Artistic Integrity

Sister Louis Marie kept a shirt box stuffed with colored tissue paper in the bottom drawer of her desk. When lessons were finished, we snipped the sheets into flowers to illustrate haiku, or pasted it over holes cut in construction paper to create stained glass. Perched on a step stool, she taped them to the tall windows in the classroom. Silhouetted against the winter sky, washed with warm light diffused through our creations; we could see how young she was. Her ankles wobbled, dainty in the clunky nun shoes.

At the end of the school year she held a poetry contest. I won. My poem was about birds, or daffodils, or more likely, death. The prize was the box of colored paper. When she pressed the cardboard box into my hands, she made me promise to cut the paper into confetti. Then she threw off her veil and eloped with a Kindergarten teacher from the public school across the street.

I hid the paper under my bed, leafing through the bright sheets from time to time, hoping something would burn my fingers too.
Spanish Immersion

Her first love comes to her on a January afternoon in childhood; that he appears in a shower of feathers seems part of a miraculous vision that she carries in her heart and never questions.

The children have just come back from the cafeteria. Maggie stops on the threshold of the classroom. The overhead lights are off, and a thick fog of condensation blurs the view from the lower half of a long bank of windows. The houses that surround the low brick school are a haze of watery pastels, but the black branches of spindly elms are etched into the matte grey sky. Last week’s snow drifts in gritty mounds on every rooftop.

They enter a room that smells like chicken soup, mildew and damp wool. Everyone's nose is running, the result of some shared virus sizzling among them. Maggie shuffles to her desk, eager to rest her feverish cheek on the cool desktop, while the teacher reads another chapter of the life of Saint Theresa. She’d been interested enough at the beginning, with the promise of mystic apparitions, but they are three chapters in and the future saint is still a school girl in Avila. Maggie closes her eyes and floats on the teacher's voice.

The door opens with a creak and Mrs. Anderson wheels in the heavy gray AV cart, instead of the usual film projector, there is a television. After a brief flurry of activity, an outlet is found, the television is turned on and the antenna is adjusted until a test pattern emerges from the static snow. The teacher moves through the rows taping small strips of paper to the corner of each desktop. They are to be given new names, José, Susana, Catalina.

Maggie is María. The name tastes exotic.

The screen comes alive. There is music with unrecognizable words, and a man's face fills the screen. His dark-eyed gaze is direct.
"Hola María"

No one from television has ever looked into her eyes and spoken to her. He beckons.

"Repita- Hola Don Miquel."

He steps back, tilts his head slightly, and fans her response towards his ear with a graceful gesture.

"Hola- Don Miquel."

"Muy bien."

Don Miguel is a dancer stepping lightly, forward and back, pointing to students, listening. María sees him as through a tunnel. She studies the way his lips move. Maps her mouth to his mouth, the mysterious words are ripe fruit bursting on her tongue.

There are pictures of animals in quick succession- el gato, el oso, el perro- Repita.

The camera pans back. Don Miquel's left hand cups the fluffy little chicken- el pollito. Beady eyed and trembling, María is the chick nestled in his palm. The heat of his touch burns in her bony chest.

"Repita- “Pio-pio-pio.”

"Pio- pio-pio"- she crows ecstatic and dazed.

Then the first lesson is over. The screen goes dark. When Maggie lifts feverish eyes to the window, the leaden sky is adrift in feathery down.
Leo’s brought me the pup so I’ll forget that he came in at four in the morning again, drunk and high. The slam of the back door wakes me. I pull the sheet up over my shoulders and keep my eyes closed. The bedroom door squeaks when he swings it open and shuffles into the room. He drops the pup on the bed, and then goes into the bathroom to pee and brush his teeth, or puke and pass out on the tile.

I turn on the bedside lamp and look at the dog. It’s a slick skinned, bullet-headed mutt, white, with one china blue eye, a bad mix of Pit bull, and something else with too many teeth. The pup nuzzles my feet under the covers, and settles into gnawing on my toes with needle sharp fangs.

"No!", I say and pop it on the nose with my finger.

"It can’t hear you," says Leo, from the open bathroom door. "Fuckin’ thing’s deaf. Can't hear a godamm thing. Not sure it can see out of that eye either."

