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FIRST FRUITS

presented by

Mary McInnis Roessler

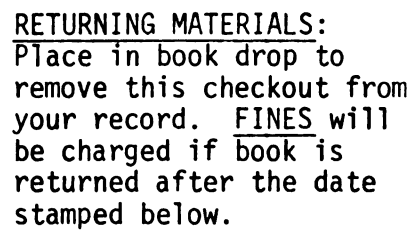
has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

M.A. degree in English



Major professor

Date May 13, 1983



P.O. 140-4830

FIRST FRUIT

By

Mary McInnis Roessler

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

1983

ABSTRACT

FIRST FRUIT

By

Mary McInnis Roessler

This thesis is a series of free verse poems and prose-poems which are largely narrative in nature. There are three sections: the first, "In Search of Real Toads," contains four poems which relate to the struggle of writing poetry; the second, "First Fruit," contains twenty-two poems which explore the author's relationships and experiences with family and friends; the last, "Entering the Brown," is composed of fifteen English-Spanish poems which stem from the poet's travel in Mexico and her experiences as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Colombia.

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IN SEARCH OF REAL TOADS

FOR DIANE (who always demands more of
me than I think I can give)

Sheepish,
I bring you
my bituminous
lump.

You are not satisfied.

Later
I offer anthracite.

Still you frown,

always
slyly
knowing
someday
I may present
you
with another
diamond
for your
crown.

IN SEARCH OF REAL TOADS

I search for you today,
knowing you must be there
hidden like a family secret
in some forgotten closet
of my mind,
awaiting my discovery
untouched, pristine
as early snow.

I search my past
as a ferret sniffs his way
in the gloom of a rabbit warren
at night,
seeking some sound,
some scent
which will recall
your presence.
My memory,
stingy as an unregenerate Scrooge,
yields nothing.

I search my imagination,
hoping to find a garden
luxuriant with tiger lilies
and toads,
but my muse is barren
and silent as a moon.

I search again
until my child appears,
eager for a story.
Setting aside
my still empty notebook,
I go to her and find you.

MEMO TO MYSLEF WHILE IN SEARCH OF
A DAZZLING METAPHOR

Dearie--

Your thoughts
are like stale vapors
which have been trapped
beneath layers of quilts
since 2 A.M.
in the upstairs bedroom
of an old farmhouse
in winter
where the cool morning air
is as pristine as
a new baby's bottom
until someone lifts the covers.

Your brain needs fresh air
and exercise.

Why not journey
across the dark continent
of Sexton's metaphors
where the muses are mad
and God wins at poker?
Do you dare?

Or spend a night barhopping
with Bukowski.
You'll
laugh your ass off
get loaded
get laid
then wake up
with bad breath
and a magnolia between your teeth.

Or struggle once again
up Mt. Diane*
where unsolved riddles
still can make you cry
and to gasp is
to begin to understand.

She has severals peaks
but all the paths lead up.

What do you say, dearie?
Why not
climb a mountain
with a magnolia in your mouth?
The mad muse may teach you
to dazzle the world.

*Thank you, K.B.

GOLD IS WHERE YOU FIND IT

I sit at a student's desk after school and try to write.
Nothing comes.

I hear the cheerleaders practicing in the hall.
Claps, chants and a little all-American ass
for the hometown fans.

(God--and I used to be one.)

The desk I am sitting at has been painstakingly
embellished with a drawing of a gigantic spider web,
complete with two spiders and a couple of dead bugs.

On the right,
with an accusing arrow pointed in its direction,
is written,

"This is the stupidisk ass thing I ever seen."

(I hope one of my Comp. students didn't write that.)

On the left,
in impeccable print,

"Jim Yager sucks."

And 46

40

86 (Well, at least they can add.)

My eyes wander across the room to the "No-nos".

Stupid--Instead try obtuse, dull-witted, dense,
addlebrained or bovine.

(Mrs. Roessler, my students tell me,
this is very bovine.)

Gross--Instead try vulgar, crude, disgusting,
nauseating or repulsive.

(Mrs. Roessler, you are repulsive.)

A poster leers at me from the front of the room:
"Sometimes I sits and thinks and sometimes I just sits."
The flourescent lights flicker.
The janitor comes in to sweep the floor.
I decide not to "just sit" any longer,
pick up my papers
and walk out.

(There's no way I can write a poem in this place tonight.)

FIRST FRUIT

-

CHANGE OF LIFE

Last year my husband was a teacher and a photographer.

He spent his time

correcting papers

making lesson plans

and figuring out new schemes to avoid

water-spotted film.

He worried about

transescent children

principal evaluations

his hair length

and whether or not his Career Ed. company would

be allowed to sell "Woodies"

(chocolate sundaes named after Brenda

Woodman--her idea)

during one lunch hour or two.

He agonized over muddy prints and trite images,

sunny days were his nemesis,

and he spoke educationese.

This year is different. He is a football coach.

He now spends his time

practicing football

playing football

discussing football

and watching football on T.V. (Go Blue!)

He wakes up nights, steals down to the family room and

makes cryptic notes on new plays to teach his teams.

He is obsessed by

weak middle linebackers

inadvertant whistles

and winning.

He curses the rain.

And he has taken to wearing Adidas.

I wonder what he will become next year.

THE NEW ADAM AND EVE

Like a dentist
tapping in swift, assiduous strokes
on white enamel,
he types out
gosubs, peeks, and pokes
on his APPLE.

(Unlike Hal
the APPLE is docile and obedient,
its subversive activities
limited to occasionally
devouring programs
meant for public rather than
machine consumption.)

The APPLE
and its beige
color-co-ordinated
monitor
pose like mini-monarchs
on the ornate oak table
which has replaced the knotty-pine bed
and musty mattress
where guests used to sleep.

