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Sugar baby

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Abstract:

This work of creative non-fiction explores notions of ‘taste’ in relation to memoir writing. The essay extends the application of memoir as mere retelling to one of critical refiguring. Core to much scholarly discussion of memoir is how to conceptualise and understand the past (Murdock 2003). This work recasts memoir as an ‘ethics of the self’ (Foucault 1986) that offers a way of remaking our encounters with the past. It does this by applying Julia Kristeva’s (1982) notion of the abject to a sequence of memories around sense experiences of ‘gendered taste’. As memory is fluid and changeable (Murdock 2003), this means that the application of these ideas to specific memories effectively ‘rewrites’ them, or at the very least provides a new context for understanding them. Given this, writing memoir can be seen as the rewriting of memory.

Biographical Note:

Dallas J. Baker is an Adjunct Research Fellow at Griffith University and an academic in Creative Writing in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Southern Cross University. Dallas is also a creative writer with work published in a number of journals and anthologies. His current research interests are memory and memoir, scriptwriting, and Creative Writing pedagogy. For more information go to: www.dallasanguish.com

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Creative writing – taste – memoir – food – abjection

Wholesome/unwholesome: Savannah, Georgia, 2000

I'm reading. I'm always reading. I'm sitting in the public library on Bull Street in Savannah's historic district. A book is laid open on the desk in front of me. One of my hands is turning the pages, the other twirls a pen as I make a pretence of taking notes. I'm finding it hard to pay attention.

My stomach is churning, as if filled with squirming eels. The eels are the result of a poor dinner choice the night before – spaghetti bolognese from an ominously deserted Italian restaurant. It feels like the spaghetti has come alive inside me, has metamorphosed into finless, eyeless things that are now breeding in my gut.

My attention is also distracted by the library itself. The Bull Street library is a beautiful, Greek Revival style building. Its colonnaded entrance and high portico make it look like a temple. It sits next to one of Savannah's many leafy squares, Thomas Park. I am at a desk by a window, overlooking the square, where live oaks overhang a small fountain that bubbles away quietly. The interior of the building is not as impressive as the exterior, having been fitted out as a book repository in that hushed, quasi-corporate style familiar to public buildings the world over. The clientele, however, are far from corporate, made up of Savannah's oddballs and outsiders, castaways from 'normal' society.

Sitting at the desk behind me is an African-American man with mild Tourettes. Each time he turns a page, he taps the desktop and mutters *misery, misery, misery*. Always the three taps and the three miseries, it's like a song he's singing. His book is a pictorial encyclopaedia of cats. Whenever he mumbles to himself, more people move away from him. But he doesn't bother me. I grew up in a house with a paranoid schizophrenic, my grandmother, and her mutterings were much more frightening. To my right is a magenta-haired Gothic girl all decked out in black, except for her platform, knee-high boots. They are a dazzling yellow patent leather. She's reading a book about Sappho.

To my left is a reed thin woman with fly-away blonde hair. Her lipstick and eye-shadow are exactly the same colour, that of an over-ripe tomato. She resembles a red panda, cute but slightly skittish. She's flicking nervously through *The Liver Cleansing Diet* by Sandra Cabot. On the desk beside the book there's a crumpled brown paper bag. Every now and then she dips her hand into the bag and digs out a vividly coloured jawbreaker. She pops the hard candy straight into her mouth and swirls it around so that it clinks on her teeth. Then she sucks away on it with no small amount of noise. She sees me watching her and smiles, her ripe lips parting to reveal lipstick smeared front teeth.

'You want one, sugar baby?' she asks, jiggling the bag of sweets.

It startles me when she calls me 'sugar baby'. That was my mother's nickname for me up until I was eight years old. I shake my head and say no to the candy, but thanks.

'Probably for the best,' she whispers, nodding towards *The Liver Cleansing Diet*, 'sugar is deadly stuff'.

I smile and go back to my book, thinking about the last time anyone called me ‘sugar baby’. My eye falls on a passage that grabs my attention. I twirl my pen a bit and then decide to write it down. ‘Food becomes abject’, I copy in my notebook, ‘only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories. A boundary between nature and culture, between the human and the nonhuman’ (Kristeva 1982: 7).

