

WITHOUT A NET

The Female Experience
of Growing Up Working Class

Edited by Michelle Tea



SEAL PRESS

Without a Net: The Female Experience of Growing Up Working Class

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WAITING

Maria Rivera

Being poor means waiting for everything. Today, I'm waiting for meds at County Hospital. Apparently, at age twenty-seven, I am incapable of leaving my house, let alone functioning in society, without being medicated. It used to be I could go to the public health clinic by Cabrini Green and wait two to three hours, the doctor would ask what I wanted and give me a bag full of samples. Now I have to register at County, get a number, and hope. Hope they find me poor enough and crazy enough to need the meds, that they can order them for me, that in a month or so I can come back and pick them up. Thank god it's not a heart condition or I could be dead by then. My day started at 5:30 A.M., when I lined up outside with about sixty of my desperate neighbors who had the foresight to get here early. At about 7 A.M., they let us in. By the time I get to give my spiel to a nurse it's one o'clock in the afternoon and she informs me that if I leave for any reason and miss the doctor calling me, I will have to start at the back of the line. Super, because my bladder is about to go and I now understand why everyone else brought a partner to stay with them all day.

I find a seat when some guy with gold teeth finally gets up to use the vending machine. I am squeezed between a carry and a nanny from Russia. The carry is telling everyone within earshot that he used to go to the vet hospital, but nowadays you have to wait at least two days

before you get seen there. He's here for a tooth extraction. Grinning with no shame, he opens up a mouthful of green and yellow rot that smells like raw sewage. I'm wondering if he's getting them all out, and of course he's going to give it up. "Third from the left, been hurtin' like hell all the way since Tampa." Oh, we all nod. I am doing my best not to inhale in his direction, and catch the eye of my other neighbor while taking a big whiff from her side. I open my backpack, filled to the brim with bullshit. I'm a bitch for fashion magazines, and thank god my landlord subscribes to them all and I live in a big building where everyone helps themselves to everyone else's mail. I decide to skip the bottle of water I brought since I won't be able to use a bathroom for the next few hours, and open the big-ass *Vogue* bible of spring. The nanny is breathing so hard down my neck I keep waiting to hear the porn music start over the intercom. She keeps saying things like, "Oooo, the tankini, that looks good on any figure," all low and in a really thick accent. After about thirty pages, I turn my head as far as it will go without touching her cheek and mumble, "Why don't you take it." I throw it on her lap. She looks up at me like I am Mother Mary bestowing some great gift and grabs my hands, all glassy-eyed. It's the little things on a day like today, I suppose.

Fortunately, about a third of the poor and desolate women who ended up in Chicago were given the same name as me. I am kept vigilant by the constant stream of Maria's being called up over the speakers. Someone told me that in most heavily Catholic regions the world over, people name their children Maria, as a lifelong blessing and to guarantee that the Virgin Mary will watch out for them. I would like to give a heads-up here and say the numbers just don't seem to be proving this great honor. I turn my attention back to the carry. Now he's chipping some glue off the back of his sweaty, held-together-by-a-thread leather jacket. My lap is covered in what looks like giant-sized dandruff. Last night, at some bar in Ohio, his son wanted his Harley patch. Being the ever-attentive father, the carry ripped it off his jacket and bestowed it upon his much-deserving son. He is now preparing the surface for a newer, better, eagle-wings Harley patch he picked up in Kentucky. He would also like to mention that for a mere

thirty-five dollars we can buy passes to ride all the rides at his carnival this weekend. I'm thinkin' if I had thirty-five dollars I'd buy a half a month's prescription of Zoloft and get on with my life. For at least two weeks, anyways. You see, my sanity costs, at minimum, seventy dollars a month. That's without the ten-dollar tyrosine I get at the health food store to actually kick the Zoloft in. If I want to breathe as well—I have the lung capacity of a squirrel—it costs another sixty dollars or so.

The man with the gold teeth whose seat I fell into keeps staring me down from the corner. If I'd had a little more time this morning I would have done my hair and applied my face and I could just look up, smile, and all would be forgiven. As luck would have it, I'm sporting a rat's nest and my natural purplish-yellow complexion, my too-small jeans and a pajama shirt I just can't seem to get away from this week. You never know who will have your fate in their hands when you're applying for any "free" service. Less is more, as they say. It's better to err on the side of "couldn't look more broke"—certainly better than getting rejected because you wore your good clothes and brushed your teeth. One of my high school friends' crack-head mother pointed this out to us when we were applying for free birth control. I think I was fifteen, and it was one of the best survival tips I ever got.

Out of the corner of my eye I am trying to appraise the value of this guy's gold teeth. After many years of pawning anything in my possession worth over five dollars I would guess that, with the top front row alone, I could buy my meds, pay my three-month-old gas bill, and get me and the friend of my choice drunk tonight. Some people just don't know how to manage their money.

By 5 p.m. I am void of any hope. Apparently rotting teeth and crabs—oh yes, crabs, the nanny broke it down—rate much higher than depression, panic, and the inability to breathe. Even the gold teeth are gone. At 6 p.m. I finally hear my name. An angel in a periwinkle smock and a weave that—I could be hallucinating—looks like a small, alien hovercraft is beckoning me from the green door. Green means go, in case you haven't been in County before.

Now it's time for my recital—of my sketchy medical history, that is. Today my audience is an internist, a psychiatrist, two med students, and

my trusty nurse. I recount with great post-traumatic stress disorder-style detail two of my favorite and most horrifying medical roller coaster rides. "It all started when I was . . ." is how I like to begin. I open with "The Abortion," a tried-and-true stunner.

I went to get an abortion because my boyfriend refused to wear condoms and because I hated him and could not bear to think of a whole life biologically tied to him through a little bundle of joy. I went to the budget clinic where for two hundred and fifty dollars, I would be free and clear. For another hundred I could be free and clear and have general anesthesia. So I guilt-tripped my boyfriend, because really, it was the least he could do. After three hours of education and waiting for them to decide if I was a "good candidate" for an abortion, the budget clinic nurse told me to strip, gown up, and wait in the hall. There was a long line down the hall. Old and young, all different colors of women, and one girl with her mother, who I was so jealous of I could scream.

As we moved down the hallway I could hear the women in front of me getting on a table, and then the countdown till they were numbed out and, finally, the vacuum. Then they got ushered out the back door on a gurney. Right before me was a girl I totally wanted to be. Rock-star hair, perfect body, super cool, popping her gum the whole time. She went in and they started without anything for pain. She said, "Just stop, let me call someone, I can get the money, please." And then the doctor: "If I stop now you'll hemorrhage, you should have thought of that before." She sobbed so quietly, but from her gut. You could hear how bad she hurt. Two minutes later, completely traumatized, it was my turn. I passed out even as they anesthetized me, and I woke up about two hours later. All those women, again lined up in a long dirty hallway. Everyone looking around quiet, some pretty bloody. A while later a nurse came and made us all put on these giant diapers and line up at the pay phone to call someone to pick us up. After my phone call the nurse pulled me aside to tell me they may not have gotten everything, and if I started bleeding unexpectedly I should give the office a call. For the next couple years I kept imagining a giant baby arm growing inside me and then having to give birth to it.

