

Introduction

Douglas Bauer

WHEN THESE TWENTY BOUNTIFULLY GIFTED WRITERS WERE ASKED to search their gustatory pasts for a meal they'd never forgotten and would surely not forget, I explained that I wasn't necessarily interested in the most magnificently prepared, heavenly tasting food they'd ever eaten. I was looking instead for meals made unforgettable by their *occasion*. Occasions that extended the culinary circumference beyond how things tasted to include the more complex palates of love and loss, of welcome and return, of comedy and error, and on and on. For what makes the subject of food the scrumptious stuff of story is not the perfect balance of the recipe or the genius of the chef; it's the narrative of what's humanly at stake as we sit down to eat; what thoughts and emotions are stirred, revived, put in play, by the table we're called to, by those who call us to it. And yet I wasn't looking either for

various renditions of Proustian epiphany: Bite into a little cake and . . . how many volumes later? As a way of writing about food, that conceit has become a little wearisome and a lot precious in recent years. If anything, the idea was for a kind of Proust in reverse: not taste evoking memory but rather memory evoking taste.

I'm delighted but not surprised to report that I got deliciously more than I asked for. Herein you will find stories featuring food as the central player in a marvelous array of roles.

Food as bait. Food as bestowal. Food as magnet. But as varied as the stories are in tone—deeply humorous to wistful to melancholy to antic—the thing that's common among them is the part food plays as offering, as consumable commerce. Food as a gift.