I sit twenty feet away
in the bedroom
reading Levertov,
pause to listen to his
woodpecker fingers.
They rest from time to time
and lift a beer,
rest while he ponders the monitor,
scanning each line for a miscue,
then return abruptly to work.

I return to my book.
A smug smile slips
between my teeth and into my brain
because I know that
later
those same fingers
will not belong
to the beer can
or to the APPLE
but to me.

FOR MY HUSBAND ON OUR TENTH ANNIVERSARY
(on the night when you're at that
"lousy Planning Commission meeting"
and I'm at that
"damn poetry class.")

I wonder tonight
if you have ever regretted
the influence of those
Singapore Slings
you drank that evening before
you proposed;
you could not have known then
that you were getting
a woman
who can't remember to turn
off the iron
or take meat out of the freezer
for dinner,
who refuses to change the
kitty litter
or shave her armpits in the winter,
a woman
who has a mania for
jogging through your
living room in cold weather
and who mends your clothes
only under duress.

Are you ever sorry?

Do you sometimes wish I had
Bo's body
Farrah's face
Golda's guts
or Margaret's mind?
Do you wish that I
hated
suntans and
poetry and
eating out
and loved
the stock market and
computers and
fishing?

Do you wish that I preferred
investment to
expenditure,
The New Republic to
Gourmet?

Are you tired of my always
wanting to lose
that same five pounds?
Have you had it with
my blow dryer
and
my interrup-
tions?

I know that
the answers must be
yes
but I know too
and I know that you know
that these
aren't
the important
questions.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

My daughter is having a bad morning.
She has a cold,
she woke up early,
and she wants to be held.
I try very calmly explaining to her
that mommy can't hold her right now
because she is busy trying to make herself look and
smell human once more.

(God, I hope I don't forget my deodorant again
today.)

She does not understand or, if she does,
she's pretending not to.

"Up!" she demands for the eleventh time.

(I've been counting them. Numbers help keep me
sane at moments like these.)

Finally, having done my best to disguise the ravages
of an almost sleepless night,

I pick her up.

She rubs a large glob of mucous,
which she seems to have been storing up
for this precise moment,
on my sweater.

Downstairs three minutes later

I have to put her down to make the coffee
and she chases me around the kitchen crying

"Up! Up!" (Twelve, thirteen.)

She grabs my leg like a strong defensive end
and plants another glob of mucous,
this one on my skirt.

I do not say,

"Poor child, you're sick and your nose is runny.

Let me wipe it dry.

Come, I'll hold you and comfort you."

Instead, between clenched teeth, I mutter, "Kate,
Goddamit, don't wipe you snotty nose on me again."

I make both of our breakfasts--fruit and granola.

I set the bowls on our kitchen table,

hoping the food will pacify her.

It does not.

She continues to cry.

She is pulling on the tablecloth which I have taped down
 (cleverly preparing for an emergency such as this.)
I hope the tape holds.
I shovel my granola more fiercely into my mouth
and finish breakfast in record time.
Shortly afterward when I have a moment to relax
with a second cup of coffee,
I hold her in my arms
and she falls asleep.

FIRST FRUIT

Her small hand opens
like a flower
to scatter seeds
in rows which lie
narrow and straight
as strings on the violin
her grandfather used to play.
She hums the tune he taught her
and studies
scholarlike
the movements of the hoe
as he fills in each
seeded furrow,
then tamps the earth
with patient hands.
Together
they spray rainbows
till the soil is moist.

Later
her fingers explore the garden,
touching each plant
before uprooting the intruders.
Those left
she tells me
will grow
as large as our house
and bear fruit
the size of grandpa's cow.

One green afternoon in August
as I sit at the piano
playing Brahms,
she enters from the garden
with a sly smile
and a secret.
When I guess which hand,
she holds out to me
like a prize
her first tomato,
still summer-warm.

I accept the gift
and she prances out
unperturbed
that her tomato
is merely the size of
a tomato.

EVENING MARAUDERS

Out of the green twilight they come,
these evening marauders.
Galloping four-strong in search of
their fifth,
each carries her provisions for the night:
a quickly folded sleeping bag bulging
in odd spots,
a pillow,
a ragdoll with legs dancing as they run.

They swoop the neighborhood for plunder,
shrill and confident,
their voices strident flutes,
a continuous staccato of excitement.
Together in the near-darkness
they own the street,
command the sidewalk.
Each stop yields up a treasure:
 chocolate bars
 plums
 an invitation to swim.

Later
inside the house,
their belongings heaped in careless piles,
a joyful jumble of shapes and colors,
they crowd about me,
clamoring gleefully for snacks.
It does no good to protest the hour.
Nothing is to be denied them--
Tonight they sleep together.

THANK YOU NOTE

Dear Mother,

I know you've always wanted me to be polite.
Do you remember
at my bridal shower
when I received
that giant hollow chocolate
in the shape of a penis
and I said,
"Mother, this is a chocolate penis,"
and broke off one of the balls
and handed it to you and said,
"Have one,"
and you asked me,
"Did you say thank you, dear?"

And I know you've always wanted me to be tidy.
Do you remember
when I came home from college
my senior year
and finally worked up the courage
to confess to you
that I had let
my boyfriend
spend the night with me
and you said,
"I hope your room was clean."

And I know you've always wanted me to be punctual.
Do you remember
that I didn't have a single tardy
in high school
until the counselor
finally contacted you
to ask that I not be sent to class
with a box of sugar corn pops and
without socks
and you said,
"But last year she had a perfect record,"
and he said,
"Lady, let her rest on her laurels."

And I know you've always wanted me
to take care of my body.
Do you remember
when I called to tell you
about the Phi Beta Kappa banquet
with the terrific speaker
who challenged by complacent intellect
and made me want to read
Kierkegaard and
Sartre and
understand the reality of existence
and you said,
"That's lovely, dear.
Did you eat your peas?"

