

Dinnerview: Julia Elliott

written by Danielle Susi | December 21, 2016



Julia Elliott's writing has appeared in *Tin House*, *The Georgia Review*, *Conjunctions*, *The New York Times*, and other publications. She has won a Rona Jaffe Writer's Award, and her stories have been anthologized in *Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses* and *Best American Short Stories*. Her debut story collection, *The Wilds*, was chosen by *Kirkus*, *BuzzFeed*, *Book Riot*, and *Electric Literature* as one of the Best Books of 2014 and was a *New York Times Book Review* Editors' Choice. Her first novel, *The New and Improved Romie Futch*, arrived in October 2015.

Here, she talks about a holy shark steak experience, dying the old-fashioned way, and scaring people with her SCOPY.

On her all-time favorite meal:

A long time ago, as a five-year vegetarian and grad student at Penn State, I became fascinated by medieval female mystics—the more fanatical the better. My favorite two, Bridget of Sweden and Agnes Blannbekin, both claimed to have eaten the “holy prepuce,” aka Jesus's foreskin, one of the medieval relics supposedly sourced from Christ's body. An anonymous confessor describes Blannbekin's experience:

And behold, soon she felt with the greatest sweetness on her tongue a little piece of skin alike the skin of an egg, which she swallowed. After she had swallowed it, she again felt the little skin on her tongue with sweetness as before, and again she swallowed it. And this happened to her about a hundred times. And when she felt it so frequently, she was tempted to touch it with her finger. And when she wanted to do so, that little skin went down her throat on its own. And it was told to her that the foreskin was resurrected with the Lord on the day of resurrection. And so great was the sweetness of tasting that little skin that she felt in all [her] limbs and parts of the limbs a sweet transformation.

While researching medieval feasting and fasting customs, I envisioned roasted swans glistening on carved oak tables, wild boars smoking on spits, and piles of pheasants glazed in honey. I remembered my mom's pot roast, her fried

chicken and giblec-crammed gravies, her greasy ham-bone soup. I felt an uncharacteristic nostalgia for my dad's catfish stew, his home-cured deer-jerky, and the wild quail he braised in gravy. I craved fried hog-jowl and liver pudding, barbecue and hash, baked ham as pink as an angel's tongue. I recalled the nightmare pica scenes from *Rosemary's Baby*, in which Rosemary, knocked up by Satan, gobbled raw chicken liver and devoured a very undercooked steak. A beast within my stomach awakened, growled, and flexed a tentacle.

On a snowy day, the sky a dovish lavender, I told my boyfriend (also a vegetarian) that I was walking to the grocery store to buy a shark steak (we had no car). He did not approve. I went alone. The local Weis Market was a mile away. Bundled in coat, hat, scarf, and gloves, I trekked down scraped sidewalks, took a shortcut through a park, and trudged through knee-deep snow. I remembered one summer at Edisto beach, watching my dad gut and skin a tiny shark he'd caught. He'd hacked it into segments, sprinkled on canned Parmesan, white wine, salt and pepper, and broiled the steaks. I planned to recreate this meal, but with store-bought fish trucked from heaven-knows-where.

I had not yet delved into the politics of overfishing, the threats of mercury toxicity, the brutalities of the agro-industrial complex, though I did see my vegetarianism as a form of morally superior asceticism akin to the holy deprivation of medieval nuns, which gave my quest for meat a twinge of delicious sin. In the garish florescence of Weis, I marveled at the beauty of raw red beef cello-packed in teal Styrofoam, at pink pork, at poultry as pale as a comatose princess's throat. I studied the pastel array of fish, the flesh gelatinous, glistening, semi-sheer. I admired the iridescent luster and pearly spine bones of the shark steaks and chose the prettiest one. I bought a chunk of fresh Parmesan and a bottle of cheap Chardonnay. I went home and tried my father's recipe: butter, Parmesan, wine, pepper, salt—nothing to it. I sipped the crappy wine as I cooked. My boyfriend sat in the living room, away from the carnage, drinking beer. Outside, the light turned pink. Snow-flecked wind whirled around our apartment building.

I drank more wine. I sat down. I ate the shark steak, *and behold, soon felt the greatest sweetness on my tongue.*

"You have to try this," I said to my boyfriend.

He shook his head like a toddler refusing broccoli.

"You can't imagine . . . It's just . . . The most amazing . . ."

"No thanks."

"But seriously. Pure heaven."

My boyfriend's austerity intensified the occult deliciousness of the fish. I heard chanting nuns. I floated in my chair.

On what the light looks like during her favorite meal of the day:

Most mornings I eat a home-harvested chicken egg and a piece of buttered toast. Breakfast tastes better when it's still dark outside.

Her preferred writing snack:

Assorted nuts and dark chocolate.

On her go-to late-night snack:

A banana or my husband's homemade bread, a wheat and rye mix. Sometimes he grows the rye himself, harvests it with a sickle like a medieval farmer, threshes it in a pillow-case, sifts out the hulls with a sieve, grinds the seeds in an electric kitchen mill, kneads the dough with his calloused hands, and salts it with sweat from his brow. The hours of manly toil that go into each loaf make the bread 66% better.

On her food quirks:

I ferment my own kombucha and enjoy scaring people with my SCOBY (symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast), which resembles a blobfish.

On her final meal request:

I'm with my husband on our farmland in Swansea, SC. We're in our nineties. Although no dwelling currently exists there, I envision an organic modern structure like Zira and Cornelius's mod cottage in *Planet of the Apes*. It's June, around six o'clock. Our daughter frolics in the flowering meadow with her children. Our progeny wear diaphanous garments that smell of myrrh. Their laughter is like the bleating of baby goats and the tinkling of silver bells. Golden chickens walk among them, foraging for grubs. My husband and I lounge on the porch in biotech pod chairs that massage our decrepit spines with innumerable papillae that administer hourly doses of opiates via nematocysts. We've decided not to have our minds uploaded to a computer and reinstalled into cloned nubile bodies genetically programmed to never age. We've decided to die the old-fashioned way, and we resemble crinkled gnomes. We're drinking kölsch and eating wild blackberries.

Source for Blannbekin Quote:

Wiethaus, Ulrike. *Agnes Blannbekin, Viennese Beguine: Life and Revelations. The Library of Medieval Women*. Ed. Jane Chance. DS Brewer, 2012: 35.