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## All the Elephants Faced the Door: Fiction and poetry

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All the Elephants Faced the Door  
fiction and poetry

A Thesis

by

STEPHANIE B. THOMÉ

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Texas-Pan American  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ENGLISH

July 2003

Major Subject: Literature

# All the Elephants Faced the Door

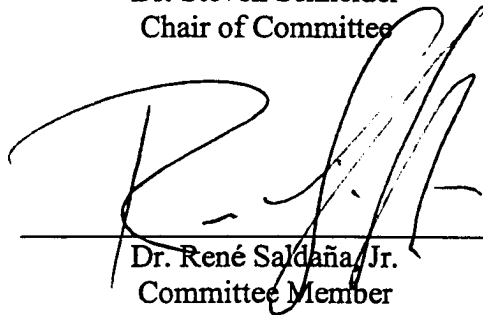
A thesis  
by  
STEPHANIE B. THOMÉ

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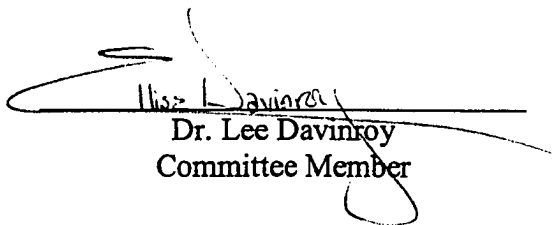
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July 2003

## ABSTRACT

Thome, Stephanie B., All the Elephants Faced the Door. Master of English (MA), July, 2003, 78 pp., 7 references.

All the Elephants Faced the Door is a collection of fiction and poetry. The first section, "The World is Nice to Butterflies," is a collection of six short stories. The collection focuses on the Solis family. The family consists of six sisters and the stories follow their journey of falling in love, forming romantic relationships and the eventuality of marriage.

The second half of my manuscript is composed of poems and is divided in three sections. The first, "The Stuff of the World is Love-Stuff," is a sequence of love poems. The second section entitled, "Domestic Anxiety," is a series of poetry addressing women's issues. One of the main themes is the fear or hatred of housework and the fear of a woman losing her identity because she is domesticated. The concluding section, "Are You Looking at Me?," is a series of identity poems that attempt to define who I am and where I come from. A woman's fear of losing herself and her identity when entering into a relationship is the main theme found in All the Elephants Faced the Door.

## DEDICATION

To: Mom, Dad, and Victor—for forming, molding, and holding me carefully; Martin—for better, worst, and worstest of all; my friends and family—all had a hand in raising me and have made me the person I am today. I'm lucky to have you all; Allisa—I'm always thinking of you and with all the magic-bean-power in the world wish you were mine; Grandpa—one of the greats.

### **The Ones That Got Away**

For all the poems—  
the escaped convicts,  
the strays—  
the words that got away.

The fish in the sea,  
the half eaten cake,  
empty boxes,  
un-popped kernels,  
wound down watches,  
unsolved theories  
and mysteries.

Sorry  
I didn't catch or convey  
all the things you wanted me to say.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **The Ones That Got Away**

I would like to make clear the poem found in my Dedication: “The Ones That Got Away” is an apology, but it is not directed toward the reader. I am not apologizing for my thoughts or any of the things I have written here. However, in true women’s style (because we, for the most part, feel the need to apologize for everything), I am apologizing to my poetry. This poem is my way of acknowledging my wish to have done more, said more, cleared my throat and made things just a little more lucid. The poem is my way of saying I’m sorry for the words and poetry that escape me—the poems I don’t write down, the feelings or experiences I’m not ready to write down yet, don’t know how to express, or just can’t find the words to express—it’s not fair to them. I felt I “ode” my writing an apology.

### **Explanation of Titles**

Let me begin with an explanation of my title, All the Elephants Faced the Door. There is a tradition in my family that is not followed much anymore except by my *grandma* and some of my older aunts. Some of the more memorable places from my childhood had, and still do have, a collection of decorative elephants. Some are made of plastic, glass, or ceramic—all different colors. According to tradition the elephants’

upturned trunks must face the door to bring luck to the people in the house. I don't believe this tradition is based on the Mexican-American culture, although I can say that Mexican-Americans do have a tendency to be superstitious about everything.

I looked this tradition up on the Internet because I wasn't sure if it was a widespread belief or limited to my family. I found there are differing versions of this tradition. Some people believe the elephants must face a window, not the door, and will bring the household money, not luck. It is a kind of superstitious feng shui. These elephants bring back memories of my childhood and appear in my poem, "A Fairy Tale." I felt using this line as the title for my thesis was appropriate since many of the poems stem from childhood memories and experiences.

The title of the following fiction section, "The World is Nice to Butterflies," is a title I have had in my head ever since I was little and my family took a trip to Washington, D.C. There, in a museum, I saw a collection of butterflies. Each was pinned inside a glass case. Some were big, some small. Some were shiny in extraordinary blue colors, and some were dull. The collection reminded me of the variety and beauty in women, especially the women in my family—the women closest to me. Since then I had the idea to write about these women. Among them I wanted to include both my grandmas' lives, their hardships and happy times, their children and children's children, and each one's experience with men, marriage and life. I feel like their lives' experience and mistakes are my inheritance. "The World is Nice to Butterflies," the version seen here, turned out to be only part of my original idea. It is something that I will continue writing.

“But what does the title itself mean?” my reader may ask. I wanted the title, “The World is Nice to Butterflies,” to have many interpretations. All around the world different cultures relate the image of the butterfly to women, just as I did when I saw them pinned down and enclosed in glass. Ultimately, I wanted the reader to realize the literal irony: “Wait a minute, the world is not nice to butterflies.” And the implied irony: the world is not nice to beautiful, unique creatures like butterflies, nor is it nice to the beautiful and unique women of the world.

The first poetry section is entitled “The Stuff of the World is Love-Stuff.” I borrowed this title from a chapter in a book called The Philosophical Scientist by David Foster. Sir Arthur Eddington came up with the idea that the stuff of the world is mind-stuff. He used this to explain that solidity is a mental notion we humans create. Humans like solidity. We make our houses of brick and stone, we make our roads of asphalt. Wherever our bodies hold a position in space, we prefer solidity. Of course, like everything else, solidity is relative. Solidity is something that we, as humans, have a preconceived notion of. If I were a butterfly, solidity would no longer be rock or brick but the air, because the air is solid to a butterfly’s wings. If I were a fish, water would be my solid substance. Thus solidity is a relative property of our human minds. A physicist would be unable to calculate a figure to quantify solid actuality (10).

It is important to understand this when interpreting my twist on the title “The Stuff of the World is Love-Stuff.” For example, a person standing on a ledge breathes faster, becomes nervous, is afraid to get too close to the edge because he/she craves a solid substance under his/her feet. “Our respect for solid substance is no mere mental notion but it is instinctive understanding of what is good for us, namely to have solid

ground under our feet to support us from the free-falling of gravity” (Foster 8). This statement can be compared to love. Many people use the term “falling in love.” We say this because love can feel like “the free-falling dangers of gravity.” If love is falling over the edge, do we have a choice as to whether we take the leap or not? In love is there a safe, solid substance on which to stand firm?

The next section, “Domestic Anxiety,” is a set of poems that deals with me and my fear of and frustration with cleaning. When I was little I did not dream about my wedding day or anything like that, I just hoped and prayed that I would end up with a man who would share in household responsibilities. Today, with over fifty percent of married men and women working long hours, I don’t feel household responsibilities are split equally. When it comes to household chores, women are stuck with the brunt of the work. Top this off with the fact that cleaning, washing, cooking—all of these things—are never-ending cycles. When you vacuum your carpet or mop your floor, it will get dirty as soon as someone steps on it. But you must clean, and you must expect that someone will dirty it. The same can be said for the dirty dishes in the sink and the clothes in the laundry basket. I think this cycle bothers me because I don’t like doing these chores. I feel like they rob many women of precious productive time and any quality time that is not surrendered to work or children.

In her book, The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir describes a woman’s need to clean as “the never ending struggle against the evil principles that creep into it [her home]; in her war against dust, stains, mud, and dirt she is fighting sin, wrestling with Satan” (475). This is the only statement I have found that can describe the scene I would wake up to as a child every Saturday morning, watching my mother attack the dust

bunnies as if they themselves were Satan's front line. Housework is a never-ending struggle. De Beavoir is successful in describing the effects this struggle has on women. In the end, this struggle proves to be annoyingly unappreciated. “..these minor holocausts must at least be reflected in someone's joy...But since the housekeeper's labor is expended to maintain the status quo, the husband...may notice disorder...but it seems to him that order and neatness come of their own accord” (478).

Cleaning is a never-ending job. I don't know how my mother cleaned up my messes for so long. It is a subject that brings up many issues in my life. The women in my family and their frustrating obsession with cleaning is what brought about my fears of domestic labor and I think these poems do a good job of describing this.

The third poetry section, “Are You Looking at Me?” is a collection of identity poems. They all revolve around personal memories, experiences, and emotions of past and present. I refer to my niece, my parents, my brother, my Grandpa, and many other family members who have shaped me in some way and made me the woman I am today. These poems mention things that remind me of my home and childhood.

