

Men sell not such in any town

In the realm of the senses.

Nalo Hopkinson

"Did you hear? Rivener has created a new fruit!"

"How dull. Her last piece was a fruit, too."

"Not like this one!" Salope said. She sat me at the table, murmuring the evening benediction as she did so. She draped my long sleeves artfully against the arms of the chair. She took my hat and veil, and hung them on the peg. She plucked the malachite pins from my hair, one by one. She shook the dark springing mass free, and refashioned it into a plait down my back. I endured as long as I could, then leaned back and stared up into her cool granite eyes.

"Tell me of Rivener's creation," I commanded her.

She came around to my side. She slipped her fingertips into the pockets of her white apron and composed herself for the tale. She stood quite straight, as was proper. My blood quickened.

"Rivener's previous fruit," she said, "only sang like a rainforest full of parrots; only enhanced the prescient abilities of those who ate it. This one is the pinnacle."

She stopped, although she didn't need breath. I felt a single drop of sweat start its slow trickle between my breasts. The heavy silks were stifling. "Stop dawdling. Tell me!"

She caught her bottom lip between gleaming teeth. She came and draped my sleeves into a second ritual form: the shape of mourning doves. I gritted my teeth. She continued: "It is the colour of early autumn, they say, and the scent lifting off its skin is a fine bouquet of virgin desire and dandy's sweat, with a top note of baby's breath. It fits in the palm, any palm. Its flesh is firm as a loving father's shoulder."

She stopped to dab at my face with a cutwork linen handkerchief from her pocket, and I nearly screamed. She resumed: "The fruit shucks off its own peel at a touch, revealing itself once only, to its devourer. A northern dictator burst into tears at the first taste of its pulp on his lips, and begged the forgiveness of his people."

"Poet and thrice-cursed child of a damned poet!" Her father too had played this game of stirring exalted cravings in me. I lifted the bodice away from my skin, fanned it to let air in. It wasn't enough.

Salope squatted in her sturdy black shoes, square at heel and toe. This exposed her strong thighs, brought her face level with my bosom. "I'm making you hungry, aren't I? Thirsty?"

"Bring me some water. No, wine."

"At once." She left the room, and returned with a sleek glass pitcher and a glass on a silver tray. The golden liquid was cold, and beaded the pitcher. Salope poured for me, tilted the glass to my lips. I tasted the wine. It was dry and dusty in my mouth. I turned my head away. "What does Rivener call this wonder?" I asked.

"The God Under the Tongue." Salope put the glass down on the table and took the appropriate step backwards. "There are one hundred and seventeen, limited edition, each one infused with her signature histamine."

"The one that makes the fingertips tingle?"

"The very same."

This heat! It distracted one so. "I wish to purchase one of these marvellous fruits."

"To taste it?"

"Of course to taste it! Bring me my meal."

"Instantly." She went. Returned with a gold dish, covered with a lid of sleekest bone. Fashioned from the pelvis of a whale; I knew this. She put the dish down, uncovered it. A fine

steam rose from it. "Here is your supper, Enlightened."

I picked up the golden spoon. "Contact the auction house."

Salope barely smiled. "I already have. It's too late. All one hundred and seventeen of 'The God Under the Tongue' are spoken for."

I slammed the spoon back down onto the table. "Tell them I will pay! Command Rivener to make another! Just one more!"

Salope looked down at the ground. When she returned her gaze to mine, she was serene. "It's too late, Enlightened. The Academy has decided. Rivener has been transmigrated to Level Sublime. She is beyond your reach."

"Machine."

"There is no need for insult, Enlightened."

"Go away."

Salope bowed, returned the spoon to my hand, and dissipated into black smoke. I preferred a pale rose mist, but Salope kept stubbornly reverting to black. It had been her father's favourite colour.

Perverse poet's child; how she could arouse the senses! Her father finally pushed me too far. I'd ordered him to dissolve himself permanently from my aura. I had grieved for two voluptuous years, then sought everywhere for his like. Nothing. Eventually, in desperation, I had summoned his daughter.

I am Amaxon Corazón Junia Principia Delgado

the Third, and I bent over my meal and wept luxurious tears into my green banana porridge. It was a perfect decoction, and it now would not satisfy me. Only the poet's daughter, and her father before her, ever saw me so transported.

The room spoke. "Thank you, Enlightened. I consider myself well paid for today's session. Please recommend me to your acquaintances."

I would.

Nalo Hopkinson lives and works in Toronto, Canada. Her writing has received Honourable Mention in Cuba's Casa de las Americas Prize for fiction. She has just completed a new novel.