

THE BREAD BAKER: A NIGHTMARE IN THIRTY-ONE BITS

Brian Booker

*He turned me around himself, and to make sure,
Not trusting mine alone he covered my face
With his hands too.*

1.

There are two possibilities. Either
a) The Bread Baker has a deformity; or
b) The house in which the Bread Baker bakes has a deformity.

Or both. It has always been so.

2.

The children file into an auditorium and assume their seats. They fold their little hands in their laps. The lights dim. Whispers flutter about the dark grotto of the ceiling. On stage, a spotlight lingers on velvety curtains, soaked in a blood red glow. From between the parting curtains, a sliver of blackness—a hush descends on the sea of faces—and the Baker emerges onto the platform. He is prepared to reveal to the children the mystery of his defect.

Or that of his house.

3.

T: The Baker once hurt a dog.
F: The Baker spilled so much vinegar.

T: The Baker sleeps in the nude.
F: The Baker adjusts the dressings on his bandage.

The Baker is keeping an awful secret—he stirs it deep in the batter.

4.

It is said that if one looks upon the Baker, one will acquire his deformity.

But only if he sees one looking.

Or is it? If one shuts one's eyes in time, but still the Baker sees one—

—it is unclear what devolves in such a case

5.

The Baker's deformity faithfully mimes the deformity of the house in which he bakes. Now say a child is taken for an automobile ride. The car turns down a shady tree-lined lane; stately old homes are set back deep in the lush green grass; the lane is very quiet, as if everyone who lives there is napping, or sitting quietly in the cool air of their rooms. The lane takes a twist; the car slows to a crawl. The driver points out the window, and the child's eyes follow the finger to where it is pointing. The finger points to the house of the Baker. 'That is where the Baker bakes our bread.'

6.

It is said that once one has glimpsed the Baker, one can't unglimpse him. The disfigurement lingers in the mind's eye.

The touch, too—if by chance one's fingers fumble over the defect—delineates the astonishing figure upon the black velvet curtain of the mind's eye.

7.

The Baker's deformity fails to congrue with the deformity of the house in which he bakes. Now say a child is taken for an automobile ride. The car turns down a parched and dusty lane; sad little homes are set back deep in the wild, uncut weeds; the lane is very quiet, as if everyone who lives there is gone, or sitting quietly inside their rooms. The lane takes a twist; the car chuffs nearly to a halt. The driver points out the window, and the child's eyes follow the finger to where it is pointing. The finger points to the house of the Baker. 'That is the place where the Baker bakes our bread.'

8.

A shingle? Crippled seeds?
When he fell asleep at the stove, and the kneading became dreaming . . .

9.

One can't elude the facts. THE BAKER'S HOUSE IS DEFORMED. (*I knew it. I knew it before we turned the corner—*)

So. Perhaps the Baker has a deformity. Perhaps it has been rumored that the Baker has a deformity. One buys the bread, one eats the bread. The buns too are fine. What else has one heard about the Baker? His character is uncertain—there was talk of an accident; there was talk of a hospital; there was talk of a misshapen loaf.

Whispering in the ice cream parlors.

10.

It is said that a pregnant woman was badly alarmed. She lay transfixed on the bed for weeks, her womb distended. When a child was delivered from inside her, they saw it had assumed the visage of that by which she'd been unsettled.

11.

T: The Baker was born colorblind.

F: The Baker has two baby teeth.

T: The Baker flutes with ease.

F: The Baker's admission will confirm the dubieties of his office.

12.

It's okay!—*the Baker is fine after all*; he bakes his bread by lamplight in the house with the deformity, the house that has nothing to do with him, that's only his place of labor, the place where he labors at the ovens to make the food one must eat.

His face and skull and hips and limbs are all of normal formation. He has both eyelids and both earlobes, and all his toes and teeth, in all the right numbers and lengths, and hair in the correct places, and clean gums. His posture is impeccable.

He can look in his pocket-glass and feel warm in his belly, knowing that if he chose to emerge from the deformed house, into the avenue where people could see him, he would say 'Here I am, I am the Baker, sound of limb, sound of spine; I could sit before you at your table while you eat the bread that I have baked.' He could hold aloft his loaf and say 'This is the bread I have baked in my deformed house; see that it is good, that I am good.'