### **Format**

Since I had decided to include both fiction and poetry, I debated which format would allow both sections to blend and have the same overall aim, but still be read as separate entities. Although, both the fiction and poetry contain many of the same themes, deal with similar issues, and share one-in-the-same message, my main concern was that I wanted the series of stories to be read in succession, as a whole. To accomplish this format, I looked at several books. One of them was Judith Ortiz Cofer's The Latin Deli.

This book also includes a mixture of short stories and poetry. Cofer begins her book with a series of short stories and intermittently intertwines poems that are directly related to the stories they follow. This format did not work for me because my stories were a series that were meant to follow each other and not all of my poems pertain to one or any of the stories.

However, I did steal the format of Cofer's title page for each of my chapter pages—only slightly modified. Cofer included her title and followed it with a quote, the Spanish and English versions. I wanted to do something similar, but because some of my favorite quotes are lyrics of songs I thought I would use the lyrics instead. Each lyric used, there are two per each title page, follows the theme of the section.

### **Writing and Me**

One of the defining moments of my life occurred when I was in the third grade at a small, Catholic elementary school I attended in El Paso, Texas. It was a Friday morning when I received a mandatory eye exam. I stood in line wearing my plaid skirt, bow tie, and oxford shoes, covered my right eye and then my left. That afternoon the school informed my parents I needed glasses. That weekend I was fitted for the thickest set of pink frames set with heavy glass. I can remember thinking it was all down hill from there—I was marked, for everyone to see, as a nerd. And to make matters worse, I was missing one of my front teeth.

On the upside, I liked to read and the new glasses helped me see the words more clearly. I remember watching my dad read book after book. His reading habits became a stencil for me to fill. He rewarded my reading habits and bought me book after book

after book. In fact, one of my first memories is of my father carrying a book for me because it was too heavy for me to carry myself. I still have many of the early books my father bought me, torn and tattered, and still pick them up and read them from time to time. One of the earliest was The Best Loved Poems of the American People. This was my introduction to poetry.

My mom did her part too. She bought me a journal. I wrote my poetry there and carried it everywhere. One day while playing basketball I left my backpack unattended. A boy searched through my stuff to find the poetry journal he knew I kept. He stole it and took it home to read. I was devastated. I wasn't ready for anyone to see my writing, much less a boy. The feeling I had when he stole my book and read it is still the feeling I fight when people read my poetry today—the uneasiness and the nervous stomach. I stopped writing poetry consistently after high school. The world of college, meeting new people, and living a different life in a different place kept my pen and imagination at bay. As an undergraduate I wrote a lot of essays and not much else.

### **My Voice**

If I had to define my voice, I would say it is a mixture of many different variables coming together and blending. I am twenty-three years old, Hispanic, about to receive my Masters, and in a serious relationship. These things, along with other complex emotions and situations, define who I am and what I feel at this moment in time. In many ways I am an educated lady still uneducated about a great many of life's experiences. Therefore, I don't feel age is sufficient enough to define my place in life. When I was twelve I felt like I was a twelve year old stuck in a thirty-something's body and now that

I'm twenty-three I feel like I don't know anything. Overall, I define myself as an optimistic pessimist—if there is such a thing. I am very optimistic about the cruel realities in life.

The writings found here are the result of my search for the answers to many questions I have asked and still ask about relationships and marriage. I grew up in El Paso, Texas, which lies on the border of Juarez, Mexico. This borderline and my Mexican-American culture affect my voice and are the source for many of these questions. I find myself having to overcome some of the old beliefs and views my culture has of a woman's role in relationships and marriage. I am convinced this is where my current relationship, cultural beliefs, and my values as a modern woman collide. These writings are my attempt to overcome and think the whole situation out.

As a young girl I was led to dream that Camelot and fairy tales were attainable, and the optimist in me wanted to believe. But all those fairy tales of Mr. Right and Prince Charming—someone to save me from all my problems and take care of me—are the cause of much of anger and concern because I've learned through many generations of women in my family, and through my own experiences, that these fairy tales are impossible and unrealistic. My fairy tale was not Camelot or Prince Charming. I always figured I would be a professional workingwoman with a husband who would be my equal, my partner in the everyday duties of life and marriage. I pictured we would both get off work about five; we would both cook dinner together. I would chop the tomatoes and my husband would chop the onions (because I hate chopping onions). And we would clean up together. But I am old enough to realize that this vision is just as much of a



fairy tale as Cinderella. I could write a book about a married couple like this and sell it as fiction. Much of the writing seen here stems from this realization.

One of the rules of writing is write what you know. Recently one of my grievances in life has been my mental battle with housework and the way it is a part of me as a woman. In her book, The Cinderella Complex, Colette Dowling deems domestic work “shit work”, and assigns a woman’s need to hate and nag her non-shit-working-husband to her dependency toward him (7). Dowling defines this dependency as financial dependence. However, there are many different ways a woman/wife can be dependent on a man/husband. For example, mentally—she feels she needs him and can’t stand the thought of being alone, emotionally—she feels attached, and so on. However the dependency occurs, it is the origin of weakness and places a woman’s self-image in jeopardy, leaving many women in a never-ending vortex of a dependent, shit-filled life. I address this idea throughout my work.

Just as Dowling speaks about financial dependency, I feel love is a kind of dependence. It is not a coincidence that my writing explores the dynamic of love and marriage. Many women today are not financially dependent on men, but like financial dependency, emotional dependency can affect a woman and make her question her self-image. There is a fine line between a balanced love relationship and domination. The “free-falling dangers of love” that I wrote about on pages three and four cause a person in love to lose control, lose perspective, and in the case of many women, lose self-image. This emotional dependency can be just as damaging as Dowling’s financial dependency, but like the never-ending cycle of household chores, love is essential and inescapable.

## Fiction

As a little girl I remember I didn't like the way I wrote. My voice and style were not like the ones I had read in all of my favorite classics. My writing and ideas did not match up with Twain, Verne, Whitman, Hemingway, Faulkner, Shakespeare—all the classics I took time and care to read—all men. The poems I loved were also written by men. It wasn't until recently, in my graduate studies, that I was introduced to modern writers, including women writers. Prior to that the only women I had really, really read were Stowe, Alcott, Dickinson and Plath. And although I enjoyed reading them, I did not relate my voice to theirs.

I began my college career thinking I wanted to be an engineer, but as a junior I read Sandra Cisneros's Loose Women. That reading, and getting a C in my Math class, changed my mind. I did not feel comfortable with my writing voice until I read her poetry. As a result, I was able to feel like my voice was allowed to become a part of the literary community and does belong. The rise of modern Hispanic women writers such as Sandra Cisneros has made a place for my voice and encouraged me to write.

As an undergraduate I took a class called Writing the Short Screenplay. This class was the only real creative writing class I took as an undergraduate and it was the class I clung to while writing the short story collection found here. This resulted in my fiction being separated into scenes or episodes based heavily on dialogue.

The collection of stories here is based on one family—the Solis family. I wanted the concentration to be on the six siblings and their experiences with love and relationships. I did not want to leave the reader with a stated lesson or the-moral-of-the-story-is message. I wanted the reader to take these situations and think. For example:

Did Joanne really get divorced? Was it her best option? Is Stan's lack of participation in household chores and refusal to help care for the children a reason for Joanne to leave? Would her parents and sisters agree? It was also my intention to leave the outcome of each situation vague. I wanted the reader to have to think about which sister really ended up the happiest—the married one, the divorced one, the one who stayed, or the one who ran away. As it stands today, I know I am not finished writing the stories and am going to expand them to include stories of the parents' past, and part of each sibling's childhood. This might relieve some reader questions as to why these characters are the way they are and explain the dynamic of the family relationship.

There was some question as to how to define my "series of stories" and why I included so many characters. I will begin by answering the question: Is each episode a story in-and-of-itself? If I follow Friedman's definition in the Essentials of the Theory of Fiction I would conclude that each would be defined as a scene. "A scene includes the continuous chain of utterance engendered between two or more speakers as one replies to the other...in a closed situation..." (103). Each scene contains a subaction. The larger action is found when the series is read consecutively. Although each scene can be taken, read as a separate entity, and the reader can extract a moral from each, I wanted the series to be read and taken as a whole. This means I wanted each scene to be taken as part of a whole. This would allow the reader to gather information from each of the sisters' differing situations, consider all the outcomes, and leave an arrow pointing to the idea I wanted the reader to focus on.

Each scene is extremely short because I wanted to focus on just one aspect—love and marriage. To accomplish this I included only the part of each characters' life that

pertained to the marriage/love dynamic, the dependency that stems from this, and the household duties that are assigned by this. Thus, the series is organized around a theme. If read separately, each can be taken as a short story, but each story would be static; the individual character of the story does not grow. If the series of stories is taken as a whole, Yolanda's growth is allowed to occur through her sisters' experiences and relationships. This also justifies the number of characters I choose to include because without each of her sister's experiences, Yolanda's character would not experience growth.

One theme I cling to is the relationship between clean and dirty—the fact that just as things can be dirty on the surface, people can be considered “dirty” inside and out. The word *mugrosa* is Spanish. Literally it is translated to mean “dirty girl.” However, the word dirty can have different meanings—in terms of cleanliness, actually being full of dirt, and moral implications, being a dirty woman who does or says things a lady is not supposed to. The term appears first in the “The Dating Game,” and is used by Mrs. Solis to describe how sweaty and dirty her girls get while cleaning the house. However, in the third short, “Maria Josefina and the Fine Line,” Mrs. Solis labels her daughter Maria as a *mugrosa* because she is standing outside of a nudie bar. What Mrs. Solis does not realize is that Maria is outside the bar looking for her husband who is inside. The question then becomes, who is really “clean” and who is “dirty”?

