

Brittany Baldwin

I Know Better And Yet

Lamb With Honey And Almonds

Chocolate Crepes Stuffed With Valbrona Chocolate Mousse And Hazelnuts

I dried the lamb, browned it in your old antique flea market le cruset. Diced yellow onion, garlic, combined it with cumin, cardmom, clove, honey, water and whole almonds. I bought it as a treat for us on our last night. It simmered all afternoon while you wrote inside and me, on the back porch, both avoiding what this had become. For the crepes I mixed the cocoa powder, flour, salt, milk and eggs. Melted chocolate with hot milk, whisked in a yolk, folded in whites whipped by hand so that the building could hear. And you would stop for a moment and stare into the coffee table, then watch me through the door in my dress.

When I went in the bathroom I would smell your work shirts on the back of the door. The collar, the soft pocket between your neck and arm, the place I would've pressed my head if I would've let you closer. But I said too much in such a way that would stop you from reaching for me. While I waited out my escape I allowed myself this small deceit.

After you dropped me at the airport, when you returned to your bed I'd borrowed for the few days we spent talking all night, did you notice me in any of it? The way I'd sat at night, my head swimming, watching the light from the street come through the shade.

It wasn't what you think. I was afraid that if you reached for me I wouldn't stop it and I knew I was nothing to you. You reminded me on purpose and then sometimes without even meaning to. It was in everything.

After I left you may have realized the distance I kept. You may on some level have sensed how close I was to failing myself. I sat there at night in your borrowed bed watching the light outside imagining the bricks and mortar that I laid over these feelings and welcomed the numbness that would get me to sleep and get me up the next day to endure more of the circling between us.

The dance back and forth. You reaching over and lifting a single strand of hair strung over my arm. How you pulled it probably watching my face. I did not look up but changed the subject and distracted us both so that you wouldn't notice how my breath caught.

This is what you wait for. You have so much fun figuring out what it takes to make each woman's toes curl. How different it all is for each and yet all the same.

It's that you do this to as many women as you can sometimes. You describe to me over drinks the technique of dating four women at the same time without implied monogamy. Pull me in all day then say this.

I sipped my drink and let out the air I'd been holding. Its different for me is all I can say, but I don't. I just let the air out and try to forgive myself for the things I notice while I walk next to you.

How so much is knives and pride, but this way in I am so broken and so ready for you to fail me that I help you.

There was a woman just before me, you told me there would be a storm of women to follow. The light from the lamp post outside above your desk, the lean of your shoulder against mine on the train and the soft pass of your hand on the small of my back while I cooked and you reached to grab a dish and offer me more wine.

I was so solved for these short instances. To you I was just a guest in the menagerie. It's never supposed to matter as much as it does. I know it's this way for everyone, it's different for me.

I boarded the plane, I sat in my car in the rain and drove to work then later to my quiet home in the country next to the creek.

You wrote me about the dinner you made after I left, that I should've been there. One more twist of this to tap in before the next woman arrived.

I bend away from it and never respond. I know this doesn't mean anything beyond chess. I move my Queen to the corner. Surround her first in awkwardness then a thousand miles and silence.

The whiskers on your chin I tried not to linger on have been shed, regrown and rubbed into another woman's thigh by now. As I walk to the creek to drink tea with the dog abandoned strands of hair drape my arms. It is this way for everyone and so must be for me.

How Chef's Mourn

Forager's Salad

Veal Chops With Cherries, Frisee, Potato Soufflé

Raspberries With Lemon Verbena Granita And Candied Pistachios

I listen, sit in the window and stare at the cows two yards over remembering you last winter in your way too stylish and expensive boots, staring at me while I showed you my property. Standing back, looking at me like I was crazy to be here, you said “you know I don't know how to chop firewood” and later by the chickens “you know I don't know anything about chickens.” I didn't really know what you were saying then or later, late at night when we would talk and you would ask me why I didn't live in the city, why out there, called it my hermit-artists life.

And now that you're back with the woman you left to be with me, the overlap I would shake my head at as you tried to get me to come out with you. And then the morning you came into the kitchen to stand too close to me and tell me it was over with her, she wanted kids, you weren't sure about having more. Only then I yielded to a dinner out I didn't expect to like so much.

And now at work I still cook for you, drop my eyes and do my best to not meet yours. I send you these plates of a communication I cannot admit to easily. The veal chop, from the center of the back, part of the cage that holds the heart. Seared still on the bone, removed from the hot pan to rest to medium rare. I add the cherries and shallots, brown them in the fat left from the veal, add pinot noir and stock. Boil it down by half and whisk in cold butter to emulsify.

Boil the potatoes, mash and cool, enrich with butter, milk, egg yolks and fluff with whipped whites, topped with cheese, baked golden brown. When you told me you didn't know how to chop wood or anything about chickens I told you I didn't know anything about computers, software or mergers and acquisitions.

Grew up quiet girl from a suspected hard life sitting with the fucked kids from the same all through school but always had a far away crush on the smart, preppy, shy, understated boys who always rejected me if they even noticed me next to them in class. Now, a house servant, a private chef, I serve those preppy boys and their brilliant wives, and I mop up after those wives leave. I hold their crumbled men into my cheap clothes and wait for them to eventually judge the story I was born into, and then the look their friends give me, a table of them at a dinner party we are guests at as he exclaims that I have 15 chickens and shakes his head and sighs into his hands.