The offending architecture cannot coerce the benignity of the baking.

13.

No one bought up the buns. The Baker baked for months in his windowless kitchen until the cramped little room filled up to the knees in buns. Their glutinous odor stifled the senses. Out of the oven marched the buns, each after the other, in two's and in three's—but no one even knew.

The rampant buns swelled toward the ceiling.

The Baker gasped for air, chewing with all his might.

14.

Hide the loaf. Say it went stiff. Say it had a funny smell, or that underneath the heel you noticed a spot of livid mold, no bigger than a dime.

15.

A disfigured boy crouched behind a gray building with a box of pictures. His parents were dead. He didn't wish to be seen. He was afraid he would be found with the pictures and punished.

His head twisted suddenly; in the corner of his eye a shadow flitted across the wall of the building; he had glimpsed his future.

He was a good boy.

16.

So sad to chew the bread.

The Baker's loaf is a loaf of sadness. To handle the lackluster loaf, the wan bun, is to sustain the limp heft of pity.

And ah! even if we *knew* the Baker was selling us bad bread *we would still buy it*, for just think how pitiful—that this man, this Baker thought so little of himself that he'd stoop to the level of manipulating our tender pity—think of the awful deformed *power* he'd wield, trusting so blindly in our clotted, hungry little hearts, *just to sell a goddamn sorry old loaf!*

Could such a Baker look us clear in the eye and sell us such a loaf?

And *what about the deformity?*

17.

T: The Baker did a sin.

T: The Baker suffered a horrible, horrible accident.

T: When they dig him up the character of his misfortune will be articulated for the eye in bone.

18.

But: EVERY LOAF I HAVE PURCHASED WAS UNIFORMLY OBLONG: *Just so.*

Or was it? It smelled so good, so fresh. The knife cut through the crust and plunged through the pith like butter.

Yet when I am enjoying my loaf a letter always comes to the box. Always the telephone rings. *Is something wrong with the baker?*

Whispering in the ice cream parlors.

19.

Look:

THE BAKER BAKES THE BREAD AS HE SEES FIT. HE IS OUR BAKER. HE BAKES OUR BREAD BY A SOFT, AMBIENT LAMPLIGHT IN *THAT HOUSE*, BY NIGHT, BECAUSE *THAT IS THE HOUSE IN WHICH IT IS BAKED*. BY HIM.

20.

A smell.

Tooth-in-a-loaf. A horrible, horrible accident.

21.

Just take it—coward!—goddamn, just take away the loaf; we might even stomach it, too. Much worse, at least, to chuck it in the trash.

22.

But—we *simply do not know the relationship between the deformity of the Baker's house and the deformity (if a deformity there be) of the Baker.*

23.

He rode by night to Wilmington. The train arrived late; torches bobbed about the darkened platform.

Someone whispered in his ear: *It is said that in the old days they'd have beat him with sticks, till from out of the pummeling his true shape emerged.*

24.

Stoop. Knead. Mime. The blind tongue within its grotto impresses into the palate the postures, the gestures of the craft.

25.

The loaf is the pity.

The pity is the lie.

The lie is the loaf.

(The loaf is the pity is the lie is . . . say it a hundred times fast, until the blind tongue tires from the strain of truth.)

26.

For years we ate up the loaves, each after the other.
Make a promise:

We will reform the dough into the shape of a feeling, a wholesome feeling without lumps. Even the twisted of knuckle, even the crippled of eye may roll out lovingly the long sweet fingers of dough, soft as powder, soft as skin.

27.

Q: *Will he be old soon?*

A: No, he is not so old.

Q: *When he was younger was he okay?*

A: No, when he was younger he was not okay.

Q: *Will I have to go in that house when I am old?*

A: . . .

28.

Look here in this pocket-glass: you're still okay. It's a good meal. Strong bones!

29.

The auditorium is swelled to capacity; but the platform is empty, the curtain closed. The Baker cleaves his way up the aisle, a mob of children weeping and blessing him, strewing honey-muffins from a basket as he goes.

30.

The fingers she pressed into her eyelids were somehow not thick enough; she could still see through them; it was like they were impalpable, translucent.

31.

Don't make me open my eyes, Momma. Don't ever make me reach out my hand.