All the stories are told in first person from the middle sister, Yolanda's point of view. However, parts of the stories read like Yolanda can hear her sister's thoughts. I wanted this to seem like Yolanda has the ability to invade her sisters' minds, as if she had read all their hidden diaries—their personal thoughts. I also wanted the reader to know

that Yolanda really did know and empathized with each situation because she felt or rather did not want to feel this-could-happen-to-me. I wanted Yolanda to live out her fears and issues about commitment through the trials and tribulations of her sisters. Since Yolanda was the one who remained unmarried until the end and had no desire to marry, she was the perfect observer and recorder of the events.

### **Poetry**

I began writing poetry again regularly only recently in graduate school for my creative writing poetry class. In that class I wrote one third of the poems seen here and was able to rekindle my poetry writing. In this collection, my poetry divides into three sections. The first, “The Stuff of the World is Love-Stuff,” deals with love and relationships. The second, “Domestic Anxiety,” includes poems with a feminine theme, including my frustration with cleaning. The third, “Are You Looking at Me?” is a collection of identity poems. It includes poems that are about my life—past and present. Each section reflects a part of me.

I draw from many influences when writing poetry. I “accidentally overhear” many conversations—many great lines have come to me this way. People do not realize the things they say can have a profound impact. For example, one day I was walking next to a fighting couple. The guy said to the girl, “I don’t care you care.” The words made me stop and I was hurt for the girl. Did he realize what he had just said? I’m sure the fighting continued, but with that line I had the beginning of a poem. I incorporated that line with a conversation I had the night prior about the ruined paint job of a car due

to an accidental over spray of green paint. These ideas paired together allowed me to write, “Over Spray.”

Another poem that was derived in a similar manner is, “Can’t feel good about nothing(s).” I was babysitting my nephew Robbie, who was two at the time. I left him sitting at the table eating while I watched TV. He came over to me and told me that he could not eat anymore. “I can’t feel good,” he said. I liked the line and wanted to work it into one of my poems. I was mulling over the line while listening to oldies and the song “Sweet Nothings” came on. I used Robbie’s line and defined what could not feel good—romantic words that mean nothing.

Music has, and always will be, an influence in my life. As I grow older I realize the similarity between poetry and music lyrics such as rap. I grew up with rap and now that I can see it as true art and understand the complexity of it, it has influenced my writing. As an undergraduate I wrote an essay arguing that Petarch’s idea of courtly love is not dead. It can be found in modern rap lyrics. I am a firm believer that many of the old ideas classic poets wrote about hundreds of years ago are still around today, however much language has changed. Therefore, I use music to inspire me. I like to listen to the lyrics as if they themselves were a poem. In Finch’s and Varnes’s An Exaltation of Forms DJ Renegade’s essay, “The Metrics of Rap,” states, “...all rappers are simultaneously poets and musicians” (227). He believes that rappers must follow rules of poetry and music to be successful. Just as poetry has rhyme and meter, so does rap. In this same tradition my Dad has recently proclaimed himself a *cancionero*—a songwriter. He writes both lyrics—words accompanied by music—and poetry.

Tracie Morris's essay, "Hip-Hop Rhyme Formations: Open Your Ears" states that Morris has, "...been dismayed by the lack of academic respect for this genre's poetic form" (223). He names artists like The Sugar Hill Gang, The Notorious B.I.G., and Busta Rhymes as being innovators of rhyme and the change in manipulated stresses to create different patterns and inflections. The artists Morris writes about here are some of the writers I look up to and draw from and am not afraid to admit I feel musicians, rappers especially, are poetic geniuses. I have written some of the poems found here using the meter, or baseline, of popular rap songs.

I have already mentioned that Sandra Cisneros' writing has made me feel like my voice finally has a place in the world. My poetic style is similar to hers in many ways. We both use alliteration, allusion, and like to play with words. Sarcasm, sound, and a strong and distinctly feminine voice are some major similarities. We each write about personal experiences and feminine issues that complicate these experiences. The list poem I created, "Calling to Be Filled," is written in the same tradition as Cisneros', "You Bring Out the Mexican in Me" found in her poetry collection Loose Women.

Another one of Cisneros's collections I read often is My Wicked Wicked Ways. There are many poems found in this collection that play with punctuation. For example, "The World Without Rodrigo" is a short poem that has no punctuation. Cisneros relies on line breaks to create a pause. I do this same thing in many of my poems. "Exchange" and "Cowboy" are examples of this.

When I was younger, nine or ten, all of my poems had end rhyme. I thought, as many people do, that a poem is not a poem if it doesn't have a rhyme pattern. Eventually I learned there is such a thing as poetry with no end rhyme—free verse. Michelle

Boisseau's essay, "Free Verse," found in An Exaltation of Forms, states that this type of poetry uses, "...meter and rhyme non-systematically (and often relies on thematic closure devices)..."—this form is no less a form of poetry than those that have a set pattern (73). The reader will find there is a lot of free verse poetry in my collection. Along with free verse the reader will find my attempts at a sonnet, "Domestic Anxiety," a list poem, "Calling to Be Filled," a villanelle, "Sleepless," and a pastoral, "Road to the Westest Texas Town."

My set of short stories, The World is Nice to Butterflies, and the collection of poetry is just the beginning for me. It began as an attempt to look at my life and turned into something greater. I will continue to write, and with the help of "creative writing therapy," will continue to grow as a person and a writer.



## **The World Is Nice to Butterflies**

**“She wanted more from life  
than he could give...”  
Tracy Chapman**

**“Sometimes love don’t feel like it should  
you make it hurt so good...”  
John Melloncamp**

Maria, the oldest, was the most beautiful of all my five sisters, second only to Stela but Stela was in a class all her own. Stela had that great classic beauty like Audrey Hepburn or Elizabeth Taylor; the kind that is given by *San Isidro* and is unattainable for any average woman. Licha was pretty in her own right, but beauty was not her strongest asset. She made sure she made up for that in other ways and had her own special talents when it came to men. Whatever it was it worked, because Licha was so popular she never had to carry her own books home—ever. I was the fourth daughter.

I was the only one who didn't want to marry or have children. Instead I spent my time working at the drug store around the corner making malts and shakes, saving every nickel for college. My parents called Joann and Jeanie, my two youngest sisters, "afterthoughts," but we older girls knew they were accidents—unplanned pregnancies. Things were different for them. Mom had retired from motherhood long before Joann and Jeanie reached puberty. Mom didn't even name them. My sisters and I gave them new modern names, not hard, traditional Spanish names like ours. Joann and Jeanie were raised by whichever one of us was home. Through it all, we each bloomed, fought our way out, and turned into our own individual kind of woman.

### **The Dating Game: Stop Thief! Licha Takes the Cake**

*Hot and spicy. My sister Licha was audacious. She had this feeling and attitude that I and all of my other sisters kept hidden because we were taught it was shameful for a woman to act "that way." Everything she did echoed sexuality, confidence and a pinch of I-don't-care-what-you-think. This quality, this special colorful flare, was with her all the time. It was a permanent accessory—like flashy earrings that never came off. I guess*

*she missed the whole lesson on women and the way we—especially the Solis women—were supposed to behave. She never behaved and always got away with it.*

It was the weekend, a very hot Saturday in June. I was outside sweeping the front porch. My sisters were inside cleaning. We each had our own chores. I was the one they always made do the outside chores, so it was no surprise that I was the darkest of all. If the rest of my sisters were considered to have brownish-olive skin, I would have comparatively been a sort of terracotta-ie shade of brown.

“Mugrosas,” I heard my Mom’s voice through the screen door. My arms were covered in a thin layer of sweat and the soft dirt that I had swept up in the wind floated towards me, flocked to me like *I* was the warm region of Texas, and clung to the thin layer of sweat on my arms. The irritation of the calluses on my fingers where the broom rested left them burning red—layer after layer of skin was being laid to cushion me from the wooden handle. The red calluses screamed for attention and my eyes relented. They reminded me of blinking lights on a runway—*look at me, look at me*—flashing lights that hurt and begged me to look at them. It was then that I realized how disgustingly dirty I was. *I am a mugrosa*, I thought but knew the girls inside didn’t look any better. I could hear the *ay-mami* sigh of tension come out in a chorus when Mom made her comment. It was late in the afternoon, and it was clear the dust bunnies had taken their toll on morale.

Fina came to the door. “How’s it going?”

“Great, I sweep and the wind just blows it all back. Are you guys almost done?” But she had already retreated indoors to resume her chores and I could again hear the lull of the vacuum. It was then I decided to go in for a moment and pour myself something cool to drink. I was going to get a glass of water when I spotted the freshly made

lemonade at the far end of the counter. I poured the thick juice into my glass and was just about to take the last gulp of my drink when the vacuum stopped and I heard a thud. It was Stela banging on the bathroom door.

“Licha, we have to clean in there.”

This kind of scene was typical in our house. When eight people share one bathroom and it is the only room with a door or any privacy to offer, things can get tense.