It is over within days of that. His tears again dry in the blouse of his law student lover and my friends all wonder how I could've been so dumb. My sister calls from her 2 million dollar mansion and does the same thing he just did, “you're both just so different”

Now I listen to his light laugh at lunch over the wall and stack the dishes, sit like sisters with the Mexicanas cleaning the house and serving tea at three. I wash dishes while we share stories and I teach them how to make the food I'm cooking. They tell me how to cross a border, how it takes days, how the migra catch you and you go back to stand in the desert and keep trying until you leak through. He wouldn't know anything about this.

I don't think my sister tells her friends anything about our life growing up, she says she doesn't remember. I wonder if she is judged at dinner parties sometimes, if anything of our rags show through.

I forage the salad greens out of the garden, since it was winter he didn't have time to tell me he didn't know anything about farming. This past year for the first time in my life I broke 50 grand. I have recipes coming out in William-Sonoma. Will he regret what he would've gained from that at the dinner party table? Will my sister tell all her friends? Will they respect me then? Will the status I gain through money and press be enough to cross the line where these men are no longer slumming it to be with me?

I could buy the blouses law students wear, but I'd rather make my friends dinner, I'd rather pay down my debt, build a growing table for incubating plants for the garden. I'd rather go walk around Paris in rags than be a princess with a past I can't own. Yet, I hope this salad I picked at dawn with the marine layer of mist in the yard, and the flowers that grow there. I hope the cherry sauce against the bones that sit behind the heart get my sorrow and confusion across to someone.

Tamers

Chicken And Vegetables In Gravy with Cheddar Biscuits

I used to walk the end of everyday through the door exhausted to that same grudge in you staring at the TV with clenched teeth or sighing from the far end of the couch. I would set down my billing, check the mail and begin dinner. Days would go by without a word between us. I used to try but then it became almost an experiment to see how long it would take you to just say the simplest things, hello, goodbye, goodnight, I love you, 3 days.

The last night I cooked for you I burned dinner from the office sitting alone at my desk avoiding the precipice of what would I would say later. I'd walked in from work keeping my eyes low after briefly meeting yours. I washed up, pulled out leftover chicken, picked the bones for meat and glaze. Chopped up old vegetables from the crisper, stewed them in butter and chicken stock. Grated butter and cheese into flour, baking powder and salt. Mixed in leftover expired yogurt from the back of the fridge and milk. Concentrating just enough with a gentle feel for the bottom of the bowl and the pull up through the flour and dry, over and over.

I left the chicken and vegetables to stew while the biscuits baked. The smell had just hit me in the office over paperwork when you called from the other room "you making something here?" Fireman in a chef's kitchen pulling the smoking cast iron from the stove. I'd burned things rarely enough for us to know to keep our eyes down. Like we'd done together for years.

There was a way we were a team, running a garden or the animals or a home. But the quiet between us, even with a farm full of flowers, eggs and vegetables, with fruit in the trees and birds mating midflight above the house and the creek, for years I would beg for a word, a match of my eyes.

Then late one night you walked past a place in me that you couldn't walk back from with a "tough, this is who I am." After an hour of tears and pleading, things I tried to tell you about in the middle of the night every few months from the other side of the bed. You would sit through it stone faced.

And maybe I shouldn't've always come around after those nights, woke up the next day like I'd been heard and we would do better. I know that made you not believe any of those tears and only reassured you I would tolerate this forever. Watching you walk twenty steps ahead during sunset on a beach full of couples holding each other.

Alone is alone, might as well make it what it is love.

Even though we always looked good on paper. Always wanted a home in the country close enough to the city to find work or dress up and play in. Who'd think a fireman and a chef could burn out. But that's what they do don't they, firemen. Women are crazy about them.

But I still see you here, left living in our dream and everything I thought would make you happy some day if I could get us there. Everything I worked my life away for years to gain. I just knew when you weren't trying anymore.

You said you would find someone who accepted you for who you were, then, that you wanted your money. You pointed into the side of the car door, engine running, truck full of the last of your things. I could barely talk, then or when we signed the paperwork for the house in the small town credit union where I caused a scene.

They shoed us into the back to stop the stares. The notary couldn't get things together and we sat in silence with eyes down through my whimpers and the general confusion until 'sign here.'

Then I followed you out the door where you turned and grabbed me for that last hold of what we'd done, I couldn't let go. You just shook your head and walked to your truck.

I'm sure I get the blame for ending it. For giving up, for not being happy. Yet there was the talk we had that first night over the phone from your hotel room in the city. You said you didn't know what happened. Why you'd shut off so completely that you couldn't even laugh anymore. That all of our dreams had come true and you were still sitting on the couch glaring with clenched teeth at everything.

I know when I see you driving around, whatever you may have told other people, whatever they may think of me now, part of you remembers all the nights I tried to get through to you.

I try to remember who we were as friends for eight years before we tried to build together. I try to remember the way we used to laugh over the phone or across a desert night with friends. I know there will be a day where we'll finally run into each other in this small town, I hope we're ready.