

## The Myths of Tantalus

By Neil Verma

“It looks a bit like the last supper up here,” joked MC Gwen Macsai, host of Third Coast Audio’s *Re:Sound*, as she greeted an unmistakable crowd of radio enthusiasts in their trademark scarves arranged for indoors. “But no one will be crucified, I swear.”

The icebreaker drew laughs but without expelling the subtle strangeness of the scene. As we took our seats in the theater at Chicago’s Old Town School of Folk Music (where else?) for the October 19<sup>th</sup> program of short documentaries, we saw the stage spanned by a long table arranged with ten seats facing us behind crisp linen, flatware and uncorked wine bottles. It was dinner theater in reverse, as if we were the ones about to be watched, perhaps devoured.

This “ShortDoc Feast” was part of the *Filmless* Festival, an event presented by Chicago’s Third Coast International Audio Festival (TCIAF). The *Filmless* event runs each autumn when the biennial TCIAF conference is on hiatus, “screening” radio works in theaters and awarding coveted audio prizes sponsored by the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation. This year featured bold programming, including presentations by producers such as Jonathan Mitchell from *The Truth*, Lulu Miller of *Radiolab* and Laura Starecheski of NPR’s *State of the Re:Union*, as well as sold-out workshops with prominent names in broadcasting, including Roman Mars from *99% Invisible* and Michael Garofalo from *Storycorps*.

The Feast saluted winners of the ShortDoc Challenge, Third Coast’s yearly break from curation to inspire new audio, as outgoing Artistic Director Julie Shapiro explained. This time, TCIAF had partnered with the James Beard Foundation, a culinary organization, to solicit pieces on the theme of “Appetite” from producers and amateurs alike. To qualify, pieces had to be two to three minutes long, structured in three courses, and contain one of the five tastes – salt, sweet, sour, bitter and umami – in its title. After 240 submissions, TCIAF tasked five chefs with responding to the winning audio morsels with a dish for its producer, what Shapiro called “food inspired by stories inspired by appetite.”

Was all this a tad precious? Perhaps. It surely met the NPR demographic right where they are nowadays, in this halcyon era of food in which trendy chefs outclass hotshot artists, and culinary fashions – Kale! Gastropubs! Cronuts! – put those of mere apparel to shame. But as these supple and expertly-curated audio pieces proved, “appetite” is darker than it seems, designating neither culinary fancy nor its arts, but instead pointing to a gulf that separates wanting from obtaining, one that’s never truly bridged. I was reminded of the perniciousness of that gulf often that evening, as we waited in air-thickening pauses as each producer took the first bite of her dish. After listening to sounds of those who would not appear over the speakers, we watched that which could not pass our lips on stage.

Indeed, it is no coincidence that tales of appetite, from the Last Supper to *True Blood*, are often parables of deprivation and yearning. The mythological King Tantalus, from whom we derive the term “tantalization,” is said to have killed his son and cooked his body to

feed the Gods, and was condemned for this crime to perpetual hunger. Homer describes a stooped Tantalus in the underworld eternally straining at pomegranates, pears and swollen figs that are blown from his clutches at the last moment every time.

As a predicament of withholding, maybe appetite is a little like radio, whose unique power as a medium lies in its propensity to give us much more than we realize, while paradoxically convincing us that we're never quite getting what we want.

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**“Sel: Trois Façons” by Kelly Jones (Guelph, Ontario).** Kelly Jones’ piece kicked off the evening, a French monologue on the dish of french fries, gravy and cheese curds known in Québec as poutine. We heard a French Canadian woman discourse in billowy vernacular about the recipe: “If I cannot stand my plastic fork straight up at a 90 degree angle with the bottom of the bowl, then the gravy is not gravy, it is pepper water ... The curds must squeak when I bite into them, and I must taste hints of cultural supremacy, athletic dominance, and separatism.” The wit of the piece lay in a contrast between the deadpan translator and the histrionic Québécois. Jones also took a jab at foodie culture’s zealotry for authenticity. As she let on to the audience, she did not interview a grizzled nationalist in some cabane à sucre, but wrote and translated the monologue on her own; the French speaker was just an anglophone friend playing a part. There was already a hint about this subterfuge in a cute line toward the end of the monologue – “Ceci n’est pas un poutine.” Perhaps Jones was thinking of her allusion to Magritte’s famous painting when Paula Haney, owner of Hoosier Mama Pie Company, presented her with a dish of improvised poutine. Jones leaned in to give the microphone the squeak of cheese in her mouth, a little tickle of the ears by the teeth.