So
I'm writing to say
I'm glad
that even though
I send thank you notes
only after several reminders and
my house suffers
from chronic grubbiness and
the last time
I was on time
was when your train was late and
I still don't eat
my peas,
you've never once
said you're disappointed.

MY FATHER WONDERS WHY

My father wonders why I am taking a poetry class.
To his mind poetry is one of Mankind's foolish vanities,
a waste of time which has little, if anything,
to do with "real life".
Rhymed iambic pentameter
full of obscure symbolism
meaning nothing
and engaged in by deranged women and homosexual men.

I tell him about my class.
He is suspicious.
"They all a bunch of weirdos, are they?"
I assure him this is not the case.
He is silent, but not convinced.

On the phone, I tell him I want to write a poem about
an early snowfall and ask how it would affect farm life.
He indulges me but is mystified when I ask for
specific details.

I can hear my mother open the kitchen door.
She has just taken Sam, their dog, for his morning walk
out to the back wheat field.

"Who's that?"

"It's your daughter. She's writing a poem."
I can hear the laughter in his voice.
It does not make sense to him.

When I finish the poem I shall give him a copy.
And he will ask, "This is poetry?"
And I will say, "Yes, I think so."

And he will fold it up and keep it in his drawer.

FIRST SNOWFALL #1

"Well, it's here," was all he said when he came in from the barn.

She hadn't looked out since getting up,
had preferred instead to busy herself with the bacon
and coffee and thick corn mush with molasses
she always prepared for him on cold mornings.
She made excuses for not confronting the window--
she usually took joy in looking out,
in watching the seasons pass
through the changes in the mountain ash
by the barn.

This morning she pretended that there was not time,
and squeezed fresh orange juice to make sure.

"The corn's lodged already," he added.
"Eleven inches and heavy wind.
The apples'll turn to mush for sure now.
And no getting in that last cutting of hay.
I'll call Ben and tell him he'd best not come today.
No tractor could get through that."

She poured his coffee and filled his bowl with
the yellow porridge.

"One egg or two?"

This was the second year the snow had come early.
It was said that if you were a good farmer
you could survive two bad years in a row.

"I'll go to the bank today," he said.
"Maybe with another loan." His voice trailed off.

Grease from the frying pan splattered her face.
"Oh God," was all she said.

FIRST SNOWFALL #2

All morning
there are urgent buzzes,
noses flattened white against
putty-edged rectangles of glass.

Geography:
The earth rotates on its axis at a
twenty-three and one-half degree tilt.
Over fifty percent of the countries in
the world have an annual GNP of less than
one hundred dollars.

Roundly earnest blue eyes
yearn to flee the pages,
purloin furtive glimpses
of the grey-white sky,
return to their task.

Language Arts:
T-h-e-r-e is a location;
T-h-e-i-r shows possession;
T-h-e-y-'-r-e is a contraction.

Scuffed leather shoes shuffle, restive.
Desks open and close.
A child sneezes.
Suddenly a tremulous flurry of voices:

Now! Now! Look! It's started!
Oh, look, look!
Oh, look!

The lesson is suspended.
Outside
billions of thick flakes
float
whitely
to
earth.

ADULT BASIC ED.

We cluster together
like grapes,
squeeze tightly,
hoping for wine.
But this group is used to vinegar.

Floyd's face is shaggy, his hair a scrub brush.
He has teeth like a cow and he talks too much.
He suffered brain injury as a child.
He is unemployed, and his wife calls him Dopey.

Tonight, Floyd tells me, he is sure he can do it.
He has practiced all week.
He is certain he knows the difference between did and the.

Great, Floyd! Let's see.

He hands me worn flash cards printed in large red letters.
I hold one up.
His brow lowers, his eyes narrow as if squinting at the sun.
After a few seconds, he says slowly d-i-d.

Floyd! That's terrific!

He smiles slyly through yellow teeth.
We try again and again and again.
The fifth time he misses.

Sonny is round, and bald at thirty-five.
He used to drink and raise hell but lately he has found God.
Now he worships with the same boisterous passion that he
brought to his drinking.
Sonny prays to lose weight, his wife to stop smoking.
He tells stories like a balladeer and he can fix anything.
What he cannot do is read.

He tries to sound out words by saying each letter very
loudly:

T! I! M! E!

he almost shouts, but the letters refuse to yield up
their secrets.
He tries again, then guesses, Tommy!

Almost, Sonny.
It's time. Remember about silent "e".
He nods, retreats to a corner to practice finding is.

Dick is quiet and intense.
He is built like a nose guard, but his back is bad.
This is the third time he has worked up the nerve to
return to night school.
His eyes become hard, his hands knot beneath the table
when he starts to read.

Tonight he has brought a book with him.
It is Green Eggs and Ham by Dr. Seuss.
With only a little help he reads one page, then another.

Floyd and Sonny applaud.
Dick shifts in his chair, reads a third page.

Dick, that's wonderful!

Beneath his thick beard there is a shy smile, but he puts
the book in a sack before he leaves.

There are others: Irene, overweight and afraid of numbers;
Judy, divorced, living on ADC--each week she has a new dream;
Al, walrus-like, writing stories about his youth.

And others.

Twice a week from 7:00 to 10:00 we meet in a house trailer,
our "portable classroom", behind the high school.
I provide cookies; Sonny, coffee.
Together we eat, drink, and struggle.

After my daughter is born, I bring in a whole roll of
colored pictures of her.
She is six weeks old and looks like an infant, bald and soft.
They assure me she is beautiful.
Sonny's wife, who is still smoking, crochets her a blanket.
It is her first attempt and one side is longer than the other.

At the end of the year, we picnic together in my backyard.
The wives and husbands and children attend.
We all eat too much and Floyd will not stop talking.

