

POETRY

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¡Viva La Tamale Lady!

I.

Now you're a citizen
you must eat tamales, Jane exclaimed
during my first September

in San Francisco, beginning what became better
known as the month spent drinking
amore veitatos, bloody marys, or just gin.

We traversed the constellation of local bars
in search of the patron saint of city drunks,
everyone's surrogate abuelita,

and finally, on the twenty-seventh night,
The Tamale Lady appeared at the Zeitgeist
looking every bit the lush Madonna

wearing a t-shirt that read, *you don't know me
but I love you*, lugging a Coleman cooler loaded
with trash bags full of homemade tamales.

We devoured her morsels of meat tucked
in sweet masa, proclaiming they were as good
as everyone said, because if they weren't,

then the month was a loss. A firestorm
to the liver. Nothing more than a September
of sloppy sex, hangovers, and unfinished art.

II.

Frank O'Hara once said, "To lie flat
on the earth in spring, summer, or winter is sexy,"
and I've always agreed. Which is telling:

I am the laziest lover. Which is telling: Jane
was so attractive because she did the work
so well like fingers stringing a star

and all I had to do was lie
and breathe her anesthesia, dream
of rapture, the tongue of an exotic tiger.

III.

Now after 20 years of service, the tamale lady
has been banned from selling in bars—
a public health violation, a lack of license. Now

after 3 years of service, Jane is tired
of my lying about. Or, she sees other women.
Or perhaps, I too, never had the license

to transact. Jane, Supervisor Campos, and the Mission
Local all say not to worry, the city plans to help
Ms. Ramos open a lawful operation.

Some say a criminal shouldn't receive such assistance.
Some say ¡Viva la tamale lady! While others say *I'm white!*
What about me? And then there are those who say

she is an institution and we must keep our institutions.
Our essence, form, and order. But is this true desire?
The tamales were only good because they came to us,

to our hands and mouths when we needed them most.