

LUNCH PORTRAITS

DEBORA KUAN

Lunch Portraits

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ISBN-13: 978-1-936767-50-2

Cover by Alban Fischer. Interior by Benjamin DuVall. Edited by Joe Pan.

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Published in the United States of America by:

Brooklyn Arts Press

154 N 9th St #1

Brooklyn, NY 11249

www.BrooklynArtsPress.com

info@BrooklynArtsPress.com

Distributed to the trade by Small Press Distribution / SPD

www.spdbooks.org

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kuan, Debora author.

Title: Lunch portraits / by Debora Kuan.

Description: New York : Brooklyn Arts Press, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016024225 | ISBN 9781936767502 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Classification: LCC PS3611.U16 A6 2016 | DDC 811/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016024225>

First Edition

for Matt

Thanks to the editors of the magazines in which some of these poems,
or versions of these poems, initially appeared:

“Portrait of My Spirit Animal” and “Portrait of Bob” in *Atlas Review*
“Mantra” in *The Awl*
“American Mammal” in *The Baffler*
“Teen Ghost” in *Blue Lyra*
“Portrait of Leah” in *Fence*
“How to Draw 500 Heads” in *Gigantic*
“Portrait of a Woman with a Hoagie” and “Teen Mammal” in *Glittermob*
“Portrait of My Stalker” in *HTMLGiant*
“Portrait of a Merwoman” in *The Literary Review*
“Partridge-Head” and “Fertile” in *Pleiades*
“Senior Mammal,” “Gigs,” and “Big Flowers” in *Resistance Journal*

Table of Contents

Automat Prayer	15
----------------	----

1

Portrait of Three Husbands	21
Portrait of a Woman with a Hoagie	23
Portrait of a Merwoman	24
Portrait of a Homewrecker	25
Self-Portrait with Three Cats	27
Paint-by-Number Portrait of an Earthquake	29
Portrait of a Reader	30
Portrait of a Lounge Singer	31
Portrait of a Broom	33
Portrait of My Spirit Animal	34
Portrait of 1976	35
Self-Portrait as a Supine Susan Sontag	36
Portrait of My Stalker	38
Portrait of My Black Hole	40
Portrait of Bob	41
Portrait of Leah	43
Double Portrait of Claes Oldenburg & Unknown American	45

2

Baby Mammal	51
Partridge-Head	53
Sui Generis	54
Teen Mammal	56
American Mammal	57

Hot Dog King	58
Mantra	60
Senior Mammal	61
The Clock	62
Fertile	63
Oranges	65
End Times Hot & Cold Buffet	66

3

Seizure	71
Fantasy Poodle	72
How to Draw 500 Heads	73
Pleasurable Poem	74
Not as Pleasurable a Poem	75
Teen Ghost	76
Optical Illusions	77
Death of the Fantasy Aquarium	78
Big Flowers	79
Reading <i>Art News</i> By the Pool with Strawberries	80
He Said, She Said	81
Gigs	82
Alternate Endings to <i>Rosemary's Baby</i>	83
Middle Teeth Conflict	84
121 Memories of an American Childhood	86
Pas De Deux	95

Notes

“Sometimes the only answer to death is lunch.”

Jim Harrison, *Warlock*

“Had sandwiches.”

Andy Warhol, February 22, 1977, *Diaries*

AUTOMAT PRAYER

Drop a coin in me.
I'll give you a sandwich.

You speak burger.
I speak pie.

Our common tongue
is lunchtime.

Roll on,
little cowboy.

Shuffle off,
tuna fish.

Choose your channel,
chicken basket.

Wave your drumstick
proud and high.

May your jelly side
land fast,

face up.
May bright ketchup

dot your days.
May your woes

slide easy
off your plate.

May you always
return

with an appetite.

PORTRAIT OF THREE HUSBANDS

Husband #1 feels the entire building move from an imaginary avalanche.

He turns counterclockwise because his mother tended to withhold praise.

He once shucked oysters to manage his anger.

He once shined faux pearls to anger his oysters.

Husband #1 is being called the Prince of Punk. He is pretty mediocre at guitar.

His inner child has an old soul who paid a fortune for a bad face-lift.

Husband #2 knows exactly what I want, but he won't give it to me.

He is a grizzly bear in the primal den of our couples therapy.

He is a snowman sock puppet in the wet mouth of a toddler.

I love his ice-cream belly. I love his thunder thighs.

I chew on them and call them Renaissance Fair turkey legs.

The epithet does not please him.

Husband #2 is really into stop motion animation.

He spends hours building a house of cards, so that the animation can play the sequence back, cards building themselves into a house in four seconds flat.

When he is deep in concentration, he sticks out his tongue.

He doesn't realize it, but he is folding his tongue into a tiny little house.

Husband #3 feels the solstices in his tendons.

He prefers not to have seasickness happen to him.

Husband #3 knows all my secrets.

He knows I can't dip my head in water and am afraid to eat a snail.

He knows that I am still in love with Husband #1.

He melts all the marigolds in a still life with a cigarette lighter.

The secret to growth, he admonishes, is not to hold on to the past.

(If not this, I mumble, then to practice the piano a little bit every day.)

Husband #3 disappears into his woodworking.

He grows old with me.