He poses, leaning heavily on the doorframe to keep from swaying. His tee shirt is on inside out and backwards. The tag lolls under his chin like a tongue.

"What am I supposed to do with a gimp dog?"

"I don’t know. Love on it. It’s a pup, like a baby. You don’t need a watch dog, Chula,” he says pulling the covers back and falling into bed. “You got me."

He smells like cigarettes and beer, and underneath a strong stink of someone else's perfume and sweat. He fumbles with the straps on my nightgown. The pup falls off the bed, whimpers, and crawls toward the light under the hall door.

"Besides, I figured it'd hear no evil. Like those monkeys, see no evil, hear no evil….ya know."
He's palming my right breast. Hefting it like it's softball or a piece of fruit. Then he leans across me to turn out the light. In the dark his breath is a familiar fruity cloud.

"¡Hijo de la chingada!"

"What now?", I ask.

"My wallet. She took my fuckin’ wallet. That’s one expensive dog I bought you." He mumbles into his pillow.

I doze off thinking about my suitcase in the hall closet, how everything is arranged. My sister bought me the bus ticket. One thing is for sure. I'm leaving him the pup, so he can find out what it is like to love something crazy and half wild that don't give a damn.

**Rites of Passage**

Anna sits, rigid on the hard chair; the awful expanse of polished desk between them, his perfect mouth shaping words she refuses to hear. She must be crying, because he reaches into his coat pocket, then leans forward to hand her a white handkerchief. She presses her hot face into it, wondering how she can launder, iron and return it to him, now that she’s not allowed to come here anymore. All her things are in a box in the hall, and Meg from Human Resources paces back and forth behind the office door.

Running the soft pad of her thumb across the embroidered monogram, she inhales his cologne. If she returns it, will he meet her in the parking lot the way he used to at lunchtime? She thinks not.

He stands up. She mimics his movement. He cups her elbow and leads her from the office. The heat of his palm against her skin makes her sob. The door to his office clicks closed.
When her car lurches out of the parking space in the garage, Anna’s box slides from the roof where she’s forgotten it. The picture frames and the dusty pot of ivy clatter to the pavement. She wipes her eyes with the cloth in her clenched fist, and roars out into the street.

The dog is a meaty thump and a howl.

Then Anna is on her knees in the gravel, pulling the matted body out from under the car, wiping at the blood pouring from its mouth and nose. The broken dog gurgles. The hind legs paw at the ground, and then it gives a great shudder and dies. Traffic has halted around them. In the hush before comfort arrives, Anna opens her crimson hand and studies the stained and bloody handkerchief. Almost triumphantly she thinks, “It’s mine.”

Bones

Jane found the bones while running on the wooded path near the railroad tracks. In the months since Nate’s death, she woke to blackness and waited for the pinkish glow above the garage next door to set her free from the house. When she ran, she became breath, heartbeat and rhythmic footfalls.

The yellowed skeleton of the opossum caught her eye. She stepped off the path and crouched to examine the delicate skull with its elongated dinosaur jaw and perfect row of needle teeth. The maggot-polished spine and tail formed an oval of ivory beads around the head and paws.

She began to gather the bones, wrapping the skull and twig-like legs into the folds of her jacket. Sweat rolled off her nose. Gnats swarmed her face, settling into the corners of her eyes. She gathered the spine and tailbones, which rattled like seashells in her baseball cap. It seemed
important to keep everything together, but the miniscule paws crumbled when she tried to pick them up, and other small bits escaped into the loose dirt.

Still, she collected enough so that later, when she unwrapped the bundle on her bed, she was able to lay the bones out, remembering the location of each piece by touch. Reassembled beside her it could have been a pet sleeping on her dead husband’s pillow. The dark eye sockets expressive, wise. She fell asleep listening to a susurrus murmur, the language of small creatures rustling through dry underbrush.

She slept without dreaming and woke to bright sunlight.