I held the bottom of the glass high up in the air so I could catch the last sweetness and sugar that had already settled and was stuck to the bottom. *It's not fair*, the best part of the lemonade falls to the bottom and is, more often than not, left unappreciated. I had to fight the temptation to tip the glass further back so the concentrated lemony goodness would ooze to the side of the glass where, if I stuck my tongue out far enough, I could reach it and lick it.

Thud, thud, thud. “You’ve been in there for an hour.”

Licha was a lot like the sticky sweet residue left at the bottom of everyone’s lemonade glass. She seemed to have this dual sweetness and annoyance that bothered me and the rest of my sisters. I washed the glass out, placed it in the sink then walked back to stick my nose in their confrontation. Besides my interest in the fight-to-come, I had wanted to wash off and had been waiting patiently for the bathroom to be free.

“Licha, get out.”

I heard the latch click open. Licha walked out of the bathroom wearing Stela’s pretty dress. We all loved that dress—other than the fact that it was fairly new and a brilliant color of just-the-right-shade-of-green, it seemed to give the wearer a great sense

of pride and beauty. Stela looked great in every dress, but for Licha that dress was magical and her confidence was the best accessory.

The dress had instantly become Stela's favorite and she told Licha not to wear it. Licha was just a size bigger and had already stretched out all but one of Stela's dresses. But not this one—Stela didn't want this one ruined. It was her favorite. It was pretty. She wanted to save it. Keep it as something just for her.

"You're not ready," Licha said, looking at Stela, flashing her newly painted nails real daintily like they were still wet.

"What?"

"You promised you would go with me—with Frank and Joe to the party—and you're not ready."

"Mom said to clean first."

"Well, they'll be here any minute and you're not ready."

I could see Stela looking at Licha, looking at Licha wearing *her* pretty dress. The look reflected the seams pulling and the small makeup stain spotted on *her* dress. I could see Stela's eyes water when she threw the dust rag on the dresser, walked into the bathroom, shut the door and the latch clicked down.

I felt bad, but expected it from Licha. She looked at me and walked to the front. I followed her through the dining room to the door. I could smell mom's good perfume. It was pulled off Licha by the faint breeze from the open window. I looked down at my dark, dirt covered arm and knew once I caught the nice smelling perfume in my nose that I smelled bad—like dirt. I shrugged it off, went outside and continued sweeping. I saw

the silhouette of Licha in Stela's pretty dress through the screen. She stood anxiously by the door looking for her date and watching me sweep.

Licha never liked sweeping and when it came to boys, Licha never needed anyone to sweep her off her feet. She had her own design for life and didn't really believe in fate. She was spoiled. She always got away with everything and made all of her decisions on a whim.

A car came up the driveway to the edge of the porch where I was sweeping. Before the car could come to a standstill, Licha emerged from the house looking brilliant. Walked right out the door in Stela's pretty dress. There were two boys in the car. Licha made her way to the passenger's side and one of the boys got out, opened the door for her, and moved to the back seat. Mom came to the door and told me to wait in the car with Licha—mom never wanted one of her daughters to be alone with a boy unchaperoned.

I opened the back door on the driver's side, made sure Joe, the boy in the back seat, was far enough away from me, and sat on the vinyl seat. I kept my legs dangling outside and tried to make like I had no interest in the conversation. Licha was half turned facing the driver's seat in mid-giggle. She never laughed, never blushed—always giggled.

“Oh, Joe that is so funny,” she said and waved her hand around the way she did when she emerged from the bathroom—limp, like her wrist was broken.

“I didn't think it was that funny,” Frank said.

“Sure it was.” She was still giggling.

“Yeah sure,” he said low and looking at me with a small smile. I looked away but not before I caught a glimpse of Licha’s right hand reaching around to the backseat, fingers finding Joe’s. They were holding hands. She and Joe were holding hands. I stretched my neck up curiously and saw that her left hand was clasped around Frank’s. She and Frank were holding hands too. One hand belonged to Joe, the other to Frank. She knew I knew.

“Go inside and see if Stela’s ready.”

My sweaty legs and the vinyl seat had formed a sticky bond. I peeled myself off the seat and went inside. Stela was just putting on lipstick when I told her the car was driving up. She had surprisingly done a lot in the past ten minutes. Her hair was curled and pinned up.

“I wanted to wear that dress. At least I finally get to go out with Joe.” She opened the door and walked outside. I followed.

“You said they were here.”

“Yeah, they drove right over my pile of dirt,” I said kiddingly reaching for the broom but when I lifted my head and stood beside her I saw what she saw. There was no car, just a cloud of dust subtly settling from two tire tracks.

The date that was supposed to be Stela and Joe’s, but Licha married him six months later. Licha always wanted what didn’t belong to her and, like it or not, made everything hers just like that pretty dress. A man, a dress—no difference.

**Estela Meets Her Match:  
The Little Rock That Almost Never Was**

Stela hadn't known Don very long. He was a serviceman who swore to her he wasn't in the service. She wasn't allowed to date servicemen. It was a chance meeting at a friend's wedding. There they danced. She always remembered the epiphany she had that night; it came to her while dancing a ranchera. It was then she knew her life would be a long game of tug-of-war. Two sides, two colors, two languages—one against the other. *How am I going to go home and tell Mom and Dad he's not Catholic?* she thought, but when she looked down and saw him dancing out of rhythm she knew she had bigger problems. *Forget religion, they are going to take one look at him with his blond hair and forbid this whole thing.* All this came to her after just one dance.

Stela left the wedding relieved. It was just a dance and that was that. She jumped the gun and felt a little silly about the flash-of-the-future—the hardships she pictured. She thought there was some kind of connection with this guy, but who could be sure after just one dance—right? She dismissed the thought until she ran into him again a month later.

“I saw him today,” Stela said to Licha.

“Who?”

“The guy—the guy I danced with at Eva's wedding.”

“You went out on a date? But I thought you were going shopping downtown?”

“No, I did go shopping. But I saw him. He was driving his car down Juarez Street and he saw me. He pulled over to talk to me.”

“Did he turn off the engine?”



“What?”

“Of the car. You know, did he stop the engine?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“If he turned it off, that means he wanted to stop and talk to you. It means he’s attentive.”

“You’re crazy—it doesn’t mean that.”

“So he didn’t turn off the car. Did he at least pull all the way over?”

“Well no, he seemed like he was in a hurry. Besides, Carmen—you know, from Science class—was in the passenger’s seat. They looked like they were out—on a date.”

“Ohhhh, a date. That’s what happens when you like a gringo.” Licha said.

“Shut up—what do you know.”

After that Don started calling the house. They dated for a good year. She swore to Mom that it wasn’t anything serious. But when Stela came to me and told me Don got orders to ship out to Little Rock I knew.

“He asked me to marry him.”

“But I haven’t even met him. I don’t even know what he looks like.” I said.

“Uh, he’s a gringo—he’s whiter than manteca.” Licha had met him before and knew what he looked like. But she had no tact.

“Whiter than manteca?” I asked, thinking how impossible that was.

“Does he glow?” I heard my father ask.

“Girls leave the room. I want to talk to Stela alone.”

Stela and Mom talked to each other for a long time. We all had to wait in the bathroom with the door closed so they could talk sitting around the kitchen table.

“What do you think they’re talking about?” I asked Licha hoping she had caught wind of it from an earlier conversation with Mom.

“They are not going to allow the wedding.”

“Well, I don’t see what the big deal is.”

Stela planned the wedding all by herself. Our parents refused to help and forbid any of us to make any of the arrangements. Mom cried all through the whole ceremony. Everyone knew she wasn’t crying out of happiness. But once the ceremony was over they knew it was done and relented. Mom and Dad made peace by helping Stela and her new husband Don pack the car for the trip to someplace called Little Rock.

I think we all felt like Stela was stolen right out from under our noses by some gringo serviceman who *would only take her and leave her*—at least that’s what my uncle said. *No mas la va ha tomarla y dejarla, prevarla y dejarla*—taste her and leave her like a beer that grows too warm and becomes undrinkable.

### **Maria Josefina and the Fine Line**

*There are two things I always remember when thinking of my sister Maria and Ralph, the man she felt God had handpicked as her husband. First, there is a big difference between love and what Maria got stuck with—maybe I should I say, what love stuck to her. Second, there is a big difference between a beauty mark and a very big, ugly mole. Ralph didn’t have a big mole on his face, but I felt he was equally unappealing.*

“Come on—let’s go,” she said already putting her right arm in the sleeve of her jacket.

“Wait, wait for me,” I yelled trying not to call mother’s attention to my desperation to accompany. I knew ever since Ralph strolled into my sister’s heart there would be trouble. I put on the purple coat that had now faded to a grayish lavender. I hated the color, but, like everything else, it was a hand-me-down from Maria and purple was her favorite color.

“Are you ready?”

“Where are we going?” I knew where we were headed but I played the role right for her sake. I knew Maria didn’t want Mom to know the kind of man Ralph was. Mom was good at gathering incriminating evidence, but mainly, she looked for anything wrong—something to dislike. Maria didn’t want Mom to hold anything against Ralph. In fact, ever since Maria graduated from high school and got married she and Ralph did such a good job of acting like they’d been married for thirty years that we all forgot about that happy honeymoon period they skipped over. I don’t know why my sisters were in such a hurry to get out of the house, but they were.

