

BOSS OF NO ONE

A creative response to Sara Kachelman's *BOSSA NOVA*,
featuring lyrics to Patti Smith's "Piss Factory"

My mom and dad took my sister and I out to dinner when we got good grades. Most often to a pizza chain where kids earned a sticker for each book read. I wore mine proudly on a large round pin until I scored four and had to turn it in for a personal pan pizza that tasted like cardboard and canned acid.

The other pizza chain was better. They gave us raw dough to play with while we waited. I rolled dirty balls on my plate and stacked them into doughmen. I had to be quick and stick them in my pockets or the restaurant people would take them away when the pizza came.

Don't fill up on bread, Dad would say. Mom, Sister, and I would take another hot roll from the basket. Dad would scowl, look away, sip his liquid loaf. Never more than two, never less.

Can we have more bread? Mom would ask the waitress. *You gotta find the rhythm within.*

Bread was our religion. Our bond. When the pizza came I pulled cheese off a slice and ate the naked triangle. Passed the crust to Mom, who hovered over her plate of nibbled ends like a vulture over bones.

Are you going to eat your crust? Can I have your crust? she'd ask my sister and me, as if we hadn't done this before.

The pleasure of bread was its texture. Cracking open a hard roll and discovering its soft center. The warm caress before it melted in the mouth. After that it turned lethal. Burned my lips and fingers, froze my joints. Tickled my throat and triggered that awful alarm.

Stop! my body coughed as the bread expanded inside me, claimed my body as its host. *I was moral school girl hard-working asshole.* Who would've known I was allergic to wheat? It was the early nineties. Gluten was god.

The next morning at church I'd follow my family in a loop around the pews, wait with hands folded for communion. What disappointment when I tasted that wafer for the first time. Tasteless, flaky, dry. It stuck to my teeth, turned my mouth sour, lingered until we got bagels on the way home. *Every afternoon like the last one. Every afternoon like a rerun.*

Mom smeared a thin film of peanut butter on hers. Sister spread hers thick with cream cheese. I dotted mine with peanut butter and grape jelly. *I refuse to lose, I refuse to fall down.* Dad used all three.

Was Dad right? I used to wonder. But there was no other option. Bread only led to more bread. Long skinny strands coiled on a fork. Bowls of it for breakfast, hard and dry. Slabs in the toaster,

crackers on a plate. Bread offered no nourishment, only the space it occupied. A swelling balloon in my belly. Bread never filled me up.

Dad married a minister and moved to Denver. I moved to Berkeley, dumpster-dove outside bakeries. Stocked my freezer with day-old baguettes until my cough got so bad I didn't speak for three months and had to have my head scanned for tumors.

The doctor said he couldn't find what was wrong with me. *I got something to hide here called desire. I got something to hide here called desire.*

My sister started getting the runs. She switched to shelf-stable gluten-free rolls that come in plastic packets. They look like the fake food in glass restaurant cases that dupe flies into dying. Now Mom's the only holdout. She claims she can eat it all by herself but I hear it tickle the back of her throat. *I will never return, never return, no, never return.*