

## Wilderness House Literary Review 15/3

*Jose Luis Oseguera*

### **No Pabulum Ever After**

Mom didn't merely want to like Dad's food—  
instant ramen noodles spangled with bits  
of desiccated carrots and peas,  
sopping over spongy bits of nacho cheese Doritos,  
and spattered with red pepper blood—  
she wanted to feel proud of him for doing something  
that had been so hard for him to do before he was incarcerated.

I don't know what made it so hard for her to swallow:  
maybe it was that her name meant loneliness in Spanish,  
or that it ended with the syllable "dad,"  
or that up to that point she had been the only parent I knew,  
the only one I wanted as much as she wanted him here, with us,  
present, in the room, doing time with her,  
a gift to us, sharing the same laugh  
of a joke they were both finally in on.

Even if it was just for this moment,  
she wanted Dad, the man who had yet to grow into  
his role like she had, to feel comfortable being out  
of the only place that he had known as home—  
a cell, his keep, the hold he couldn't release himself from  
so that he'd begin to get used to us again.

She hoped each morsel would stifle the cavity that had grown  
and ground her tired voice to a haematid asking, "Why?"  
A "when?" that the bland, grease  
sliding down her esophagus still hadn't been able to.

She chewed the abscess rife on her plate  
and reprimanded me for asking disgustedly, "What's this?"

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"Shut up and eat it," Mom hissed.

"It's okay," Dad replied with a chuckle

I failed to recognize as his.

"It's pizza, or, at least, what my cellmate and I  
used to make with what we had around  
whenever we missed the outside."

What about when mom craved him, her pie whole again?

What was left for her to use when her soulmate broke his promise  
of sticking together until the end even though they were both  
unfit to start a family when they did?

That taste in her mouth couldn't be replaced  
by this insipid meal that was supposed to bring it all together.  
It wasn't so much that she truly believed that Dad was trying at all,  
let alone his best, it was that she was unhappy  
and was willing to eat whatever he still owed her, their discord;  
she had accepted the blame for the two bite marks on the apple,  
as if it were her responsibility to not need him,  
her fault for thinking that she could rely on his "for better or worse"  
and not knowing that his freedom was his alone  
though he'd never be free from her.

She ate this first supper as if it were the last,  
a renewed covenant, not because she thought it was good,  
but rather, because she thought it'd be good for her children  
to see the man who'd spent hours in the kitchen,  
preparing this eyesore, as what she'd always wanted him to be:  
a father.

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### **How the Body Can Be a Sky to Hold the Stars**

*—after Karla Cordero*

The mole that orbited back and forth between his forehead and cheekbone  
has finally found sanctuary on his right temple.

It burns bright like a star equidistant from the helix of his ear  
and the lateral canthus of his eye—  
a distance traveled only by a tearful little dipper.

His eyes, their nebulous steeliness, are my mother's:  
strong, brown, unbreakable; hard to read, easily wounded;  
silent spheres that quickly turn as the moon, from phase to phase.

They're eyes born to suffer— annuli of pain—  
twin celestial bodies steeled for the impact  
of meteorites and comets, space debris, mediocrity and regret.  
They smile, though never in photographs,  
and laugh with a silence that can only be heard  
from afar as the sparkles of intergalactic jewels  
that do so without care or inhibition, unaware or burdened by earthly gazes.  
The chiaroscuro beneath his eyes is burdened by the phrase,  
my mother's refrain: "your son is my new Pepito, my new you;  
a new chance to make things right."

He lies in his crib, unfazed, as the orbs inside my head  
remember that as bright as she may be,  
the moon is nothing but stone with no brilliance of its own—  
a mere reflection of the sun— just as my satellites and his  
are but mere moons to my mother's Jupiter;  
eyes don't produce their own light,  
their brilliance and power emanates from the eyes they remind you of,  
their cores, cones and rods, as they age, create heavier and heavier elements,  
a sorrow that remains in the iris as an afterimage.

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But mostly, his eyes remind me of hers when he cries  
because light years ago, in a faraway place we once called home,  
she used to paint most starless nights with a big dipper full of tears.

**Ode to the Testicles**

The apocalypse is very becoming of you fresh out of the shower—  
flesh pink and silken, tenderized by streams of scalding droplets—  
in nothing but the red “Go Nats!” T-shirt we bought, ironically,  
back when we were so sure of many things: our love, life  
and the Dodgers making it to a third straight World Series.  
Steam plumes leave your eyes, half open, so naked and helpless  
without your rose crystal glasses that I question whether the blur you see  
draped comfortably on teal olefin is me or a vision of what could be.  
They say that one cannot be afraid of what one cannot see and yet I wonder  
if I have the balls to go on living without you knowing  
that half the things you say or do drive me nuts.