I’m not sure why I copy these sentences down. I’m doing research for my Masters’ thesis, which is about monsters in fairy tales, and has nothing to do with food. But something about the way my stomach feels today attracts me to the ideas the passage conveys. When food transgresses certain boundaries, it becomes that which must be expelled, in the same way that our bodies expel poison, putrefaction, pus and other kinds of ooze.

I try to think about food the way Kristeva might. When food is tainted, spoiled or rotten, or if it is food of an unsavoury or alien type, it must be thrown from the gut, expeditiously expelled. I certainly feel that I need to expel the eels currently using my belly as a discotheque. My stomach is roiling.

The borders Kristeva describes manifest themselves as a slash in strings of binary opposites: human/nonhuman; normal/abnormal; sane/insane; male/female; sacred/profane; good/bad; wholesome/unwholesome and straight/queer. One of the most rigidly policed (and most often transgressed) of these borders is gender. It is quite clear that some foods are considered wholesome for men and others wholesome for women. Women and men are expected to have different appetites, different tastes – women should eat like birds whereas men should eat like lions. There are many everyday axioms that say as much: *men are big eaters; women are always dieting; women love chocolate and salads, men love sausages and onions; real men don’t eat quiche; every woman has a sweet tooth.*

It also occurs to me that monsters often have their own (usually unsavoury) appetites or tastes – for children and virgins and blood and filth. These unwholesome tastes are the very source of their monstrosity, their perversion. Vampires have a taste for blood, zombies a taste for brains, werewolves a taste for human flesh. It seems to me that it is these tastes, these aberrant oral desires, that make them a danger to us and that disgust us the most. Worse still, if an ordinary human indulges in these abject tastes, they are transformed. They become monsters themselves, as when someone drinks tainted blood to become a vampire. The unwholesome craving transforms and poisons the mind, and then, once indulged, the unwholesome food poisons and transforms the body. The human becomes the nonhuman, the abject that must be cast out. This implies that we are all just a single oral misstep, one tainted meal, away from becoming that which we most despise. It implies that lurking within us is the seed of the monster; an unwholesome seed that is fed by ‘the oral nature of our darkest imaginings, dreads, and desires’ (Skubal 2002: 9).

Food then, according to this line of thought, has a certain transformative power that works on our very humanity (Curtin 1992: 3–22). I believed this wholeheartedly as a child. I was raised catholic. In Catholicism, the Eucharist is a food that is both metaphysically transformed and transformative. Also, each year at Lent, we refrained from eating meat, believing that this ‘sacrifice’ cleansed us somehow. It was clear to

me as a kid that eating defiled food desecrated or poisoned my soul. In the reverse, certain foods were sanctified. We believed that by ingesting those sanctified foods we came closer to that which we held sacred. This is the idea that informs the kosher discipline of Judaism, and the vegetarianism of Hinduism and Buddhism (Kalupahana 1992: 100–8).

I draw large circles around the Kristeva quote. Then I draw lines from certain words (food, human) to other words (abject, nonhuman) and then to the word MONSTER, which I have written in uppercase at the top of the page. Then a series of seemingly unconnected sense memories come back to me from my childhood: the taste of fish finger sandwiches on Fridays during Lent; the comforting warmth of a cup of tea; waking to the smell of eggs frying on a cold winter morning; and the fact that for a year, at the age of eight, I refused to eat sugar because I thought it would turn me into a monster.

This last memory is a surprise. I'd forgotten that as a child I believed sugar had the power to transform ordinary people into monsters. Sitting there in the Savannah Public Library – as the woman beside me sucks on her candies and the man at the desk behind taps and says *misery, misery, misery* – the memories take full form again, bubbling up through those thoughts on abjection.

Human/nonhuman: Maternity ward, Toowoomba General Hospital, 1968

'Are you sure you didn't give birth to a *kitten*, Lyn?' the nurse says. 'It's far too small to be a baby!'

