



Tobie Shapiro

Eating Habits of the Neurologically Unusual

My daughter hates tripe. It looks weird. It's fuzzy and fatty and white, with honeycomb cross-hatching. It's floppy and rubbery. That's what she sees. A cow's stomach lining—the idea of it is weird. Not a good match, tripe and OCD. If it's on the table, she curls her lip, squinches her nose. She's a kid, I think. She'll learn. But not yet. She's adamant.

Unfortunate, because I just made a large vat of tripe soup with pozole, also patas, beef feet, but I know better than to go there with her.

"It's wrong." She turns her face away.

"What is the difference between tripe and kidney?" I ask her.

She thinks. Kidney, she loves. "Hm m m m m," she ponders further. "I guess you're right. I don't know," she answers.

"How about liver, which you love?"

"Don't know. Maybe nothing."

"Squid?"

"OKAY, MOM. I GET IT!"

But a lot of people don't like tripe, or kidney or liver or tongue. The American palate—bland, unadventurous. Irrational.

The woman at the butcher shop turns up her nose at the beef tongue that's on sale.

“Disgusting.” She winces. “Eating something out of an animal’s mouth!”

“Then how about a dozen eggs,” says the butcher.

“We’ve heard that one, Mom.”

“I know. But I thought it bore repeating.”

It really is the OCD, I think.

When I make chicken for dinner, I must follow proper procedures to maximize the chances of her being able to eat a piece. She will want one-half of a chicken breast, but of course I don’t know which half she will choose, so I treat both halves equitably. I must carefully remove the skin and the bones without disturbing its biological integrity. It has to look like the chicken was born without them. Next I proceed to strip it of the tiny ribbons of little yellow fat flaps at the base and try to shape it with my hands into as close to a perfect oval as possible. When I’ve cooked the bird and set it out on the table, she will lift a perfect oval breast from the platter and inspect it, suspended over its original serving position, pinched delicately in the tongs. She will peer at it this way from this angle, turn it, revolve it, look closer, hesitate, and put it back. Then she’ll find the other piece of breast and give it a complete physical. Replace it.

I’ve watched it a hundred times, which means she’s suffered through it a hundred times too. Back and forth, she will calculate the attributes of the two halves of chicken breast. She has all the time in the world because no one else wants the white meat except maybe her twin brother, and he’ll take whatever she leaves in her wake. Exasperated, she’ll look to me with worried eyes, on the verge of surrender to hunger.

“Mom. Help me. Which is the better piece?”

“I don’t know. I don’t like white meat.”

“You *know* what I mean! Mom! *Please!*?”

She can’t choose; she can’t decide which is better because, on minute inspection, they are all flawed, though she can’t define “flawed.” It just has to look right to her, and nothing does.

“Sweetheart, they’re the same.” I’ll scan them, do a silent equivalent of eeny meeny, and point decisively. “That one!”

She’ll take it to her plate, put it down, and prod it with her fork. She’ll put it back and take the other one, apologizing for her rejection as if she’s hurting my feelings. But that’s not it. She is humiliated by her own neurology, and that does hurt me because I ache for her. What can she do with this? What can I do for her? I’ll watch as she takes her fork and pushes that chicken breast, the one she’s worked so hard for, around the plate until she finally decides to take the plunge.

She’ll begin by carving the thing up into geometrically perfect and equally sized cubes, which is a problem with a chicken breast. A chicken breast is not cuboid in shape. This means there will be decisions to make. Will she allow herself to discard irregularly shaped quasi-cubes of chicken breast? If so, which pieces pass inspection and which do not? She is morally opposed to waste, which complicates the issue. She is smart. She knows she has to approach this task anatomically, surgically. Tiny threads of connective tissue are pulled carefully from the meat.

Irregularities are given the rabbi's twice-over. A speck of a vein, invisible sinews, or slight tinge off hue—all are painstakingly removed to the edge of the plate so they can't be confused with the as-yet-unexamined. They collect in a pile that grows taller, larger, finally equal, then more than equal to the collection that has finally passed inspection.

She evaluates the product of her surgical strike and is displeased. There is waste. The fate of the planet hangs in the balance. As such, this is not a mere chicken breast, but an ethical and moral issue that commands her grim judgment. She shrugs apologetically in embarrassment. "It's the OCD," she whispers. "I can't help it."

She can't. This is not something requiring discipline, no matter what her father thinks. The raising of twins, both with special needs, is the topic of hours of wasted anguish arguing with him into the night when we may as well be sleeping. No agreement is ever reached. But I am with them every day, learning the moments as they erupt, and I know them. I know how their minds work, how their hearts break, and how brave they are. I must disregard my husband's opinions because they are not based on knowing these people. He doesn't know them, because they are flawed, and to him, having flaws doesn't make them unusual. It makes them wrong. It makes them not enough, and they feel it. This makes me a member of an unhappy demographic: married single mothers of disabled children. We nod at each other across the room at all the meetings for parents of children with special needs. We don't notice that there are no men until one shows up some evening. We tell his wife how lucky she is. He gets a lot of applause while she stands there, lucky and uncelebrated.

