

GREG EMILIO
RUNNER-UP

Whenever You Eat This

after James Dickey

"A bakery was also struck, killing at least a half-dozen people lined up for bread." The New York Times, September 2016

Breath, manna, body of God,
Leavened alchemy of yeasts,
Primordial slow-boiling dough,

Trinity of water, flour, and salt,
Fermented, fired, an image of air,
Crust like a child's scabbed elbows,

We reach for you over porcelain,
Across ironed linen, fisted loaves
Flowing from swaddling baskets.

We open our refrigerator doors
For paper-white slices machine-beaten
Into iron-fortified Eucharists,

Choosing these bleached logs
Over the gnarled, scored flesh
That was surely Christ's bread.

Ethereal, whole, you're ancient
Inheritance from the fecund crescent
Of our birth, vital as a mother's breast.

Breads of the last bakery in Aleppo—
Khubz arabi, lavash, saj, chubab—
Our tongues lean toward you.

Yet we've witnessed nothing,
Never seen a grandmother bent
By scoliosis scoop up a scrap

Of salty fallen bread, then bless
It with her lips, amen, and take it
Into the furnace of her body.

Life itself, ghostly incarnation glowing,
Did your bakers sense in the predawn
Iris-light, skipping you, sponge-soft,

Into the blistering brick ovens,
Their hands grasping the callused
Handles of their heirloom peels,

Did they know it, dear gift from God,
And did the war-weary, stomach-shrunk
Martyrs waiting in line for this, their daily,

Did they all understand that this morning
Still becoming morning, beginning to rise,
That this would be bread forever awaited?

Tell me, did the flames render them
Supernatural, other, borne of breath,
Spirits un-shackled of flesh, no longer

Bothered by bones? In that last flash,
In the hail of glass, brick, and shrapnel,
Did they ascend like vengeful seraphim

Riding fire toward the light?
No, Sour Father, Omnipresent
Yeast, they must've been more

Humble, more human than that,
Smote like the charred sunspots
On a perfectly baked wheel of pita.