

Hairbands

by Julia Alvarez

My husband has given away my hairbands
in my dream to the young women he works with,
my black velvet, my mauve, my patent leather one,
the olive band with the magenta rose
whose paper petals crumple in the drawer,
the flowered crepe, the felt with a rickrack
of vines, the twined mock-tortoise shells.
He says I do not need them, I've cut my hair,
so it no longer falls in my eyes when I read,
or when we are making love and I bend over him.

But no, I tell him, you do not understand,
I want my hairbands even if I don't need them.
These are the trophies of my maidenhood,
the satin dress with buttons down the back,
the scented box with the scalloped photographs.
This is my wild-haired girlhood dazzled with stories
of love, the romantic heroine with the pale, operatic face
who throws herself on the train tracks of men's arms.
These are the chastened girl-selves I gave up
to become the woman who could be married to you.

But every once in a while, I pull them out
of my dresser drawer and touch them to my cheek,
worn velvet and faded silk, mi tesoro, mi juventud—
which my husband has passed on to the young women
who hold for him the promise of who I was.
And in my dream I weep real tears that wake me up
to my husband sleeping beside me that deep sleep
that makes me tremble thinking of what is coming.
And I slip out of bed to check that they are still mine,
my crumpled rose, my mauve, my black hairbands.

Woman's Work

by Julia Alvarez

Who says a woman's work isn't high art?
She'd challenge as she scrubbed the bathroom tiles.
Keep house as if the address were your heart.

We'd clean the whole upstairs before we'd start
downstairs, I'd sigh, hearing my friends outside.
Doing her woman's work was a hard art.

to practice when the summer sun would bar
the floor I swept till she was satisfied.
She kept me prisoner in her housebound heart.

She's shine the tines of forks, the wheels of carts,
cut lacy lattices for all her pies.
Her woman's work was nothing less than art.

And I, her masterpiece since I was smart,
was primed, praised, polished, scolded and advised
to keep a house much better than my heart.

I did not want to be her counterpart!
I struck out...but became my mother's child:
a woman working at home on her art,
housekeeping paper as if it were her heart.

To Live in the Borderlands

by Gloria Anzaldua

To live in the borderlands means you
are neither *hispana india negra espanola*
ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed
caught in the crossfire between camps
while carrying all five races on your back
not knowing which side to turn to, run from;

To live in the Borderlands means knowing that the *india* in you, betrayed for 500 years,
is no longer speaking to you,

the *mexicanas* call you *rajetas*, that denying the Anglo inside you
is as bad as having denied the Indian or Black;

Cuando vives en la frontera
people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,

you're a *burra, buey*, scapegoat,
forerunner of a new race,

half and half-both woman and man, neither-a new gender;

To live in the Borderlands means to
put *chile* in the borscht,
eat whole wheat *tortillas*,
speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent;

be stopped by *la migra* at the border checkpoints;
Living in the Borderlands means you fight hard to

resist the gold elixir beckoning from the bottle,

the pull of the gun barrel,

the rope crushing the hollow of your throat;

In the Borderlands

you are the battleground

where enemies are kin to each other;

you are at home, a stranger,

the border disputes have been settled

the volley of shots have scattered the truce

you are wounded, lost in action

dead, fighting back;

To live in the Borderlands means

the mill with the razor white teeth wants to shred off

your olive-red skin, crush out the kernel, your heart

pound you pinch you roll you out

smelling like white bread but dead;

To survive the Borderlands

you must live *sin fronteras*

be a crossroads.

