

Second Coming

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I. Disorientation

The day I returned home from two years of living in South Korea as a missionary, I made my way to the grocery store and walked briskly to the bread aisle, holding my breath for the last fifteen feet or so, so that when I breathed in anew it would be the breath I had anticipated for months. Despite a new-found love for rice, I was ready to be re-Occidented by the heavenly smell of manna in the marketplace, the flesh and blood of the Western diet. I took the final steps of the day's seven-thousand-mile pilgrimage (Seoul to Tokyo to San Francisco to Houston to Gerland's Food Fair on Eldridge Road), looked lovingly at that archetypal shape multiplied endlessly before my eyes—enough to feed a multitude—and inhaled.

II. Sacrament

The ancient Israelites pleased the Lord with sacrifices. As instructed, they often burned only the fat of an animal—the Lord accepting his part of the meal as smoke rising to heaven, incense and flame as insurance: let the Lord be not incensed, nor inflamed—while the priests, and sometimes even the family offering the sacrifice, feasted on the meat. They broke bread with God.

As a missionary I would sometimes bake banana bread as a gift for friends. Maybe because they had never seen such a thing and thus did not know what use they would have for it, or maybe out of a complex Eastern etiquette I didn't quite understand, the bread was often received with awkward smiles and then cut up and fed mostly to me.

III. And the Glory of the Lord Filled the Tabernacle

Wedge in between a salt sea and the Phoenician harbors and consistently at odds with neighbors, Jacob's children led lives of smell: the shepherd's wool and manure, the soldier's blood and leather, the Sabbath's candles and scripture and the nearness of bodies in the synagogue. The sweet scent of wine and the ceramic savor of still water in an urn. Wilderness: locusts, reeds, honey. Jerusalem: a congregation of the clean and unclean. And the temple, a family reunion and a barbecue celebrating day-old memories of sweaty, sandy Egypt.

Once scattered, Israel pined for its temple. Not that they couldn't please God with the sweet smells of sacrifice while in the wilderness—Abraham and Moses showed them they could—no, they yearned for everything else that went along with the familiar smoke rising to heaven.

While in Korea I was not deprived the joy of eating bread. In fact, some of the best I've ever tasted I tasted there. Gigantic white pillowy slices sold in half-loaves—"milk bread," they call it—formed the basis of my French toast, and long loaves of faintly yellow, faintly buttery "corn bread" flanked my doses of peanut butter. But these were merely placeholders during my sojourn in the wilderness. Tents, not tabernacles. No store I visited ever had a whole aisle of bread; no bread smell could ever defeat the pungency of kimchi and soy bean paste. Even stockpiled it wouldn't have been the same, for it wasn't just scent I was missing. It was also the gauge of the plastic, the presence of the twisty-tie, the wideness of the aisle, the comfort of knowing root beer and marshmallows were steps away.

IV. Reorientation

Seven thousand miles to stand before Saint Sara Lee and her wonders, to breathe in the ovenly aroma of fresh loaves, the yeasty exhalation of bottom bread squished by top bread. A two-year pilgrimage to break bread with my past: I remember in that breath the summer swimming pool smell of my own skin, the barefoot popsicle quest, my mother pushing the cart. Also, a two-minute prophecy, because every rite is a shadow of what is to come: a girl whose hair will smell faintly of pizza dough, a birthday gift of oversized muffin tins, the craving for rice.