Whether or not my next tale is related no one will ever know, as every last one of my medical records, from three different hospitals, is MIA. I never existed, medically, before 2000. After high school, I started getting very sick. My skin was sapped of all color. Sleeping was the only thing I could do for more than a couple of hours, and to stand upright caused me so much pain it was unbelievable. Once, my period went on for two months. I would go to the emergency room to see a doctor—without insurance there is no other way. And while by law they have to see you, they make you wait all day. After spending five minutes with me, the nurse or doctor would send me home with a package of birth control and a few brochures about sex that made me feel like a big whore who deserved to rot from the inside out before I turned twenty-one. One night, after six months of walking around dead, I was having plain old vanilla boyfriend sex when dark blood started pouring out of my vagina like a river. My legs went numb. My poor boyfriend carried me to the car and into the emergency room. We waited all night. Eventually a nurse made me walk to an exam room where she told me to strip and get on the table, a doctor would be in to see me. It was cold, but she gave me no gown. Nothing but a table and a clock in the room. I lay there for almost three hours. A doctor came in and told me I was obese. Then I tried to explain what had been going on with me, and recounted the night's events. She never examined me at all. "Get dressed, you're having sex too rough," she said. "If it hurts, don't do it." She walked out.

In the months to come I just got worse. I was miserable. I was convinced I had some horrible disease and was going to die any day. I made one last attempt at the emergency room, and by chance I got a doctor who actually gave a shit. She wanted an ultrasound, which cost three hundred and fifty dollars at the time. I told her I had no way to pay for it. She ran out of the room, came back with a machine, and told me she would take care of it. On the ultrasound she said something was there, but she could not see it. My stomach was too tender to feel around. I was scheduled for a laparoscopy the next week. Outpatient surgery, small incision in the bellybutton, they slide a camera in and look around. The surgery fell on my birthday, and after I signed my life away they drugged me up and sent

me in. When I woke up I couldn't really move too well, but managed to lower the blanket to find not an incision in my bellybutton but a row of metal staples where before I had pubic hair. Twenty staples, on my twentieth birthday. Being all knocked out and delirious, I was convinced they'd done the wrong surgery. A nurse came in with my doctor and they explained in tandem how they'd found a thirteen-pound cyst attached to both my ovaries, and that my fallopian tubes were wrapped around it. They had to take it out before any more damage was done. It was too late to remove through my bellybutton; therefore, my staples. Another nurse came in and showed me my new morphine drip. She slid it into my IV and I spent the next day or so timing out my next hit.

Later they explained what they had done. They took an ovary out, and now I have about one day every two months in which I can conceive. I was told they had to piece my fallopian tubes back together, so there was a chance that, if I ever did get pregnant, it would be tubal, in which case I could try and have the baby relocated to my uterus. They also had failed to mention earlier that they severed all the muscles in my lower abdomen so afterward my stomach just hung down, like I had been through a fat-suctioning machine. In fact I walked around kind of holding on to it, like it was my baby instead of my saggy, deserted womb.

After that, I explain, it has been worse and better, but I have never really felt good. My audience of medical professionals and trainees is gazing at me as though they would like to slit my wrists for me, just to make it stop. I ask if they need me to say more, and they all look at each other, shake their heads, and the nurse proclaims me worthy of my prescription. When they ask me my dosage I double it, and head to the pharmacy upstairs. Only a five-hour wait if I need 'em tonight. . . .

THE POET AND THE PAUPER

Meliza Bañales

Growing up, there were hundreds of times when I wanted to be a writer. I must have decided on it in seventh grade, when my grandparents got me an electric typewriter for my birthday. I had been writing poems on a card table and I suppose she felt there was a more productive way of doing things. That typewriter followed me until my freshman year of college, and even then it was hard to give it up to the dawn of the computer age. But I went with the times.

I have been a writer, professional and otherwise, for much of my life, and my only hope was that someday I would be good at it. I thought publishing was nice, but I knew I would be a writer whether I published or not.

In the Laundromat recently, I met a famous poet. He lives in Berkeley and writes poems about trees. He is very published, about eighty or so publications to his credit, including four books of poems. He has been interviewed for *Poets and Writers*, has taught poetry through NEA grants, and has read with some great people, like John Ashbery. I'm sure he must have felt he knew something about me when he began to talk to me at the top of the wash cycle. He recognized my name, asked where I was getting my M.F.A. I told him I had just graduated from San Francisco State. He told me he remembered that I edited a magazine once, that I rejected one

of his poems, but that another editor after me published one. I told him I was in a palace, eating French fries and watching cable TV in my own room. I didn't remember. I have edited magazines and scripts for a long time now, looked for a moment, something to give the poet. But none of them five years, and I couldn't place him right away. But I told him that I was seemed to make it real. I wanted to break down the racism, the classism, the outright rude nature of the poet's question, his comments like-seared the world didn't come clean.

He asked me what I wrote. I get asked this question a lot and I never grease on a frying pan that just wouldn't come clean. I really know what to say: family, magic, poor people, thrown people, mixed race, family. It's never so black and white, I think. But people want to know, and the famous writer asked me in the Laundromat if I was putting out a taste like, how having nothing made you only want more, so much I liked and what I was doing with my writing. I told him I had a book more that you were willing to imagine yourself somewhere else every day coming out, a book of poems. It would be out in one week. Again, how of your life. How you dreamed of being in a different-colored skin or a different culture, how you wished your father could speak more clearly, how asked me what I wrote about. I told him the same subjects, and he looked at me as if he had a sour taste in his mouth. He said, "Huh, all that? There you hated your mother for never sticking up for herself and staying in jobs not really a huge market for poor people. You probably won't do too well as a reality. How you chewed at your own fingers until they bled and held especially since it's your first book. How did you get a book deal?"

The words fell, stones in a lake. They sank and the farther down they went, the more I could feel their weight, their overwhelming weight crushing me. It was not the first time someone had told me this. I've been told by various people, in various ways, that I have nothing to say. I've been on stages all over the country and even outside of the United States and have been told to "fuck off" and asked "what do you think you're doing?" I've collected all of these and placed them as artifacts in my work, remnants of a typical life. But when the famous writer asked me the question during the spin cycle, all I could do was taste potatoes.

My mother was a master of all things potato. We grew up that broke. She would sometimes dig in trash cans for bottles and cans, because she was too proud to go on welfare. Then she would take the recycling money to the Lucky's grocery store down the street and buy a bag of potatoes. We would eat them mashed, creamed, chunky, in soup, even potato sandwiches. As a kid they stuck to my throat, never coming out.

