

During Chemo, My Father Ate Canned Mandarins

By Amy Ratto Parks

During chemo, my father ate canned mandarins. At least,
I think he did. Someone said it once and I believed them.
I was too young to know anything more
than what I was told about him.

At home, I ate too quickly.
My stepfather joked *slow down, Hoover* at dinner
and it took me weeks to understand that the joke
was about a Hoover vacuum. My mother said, *seriously,*
no one will take your food.

We ate standing up at school.
We pressed Doritos into our bagels and cream cheese
and pinched off pieces of the plasticky bread. We wiped
orange cheese dust from our cheeks and fingers,
drank water from the fountains on the way to class.

In the evenings, my stepmother took my sisters and me
to the hospital. I talked too fast and chewed
my nails and smiled hard.

Afterward, we went to Pizza Hut.
We pressed white napkins onto the pizza grease and felt
the warm red-orange oil under our fingers.
Whenever I thought of my father that year, I imagined

him eating mandarins. I pictured morning, with a bit of sun
across his bed, a quiet background beeping, a silent movement
of liquid through IV tube. In front of him, the slices float
in their syrupy water. He catches one on the tines of his fork
and holds it there, above the others, letting the sugar drip off.

Before he brings it to his lips, his mouth waters.
I do not to imagine bone pain in his arm or fingers or jaw.
I do not imagine the fork shaking or that he might be left tired
from taking this one bite. I imagine only the anticipation

of a small pleasure. The bright fruit hovers in the air,
its pulpy cells smooth with juice. I imagine only one slice
at a time, held for a moment like a communion wafer—

its coolness, its small weight—this human act of eating,
of taking in the outside world, of giving the body
something to go on. (We all needed something to go on).
For a moment, even as he was leaving us, I hoped
he could feel its forgiving break between his teeth.

Amy Ratto Parks is the author of three books of poetry and a verse novel, *Radial Bloom*, which Kirkus listed as a Best Book of 2019. In their starred review, Kirkus said the book was “contemplative and original” and “brilliant, at once dense and ethereal.” She teaches writing at the Writing and Public Speaking Center at the University of Montana and is the Executive Director of the Institute of Health and Humanities.

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