In the days that followed Jane began leaving her desk at noon, joining colleagues for lunch. When Ed, a slender bespectacled man from accounting invited her to a popular movie, she agreed to go, and carried single vertebrae in her sweater pocket. The movie was an adventure. During the chase scene, Ed rested his hand on her knee. She toyed with the bone in her pocket, tracing its slightly raised edges, insinuating the tip of her index finger into the concave surface. The ends of her fingers tingled.

Jane and Ed began seeing each other.

An art show, a dinner downtown, a concert…

A broom straw rib bone, toothpick leg bone, tail bone, like a button in her palm…

The bones were fragile, crumbled to powder at her insistent exploration. The skeleton on her husband’s pillow began to disappear. One night she dressed and readied herself to go out, but found that only the skull remained, too big to carry with her. Hollow and silent now, it gazed at her impassively, an artifact she’d excavated and studied to extinction. She lifted it from the pillow, put it on a shelf in the closet and closed the door.
Rosa Sola

Rosa Sola didn’t want a baby.

The truck driver Flaco, tried to convince her every time they had sex. He spooned against her, tracing the deep curve of her hip and waist with his fingertips, murmuring hot and ticklish in her ear, “Come on, Rosa. I wanna give you a baby. Imaginate, a sweet little baby. You’d make such a pretty mama. I know you love me, Rosa. Let me give you a baby.”

Rosa ignored his blah-blah-blah. She enjoyed having sex with Flaco. He always brought take-out and she liked the way he used his hands and mouth, the trick he had discovered that made her shiver and see melted fireworks on the inside of her closed eyelids. It also suited her that Flaco had a live in girlfriend named Norma, and went home at the end of their evenings together. Rosa never encouraged him to stay. After the sex, his body seemed bulky and awkward to her; the room crowded with his breath, shoes and underwear. When he left, she locked the door behind him, threw away the beer bottles and used tissues, then sat cross-legged on the mattress, savoring the empty space.

She’d waited all of her seventeen years to attain the freedom of this tiny apartment, her job at Shopsmart, and the three pairs of designer jeans that fit her slender frame exactly the way they fit the models in magazines.

Clothing and apartments were expensive and hard to get. Babies were easy. Everyone had babies. If she had wanted a baby she could have stayed in the crowded apartment with her mother and her mother’s boyfriend with the wandering hands. Her sisters bred early and there was an assortment of sticky toddlers in every room. Instead Rosa got a job at sixteen and began saving for a place of her own. A long weekend in a motel room with a man she met at the icehouse provided her with the deposit money six months ahead of schedule. She moved out with
a gym bag full of clothes. She loved having a key, a bathroom, and a refrigerator of her own. At first she slept on the beige shag carpet, but Flaco complained about rug burns on his knees and scrounged up a mattress. Rosa installed it like an island in the center of the room.

Everything was perfect until the day Flaco gave her the baby.

It began the night before. He came to the apartment drunk, bearing pizza and a six-pack. They drank the beer, and then Flaco insisted on feeding her folded slices of pizza. Rosa bit and licked his fingers until he lost interest in the pie, which was getting cold anyway, and turned his full attention to Rosa. Before they knew it, the garbage trucked clanged in the alley behind the apartment, and they woke up tangled in greasy sheets. Flaco was dressed, gone in minutes, but the damage was done. The sun was up. He’d spent the night.

Rosa was putting on her smock for work, when she heard a knock. Flaco’s face moon-like through the peephole. When she opened the door, he pushed inside and set the car seat down on the floor by the door.

"Norma’s left me. La condenada just walked out, and left me with the kid. What am I supposed to do? I’ve got a run to Seattle today. I’ll be gone at least a week. Take him for me, huh Mama?"

He rifled through his billfold and pressed a handful of bills into her hand.

"Here Mamacita. There’s a bottle in the car seat. Get whatever else you need. This is good practice, you know, for when you have your baby."

He kissed her quick high on the cheek.

"I’ll try to call you as soon as I get back into town."

The door closed and he was gone. Rosa studied the bills in her hand, one hundred seventy dollars, enough for a television and a stand to put it on.
The baby shifted in its car seat. It was a small damp looking infant in faded footie pajamas. The nose was caked with dry snot, and a diaper bulged obscenely between stubby legs. Rosa couldn’t be late for work. She filled the bottle with diet soda from the refrigerator and offered it to the baby, who took it and began sucking vigorously. She remembered that babies are noisy, so she put the car seat in the closet in the bathroom and tucked the bath mat under the door. Then she combed her hair, locked the apartment and went to work.

