



YEAST

after Robert Hayden

BY KHALISA RAE

I'M UNSURE WHY AT 7 A.M. MY MOTHER NEEDED ME TO RISE alongside her on cold holiday mornings, first light and I'd whine/growl right as the light bled through the curtain the elongated ahhhhh of "Khalisaaaaaaa" curdling what dream I clung to. Still, she'd extend the air of my name—her kettle whistle a warning bell that I had exactly five minutes and 14 seconds to wipe the sleep from my eyes, and appear—hands washed and floured, apron tied, hard knot ready for bright-early beating. I'd arrive, dough batter already started, sticks of butter waiting for me.

*One stick of butter for the mixture
one stick to fold in during the kneading process. Combine
one stick of butter, one egg, ½ cup of sugar, ½ cup of 2%
Whip the egg into the milk first so it does not cook. Stir in wet ingredients.
In a separate bowl combine ½ cup of sifted all purpose flour—
One package of all-rise yeast,*

I nodded my head as she shadowed my steps, *pour in salt, baking powder, more sugar*, her brown hands over my hands. Saturday mornings were lessons in the pretty patience of a boxer—roll and fold mixture, watch the lump turn to sticky mess—this fermented bread—an inheritance of laying hands, her mother and mother before her begot yeast secrets, hushed for only the counter to hear. *roll, knead and fold. roll, knead, and fold. Cover and rest. Wait. Quiet. Rise.* Uncover. We curled our knuckles, balled them into a fist, now she could take her hands off. Muscle memory knew what came next. I was only there for the pounding—at eight I'd push all my weight into the dough rocking forward, then whale into the heap. This was what a woman was capable of—my tiny fists metabolizing into weapons—I could feel the marble slab shake and rattle under my little fingers. It needed me hit it, to release, and I needed to feel powerful. Here, this is what we were born for—to turn yeast into carbon, cock hands back and watch a million meals spiral from risen bread.

I understand the rise and chemistry of it now.
Today, in my kitchen I'm thinking about fermentation,
the way my body over the years has been reduced to carbon,
how small I feel even now, but I am prepared, standing ready with kneading hands.

Khalisa Rae is an award-winning poet, activist, and journalist based in Durham, NC. She is a senior writer for Jezebel magazine, content creator for BET, and author of the debut collection Ghost in a Black Girl's Throat (Red Hen Press, 2021). Her YA novel in verse, Unlearning Eden, is forthcoming.