He carries me upstairs while I whistle myself a lullaby.

He knows all the reasons I'm dying.

Look at him, my sweet Husband #3.

He is prostrate beneath the gingham tablecloth, lonely only for me.

PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN WITH A HOAGIE

I want to drown in six pounds of macaroni salad.
The groans of Super Bowl Sunday. The cries of triumph.

I want hoagies
unfurled from cold foil.

They're called hoagies where I come from.

O beautiful possibilities
like second-base in a parked car

in the half-full lot outside a movie cineplex,
the neon glinting off your corneas.

When God closes one door, somewhere
He opens a hoagie

and jams that football
mouth with thinly sliced ham

and honey roast turkey, roast beef,
cheese, pickles, and shredded lettuce.

Paper hoagie covers rock hoagie!
Melted cheddar covers everything.

PORTRAIT OF A MERWOMAN

The clam grew depraved in the dark
toe of a rubber boot,
draped in fashionable seaweed.

I was a mermaid martyr
who lusted after those boots.
Then winter came.

The black pond froze
its black-eyed octopi,
and I formed my own stomach fat

into a gourmet doughnut. I could do
that now. I had a lead foot,
a merman's cough, and a dump truck

full of sea salt. I crashed into a levee
as a bitter old starlet,
my fishtail stuffed in my mouth.

But every time I got close to the reset
key, it floated farther out to sea
on a raft of gasoline.

I had banked on returning
to childhood as a totaled car,
but they only wanted redheads.

PORTRAIT OF A HOMEWRECKER

I sailed onto the desk of my next life
as a plagiarized term paper.

Yes, it was me who bit a heart-shape
into your ham sandwich.

It was me who chain-
sawed your daughter's

child-sized armchair.

I followed your wife down

the medium-slow pool lane.

I befriended her

in the hotel laundromat.

For years all the freight elevators

shuttled sideways and hellish.

I clung to the padded walls,

screaming your name.

Sometimes I would drop

one floor beneath my eyes

then pop right back up

out of service—

queen of the weekend visit,

creature of the extinct
computer,

“help” button of the burning
telephone.

BABY MAMMAL

In my infancy, I
wear a baby life vest
while canoeing.

Because *safety first*.

Because *you must*.

Because baby hands

can lose an oar or two.

I also wear baby goggles
when blowing up

my teddy bear
cookie jar of
gunpowder.

The project goes off
without a hitch
and yet all I feel

is a crust
of melancholy
about the mouth.

Nobody tells me
women babies can do
whatever men babies do.

Nobody tells me
I can carry my mother's name
like a decimal point.

Even my father gives me
a toy nurse's kit
for Christmas.

SUI GENERIS

I warmed in my easy oven,
as if I were my own bun.

Yesterday I was three layers
of cells. Today I am all heart bulge,

arm buds, leg buds, and even
a full set of jaws. The truth

is I spent my early twenties
hovering above the fray

near the ceiling, like a party
balloon moodily

drooping over the hours,
a hypochondriac virgin

ready to burn her twin mattress
at the slightest hint of storm.

But it rained men, even in fog.
Ardent, patient good guys,

a cornucopia of penises.
They lived under my stadium

umbrella without complaint.
They stuck their hands

in my dorm door mail-slot,
though I never received the post

that way. Instead I was always
someone's hospitalized meatloaf,

someone's unformed fetus.
One of them bought me

a television. All of them
fed me while I bled.

I learned to burrow in tenderness.
I didn't learn a thing.

MANTRA

My husband didn't like his mantra.
“Shirim” or “Shring” or “Schwing.”
My own mantra was much longer.
“It is only money.” I chanted
this while driving the minivan.
I whispered it into a mussel.
I shouted it from the fire escape
to the ram-faced gargoyle
across the street. *I think*
you're doing it wrong,
he said. *Your eyes*
should be closed and you
shouldn't be shouting.
I ignored him and continued
my diatribe, shaking my fists
at greedy little ghosts.
You don't control me, money!
No, you don't! Then I went
inside, fried up a \$50 bill
with sauerkraut, and ate it
with a side of buttered toast.
It didn't taste like chicken.
More like manta ray.

TEEN GHOST

In real life,
I chased more
dust than dark.
I sought more
dolor than horror.
Around the clock, the false
hands flew. I
couldn't get any younger.
I could never return
to that original thrill, or
a room of my friends
watching *The Shining*
for the very first time,
a boy unhooking my bra
in stealth. The first time
in the backseat the cattle
were lowing, a drowsy
brigade behind us
in the frosted broken
dark. His face
was sharp and cold
like a knife wrapped
whole in a scarf.
The palms of his hand
were dry. I
went home,
preserving the kiss
on the back of my neck
as if it were a firefly in a jar.
I chased its life like art.

THE AUTHOR

DEBORA KUAN is the author of the poetry collection *XING*. Her writing has appeared in *The Awl*, *The Baffler*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Fence*, *The Iowa Review*, *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *Modern Painters*, and other publications. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and the CUNY Writers' Institute, she has been awarded residencies at Yaddo, Macdowell, and the Santa Fe Art Institute. She is currently Director of English Language Arts assessment design and development at the College Board and lives in Brooklyn with her husband and daughter.

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