

ARUSHA

GALLERY

Feasts, Simultaneously

In the parlour, the guests meet for games and fables. It is Mutton's Eve, and the evening is edible. The boys are hesitant to share their writings; the girls are already absorbed in their sports. They bide their time pouring tea for whomever will have some, using their books to bat away bees coming in from the open windows. The bees harden with every swat – lemon and liquorice bonbons inside clear wrappers. The men untwist them by their wings and suck rapturously. One young man eats his pages and kneels to assist a woman grown despondent with putting on her roller-skates; he finds she has eaten all the wheels and is sequined with sugary crumbs. They play tennis over the table with ham hocks and a brainy cabbage.

Lightly sweating on large decorative plates are giant slices of toast. Thick and singed, a burning smell hovers over them; a weather system, a heat dome. A quartet of stewards carries them in while dancing a jig. Each piece has been spread with thick knifefuls of brackish butter, goat's curd humming with a dungy tang, sheep's cheese sharp as piss, the soft, rusted iron middle of a black pudding, to form images of the present scene.

The girls must share a cup of cold fruit-blossom tea. They pass the cup around the table on its saucer while singing, each pressing their syrupy lipsticked mouth to the cup's starched white collar, printing it an embroidered choker of roses. A young steward is so aroused by the thought of the bemouthed cup, he spills a basin of yolks down the scullery stairs. He rushes back with a tray of heritage carrot jellies layered in crystal goblets – blondish, blueish. The guests churn them up with their fingers, transforming them into distorted summertime landscapes as seen from a smeary carriage window.

The tablecloth has a fried quail egg motif, crispy and congealed into the fabric. Some young thing wants a finger-thin sandwich, underestimates the quantity and proximity of candles. There are no flames; the wick weaves a flat, woven, golden teardrop that puffs up hotly and floats upwards like a warm bubble; they taste like paprika, crackle-melt on the tongue. The young thing leans over the candle's production of smoky snacks and gets a hairful; a dozen of them catch in her curls, deflate, rise in temperature, clench like scalding chewed gum for a moment then cool to weighty gilding. They jangle as she deals cards.

In the grotto on the far edge of the grounds, the icons meet for canapés and life-drawing. They portray one another, sketch likenesses and depict ailments using the very snacks they're picking at: dry fibrous crackers – beneficial for their bowels – and pewter-grey, mysterious pâté; lacy seaweed and iridescent caviar. Snails trace over the lines in silver while the icons peer out at the house; an oven emitting a tasty glow.

On the lawn the goblins roll about in gastrognomic ecstasy. They pile up and wallow in mashed earth buttery with moonlight and shot through with wild garlic and leafy greens. The younglings grow bored and sneak into the back of the house, play dress up with the ladies' wigs in the salon, tire themselves out, fall asleep on the chaise longues and the floor; the wigs snooze around them. At dusk the whole room becomes dessert; chocolate parquet, mint custard goblins, whipped cream rosette wigs, every element slightly split, daring to fulfil a curdling.

Deep into the night there is biting, gnawing. Slurping, guzzling. The licking of fingers and lips, the lapping of palms and eyelashes. Picking teeth with sprigs of rosemary, rouging with elderflowers. The girls tug the ribbons from their hair and chew on them with the boys. Blackberry juice runs down their chins. The fire in the hearthspins swede-flavoured floss that floats out the windows. The goblins try and catch it from their comatose repose; the icons drift on the twilight breeze to nibble at the airy, earthy clumps. They go all the way to the spearmint stars, which they scrape at with their teeth until they feel stings in their temples, before sinking back down to taste the sour tears of morning.

The trio of feasting parties meet on the patio to consume the dawn; a warmed-through peach cobbler with pouring cream on a cornflower dish, both in and out of reach of their raised spoons. They devour it, and one another, for breakfast.

A bird dings like a timer. A new day; as restoring and mellow as a tonic.

- Jen Calleja, 2023

Jen Calleja is a writer and translator based in Hastings, UK. Her first novel *Vehicle* was published this year by Prototype, and her first full-length work of creative non-fiction *Goblinhood: goblin as a mode* is forthcoming from Rough Trade Books in 2024.