

5 Poems by Stanley H. Barton

Five poems from *ABC of Fruits and Vegetables* collection.

“Chreyn”

“Fig Leaves”

“Jalapeños”

“Pickle”

“Rice Krispies Vanilla Squares”

CHREYN

for Max Schwartz

Grandfather liked
white horseradish,
chreyn,
on his gefilte fish
because it was strong
like the Limburger cheese
he spread on the large
oval slice of pumpernickel
he covered with heavy sweet cream
thick from the top of the tin milkcan
delivered at predawn to the grocery store
he opened at the crack of every morning.
Horseradish, after all, is just a weed
whose roots in the earth
you may, by chance,
spread as topsoil on your lawn.
It can grow through sand, asphalt—even cement.
It is strong in any form—red or white.

But *chreyn* is good on flanken and fish,
especially on gefilte.
If he were still here,
you could ask my grandfather.

FIG LEAVES

It was the leaves of the fig
that covered them in their nakedness,
hiding the shame of their opened eyes.

So close they were, those happy leaves,
to the source of pain and pleasure
to follow expulsion from the garden.

Perhaps it is thus why the fig itself
—when opened—spreads to receive
the tongue that delights in exploration.

Luscious fruit, open to willing mouths,
so full of transient solace, momentary bliss,
opening and closing to the curious.

JALAPEÑOS

When the Devil
fell to earth,
cast out of the light
into supernal darkness,
some of his tainted blood
spilled upon the ground,
and, like dragon's seed,
sprouted into peppers—
black & red & green

chili peppers, paprika,
but, most of all, jalapeños!
They spread on the winds
of khamsin, scirocco, mistral,
all over the equatorial lands,
providing fire with fire
to sere the tongues
like the seven deadly sins.
When you spice your meals,
oh, sinners of the world,
not only your mouth is burning!

PICKLE

A kosher pickle
is a cucumber with *taam*.
Eaten with roast chicken
or Romanian tenderloin steak,
preferably with corned beef
or pastrami on club bread
—ah, that was my ambrosia.
The pickle store on Blake Avenue
was my Paradise in Brooklyn.
It lured me by the nose,
wafted such sweet scents
through childhood's summer air
I was transported out of
the crush and chaos of pushcarts
and burnt odor of flicked chicken feathers.
The walls of the pickle place
were covered with calendar girls,
but it was the brine in the barrels
that drew me to their salty pleasures.
No toilet water or perfume
could compare with that aroma.

In the East New York of my childhood,
kosher pickles were my garden of roses,
my eau de Cologne, my Deli No. 5.

RICE KRISPIES VANILLA SQUARES

Once Mother made a confection
out of the Rice Krispies
which snapped, crackled, popped
in the bowls of our childhood
(my brother's and mine)
in old East New York, Brooklyn.

She took the recipe
from the side of the box
but added her special magic:
the extract of vanilla beans.

It was so-o-o good
my brother and I
could only take a square
at a time from the large
whole pan-filled candy cake.

We savored it
treasured each bite,
wishing it to last
as long as possible.

We hid it in the ice-box,
hoping to have it always,
a bit of vanilla each day
to sweeten our leftover lives.

But, kept for so long,

most of it spoiled,
most of it had to be
thrown away.

It was one of the only things
My brother and I shared
Without a fistfight,
And we both lost.

Still we remember
the special crunch
with the fantastic flavor
we both can never forget—
crispy squares with the tang
of vanilla-bean extract!