The famous writer was still waiting for an answer. I was stuck in a bucket of memory. My brothers and I hiding our yellow tickets at school never telling anyone we got "free lunch." Trips to Kmart to buy four children school clothes. Living in a one-bedroom apartment, one large bed supporting three tired bodies. My days spent wishing I was a real prince.

was just not an option. The smile my sister gave me when he called her "stupid" and "fat" only hours after she gave birth to their second child. The smile my brother, Eddie, gives the cops even though he's been out of prison for years, has a good job, and is married. The smile my brother, David, gave his first-grade teacher when she told him that she

in a palace, eating French fries and watching cable TV in my own room. I looked for a moment, something to give the poet. But none of them seemed to make it real. I wanted to break down the racism, the classism, the outright rude nature of the poet's question, his comments like seared meat on a frying pan that just wouldn't come clean.

I wanted to let him know that I knew how to say "fuck you" without ever uttering the words. I wanted him to know what your own self-pity can taste like, how having nothing made you only want more, so much more that you were willing to imagine yourself somewhere else every day of your life. How you dreamed of being in a different-colored skin or a different culture, how you wished your father could speak more clearly, how you hated your mother for never sticking up for herself and staying in jobs that spat on her self-worth. How you saw living as a luxury and surviving as a reality. How you chewed at your own fingers until they bled and held the wounds in your mouth to remind yourself that you had control over something. The famous poet wanted me to tell him how it happened, how I came to this, to be in books and in universities; to be the judge of literature when I came from nothing, which really meant I had nothing, which equaled I was nothing.

Of course, I said nothing. I didn't tell him about the memories. Instead, I smiled. I smiled because as a woman, as a woman of color, as a poor woman of color, I didn't want to be impolite. I smiled because I wanted the poet to know that I was schooled in the art of getting by; that I had spent years learning and perfecting this smile I was giving him. The same smile my Mexican father gave to white people every time he was passed over for promotions or raises, or on the street. The same smile my mother gave her male bosses at work when they made "secretary" out to mean "personal slave," when their glances and passes at her came daily and she smiled because she had a family and no education and losing her job was just not an option. The smile my sister gave her own husband when he called her "stupid" and "fat" only hours after she gave birth to their second child. The smile my brother, Eddie, gives the cops even though he's been out of prison for years, has a good job, and is married. The smile my brother, David, gave his first-grade teacher when she told him that she

would be holding him back a year because he read too slowly (she thought strength, how her touch still remained tender through years of abuse. I he wouldn't understand her speaking English to him anyway, and I wrote about my parents, their struggle to make every day special for us, didn't hesitate to tell him this to his six-year-old face). The same smile to make it seem like we had everything we needed. How I grew up with grandparents, my cousins, my neighborhood always gave to rich white people when it came to love and affection and a home that I wanted people, people of authority, whenever they were up against the wall with to be in. According to the famous poet in the Laundromat—the poet who no chance of escape. I wanted to take all of those smiles and throw them away. I had eight publications, wrote about trees, read with John Ashbery—at the poet, to let him know that I came from a different sort of education, according to him, poetry had no room for me, for my life. According to one where you never let them know how much they get to you, never him, nobody wanted to read about my family, my poor, brown, mestiza family. Nobody cared about roses in concrete, or love through traffic.

But I just smiled, retrieved my wet clothes from the machine, and poetry was a place that had no room for these subjects. The fact that, began placing them into another. I felt like I had failed. I hated smiling amid the patriarchy, racism, classism, homophobia, and ageism of this society. I was able to get a book published that did not represent these structures, but worked against them, made me see that maybe the famous I could come up with was a smile. I felt defeated and ashamed. And the poet's question was appropriate. How did I do this. How did I get here. were my mother's potatoes, clawing at the back of my throat, wanting to be. How did this come to be.

perately to come out. To throw up a potato potpie filled with the stars.

taste of want. My answer came a few days later. That night, after doing my laundry, I went home to my boyfriend, my FTM transgender boyfriend (something I'm sure the poet would have asked me about as well if he had known), finished his laundry and left, waving to me as if I were an old friend. I and cried in his arms. I told him how the poet called me out and all I did went back to, my car, where I decided that he was right: There is no market for poor people. And I returned to his question: How did you get a book deal?

In essence, it didn't make sense. I come from poor, working-class roots. My parents weren't college-educated. I grew up in the ghetto, the slums, the part of town people know exists but never see. I didn't write about trees, or language, or literature. For a long time, I didn't know about rhyme and meter or sound in a poem. I hadn't been brought up on the great authors of the canon and I didn't write every day because I was too busy working two jobs or trying to be the first in my family to go to college. I wrote about things I knew. I put my grandmother into my poems—her stories, her voice. I wrote about the days she spent beating her laundry against a rock and losing everything to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. I wrote about my father's parents, who believed in magic and ghosts and the Pope and who worked in the fields of California and Texas for more than eighty years. I wrote about my sister, her unbreakable

Take it or leave it. Sitting down to write this, I come to an answer, and if the famous poet ever reads this he can hold me to every word. How did I get a book deal? How am I able to be in books and universities? How is it that my poems find themselves in print? I believe it's because it's poetry. Poetry is real. It encourages connections and wants attention. In the words of Muriel Rukeyser, from her book *The Life of Poetry*, "A poem invites a total response." My family, my life, is worthy of a total response. Though the oppressions of American culture remain, they are not what completely dominate a readership of poetry. I suppose I could say that my book

getting published is proof that people are interested in this type of work. It forces the real issues of oppression and prejudice to go undiscussed. There and that there is a desire for its existence. I've spent much of my time at the bottom, the place where more than water rests. I am one out of hundreds feeling as though what I was writing was not "real" poetry. In the context of achieving three degrees, all of them in creative writing and literature, I have been told in many ways that what I write is "too ethnic," "too confessional," "too limited to only one experience," and "too raw." I was even told by a professor who I respected and looked up to as a mentor that I should reconsider going into an M.F.A. program. "Your work may not fit me," he said. "I don't know how fate decided on this. I don't know how on earth I was chosen by a professor who I respected and looked up to as a mentor that I should not go into an M.F.A. program." "Your work may not fit me," he said. "I don't know how fate decided on this. I don't know how on earth I was chosen by a professor who I respected and looked up to as a mentor that I should not go into an M.F.A. program." "Your work may not fit me," he said. "I don't know how fate decided on this. I don't know how on earth I was chosen by a professor who I respected and looked up to as a mentor that I should not go into an M.F.A. program."

But I do know that I have earned the right to the poems I imagine. I am as hard-working and broken and human as the next person, despite my complex identity. I don't claim to know everything, but I know some things and I know them well enough to explore them and honor them through poetry. I don't focus on "why me." Rather, I take it as it comes, and please know, Mr.-Famous-Poet-from-the-Laundromat, that I am worthy.

of poetry, I began to see what they saw: I did not write like the poets being published today. My professor, like the famous poet in the Laundromat, was right. But I don't see this as negatively as they do. I don't want to write anything that doesn't have the power to make me think and to allow me to be the decent human being I know I can be.