When my twins were infants, I could recognize each one's distinctive crying, but I had to do that fast because when one started to cry, the other was soon to follow. This happened even if they were across the house from each other in different rooms. I never figured out how they did that, or, of course, why. But I worked at it. You must know your children to help them, and if you don't know them, you can't truly love them. If you don't know why they are what they are and do what they do, you must at least honor the mystery. Their father is all answers but incurious. I think, *This will be our undoing*, and wonder what that undoing would look like.

At last, the cuboid chicken breast pieces, free from any blemish, will lie there in a single layer on her plate. They will be arranged in rows. With luck, none of them will be touching. Then at last she is ready to ladle a few carefully measured teaspoons of sauce over the chicken. But if she finds out there is no sauce, we'll be in deep trouble. This means it will be time to auction off the unacceptably sauceless chicken.

"I didn't know. Why didn't you tell me there wasn't any sauce? I need sauce."

At this point in the procedure, I want to grab one of the chicken thighs, hold it over her tidy cubes of white meat, and wring all the juice out of it with my bare hands so she can get sustenance. If not the chicken, no protein again.

She'll eat dessert, the sweeter the better, the more butterfat the better. I've found empty tubs of canned cake frosting in her room, a sticky plastic spoon jutting out, not something expected of a fussy eater. It's a waste of time applying logic. For some reason, starches, grains, vegetables,

fried things, syrups, milkshakes, ice cream do not trigger the micro mutilation—only meat. As for the rest, there are also rules. She likes a wide variety of not-meat, but not just any not-meat. She's selective.

No asparagus, but yes, broccoli. Green leafy, yes, squashes, no. Eggplant yes, Brussels sprouts, yes, but root vegetables, no—oh, except beets. Beets, yes. Grains have to be prepared so that she can see the individual kernel. The skin on a potato must be perfectly smooth and of uniform color. Pasta of any kind escapes criticism. Unless suddenly she has a change of heart. Then, for that meal only, the noodles are to be judged one at a time—very hard with spaghetti, but as I said, this happens but rarely and for one meal only.

The gene comes from my mother's family. I've seen the symptoms among her mother's siblings: terrible worriers agonizing for weeks over a word spoken, a subtle gesture, and though the diagnosis didn't exist then, all the signs of OCD: Great-Aunt Clara was supposed to have excised all the veins from every lettuce leaf before eating a salad. Then the gene passed to the next generation. My poor mother got it. She's thrown her neck out at our table, from periscoping to oversee every bite of what goes into whose mouth and counting the morsels matched up to the mouths. She is going crazy with worry over my daughter and her rituals.

The gene skipped me but landed squarely on my daughter. She will do what she will do, I repeat to myself. She will not starve. When there is no crisis, I make myself busy, ignoring the tiny fireworks popping away at the table. I admit that sometimes I try not to look, sitting down for the first time in the day. Someone has to eat.

Her twin is autistic, so prepare for the food fetishes, they told me. I heard riveting cautionary tales about "someone I know" who had an autistic boy who wouldn't eat anything except at McDonald's. But not only that. It had to be the same order at McDonald's. But not only that. It had to be the same order at the same McDonald's. It couldn't be a different McDonald's. Only that one, even if it meant driving an hour to get there. And that's not all because everyone had to order the same thing at the same time at the same McDonald's sitting at the same table, each in the same seat and he on his favorite chair, the one with the green marker graffiti on the back. That was all he'd eat, ever. They were afraid he'd starve. If they got to the same McDonald's, ordered the same food, paid up, and hustled to the same table only to find some unfortunate strangers sitting there, a tantrum ensued. These tantrums—I know them—they are enough to empty a whole restaurant, let alone a single table. This is why we never have friends over for dinner. Even toddlers can hurl chairs. When they're older, take cover. They can bite and destroy anything in their path. The shrieks can make a desperate parent beg, and they can go on forever. To take a child like this to McDonald's, you must be brave or stupid or so exhausted, you've agreed to do anything, drive anywhere, to make him stop. The nice people at his special table might be kind enough to move, but if not, they could all get kicked out. They lived in fear of "Don't come back."

Was that what was in store—despotic rule by a toddler with the tantrum bomb?

I would not let this happen with my autistic boy! Remember the mantra "He won't starve."

Wait for the extinction burst.”

