
With the explosion of sweetness

That says *earth, sun, tree, hand, mouth.*

I have been taught the grace of eggplant,
The salvation of olives, the epiphany of garlic.
I have had lessons
In the redemption of plum tomatoes.

When I was seven, Grandpa Joe
Sat me down at his kitchen table
And desperately whispered,
This is what I wait to show you.
This is for your whole life!

He pulled a package
From his locked tackle box:
Strong string crossed tight

White butcher paper. Inside it,
A pungent slab of Asiago pulsed with light.
Louie Cordino smuggled it from Syracuse
Because not even my father at the store
Was allowed to give Grandpa the cheese,
Genoa, or prosciutto he loved.

Oh, this lunatic is always before me—
His old knife, and the way
The backlit slice falls
Onto his thick fingers.

In his eyes, though, I saw
The treasure of teaching.
He gestured and said, *Ah? Ah?*
As if we were in a presence
As obvious as it was holy.

I saw the depths of ten seconds as he checked
Back toward the sewing room for Grandma,
Nodding in his own certainty,
Eyes now brown pure joyful saved
Then shutting at the first bite
That said *home, mother, father, son, grandson*.
I swore he was sleeping.

Oh, the world tore itself to shreds, ignoring the wordless
Time of white crumbs on a stilled blade,
The endless patience of five sardines on a white plate,
Or the utter omniscience of good bread,
Which he broke and blessed with Tuscan oil.

His steady hand gave me the communion
Of Asiago in that human kitchen,
Where, a year later, my widowed grandmother wept
She'd forgotten everything, even her sauce recipe:
To an Italian, this is to lose your name.

But on the next day,
He was caught again,

And I stood watching the mortal sin
Of an old woman burying his infinite
Wisdom behind a line of rosebushes
As if the thorny arms
Could keep such dreams away.

Oh, the transcendence of Sicilian olives,
The forgiveness of fettuccine,
The peace of Bardolino in the chipped glass:
This is all the mercy we have against
Sorrow, gravity, pain, damnation, and death.

Let the fig save you—
Pour the reconciliation of oil,
Fry the time of peppers, crush the days of garlic,
Slice the lives of cheese, break the soul of bread,

Close your eyes, open your mouth,

Sip this wine, and ascend.

Benediction: How to Winter Out

(After Patricia Dobler's "Wintering Out")

Do not hide
In the cellar
Regardless of your beer supply
Value the blackbird
Without it
The robin's song falls flat
Burn the wood
And sing the blues
And let the pork roast cook
On the old iron stove
All day long
Eat garlic
And breathe poetry
Into your lover's face
And thereby open yourself
To the rare sun
Don't look when it goes down
Remember
Let all voices wait
And all flesh be silence
And all flame be a language
Perfectly understood
Yet constantly in need
Of such translation



A LITTLE DINNER MUSIC

by Stephen Murabito

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