In September I find a full-time job.
None of the people who were in the A.B.E. program when
I taught it finish the following year.
Floyd and Sonny and Dick still can't read.
I'm not sure how much it matters.

I think perhaps it was I who profitted most from our
time together.

APPLE EVENINGS

Eight autumns ago
I taught English to the migrants
who worked in Nelson's orchard.
I would arrive
September evenings at dusk
after they had spent all day
with the apples--
 picking, sorting, crating, hauling
 Cortlands, Spies and Johnnies, Macs.
We met in a barren room
 which held a table
 a few chairs
 and an erratic stove;
Above us, a sixty-watt moon.

Mostly men,
the workers would arrive
often late
fresh from supper
or a nap--
or from a bath,
their hair still wet,
slicked back,
with plans to go into town
after class
to drink
or find a woman.
Young men, good-natured,
with thoughts of cars
and travel--
soon to Texas.

Some spoke English fairly well;
others little.
In truth, it was the same;
they came for something to do,
to visit with each other
and with the big-bellied gringa,
more in Spanish than in English.

I was round and ripening
like an apple,
though mine would be January fruit.
After class

I would walk out into
apple-crisp evenings,
see the moon, apple-round and rosy,
smell the apple air,
and go home to hot cider
and my husband.

And they would walk
through that same apple-sweet air
to their shacks
their women
their liquor
and their dreams.

In October I received a call:
They were gone with no good-byes,
following their migratory pattern
like geese,
travelling in communal flocks
to the lemon-warm air of the South.

I stayed in the North,
awaiting my winter harvest.

GOING TO THE SPRING FLING

Are we more generous in the spring?
Are violets and robins
sly alchemists
who work upon
our tarnished winter spirits
converting them again
to generous gold?

Perhaps.
Perhaps there is that.
More likely though
it is the children's
radiant eagerness:
"Oh yes! We want to go!
We've never been.
Oh yes! Oh yes!"
And knowing their mother cannot
afford to take them.
It is arranged by phone,
my husband's voice
like a young boy's
seeking his first date.

On Saturday they arrive early
in T-shirts
and jeans still damp
from the dryer.
At the carnival
we watch four children
instead of one:
they bob
gay and bright as helium balloons
through the spacewalk
to the duck pond;
hearts and stars
blossom on their cheeks;
a jubilant cascade of Pepsi
redampens the jeans.

They tell others loudly,
"Kate's mom and dad paid our way!"

We lose in
the cakewalk and in
the raffle
for Preppie the Mouse.

"Okay, you guys,
two more tickets each,
and that's it!"

Chrissy encircles a milkcan
with a hula hoop
and wins her best prize:
a fuzzy rainbow pillow.
Wendy picks up another duck
from the pond
and walks away with a second watch.
Peewee shoves the truck again
and it stops in front of
the plastic spider rings.
His grin is larger than he is.

Later
leaving us, they chorus,
"Thank you.
Thank you. Thank you!"
And
in the still cool
spring twilight,
we glisten.

FOR FRANK

Old Frank Davenport came to look at
our furnace today.
He spent an hour with us
even though he's supposed to be retired,
told us,

"This furnace was a good one when she
was built.

She ain't too bad now."
took apart the motor
oiled it
fixed the fan
spoke about the advantages and disadvantages
of woodstoves and
forced-air heat.

It was hard for him to talk.

"Had a stroke.

But besides that and diabetis and
bad circulation, I ain't doin'
too bad."

He chuckled.

"Do you want us to pay you now or will
you send us a bill?"
my husband asked.

"Don't matter, but if you've got
three dollars, I'll take it now."

We made him take five, though he protested.

JIMMY T., I LOVE YOU

Jimmy T. was born
eighty-eight years ago in Woodland,
the town where he lives today.
He is smooth and bent now
as the silver spoon
with which he stirs his Sanka.
We sit together in his kitchen
with coffee
and sugar donuts which he has bought
for the occasion.
I admire his placemats,
laminated Christmas-card collages
made by the Senior Citizens,
each one
one of a kind.

He tells me stories
of when he was a young man:
he refused to marry
the first woman he loved
when she confessed to him that
she was not a virgin (though he does not
used that word).
At unexpected moments his eyes fill
with tears;
his voice rusts.

He shows me old photographs
of Woodland:

A.J. Smith when he was postman
with a horse and wagon,
carrying the Christmas mail;

two Richardson ladies
wearing long dresses and blurry smiles,
outside, making apple butter
in a giant kettle;

a gathering downtown
of people come to listen to
a re-election campaign speech
of Michigan Governor Ferris;

the first pet parade with children
and their animals, including
roosters, turtles, and guinea pigs;

all of Woodland's returning
Civil War Veterans; there were
twenty-three.

I make copies of these photos
to put in a book
and take a picture of him as well.

I leave later than I should.
He kisses me good-bye,
still talking.
I squeeze out the door,
clutching my little piece
of history.

His voice
resonant as antique crystal
lingers in my ears
as I hurry through the snow
to my car.

PORTRAIT OF A NUN IN A GARDEN

On this cool summer evening
 we find you in the garden,
 your broad body bent over
 a row of dahlias
 like a concerned mother,
 muttering tersely in Hungarian
 as your fingers ferret out
 crabgrass and chickweed.
 Your hands are at home with the soil,
 your eyes touch every bloom.

You pinch seeds from the dry blossoms
 of the columbine,
 give them to me
 along with others you have gleaned today:
 delphinia, marigold, coxcomb.
 You tell me when to plant,
 in fall or spring,
 then pick peonies and iris
 to fill my daughter's arms.

We leave the garden with the sun.
 As you pass,
 the flowers ripple and
 bend in the breeze.

ROMANCE

When I was thirteen
and had just seen "Gone With the Wind"
and my hormones were caught in overdrive,
I met a short blond kid
with eyes as deep as Lake Superior
and I immediately jumped in.