My mother is so fatigued and medicated that the tone of the nurse's voice makes her think that she has given birth to something other than a human child, perhaps something monstrous. She pictures a wriggling kitten, blind and hissing and damp with blood.

I've been told the story so many times that it's as if it is my own memory. I was only a new born baby though, and so can't possibly remember it. Nevertheless, I can see it so clearly in my mind that it has become just like any other of my memories, if not more vivid.

'I'll have to check him for whiskers,' the nurse says then.

She laughs at her own joke as she takes me from amongst the pool of amniotic and other fluids to be bathed and swaddled. My mother lifts her head and glances over to check that she hasn't actually given birth to a monstrous kitten.

The back of the nurse's dress is drenched with sweat. It is a hot summer's day and steamy in the maternity ward. The only comfort comes from a single overhead fan that turns with an unsatisfying languidness. The nurse moves aside so that my mother can see me. She can tell straight away that the nurse is right. I am little, weighing a mere four and a bit pounds, about the size of a small honeydew melon. But I am a normal human baby, not a kitten, and not a monster either.

She closes her eyes with relief. The relief is greater because she's been worried for months that I'd be born abnormal. It's a leap year and local superstition has it that

babies born in a leap year are hard to bring to term and come out not quite right. 'They almost all turn out bad,' one of our elderly neighbours had told her. 'Leap year babies are law-breakers. Those who don't turn out to be criminals are mentally deficient, peculiar at the very least.'

My mother's pregnancy was uncomfortable, plagued by odd pains and insistent cravings. She couldn't eat anything but sweet foods like chocolate, sugar-coated donuts, rice pudding, cake and sticky fruits such as mango and melon. Everyone said the baby must be a girl.

'You always crave sweet things when you're having a girl,' they said, 'sugar and spice and all things nice you know.'

She was happy to have another girl, but the cravings were very different and much stronger to those she'd had with her first daughter. That set her mind to worrying even more. Then, when the contractions started more than a month early, she feared that what everyone had said about leap year babies was true.

'He'll need to spend quite a while in the humidicrib,' the nurse calls over to my mother as she wipes me clean.

My mother feels a stab in her chest at that. She fights the urge to cry.

'I have to admit,' the nurse adds, looking into my unfocused eyes, 'he is a sweet little thing. A sweet little sugar baby.'

'Sugar baby,' my mother echoes with a tired smile, thinking of those desperate cravings for mango and melon and chocolate.

'Sugar baby boy.'

Sane/insane: Wombyra Street, Toowoomba, 1976

The memory of it has become a nightmare. I'm eight years old. I wake up with my grandmother looming over my bed. It's the middle of the night and very dark. The glass of the sash window is trembling a little with the wind outside. The corrugated iron roof creaks as it contracts in the cold.

'They put it in the sugar!' my grandmother whispers. 'Dally, wake up, they put it in the sugar!'

'Wha ... sugar ... what?' I'm mumbling, struggling to keep my eyes open.

My lids are very heavy and drawn to each other like oppositely charged magnets.

'Poison!' she hisses back. 'They put it in the sugar!'

I'm only half awake, confused. Her breath is like mist on the cold air. For a moment I think that she's breathing out fumes from some poison that's swirling in her belly.

'They've poisoned us all!' she shrieks.

My gut clenches with dread and my heart lurches into a pounding run, as if trying to tear itself out of my chest. I sit up.

‘What?’ I stammer, totally awake now.

‘Sugar! They put poison in the sugar. It’ll turn us all into monsters!’

Before I can take in what my grandmother is shrieking, my mother calls out from her bedroom across the hall.

‘Nobody’s been poisoned! Go back to bed!’

‘No!’ my grandmother shouts back into the dark. ‘They’ve put poison in the sugar and it’s changing us! It’s too late to stop it! We’ll all be monsters!’

My heart picks up speed. I wonder if it will just pop, like a balloon filled with too much air.

My mother comes into the room then, her white feet padding on the worn floorboards. She’s shivering, wearing only an old t-shirt and panties.

