

Dinnerview: Natalie Eilbert

written by Danielle Susi | August 16, 2018



Natalie Eilbert is the author of *Indictus*, winner of Noemi Press's 2016 Poetry Prize, which published in January 2018, as well as the poetry collection, *Swan Feast* (Bloof Books, 2015). Her work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *Granta*, *The New Yorker*, *Tin House*, *The Kenyon Review*, *jubilat*, and elsewhere. She was the recipient of the 2016 Jay C. and Ruth Halls Poetry Fellowship at University of Wisconsin–Madison and is the founding editor of [The Atlas Review](#).

Here, she talks about a chartreuse mug, disordered eating, and a cake with a special device inside.

On her all-time favorite meal:

I seem to be missing the part of the brain that captures these core moments in life. It isn't that there *isn't* a favorite meal of mine out there. It's that the idea of absolutes doesn't do my heart good. Perhaps my all-time favorite meal hasn't happened yet, or it may have come and gone without my realizing it. Be that as it may, there could be an answer to this question if I close my eyes.

There.

I recall recently saying *This is the best meal of my life*. This happened in the last year and I don't know what made it the best meal of my life or where I even was. It couldn't have been in New York City, where I live. I was too bowled over to shed that level of awe for something in such close proximity. I told my therapist about it because she must ask me every week how my eating disorder is going. Usually I say she is doing fine, if a little restless. But I remember that on this particular day, I told my therapist all about this meal.

This is what I mean.

This isn't the meal of which I'm thinking, but I can tell you anyhow. I visited my friend Lily in San Francisco and we went to a place by her called Nutes in Bernal Heights. I wore lingerie as a top. Tech bros guffawed at the next table, probably not about or at me. I hadn't been okay, and wouldn't be okay for a long time. We spoke until the restaurant closed. I ordered the vegetarian ramen, but we also ordered corn tempura for the table. The food was so good I shed a tear. I had this idea that this tear was like a lit match falling into an inferno, because I had been crying throughout our meal. But this was a sweet tear.

My favorite meals consist of noodles and umami. I like the tang of fried egg and the bitter crunch of green vegetables that accompany it. But there was a time that I was so broke I couldn't see straight from hunger. I would go to my publishing job and hope that somebody brought snacks in that day. I would linger near the fridge of the office kitchen. Often, when nobody was looking, I'd pour the communal milk for coffee into my mug and down it in a furious gulp. There had been a can of black beans for six months in the office cupboard that I didn't think anybody would miss, so one afternoon I ate microwaved beans for lunch. Then there was the time my equally broke partner and I were at my tiny apartment around dinnertime and we found a can of mixed vegetables in the back of my cupboard plus some leftover takeout rice. We fried the rice and threw in the can of vegetables, squirting hot sauce on like kerosene. We ate straight from the frying pan in a rapturous state.

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

Morning light coming in through a dirty skylight. I hope it is raining, and I hope I am eating a perfectly plump omelet with my coffee. When I was living in Madison, Wisconsin, during my WICW fellowship, there were days I was so bored I would walk across the entire city, from my apartment by Orton Park, to campus, to The Square, to Atwood, and back. All the while, I had this crazy idea that a group of people would invite me to their table and we could drink white wine and learn about how little we have in common. Have you ever invited a stranger to your table who desperately wanted to be invited to your table? I don't know you, but my guess is, no, except in rare moments of epiphany. In one of my journeys back and forth, I walked into an Urban Outfitters and my eyes met this chartreuse mug. I bought it immediately and drank from it every day. Here, in Brooklyn, I drink from it every day. It is next to me now. I suppose, then, the light of breakfast should be chartreuse.

On snacking while writing:

I do the opposite. I drink coffee to suppress my appetite. I have a bad history with eating, so the idea of incorporating eating on top of another activity is not something I'm able to do.

On her go-to late-night snack:

I only eat late-night snacks if I'm stoned. That said, I do enjoy yogurt and granola. Also tortilla chips. I've got too many complexes to eat a late-night snack and get into bed. Usually in those cases, I just chug some water. I know that isn't a cute answer, but having a body is a wonderful horror.

On her food quirks:

I have very bad food habits, as I've mentioned. It shouldn't be a surprise then to learn that I was a very picky eater growing up. I hated ice cream in its solid form—it needed to be ice cream soup for me to tolerate it. I would peel and discard the cheese from my pizza, eating only the naked, saturated crust. I lived in a mobile home for the better part of a year when I was ten, displaced after losing our home to a fire, and I only ate two things: mashed potatoes and chicken noodle soup. But that's not all. To make this diet work, I had a box of instant potato flakes that I would microwave to some lumpy simulacrum of mashed potatoes. It was all I craved, despite it sometimes tasting like gruel. I also had cans of condensed chicken noodle soup—Campbell's was the best, but I usually ended up with the generic brand, America's Choice, which tasted like a stale proximal liquid—and when I'd prepare a can of soup, I didn't water it down. I simply ate the concentrated broth. Its extreme brininess raised the hairs all over my body, had the effect of dilating my eyes and energizing my blood. It kind of felt like an MSG-fueled drug. I never let my mom make the soup, when she noticed my kitchen antics, because she would water it down and make it taste like boredom.

I still have this obsession with certain routines. For eight months while teaching this past academic year, I ran five miles in the morning; then I made a breakfast of a brussels sprouts-spinach omelet with avocado toast; then I went to my favorite coffee shop, Sweatleaf, for a coffee, as well as a granola bar and a savory scone (if they had pepper pear goat cheese, my day was made), one of which I would eat in lieu of lunch during my office hours, the other I would eat during break from my class; then I returned home starving and would order some sort of delivery. I did this every single day, even though my nutritionist told me this was terrible for my eating disorder, even though my therapist told me this was terrible for my eating disorder, even though I knew that eating a pastry instead of lunch was terrible for my eating disorder. At least it was calories and at least I kept them down (for the most part).

On her final meal request:

A vegetarian burrito from LA, very crispy Belgian fries with garlic aioli, creamy mashed potatoes, and a giant chocolate cake with cream cheese frosting. Inside of the cake is a device that, when applied to American borders, removes any penalty for crossing. Here is my final heist, for I am on death row for my years of politically motivated heists. It is my last meal and I want to eat at the Texas border. I helped out the baker of this particular Texas town many years ago and she knows this is for the greater good. She also knows the best way to implant a device without detection from my captors. Once I finish my burrito, fries, and mashed potatoes, the cake is wheeled in. It creeks over the gravel. My captors look gruffly at each other—how much of this cake can this little lady eat? In reply, I eat so much of the cake that I can only breathe through my mouth in gaping breaths. In a final minute of will, I scoop my hand into the cake and pull out the device. Everyone around me has heard of this device and officials are running to stop me, calling for backup. But it's no use. They didn't see this one coming, not

from a woman with a random death sentence hanging over her head. In that instance, I throw the device toward the border and, in a flash of light, we are free. Well, not me. At the end of life, death reveals its mischief, that its vagaries and banalities don't matter. It is only the same hole from which we sprung, back into the nameless timeless dark we go. All of our memories and our tears funnel into a lake of forgetting. The forgetting spreads. I never had a mother. I never had two brothers. I never had a body or cats or a father. The forgetting puts everything back where it belongs. Everyone cheers.

Author photo by Vonesper Studios.