"Where you from," I asked,
getting right to the point.
"Copper country," he said.
He had a funny Finnish accent
which charmed me.
"What's your name?"
"Just call me Ladd."
Of course I should have known
right then and there
that any boy who calls himself lad
is not to be trusted,
but I didn't.
Ladd, whose first name was Donnie,
spent summers with his aunt and uncle
who lived near us.
He was buddies with my brother, Jim,
and was often at our house.

I tried various methods
to attract his attention.
For a while
I took to applying Vaseline
to my face,
then covering it with powder
because I found this gave me
a glamorous tan complexion.
This continued until one day
when I entered the kitchen after
my morning toilette
and Jim looked up from a large bowl of
neapolitan ice cream and said,
"You'd better see a doctor.
Your face is orange."

I tried other methods as well--
such as shaving my legs,
plucking my eyebrows,
and telling Donnie how much I hated him--
but none of these worked either.
I felt like a fisherman
dangling an underweight worm
in front of a Northern pike
that had just lunched
on a sizable and succulent trout.

Then something happened which was
as unexpected as a sad ending
in a Doris Day movie.
For reasons
which I didn't question then
and haven't figured out since,
one night
for maybe fifteen minutes
in our treehouse
with my brother
and several neighborhood friends present,
Donnie held my hand.
I didn't dare look at him
and we didn't speak to each other
the whole time,
but joked with the others
as though holding hands
were as normal
as Friday night movies
or corn flakes for breakfast.

I developed an aggravated case of
sweaty palms,
but I held tight anyway
for fear he might lose interest
if I loosed my grip to dry them.
After a while
he and Jim ran off to dig nightcrawlers
in their secret place
and wouldn't let any girls tag along.

I didn't care.
I had things to think about,
such as when Donnie might kiss me
and how he might propose.

Donnie never held my hand again
despite its eager availability and,
through my elaborate nocturnal maneuverings,
its conspicuous proximity to his own.
A couple of years later
his summer visits ceased
as suddenly and inexplicably
as his handholding.
My first brush with romance was over,
but the effects remain.
My palms still sweat when I hold hands
and even now
I have a weakness for lads
with Lake Superior eyes.

PHOTOGRAPH

I see you
drinking the beer I bought you
your hands raising the glass
to your lips
again and again
until you are touching
me
with your hands and
your lips
again and again
and there is not enough
time
for drinking or touching
and afterwards we are
like some poorly exposed
photograph
blurry and underdeveloped
and I wonder
as I see you
again and again
if we are worth keeping
or if
like that photo
we
should be discarded.

WINTER LOVER

Once a year and always in the snow
you leave your land
and travel to the city.

You come to me
beard trimmed
smelling of lavender.

(I wonder if the fragrance is your
wife's, but I do not ask.

You never say.)

One question I do permit myself:

Why do you come only in the cold?

You tell me:

The winter wheat is safe
beneath the snow.

I know your firewood is piled
high and neat,
cords of ash and oak and apple
cut from timber in your woods,
purchased by your labor to warm
the frozen night.

The fire's my companion, you have
said.

(This gives me hope.)

Always

before you come
you send me word.

The message is the same:

One week from now.

Four words which pierce
like silver blades
and pare away all else in life
but thoughts of you.

Each year I keep your letter.

I have a small packet of them now
tied with ribbon
and fragrant with sachet.

You bring me gifts,
last year a brooch,
this year some amber beads.

They're very old, you say,
made of ancient resin.
They carry fossils thousands of
years old.
You show me one--
a tiny insect
caught while trying to escape.
You place the chain around my neck
with hands which know
the secrets of my body.
I blossom in them like your
wheat in spring.
We touch. We touch.
You look at me just so.
I lose myself within your amber eyes.

Is it time, you whisper.
Oh yes. I'll light a candle.
Silent as snow you follow me.
The fire hisses after us.
And then all else is silence
till you moan.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

An acquaintance of mine,
an artist who creates
angular mysteries
with water colors,
recently moved
to California
where she resides
with her husband
in a two-hundred-thousand-dollar
house
custom-furnished
in earth tones
and tastefully decorated--
understatement is the key--
with moderately priced
"objets d'art".

Both dress
in designer clothes
and have grown
fashionably thin
eating wheat germ and yogurt.
And last spring
for only eight hundred dollars
her slender legs
were purged of
cellulite.

She and her husband
live contentedly alone
with their Burmese cat
and a part-time maid
making plans to buy
a more expensive house
which, they explain,
they are fortunate enough
to be able to afford
because they have no
children.

IN RESPONSE TO A REQUEST FOR INSPIRATION

You have asked me to inspire you.
What can I say?

Shall I tell you of my friend
who is dying of Lou Gehrig's disease
at thirty-five,
how she laughs as her muscles
turn as soft as a fish's belly,
how she
writes letters
takes trips
visits friends
and worries about her husband
who can't cope?
She cries when he's asleep.
Perhaps she's wrong.

Shall I tell you of my aunt
who has lived by herself
for sixty years
and fills her life with books
and photographs of places she has been,
who is alone
with her bad heart
but knows that next year
she will see the Bahamas if
she saves a few more coupons
and gives used paperbacks
at Christmas?
She cannot hold a conversation,
for muttering to herself,
and she's quick to fuss at
children when they're loud.

Shall I tell you of my grandmother
who has helped
two daughters
a son
her husband
and a brother
to die,

who drinks her tea strong and
still dares to read her future
in the leaves,
who, at eighty, walks three miles a day
bakes bread
and teaches her great-grandchildren
the mysteries of the pudding stone?
She's cranky with clerks
and sometimes wets the bed.

