Taste

by Teresa Shen Swingler

I. Sweet

Anthill

The anthill is in front of my house. It started with a cupcake I dropped on the ground, frosting first. The ants started to congregate, carrying sprinkles and cake crumbs into the deep sidewalk crack. A week later, they created the hill. Around it, we stand; you, three other boys, and me, the only girl in the neighborhood. It is early afternoon, the sun sits high in the sky, heat seeps up into our shoes. I am holding a pot of boiling water. The bubbles have calmed down but the steam rises into the hot air. You crouch down and peer into the ants' world. They are marching in lines, busy, so busy, ever productive. They march toward their home, hauling sticks and pebbles and grains of sand. I look, too, but all I can think of is how you kissed me behind the shed last week.

The ants march forward to the hole in the hill. I wonder where it leads—to secret tunnels beneath the earth, to a series of rooms and hallways we will never see, dark and cold and private. You and the boys don't think of these things. One of them pokes at the ants with a branch, the other smears an ant across the sidewalk with the sole of his shoe. You pinch one between your fingers and smile at me. Then, you say, with your head cocked and one shiny piece of hair hanging over your eye -- "You gonna pour the water or what?"

I hesitate, looking down into the pure, clear water. With all eyes on me, the waiting, I think about my dad, a botanist, and how he meditates in the morning among the cobwebs in our house, alone with the spiders, at peace with nature and all its creatures. But, there is intensity in your stare—a promise we will go behind the shed, again. Maybe you will stand between me and the wall, lean into me, and put your mouth to mine. Maybe you will put your fingers behind my neck. I tip the pot.

The water trickles at first, then pours over the anthill with a big splash. You and the boys watch closely as seventy-some ants that

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once had bodies, antennae, and legs, shrink instantly into tiny black balls the minute the water hits them. The sounds: they are high-pitched, like tiny squeals, as the heat makes them pop, sizzle, and scream. I cover my ears and shut my eyes, and hear your laughter.

A week earlier, after our kiss, while playing in a dirt lot behind an abandoned house, I stand invisible behind a corner as you and your friends pee on the side of the house. My legs are crossed tight. I need to go to the bathroom, too, but our houses are miles away. I hear you say, too bad Mei can't piss like a guy. Mei, you say, will stay out here as long as I want her to, if you know what I mean.

You cross your arms and whisper "Sweet". The air is hot and quiet, the earth stands still. Everything is still—the anthill is completely still. I purse my lips and look into the sky, to prevent those hot, hot tears from falling. You high-five your friends, and you all turn and walk away.

II. Salty

The Shellings

For a minute, I got mad. He said to ease up, he would introduce me to his family someday soon. It was just hard for them to accept, he said, him dating a non-Muslim. Then he cocked his head to the side, smiled up at me, and said "A hot one, too" and pulled me toward him. He kissed me on the mouth, sticking his tongue inside, and I pulled away. It wasn't that I didn't want to kiss him, it's just that this image kept coming back to me, because of a story he told me earlier that day. Two years ago, he went to Vegas with some buddies for a bachelor party. He lost two hundred bucks at blackjack and couldn't afford to go to the strip club, so he headed back to the hotel while the rest of the guys headed the direction of the neon pink XXXs. I almost wish he had gone with them, because nude girls wouldn't even really bother me that much.

Instead, he walked back to the Frontier, a beer sweating in his palm. As he approached the hotel, he saw a hotel employee leaned up against the outside walls of mirrored glass. She was smoking a cigarette with her left hand. She had dark hair, and red lips that

matched the polyester red uniform she was wearing, with its gold buttons buttoned all the way up to her chin. Her eyes, he said, were deep set and familiar. I wanted to think she was some long lost relative—a cousin, maybe, but no. He had never seen her before in his life, he just recognized her as someone from his home country, Bosnia. And he also noticed one of her arms was crippled; permanently bent at the wrist and elbow, like the neck of a swan. He says he wasn't interested in her that way. He just didn't meet people from Bosnia very often, so he went up to her and started talking in their language.