The first three nights were the worst. Even with the bathroom door closed she could hear muffled wailing, and when it wasn’t crying there were thick, wet gasps. She was glad to leave for work in the morning, even if she wasn’t as fresh as she liked to be. She had to put on her makeup in the restroom at the store. The baby’s breathing took up all the space in her bathroom.

It was nearly a week before she came home to silence. Tidying up was easy. Everything fit inside the gym bag, which was surprisingly light when she carried it down to the dumpster. A coworker with a red pickup truck helped her transport the stand and arranged the new television so it could be seen from her mattress. They sampled various entertainment possibilities. Rosa marveled at how good her legs looked in the gray light. Babysitting was inconvenient, but not really that difficult. Easy money, and there were so many other things that Rosa wanted. She wondered if anyone else needed some help with childcare. She was thinking about a sign for the bulletin board in the break room when Mr. Pickup splintered her thoughts into dizzy Fourth of July fragments. Rosa exhaled a long deep sigh. Everything was perfect again.
Aurelia

Papi is dragging us to a cena at the Callejo's house. I have to sit in the back of the Nissan with my legs all chueco, because Tio Danilo can't wreck the crease in his pants. I knew something was up when he showered as soon as he came home. He's slicked his hair back with something greasy; the tight curls are waved out smooth against his head. He smells like flor de naranja and the mint gum he always keeps in his shirt pocket in case the cops pull him over.

Papi caught him chugging rum out of the kitchen cupboard right before we left. I thought he was going to knock him down. My tio has been sleeping on our couch for almost six months. These days Papi is all about rage.

"Pendejo-you're going to mess it up. These are nice people, a good girl."

Then Mami has to chime in. "I don't know what kind of man is going to take advantage of a girl with cancer to keep his sinverguenza of a brother in the country. Count me out."

Next thing I know I'm dressed in my funeral pants and shoved in the back seat to take Mami's place at the dinner. Their house is down in Ybor City. Papi takes the 55 and we pull up in front right on time. You can tell they've been waiting for us, the lace curtains shiver at the front window and the door opens before we can ring the bell. There is a wave of arroz con pollo smell. There are abrazos and kisses on the cheek, Papi passes Mr. Callejos the bottle of rum we've brought, but Callejos sets it down on a little gilt table by the front door. Turns out they are Seventh Day Adventists and nobody's going to get a copita of anything except lemonade.

They lead us to the sala and we seat ourselves carefully on the plastic covered couches. In the center of the gold coffee table there are two dishes, one with green olives and one with peanuts. I reach for the peanuts and discover that every time I shift my ass- little sparks jump off
my wool pants and the hairs on my arms stand up. I do that for a while until Papi throws me an elbow in the ribs.

I look at Danilo and can tell that the rum has heated him up. He's got two spots of color on his cheeks and his eyes are bright but kind of unfocussed. Pretty soon they bring the girl in and everybody jumps up to say hello.

They've dressed her up in a pale yellow dress that flares out where her hips should be, but this chica is flaquisima, all bones, wide eyes and red lipstick. Tio Danilo steps forward, shakes her hand and gives her a peck on the cheek. When she smiles there is a smear of lipstick on her small uneven teeth.

At dinner everybody is really quiet. There's a big platter of arroz con pollo, tostones, frijoles negros and a salad with tomatoes. I eat everything except the salad, so does my tio. The girl just stirs her food around on her plate. Papi tries to make conversation with the Callejos, but they are really just people who come into his shop, and nobody has much in common. Things get a little easier when Mrs. Callejo brings in a big flan for dessert. She pours thick Cuban coffee for us and some kind of yellow tea for them.

In between spoonfuls of sweet flan we find out the girl was studying business at the Hillsborough community college before she got sick, and of course, Danilo is a doctor except he can't pass the exam to practice in the U.S. He's working part time in a lab sifting rat shit out of cages and sleeping with some fat ass housewife he met in a bar in the medical center. His visa is about to expire, but we don't talk about that.