‘We’re all fine!’ she says. ‘There’s no poison and there’s no such thing as monsters! Now come back to bed!’

Mum takes my grandmother by the arm and leads her out of my room. My grandmother’s shrieks recede down the hallway: *monsters, monsters, monsters*. I lie there in the dark, my heart still racing so that I can feel my pulse in my ears.

I wait for my mother to come back and explain what’s happened, maybe put her arms around me, reassure me somehow. She doesn’t come. It takes a long time for me to go back to sleep. When I do, I dream of mouths filled with sparkling sugar, mouths that transform into monstrous maws with fangs that drip with congealing blood.

Male/female: Wombyra Street, Toowoomba, 1977

I have porridge for breakfast with salt and butter, but no sugar.

‘Still not having sugar?’ my mother asks with a knowing smirk.

I shake my head, no. My sisters, who are on each side of me, roll their eyes in unison.

‘How long’s it been now?’ Mum asks.

I shrug my shoulders.

‘It must be nearly a year. You’ll be the skinniest kid on the street soon.’ She smiles, winks.

My not eating sugar has been a big deal. Up until a year ago, sugary foods were about all I would eat. At first, my mother worried that I would starve. In the past, before the night my grandmother came into my room whispering about monsters, I had refused to eat most forms of meat and practically every vegetable. But the fear of being poisoned outweighed my addiction to confectionary. Soon I was eating things that had never passed my lips before, such as carrots and peas and cauliflower, but still no meat. Scorched carcass seemed to me the food of Neanderthals, not proper humans.

I smile back at mum and then glance over at my grandmother. She is sitting across from me at the table, apparently oblivious. She hasn’t had one of her ‘episodes’ since

that night. She can go for a long time being just like any other normal nanna, and then she's frothing at the mouth and screaming about monsters, only to go back to being a nanna again just as fast, drinking tea and gossiping about the neighbours.

Mum gets up and rinses her bowl in the sink.

'I have to take your sisters for new shoes,' she says. 'You stay here with Nanna.'

This is a recent development, being left alone with my grandmother. I'm never sure if she's meant to be watching me or if I'm watching her. Mum scruffs my hair as she leaves the kitchen. My sisters follow her out.

I finish my porridge and decide to have a cup of tea, even though I don't really like it without sugar. I glance over at my grandmother and find that she's staring at me. I smile. She doesn't smile back, just keeps staring. I begin to feel uneasy.

'Sugar baby,' she whispers, still staring.

'What?'

'Sugar, sugar baby,' she whispers again, taking the sugar bowl in a trembling hand and sliding it towards me across the table.

The bowl is nearly as old as she is, it's white porcelain with pink roses. I glance at the sugar bowl and then back at her. What does she want me to do? Then I hear mum's car pulling out of the driveway. I nearly run outside to call her back, but I can hear that the car has already turned into the street and driven away.

'Go on, eat it,' Nanna says, not whispering anymore.

'No,' I say, 'I don't want to.'

'What's the matter?' she asks. 'Are you scared?'

'You said it was poisoned,' I answer.

'It is,' she says firmly. 'Poisoned.'

'Well I'm not eating it then!'

'It won't make any difference to you,' she says, reaching out and shoving the sugar bowl so hard that the lid slips off and breaks.

I stand up to leave. She stands up as well and shuffles to the door to block my way. I'm so surprised by how quickly she moved that I forget to feel scared. Just for a moment.

'Get out of my way!'

I shout so loud that she flinches and steps aside. As I pass her, she hisses,

'I know what you are!'

I step out of the doorway and turn to face her. I'm frightened that she will launch herself at my back as I walk away.

'What am I?' I ask, frightened by how she might answer.

'You're a monster!' she snarls.

At first, I don't respond. My heart trips into an erratic beat. Could she be right? For a while now, I've known that I'm different to other boys. I get called names. The other boys stay away from me. Could this be why?

'I'm not a monster,' I say, my voice shaking.

'Yes, you are. You're a monster. You were born a monster.'