There is no inspiration in this,
you say?
Perhaps you're right.
So I tell you to look elsewhere
for your inspiration.
Don't look to me.
I have none to give.

FOR RON, MIKE, AND JEFF

Cupped in life's hands
like fresh spring rain,
you slipped too soon
between her careless fingers
into other hands
which one day
will cradle each of us
as well.

We were not ready to lose you.

We grieve.

We grieve
for we loved you.

We grieve
for what you might have become
that now is lost to us.

And we mourn for each other,
for those suddenly arid places
in our lives
that you refreshed and nurtured
with your presence.

Our only consolation
is that, for a while,
you were among us.

Even in brittle winter
we can rejoice in thoughts
of fresh spring rain.

ENTERING THE BROWN

OH SERGIO, WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?

Half my life ago, back when I was twenty and had more time and energy and metaphysical inclinations than I do now, I earnestly sought the answer to such basic cosmic questions as: What is the meaning of life? I was having trouble finding the answers.

The summer before I had been in Mexico, practicing Spanish and falling in love with my roommate's novio after my roommate returned to Michigan. The young man's name was Sergio. Sergio was short, dark, and flaco. I outweighed him by at least twenty pounds. Nevertheless, we got on.

Sergio, like many Mexicans, was poetically inclined, and talking with him in my faltering Spanish over cafés or refrescos while gazing into his dark, tragic eyes was almost more than my romantic little soul could bear. Of course, my incomprehension of at least half of what he said contributed deliciously to Sergio's mystery and appeal.

When we separated late that summer, we promised to write and I sniffled during much of the three day train trip from Mexico City back to Chicago. Feeling the need, as I often did then, to impress my boyfriends with my spiritual depth, I wrote to Sergio on the eve of my twentieth birthday, at which age, it seemed to me, I should surely be able to answer all the essential questions of life. I wanted him to share in my search.

"Oh Sergio," I asked, "Sergio, qué significa la vida?"

A week later I received a letter from Sergio in which he obligingly and glibly answered my question.

I don't remember what he said and I have long since thrown away his letter, though I wish I hadn't because it would be a kind of archeological key to my past self.

I ponder smaller questions now: What color should we paint the bathroom trim? Whose turn is it to change the kitty litter? I live with my husband and daughter, I teach, and I struggle to write an occasional poem. I no longer wonder about the meaning of life.

CRUZANDO LA FRONTERA

At the frontera in Nogales
there is a sign
announcing our arrival in Mexico:
a small, grey-white metal rectangle,
rusting at the bolts,
black lettering
which could as easily say,
 "Do not pass," or
 "Watch for falling rocks."
It is irrelevant: the real harbingers
are hidden in the air.

Outside a shack
a brown woman with a thick black braid
waist long
stands patting a lump of dough
in quick, rhythmic movements.

I see her at an Aztec market
dressed in white.
Her artful fingers
turn the little corn cakes
which she sells to
customers in the marketplace,
trades for feathers--
or, if she is clever,
a jade bead.
Her mouth opens like a sunflower
but instead of Nahuatl
I hear Spanish:
 "Hijo! Rafael! Vente pa'ca!"
A black-eyed squirrel of a child
scurries to her side.

The smell of unleavened corn cakes
baking over a fire,
the staccato ripple of another tongue,
obsidian eyes,
faces chiselled from ancient stone.

Quetzalcoatl endures.
Suddenly the air is full of feathers.

GUAYMAS 1 A.M.

"Un hotel barato,"
we tell the taxista.
"Muy bien," he tells us.
"I know a good cheap one."
His cab smells of tortillas.
Through static
mariachis croon "Cucurrucucu, Paloma";
the taxista hums along.
We reach the hotel and
ask the taxista to wait.
Someone shows us through the place,
which looks vaguely like
an open-air mortuary.
Outside again
we tell the taxista,
"No nos gusta."
He is incensed
and refuses to take us
anywhere
but back to the bus station.
The mariachis sing alone now.
We lurch into the main plaza
where another taxista
who knows of another
good cheap one
picks us up.
We spend the night
in a room
with cracked maroon walls
soapy grey sheets
and a resident lizard.
It's not good
but it's cheap.

EARLY MORNING MAZATLAN

Arriving
two A.M.
in a tropical
niagara of rain,
calling the pensión,
 (Sí, señora, cómo no, los espero.)
finding a cab,
knowing we will pay what is asked.
Through the streets,
glittering puzzles of red and green,
kettledrums overhead,
our clothes leaking
into small, dark puddles
on the unreceptive vinyl,
our bodies,
still new to each other,
meeting in damp contentment
at elbow and thigh.

At the pensión
a dark young woman
receives us,
gracious in a flowered robe,
offers a key
without asking our name.

Together in the wrought iron bed,
the mattress trouging the middle,
we sleep still entangled.
The rain, still like tambores,
orchestrates our dreams,
quieting only at sunrise,
replaced by a noisy urban cock
which surprises us from sleep.

Next door
the panaderos bake bolillos
which we will buy
crusty warm
to accompany our morning
café con leche.

But that will be later.
For now
in the torpid dawn
comfortable with yeast,
the cock's crow intermittent,
receding,
softly
softly
for now
softly
softly
we sleep.

EL FUTURO DE MAZATLAN ES EL TURISMO

The signs are everywhere:
"El futuro de Mazatlán es el turismo."
And a more direct admonition:
"Sean amables con los turistas."

Immediately
I imagine the mayor
as a large maternal figure
patting each citizen
on the head
as he rushes out of the house
in the morning
and reminding him
in the dulcet tones
of a mother
concerned not only about
her child's well-being
but also
about his proper deportment:
 "Good-bye honey.
 Have a good day.
 And remember dear,
 be nice to the tourists."