The girl, her name is Aurelia, sips her tea and stares across the table at my uncle like he's a paleta de crema. All of a sudden I know she wants this too. She doesn't want to die a skinny
virgin sleeping alone under the pink satin bedspead her Mami bought her at Walmart when she was nine. I don't know if I ate too much flan, but I feel sick to my stomach.

After a while we push our chairs back from the table and start the despedidas. In the front hall Danilo kisses Aurelia’s cheek. She blushes and looks down at the floor. He holds her right hand just a little too long and with his left he picks up the rum. We step out into the humid night air.

Nobody talks on the way home. Papi turns the radio to WGCN and we listen to cumbias all the way up the highway. You can barely hear Danilo crack the seal on the bottle.
Visions

Once her head cleared, Estella realized she was going to miss bingo night, which was okay with her. There was no point in telling any of the busy bodies at San Ignacio about seeing Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe floating over the driveway. They wouldn’t believe her anyway. What did she have to show for it? Nothing—a lump on the side of her head, and a skinned elbow from the gravelly blacktop. It happened in an instant, the Virgin’s brilliant light filled all the spaces in her head, then she’d fallen right over and awakened bruised and dizzied by the scent of roses that hung in the air.

Standing at the kitchen sink, she patted the blood off her arm with a damp paper towel and wondered why the Little Mother hadn’t chosen to appear in the nicho in the side yard. Everything was ready for Her there. Estella kept three candles burning in their tall glass holders, one for the souls of her sainted parents Que en paz descansen, one for her late husband Leo, the less said the better, and one for her daughter Brianna, a petition that she’d finally marry and give her a granddaughter before it was too late to teach her how to make tamales the way her mother taught her. There was a painted cement bench in the side yard, a red glass vase with carnations, and soft grass in case someone got overwhelmed with a divine vision and flopped over, but the Virgin had appeared in the driveway, drifting in the space between the Buick’s front bumper and the garage door. It didn’t make sense.

Still, seeing La Morenita hadn’t been a complete surprise. It seemed like She’d been hovering just at the edge of her vision for the last several weeks, a wisp of blue veil vanishing around the kitchen door, the padding of bare feet down the hall. Once Estella thought she heard her laugh coming from Brianna’s old room. It was a girl’s laugh, like tinkling bells. It felt nice to have someone else moving through the old house.
Of course she wasn’t really alone. Bri came by on Tuesday nights after work. She always brought groceries and a new copy of TV guide, but she never stayed for supper, even when it was something good. Like tonight, her daughter had settled at the kitchen table, smoked one of those long cigarettes she liked, and chatted for a while about work and some fellow named Raul, or Pete who wasn’t worth the time of day, then she crushed the cigarette out in a saucer, leaned over to kiss Estella on the cheek and left.

“Love you, Ma. See you Sunday for church. Can I take you early? I might go tubing with Eddie at the river.”

Brianna hadn’t noticed her arm, so Estella didn’t have to explain about the Virgin, or the fall, which was good because it all seemed not-quite-real now, like it had happened to someone else, someone better or holier than Estella, and besides she was so tired. Too tired to open a can of soup, or watch T.V. Suddenly her arms felt heavy with exhaustion. She needed to go to bed. She locked the back door and shuffled to the counter to draw the blinds above the kitchen sink.

The late summer sunlight fell through the dusty slats in golden bars and danced on the dishwater in the sink. Estella glanced down.

The Virgin was there looking up at her from the surface of the water. She was just the way Estella had always imagined her; her blue veil shone around her illuminated with trembling light. “Santa María”, murmured Estella, as she slid to the floor in a shower of petals. “Wait till I show them the roses.”
Pastorela

The crowded bus to the border travels all night in the darkness, first forested mountain curves, later the high plains desert. Cold air whistles through gaps in the windows. The passengers bundle themselves as best they can, and the driver turns on the heat, which roars up from vents in the floor and fogs the windows with a chilly mist. Jaime and Maggie drape an old shawl over the seat back and eat the last of their tortas in this improvised tent, warmed by each other’s breath. Eventually they fall into a fitful sleep.