I'm sure writing about trees and language and literature is very important. I'm sure there are readers out there who crave that work. But I can't write that way, I won't write that way. Why does that set me up for failure? How is writing about "real life," especially my life or how I see the world, a setup for disappointment? I want to make it clear that the long I am kept out of the conversation of poetry, the more I don't exist. The longer my poems are encouraged to be something they're not, the more I don't exist.

I wish I could chalk up the famous poet's comments, my professor's comments, all of the comments I have received from readers who have not taken the time to truly give my work a "total response" to simple old-fashioned jealousy. I wish I had an ego that worked that way. I don't. Really. And to excuse these comments as just "poet jealousy" would be unjust. Writing off the comments as coming from a place of jealousy

"Yes," he said. "Your husband's amputated leg. We need to know what you want done."

"Well, don't you just . . . uh . . . discard it?"

The priest fell silent. Mom, fearing she had said the wrong thing, added, "I mean in some final . . . respectful manner."

"Oh, Mrs. Ryan," he said. "No. It's a Catholic leg and has to be buried in consecrated ground. You understand."

But Mom, who was raised Methodist and converted to Catholicism only when she married Dad, didn't understand. "Consecrated ground?" she said. "You mean like a cemetery plot?"

"Well, not a whole plot, necessarily, but in a portion of a plot in the Catholic section of the cemetery."

Mom could see the dollar signs adding up. "Egad, Father, you mean a full burial? With a casket? With a headstone?"

"No, no, no, Mrs. Ryan," he said. "That's not necessary. Don't you already have a plot at Riverside?"

"Well . . . no," Mom said. An expense like that was the least of her worries. "I guess Kelly and I have been too busy paying off the debts we've accumulated while alive. I'm sorry, Father, you've got me flustered. I'm afraid I'll have to think about this and call you back."

Then Lucy, who had overheard Mom's half of the conversation and immediately guessed Father's half, laughed and said, "Oh heck, Evelyn, just toss it in my plot."

And so they did. With requisite ceremony and little expense, a small but deep hole was dug in a corner of Lucy Agnes Moore's personal plot in Riverside Cemetery in Defiance, Ohio, and the remains were interred.

Aunt Lucy died in 1989 and was buried in the same plot as her brother's leg. Dad died in 1983, and was buried in a plot the Ryans were eventually able to afford. Mom died in 1998. Evelyn and Kelly Ryan rest side by side in the cemetery, about ten yards west of Dad's Catholic leg.

MY FATHER'S HANDS

Daisy Hernández

My father is in his sixties. He is a tall, thin man with an almost bald head. He has a small beer belly beneath his white cotton T-shirt. His hands are never empty. There is always a cigar, cigarette, or beer can in them. He's handsome, and he's an alcoholic.

Years before the Cuban revolution, my father, then a teenager, saw a soldier in the hills where he and his family picked coffee beans, cut sugar cane, and raised pigs. He liked the soldier's matching jacket and pants, the uniform's sense of purpose. My father didn't want to be a farmer. He wanted something more. He wanted to be on the side that won.

Some years later, he got the uniform and fought against Fidel Castro. Unfortunately, he only talks about it now when he's drunk, slurring the words and his history into a number of possibilities. But this much is true, he says: It isn't easy to switch sides in a war. So he left the island along with the United States embassy workers and came to New Jersey, where he cut hair, opened a bakery, painted houses, closed the bakery, and cut wood. By the early 1970s, he had settled into factory work and married my Colombian mother.

He returned to visit Cuba once before NAFTA and told his cousins how good work was in the north. His job was to stay up through the night with a textile machine. He'd replace needles that broke and alert the bosses

to any problems. It was he and the night and the deafening sound of the machines. He didn't need more than a few English phrases. On weekends he made extra money helping with plumbing, electricity—those many jobs where a man is always useful.

Then, in the nineties, factories began closing. My father's work hours were cut from twelve a day to eight, and then six. I began finding him home at all hours of the day and night and after awhile I stopped asking why, because all he would say was, "*Se terminó el trabajo* (the work ended)." The work ended like a novel, its mournful last page close at hand.

When he wasn't on the clock, my father drank. His hands would point at me and remind me to study hard because "you don't want to end up at a factory like your mother and me." Even before I understood words and phrases like "manual labor," "working class," and "alcoholism," I knew how they felt: like my father's hands.

Parts of my father's hands are dead. The skin has protected itself by hardening, turning his large hands into a terrain of calluses and scars, the deep lines scattered on his palms like dirt roads that never intersect. His hands are about power and survival, my first lessons about class. The dreaded question comes on Wednesday afternoons when my father drags the trash cans to the curb. That's when the Colombian lady across the street pushes her screen door open. She's noticed my father at home lately and asks him about his job. When he tells her the factory is closed *por ahora*, she tilts her head like she already knew. "*Y estás coleccionando?*"

What she really wants to know is if he's collecting unemployment benefits.

"There's no work to be found," my father answers. His pants are falling from his narrow hips and he yanks them up with his left hand.

"*Pero, estás coleccionando?*"

My father shrugs his shoulders. "*Es la misma basura*" It's the same garbage.

He wishes the Colombian lady well. From my bedroom window, I watch him walk into the two-family house he and my mother bought with years of savings. In the basement, he finishes a six-pack of Coors beer and

listens to Radio WADO. He's found a store down Bergenline Avenue where the price of beer drops when unemployment rises.

At Catholic Mass on Sunday, the collection basket makes the rounds. The Cold War is over, but the world is still divided into good and evil, democracy and communism, Catholics and others, the ones who give and the ones who collect. It is a simple arrangement. One ill-spoken word could damn you to hell, communism, and poverty.

There is some comfort in knowing even God has to collect. But still the church's collection basket makes me anxious. I'm afraid we don't have money to give because, when it comes to Strawberry Shortcake stickers, my mother says we don't have the money. In church, my eyes rarely turn to her. Instead, I listen carefully to hear whether her pocketbook will join the others to interrupt the church's silence. It does.

The collection baskets crawl down each pew and swallow the sounds of crinkled dollars and jingling coins. I hold two, sometimes four quarters, excited to throw them into the basket. The tap dancing of those coins into the basket makes me feel we are as good as any of the families here with five-dollar bills in their hands.

Spanish is a Romance language except when you're trying to make ends meet. The Spanish we speak is a language in which life is reduced to talking about what you need, what's working and what isn't. *No hay trabajo. Media libra de chuletas. Basta ya. Van pa' iglesia. Estás coleccionando?*

Are you collecting? The rest of that sentence, the words "unemployment benefits," never makes it into Spanish. There is no need for it, because everyone here knows what is meant when the question is asked. No one says we're "receiving" or "getting," because no one here really believes we have a right to that money. You're "collecting" because you don't have work. You're one step away from *la gente en welfare* and two steps away from the old lady at Port Authority who's collecting pennies from commuters. Even in English, we call it "unemployment benefits," thinking it's a benefit to get something back from the work we do.

