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EAT, DRINK...

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Author Bio

Ambika Kirkland was born in rural Pennsylvania, where he lived in the same deep, dark, goblin-infested forest for eighteen years. He also gets chased about frequently by scary men in black robes. He kindly asks: "If you see any of them, don't tell them where I am, but let them know that I have finally decided to go over to the dark side..."

EAT, DRINK...

The dining hall was a mad rush of color and motion as I made my way to an unoccupied table and took my seat. Voices were pressing at my ears from all about, clattering sounds of forks and plates, the noises of chairs being moved across the floor. It was the pleasant cacophony of hundreds of students descending as a mob upon the offered fare -- a clamor that I had grown used to very rapidly over the past week.

I was trying to be inconspicuous, but the notebook drew a few stares from around corners or over the tops of cups. No one evaded me though. They were too preoccupied. Sliding my tray with its dismembered garden of green plant parts over to one side, I cast about in search of a subject. No one seemed particularly promising -- and I didn't feel like writing at the moment anyway.

Damn assignments, I thought irascibly. People, trays, cooks, moving. Get out of my way with your little aprons. Move your asses. I don't want to watch you eat, I do not want to Sam I Am. What time is it? Sodas are bad for you, fool. I'm hungry.

I contemplated my salad, but it offered no advice. Predictable, that. Inanimate objects are always mute, except when you wish that they would shut up and stop bringing your insanity up as a topic of discussion. I spurned the greens, the utensils as well, pushed them farther away and turned my notebook to a blank page.

Well there's someone, I write lazily. They are eating. They are taking a bite. How happy. In the mouth, out of the mouth, chew chew chew, one bite two bite red bite blue bite. What the hell is it with Dr. Seuss today? Can I eat? Am I a stranger to myself? Oooh, philosophy!

Then the girl who sat across the room from me caught my attention. It was not so much the direct method by which she transported the food from plate to mouth that struck me (I mean, really *struck* me), nor was it the particular choice of meal -- though the array of pseudo-edible processed substances was quite daunting. It was her expression -- the raptness of it, the happy solemnity with which she devoured like a sleepwalker. Eating might well have been an act of worship for her. Her round face was transfixed, as if each bite were an epiphany and each sip of soda a baptism. The ice-filled glass was resurrected twice, three times. I watched this rapture with deep interest. This acolyte had awakened in me a sense of intrigue. Why pray vainly at some distanced divinity for sustenance when one can give thanks to the food itself?

Here here. More directness is called for these days. Now sit back down so that I can make a spectacle of your bizarre religious practices.

But she did not so quickly return to her seat. Rather, she chose to make a pilgrimage. I saw her migrate the unwieldy bulk of her overfed form to the ice cream, and for a second my view was obscured as she bowed her head in prayer

to the pantheon of flavors. "Tonight's Forecast," the sign beside the machine read. "Cold and creamy." A prophecy?

The girl turned and navigated the sea of tables and students back to her seat. I wondered briefly whom she worshipped -- the food, or the Creators, those imposing figures who stood behind the Plexiglas alters and delivered nourishment as the supplicants lifted their trays in prayer. They had benevolent smiles and a ubiquitous presence, but one would expect a bit more terrorism from heathen gods, a bit more commanding about besides the ominous plaques that prohibited sternly the removal of certain religious idols from the place of worship: THE ONLY FOOD THAT YOU MAY TAKE FROM THE DINING HALL IS ONE ICE CREAM OR ONE PIECE OF FRUIT.

I looked back at my salad musingly. Was I too a member of this cult and did I simply not realize it? I obeyed the mandates. I removed no prohibited food. I left no trays upon the tables to call down evil spirits when I departed. I placed the silverware within the designated vessels. I came each day at the times of worship and gave proof of my identity to the door guards, then went daily to bow my head over a laden plate and give homage with my satisfaction. Did this make the blue-clad Creators my masters, or had they themselves been Created to serve me? Perhaps I am not meant to know. Who can fathom the vast mystery of the universe? Eat, drink and be happy!

LAUREN BARRETT

A Late Night Tribute

I remember the drive to your house.
There were only four lights and six roads of separation,
 but every midnight ride home
 showed me that was too far.
There were afternoons that I spent
 in lust with you-
 the bedroom on the left,
 the door always closed,
 the shades always pulled so the neighbors couldn't see us.
I remember the end,
 and how few tears I cried,
 and how sorry I am for that now.