

This first place poem, "Ode to Margarine" in the 9-12 grade age group is a tribute to margarine given by a recovering anorexic who praises margarine's qualities and benefits. Traditionally, the ode is a structured poem praising or glorifying an event, thing, or individual, often using nature intellectually as well as emotionally.

Many of today's odes are distinctly less formal than odes of the nineteenth century such as those written by John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," or William Wordsworth, "Ode, Composed On A May Morning." Modern odes are formal poems of praise, but they can also be lighthearted, funny, or ironic, or even poems of condemnation. In "Ode to Margarine," this poet's tongue-in-cheek tone carries most of the poem until the last eight lines when the speaker reveals a serious difficulty with anorexia. The poet's use of perceptive language, imaginative metaphor, unusual poetic form, and deftness in handling tone, denote "Ode to Margarine" a first-place poem.

The first two sections are stylistically formatted as prose poetry, while the third section is written in varying line lengths. This unstructured style fits the poem's mature, relaxed tone; and although it is opposed to a formal ode structure of rhyme, set stanzas, and lyricism, it works as a modern ode.

In the first section, the poem opens as many odes do—with a direct address to the object of the poem: "This one goes out to every 'I can't believe it's not butter' and every 'Smart Balance' " those "distant cousin of dairy." The speaker memorably praises the virtues of margarine. Not only does margarine "soften stale toast," it also "softens my brother's sharp tongue." The speaker's mother loves margarine's "reusable body" and "my dad loves your apparent benefits." This inspired metaphor that concludes the poem's opening describes margarine's counterpoint, butter: "The stick of butter now sits unused in our fridge, both edges patched up like sewn sleeves." The poet's tone is a delightful exaggeration of margarine's qualities.

The praise of margarine's qualities becomes more specific—and excessive—in the second section. Margarine is "the WD-40 of a vegan pancake," "the prom dress of broccoli," "the king of the dance floor" that always shows up in "everyone's snapchat story." Most importantly, margarine "has perfected the Cupid Shuffle across my tongue."

Because of its varying line length, the final section differs stylistically from the opening two sections. Here, the speaker melds the properties of margarine with recovery from anorexia. Margarine, the speaker believes, is "the god of eating disorder recovery" and became the "saving grace of my distended stomach, / and the perfume of my night sweats." When the speaker came home from the hospital (we assume the speaker was there because of anorexia), her "mom put margarine on everything she served me" since "margarine is a step away from the place / where my heart beats too slow and my knees bruise each other while I sleep." More to the point, the mother uses margarine because "this means she can't lose me again."

The final lines of the poem offer unsettling revelations of this young speaker's struggle with disease:

From a hospital room that swallows boney bodies whole

and where, at 12, I am the youngest and the only one who's still
scared of the dark.

In recovery, vegetables were useless unless they were blanketed in the oil,
tucked within the slip and slide of a salty puddle,
give me your saturated fats, your peanut butter and ice creams,
give me all the ways I will make my body big enough to see again.

This language of yearning for any fat-based substance that will enable this writer to subdue anorexia rescues this poem from mawkishness and cleverness, or as merely an exaggeration of margarine's qualities. Instead, it is an honest look at a young person's struggle with food as nourishment. In the poem, food is not celebrated by its deliciousness and natural benefits, but by its ability to add fat to the speaker's diet, which will enable this speaker to heal her body.

The poem, "Ode to Margarine," takes the ode's style and purpose and uses exaggeration, irony, and expressive language to create this compelling poem.

Thank you for the pleasure of reading your work!

Marie Kane, Final Judge
Sarah Mook Poetry Contest, 2018