



Feasting on Bread and Dry Bones

Why hadn't I offered the hungry man a meal
from my own well-stocked pantry?

by SHAY YOUNGBLOOD
Illustrations by LINDSEY BAILEY

ON MARCH 13, 2020, THE DAY COVID-19 was declared a national emergency, I was in Philadelphia at the launch party for my first published work in a decade, a graphic novel collaboration featuring a Black woman superhero. It was also the day my spouse of more than ten years told me she wanted to divorce. A few weeks later, I would move again for the third time in less than two years.

In the first chapter of the pandemic, I ended up sheltering-in-place alone in my new home in the Old Fourth Ward in Atlanta, where cooking would become part of my daily practice as an artist. I filled my pantry, my freezer, and a hall closet with enough food and supplies to last for months. Two shelves of one kitchen cabinet brimmed with spices from around the world. My kitchen transformed into a creative lab, a room in my memory palace, a place of comfort in unsettling times.

My new home in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood was close enough to walk to four large chain grocery stores. Those walks became my daily exercise. I used the *New York Times* section “What to Cook This Week” as my guide to create dinners for one. While friends and family were taking online classes in yoga, concealed weapons, and Sanskrit, I cooked three meals a day plus snacks, seven days a week.

A lot of things comfort me in hard times—music, art, friends, family, nature. In one day, I streamed the *Nixon in China* opera, took a playwriting master class with Suzan-Lori Parks, had a virtual dance-off with a friend in Texas, and attended a surprise Zoom birthday party for which I dressed up and then raised a glass of champagne in an empty room. Yet food, most of all, is what has eased my anxiety during the most challenging periods of my life.

On the first morning of the lockdown, I headed



out early. I turned onto a usually busy main street. Few cars were on the road, and for more than seven blocks I didn't pass a single person. I arrived at the grocery, put on my required mask, and wiped down my cart. The air in the grocery store was thick with the feeling of panic and fear. The morning news showed empty shelves, which fueled my concern that staples might be unavailable.

It felt dangerous to have left the house without a shopping list. What I did have was an insatiable hunger for things from my childhood—like cherry Jell-O, sardines, peanut butter, collard greens, fried chicken, cornbread, vanilla wafers to make banana pudding, a bacon and jelly sandwich on white bread. I imagined that being stuck inside, I'd have time to experiment with recipes, so I loaded my cart with dozens of spices and condiments. In one month, I spent seven hundred dollars on groceries. I didn't order takeout even once.

When I craved Indian food, I looked up a recipe and went to my pantry to create dishes that made me cry. I baked cookies just for the aroma. I discovered that I could make up a batch of ginger and

cinnamon-spice oatmeal cookies and freeze the dough into a log so I'd have fresh-baked cookies whenever I wanted. I went around the world in my kitchen, reaching for comfort and distraction in quick Japanese pickles, Spanish omelets, BBQ tacos made with jackfruit—and stews, the delicious stews. I experimented with old favorites, plating my meals in gorgeous Instagram-worthy arrangements on fancy dishes and serving myself champagne or mineral water in gold-rimmed crystal glasses. When I craved meat, I made oxtail stew with thyme and a good red wine for gravy that I sopped up with a thick slice of bread.

One afternoon, I looked out of my office window and noticed a young Black man walking along the back fence outside my duplex. His thick Afro looked dusty, slept on, uncombed. He was shirtless, his chest lean and dark brown. With sagging jeans two sizes too big, a dirty white blanket around his shoulders like a superhero cape, he cut across the grassy lot behind my house and approached the large blue dumpster assigned to the apartment building next door. I watched as

the young man circled the dumpster. He reached in and pulled garbage bags out, dropping them at his bare feet. He leaned over the small pile, tore open the bags, and poked through them. I thought he might be looking for bottles or cans to sell. Times are hard, I thought. I turned back to my computer but kept thinking about him. When I looked again, he was sitting on the ground with his back against the dumpster. I watched in horror and fascination as the young man ate food he pulled from a garbage bag in the middle of a pandemic. He chewed and swallowed each bite as if savoring a restaurant meal. My stomach lurched, and my eyes filled with tears as I looked away, paralyzed in my spot by the window. A few moments later, he was gone. I felt a sting of shame. Why hadn't I offered the hungry man a meal from my own well-stocked pantry, itself an embarrassment of riches, a trip through time back to the desires of my youth? Having experienced housing insecurity, I know it is a privilege to be able to turn to my art, to the writing of this essay, to reckon with the heartache I feel for this man. I know that it is not enough.

