

## Molcajete

### Charles Henry

I remember the black bowls at the Mexican restaurant. They were pocked. Rough dark plastic. Knock-offs with no pestle. One of the endless tacky things to buy in the early 90s. The things millennials are so fond of now, as they near 40. I thought they were cut from lava, but, then again, I was young enough that I still believed in the magic which would be killed sometime later before moving out of my parents' two-story farmhouse and into a one-bedroom flip for a person I thought was the answer to an unrealized and unearned displaced anger masquerading as love. Chi-Chi's, the brand you sometimes see in dilapidated Kmart's, with flickering lights somewhere in the back accentuating the coffee-and-cigarette-stained colored floors like the teeth of a mid-twenty-something before the fear of cancer was compounded with the proliferation whitening strips. It used to be a chain, Chi-Chi's. Across from it, a decade after we saw those black bowls, my older brother worked in the Spencer Gifts, a store that if not for sex toys and a thriving nationwide then-illegal weed network would've had that same flickering yellow light as those dilapidated stores. He would boast that "if you were cool" the bartenders at Chi-Chi's wouldn't card. That place died in 2003. Chi-Chi's, that is, not Kmart or Spencer's. All that's left of those black bowls lives in a memory of my parents' home.

My Dad must've worked hard back then. I don't have a lot of memories of

him doing much other than coming home, showering, and then sitting in front of the TV before and after dinner. I do remember eating at the table with him some mornings and most nights. I do remember the time that he walked into my first-grade classroom after school one day to correct Mrs. McLain's insistence that my inability to pronounce s's and t's stemmed from a general lack of trying or from a personal attack on the teacher herself. She had a tough-love approach, but my dad was just tough. A week later I was in Mrs. William's class. She played the piano for us, sometimes.

The thing about rust is that it never stops coming after it starts. Rain, water, a spec of unprotected metal is all you need. Then there's just never getting back to what was, especially when you add salt to the problem. It rains a lot in the valley where I'm from. It's almost ironic that water creates dust, but the best thing you can do is to cut it out and replace it. Most people don't. They just let time creep up until it's all just rust and there's nothing to do but let it rot.

My mother used to make *Salsa Con Queso* in those bowls. More correctly, she cut a block of Velveeta in to chunks and crushed it down into a jar of Pace with a wooden spoon, then melted it for seven minutes on high. After the cheese substitute dissolved into the salsa, she ladled it out into four black pocked bowls, the remainder going to my father. We had it once a week. On Sundays, we watched *seaQuest DSV* and *Earth 2* to mark the special occasion of the *Salsa Con Queso*. I was afraid of *Earth 2*. It was a show about finding a new Earth after we ruin this one, but the new Earth is already inhabited. I promised myself, at 9 or 10 years old, that when I grew up I would eat *Salsa Con Queso*, and fruit roll-ups, every night of the week.

As one of those aging millennials, I don't eat queso every night, and I don't think I've had a fruit snack since I moved away from that new dollar store built at Market and 4<sup>th</sup>, when I lived in the valley. I used to walk over to it with five dollars, some of it in change. I'd buy a pack of fruit rollups or a pack of Marb Lights. Or other things that reminded me of better times. Whatever I could afford to help get me through the day. I suppose many people there did the same. We were just the kids of rust belt retirees. 55-year-old Walmart greeters, hoping that their pension from the mill would get un-fucked so they'd finally be able to start living.

**Charles Henry** is a second-year PhD student in the English Department. He's from the Ohio valley originally, but moved out to the University of North Dakota in the Fall of 2020. In his graduate work, he is interested in secular and composition theory, but in his writing he is very interested in the generative and craft qualities of creative nonfiction and poetry.