Maria and I headed out the door and were in such a rush that we let a cool gust of wind blow in. Before I could shut the door I heard Mother screaming about the cold air and how we were going to make her catch a cold. It was as if Mom had a sixth sense about these things and took every opportunity to use these powers to annoy me. I let the screen door fall heavy against the frame just to spite her nagging—my own form of protest—still trying to pull my fingers through my glove. We made our way past the alley to the corner store where Maria looked at me.

It was understood between her and me that from the moment she and Ralph met, she had no choice in the matter. She was meant to love him—for better or worse. The

whole situation reminded me of the skin cancer informational video I watched in Biology. Ralph had become this freckle; a spot that just appeared when she was seventeen. Yes, a cancerous spot that God saw fit to tattoo on her soul before she had a chance to decide if she even wanted to love him. I knew there was no choice—she did love him. She felt she was assigned him, or dealt him like a good-for-nothing deuce in a game of cards. But, I was also old enough to know there was a fine line between a freckle and a cancerous mole and I knew God dealt her a mole. I told her it wasn't her fault, it was the pheromones—purely scientific—anyone could love a man (even one like Ralph) if the smell was right. So that was that. She was stuck with him. Besides, she was looking to get out of our crowded house and a life with Ralph was not a hard sell for Maria's desperation.

So Maria made it her life's duty, her profession, if you will, to become Ralph's own personal Serve-U-Mart. He went to work, and she stayed home. She watched the Price Is Right, As the World Turns, and combed her hair several times a day—doing, re-doing and curling. She hardly spent money and bought into Ralph's constant reminders that they were on a tight budget and could spend no money frivolously; although he made exceptions for himself often, buying endless amounts of beer and a new Mustang, while she kept a ledger-listing of everything she spent. She vacuumed daily but could never sufficiently get all the lint out of the carpet and was constantly bending to hand pick a little dirt or something-or-other here and there. She had dinner on the table when he came home—if and when he came home. There were days when he came home with beer oozing from his skin.

*Where were you?* she wanted to ask, but she hated confrontation. Maria never was the dominant type, and she never did ask him outright where he spent those lost nights. Besides, she already knew where he was. Ralph liked to go to bars and strip clubs with his work buddies. He had a sweet spot for beers, nudie bars and old cars—anything else and Maria didn't want to know. She was happy living her lie. So she never questioned Ralph and, soon after, even stopped playing the confrontation fantasy scene in her mind. It was all okay with her. She didn't really want any answers and felt they would have only fed the fears that had been growing on the petri-dish of her soul.

“Don't tell Mom.”

“I won't.”

We stopped in front of the corner nudie bar. I hated standing outside among all the slimy men and smoke that didn't fit inside the place. It was cold. They were all lit up and huddled in a circle, and they seemed a little like homeless people standing around a bonfire. Despite the smokes, they were still shivering and had their hands stuck tight in jacket pockets. I never liked bar guys; they wear cigarettes like businessmen wear ties. The whole thing reminded me of a basketful of Dad's dirty socks. I hated Dad's dirty socks. I'm sure Maria hated Ralph's dirty socks.

“Is he in there?” I asked Maria, watching her bob and weave. She was standing beside one of the men trying to get a good look in through the frosted window. We went through this dance often. She searched for his profile but there were always too many like his to make a distinction. But she could always get a good look at the women bobbing and weaving inside, dancing on stage. She knew they were mugrosas—dirty women—but part of her wished she could keep Ralph's attention the way they did.

Though she was never able to spot him, we always walked back home with her saying, “I know he’s in there.”

The very next Saturday Mom and I spotted Maria standing outside the bar. I knew she was looking for Ralph. “What is your sister doing—standing there like that? Mugrosa—what would her husband say?”

“Wait Mom. Drop me off here with Maria.” I wanted to save her, console her, be there so she wasn’t alone in her embarrassment. But Mom kept driving.

“No, I can’t afford to have two mugrosas.”

### **Jeanie and Juan’s Temptations**

“That’s not The Temptations. It can’t be.”

“Yes it is,” Jeanie said as her hand reached for the volume knob of the car radio. She liked the sound of her bracelets jingling. “It’s their new sound after they threw out David Ruffin.”

“Well, I don’t like it.”

“I do Sis. Plus, they’re Juan’s favorite group. You have to face it sooner or later Yolie—and I think Dylan said it best—the times they are a changing,” she sang, her head swaying toward the window allowing her eyes to observe the scene outside.

I took a long pause to listen to the music and let it sink in—the changing. *No*, I thought, *the times have already done their changing*. We were about fifteen minutes away from the house. Jeanie’s eyes were still fixed on the scene outside the window and her lips were softly mouthing the song. “Papa was a rolling stone,” she sang staring at

the back of some distant stranger walking down the sidewalk past the corner store to the residential area. He seemed oddly familiar. “Hey, there’s Juan.”

Confused, I slowly came out of my daze, saw the red light and eased the car to the intersection. “What—what did you say?”

“That’s Juan.”

“It can’t be. He just left for work.”

“I know, but that’s him.”

My eyes followed the direction of Jeanie’s pointing finger. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure—that’s Juan.”

“I guess—it sure does look like him.” The car behind us honked. “Hold your horses,” I said as I lifted my foot from the brake.

“Wait—stop! Pull over.”

I pulled over to the side a good distance behind Juan. Jeanie watched him. She watched his walk and his long hair bounce with his step, his skinny arms sway back and forth. He was like John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever, but not as dazzlingly handsome. Jeanie and Joann had known Juan since elementary school. Both of them had a crush on him. Still, years later, everyone in the family was surprised when Jeanie announced one morning at breakfast that they were engaged. He hadn’t even asked for her hand properly. But the whole family could tell he made her happy and the goofy smile on her face had not washed off for months since they officially started dating. Soon after the announcement Jeanie and Juan were married and wasted no time in renting a small house down Alameda. Mom suspected she was pregnant; it was all too rushed. But that theory proved unfruitful. The rest of the family pinned the rushed wedding on

the chaotic feeling of the time and the war and were happy enough knowing Jeanie and Juan were a happy couple.

They had not been married long and were still in the honeymoon stage when Jeanie found out Juan was a hard worker. They were both young and penniless so she attributed his hard working attitude to their penniless-money situation. Both worked a lot to make the rent payments plus other expenses. Juan's job was at the local Cashway, a hardware store, where he worked in the paint department. Despite the long hours both Juan and Jeanie kept, and the tireless work they did, neither could manage to keep more than a hundred dollars in the account. Jeanie could never figure out the reason but as long as she could make the bills every month she didn't really care. But now that she was watching him strut down the sidewalk suspicion-filled goose bumps covered her body.

“What is he doing?”

She didn't get the answer to her question right away. And never got up the nerve to ask. Jeanie divorced Juan months later. There were too many good reasons to leave that I can't pin it on just any one. But it was while reading the Sunday paper that she found out Juan had been married to that woman living off Alameda. They had three kids together and appeared on the front page because of a terrible fire that had killed everyone in the house except Juan—he was never home.



### All the Little Things

Joann had pretty, long hair all the way down to there. Stan had always loved her long hair. I found her looking in the mirror tugging on her hair. She was tugging on her hair and I could tell she was thinking about something.

How she hated her long hair and should have cut it a long time ago. How Stan was scum anyway. How pretty she was, in that Cher-extrodinarily unique sort of way. How he had annoyed her by not moving his ass from the couch all day while she washed dishes and did the laundry right in front of his face. She tugged on her hair as her eyes watered and she was making this face like she was angry at the tears that were going to fall.

“Hey, Sis,” I said. I turned to leave the room and pretended I hadn’t seen a thing.

“Hey, wait. Stay a minute,” she looked up to the ceiling and blinked, trying to keep the tears in. “Uhhh, I’m just so tired, you know,” her eyes focused on a white piece of lint floating on the blue shag.

“Yeah—sure. Cleaning days always do that to me.”

Stan walked in to the bedroom. She looked at him, her eyes followed him for a second then she looked down at the carpet again. She already knew he was going to throw his dirty socks in the corner. She had just picked up the old pile and the new one’s foundation was already going to be laid. Joann faced the burrow, placed both her hands on it and looked at herself in the mirror again. It occurred to her that she was better than this. That she was still young and could find someone better. *I’m pretty. Stan doesn’t deserve me.* She knew it. She was sure of it.

She waited for him to say something to her as he passed through the room. *He must know why I am mad. He can't just expect to sit there while I clean, take care of two kids, make lunch, and wash all at the same time while he watches TV.* This was too much for her. She had too much with the kids fighting, the sour, greasy dishwater, the stained clothes, top it off with changing three sets of sheets and doing five loads of laundry, and not receiving one hug or kiss or a little 'thank you, honey' in the midst of it all. One hug, one kiss, one 'thank you' could have saved the day. But it was too late. It was one thing to compromise in a marriage, but this was far beyond compromise—this was selling out. I could see she was about to burst.

Joann yelled at Stan all the time. She had always been a yeller, even at home, but this was too much. That pair of dirty socks in the clean corner was the last straw. From the reflection of the mirror she watched him leave the room.

"I'm getting a divorce," she said.

After a long pause, "Are you sure?" is the reaction I decided to go with.

"Yeah, I'm sure. I wouldn't have said it if I wasn't sure."