That night, I had a dream—a nightmare, really—that I was homeless, dressed in dirty clothes, coughing, wiping away sweat from my face as I pushed a shopping cart full of cans and bottles. I was living on the street, afraid that I would soon be desperate enough to eat out of a garbage can.

It was day 223 of the pandemic, according to my journal, when I had another dream. In this one, I walked to the grocery store. It was a beautiful spring day. The sun was shining in a cloudless sky, birds were singing, and a gentle breeze caused the leaves to sway as if they were dancing. The streets were nearly empty. On my short walk, I passed only four or five people on the sidewalk. The few cars on the street sped by as if being chased by the virus. When I reached the store, about a dozen people wearing masks of every color and kind were lined up one body length apart. At the head of the line, a young man wearing a yellow-flowered apron, pale blue mask, and lavender gloves sprayed my hands with sanitizer. A presanitized, shiny red cart

was positioned in front of me. I pushed the cart forward, hoping there would be something left on the shelves to fill it. There were expensive cans of crab meat, cheap black bottles of no-name champagne, and large tubs of fancy nut butters. There were limits on essentials: three dozen eggs and one package of toilet paper per person, if available. The aisles were full of people who looked stunned, like they'd been hit with a beam of light. Their eyes were stretched wide, and they walked slowly as if underwater. Their fingers twitched as if signing signals of distress. I pushed my cart slowly and kept my distance from the other shoppers.

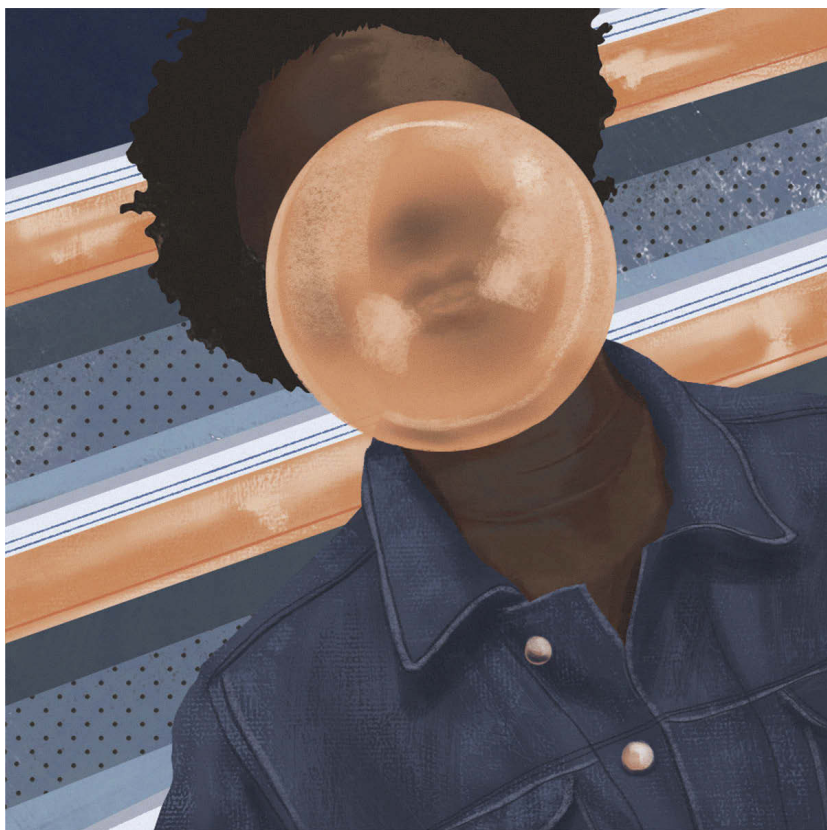
When I turned down the paper products aisle, I saw a teenager standing in front of the empty shelves. She was not wearing a mask despite the rule. Her black cloth mask hung around her neck, its ties trailing down her chest. Her hair was a huge halo of dark curls sprinkled with glitter. The cloud of hair framed a pretty brown face on top of a thick frame in a body-hugging blue-jean jumpsuit. She smacked on a wad of gum in her right cheek. She pressed her lips together and blew a pink, sparkly bubble that trembled as it stretched bigger and bigger and bigger until it grew to the size of her Afro. When it popped, she smiled and sucked the sticky wad back into her mouth. "Nothing lasts forever," she said. When she noticed me standing the requisite six feet away, her eyes landed on me warily. She reached for a roll of toilet paper—there was none, all of it having been ransacked by panicky shoppers—but still she pantomimed the motions of lifting a package off the shelf and dropping the invisible rolls in her basket, already filled with several cans of crab meat, bottles of champagne, and a tub of cashew butter. I watched her stroll down the aisle with a giggle in her walk.