I live with Spanish, with coming home to find my mother watching a *telenovela*. Her factory shut down for a few days and her Spanish words are

to the point. "Your father's in the basement. They called from work, said to not come today."

In the basement, my father talks to Elegua, an Afro-Cuban god without hands who lives in a clay dish and opens doors. He has only a face, sculpted into a round pointy crown. When my father is collecting unemployment, he feeds Elegua more candy and espresso so the god will open the door to another job.

Elegua is better than learning English. He's the god of trickery and journeys; you can trust him more than English words that change tenses, don't sound the way they look, and get turned on you at the factory.

As a child, I am drawn to Elegua and his candy-dish. The Cuban women explain to my Colombian mother that Elegua loves children and that's why I'm spending time with him. But they are wrong. I am a practical child. Elegua's the god who opens doors and I am desperately trying to get away from my father's angry, drunk hands, and the feeling that our destinies are scribbled in the square opaque windows of my father's factory. Because Elegua is the god of crossroads, I imagine he understands the contradiction of my growing up: that I want to escape from my father and also take him with me, that I want to flee my life without leaving Papi behind.

I am meant to escape. Everyone tells me so at the barbecue for my mother's birthday. "Girl, you're going to be something some day. You're going to make it. Irma, will you look at this thing the *nena* wrote for the school paper, her name and everything. Girl, you're going places." No one ever says where I am going, but they are sure that a place is waiting for me.

By the time I am nine and translating my report card for my father, I know he is not going with me.

In elementary school, I hear that Americans are trying to keep up with a family named Joneses. The Joneses are a mystery of the English language. My mother says she's never heard of "*la familia Joneses*" and I should quit worrying about what everybody else is doing.

In our part of the world, no one is keeping up. We belong to a community based on the fact that we are all doing bad. When someone does a

little better, there is an unspoken betrayal. You smile at them and when they leave, you talk about how they are lying to get welfare checks, working *por la izquierda*, putting on airs. When you are the one doing better, you sit at your kitchen table and say, "It's incredible but true. Any little good thing you got, somebody else wants." You talk about how *celoso*, jealous, people can be. It is easier to say that people are jealous than admit they have a right to want something better.

It takes years for me to understand that the Joneses happen only in English, in houses where people cook in one room and eat in another. The Joneses don't happen where people are called "white trash" and "spics," "welfare queens," and "illegals." And no one ever asks the Joneses if they are collecting.

When someone asks my father how he is doing, he looks at his hands, studies the scattering of black scars and the dryness of the skin. His answer is always the same, "*Ahí, caballero, en la misma lucha.*"

When I ask him what it means to say you are in the same *lucha*, my father says it means you are doing the same old thing. Years later in community activism, that's all I hear, that we're in this *lucha* together. *Lucha* means struggle, someone tells me. The same old thing, *la lucha*. I sit at a lesbian collective meeting; my hand clapping my pen tightly. It's hard to explain how in one moment, someone can translate a word and your understanding of your family and your history can be turned around.

In the mid-nineties, the *lucha* changed. Neighbors began talking about working as home attendants. The closed factories began outnumbering the ones that stayed open, and the new jobs were in cleaning floors and baby diapers and serving food. Men from Central America arrived, renting the first floor of our home, eight men, two bedrooms. The whites who could moved out. People came from all parts: Mexico, Pakistan, Brazil, India. The men waited at the street corner for construction work that barreled down the street in blue pickup trucks. In our basement, the Spanish newspaper was marked in red ink with circles and X's.

My father survived the onset of NAFTA because of the Cuban revolution. A political refugee, he was entitled to citizenship and the unemployment

benefits that carried us between his jobs. The newer immigrants and those who came from other countries didn't have his privileges.

At the unemployment agency, he sat alongside African Americans, Pakistanis, Dominicans, and Nigerians, and they learned the English words for the work they did, and how to spell them. "Embroidery," "Seamstress," "Machine operator."

Factories closed for a week, a month, forever, and we waited for the phone to ring. The calls came randomly. At first the voices were Pure American English, a language that rarely falters. It begins with a "hey, your dad home?" and ends with a "thanks."

I was never to say that my father was out looking for another job or that he'd found one, part-time. I was never to reveal anything over the phone. Just take the message.

Sometimes the factory had not closed but "tell your dad to come at eight, not five, tonight." Or, "Tell him we need him tonight." "Tell him to call us next week." "Tell him he can file for unemployment."

As the years passed, the factories changed hands and the callers changed. The American voices disappeared and were replaced by an English that stumbled all over itself. "Halo, Ignacio?" No, he's not home. "Eh, tell him, no work, eh, come ehere efriday."

Even the unemployment agency changed to a new dial-in system to collect unemployment benefits. The brochure came in Spanish and English.

My mother studied it carefully. My father made the money and my mother handled it. She wrote the checks, paid the bills, and completed the forms for unemployment with me. My father's hands could do many things, but handling money was not one of them. Making phone calls was not one of them, either. His hands would wake me up with a gentle shake. He'd still be sober. "Your mother called unemployment and couldn't get through. Come on, get up, call them."

The dial-in system was fabulously efficient. Much more so than the factories that closed.

If your social security number ends on an odd number, call on Tuesday. If it ends on an even number, call on Thursday. Enter the weeks for which you're claiming.

The dial-in system was clever. They said it was to help us, to avoid waiting at the agency for a long time. I suspect it was the best way to handle a possible riot as the economy switched from the manufacturing to the service sector. Not making a trip to the agency meant you wouldn't have to see in one room how many other people were going through the same thing. When you did show up (because the phone system didn't work), there were fewer people, even though back on your street you knew it was more people than that. You began to doubt yourself. Maybe it wasn't so bad.

Not going to the agency meant you could avoid seeing the pain of other people. You didn't need to know English to understand the agency man telling someone on the line that "no, sir, according to this you have nothing left to collect." You didn't need a translation for the immigrant man's English words, "But I no find job." And then came that dreaded English word—"welfare." "Sir, I'm gonna need for you to get off this line because we can't help you here. Get on the line at window four and you can talk to someone there about welfare."

Calling in, you could avoid that man's eyes, the way his brown body, sheltered under five layers of clothes against the winter storm, turned away and left. You could avoid looking at his empty hands. You could avoid thinking about what would happen one day when none of us could collect.

The only thing I feared more than my father not being able to collect was time spent collecting. At least when there was work he wasn't around drinking and yelling at me as much. The world was cruel to him, yes, but it was hard for me to be angry and afraid of an abstract idea like "world." It was easier to be afraid of my father's hands. Easier to be angry when the blistered and swaying drunk hands slapped me on the back of my head. And there were other emotions that came more easily than anger: fear and guilt. Fear that life would always be like this—at the mercy of a factory closing, a paycheck arriving. Guilt because I—with my English words and schooling—would one day lead a different life than his. I just had to get there.