"When did you escape?" he said to her, just like that— he was probably feeling his beer by now, which makes him much more direct and to-the-point, no frilly formalities.

She stared at him, for what he said felt like five full minutes. She looked bored. Her bent arm emphasized the bored look even more. She was probably thinking of a snappy comeback like "The asylum? Yesterday," or "There is no escaping the Frontier. Yee Haw." But she probably recognized in his eyes a look I've never seen—a look of sincerity. Because she answered straight.

"'93. You?"

To which he replied "'94."

Then, he took both his hands and breathed heavily onto the mirrored glass next to her, and with his finger, he drew a box. He drew the window to the outside, then the kitchen area, pressed his finger down as he drew the heavy wall between the eating area and the rest of the house. Then, he drew circles for his father, his mother, his sister and himself around the kitchen table, a circle for his grandmother washing dishes, and a circle for his grandfather who was walking through the hall. He told her he was eight years old on that first night of Ramadan, the new moon right outside their one window, and they all gathered to eat after dark. He took his finger and scratched through the little line representing the window—that was where the shelling came in, and a piece of shrapnel flew right into his grandmother's back. Of course, he said, he didn't know it at the time, but even today, he can feel it in the

raised surface of her skin. He said all he can remember is grabbing his little sister and running for the door on the opposite end of the window, and how he tripped over his grandfather's body on the way out, and fell hard, on his knees, and scrambled to get back up again. They left the next week.

I suppose he didn't have to do much explaining. He didn't have to explain to her what a shelling was, like he did for me, he didn't have to talk about how it was a bomb that split out into many, many pieces of shrapnel —the purpose to take as many human lives as possible. He didn't have to describe the sounds of the shellings he heard in his bed at night, or how the fear of the shellings prevented him or his sister from ever going outside. How they stayed cloistered in their apartment building, shuffling downstairs to the basement for daily lessons from a retired teacher in the building. He didn't have to hear me repeat "That's so awful, that's so awful, that's so awful."

The girl with the bent arm merely looked at him, and he saw tears in her eyes, just barely noticeable on the inside corners, because they caught the neon light. She breathed onto the mirrored glass and drew the hospital in Sarajevo, all the beds lined up like dominoes, and the shelling that caused a doctor to pull her arm so hard, the nerves somehow got unattached. And then, she stepped away from the mirrored glass, and struck the ash off her cigarette, and then sat down on the edge of the sidewalk and took a deep breath.

He didn't know what to do, he said, so he sat down next to her and he hugged her. She hugged him back with the one arm, rested the other elbow on his shoulder, and leaned her head against her forearm. And even though he swears there was no attraction there, he leaned over and kissed her upturned cheek, like he was kissing a sister, and her tears were salty.

III. Sour

Ten

For many years, I was afraid of flying. Then, one day, I almost flew. Why I married a pilot in the first place, I have no idea—besides

the fact he once came down to the ground for four days every two weeks and brought me little treasures from the places he'd stopped—like a kokeshi doll from Tokyo. Or wooden clogs from Amsterdam. I still wear those things today. The painted Dutch ladies are completely worn off of the toes. Only their eyes remain. The hollow sound of them against the cement of our front driveway reminds me I'm here on the ground, while he's up in the sky.

So, anyway, today I packed up the clogs into a little rolling suitcase and headed to LAX. You see, it's our anniversary, an important one— the 10th. Ten is an important number. It's the number of years before a first high school reunion, the number of commandments God gave to Moses, the number of pins in a bowling alley. It's not a number you miss, especially for reasons such as flight schedules or layovers. In other words, a woman shouldn't sit in a silent house on a tenth anniversary, waiting for the phone to ring.