**“My Umami Gas Mask” by Sam Agee (Boulder, Colorado,).** Sam Agee’s vignette starts with a narrator lamenting the creaturely deprivations of life after an unspecified apocalypse known as “the accident.” Defiantly tossing away the “protein cake” issued by the government, the narrator fries up a gas mask whose odor haunts him with memories of the Golden Sun, his favorite restaurant. Auditory touches like the minimalist underscore, the sound of opening cans, of breathing inside a gas mask, scissoring of rubber – these gave the imagined world a thickness that mimics the narrator’s search for a “meaty” taste. To respond to the piece, Iliana Regan of Elizabeth Restaurant was an inspired choice. Famed for foraging juniper branches, berries and mushrooms from the forests in the Chicago region, Chef Regan has called her approach “New Gatherers Cuisine,” a term with more than a faint survivalist undertone. If Agee’s gas mask motif was a Proustian madeleine for a HAZMAT era, it seemed only fitting to release its magic with fragrant tea. Regan’s sweet elderflower concoction was brought up to center stage; in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, at least one audience will pay good money to sit in an auditorium to watch tea brew.

**“The Last Morning Was a Sweet One” by Alix Blair (Carrboro, NC).** Alix Blair was made for this challenge. Her career began with an internship with the Kitchen Sisters ten years ago, after which she went on to study at Duke’s Center for Documentary Studies

while contributing to several documentary projects about farming, including PRI's *Five Farmers* in 2009. Blair's piece had a simple concept, capturing the farm-to-table narrative of a pig, a story bookended on one side by the snorts of the animal and on the other by the distant laughter of diners. With no narration, the piece minces no sounds: we hear the pig lead away by a farmer to be shot; we hear its body slaughtered and spilled out; we hear its flesh frying. The extraordinarily vivid captured audio is matched by editorial restraint. Blair showed judgment, conveying whetted knives and appetites with masterful balance. A few moments too long on the rooting pigs and it might have come across as naïve or hectoring, a moment more on the slaughter and the piece would have veered into gore. Chef Jason Hammel of Lula Café responded with a pork belly dish – long out of fashion, he admitted – drawing on a memory of an animal he had once seen slaughtered. Telling his story, Hammel seemed not horrified at coming into contact with the reality of our way of nourishment, but humbled, awestruck.

**“Salt on the Lips” by Jenny Asarnow (Seattle, WA).** Asarnow's piece was the bravest of the evening, prompting titillation, shock and empathy in two minutes flat. It starts with a man after a dinner party, maybe a little tipsy, starting out on a fantasy, as if dared to. The audience tittered a little, at first:

The table would be big enough that you could push the tray to the side, and then a woman would get up on the table and you'd drip the oyster, say, across her breasts, just like the oyster brine, and then it would run down her stomach and eventually there'd be enough brine on her that it would sort of be between her legs ... at some point you'd see how it tasted ...

Too spicy? One minute and fifty seconds in to the piece and a mortified hush fell over the Old Town School of Folk Music. There was a pause. Then the narrator revealed that his intense fantasy life arose from the fact that a climbing accident had left him paraplegic. The mood of the listeners transformed again, relieved it was over, almost thankful for a way out of the piece that let them applaud the kink that had embarrassed them. Moved by the piece, celebrity chef Rick Bayless created a dish that could “stop at the moment of longing,” a scallop aguachile with thin slices of truffle frozen in lime juice, which could only be experienced by waiting patiently. It was a “time-release meal,” as Gwen Macsai put it, that sat sublimating on the table before Asarnow for some time.

**“Blackbird Pot Pie: Not the Pie Umami Made” by Mary T. Diorio Schilling (New Jersey).** The last piece of the evening, the winner of a People's Award, returned us from the sonic molecular gastronomy of Blair and Asarnow back to comfort audio. Schilling's well-executed piece began with children singing the schoolyard “Song of Sixpence” about blackbird pie before cutting to 90-year old John Fahrner of Salem, New Jersey, reminiscing about hucksters selling peach baskets of blackbirds during his youth. “Whatever you bought, fifty, sixty, seventy birds, it was all put in that one pie. Before you cooked them you cut the head off, but you left the feet on, so you had something to hold on to when you got your blackbird.” Did I lose my appetite a little when Chef Abraham Conlon entered with a pie with a dozen blackened quail legs poking out of the top like old steeples? Sure, but not for long. Appetite is always with you, somehow, like a shadow. And besides, there were going to be cupcakes in the lobby, I heard.