For about a year, I worked at McDonald's. I worked the register and got free meals. My job meant that if I set my mind to it and flirted with

the right managers, I could become a manager too, with paid vacation, paid sick time, and a steady paycheck. So I watched my classmates play softball, run for student council, and drive their new Nissans. I'd get home and change from my Catholic uniform to my McD's one. If I worked enough hours, I made as much as my mother did at the factory.

On Saturdays, the manager created competitions to make us work faster. "The register that makes the most money before noon gets two tickets to Loews movie theater!" It was the first time anyone had ever referred to me as a machine. But I just smiled politely. I was proud of learning the register, its grid of prices. Big Macs, Large Fries, Apple Pies. But the manager was right. In a matter of months, I had become a machine. You had to shut down some part of yourself to the sexist jokes, to your hours cut when a new manager took over the schedules and didn't like you. The job was like walking on a tightrope without a net. You are up in the air alone. Interacting with other people is an act of acrobatics. You never know who will start talking shit about you. You never know what will piss off your boss. You never know why they sent you home but not the others. A wrong word could mean your hours the next week were reduced from forty to thirty-two.

It's hard to write this part of the story. It's the part of the story I never talk about with my New York friends, writer friends, community activist friends, with anyone. We act the same—like we never worked with our hands. Sometimes we mention in conversation that we worked menial jobs, we stripped, we waited tables, we worked fast-food jobs, we cleaned diapers. We use those middle-class words to describe experiences that are not middle-class. But we don't know how else to talk about them.

It's hard to write about how quickly I moved that Saturday, how jealous and ashamed I was when I came in a close second for those tickets. It's hard to write about burning my fingers at the fry machine, how the grease of the place sticks to your skin, how you take the money you earn to the nail salon and get long acrylic tips and for a moment forget you are at a job that slowly turns your hands to cardboard. And it's harder still to know that a good number of people don't work and live like this. Harder

still to know those people are your teachers, your friends who live in towns where McDonald's aren't even allowed to open.

In college and after, there are other jobs, the ones you really talk about over dinner with friends. The job at the library, the newspaper, the publishing house. But after years of numbing myself to working-class life, an alcoholic father, a fast-food job, it isn't easy to make myself feel something. I am too used to a world where trips to museums are something you do on class trips in high school. Our passions weren't work, but what we saw on the Spanish news, our romantic lives, losing weight, getting pregnant, waiting to love, wanting to be loved, the specials on Bergenline, the freebies at the Macy's Clinique counter with a purchase of \$19.95. We talked about dreams, where we'd go if we had all the money in the world, who we would marry if we could pick anyone.

Those office jobs after college meant walking into a place where people didn't dream like that. They had jobs they liked, money-market accounts, paid vacation time. Dreams were something that actually happened. No one talked about buying a Lotto ticket.

More than anything now I am trying to feel something rather than numbing myself to the gap between my father and me, between the past and the present. I get a paycheck for writing newspaper articles about unemployment, while he works part-time as a janitor. Friends tell me to feel accomplished, that my résumé is a reflection of him, his sacrifices and triumphs. That's probably true, but it doesn't resonate.

The only things that do make me feel something are art, writing about him, loving him, taking pictures of his hands, listening to him tell me I should photograph this one scar on his index finger. He can't remember how he got it.

parents, and said how he had failed them by not being rich. He also declared his right, in the freest nation in the world, to choose death.

Our family was left in a sinkhole of debt. People came to the house during the funeral to claim cars and to try and buy the house. Everything was liquidated, and we all went our separate ways.

Despite my parents' arduous attempts at my reconstruction, I have retained bits of my native culture that will now be offered up to my daughter whether she likes it or not. Like eating green olives and watching *Lawrence Welk*, dirt-bike ganging and the art of survival in a classist nation, flamboyant American-flag apparel preferably worn in conjunction with a Mohawk or similar angst hairdo, and, most important, keeping a bag of bread on the table—not for fear of choking, or as a festering analogy to money, but to eat.

FILLING

Sailor Holiday

Why do my teeth hurt so badly? A deep, daily, thick, acute pain. It isn't just because I have nine cavities that need to be filled. I come from a long line of bad teeth. My granny had a full set of dentures before she turned thirteen. Her family was stationed in China at the time, during World War II. One of her teeth became infected and it spread through her whole mouth. She had every last one of her teeth pulled. My granny would tell us the love story about her meeting our gramps on the military base they lived on. He was a friend of her dad's and thought she was cute. One day he came up to her and introduced himself. She didn't say anything—she just flipped her top plate at him.

My teeth and I started out on better footing. I was my mom's last hope for oral glory. Topping her list of regrets were those braces she never had as a kid. She always said I had a chance in life, with my straight teeth. Unfortunately, when it came to predictions my mom's success rate was never very high. I got my first filling at age four. My kindergarten teacher sent me home with red pills I would scrub on my teeth, the dye sticking to the places I had plaque—red spots waving my toothbrush down, hoping to be seen, like road flares on a desolate highway. Those red pills never did much good—me and my little brother had contests to see who could go

the longest without brushing. With no basic utilities or stable housing, dental hygiene wasn't a big priority.

We weren't always homeless, but if it wasn't the street it was a bus, a shack, or a trailer. Not a "look, Mommy, our house has wheels" kinda home, but a ten-foot-, maybe twenty-foot-long, "look, Mommy, the shower stall is above the toilet" kinda home. Being poor meant learning that Diehard is the best car battery to buy 'cause Sears'll let you recharge it for free, for life. Recharged batteries powered our television so we could watch *Full House* before doing homework by kerosene light. Being poor meant having lice until I was sixteen. Being poor meant going to twenty-five schools before graduating high school. Being poor meant having cold running water once in seven years. It meant putting used toilet paper in a bag next to the toilet because there wasn't a septic system, just a fifty-gallon barrel drum buried under the trailer, leaking sewage into the ground. Poor people don't conserve for political gain—they really ain't too much to waste. Once a week we'd haul ourselves down to the YMCA to shower. Mom would beg the attendant to waive the dollar charge until next time, or sneak us by. Other days we heated water on the stove and poured it into a basin. Dad washed first, Mom second, me third, and my two brothers last.

I've been plagued with nightmares ever since I can remember. They started when I was two years old. Often I dreamt my teeth were decaying and falling out. My handy dream dictionary states: "Dental problems, such as teeth falling out, being broken and so on, are the focus of many anxiety dreams, reflecting insecurities in the personal, domestic or professional sphere." Not only were my teeth dreams a reflection of waking-life anxieties and domestic troubles, they were a reflection of waking-life tooth trauma. It makes sense to me that my most compulsive ritual involves clicking my teeth. Ever since I can remember, I have been doing it: If I click my top and bottom teeth together on one side of my mouth, I have to click twice together on the other side and then click once more on the original side. I continue with this until I am satisfied that the pattern is symmetrical. This is one way that I release my anxiety through my teeth.