"What about the kids? How are you going to tell Mom and Dad?—What about the church?" Too many questions were running through my head. I had never even thought about divorce as an answer to an unhappy marriage. It was something that had become more and more accepted—but my family had their watches wound back a good ten years behind everyone else in the world. *A good Solis woman would never get a divorce,* I could already hear Mom say. It was just unheard of. Not that I didn't think she should, 'cause I did. But there were so many questions. "Where will you live?" was the last one that came out of my mouth.

A small, “I don’t know,” floated in the air to my ears and that’s how we left things.

**I Fell and Was Swept Away—  
way-off-my-feet, head-over-toes, nothing-but-trouble in love**

*I had made up my mind. I was going to go to school, never get married, never have kids. I had gotten my degree. That alone was enough to fulfill me. With it came the knowledge that I would never have to depend on a man—ever. But it was a trade off. I had become known as the old maid and whispers of, “Aye, poor Yolie can’t find a husband” disturbed my Mom. So she took it upon herself to find me a husband via my sister Stela. I never thought I would get married. Who would have known one dance at Hector’s wedding would change my mind.*

I was supposed to be dusting the furniture, so when I heard the knock on the screen door, I jumped and turned off the TV. I walked to the door with my no-I-was-not-watching-television face.

“Oh, it’s you.” My sister’s friend Javier was at the door. He was a frequent visitor. I think she felt sorry for him. I often came home to find him sitting at our kitchen table drinking coffee with my Dad even when Stela wasn’t home. I always thought he didn’t have a home the way he was always at my house.

“Stela isn’t home,” I said unlocking the door but not opening it. I didn’t really want to invite him in but was utterly incapable of being rude to guests—even if it was a skinny-to-the-bone, huevo-head friend of my sister’s wearing a suit and carrying a corsage.

“Why are you so dressed up? Are you meeting Stela here?” There was a long pause. “Well, what do you want?—Hello,” I said waving the dust rag in his face then turned around to continue cleaning.

“Stela told me—she said it was all set up.”

“She should be here any minute. You can wait, just pick up a rag and make like you’re cleaning.”

“No—um.”

I turned around to face him, but he still had the same look on his face. “Spit it out,” I said and placed my hands on my hips, dust rag hanging down and wagging impatiently. “Come on, I don’t have all day.”

“You and me were supposed to have a date—today—uh, tonight.”

“What?”

“I guess Stela didn’t tell you?”

“No, she told me—I just never said yes—I forgot—I didn’t know that was today.”

“Well—I think you should go with me.”

“I’m not even close to ready.”

“I’ll wait.”

Ugh, he was right—it was the right thing to do. *I had* told Stela I would go, but I sure didn’t want to go to Hector’s wedding where people could see me with Javier, the skinniest guy in the world—his nickname was Palo for crying out loud. But I felt bad, and he was standing there already dressed up, with a corsage, and his mother’s borrowed car was probably parked right outside in our driveway.

“I’m going to kill Stela,” I said, back turned already walking towards the bathroom.

“We’ll have fun. I promise.”

I guess Stela could have told me that my life could change with just one dance. Javier and I danced all night. He was and still is a great dancer. I fought and fought not to get married, not to end up in the same high-heeled marriage mold my sisters fit into (it always seemed more like a rut than a mold to me). But love found me, captured me, sugar cubed my heart, conquered and divided—caused a heart-vs-mind-vs-soul conflict. My brain lost. Eventually I did marry, have kids, and learned to never say never ever again.

## **The Stuff of the World is Love-Stuff**

**“Scar tissue that I wish you saw...”  
Red Hot Chile Peppers**

**“You’re a heartbreaker, dream maker, love taker  
don’t you mess around with me..”  
Pat Benetar**

## Right Hook

He and I had a fight.  
 It packed a punch,  
 ended and began with *you're right*  
 as the only answer,  
 pushed me off the ledge—  
 homicide from cloud nine,  
 sparked my he's-just-a-man epiphany.

Mr. Right—yeah right  
 address me as la diosa—  
 the goddess her rightness,  
 treat me like a princess,  
 show me respect—  
 I command it long and loud,  
 dish it out with Aretha Franklin determination.

Can't be wrong about what I feel,  
 can't apologize for that.  
 Forget how to  
 stand up for myself  
 when you bully me down—  
 bend me,  
 break me,  
 conquer and divide.  
 Can't apologize for that.

But I am sorry  
 you can't pick up a mop  
 or find the trash bags—  
 things that yelling  
 a big *fuck you* al-a-mode,  
 served up  
 on top of everything else,  
 will not resolve.

Don't make me your target,  
 just love me.  
 Eventually you will for-  
 give this Brutus-style retaliation.

So  
 I leave you with my sorry apologies  
 and know you will find the poetry in that.

## Careful what you want for

I know you know  
what it is  
you do to me.

All invitations—addressed to you—  
mentiroso,  
my magician,  
make a moment last long and loud.  
I applaud the illusion  
and ask for more.

You turn my butterflies out,  
tie my tongue,  
pin my wings,  
make me your specimen,  
your game, your mystery magic trick  
still  
leave me wanting more.

I become the smoke from your disappearing act  
floating in the air  
mixing, melting with the sky.  
The stench on your jacket  
when you come home.  
Your restraining-order-dilemma—  
still  
I want more

of your love—  
lethally laced with poison  
delicate as Grandma's doily.



**ex-change**

too late for me  
I have no receipt  
and am reminded that in love  
there is no policy on return

**The thug made promises but never put out**

Swindling card trick,  
conquistador thief,  
expect me to believe  
like Pangaea—we “drifted apart”  
untangled slowly like a wrongly sewed seam.

Left me ruined—  
a little less loving,  
a little less consoling,  
queen looking for checkmate.

## Swept Away

You are my  
slip up  
trip up  
hang up  
five and dime up  
mix up  
make the world go round  
earth movin'  
dollars and cents  
don't make sense  
tease me  
make me say please me  
thank you  
tell me what you're going to do  
then don't follow through  
end of my string fray  
the one that got away  
kind of guy

mess around  
skirt around  
under handed  
under your hand  
naked not nude

my kind of guy.

**Can't feel good about nothing(s)**

Says he loves me,  
tells me  
in-a-hurry, under-duress, robotically-mechanical,  
forced-like-broccoli,  
over-the-top-to-make-up-for-lost-time,  
can't-lose-their-generic-ness  
words.  
Says them without thinking,

but I can't feel good  
about those words.  
No, I can't feel those words.

For once  
let your mouth go dentist-office-numb  
don't make me guess if it's trick or treat  
don't let it roll off your tongue so easily—  
keep it deep,  
dark,  
our dingy grape-juiced-stained secret.

Don't whisper in my ear.  
No, I can't feel those words.

Cause I know the meaning of sweet nothings.

## Seek

You, with your skeletons  
and confessions.  
No tongue-and-cheek—  
we'll have none of that here.

Let it out  
like slipping on lace and silk.  
Let me dress you up in my touch,  
baptize you with kisses.  
Let your skin be the slip,  
a dress you wear.  
Let me touch your underneath,  
under the cover—  
where it counts.  
Let me see inside you,  
stamp my hand and let me enter—  
three ring circus, whatever—  
I am not afraid.  
Let me, a lion, into your pride.  
Let me find what it is you hide.

Let me in,  
under the cover,  
so I can see your soul.

## Anything Is Possible

He plucked every bird in the sky,  
each feather, a quill  
to tattoo, scar, scab, and sting  
the word:  
impossible.

Just one of those words that slips,  
no one ever admits  
they mean it.  
“Oh, it just slipped.”  
Impossible,  
words don’t slip.

Said it, then took it back,  
so don’t worry,  
he didn’t really mean,  
“it is *impossible* to love you”  
per se—  
not literally  
impossible.

But words like that  
don’t qualify for take-back status.  
He left the word there to linger.  
It resonates—unforgiving—  
ferments inside,  
rumbling over and over,  
in constant never ending clutter.

Impossible.

## Episode

Standing in the shower  
I panic—  
tears mix and melt  
with the falling water  
and I have taken too many drinks  
of the salty rim.

Drunk, drowned,  
drenched, soaked,  
bathing in you,  
out in the rain with you,  
floating in the gutter  
piece of trash of you  
swept away with you.

## Refrain

You read the instructions carefully  
and always did know how  
to make me cry,  
make me run on empty,  
wild horse ride me  
break me in  
leave me broken.

For you  
I refrain.

Words taste good—  
chocolate covered vowels,  
not bitter  
just down on my knees  
praying  
insidious, penniless, trash can  
prayers  
to show how much I love you.

Do you like my refrain?



## Not enough to make you different from a fish

Love  
 is not enough at night  
 to stop the snoring  
 the crying  
 the praying  
 the needing—  
 wishful pleading.

Not enough to make me see God  
 believe She is a He,  
 not enough to erase the vortex  
 that is the Death Star of my soul,  
 not enough to make me right  
 make me hand over my brain,  
 consort with the enemy,  
 walk ten steps behind,  
 never enough to make the hurt go away.

Love  
 will not dress you in happiness  
 or the Gap  
 or make you hear,  
*yes, you are fashionably loved.*  
 It's not enough to stop the rain

but fish don't mind drifting in the sea  
 why should we.

**switch**  
**stitch me on**

buy me  
sell it to me  
consume me  
shoot me up  
make me your own  
don't be sorry

fill me  
stuff me  
corrupt me  
take me in  
wear me  
wear me out

I've been off for so long.

