

*Blood; Borscht*  
By Abby Richmond

I'm not vegan and I'm not religious and I'm not particularly attached to beets, but I am convinced that, if I attempt to cook this recipe for vegan borscht soup, I may find God.

I have a vague idea of heritage, and borscht encapsulates mine, I think. And no, these musings have nothing to do with my family, for the love of God let's not psychoanalyze, except if I'm honest with myself this is not a food of my childhood and maybe that's part of the appeal. In fact, when I think of foods of my childhood the only one that evokes a visceral response is my father's favorite plastic jarred marinara sauce from the pasta aisle of Stop and Shop. I got a whiff of it on the first floor of my apartment building a few weeks ago and was dumbstruck while I waited for the elevator. I haven't been home since late summer and I don't buy his sauce. I don't cook enough for myself to do that and even if I did that's not what I would want. No, I want borscht, I want old world and idyll and I want to find God.

No, no, there's no need to try for connection with the fare of the suburbs, I used to be comforted by its clichés but now they are cutting. In those days, I got high in elementary school parking lots and felt claustrophobic amidst my bedroom's pastel walls and found sanctuary inside the dirty car of a boy with a pockmarked face. Tropes lined the pages of that old sacred text: a classic adolescence. Dark Victorian porches, bright sterile hallways. Moths and motion-sensing lights and a monastery of my making. Back then a kiss was cause enough to thank God.

But now I am reactionary, I want to go back so much further, all the way back to the shtetl, a time when plastic jars of sugary tomato sauce would have given a whole village stomach poisoning. My ancestors were probably named Golde and Frumah and Gittel, and I know they never wrote bad poetry in the Notes app of an out-of-date iPhone, they were stronger women than I am. Oh I know it's just escapism, but will you allow it?

As a teenager my favorite holiday was Rosh Hashanah; I wore inappropriately high heels to synagogue and no one called me slutty because of my straight A's and sweet smile. After the annual services I posed for photographs with my cousin and we laid on her bed while her mother cooked dinner; digital hearts piled up on our phones. Our hands squished swiped slices of challah—homemade in her household—in mine we ate Saltine crackers when we remembered to utter the Friday night prayers. My cousin and I rolled the bread into little dense balls with our fingers. An act of desecration or an act of reverence? Disgusting either way.

Flippantly I said I would not raise my children with religion and I didn't mean it to come out so callously but maybe I did. She stared at me as though I'd hurt her feelings and it was a victory in a battlefield, I was progressive and detached. I zoomed in on the photos to inspect the positioning

of my legs and ankles. (I realize now that my father's jarred marinara was not the only food of my childhood, although I am not sure that these balls of challah, marked with our fingerprints and forced into hardness, count for anything.)

In my deepest borscht fantasy I see myself prying a beet from the ground, caked in dirt and dust—in truth I sport a delicious delicate pink acrylic manicure (my fingers bled at the fluorescently-lit nail salon)—but in this dream I cleanse both my skin and the beets, precious materials that they are. This will be my new form of victory. I swear I am repenting; this is my *teshuva*, only two months late and also maybe twenty-one years. I am Lady Macbeth's successful sister, all stains are removed in my dream. But there are no actual fruits of my labor. I live in New York City now, and I cannot keep a houseplant alive.

I recently ran into a boy from my hometown. He became abruptly religious in college and on a Wednesday night his velvet skull cap was the daintiest thing in my dingy campus apartment. After school he will move to Israel's desert region, be married by twenty-five, and read the words of medieval thinkers all day. He told me this with his eyes glistening and I made a snarky comment about the occupation and he surprised me by agreeing but regardless he is a man of God, or at least he is trying his best. I am a woman of war, or at least that is my history.

Not anymore. I will go to the market and buy beets and cabbage and carrots and cucumbers, I will throw them into my deepest pot straight away so they don't develop mold in my fridge and disintegrate. I will chop and dice and slice and when my hands bleed again it will not be from a pretty pink manicure. I will be wifely and hardy and exquisite and capable. My stomach will not growl, my legs will not shake, I will be reheated fully. My blood; my beets; top to bottom my flesh will turn scarlet. I will throw myself into my deepest pot and simmer alongside the vegetables. The broth is my *mikveh*. I am ready to submerge.

And trust me I keep my cards close to my chest but the other night I almost cried after confiding in a too-casual acquaintance that if the ultra-Orthodox man on the street corner tried to recruit me tomorrow and told me to wear a long skirt and light candles I might just allow it. I want to cover my body anyway, I want to wrap myself in animal skin parchment and the unintelligible words of an ancient language. "God I hope I wouldn't be so susceptible as that," the acquaintance responded and I flinched when he laughed. God I hope I wouldn't be either yet God here I am with my ruby red dreams of borscht and God. I dream of God.

The online recipe I'm looking at is so God-damned verbose it's practically a Talmudic text of its own and my eyes are glazing over. Maybe I'm not cut out for any of this profound godly reading business anyway because truly I just want to make borscht and have that be the end of it. I want a quick solution and yet I'm the one making things difficult for myself. But I will be at home in the kitchen, I tell myself, I will make this borscht perfect, somehow. Look at me look at me look at

me I can do it except don't look at me too closely. I chose the vegan recipe because I can feel my underarms jiggle as I envision cutting an onion and then I will cry for two reasons. And maybe it's all still for the aesthetics, maybe I am just seeking a new form of performance, after all it is the redness of this God-damned soup that flashes in my mind. Let me curtsy prettily for my borscht and I will find God in the sound of your applause.

No, no, don't clap for me. None of it counts, none of it matters. Let's move on now because the doubt is non-negotiable, I will choose suburban cynicism every time. Murderous jars of marinara and hardened balls of bread and ugly kisses in cars. My mental synagogue with its single congregant. I am still tethered to those ruins; borscht is a romanticization. I know the shtetl was bitterly cold and my bones are brittle. And let's be honest there is no one in this city who likes the taste of beets and inevitably I will be left with stained crimson hands from my botched vegan borscht and I will still be, after all of this, godless.