A few weeks later, in the waking world, a single tent popped up on an empty corner lot across from my house. Soon, there were five tents, and then there were a dozen people living on the land. I rarely saw anyone enter or leave the tents during the day, but at night I saw the glow of a computer screen in one tent and watched the

In the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, my kitchen transformed into a creative lab, a room in my memory palace, a place of comfort in unsettling times.

single garbage can in the center of the area fill up and spill over onto the ground.

A year into the pandemic, a young, gaunt white woman in a black hoodie and sturdy boots, pants hanging off her small frame, strolled down the driveway next to my house and approached the big blue dumpster. She disappeared inside and came out a few minutes later with clothes over her arm. Moments later, I heard noise under my deck. The following day, I noticed that plastic bags inside my garbage can had been torn open. Anyone looking in my trash would find only ripped



up drafts of false starts on a new novel, letters I never sent, stale bread, and dry bones. There must be more I could do, I thought, than donate to the local food pantry.

In June 2021, I walked into a grocery store, wearing a mask as usual, and heard an announcement that people who had been vaccinated were free to remove theirs. I felt a sense of elation. As the world slowly opens up, it means that I can look forward to sitting down at a table with friends and family to laugh and feast together. It means traveling again to places that will feed my imagination and bring new recipes and food

memories back to my home kitchen. Yet I can't help but think of all the people for whom there will be no feasts. No new recipes.

In my last vivid dream, I invent a bright yellow pot that is always filled with delicious, healthy comfort food. No matter how many people eat from it, the pot is never empty.

Postscript, January 2023

When I wrote this piece in 2021, like many folks, I thought the scourge would not last forever. That, in time, our lives would return to normal.

This was the hope and dream. In some ways, it does feel as though we're back to our day-to-day, pre-2020 routines. By now, many of us have been vaccinated. People don't seem to be afraid to take trips on planes without wearing masks. New restaurants are opening. Audiences fill movie theaters and sing along at in-person concerts. We socialize outside of the safe circles, or "pods," that many of us created when the world locked down. The unsheltered, hungry folks who haunted my neighborhood have moved on, too. The abandoned houses where they sought refuge have been torn down. The open fields where they set up tents have been fenced off to make way for dozens of townhouses and new commercial developments. Where those souls landed, I'm not certain. I imagine that many are still hungry and seeking sustenance. And the virus that has claimed millions of lives worldwide is likely with us, the sheltered and the unsheltered, forever. What I know for sure is that we will always need to care for each other and nourish ourselves in

good times and bad. I'll keep making meals that feed my soul. Cooking will always be my expression of love for myself and others. 🍴

Adapted from "Feasting on Bread and Dry Bones" from Bigger Than Bravery: Black Resilience and Reclamation in a Time of Pandemic, edited by Valerie Boyd (Lookout Books, 2022). Copyright © 2022 by Shay Youngblood. Reprinted here with the permission of Lookout Books, University of North Carolina Wilmington, lookout.org. Shay Youngblood is an Atlanta-based author of plays, novels, short stories, poetry, and children's books.