She smiles, as though she has made an irrefutable argument.

'Sugar and spice and all things nice,' she adds triumphantly.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'It's only girls who are supposed to like sugar,' she hisses, 'Even in the womb, that's all you wanted. And what kind of boy won't eat meat? I'll tell you what kind, a monster! And I know what's going to happen next!'

'What's going to happen?'

My voice is flat but on the inside I'm in turmoil. My knees feel like jelly. The things she's saying are true. Until she ruined it for me, I was obsessed with sugar. It's also true that I'm not like other boys, and not just because I won't eat meat. I don't like sport. I'd rather read. I'm small and don't like the rough games the other boys play. Not that they would ever include me anyway. They think I'm more like a girl than a boy and so they hate me. I wait for my grandmother to tell me what she thinks is going to happen to me, my heart doing that thing where it seems to be trying to escape from my chest.

After a pause, she takes a deep breath and spits, 'You're going to turn into a girl!'

Her eyes are wild, as though she has just pronounced the worst fate a boy could ever endure. I however feel a huge wave of relief.

'If I eat sugar, I'm going to turn into a girl?'

'Yes! A *monstrous girl*! The more sugar you eat the quicker you'll change! It's poisoned!'

When she says *monstrous girl*, I picture Maleficent from Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* and the Wicked Queen from *Snow White*. I picture Morticia Addams and then Sabrina from *Bewitched*. Then I think about what she's saying.

Despite the fact that none of the other crazy things she's said have ever been true, this one seems to make sense. I tick the evidence off in my mind: boys are supposed to like meat, but I don't; boys shouldn't love sugar so much, but I do; my mother only craved sweet things when she was pregnant with me. There's also the fact that I was born in a leap year. It all makes sense to me now. I'm not a normal boy after all.

I feel a sudden sugary rush of relief. If I'm not a proper boy anyway, then why not change into something else, into a girl? I turn back towards the door into the kitchen. My grandmother jumps back from me, clearly afraid. In her eyes I am not her grandson anymore. I am just a monster. I smile at her sweetly, not at all how a normal boy would.

I walk through the door and take a spoon from the kitchen draw. I sit down at the table. I slide the sugar pot so that it's right in front of me. I look at my grandmother again, smiling one more time for good measure. Then I dip the spoon into the bowl, heap it up with sugar and pop it straight into my mouth.

Nanna howls and runs from the kitchen muttering, 'monster, monster, monster'.

I close my eyes as the sugar crystals dissolve in my mouth and are absorbed into my bloodstream. I can almost feel it coursing through my veins, changing me one cell at a time. I dip the spoon into the bowl, heap it up with sugar again and pop it back into my mouth. The sugar crackles on my tongue, like electricity, and the rush of that electricity floods my body. I sigh with the pleasure of it.

My grandmother's bedroom door slams, echoing down the hallway. I smile, dipping the spoon into the sugar bowl again. I don't feel weak anymore. I'm flushed with sugar and pleasure; the pleasure of breaching boundaries, of becoming something else. I smile to myself and whisper:

'Sweet sugar baby, sweet sugar sugar baby.'

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Research statement

Research background

Much memoir is concerned with conceptualising and understanding the past (Murdock 2003). Foucault's (1986) work on the 'ethics of the self' offers a way of rethinking the past, especially when applied to memory. As memory is fluid and changeable (Murdock 2003), the application of Foucault's ideas to specific memories effectively 'rewrites' them. Given this, writing memoir can be seen as the rewriting of memory.

Research contribution

This work reframes memoir from retelling to critical refiguring. The essay applies critical ideas to food-related sense memories, thus 'rewriting' those memories. This is done as part of a Foucauldian ethics of the self (1986) to remake memory and subjectivity. In this way, the essay makes a contribution to the rethinking of the role of food and memoir in self-making.

Research significance

This work is among the first creative applications of ideas around subjectivity, food and the mutability of memory to the writing of memoir. The work is innovative in that it applies theories of memory and subjectivity from multiple disciplines in the creative practice of writing. It is also a wholly original creative and critical work.

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