

Mary Harris

On the Back Burner

Use it up, wear it out.
Make it do, do without.

I have always settled for less,
swept up crumbs and been grateful,
devoured a scrawny chicken back
as greedily as a goat.

Women make more of anything than it is worth.
We compose paintings from trays of trapped lint
and sew enduring quilts from petty scraps of cloth.
We cultivate gardens in cups on kitchen windowsills.

I have stewed long enough.
Now I am weary of morsels and leftovers,
his old car passed down to me,
furniture salvaged from discards,
coupons to redeem myself at the supermarket.

I want to vacation at a destination
not adjacent to a golf course.
In dreams I wear silk dresses on weekdays
like women in soap operas.
I crave chicken breasts,
the first slice of French toast
still warm.

Coming of Age, 1969

The view was groovy
from where I sat beside
Stuart Butz in his new
custom Mustang (metallic
olive green) with bucket seats
and louvered rear window.

He drove me everywhere,
fast and steady, from Griffith Park
to Point Mugu. He never said
much. We never went
all the way.

After his father died of cancer,
Stu cut classes, raced
around the valley like a pinball
with his stereo blasting Led Zeppelin
and parked on Mulholland Drive
alone. He grew a mustache.

I saw him not too far back.
He and his wife were holding
hands at a garage sale. Stu wore
Levi's with a skosh more room,
said he programs computers.

I wanted to ask
about his Mustang but didn't.
I don't want to know
he owns a Toyota.

Friday Rush Hour on BART

Every seat is taken so
the man sinks to the floor
of the crowded metro car
burrowing beneath San Francisco.
He reads a novel propped open
across his right palm. Flowers plume
from a cellophane cone
in the crook of his left arm.

I don't know
what prompted him to stop
at a sidewalk stand to buy
a bouquet of mixed blooms.
He wears no ring. Flowers are not mandatory
except on Valentine's or Mother's Day
and today is neither.

She will never know
this portrait of a man
holding yellow roses, coral tiger lilies,
purple statice and baby's breath
spraying out of tissue paper.

Yet every time I tunnel
into that dark mystery of romance
he travels with me
longer than any lover,
as much as an impressionist oil painting
or a watercolor bleeding at the edges
like a bruise blooming beneath my skin.