When bus lurches to a stop at the deserted little park six blocks from the border, they awake gritty-eyed and confused. Jaime lifts their small bag down from the rack. Maggie puts on her coat, but not her shoes, her feet have swollen on the fifteen hour bus ride. She carries them in her hand, savoring the chill of the metal steps, as they move down into cold December air. They stop at a wrought iron bench, and Jaime kneels to help her wedge her feet into the worn leather flats. They leaf through the creased envelope containing their passports, marriage license, and Maggie’s expired Mexican tourist permit. She must cross the border, have her passport stamped on the US side, and then return to Mexico to renew the permit. They walk until they reach the river, then join the throng crossing the bridge.

The Laredo Bridge is crowded with holiday shoppers carrying bags and parcels. A never-ending line of cars and trucks belches exhaust into the grey air. Someone wound festive silver tinsel around the light posts, but the wind has torn it to limp glittering shreds. Half way across, they step out of the stream of people and stop to stare down into the dark water. For a moment they straddle the border.

No one is swimming across today.
After an hour of shuffling in line they reach the window, and slide their passports through to the immigration agent, who glances at her hand with its thin gold band, then seems to takes note of the way Maggie’s coat doesn’t button at the waist, but finally stamps the passports, and pushes them back through the window.

"Merry Christmas. Welcome home," he barks. "Next."

They have a few hours to shop, cross the border and catch the return bus to Mexico City. They walk the few blocks to J. C. Penney. The store is a perfumed haven from the windy streets; colored lights twinkle in potted pines on either side of the glass doors. Maggie lingers over a display of soft wool scarves, but they settle on two dozen thick cloth diapers, a card with four curved diaper pins and three pairs of impossibly small plastic pants. They have a few dollars left for a lunch of hamburgers at McDonald’s, but Maggie’s shoe splits open two blocks into the walk, and Jaime leads her limping into a tiny loncheria, where a girl with silver glasses serves them chipped plates of carne guisada, with flour tortillas so thick and fluffy they remind Maggie of her grandmother’s biscuits. They emerge into the afternoon with just enough time to walk back across the bridge, but Maggie ducks into a tiny grocery. Deprived of the salty burgers she craved, she needs to carry back some taste of home. She scans the shelves of dusty canned goods. Nothing. In the dairy case she finds a pound brick of Wisconsin sharp cheddar wrapped in plastic. She spends the last of their dollars to buy it and slips into her coat pocket, where it nudges her hip with each step as they race back across the bridge.

She has become a smuggler.

They stand shivering at the counter as the Mexican customs agent paws through their bag. He discovers the stack of diapers and stares pointedly at Maggie’s round belly. Jaime quietly passes a rolled fifty peso bill. The agent pockets it discreetly, and renews her tourist
permit, stamping it and adding his signature with a flourish. Jaime slips it into the envelope, and they go back out to the street. The bus is parked on a side street near the park. They board and join the other passengers accommodating their purchases for the long trip home. Agents will stop the crowded bus and search three times before they reach Monterrey. Maggie’s heart pounds each time the bus slows to a stop. The cheese has warmed and flattened in her pocket. She runs her fingers over the ridged edge of the wrapper, feeling its contours soften. The men in shabby uniforms move down the aisle examining documents and rummaging through bags and boxes. One woman, who is wearing her purchases in bulky layers under her coat, will pay so much in bribes that the bus driver buys her coffee at the rest stop in Saltillo.

Hours pass before the driver turns the lights off; the passengers settle into sleep, and the bus begins its long glide across the desert. Jaime dozes, his head leaning on her shoulder. She slips her hand from his and works it into the coat pocket. She digs the cheese out of the package in greasy chunks, pressing it against the roof of her mouth with her tongue, licking the buttery oil from her fingers. Resting her cheek against the window, she watches the desert flow by in flashes of huisache and cactus lit by passing cars. The cheese is a summertime picnic in her mouth, wildflowers, sunlight and shade under an elm tree. Her breath deepens and slows. Mountains move by in the distance, vague silhouettes against a dome of stars. She gropes for Jaime’s warm hand in the darkness. Their baby rocks and sways inside her, and Maggie falls asleep dreaming of a baby infused with golden light.