**My Mother’s Chiles Rellenos**

Jose Oseguera

Before she married her second husband,

Mom’s cooking had failed to bewitch

the two men she’d cast its magic on:

my father, the wraith, her first and only lover

who’d charmed her into a wife

only to make her a waif;

and her second boyfriend, the wight,

who often spoke of marriage,

but only kept her bed warm

and her kitchen full of dirty pots.

Mom didn’t merely roast the pasilla peppers,

but laid them on the burner grates

guiding the flame’s orange-blue jaws to bubble

and gnaw the green veneer off their flesh.

After she peeled the warted char—

the blackened stem curled like a tail—

and fileted the pepper’s seeded heart,

the slit along its side yowled and hissed

a suffocating vapor— the few remaining demons

departed its veins. No cough could dislodge

the claws scratching the esophagus raw.

She’d stuff them with whatever she had around—

dusty potatoes sprouting eyes and limbs

and aged cotija cheese, yellowed and ripe

as forgotten parchment scrolls.

Stacked on a plate, the chiles looked like severed witch noses

ready to be dipped in egg whites she’d foamed

by fork whisk. She’d then submerge them in oil

so hot it shivered: the whitewash browned golden,

the peppers silkened, the potatoes soft as moistened earth,

the ribbons of melted cheese slithered

out of any verdant crack.

Long, delicate fingers of steam reach to devil

the eyes like voodoo pins and salivate

the gums to marsh, teeth to quicksand, to swamp slowly

down the throat and rest in the bog

of the stomach as a toad melds into mud.

By the time the philter cleaved a man’s lips—

his tongue helpless at the cusp of all of her seasonings—

it had also entered the bloodstream and clawed

the heart. Though the spoonful

was cool enough to mouth, the heat beating

at its core broke the skin of his hard palate

and tinged the coven of textures sloshing

from cheek to cheek with the umami of fresh blood,

like spiders traversing cobwebs inside his mouth.

To watch Mom cook was to witness a sorceress

conjure a spell that permeated the body and hypnotized the mind

before the food appeared before you, delicious and magical.

When she stood in front of a stove,

she didn’t merely conduct the stove’s heat,

her hands were singing fire.