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Melassa makes... you see what it wants you to see. It makes a home out of you. It's a place that inhabits you. It makes you its own. It makes you dream, think about it—a spell, like warm honey medicating your synapses, drowning your conscience. A dream, the edges of the scene playing in front of you are blurred, like in a soap opera.

Melassa—the social and geographical equivalent of molasses—makes you think you can enjoy it without risking the feeling of emptiness that usually accompanies it. It possesses a certain seductive quality. Its shores can lure you like the basilisk: a not-so-sexy-but-just-as-dangerous Medusa, without the congeniality the famous Gorgon exudes. Melassa makes sense, doesn't it? It's the periphery, the margin, an external limen that can't be integrated. You've heard of it under so many names and in so many guises. It makes you dizzy, like the chaos in the audience at a donkey race. Everyone has their eyes glued to the animals, both the ones doing the riding and the ones doing the running. While you follow their path, the circular emptiness they are forced into, do you wonder about their inner being? Does the rhythmic clapping of their hooves speak to you? Is it revealing their thoughts? Does it disclose their tiredness and their strength? I think they want you to know, they just don't have the words. Would any of this—any of the answers you tried to conjure—change if, instead of docile, patient donkeys, they were horses? Would the nobility of their step demand a different kind of respect? Do you think the jockey would have been less aggressive, less intolerant of their insubordination? Donkeys are Melassa natives. They fit right in. Their hooves and stocky physique allow them to gracefully collapse into the comforting thickness of molasses. They don't resist it—they let it swallow them in its sticky hug. During the Boston Molasses Disaster of 1919, horses “died like so many flies on sticky flypaper.” I'm sure donkeys would have taught them about passive resistance. About the embrace that awaits you when you stop struggling against the amorphous mass that engulfs past and future like the hungriest black hole. “Don't fight it. Don't even move. Act as if Medusa herself laid eyes on you. This is how you survive. Get rid of your desire to move, to change position and pose. Let it do its job.” Donkeys know Melassa because they were molded by it. They know its strengths and what it fears—the ones it makes up and the ones it suffers from. Melassa makes sure—of your position and your velocity at the same time. It makes you do; it makes you you. It shapes you and determines you. The slime at the end of the world traces your movements like (a) mold, and out of the path you thought was unique, it makes a thousand more. Melassa makes, fabricates, loves make pretend, makes up as it goes. If you ever see a Pinocchio toy made of wood, rest assured it was made in Melassa, you can read about it on its tag. Make of that what you will—lies, maybe habits, lots of making do.

SEPTEMBER

AUGUST

JULY

Mysterious creatures

Eye in the eye—paralyzed stuck breathless motionless. What's new in Melassa?

Sometimes, though, these are not just abstractions. A long, long time ago, my great-great-grandfather saw a snake emerging from the grass and locked eyes with it because you don't ignore a threat, and you don't give something so good at hiding the chance to disappear in front of your eyes, only to show up later on around your boots. He had seen many such critters—from “bisce”, or grass snakes, sometimes vipers, often walser vipers. This one, though, was different. This one was looking back at him. And in that gaze, he felt a grip, a claw grabbing his neck and demanding stillness: that's when he realized it must have been a basilisk. The mountains are difficult to get to know well. You have to spend all your waking hours in and around them, talking about them, sensing all you can sense, and gathering information like you gather wood for the stove. These tricky mountains, especially in the summertime, are full of unknown dangers, and a certain smell of gone, of no-more, that seem to prelude your own demise. Some of the creatures people tell you about, from witches to the “little people”, are scary and off-putting because their purpose is to keep people far from the wilderness. Usually, they are told to protect nature and warn people not to disturb it, not to encroach on its premises with excessive confidence. While this is the usual explanation for folktales, in the case of the basilisk something peculiar seems to apply. It's not trying to force you to move along, to flee the scene and go back to your manmade dwelling, warning your fellow humans as you go. The basilisk forces you to stay, be present and silent, to observe and take in. Passivity, once again, is the only way to survive in these woods. According to folklore, the basilisk is a snake with wings that is born when a hen hatches a snake's egg, or maybe like other reptiles, it's born from the putrefaction and decay, enhanced by the summer heat. It is said to populate Melassa with exceptional density and it was celebrated with a monument in the town of Malesco.



It's time for...

They claim it started in 1954, when some bored friends decided to ride some donkeys around the village of Premosello. In 1981, this elaborate joke of a tradition took a more official legitimacy, and thus the Palio degli Asini (the donkey race) was born. In the days leading to the 15th of August the streets are flooded with sand to make them softer on the donkeys' joints. The event is divided into two phases: the stopwatch race, in which the jockeys run one at a time, and the actual “in-line” race, in which all the participants run simultaneously, risking dangerous encounters in the narrow streets and bridges. Every donkey is associated with one of the cantons of the village, in a timid imitation of the Palio di Siena. These poor animals are forced to run with the weight of a jockey on their backs in the mid-August heat. When describing the event to entice the potential local public, the organizers quip: “Beware, however, that donkeys are not always compliant and cooperative with their jockeys; thus, some moments of uncertainty and hilarity during this unique and fun event will not be uncommon.” Are you laughing yet?

In Melassa, there is more than one occasion that prompts the creation of luminous corridors made of linen. Every five years, the effigy of the Madonna of the Rosary moves back and forth between the parish churches of Fornero and Piana di Fornero. The festivities last three days, and start with an evening procession along a path lit by tens of thousands of candles, through tunnels made of sheets and ribbons, and accompanied by bonfires and chants. At the end of the sacred period, the Madonna is taken to the original location once again. Flowers, real and painstakingly made of paper, are disseminated throughout the path, and everyone is invited to contribute their own linen to decorate the main square of the village. Another occasion, in this case taking place every three years, is the celebration of the Madonna of the Colletta in Luzzogno, in which a plethora of candles is added to the scenography of pure white sheets. These are rituals of light, echoing agrarian symbols—fire, vegetation, and protection from darkness. They probably predate any Christian sentiment or mandate. There and then the Madonna and the archetypal mother (earth) are one and the same.

DID YOU KNOW?



Since the 13th century, Melassa has been inhabited by two distinctly separated cultures: the Latin culture and the Germanic culture, known as the Walser. The first to populate the area were the Latin, who employed stones to fabricate their homes. Their villages still look like a graveyard from above: many rocky, low buildings camouflaged with the terrain. The wooden houses of the Walser, who used stones only to elevate their dwellings and keep rats and humidity at bay, tell you a very different story. Their peculiarity was that they initiated a model of colonization of high altitudes by occupying and transforming abandoned mountain pastures, valleys, and depopulated mountains with permanent settlements. The origin of the settlers, however, remains a mystery. The Walser had their own language, laws, traditions, and even familiar lineage, preserved uncontaminated until recently. The pancake-like specialty called runditt is specifically tied to the All Saints Day celebrations. Until its abolition by the Church in 1826, it was common for the youth of mountain villages to drink and eat runditt all night long, while the more pious were busy praying for the souls of the dead. Thus, the runditt took up an almost eretic significance in the writings of some contemporary bigot. And what if this distinction were mostly a matter of faith and the degree of commitment to it? What if the Walser still had a Calvinist profession ill-fitted to please the local Roman Catholics? Who's to say what is authentically local and what was imported from Germanic populations, be it food, festivities, or building techniques?



Ingredients

- White flour
- Buckwheat flour
- Salt

Cook on a hot cast-iron griddle.
Add butter and garlic while still warm.