

The Life and Times of the Tomato

Motherhood:

From my perspective, it always seemed that the dog ruled the gardener. I mean he spends half his day playing fetch, which is obviously for her benefit and on top of that, whenever the dog shits the gardener walks over to the steaming pile and PICKS THE SHIT UP. I'm not kidding—this isn't something I'd kid about—the gardener really gathers it up and takes it out of the yard, to the other side of the fence, where he puts it on top of a pile of her other shit and saves it like he's afraid that the dog might be both offended by the smell of her own feces, but always wanting it around in case she needs it later. I've seen him pile up so much shit along the fence that for awhile I thought the gardener was feeble-minded and that the dog was taking advantage of his unhealthy compulsion to collect feces so she wouldn't have to deal with it. But whenever the gardener leaves without picking up every last fragment of shit, the dog trots over and sniffs. She finds that last morsel of waste and takes big, deep breaths through her nose and pushes the air out her mouth, over her teeth, rolling it over her tongue as if she's trying to fully appreciate the extent of its ordure. Then she gobbles it up.

That I've never understood. I'm a shit-eater myself and understand taking time to savor a particularly good bit of shit, but to eat your own shit? I don't even do that and my standards are not high. While it is true that I never expel my wastes, I don't eat it; I compartmentalize and then use them to grow bigger and stronger. I have never shat, I've never eaten my own shit and what shit I do eat comes directly from the gardener and *he* gets hold of some primo shit. It's got a nice mulchy quality to it, replete with a heavy

herbaceous content and a deep, rich flavor with just a hint of methane in the aftertaste. The gardener knows his shit and that used to confuse me back when I thought the dog was in control. But now I know that the gardener's the top bloom on the clematis vine around here nothing he does surprises me.

He's as dark as an Eggplant, skinny as a string bean, and has ropy back muscles as thick and as round as two-year-old leeks. His beard's scragglier than Spanish moss and his teeth gleam whiter than pea gravel that turns up after a good tilling. It's like he pulled himself up from a fallow bed that's laid fallow for a long while and for good reason. Even his stubby toe roots are withered. He's desiccated. He looks underfed—there's no plumpness.

The dog, however, is regal in her voluptuousness. Running among the garden beds, her belly cuts wandering furrows that never see seeding. Her right ear points up at the sky, sucking in the sunlight—I think that's where she keeps her chlorophyll—and her left droops over like a stunted patch of hyssop wilting in the July heat. Her tail's the only thing that's remotely plantlike, a summer squash that she wags with the dangerous intensity of a hailstorm, shedding wispy strands of blonde fur that float lazily on the breeze until they finally catch up in the loam below like dandelion seeds at the end of summer. Her roundness is what made me trust her more than the gardener; one's always more partial to those who resembles one's offspring.

But that's just talk. I haven't birthed yet. I've watched the pear tree on the hill push out pome after pippy pome and a couple of my bedmates have been blessed with so much fruit and so often that they could just toss off their young and never worry about being alone, but the gardener must think I'm special, because he's been pinching off my

reproductive bits ever since he caught the dog eating up my kin's toss-offs. He staked and encaged me. I squirmed out between the bars but the he pushed me back and twined me in, so I went higher, climbing the bars to get closer to the sun. He pinched me regularly, sometimes clipping my branches off and throwing them over the fence to top off the shit pile and at first I shied away, but I soon realized that by postponing my reproductive cycle and removing my weaker parts, the gardener was giving me the time and space I needed to grow and I did grow. I strained, reached my tippy-tips into the air, devouring as much energy as the sunbeams were willing to give me. But on my way up I did not forget where I came from. I clung tighter to the soil, rooting through the lovely particles redolent of death and decay from which I sprang. I mixed the shit the gardener gave me with the rotting remains of my kinfolk's children and ate greedily. A headiness rushed through my veins. I grew thicker and starchier. I began hoping the dog would steal into the garden at night and tear up the others around me. I wanted her to gnash them between her teeth and pile their chewed up remains at my base. I wanted to consume.

Over time I relied less on the support of my cage and eventually I broke free, twining towards the sun. It was then I blossomed deep within and I arranged my leaves artfully, hoping to hide my secret from the nipping fingers of the gardener and the nibblings of deer. I poured all of my energy into forcing that bud open and finally it popped. Sex came and I was pollinated. The juices gathered inside and rushed up the length of my stem and I fruited.

At first my baby was indiscernible from the leafy green fortress I had built up around her. She was a lighter green than I, but shone with a luster that made me look

dusky. She was my first and I pampered her unabashedly. I let some of my lower branches wither so I could give my baby more sugar. I wanted her to plump with health; I wanted a child I'd be proud to show the world as my own. My love made her grow quickly and within days I was struggling to hold up her girth. My vines went wizened and crooked. Like any good child, she sensed when she had become a burden and knew it was time to ripen and strike off on her own. Her demeanor softened and she tried to relieve me of her weight by leaning against the edge of the cage. She blushed more easily now, and the color wouldn't go away. Although I was still worried about the gardener taking my child from me, I couldn't help moving aside some of my leaves so the rest of the garden could gape at my child. We were lucky—the sky had been painted with rain clouds since before my child began growing in earnest and the rain kept the gardener and the dog away. My lovely did most of her growing between raindrops and was startled when the rainstorm finally tuckered out like all rainstorms do. The day after the rain stopped is the day she embraced her redness and it was the day the gardener, hoe over his shoulder, strode down the hill to the garden, the dog at his heels.