TEOTIHUACAN

Long ago
before the Aztecs
before the Toltecs

you arose
when there was sand and
there was water

you became
built up of blood and
built up of sinew

pyramids
you are el sol and
you are la luna

you endure
who were your makers
who your creators

pyramids
you guard their secret
in your stone stillness

evermore
we cannot know them
they are forgotten

still you endure
your plumes and serpents
your steps toward heaven

lead us back
to times of feathers
of blood and sinew

long ago

BOGOTA ARRIVAL

Flying low
over the Andes
down into the
turbulent black tunnel
of the Cordillera Oriental,
landing
several hours late,
passing quickly
through la aduana,
we are taken
at 2 A.M.
to our hotel.
It is not remarkable.
The building
is a rectangular box
with a lobby
restaurants
elevators
room keys
beds with nubby bedspreads
venetian blinds
telephones
and running water.
I am unimpressed.

I sleep until late
the next morning,
arise
to the noise of busses
and cathedral bells,
raise the blinds
expecting to see
the same busses I hear.
Instead
hulking before me
astonishingly green and
immediate,
more enormous than
Spartan Stadium,
an Andean mountain!

I know at last
I have left
the Midwest.

THE FIRST DAYS

My first days in Colombia
as a Cuerpo de Paz
are spent
in orientation meetings
and in exploring Bogotá.
I drill contrastive phonology,
walk miles,
sample arequipe, agua de panela,
plátanos fritos
and listen,
always I listen
to the Spanish.

There is a señora
living with her son and daughter
in the pensión
where I am staying.
She works
in a salón de belleza
as a manicurist.
One afternoon
I take her two children
to a nearby park.
I buy them balloons and dulces.
We gallop together
until I gasp for breath
in the thin air.
That evening
the señora
insists on giving me
a manicure.
She trims my cuticles
until they bleed,
then shapes and polishes my
unevenly chewed nails.
She calls me "su merced",
your mercy,
and says she will
pray for me.
I know she will.

The next day
I leave the pensión
for Tunja.

ENTERING THE BROWN

Por las montañas
winding
por las montañas
higher, higher,
ten thousand feet up,
where hearts are larger,
where campesinos
wear only browns and grays,
their somber temperament
reflected in their clothes.

Por las montañas
winding still
we arrive at last
in Tunja,
the clay and tile city
that is to hold my life
for the next two years.

Tunja is a brown place
amongst brown hills.
Her buildings are brown,
her people's faces brown,
brown veins coursing
rich brown
Chibcha blood.
Barren brown barrancas
beyond
dusty brown streets.

We enter
the main square,
la Plaza de Bolívar,
lined on one side
by tiny almacenes,
and opposite them
the bulky brown
sixteenth century cathedral.

I feel
brown eyes
on my too long
too white
body--
inquisitive, suspicious
they linger a moment,
turn back to their own,
leave me free,
anxious to absorb
the warm sounds
the clay and dust
the brown
the brown.

PRIMER APARTAMENTO

Tunja's buildings
are clay and tile eggs
in the dry-grass nest
of hills
which surrounds her.
I live in one like the others,
near the edge of the city
on a narrow almost-street
with holes as large as
laundry tubs.
In winter
when the rains come
and we once again
have water--
it runs brown at first,
always we must boil it
before drinking--
the street is a scarred and
muddy riverbed,
passable only to patient burros,
petering out, forgotten
just beyond us.

I live with another
Cuerpo de Paz.
Our apartamento has
flamingo pink and green walls,
a marquesina so dirty
we can't see out,
a shower,
and fleas.
After a month
the walls are mostly painted
(ambition fails us half way
through the last room),
the marquesina admits sunlight,
the shower runs dry,
and the fleas lose interest
in us.

Estoy contenta.

I teach.
My students ask me,
"Miss Mary, se amaña usted en Tunja?"
I tell them, "Sí, mucho."
Once a month
I invite a few of them
to our apartamento
for a fiesta de cumpleaños.
Half my height,
they dance with me
la cumbia, el bambuco;
we sing.
I offer them
a lop-sided torta de chocolate
which I haven't learned
to adjust for 10,000 feet
above sea level.
They eat it all.

We invite our adult students too
to celebrate their graduation
from our course.
All night
we drink and dance together.
Like lovers
they are slow to leave.
The last one there, Joe,
has a poem for us.
He is drunk,
has trouble remembering the lines;
a friend prompts him.
It is a soft,
fragmented
slur.
Afterward we applaud
as he bows.

A week later
our students return
at two in the morning
to serenade us,
singing songs they know we love.
The four adults
and seven children
who live in the apartment below
listen too.

DIA DE MERCADO

Viernes.

Día de mercado.

Before daybreak

the campesinos come

on foot, on burros, in busses,

from Sogamoso,

Chiquinquirá

to the marketplace.

They bring

papayas large as moons,

cups and bowls of clay,

goatmeat which they wrap

in plantain leaves,

yuca, guavas, papas criollas.

They fill makeshift stalls

with coarsely textured garments:

camisas, pantalones,

blusas, faldas, y sombreros;

alpargatas with their

woven soles and

long black strings

that tie about the ankle.

Only campesinos wear them.

Stacks of ruanas.

Somber brown and grey for men;

teal, rose, and saffron

for the señoras ricas

to wear in Bogotá.

Always the market is crowded.

The vendors are shrewd and wary.

I learn to clasp my money firmly

and to bargain:

A cómo son los guisantes?

A uno cincuenta.

No se puede por menos?

Bueno, señorita, uno veinticinco.

Bien, deme medio kilo.

Aquí tiene.

Y la ñapa?

Sí señorita.

Gracias.

One woman
has the largest stall
with the finest produce.
She has no need for gringo business.
Once
in a flurry of curses
she banishes me from her stall
for fondling her tomatoes.
I am determined
to win her over.
The next week
I return with my camera
and ask to take her picture.
She consents gruffly,
scowls into the lens.
Afterwards
she lets me pick out
mangos, melones, chirimoyas,
and a few tomates.
I am careful to touch
only those I buy.

