



**TAPROOT**

Issue 18: Preserve

Summer 2016

# Recommended Reading: *Preserve*

BY CHELSEA SLAVEN-DAVIS  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELENA MEGALOS

**M**y mother took, quite literally, thousands of photographs of my siblings and myself as we grew up. Film photographs, developed at the grocery store and tucked neatly into the plastic pages of dozens of photo albums; moments preserved as they happened. Sometimes I wonder if a memory I have is true or if it was just constructed around the photograph that captured it—and if that difference even matters. A memory is a living, shape-shifting thing that needs preservation, something to hold it in place for future use.

The best definition of “preserve” I have found comes from one of the books I recommend. It comes at a moment in Abigail Thomas’s memoir, *Safekeeping*, as she describes an experience her mother had in Switzerland and shared with her:

While walking in the mountains, [she] had come upon a small church, and a sign outside said it had been dedicated at the time of Charlemagne. She said it was the first time she’d realized there had actually been a Charlemagne, that he was not a creature of myth. It was late afternoon, getting toward dusk, and as they began to walk away, my mother said all of a sudden they could hear the disembodied voices of nuns coming through the windows of the church singing the same song they had sung at the same hour every day for the last five hundred years. “If safekeeping has a sound,” she said, “then surely this was it.”

The following books also hold the sounds and images and stories of safekeeping.

*Safekeeping:  
Some True Stories from a Life*  
by Abigail Thomas

I first read Abigail Thomas’s memoir when I was in my final year of undergraduate studies, and newly pregnant. I’d never read anything quite like it before. Structurally, the book is composed of titled vignettes that are divided into three parts: “Before,” “Mortality,” and “Here and Now.” The vignettes, however, do not add up chronologically but instead gather up the story, piece by piece, with an unspoken assurance that we’re being told what we need to be told, when we need to be told it.

It was the stuff of the book, though, that felt new and untrod. In *Safekeeping*, Thomas revisits with warmth and frank clarity the formative experiences and difficulties of a life lived: pregnancy at nineteen, single motherhood, marriage and divorce, the keeping of a household, marriage and divorce, the death of a dear friend. She also holds up for examination the smaller moments of in-between: a moment when a young mother soaks her filthy feet in the bath along with her young children in their tiny New York City apartment, and a moment when the young mother sits in a corner of her large house overlooking the Hudson River



and worries that she isn't as happy as she's supposed to be. Thomas's kitchens felt familiar to me—the apple cakes and roast chicken; even at twenty-two, I knew the irrepressible urge to feed those around me.

My cover of my paperback copy of *Safekeeping* has an image of a glass jar with a piece of brown paper crumpled up inside of it. This jar—an icon of preservation, the thing that holds safe the fruits of now for later—suggests, perhaps, the book as an offering, the gift of a life remembered as honestly as the writer can remember it. I've read it at three very different moments in my life, and each time I return to it, it feels like just that.

## The Coast of Chicago: Stories

by Stuart Dybek

In an interview with the Chicago Public Library, Stuart Dybek says a primary function of the arts is “to memorialize, to defy time by using the medium—whether it's painting or photography or poetry—to preserve the past not by storing it in a museum but by making it come alive in the present.” This is, essentially, what *The Coast of Chicago* does for Dybek's memories of the Southwest Side neighborhoods of his childhood.

The stories in *The Coast of Chicago* are populated by bawshkas and summer street corners and Sunday morning mass. Wisps of Chopin's waltzes linger in the air shafts, behind the walls and ceilings of apartment buildings, and

boys give each other nicknames like Pepper and Padrecito and Deejo. Memory is dreamily stirred into the present, the swirling contrast of Pet Milk in coffee, crème de cacao in heavy cream.

Although the street names are recognizable as stops on Chicago's El train, and the Czech and Polish and Hispanic communities that occupy these neighborhoods belong definitely in that city, these stories are set in memory more than place. Its churches are churches I remember visiting as a child in rural Kansas; the sensation of missing someone who is still there is a feeling that I know. Dybek has a knack for making images that rise from the page with an eerie familiarity: shoes peeling flying clods of footprints from the sand; the moon shining on the oily surface of a black river like a single, intense spotlight. What these images evoke is both personal and universal. But this evocation reveals the act of remembering as a way of living in a more heightened present.

## Full Moon Feast: Food & the Hunger for Connection

by Jessica Prentice

I set an intention for myself at the New Year to spend time getting to know the moon and her cycles better. It can be difficult to ignore the moon when it's full, with its big, auspicious energy and light-filled nights—my boys even brought home tales from school of a full-moon fairy who leaves little treats for children who leave their shoes out for her. This

been a sweet way for us to connect with the moon as a ily, but I also wanted a ritual that was deeper in mean- more deeply rooted in an ancient tradition. My digging and for resources led me, perfectly, to *Full Moon Feast* by ca Prentice.

*Moon Feast* is a book both sincerely personal and ex- ively researched. Each chapter is centered thematically und one of the thirteen full moons of the year. The names 1e moons—Hunger Moon, Sap Moon, Egg Moon—are igned from various calendars in the northern half of the tern Hemisphere, much as the historical anecdotes in 1 chapter are collaged from various traditional peoples. ously, Prentice also offers moments from her own ney to “be in touch with the planet and its cycles and ses, the profound intelligence that is at work in the uni- e” as well as in the body—and these moments resonate t clearly when they examine food.

1 chapter ends with a handful of recipes that speak to ull moon at hand. Keeping in mind what might be lo- uly available in that seasonal moment, Prentice puts forth s that are both spiritual and fundamental in nature: ion cured with maple and juniper, lemon verbena ale, 1g tonic nettle soup, Ethiopian spiced ghee, clabbered 1ge cheese. Much as an exquisite violin must be con- ally played to maintain its value, to safely preserve the itional foods and nourishing practices *Full Moon Feast* up from our shared history, they must be prepared and rmed, off the page, served and shared in our contem- ury communities. That is Prentice's vision throughout ook: “That we may find within our hearts the faith, e, and love to live ourselves into a world where action lanced by relationship, and vision is balanced by tradi- ”

## Ah Ha to Zig Zag: 31 Objects from Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

by Maira Kalman

1 *Ah Ha to Zig Zag*, Maira Kalman crafts a playful narrative nd the letters of the alphabet and thirty-one treasures ted from the Cooper Hewitt design collection. In this ren's book, the colors are great and bouncing, and the t is practically curlicued. The objects are not arranged abetically—D does not stand for the sweet porcelain 1 statuette, E does: “This is the cutest dog on Earth. e the cutest Eyebrows on Earth,” and an illustration of mbroidered shirt is accompanied by “Keep your shirt nd please be Kind.”

Although only briefly, at the end of the book Kalman shares the story of the two sisters who created Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. She summarizes with a les- son to be learned: “If you have a good idea—DO IT.” Kalman truly honors the vision the Hewitt sisters had for their mu- seum, as a happy and busy place where the objects collected are to be used and learned from, by creating a joyful book in which these preserved objects come to life, hold emotion and sensation, and invite us in.