The extinction burst: you ring the doorbell. No one comes. You ring again and wait. Nothing. You ring twice in a row and wait. You look at your watch. Maybe they’re upstairs. Maybe they’re wearing earbuds. You press the buzzer hard and angry, inflict an extra push, then stand back and wait. One more time. You decide to give it the count of fifteen. Nope. You’ve been stood up. That’s it! Not going to waste one more second on this shit. Fuck it! You give up and stomp off.

That was the extinction burst.

Now the residents can come out of the closet where they were hiding. They’ve won.

To my surprise, my son was a dream, or relatively anyway. One tantrum, one extinction burst, and I thought we were home free. His problem was with quantity, naiveté, and proportion. He vehemently refused to eat a molecule of fast food. For that this mother is grateful. But the healthy foods? Put him in front of the fruit bin, and he will inhale it until someone stops him. He could eat a whole bowl piled high with peanuts. I had to start buying them in the shell to slow him down. Then it became a ritual, standing in front of the peanut trough, shelling and stuffing, shelling and stuffing. He loves starches of any kind and can go back for thirds and fourths of pasta, potatoes, or plain rice. The next day, he could eat the leftovers cold. He does not gain weight. He burns off the calories pacing, hurtling across the length of the house, stopping, crouching, and leaping into the air. He doesn’t even bend his ankles, just lifts off—a wonder to behold.

But these festive celebrations get their comeuppance with over-reading reports about food safety, about the evils of cholesterol or fat, too much or too little fiber. Did you know that if you eat over seven pounds of spinach a day, it can be toxic? Best not eat any. He pored over charts about mercury in fish, about salmonella in just about everything, about his part in oppressing workers when eating a tomato, about famines and plagues and how the food chain is being destroyed by his assent to eat a lentil. He gave equal weight to science, rumor, and wild predictions. When you believe all of it, there is nothing left to eat.

“Sweetheart? Do you know what seven pounds of spinach looks like? It wouldn’t fit on your plate. It would have a hard time fitting on the table. You can eat the spinach.”

“Is it safe?”

All that’s required of me to calm him is taking the time to talk him down from a ledge, the same ledge his twin sister is perched on but for different reasons—only a couple of hours a day, give or take. My son’s autism yields to reason. It’s his twin sister who makes me tear my hair. “Comparative Disabilities, 101,” maybe good for four credits retroactively at my local university.

When my daughter is at a friend’s house for dinner, I can bring out the exotic stuff—all the pleasure it would take her an hour to dissect. I’ll know if something goes wrong when I get a call from a frantic, bewildered parent asking me what to do. I can only advise, “Don’t be insulted. She’s not violent. Let it go.”

One such night I brought out a pot of menudo. My son and I were hanging over our bowls. Steam, vapors, organ aromas rose sinuously from below our noses. Add the fresh chopped onion, the oregano crumbled in the palm, the hot red pepper, fresh cilantro. The discard bowls were filling up with the bones. He looked up from his bowl and asked, “May I have some more?”

“Absolutely! It’s on the stove.” He filled his bowl and brought it back, heaped it high with all the options—and an extra spoonful of hot peppers.

“Happiness is a spicy mouth!” He devoured it all and then slurped up the last of the broth, tipping the bowl to his mouth. “They do this in China. But not in this culture,” he observed, and taught us how to shovel in harmony with the Central Kingdom.

“Why does food taste so good!?” He stood up and pronounced his one word adieu: “It was a delicious meal, may I be excused please.” He carried his plates to the sink, then ran upstairs, leaving the parents alone, a rare moment to ourselves.

Dad was not so thrilled, stiffly looking over everything, his bowl empty.

“You okay over there?” I asked.

“Tripe isn’t my food of choice,” he offered. He was trying to be polite.

“And that’s why I made you *this!*” I brought him the half chicken breast our daughter had not mutilated the night before.

“You didn’t have to,” he said, but he was smiling.

“Yeah, I did. It’s a reward for you not throwing a tantrum.” I set my inefficient soup spoon aside so I could gnaw on the bones with my bare hands. “You sure you don’t even want a taste? Some day you could at least try it.”

“I am going to demur. Let’s just say it doesn’t call to me.”

“Really.” I shrugged. “You know. It’s probably neurological.”

Tobie Shapiro is a composer and cellist who has also worked as a visual artist, cartoonist, graphologist, and professional chef. She was a columnist for the East Bay Phoenix and has been published or is forthcoming in American Writer's Review, Bluestem, Cobalt Review, DASH Literary Journal, Entropy, Kaleidoscope: Exploring the Experience of Disability through Literature and the Fine Arts, Santa Fe Writers Project, Songwriter Magazine, The Monthly, The Penmen Review, The Coachella Review, and in the anthology Fire in the Hills: A Collective Remembrance (1992). She has attended numerous writing conferences with The Opening and studied with Andy Couturier. She lives in Berkeley, California, with her family.