She knew our secret first. She ran up, tail wagging, her eyes turgid with excitement. The gardener yelled, demanding the dog heel to him and leave us alone, and though her left ear perked up at the sound of the gardener's voice, a dog's ear and stomach are not directly connected. She jabbed her muzzle deep inside my leaves and tore me open with her teeth. As she snapped up the only child I've ever known, I looked into her eyes and I swear I saw compassion.

Childhood:

For one glorious moment I was free and conscious of my freedom. I was wholly alone, but possessed memories of innumerable growing seasons stretching back to the first of my kind that ever was. For two seconds I knew myself to be manifested as only I could be and then I burst. The dog had pinned me to the ground and had ripped me open with her grating teeth. There was no pain. Don't ever worry about the pain. I am a tomato, meant to be eaten, digested, and shat out so my kind can spread the world over, so even in my first moments of consciousness the collective memory of billions of tomatoes had already prepared me for what was to come. Sure, it would've been nice to sit awhile in a bowl and ripen. Maybe chat up a sweet pepper to find out if they're as sweet as they're told to be, but alas and alack, it was not my fate. My fate was the dog. It was my destiny to be devoured, smashed up and slurped by a mouth that reeked of the dogshit the dog had eaten before taking me from my mother.

The dog swallowed and I embarked on my first and only adventure: exploring, in depth, the length of her alimentary canal. The trip was long enough to be informative but brief enough not to be tedious. I thank god that I was offered up to a carnivore instead of an omnivore—had the gardener eaten me instead of the dog I would still be stuck in his musky nether-regions, bored to death. Instead I was able to slide down the dog's throat and spend a nice, relaxing time in the dog's stomach and then move quickly on. The dog was an interesting place and I made some good friends there. With the first wave of acid I made the acquaintance of some delightful chunks of dog food that had already seen much of the world before the dog had chomped them. Although they were made of many different components, they spoke of their experiences with one voice. They spoke of the golden cornfields they had once been part of, of silos and threshing. They reminisced

over all the pungent impurities their chicken livers had filtered, back before the chickens had met death by chopping block.

After the second wave of acid the dog chow voice began to break down. The bits of liver took the lower registers and began to speak nostalgically of life before dog chow. The corn answered at higher pitches, trying to assuage the liver by explaining that the existence they were now experiencing was just one step among many on the never ending trail of life, that in a few hours they would once more become part of a greater organism, learning new ways to comport themselves so as to strengthen the gestalt of their host. Another wave of acid washed over us and the dog chow fully lost cohesion. The shreds of chicken liver accused the corn of coddling them, trying to shield them from the harsh realities of digestion because the corn thought the liver wasn't good enough. The corn denied it, but it didn't matter; the liver had already gone off into the lower quadrant of the stomach to sulk. The corn sighed and whispered to me that they had always only ever found this fatalist worldview in meat and that they suspected it was because flesh was farther from the sun, one more step from the sun's direct energy.

You'd never hear a vegetable talk like that, the corn said. When you spend your life catching sunbeams and eating excrement in order to grow into a plant whose sole purpose is to eat, reproduce and die gently so your corpse can fertilize those left alive around you, you tend to have a very karmic view on life. You know what I mean? We vegetables need to stick together. I didn't have the heart to tell the corn that I was a fruit, that for us the true purpose of digestion is to seed our next generation as far away from where we ourselves sprouted. But I felt sorry for the corn since the liver bits had abandoned them. I took the corn into my most membranous hug and waited until they

were thoroughly digested. The liver didn't last much longer and soon I had the whole stomach to myself.

The waves of acid came more quickly and I felt myself breaking down. The flesh between my seeds dissolved and they tried to separate, but my skin kept them clumped together. I didn't want to let go because I knew when they went I would go, I wouldn't exist anymore, only they would exist and I'd be finished. I turned this over and over in my mind and couldn't find a way around it. I wasn't ready to go yet, but go I must. I had resigned myself to digestion when the sock came.

What a sock he was! I must admit that he was the only sock I've ever met; the gardener pattered about barefoot, wriggling his toes in the loam, and though I've rifled through all of the memories of the tomatoes who had come before me, none could remember a sock. Before the gardener there were farmers and they always wore boots that covered their socks if they even wore socks, or the farmers sat high atop tractors where tomatoes couldn't see any of the farmers at all, especially not their socks. But it doesn't matter how wonderful other socks might be, because *this sock* was special. A black sock with golden toes, darned so as to gently squeeze the foot without blocking off its airflow, thin threads interwoven with delicate placement, providing the sock with a natural elasticity that kept its form svelte and limber. The sock's demeanor fit its form—classy on both counts.

