

Sara Alexander – Belonging in Nature – 5/17/24 – “Le Fave”

I first encountered Fava beans walking through a small village in Italy 55 years ago. I was a young twenty-something in a meandering group of American Art students; recently arrived, and all aglow with the excitement of discovering this beautiful new universe of Italy. We exchanged greetings with the elderly men and women sitting by their front doors at the edge of the narrow cobblestone streets. They were popping large beans out of fuzzy green pods into bowls at their feet. The men *really* wanted our attention (I’m sure we were a sight to behold!); chatting us up in an Italian which we barely understood.

They succeeded in getting us to linger by offering tastes of the raw “*Fave*” as well as their homemade *Vino Rosso*. The wine was quite delicious, but I found the beans odd, unfamiliar, and astringent. But, then again, I had never eaten a raw bean, nor, come to think of it, *any* fresh vegetable *ever*. At home, and at school, they had always come from a can or a frozen box.

Soon I will turn 77, about as old now, as they were then. And I am surprised to find myself staring down multiple terrors of aging; the loss of hair and beauty and agility, as well as memory, strength and dreams. And my front door does not open onto a narrow street of a friendly town. If someone does happen to walk by, most likely they are reluctant to say hello, or they are talking to an invisible person through earbuds in their head.

And even if I happened to have some food with me, would I offer it up? Probably not. I’d be afraid of appearing - or rather of *being* – quite odd. I already feel weird enough from all the ways that I deviate from the social norms of my culture: lacking both life partner, and progeny. And at times I feel weird about the things that I do have; like my garden in Sonoma, and the delight I take in growing and eating Fava Beans.

I became, surprisingly, a fan a few decades ago; when I happened to share a plate of gaudy green fava bean puree at the Parkside Café. Soon after, I started buying them whenever I could, and learned how to free each bean from its pod; boil them, ice them, then coax them, one by one, from their second, inner skin; surely the most tedious vegetable preparation I ever endure. But by the time I am done, I have been catapulted - at least temporarily - from the usual hectic pace of my life, into very lovely, very slow, “slow living.”

Then one year a friend gave me a few small plants and they survived! and I became hooked; growing more and more each year, even propagating from dried beans left over from last year’s crop.

There are days when I fear that I love gardening and food more than I love people. That seems like an unfortunate fact...if it is true. But I am sure that there are at least *some* days when I, like the French Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, am quite sure that “Hell is other people”.

And some days, I am equally sure that Heaven comes from favorite foods and from gardening, especially Fava Beans. I am thrilled to see little green leaves shooting up through dark soil. And with rain, and sun, and the passage of time they do the most amazing things: growing slowly at first and then, as the days warm, shooting rapidly towards the sky; birthing little black and white flowers, that morph into long, phallic green pods. And, like my favorite lovers, (- perhaps not so recent - ) there is something *in* them that my body and spirit crave.

I love them variously; simply tossed on a bowl of pasta, with Parmesan and butter. Or pureed with olive oil and not too much garlic, into that bright green paste that turns a lowly cracker into a magic feast.

I do have to figure out how, and where, to age with grace – or perhaps with mischief and audacity - in this culture of mine, that I find sometimes ugly and disappointing. But this year, at least, I still have my garden; and the biggest crop ever (Gd willing I can keep the gophers and wild turkeys at bay.) I haven't harvested the first bean yet, but I am already feeling the comfort and joy.