## The Key

In the act of loving me  
you did, you see  
form me, mold me,  
compromise my I-won't-bend mentality.

In the act of loving me  
you  
X and Oed me,  
groaned and grunted,  
hissed and hit-and-missed me,  
waited patiently.

I moved slow and heavy  
to unlatch the lock

and let you love me.

**Cowboy**

All tied up—  
screwed up, wound up  
dried up

threw his lasso  
round me  
won me, wowed me  
found me

all round up  
from the ground up

## Domestic Anxiety

“Gonna use my legs, gonna use my style,  
gonna use my side-step...  
gonna use my, my, my imagination.”  
Pretenders

“I’ve been a bad, bad, girl  
I’ve been careless with a delicate man...”  
Fiona Apple

**Adam, Eve, Jack, and Jill: rolling down the hill in the Garden of Eden**

Mommy taught me—

just like Eve  
I bet Jill fell first

women always do all the dirty work.

**Sopa de Letras—  
a kind of alphabet soup**

Forced  
from the cradle,  
taught to swallow your words,  
suck em down—  
hot milk.

Never say what you feel,  
never admit that you think.  
Stay pretty,  
wear earrings, long hair, make-up.

*Mija*  
*extenuate your breasts,*  
*your hips.*  
That's what they always said,  
*you have such a cute figure,*  
but I knew I didn't.

*Aye, mija*  
*but you're a girl,*  
you're just a girl.  
Like it's no use to try  
to be different  
to do more.  
Like it's a sin to do the things a man does,  
A sin to wear glasses  
and read book  
after book  
after book  
after book.

*Aye, mija*  
with a disappointed sigh  
*please learn to cook*  
*how else will you make your husband happy?*  
keep him.  
*Spend some time in the kitchen with us,*  
*make some sopa.*

Maybe then I can spell it out for you.

## **Lessons like ABC**

With callused hands and heart—  
learn how to balance a cookbook and a checkbook  
and for heaven's sake  
learn to let go of that storybook.



## Over Spray

Mr. I-don't-care-you-care,  
spit the words at me.  
I took it  
innocently,  
ignorantly,  
stupidly,  
like a tongue catching rain drops.

So selfish,  
never listens to a word I say.  
A waste of a great mind  
with great things to say.

He thinks  
it's just over spray.

## **I can change.**

I would like to see,  
*Love,*  
 your dark back room.

I will dust the skeletons without judgment  
 wearing nothing but an apron to shield my heart.  
 I'll be your sexy French maid—  
 iron the wrinkles out,  
 sew the holes,  
 be your Cinderella-happy house wife.

Spend hours making dinner,  
 burnt meatloaf.  
 Throw it away when you  
 come home late,  
 wake up in the middle of the night and say,  
 "How was your day,  
*Love?"*

Be your Cleopatra trophy,  
 have nice clothes and such.  
 A perfect Barbie body,  
 always waiting for your touch.

Yes, I can change,  
 compromise;  
 lose myself,  
     my self respect,  
     my life,  
*Love,*  
     and soul.

**Domestic Anxiety: “God knows I would love to love you, Love...**

dig out your backyard pit of sorrow,  
make the birds fly away—be your scarecrow,”  
but, “I’m a busy man, it’ll have to wait ‘til tomorrow.”  
Drifting in rough waters—row, row, row—  
a sailor in the same boat cannot  
be a savior, and a hole will sink your soul.  
But, “I’m busy trying not to get caught;  
fighting my own battles takes its toll.”  
Manful pride lets love burn like a light left  
on in the kitchen too long, then complains  
about the bill. When the time comes he’s deaf.  
“Oh, I just don’t get it,” he explains.

I would love to fight your battles, Honey  
But I’m busy making the family money.

## Saturday Kind of Girl

I promise to  
keep the house clean,  
never ask for what I deserve,  
ignore,  
compromise.

Wring the water from the mop;  
Wring, drip, and dip  
back into dirty water.  
Pointless.

Do the laundry.  
separate the load,  
wash your soul clean,  
rid it of dirt spots  
Clorox—  
it's a family secret  
works like a charm.

do it  
all  
willingly,  
dutifully.  
I promise.

But only once a week.

## Handled

I am a complicated woman.

Do you understand?  
A complicated woman  
Can't be handled by a man.

Go ahead—  
try to read between the lines  
of my grocery list.  
Try to see past my Victoria's Secret,  
past the slip of my skin,  
past the devil's advocate.

And when I aim my finger,  
see past my  
you-don't-deserve-me,  
you-can't-hurt-me attitude,  
my ridiculous charm.

I am a complicated woman,  
I know *you* understand.  
I am a complicated woman,  
I can't be handled by a man.

## The Honeybee returns, of course

Little bee,  
I knew you could not resist  
the gentle petal,  
my flower kiss.

It's plain to see  
you like to  
fly,  
buzz,  
and move  
around me.

You must want my nectar,  
go ahead and venture.  
Take it to your queen  
and make from it,  
Sweet,  
honey to dis-spell  
Any undone laws of nature—  
the broken hierarchy as well.

Busy bee,  
nectar is sweet  
take it and retreat.  
Honey,  
taste and forget my call,  
but remember  
we are symbiotic  
you and me.  
I am irresistible,  
after all,  
to a bee.

All bees bumble  
when they're around me.

## Keep your head on straight

I turn your head  
spin it round  
invade, posses  
twist and turn you  
with the worst of the worst in me—

a tale or two  
a bare shoulder  
slight touch  
witty comeback  
smile, laugh—  
and you're mine.

Ruined the thinking part of you.  
Left you running on replay—  
thinking of me.  
Overloaded your microchip.  
Own you  
twisted-head to curled-up-toe.

Headless horsemen beware  
there are a lot of women  
like me  
out there.

## Left Over

Shackled myself to the stove,  
slaved over dinner  
to do something nice,  
a treat.  
Took time,  
waited for you to get off work—  
late again—  
but I feel selfish telling you you're selfish.

The food and I  
grow stale  
and clean the mess you made—  
air-tight-sealed,  
Rubbermaid-contained,  
Reynold's-wrapped-up.  
Tucked myself in  
way in the back  
saved  
perhaps  
for another day.



## **Are You Looking at Me?**

**“Nice to meet you, nice to know me...”**

**Stone Temple Pilots**

**“I ain’t the woman in red, I ain’t the girl next door  
but if somewhere in the middle’s what you’re lookin’ for  
I’m that kind of girl...”**

**Patty Loveless**

## I Am

Child Prodigy.  
 Dissertation on milk and cookies,  
 Mozart fiddlin',  
 fire starting,  
 long hair in braids and pink dresses  
 (imprisoned from the beginning).

Daddy's Girl.  
 Who will shoot if he lives to be a hundred.  
 Dr. Kevorkian?—no, just doing daddy's bidding.  
 After all, "yours is not to do or die,  
 yours is but to listen to your father,"  
 and, "children are to be seen, not heard."  
 Am I being heard now?  
 Oh yes, and don't forget,  
 "The world is mean and nasty, take heed."

Mommy's Dearest.  
 "Ignore your father."  
 Hold your heart out  
 and hand it to any jerk, heart-jacker  
 threatening you with an uzi.  
 "It's the right thing to do in that situation.  
 I heard it on Oprah."  
 You can, "burn your bra  
 but be sure to recycle it,  
 okay dearest?"  
 Okay mom.

The Poetess  
 who paints herself nude on canvas,  
 makes up words in her head.  
 The filament of bright ideas,  
 the lightening...no, more like  
 the key attached to some man's kite.

Medusa.  
 Waking every morning an angry,  
 wire-haired-ugly,  
 sharp-toothed creature—  
 animal.

The Siren  
 that sings like Etta James or Selena  
 only not on mountain top  
 (but in the shower, for my ears only)  
 commanding each useless arm hair to stand—an ovation?  
 Luring—  
 each sailor,  
 a sardine.  
 Hook, line, and sink 'em.

Venus Seductress—  
 red lips, round hip,  
 hot head.  
 Mistress  
 of the manor  
 not a married man's bed.  
 Prickly don't-touch-me-there legs  
 warn off curious cowboys  
 (married or un-).

Amazon.  
 Belonging to a tribe,  
 women warriors  
 searching for our rightful place in the world—  
 the throne.  
 And princess will not do  
 (that title doesn't pay enough, gender gap and all).  
 On the hunt for prey—a man that is yummy  
 to gobble up and fill my tummy.

Angel of Death.  
 Those last few days bedside—  
 Hard, slow breaths.  
 Looked into deep set eyes,  
 waiting, praying for death.

I am the lion  
 Who chased the tiger  
 Who ate the bear—  
 Oh, my!

## A Fairy Tale

There was a time  
at grandma's house  
when the floor was made of dirt.  
When chile was candy  
and all the elephants faced the door.  
When the yellow truck  
was our playground,  
when we played hide and seek in the corn.

When every morning  
coffee and chorizo  
filled the air.  
When we didn't care who  
spoke English or Spanish.  
When a used-to-be  
or a could-have-been  
was still loved equally.  
When the house overflowed  
and there were never enough chairs.

There was a time  
when grandma's floor was made of dirt,  
same as the fertile land outside.  
My mom professes they swept it daily,  
But that was before my time.  
Then  
the floor was covered  
in brownish-gold linoleum—loud.  
Yes, I remember that.