I remember one time when I was getting what was supposed to be a temporary crown put on after a root canal. I asked the dentist if I could get some kind of pain medication while I waited for another root canal months later. He sat me down and explained to me how "habit forming" painkillers can become. He lectured me against using any type of pain medication for fear that I would become addicted to it. I wondered then if having rotten teeth and no health insurance automatically serves as an identifier for drug addiction. If so, are both drug addicts and people with rotten teeth supposed to suffer in vain because we are told we brought it on ourselves? Preschools full of fluoride washes and flossing videos are insufficient when educating the poor—the "dentally challenged."

As the oldest kid in a poor family, I concerned myself with hustling ways to get milk on the table when the food stamps ran out. I concerned myself with whose stuff got pawned which month. Where I come from, if you have a mouth to feed, you've got two hands to work. Sometimes I wonder at how I knew so much about my family's financial matters. My middle-class friends who don't know how much money their parents make have always fascinated me; some don't even know what their parents do. When I first came into class consciousness, at age sixteen, I called my mom to break the news: "Mom! We're working class!" She responded: "Oh, no, honey, we don't work." Her comment made me begin to understand the unique struggle all working people—but specifically poor people—face, fighting to survive in this society.

If people are ever confused about what class they belong to, housing, prior occupations, and access to education can all be good indicators as to where one might fit in. The condition of one's teeth is an even more accurate indicator. I would never tire of someone talking to me about their tooth trauma all day long, though most people don't want to have anything to do with such a conversation. Tooth problems are seen as a private matter, an ascribed condition.

Unlike some of my other poor friends, I did have the opportunity to visit the dentist a few times as a child. These visits began with excavating cavities and filling them with a metal amalgam that included mercury. Ten years later, mercury was reported to be potentially harmful, and

when we got welfare insurance that covered dental procedures, my new dentist replaced all my old fillings with plastic composite ones. He even dug out and replaced all of Mom's old, dark-blue fillings. We were elated—no more metal coats of arms shining through our teeth, exposing them for the frail, chipping appendages they were. Three years later, when I was on my own at age sixteen, my beautiful white fillings started to leak. That shiny plastic became a symbol of what hid the reality of my life and class background: a pretty, quick fix for the much deeper underlying distress of poverty. Underneath their flawless exteriors were rotting teeth screaming to be drilled. Four root canals and one pulled tooth later, I was screaming, too.

I have always had a sorrowful relationship with my teeth—one filled with regret. If you have ever had a tooth pulled, maybe you understand. It was a sad, sad day when I had my first tooth extracted. It was pulled because I couldn't afford the eight hundred dollars cash it was going to cost me to get a root canal. The tooth had already been partially drilled by another dentist. As a tattoo artist often won't work on a tattoo by another artist, getting a dentist to finish another's drilling comes at a price. The music blared into my Walkman as I distracted myself from the dentist's chore. He put my tired tooth to sleep like a family dog that must be put down. Wrapping sophisticated pliers around my tooth, he rocked it back and forth, coaxing it out of my gums. I moaned in agony. My gums constricted and finally birthed their obstinate tooth. The vacancy that remains can never be filled.

REVERSE

Silas Howard

Donut Shoppe, 1978

I watch through the rain-streaked windows of the camper.

The Formica counters in the doughnut shop are chrome-lined, chipped, and faded to the color of Miami pools. Fluorescent lights flicker as the television plays: a blue Cycloptic giant announcing the news of the day; Christopher Reeve plays Superman, Carter meets with Middle East leaders at Camp David, and Jim Jones kills a congressman and then orders his followers to commit suicide. Sun-washed posters along the walls feature colossal close-ups of French crullers, maple doughnuts, and old-fashioned. A couple sits drinking free refills and contemplating the responsibility of leaving town with a child, a fat golden retriever, seventy-five dollars in their pockets, and the camper. This is their escape hatch—a family vacation, an extended Sunday drive, travel through the nice neighborhoods to envision life in the ornate homes of the well-to-do.

At the doughnut shop that night they decided that, yes, they would go across the country. They would ignore the grinding, almost suffocating lack of money that kept them in a never-ending state of panic, a feeling that staying at home averred. This trip would be a clean slate, a new page, everything still to come. Necessity makes reality real.

repeated the words, eventually chanting them as if they were commands. "Ocean! River! Stream!" I didn't even attempt to write on the board; I went back to my desk, my fingertips dusted with white chalk.

I dreaded those public moments that highlighted the fact that I was a foreigner. Sometimes I sat at my desk plotting my revenge. I would master the English language. I would infiltrate the gringo culture without letting on that I was a traitor. I would battle in their tongue and make them stumble. I would cut out their souls and leave them on the shore to be pecked on by vultures.

One pivotal afternoon, I squirmed in my seat. I had an itch between my legs like a red-hot ant bite. Finally, I reached my hand toward the ceiling to ask for permission to go to the bathroom. Mrs. Clara looked at me; I knew no words to express my state of emergency. I pointed to the door; she stared back blankly. The whole class looked on. I grabbed my crotch, squeezed and grimaced. Finally, she understood, but as I darted out of the room, warm pee exploded between my legs, trickling into my socks and splashing in droplets on the floor. I ran out of school, my moist shoes pounding on the speckled tile, squeaky drumbeats echoing in the corridor.

Past the banyan tree by the playground and through the neighboring streets, I sprinted as if I were being pursued. I ran with the insides of my legs soiled, wet, and sticky with urine, sucking oxygen into my bursting lungs with wrenching gulps. I wished that the stiff metal airplane that had ripped me from my home would take me back. Pumping my arms, I wished for silver angel wings that glided or long, broad eagle wings that soared. But I knew that my flapping was useless.

THERE ARE HOLES IN MY MANDARIN DOG BISCUIT

Shelli Feijo

The stretch of my favorite shirt as I pulled it over my still-damp hair helped ease me into the day ahead. Going to school had never been easy and middle school at MILK had proved to be no exception. The teasing had begun almost as soon as I climbed onto the bus for the first time. Words like "greasy," "dirty," "smelly," "pizza face," "poor," "trash," "welfare case," and so on engulfed me on a daily basis. But, I had found friends and muddled through, making jokes at my own expense until the teasing subsided. After all, the rest of the kids on the bus weren't much different. They were probably just using me to get the focus off of their own clothes, smells, lives.

Anyway, I smiled that morning getting dressed—I always felt good when the red-and-white-striped T-shirt that I loved fell snug against my chest. As I turned to leave, my mother reached out and grabbed my shoulder, saying, "You aren't wearing that, there's a hole in it."

I pulled away. "Everything I have has something wrong with it. This is my favorite."

"I don't give a shit. You are *not* wearing a shirt with a hole in it." I started to cry. I ran back to my room, grabbed a dirty sweatshirt, and yanked it on, tears streaking down my face. I ran down the six flights of stairs and out into the sweet stench of a Berkeley morning, hoping I wouldn't miss the bus and have to walk.