Locked in our one-bedroom quarantine state, we seek shelter  
from the quagmire looming outside our front door, the stuff muddying  
the fourth and final horseman’s clip-clops in the hallway.  
We blanket ourselves with one another— dark on light skin— at the edge  
of the couch as the death tally ticks faster than time tolls, the news reports,  
at the speed of truth, as the ignoble steed eats away at society’s foundations  
as easily as layered hay bales, and the body stacks pile at the end of the world.

I look into your blue eyes as if it were the first time, as if it were the last—  
wondering if we’ll be raised from the dead after this lazaretto—  
and I try to count the problems that plague us and multiply  
in this tiny space surrounded by walls labelled,  
“Temporary: En route to forever home.”

In spite of this virus, I’m still able to lie to your face with no vaccine to cure  
this learned behavior in sight. Our lies and promises were easy to make when  
life was almost certain and walking out was as simple as turning a knob,  
ignoring the huffing nag, and never looking back.

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But when breath is death— its cold grasp, another's touch—  
our fights, breakouts and, as rage, remorse and rambling course through  
our safer-at-homebodies, our breakthroughs will lead us to a place  
in which the pale horse can find peace, quiet and pasture on which to graze.  
As I lay with you in my arms, you cup my scrotum  
and its vaginal tunics as lovingly as if it were a heart:  
the only heaven I've ever known. I exhale away from your face  
lest I fog up the glasses I fetched for you from the wet vanity  
and this be the last time you see me, the final breath we share as one.

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**Ode to the Corpus Cavernosum and Her Sister, Spongiosum**  
*or (Cuando Todo Se Va a La Verga)*

“Wow nice, you are going to be a father,”  
she texted late one night, well, 7:38 p.m. in LA, late for her in New York.  
She was my ex and I, her why?

The mail body of handwritten letters and Yoko Ono postcards  
we were supposed to make together was aborted  
for a ghosting of texts and haphazard selfies.

How selfish of me to not think of her as mother material,  
her hips and womb, as yoke and beast of uterine burden.

It was my way of forgetting her,  
how I chose to ward off her gentle eyes,  
the warm sensation of how she used to kiss me  
and dig her untrimmed fingernails into my twin tissue  
as if it were dirt primed for seed.

“When is he due?” she texted two hours later.

“June,” I replied.

“You know... ours would’ve been a Virgo.”

The baby — our oneness — we dreamed of after we’d each reach  
our own version of orgasm inside the secret ward  
we had built out of hours of Beatles’ music, sencha tea, and her virginity,  
her “virgin” in her “English,” which wasn’t necessarily broken, but quite fragile:

a place so unlike the world outside of it that,  
when I touched her, I couldn’t feel her;

I’d gaze upon her, yet I couldn’t see her.

When our mouths were layered lip on lip  
like a cake, a spongy upside down cruciform with all the fixings,  
our teeth were retracted, tongues intertwined,  
breaths protracted, but I still felt the bite.

She spoke, I listened, but I couldn’t hear her:

we were as two cosmic travelers lost in outer space,  
no longer two but together, not lovers yet too in love  
with nowhere to go but outside of our creation;  
both of our virtues faced forward,

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blinking as clear as Lennon-McCartney harmonies,  
as black and white as MS-DOS waiting for an answer, a command,  
toward one another— inward— usward.



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### **Hoping for the darkness that shields me**

*—after Chiwan Choi's "the moment it begins"*

There's a wolf in us all;  
it grows heavy in our bones  
as it gently nibbles away  
at all that is wild and pure and bare.

At 10 months, you mouth at anything whose will  
your soft, long fingers can bend—  
the pianist's hands my Grandma Chole used to say I had at your age.

Yet from the same litter, we are different:  
you were born of chaos and night—  
child of earth and love—  
and thirst the ocean and the clouds;  
you breathe and exhale the ether's light;  
your pup growls and craves the fatty mire in my marrow.

Soon you will grow canines sharp enough to speak words that'll cut  
through my flesh, the white fleece  
of excuses that cover my gray fur;  
it is an endless sea of anger and disappointment,  
familiarity and warmth, the whole  
of a Mexican she-wolf and her prodigal mate,  
an alpha and beta unfit to keep their pact,  
their fangs, whet with any sign of weakness,  
raring to bathe their lips with "shut the fuck up"  
and "you better not look at me that way when you cry."

These thoughts that make me flee, infested  
with visions of an older you  
whose eyes no longer ask for food, but answers,  
when you'll let me know who you are  
and my immediate response will be  
to overpower you with who I've been,

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the dogged spirit burrowed deep within my heart den  
that howls to the moon about the brute,  
the brusqueness, the mess, the trauma in its blood:  
I won't allow my shadow to be your body,  
and I'll paw away and bury my pack's shards,  
their reflection, my mirror no more.

We'll each have a chance to find our beast,  
yet let's not be so quick to kill it  
lest it shakes in fear before you, ready to bite;  
instead, put your knife away, and listen.