

DON JUAN AS GOURMAND

John pored over the art book filled with plates of old masters. He coveted each serving illuminated by incandescent bulb or morning sun, sometimes by flashlight when he woke up in the night hungry. A city friend lent him the volume, then died, so John decided the ripe nudes, elegant elk and boar, the riverine forests and cornucopias were his.

He grew fond of the rustivating gentlemen wearing medals and ruby rings. Vermeer and Breughel and Bosch painted for him even if dirt still limned his latter day Flemish face and hardscrabble palms after he washed. His big overalls and brogans plodded between ordinary Monday meanness and Saturday amusement, no more suspect of excess than his neighbors.

The deal was made quickly, grinningly, not devilish. His secret garden of delights no longer featured flesh of women, pink clover-tipped and scented, fresh from Rubens or Titian. Now his most favored palette was blended from meats and fruits sweating gem-colored juices, and urns overflowing berries purpling and bursting cerise, all multiplied in an opulent allegory of reds. Pome-cheeked cherubs basted roseate ribs flavored with grated tropics, aromatic roots, seeds. Venison roasted in lemon and honey surrounded by plump capons turning to earth-tone treasures over lambent coals, dripping amber, sometimes faintly whistling. Tablescapes of lamb and pork in Tintoretto sauces posed for the eager tear of tooth and jeweled hand.

During each protracted feast, he saw his fingers grow heavy with sapphires, opals, topazes, but never hesitant to plunge into saffron rice or almond and morel-filled breast cavities and sunset-hued melons. His tongue reveled in the sweet burn of peppers, hot rum, steamed crabs. His buttered icons melted in his mouth.

Unnoticed was the widening midden, worms writhing under bone piles, shell stench, the battling flies breeding on rinds, the miasma of mold and rot. Nor did he notice, for awhile, the creeping digital numbness from tightening gold bands on his fingers, or the gray grease building up under carved prongs and smeared on the facets of his precious stones. Or the book's pages charring and curling near his stove, igniting the walls of his house.