

seared scallops and steamed green beans

by christopher rowe

for gwenda on her 27th birthday

The historian was the only one of the old gang left who played those little head games with me. The rest had all moved on or moved off — done their damage, mostly, and figured out I wasn't much of a challenge.

But the historian was marked deep by two markers. Unlike the others, he was petty and he was patient.

So, when he spelled me up I'd forgotten whatever slight I'd offended him with, if there ever was one. Whatever he imagined I'd done to him, though, it was almost certainly at the card table and it had almost certainly happened a long time ago.

I remember now that the historian had, some months previous to this, attempted to introduce a counting system based on random number theory into the spades games we played in Triangle Park. I only apprehend enough of the higher maths to recognize the historian's vast misapprehension of them, and I remember discouraging him up to the very limits of table talk. That must have been it. That must have been how I offended him.

Still playing with randomness, he'd introduced it into the mist he blew in through my kitchen window. I'm not a big leaguer, but there's nothing in the standard history student's toolbox for me to fear and the historian knew that. So, he didn't try to grandfather clause me or to whittle my bones with entropy. He'd done some thinking. His attack was indirect.

I'd gotten a really good price on some scallops at the fish market on Winchester Road. I had some green beans from the Saturday morning farmer's market, still, and we were dieting just then, so, sear the scallops over the grill and drizzle with just a little butter, steam the beans and toss them with a bit of lemon juice and some shaved almonds. The kind of meal my true love loves and, it turns out, a minefield waiting to be primed by the historian.

My cutting board was cleaned and oiled, my knives were at hand, as were all the ingredients except one. I reached over and picked up the cardboard canister of rock salt and, and, and...

Blind Marcellus draws the plans on soft clay outside the shaft entrance, pillars here and here and here. He can feel the strength of the seam with his fingers, then taste its richness. The cohort is watchful. We are mining their money and the Celts might stream down from the tree line at any time, with their mad blue faces and gutting bronze spears —

— and dropped it to the floor, grains piling against my feet. In the instant before I doubled over against the counter, I saw George stir, sniff to confirm that it wasn't cheese or beef I'd dropped, then slump back to sleep. I reached forward to catch myself, one hand landing in the —

"Butter, wife!" He is worn down with the cares of patriarchy and with all the demands of his terrible shepherd god. Those golden men resting on their heels outside the tent are from

heaven, he says, and he is rousing the camp, wringing out every bit of hospitality he can find beneath the oaks of Mamre. I skim cream into the goatskin and roll it back and forth, back and forth...

— and I slide forward, the quarter pound block of butter refusing to arrest my fall, so my other hand scrambles, catching only a handful of —

The beans are plentiful enough this time that we don't fear their hammers. We have two whole sledges heavily laden enough that the llamas complaints are legitimate, for once. The soldiers took my son for the priests last time, when even all we had wasn't enough. In a year better than last, but not so good as this, they took one of my ears as warning. This time we dared to hold some back, bounty enough for the soldiers and priests and even for us.

And I fell, twisting, scattering beans across the kitchen floor, rousing the dog, landing heavily on my back. From down there, the top of the counter seemed so far away. I was looking up from the bottom of a presswood canyon. Looking up to see a bowl teetering, dropping, spilling a rain of translucent fish meat over me and —

I will swim forever. I will turn on my side when I approach my prey and I will kill and eat in motion and swim forever. I will swim forever...

And I was swimming like that and would have forever, but her hand touched mine and she said, "Are you okay?"

The historian's fog was still floating around the room. Her hand... I was redefined by this new touch.

"Are you okay?" she said.

I leaned up. Green beans were everywhere. George was licking a stick of butter near the refrigerator. My face and chest were covered with a sticky mass of square cut flesh.

I nodded. "I'm okay."

"Good," she said, "Because now I'm going to laugh at you for a while." So she did. So did I.

"No scallops for dinner, then," she said, after she'd caught her breath.

"I got scammed," I said. "It was shark."