TRAVELLING BY BUS IN COLOMBIA

Shortly after arriving in Colombia with the Peace Corps, I am told by an older, more experienced volunteer that I can never fully appreciate the "true essence of Colombian culture" until I have taken a lengthy trip by bus. Like all good volunteers--long on idealism and short on money--I am, of course, most anxious to experience this essence, particularly since it can be done for such a trifling number of pesos.

And so it is arranged. There are three of us travelling from Cali to Buenaventura. We carry grimy gringo luggage stuffed with cans of tuna fish and peas for our trip down the river from Buenaventura into the jungle. We sit in the back seats and talk. This is our most daring foray into the heart of "Colombian culture". We feel self-righteous: twenty hours by bus over the Western cordillera of the Andes.

The bus is crowded. Several people stand in the aisle. One old woman holds a noisy chicken. She wears a black fringed pañolón over her shoulders and a dirty man's hat. All the campesinas wear men's hats. Her hands are bony smooth and mottled, her teeth rotten. She cackles like the scrawny hen she is holding.

I read the signs in the bus, most of them advertisements. One in particular draws my attention:

"Favor de tirar su basura por la ventana."

Please throw your garbage out the window. I think of our American highways and the \$500 fines for littering. Which is worse--garbage inside or out?

A man and his two children sit in front of us. The little girl has become ill from the constant weaving through the mountains and has thrown up. Ascending the next incline the pool of vomit becomes a river which flows downstream toward me. The vomit is never cleaned up so I sit on my feet for the remainder of the trip. No one else seems to notice.

We reach Buenaventura late the next afternoon. After spending the night, we set out again by bus for a small jungle village where a boat is to pick us up and carry us into el Chocó. We spend the entire day waiting. We sit in a shaded straw hut, drink icy colas from the only refrigerator in town and watch the native women wash clothes in the river. Curious black eyes peer at us out of curious black faces. We take a few pictures. Our boat never comes.

Not entirely disappointed, we take the last bus back into Buenaventura. It is crowded and this time we must stand. It has no sides and lurches wildly over the dusty pitted path that is our road. I fantasize about a delicious steak for dinner. Instead we eat tuna fish and peas.

GO HOME DOG Entre los colombianos
 hay los que me odian
 porque soy americana
 y los que me quieren
 por la misma razón.

I was born 2800 miles to the north. This accident of geography inspires a local woman, the daughter of a former President of the Republic, to mutter each time she passes me on the street, "Go home dog!" She mispronounces the words and I contemplate correcting her:

"Miss, listen. In English the
[g] in syllable final position
is occlusive, not fricative.
Repeat after me:
Log, bog, fog, hog, dog.
Much better."

Like John Fowles, I have given my fantasy two endings. Readers may choose whichever they prefer.

Ending one:

Ella: Gracias, señorita. Su merced es muy amable. Siempre he querido pronunciar mejor la palabra "dog." Cómo le puedo agradecer?

Yo: No hay de qué. Ha sido mi placer. Siempre estoy dispuesta a hacer todo lo que pueda por los seres menos afortunados que yo.

Ella: Su merced es muy noble.

Yo: Sí, yo sé. Es porque soy americana.

Ella: Qué maravilla.

Ending two:

Ella: Cómo se atreve un marrano como
Vd. a corregirme a mí?

Yo: Es que Vd. tiene una pronunciación
pésima.

Ella: Pésima? Pésima! Vd. va a aprender
lo que les pasa a los que me insultan!

Yo: Veo que Vd. no quiere mejorarse.
Qué típico!

Ella: La que es típica es Vd.--gringa
ignorante y presuntuosa! Váyase de aquí
americana ignoble!

My fantasy remains only that. I giggle
over it like a child contemplating some
naughtiness she knows she will not under-
take. I am safe from myself. And from
Señorita Rojas Pinilla.

Perhaps here I have failed.

LA CUMBIA

Delicadamente
she holds the candle aloft;
it sheds amber light
on her dark face,
glistening
glistening,
a black opal,
in the flickering soft.

Repentinamente
suena una maracas;
the music
uncoils;
she lifts her skirt
with one hand
and, in the other,
the candle
begins to sway.

Silenciosamente
aparece su pareja,
los brazos alzados
hacia la luz.
He bends,
his arms fanning
the amber light
about her feet.
Once again,
like an early
worshipper of the sun,
he raises his eyes
and his arms
to the flame.
But in her clever hands,
it eludes him;
dancing,
like her feet
dancing,
dancing;

swaying
like her swollen breasts
which
rise and fall
rise and fall
like her feet
like her lungs
her heart
with the flame
the rhythm
the flaming rhythm
of the cumbia.

VOLVIENDOME COLOMBIANA

En Tunja
I grow new flesh.
Es puro boyacense.
Each day
I absorb more Spanish.
My new tongue holds
unexpected secrets,
like dolls I have seen
from Ecuador--
each one carrying
another within.
I want becomes I love
but the word doesn't change.
I learn
the local modismos
and watch
ancient structures unfold
as I speak
like some arcane magic
suddenly revealed
in the air.

Cada día
tomo onces--
agua de panela,
una empanada--
con unos amigos
en el centro.
Por la noche
dicto clases
y después
vamos al mesón
a tomar café
y charlar.
Hay fiestas
y aprendo a bailar.

Mi novio también
es colombiano.
We are an odd couple.
He is
nine years older

and six inches shorter
than I.
But he sends
me messages
in my still mysterious
new tongue,
shows me how to bargain,
tells me of the Chibchas
who lived here
before the Spaniards,
gives me ruanas and emeralds,
and teaches me to love
in Spanish.

Con él
me he vuelto colombiana.

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