After introductions, I asked the sock how he came to be eaten by the dog and he laughed, surprised that he was actually in a dog. He said the last thing he remembered was lying curled up, languidly, with his mate, both still sweaty from their exertions, and then all of a sudden he was alone, somewhere in the dark, caught on a series of ridges that

I later surmised must have been the dog's trachea. After I told him that he was, in fact, inside the dog and headed for the colon, I expected him to grow despondent, maybe go off and sulk as the liver had, but the sock surprised me with his enthusiasm over the situation. He grew doughtier, said that, among the gardener's socks, there was a long-running tradition of being eaten, and that to fully pass through the dog, to be recovered by the gardener, washed and then reused carried its own mark of distinction.

You know, the sock said, half the time the gardener forgets to wash his socks unless he finds one of us sticking out of some dogshit.

The sock went on to say that he would be the fifth sock to make the journey through the dog and that the four that came before him all went on happily, three returning to their jobs as socks and the other, one of the older athletic socks that didn't get much use anymore, retired and was trying to make a go of it as a dust cloth.

I admitted to the sock that, while I wasn't frightened of being digested, that I understood that digestion was a part of life for every tomato and I was alright with that, I still dreaded the moment where I would break down completely, my skin disengaging and all my seeds going off on their own. I wasn't ready to separate myself yet because to separate meant to lose myself, and the sock understood. Said that even though he was happy to make his way through the dog, he missed his partner something terrible, said that it was worse than when they were in the dryer and he got caught up in a pair of underwear and saw his mate flopping, stuck somewhere up by the lint trap, said that he couldn't even imagine what it must be like to disassemble one's own self and that he felt so sorry for me. The sock offered to do the only thing he could. He wrapped me up in his folds, squeezing tight, and promised not to let me break down so long as we were still in

the dog. The sock was my first friend and my only friend and he taught me that friendship is sometimes the only thing that can keep it all together. The bottom of the dog's stomach opened and we left for the intestines. It was cozy; the sock kept his promise. We were squeezed and I was comforted.

Pubescence:

There was a release of great pressure, a brief sensation of plummeting, and then stillness. The sock held me tight until sunlight found a way into the sock's most hidden crinkles, and caused it to loosen. The sock and I left each other and my skin tore.

We clung to the remnants of our skin, we rolled and snuggled deep into the shit below, and we made it down to the grass, but not all of us. We were happy. We shouted to the sock that we were no longer worried, that disunity became us, but the sock either could not or no longer wanted to understand.

The sun shone on and the heat pushed the last remnants of our husk from us. We put out scabbling roots for sustenance and support. We baked in the sun and died, but not all of us; we in the shit and in the grass did better. We found purchase and grew. We were a crop of tomatoes, a Black Krim horde that owned the world we sprouted from and would turn it into a garden. In the sunlight, the dogshit cracked and crumbled, throwing some of us farther from others of us, giving all of us more room to grow. We were careful not to leech nutrients from one another and if one of us was too close to another of us, the one that was weaker gave up its energy to the stronger, so as better to propagate our line. The two days after the shitting of the dog were hopeful days. The third day the dog came and regobbled and left only one.

I have always been alone and always will be alone. I am a plant; I am the only plant, attached to none but the soil and the sun. I am warm in the muck that coats me, and moist. I am comfortable, I am strong, I am relaxed. I root around with my rhizomes and while they are me I am not them and if they don't provide, when they refuse to find life in the refuse, I cut them off and let them rot and then I eat them and they become me. The first time my taproot tastes dog it reports that that dog tastes of tenderness. I pushed my taproot deeper and deeper in the earth, creating space for my contentment. My space. Space for me to grow so big that my branches will overcome the world and my fruit will drop everywhere like rainfall. My sprout squirms through the dross above and my veins open. I am a transport of sugars, I move water, I take in the air and I alter it. The cotyledons come and fly me upwards. The rapidity of growth gives me vertigo, but I shrug it off and push higher. Every set of leaves that sprout leaves me weaker and takes my sugars, but gives me strength in return. I grow so quickly that I know that in no time at all I will be larger than the universe and the world will be my tomato.

Then the gardener walked by without the dog and he saw the sock. When he looked closer at the sock, he saw me. The gardener took the sock and shook the sock and put the sock in his pocket and then he got a shovel and dug me up. He dug carefully, but still cut off most of my roots. He carried me down hill, back to the garden of my mother, and lay me in the bed on my side. He scooped out a hole with his hands and placed me in it. He filled in my hole with dirt and sprinkled me with earthworm casings. He watered me and the soil around my roots turned to sludge and I was anchored in place. After the gardener left, I turned to the sun, looking for the strength to pull myself free and hop the

fence so I could look for a new place for my dreams, but my mother stands between me and the sun and since she has her vines out, reaching for me, I had to turn away.