I thought about the hole in the shirt a lot that day, as though I were wishing the shirt back into its pre-hole existence, the worn-in comfort that it had had the day we bought it at the thrift store. I felt empty without the T-shirt holding me tight, cold without its striped warmth. When I wore it I imagined there was no pain, no queasiness, no hunger. But soon the shirt was forgotten; more pressing issues were at hand.

Rushing home after school, my stomach would groan and shift, crying out with after-school hunger pangs and butterflies of hope that my mother would not be home when I got there. I climbed the stairs, silently praying that when I rounded the dark hallway I would see the outline of a note, taped glistening to the door. When it was there, it meant going in and sighing with relief, making a baked potato when we had a bag, or getting a cup of the sugarless cheap drink that nobody else's mom made them drink. My mom had to be the hippie welfare mom, no Kool-Aid or Skippy peanut butter here. Only chunks of natural peanuts in a layer of oil, and pure, juice-flavored water. Some days, I would rush home and in note-inspired bliss I would wander the apartment, imagining that my mom would never come home, never yell again, never hit, never cry, never stare at me with the hurt of her whole life transferring to me, through me. Other days, the hunger would be too much, and I would search the kitchen, thinking maybe I had missed some small piece of cheese, or a leftover piece of chicken in the fridge. Never had anything been overlooked, but there was always the box on top of the fridge.

It never failed that no matter how poor we were, how much we struggled to stretch the food stamps or the social-security check my mom got for being legally blind, mentally ill, and unemployed, the dog, the beautiful Doberman my mom had gotten for protection, always had bones. Purina dog biscuits, at that.

The first time, I tried them at my mother's demand. She said there was nothing for dinner that night, and that dog biscuits were really made out of "people food."

"Really," she said, "they have more nutrients than anything I would cook. If you are that hungry, eat one." Dog biscuits taste like crunchy box. No flavor, just crunch, and a mealiness that makes you feel full even when

you have tasted nothing of any substance. I guess they must taste different to dogs. But, they weren't so bad. They weren't like rancid meat or anything, more like a really healthy granola bar from the overpriced natural food co-op around the corner.

The taste of the dog biscuits was better than the acid pinch of memory that comes to me as a mandarin orange. Mandarin oranges and I go way back. Back to the couple of months we lived in Albany, in the rented house with the fat tree in the yard. The house with roaches crawling under the kitchen sink and over the walls when the dark descended at night. The house where the electricity got shut off. The house where my mom and her latest boyfriend smoked and snorted, stayed in bed all day and yelled all night. The house where a sleepover turned into torture, all on account of those damn mandarin oranges.

My best friend, Nikki, had come on the BART train alone, all the way from Concord. We had overnight plans of giggling and reading together, snacking and sipping ice-cold Coke late into the night, covering up the glare of low-battery-flickering flashlights with torn blankets and just the right angle of bodily shield. Nikki was the only friend I would ever invite over, the only one who could be trusted with my secrets, the only one I had ever known with secrets of her own. The night of the mandarin oranges is the last night I remember us together. Maybe she was scared to come back. Maybe my secrets had proved to be too deep.

We were hungry and there was nothing to eat. I don't mean that there was only peanut butter and jelly, or milk instead of juice; I don't mean that there was nothing we liked. I mean there was nothing there. I walked down the hall apprehensively, the familiar butterflies grinding against my stomach, and knocked quietly on my mom's bedroom door. She answered in her nightgown. I told her we were hungry and asked if she had any money for us to go to the store.

Clutching the five-dollar bill with delight, I chased after Nikki, screaming that I would catch her as we approached the nearby Lucky's. We slowed to a fast walk, sweat pooling with kid-funk on us as we laughed and entered the shiny mecca of food. We struggled past the potato-chip aisle

and stole peeks at the bakery cookies. We had my mom's last five, and a TV dinner apiece was what we were allowed to get. I chose the veal parmigiana, a 99-cent favorite, and Nikki picked the Salisbury steak meal. We held hands and waited to check out in the express lane.

I know I had the five. I had been holding it so tight I could still feel its crinkle, its damp presence in my palm. The checker glared at me and said, "Do you have the money or not?" I started to panic and could feel tears welling up. Nikki tried to help, and took off through the store's aisles, scanning for the wrinkled bill. After an eternity standing there and the realization that the money was gone, I asked the checker to hold the dinners while we searched on the street. We walked back and forth in a crisscross pattern, without saying a word. I was supposed to bring back the change—the three dollars left over—and dinner for Nikki and me.

Finally, we gave up. It was very dark and my tears had turned to sobbing. Nikki let me lean on her and we slowly edged home, so different from the girls who had bounded toward the store. I turned the knob slowly and tried to sneak in. My mom was waiting. She was mad. "Where have you been? It's been over an hour."

I started to tell her that I was sorry. I wanted her to know that I really didn't mean to lose the money. I said, "Mom, I don't know what happened. I was holding the money real tight but when I went to pay, it was gone." *Whack!* She slapped me hard, and turned to Nikki. "What did you two buy?"

"Nothing," Nikki said. "We picked frozen dinners and then the money was gone." My mom took my arm and dragged me into the kitchen. "Well," she said, "now you are going to eat what I fix. The last of my cigarette money." She mumbled for a while, slamming empty cabinets and cursing. Nikki stood transfixed, wedged into the corner of the kitchen, staring at my mom.

"Come here," my mom said. "Get in line."

Nikki stood behind me and my mom opened a large can, placing it in front of me with one fork. "Take turns eating one bite at a time, and finish the whole thing. This is your dinner." I tried to swallow, but the tanginess stung my tongue and the crying had made my throat tighten. I didn't even

feel hungry anymore. I started to spit and my mom yelled, "Oh, no, you wanted dinner, you lost the last of my money, you are going to eat." Nikki stepped in front of me and grabbed the fork, taking a huge bite. The liquid sprayed, making my face sticky, and Nikki reached for another section of orange. I think she was trying to save me from eating it. My mom pushed her out of the way and told me to eat up.

I tried again, and this time the force of the fork plunged against my gag reflex, and I threw up everywhere. My mom paused. For a moment, I thought she was going to make me eat it. Instead, she said, "You girls have had dinner. Now clean this shit up and get to bed."

We cleaned late into the night and fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. We never did play that night, tell stories, or giggle. We fell asleep listening to the sounds of each other's growling bellies, and woke to my mom thanking her boyfriend for a bag of food. We ate cereal that morning, and cold milk. No one ever mentioned the canned mandarin oranges.

Locked in my mind is a mist of childhood experiences like this one. They run together—food, clothes, pets, houses, fights, family—intertwined with each other, flowing and stopping as they wish, resisting separation into neat categories. These childhood experiences all revolve around money, and the lack thereof. As I reflect on them now, twenty years later, they boil down to one memory, an amalgam that reminds me, that speaks to me, that scares me: There are holes in my mandarin dog biscuit.