Now  
it's all covered up in fancy blue carpet,  
but there was a time  
when it was just dirt.

## El Cancionero

past the cornfields and sugar cane,  
past the yellow Chevy,  
past the front porch and the dog  
sleeps el cancionero.

In the hot air of the adobe home  
the ranchera haunts him.  
He hears the rhythm  
in the squeaky old screen-door.  
And in the ~~chip, chip, chip~~  
of the parakeet  
he understands the song.  
It lives in the everyday—  
the cracking of pecans,  
the sting of tomato sauce  
sizzling in the pan,  
fresh tortillas, mole,  
separating and cleaning beans  
for the cooking,  
gutting jalepenos,  
the baby's filled tummy and sleepy eyes.

Its all there  
in his song.

## Holy Hot Jalepenos

My first run in with jalepenos—

I found they had the power to light the eyes,  
much like the tongue,  
on fire.

I used to suck my finger—  
not my thumb,  
my finger.

A big, red bump formed  
and my Grandma told my Mom  
my finger would stay big and red  
if she didn't do something about it—  
*it was her duty.*

So she dipped my finger in chile  
hoping it would deter any finger-sucking  
and I would learn my lesson.

I wasn't stupid enough to stick a chile-soaked finger  
in my mouth,  
that was not my mistake.

My mistake came in a lapse of thinking  
cause when I had an itch in the corner of my eye,  
I scratched it,  
with my finger

and lit a fire in my eye.  
They tried to put it out with water,  
then grabbed at my long hair,  
pulled and stretched it over my eye—  
rubbed and rubbed.

I prayed out loud,  
so that Mom would hear,  
asking God not to make me blind  
cause the sun came down from the sky to live in my eye.  
Cried hot tears the rest of the day  
and got to suck my finger  
to ease Mom's guilt.

## Road to the Westest Texas Town

Black road, yellow outline  
frames the hot wind captured  
through rolled down windows  
and outstretched fingers,  
offering no salvation from the heat.  
Your hand—a sail boat  
floating over an oasis of Cherry Lime-ade dreams.

Steam rolls off the shoulder,  
blurring the distant view of  
rattlers, roadrunners,  
and sand.

Cacti, prickly pears,  
and women in cowboy hats—  
the worst wild creatures here.

The land wills you to pray  
for rain and relief  
to appease your hot-headed  
fry-an-egg-on-the-side-walk self.

## Sleepless

Cried a little, just for spite  
but wasn't in my bed.  
Woke up, thinking of things that keep me up at night.

Contemplating, searching, for something to ignite;  
thinking of the books they won't write about me when I'm dead.  
Cried a little, just for spite.

There will be a next time. No, not this time—it just doesn't feel right.  
Opportunity missed—"next time's too late," father always said,  
but I was busy making up things to keep me up at night.

My motto: everything will be alright.  
Besides the world is as it should be: Me, making up things to fill my head,  
Crying all night, just for spite.

Line by line I can recite  
The books they won't write—right?—when I am dead.  
Still awake, thinking of things that keep me up at night.

I demand a rewrite  
And a magazine spread.  
Instead—I cry a little, just for spite  
And write about the things that keep me up at night.



## Victor's Lullaby

There's a place  
where we overlap.  
Couch-cushion-castle-building,  
Hotwheelin' kings.  
Roo roo roo

Chased you around—  
you made me fast and limber  
strong and smart.  
Roo roo roo

My deepest regret  
is that I didn't find the courage  
to slit and peel  
open my heart for you.  
Roo roo roo

So you could see  
the part of me that is you.

## Calling to Be Filled

It was you—

The reason I don't comb my hair,  
my wild side, my love-hate relationship  
with life, the wonderfully real Camelot,  
the ideas, the original, the weird, the  
motivation of intelligent laziness, the  
best selling books, the sarcasm,  
the passion, the sin, the motorcycle mama,  
the who-cares-go-out-and-get-a-tattoo  
stupidity in me.

It was you—

My jeep loving honey, my  
banana-nut-ice-cream-dream with dusty  
skeletons in the closet, my disaster area lost  
in labors and aspirations, my worry-wort  
worker, the rock and the hard place,  
my life-time warrantee guarantee.

It was you—

Mr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, my crazy side,  
beauty and beast—defiantly so,  
my psychotic siren, “give me attention, or else”  
(but can never follow through with the *or else*),  
unconditional kisses, white hair that  
does not bring wisdom, million dollar brain—on  
loan at 12%, underpaid peanut butter eating girl  
(who's grown to hate eating peanut butter),  
the skinny twig and bloated goat.

It was you—

My manners, the voice inside my head,  
the right and wrong of me, all that is nice  
and kind, the Catholic, all that hurts—  
the living and dying in me, the guilt,  
the beautiful heart, the wonderful  
woman, the chef—the enchiladas in me,  
the seamstress—constantly trying to  
mend holes, my genetic destiny,  
the weak body and beaten soul,  
the tears I bring upon myself,  
the do-everything-to-please “why aren't you pleased?”  
the unhappiness searching desperately for happiness.

It was you—  
    You made me dream,  
    you gave me nightmares.  
    You made my heart a glass  
    half empty, half full—  
        calling to be filled.

## Everything Nice

Let me in  
let me witness your little girl defiance

never wore dresses,  
knees covered in scabs and scars—  
beautifully dirty.  
Wanted to be a bird,  
a butterfly  
*Superman*,  
trenzas blowing in the wind  
and when the flight mechanism malfunctioned  
you ran in circles,  
rode that get away horse  
with magic smiles,  
sugar, canela, and dust in your hair—  
a new definition of sugar and spice

Let me in  
back to a time filled with

flat tops, burnt terracotta skin,  
coffee three times a day,  
pink tortillas, pumpkin empanadas,  
piranhas in the river,  
corn fields and sugar cane,  
couch-cushion-fortress-building,  
fell off the bunk bed and rooftop ledge,  
Hotwheelin',  
jump ropin',  
jack throwin',  
here's chile in your eye—  
first realization chile was not candy.

Let me in  
to a time when he saw that magic something in you.

The poor little boy who's heart you stole  
along with his last stick of gum—peppermint  
then got it stuck in your hair—  
proof we're all tangled in fate.  
You laughed,  
thought he was kidding,  
in disbelief that *he* would ask *you*—  
fuzzy eyebrows,

hairy boys legs,  
bottle cap glasses,  
braces that hurt like hell.  
Laughed and walked away.

Only you, he, and I knew  
there was a homecoming princess underneath it all  
trensas blowing in the wind.

Let me in.

## Bloom

Don't want to be the kind of person  
 who gets off on a technicality—  
*I'm your mother*  
*no matter what I do*  
*you have to love me.*  
 Invaded the nursery with  
*it doesn't count*

*cause I'm your mommy*  
 scheming snake  
 crawling, plotting

Ewe! It's so  
 good Jezebel,  
 pretend to knit,  
 nest,  
 but your just  
 screwed full of parlor tricks.  
 No light on your nightstand,  
 no light in your day.

Abandoned places  
 inside you grin,  
 vow to fix my faults,  
 mold me  
 unfold me empty box—  
 that is what you are to me.

And I  
 am a star you named  
 but I don't belong to  
 you  
 lemon-bittered demon.  
 You are the voice inside  
 that is not me—  
 ugly, unforgiving.

And when I tried to go,  
 grow,  
 find love, laughter  
 you pushed me off the plank  
 hoping I would hit the floor  
 but I have finally found the sun.

## What I Know

Already said all my penances—  
ten Hail Marys, three Our Fathers.  
You might not think so.  
I know.  
He knows.

Embraced my mom's almond eyes  
and fullness in the hips,  
my inability to roll round tortillas  
and the ditzy lapses that come on like rain clouds.  
I know.  
She knows.

You might think you captured me  
but I am the scene in your photograph—  
pretty,  
distant.  
I belong to you because I let it be so.  
I do not obey  
I say so.

I know.  
You know—  
and still there you go.

## What this girl is made of

The mustached cartoon villain and  
*help! my hearts tied down to the railroad tracks catastrophe—*  
 simultaneously,  
 I wish there were two of me.  
 The run-stop-run never-ending energy,  
 no patience for politics,  
 spend money like play dough,  
 the gem that is the master of the art of defiance—  
 dance like you don't care,  
 jump up and down on the bed,  
 sing in the shower,  
 turn into a pumpkin at midnight and down a Shirley Temple,  
*but why?* ongoing questions.

The mommy I am and someday will be.

The emocionada no razona,  
 feel sorry for myself,  
 stand out in the rain,  
 run and keep on running  
 but somebody please love me,  
 knocking-on-the-door-desperation of insanity,  
 the please turn my love off like a light switch and wash the dishes while your at it,  
 the Clark Kent superhero nerd insecurity,  
 the uniformed bully  
 S on my chest,  
 the fright or flight swim for the shore,  
 the survival of the fittest competitor,  
 light saber carrying,  
 cape and tight wearing superhero fool.

The hang-on-hero and trooper in me.

The paint every fence post blue,  
 avocado sandwiches, whiskey bottles,  
 cowboy boots and bowties,  
 the watermelon seeds inside my tummy,  
 the coffee grounds and concrete mix,  
 my barbershop savior,  
 the handyman in dark blue pants,  
 the hat on my head,  
 the gray hair and silent repose.

The farmer and the seed  
 that is both the maker and frontier.



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