

**letting my late night snack eat me back** by naomi rottman

I found enoki mushrooms at H-mart,  
submerged them in flour, egg wash, and panko,  
fried them on the stove top,  
and dunked them in chipotle mayo.  
a crispy light snack of spores.

in washington,  
my home state of forests,  
mushroom advocates did an experiment  
with samplings of the planet,  
each drenched in diesel and waste,  
one pile control, one infused with enzymes,  
one with bacteria, and one inoculated with mushrooms,  
covered and left to sit like loaves to rise.

six weeks later every pile remained thick with grease,  
except the mushroom mix. it was thriving.  
the mycelium devoured the oil spill.  
cracked the carbon hydrogen bonds like eggs,  
baked them into fungal sugars,  
sweet carbohydrates,  
pounds of oyster mushrooms  
absorbed every nutrient and sporulated,  
attracting hungry insects and critters,  
chatting birds who brought seeds.  
the pile sprouted alive with leafy greens  
and that's how I'd like to be.

I would like a mushroom suit  
to take care of my body when I die,  
because crematories fold carbon into the air  
and formaldehyde leaches through soil,  
and spoils the cemetery earth,  
and I don't want to leave the planet's picnic  
with more dishes for it to clean.

so let the mushrooms find me in the ground,  
dissolve my worst parts into an oasis, grass, and moss,  
taste my toxins next to tree stumps,  
and dunk into me— oysters, chanterelles, and enoki!  
a crispy light snack of bones

**Alan From the Dim Sum Place** by naomi rottman

I spent the winter complaining  
about my job to my girlfriend over the phone.  
three whole weeks in a dim sum place with green walls,  
where i spent 40 hours a week carrying steaming bowls of pho,  
heavy with noodles and vegetables, and beef  
that cooked the second it touched the popping broth.

I told her about the white customers  
who asked me if I spoke english,  
about filling thousands of flimsy to-go cups with peanut sauce,  
clearing tables covered in soggy dumpling papers,  
and about alan, who had a major crush on me.

alan was a few years older,  
a line cook and a server.  
to him, I was a market fresh fish,  
intriguing for going to college on the east coast  
and having wispy bangs and a gentle voice,  
his words not mine.  
I immediately told him I was a lesbian  
which made me even more interesting,  
definitely not my words.

alan was hopeless, he brought me stuffed animals  
and added benjamins to my cash envelopes  
something that seemed normal in that brief environment,  
even though no lesbian in new york had ever  
given me hundred dollar bills for being pretty.

he started coming in when he wasn't needed  
to bring me dairy-free milk tea from his boba shop  
and cook me mongolian beef when service was slow,  
all in exchange for briefly touching his back when I yelled BEHIND,  
telling him what kind of plays I did in new york,  
and asking him, please  
could you put my table's egg rolls in the fryer,  
I forgot.

I had forgotten,  
in my liberal arts, historically women's college,  
that men like him existed,  
guys who never leave their hometown,  
who put major money into their cars and

pass the hours of their shifts making my job easier,  
while I passed mine enviously staring at the families eating together,  
and imagining my girlfriend  
spooning noodles up into our future baby's mouth,  
whose name was leaf, or something.

alan gave me rides home in his precious car after I smashed mine,  
and asked politely whether I was the girl or the guy in my relationship.  
I didn't feel like educating him on the nuances  
of butch/femme presentation or getting into queer relationship discourse,  
so I showed him a picture of my girlfriend  
and had him take a wild guess.

she asked me about alan on the phone,  
made fun of him for not seeing that I had no interest,  
for maybe being lonely,  
and I didn't tell her that this guy in yakima, washington  
was taking care of me more than anyone did at our school,  
or that he was my friend.

but I did say that I'd gushed to alan about her  
sky blue eyes, the thanksgiving we spent alone in massachusetts,  
how she'd asked me out by holding a sign beneath my window.  
I didn't tell her that I loved her, not over the phone,  
we were too new and I was scared to say it first,  
but i had told alan, while refilling napkins.

during my last shift,  
the one before my flight back to her,  
my girlfriend dumped me over text,  
like I was a half eaten bowl of mushy rice noodles.  
I cried behind the register  
in the bathroom  
in the kitchen  
into thai basil and lime.

I wrote a lot of poems about my girlfriend,  
about our breakup, about my healing,  
but never anything about alan,  
my one friend in that moment.  
chances are, he loved me more than she did,  
so here it is,  
this story of absolutely rotten luck  
and winter, in the dim sum spot.

## **Half a Korean Kid** by naomi rottman

There were the white mothers of my classmates and there was my mother,  
Who was not white and did not seem to like me  
In the way that the white mothers liked their children.  
She'd repeat, *I do not like you but I love you.*  
And when my friends' moms were nice to me in the pickup line,  
I begged for hugs and for like.

So, jealous of my friends who grew up honey blonde and mousy brunette,  
With mothers that taught them how to braid and shave,  
Who called them pretty girls when mine would not,  
A barrier of confidence, of being the same, of having been taught.

Japanese, Chinese, Koreanese,  
fingers pointed at my lunch, *I'm sorry but that just looks disgusting*  
white grandpa eating cheerios, *You're barely a person of color*  
winged eyeliner blonde smirked, *You're pretty for an Asian girl*  
my white cousin at Christmas, *I love my Chinese cousin*  
white aunt and uncle in response, *Guess we should've taught them about Korea*

Try saying asian like it's not a dirty word or a dinner option,  
Like coronavirus blame and stabbings in Yonkers  
Like model minority and affirmative action,  
Like white people afraid Asian kids will take over the colleges  
Like I applied as white so I would get in  
Like I'll never know if I'm cast for diversity or for who I am  
Like are they even separate things  
Asian like I think I need an advocate  
Asian like dealing with blame while using an inside voice.  
And I think I'm sick of being strong.

I blamed my dad for not making me with a white woman,  
my mom for not raising me in any of the cities she lived in,  
for picking a small white town and a small white dog.  
I blamed myself for dating too many people who liked anime,  
for not making enough Asian friends, mixed friends,  
for studying theater, having to compete with white girls for white roles,  
for thinking they'd be happy for me when i won,

for worshiping my white dad, for looking for a white spouse,  
for blaming my two little brothers  
for growing into men.

But most often, I blame the white girl

Who doesn't think to hold the door behind her  
Who doesn't say thank you to me  
When I'm her barista or her server,  
Who talks without pausing because she gets to be quirky and ramble,  
Who forgets to make an effort to pretend to listen,  
Who gets to sit and look pretty,  
(or mediocre looking,  
in which case she can just sit and do nothing  
and oh god,  
wouldn't that be so nice)  
Who can tuck entitlement innocently behind her ears,

Not having to be half of anything,  
Just to fall short of both.