

Political Poems?

There are many ways to write a good food poem. Even though this competition is to benefit SecondBite and raise awareness about food waste and food insecurity – both pressing contemporary social and political issues – we do not want to attract only political poems, nor will these be privileged above others in the judging process just because they are political. The competition is looking for well-crafted, vigorous, juicy poems which leave the reader hungry for more and we hope that poets will write broadly about food in all its multiple, sensual, chthonic, vegetal, human-appetite as well as political guises.

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It is hard to write a good political poem – one which does not sacrifice artistic integrity for the sake of the message, one where the drivers of the poem are central poetic ideas rather than political messages. Doctrine and cant don't have many imaginative openings.

One poem, *Canned Fruit Drive* by Kathleen Lynch, succeeds I think as a political poem with little fanfare but with simple moral and imaginative potency. Apart from the title, food is only scarcely mentioned, but food plenty and its opposites, hunger and starvation resonate through the whole poem.

The speaker remembers a first world childhood in

...the lucky world –
not the far place where flies

sipped at eye corners
of children too weak to cry.

Lynch takes it further and with a child's characteristic honesty, too young yet to know to dissemble in this instance explains –

We wanted most to not be those
others, with their terrible bones.

Where food is actually mentioned in the poem, Lynch tells us that the children are allowed to choose which cans of vegetables will be donated to those starving others from an apparently full cupboard: 'We gave/ what we hated—
beets, peas,/mushrooms. Our dreams/were not of rice.' The contrast made again between a world rich enough to permit the luxury of hating certain foods and a whole other world which can only aspire to food and then only to rice.

In one of the most telling parts of the poem the speaker sees the fact of those suffering children as 'a betrayal/by the grown world'. But she fears that to speak of this betrayal, kept silent by the adults, would invite something of similar consequence upon herself. It's a gut-wrenching observation. Politically speaking

one of the ways that world hunger is allowed to persist is that this betrayal is not named for what it is. We have all sorts of ways to dress it up but as has been claimed many times the world grows enough food to feed us all.

Canned Food Drive is to my mind a potent poem. It succeeds as a poem because of its compelling narrative drive and its condensed language. The child narrator's voice rings true, and impresses with the degree of emotional complexity imbedded in apparently simple language and events. It succeeds as a political poem because it holds the contrast of plenty and privation – the perennial polar opposites of starvation and satiation – in dynamic equipoise.

Canned Food Drive

BY KATHLEEN LYNCH

We lived in the lucky world—
not the far place where flies

sipped at eye corners
of children too weak to cry.

A camera showed that world to us
on posters. But we were children.

We wanted most to not be those
others, with their terrible bones.

We spoke of them wide-eyed, with
what we thought was tenderness.

But our words came in a different register,
as if to speak of such betrayal

by the grown world could bring
a harm of great immensity

upon us too. We got to choose
from the cupboard. We gave

what we hated—beets, peas,
mushrooms. Our dreams

were not of rice. The moon
laid light on our bicycles propped

against the porch. Sycamores

became our giants standing guard;

the overgrown shrub, our fort. We thought
we understood what was required.

Even crouched beneath our desks
during drill, we said one prayer

for the fear, one for recess.
McClellan Air Force Base

sent forth big-bellied planes
that rattled the windows

of our houses. Evenings, we took
to the streets shrieking

with joy, rode madly fast
around the block. We collapsed

on the lawn breathless, the earth
cool beneath us & pounding hard,

as if it had one great heart.
As if it was ours.

<http://www.kathleenlynch.com/>