Quinceañera

by Judith Ortiz Cofer

My dolls have been put away like dead
children in a chest I will carry
with me when I marry.
I reach under my skirt to feel
a satin slip bought for this day. It is soft
as the inside of my thighs. My hair
has been nailed back with my mother's
black hairpins to my skull. Her hands
stretched my eyes open as she twisted
braids into a tight circle at the nape
of my neck. I am to wash my own clothes
and sheets from this day on, as if
the fluids of my body were poison, as if
the little trickle of blood I believe
travels from my heart to the world were
shameful. Is not the blood of saints and
men in battle beautiful? Do Christ's hands
not bleed into your eyes from His cross?
At night I hear myself growing and wake
to find my hands drifting of their own will
to soothe skin stretched tight
over my bones,
I am wound like the guts of a clock,
waiting for each hour to release me.

Esperanza

by Judith Ortiz Cofer

My name mocks me
for I was born at the cost
of my mother's life,
earning my father's hatred
with my first breath.
All my life
I have scoured a house soiled
with the thick soot of his resentment.
It has left its mark on the walls,
in his eyes, and on me.
All of it I have tried to wipe away.
In my hands I hold a broom,
in my heart—
ashes, ashes.

Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100

by Martín Espada

for the 43 members of Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Local 100, working at the Windows on the World restaurant, who lost their lives in the attack on the World Trade Center

Alabanza. Praise the cook with a shaven head
and a tattoo on his shoulder that said Oye,
a blue-eyed Puerto Rican with people from Fajardo,
the harbor of pirates centuries ago.

Praise the lighthouse in Fajardo, candle
glimmering white to worship the dark saint of the sea.

Alabanza. Praise the cook's yellow Pirates cap
worn in the name of Roberto Clemente, his plane
that flamed into the ocean loaded with cans for Nicaragua,
for all the mouths chewing the ash of earthquakes.

Alabanza. Praise the kitchen radio, dial clicked
even before the dial on the oven, so that music and Spanish
rose before bread. Praise the bread. *Alabanza.*

Praise Manhattan from a hundred and seven flights up,
like Atlantis glimpsed through the windows of an ancient aquarium.

Praise the great windows where immigrants from the kitchen
could squint and almost see their world, hear the chant of nations:

Ecuador, México, Republica Dominicana,

Haiti, Yemen, Ghana, Bangladesh.

Alabanza. Praise the kitchen in the morning,
where the gas burned blue on every stove
and exhaust fans fired their diminutive propellers,
hands cracked eggs with quick thumbs
or sliced open cartons to build an altar of cans.

Alabanza. Praise the busboy's music, the *chime-chime*

of his dishes and silverware in the tub.

Alabanza. Praise the dish-dog, the dishwasher
who worked that morning because another dishwasher
could not stop coughing, or because he needed overtime
to pile the sacks of rice and beans for a family
floating away on some Caribbean island plagued by frogs.

Alabanza. Praise the waitress who heard the radio in the kitchen
and sang to herself about a man gone. *Alabanza.*

After the thunder wilder than thunder,
after the shudder deep in the glass of the great windows,
after the radio stopped singing like a tree full of terrified frogs,
after night burst the dam of day and flooded the kitchen,
for a time the stoves glowed in darkness like the lighthouse in Fajardo,
like a cook's soul. Soul I say, even if the dead cannot tell us
about the bristles of God's beard because God has no face,
soul I say, to name the smoke-beings flung in constellations
across the night sky of this city and cities to come.

Alabanza I say, even if God has no face.

Alabanza. When the war began, from Manhattan and Kabul
two constellations of smoke rose and drifted to each other,
mingling in icy air, and one said with an Afghan tongue:

Teach me to dance. We have no music here.

And the other said with a Spanish tongue:

I will teach you. Music is all we have.

América

by Richard Blanco

I.

Although Tía Miriam boasted she discovered
at least half a dozen uses for peanut butter—
topping for guava shells in syrup,
butter substitute for Cuban toast,
hair conditioner and relaxer—
Mamá never knew what to make
of the monthly five-pound jars
handed out by the immigration department
until my friend, Jeff, mentioned jelly.

II.

There was always pork though,
for every birthday and wedding,
whole ones on Christmas and New Year's Eve,
even on Thanksgiving day—pork,
fried, broiled, or crispy skin roasted—
as well as cauldrons of black beans,
fried plantain chips, and *yuca con mojito*.
These items required a special visit
to Antonio's Mercado on the corner of Eighth Street
where men in *guayaberas* stood in senate
blaming Kennedy for everything—“*Ese hijo de puta!*”
the bile of Cuban coffee and cigar residue
filling the creases of their wrinkled lips;
clinging to one another's lies of lost wealth,
ashamed and empty as hollow trees.

III.

By seven I had grown suspicious—we were still here.

Overheard conversations about returning

had grown wistful and less frequent.

I spoke English; my parents didn't.

We didn't live in a two-story house

with a maid or a wood-panel station wagon

nor vacation camping in Colorado.

None of the girls had hair of gold;

none of my brothers or cousins

were named Greg, Peter, or Marcia;

we were not the Brady Bunch.

None of the black and white characters

on Donna Reed or on the Dick Van Dyke Show

were named Guadalupe, Lázaro, or Mercedes.

Patty Duke's family wasn't like us either—

they didn't have pork on Thanksgiving,

they ate turkey with cranberry sauce;

they didn't have *yuca*, they had yams

like the dittos of Pilgrims I colored in class.

IV.

A week before Thanksgiving

I explained to my *abuelita*

about the Indians and the Mayflower,

how Lincoln set the slaves free;

I explained to my parents about

the purple mountain's majesty,

“one if by land, two if by sea,”

the cherry tree, the tea party,
the amber waves of grain,
the “masses yearning to be free,”
liberty and justice for all, until
finally they agreed:
this Thanksgiving we would have turkey,
as well as pork.

V.

Abuelita prepared the poor fowl
as if committing an act of treason,
faking her enthusiasm for my sake.
Mamá set a frozen pumpkin pie in the oven
and prepared candied yams following instructions
I translated from the marshmallow bag.
The table was arrayed with gladiolas,
the plattered turkey loomed at the center
on plastic silver from Woolworth's.
Everyone sat in green velvet chairs
we had upholstered with clear vinyl,
except Tío Carlos and Toti, seated
in the folding chairs from the Salvation Army.
I uttered a bilingual blessing
and the turkey was passed around
like a game of Russian Roulette.
“DRY,” Tío Berto complained, and proceeded
to drown the lean slices with pork fat drippings
and cranberry jelly—“*esa mierda roja*,” he called it.
Faces fell when *Mamá* presented her ochre pie—
pumpkin was a home remedy for ulcers, not a dessert.

Tía María made three rounds of Cuban coffee
then *Abuelo* and Pepe cleared the living room furniture,
put on a Celia Cruz LP and the entire family
began to *merengue* over the linoleum of our apartment,
sweating rum and coffee until they remembered—
it was 1970 and 46 degrees—
in *América*.

After repositioning the furniture,
an appropriate darkness filled the room.
Tío Berto was the last to leave.

Christmas, 1970

by Sandra M. Castillo

We assemble the silver tree,
our translated lives,
its luminous branches,
numbered to fit into its body.
place its metallic roots
to decorate our first Christmas.

Mother finds herself
opening, closing the Red Cross box
she will carry into 1976
like an unwanted door prize,
a timepiece, a stubborn fact,
an emblem of exile measuring our days,
marked by the moment of our departure,
our lives no longer arranged.

Somewhere,
there is a photograph,
a Polaroid Mother cannot remember was ever taken:
I am sitting under Tia Tere's Christmas tree,
her first apartment in this, our new world:
my sisters by my side,
I wear a white dress, black boots,
an eight-year-old's resignation;
Mae and Mitzy, age four,
wear red and white snowflake sweaters and identical smiles,
on this, our first Christmas,
away from ourselves.

The future unreal, unmade,
Mother will cry into the new year
with Lidia and Emerito,
our elderly downstairs neighbors,
who realize what we are too young to understand:
Even a map cannot show you
the way back to a place
that no longer exists.