I packed my bag and drove to the airport, along I-10. The 10s of the highway signs taunted me every few miles. 10! 10! 10! They were my tanned, big-calved male cheerleaders along the way, and as I saw each one I gripped my knuckles tighter around the steering wheel. I was going to do this. The rest was a blur—long-term parking, shuttle bus, departure ticket line, escalator ride, until I reached The Tunnel.

I gave my ticket to the ticket taker, and entered the portal, the birth canal, the entry into this other place, devoid of air. I stepped up, only to be greeted by some bimbo stewardess, I mean, flight attendant who smiled at me with her picket white teeth. I thought to myself—"I am breathing in other people's sour breath. There is no way out once they close us in. I will be in a Ziploc bag, sealed tight until the red and blue make purple, with every bubble pressed out with the palm of one's hand. The closing of that door is the final cinch."

They gave me a window seat. I looked at the Plexiglas next to me. It wasn't a circle, yet it wasn't a square. It wasn't even a window, really. It was a false opening into the sky, an illusion of escape. I pulled the seatbelt tight, the metal clasp sitting heavy on

my stomach, and gripped the armrests in my hands. I thought to myself, "How many other sweaty hands have gripped these armrests? How many others have imagined the yellow breathing masks falling from the ceiling like octopus angels? And does anyone but me realize that they can't be saved, that those things are there to strangle them, to wrap their many suction-cup covered tentacles around human necks, to save them from their own hysteria?"

And when the air had grown too stale, I stood up, gasping for breath, clutching my carry-on bag and shouting, watching those passengers walk backward in their clumsy, pitiful way, stepping on each others toes, steering their luggage backward, shuffling and mumbling to themselves. I rubbed my hair wild with both hands, and shouted. It felt good to shout. It made me think maybe ten is not such a significant number, it is only one more than nine and one less than eleven. As I ran the reverse direction— out of The Tunnel, floating up into that gorgeous brick chimney bringing smoke to the sky, I could see the light of the souvenir shop. I opened my suitcase, and took out the clogs, and set them on a shelf next to the shot glasses and spoons. And I kept walking until those little eyes could see me no more.

IV. Bitter

Her Giant Face

Here's the deal. I went to Chicago on one of those "find yourself" trips, the first vacation I'd taken from my cubicle job all year. I figured if Roxy and Velma could become infamous in this town, I could find my own piece of jazz. I was sitting in a pizza parlor, eating a piece of Real! Chicago! Pizza!, and reading a hot pink flier that was handed to me. It claimed that if I called a certain phone number, I could lose five dress sizes in five weeks. I was thinking about this...how a teenager can make a woman feel so bad about herself by simply passing along a piece of paper, when I glanced across my table, out the window, and saw a large, familiar face looking at me from the side of a skyscraper. I'm talking large-large, huge—almost five stories tall. I almost gagged on a thick, doughy piece of crust,

that's how surprised I was to see my old friend Barbara on an ad for some perfume we used to call "ode de toilette" when we were just kids. Thank goodness my crust didn't get lodged in my throat, because I've been trained to do a personal Heimlich maneuver which involves flinging myself over a chair—it's not a pretty sight, especially after seeing Barbara looking so beautiful, so I was pretty thankful I didn't have to make a spectacle of myself within that very hour. Instead, I walked casually out of there, pretending that her face wasn't looming over me. I forced my gaze up the side of another building, where a couple of window washers were at work. They dangled by ropes around their waists, just one slick wall of skyscraper in front of them. They had interesting techniques. It was unique and very intriguing and made me forget all about Barbara and her giant face. It made me forget so much that when I looked back across the street at her, I could only make out a pair of eyes, a nose, a mouth.

You figure they would change the ads on skyscrapers fairly often. Not this one. It didn't budge. Every time I stepped out of my hotel room to take a walk in Millennium Park or head to the Art Institute—the bland face of large features was there. I could even make out the peachy-beige speck of a face from the Sears Tower. Considering that cars look like ants from that height, we're talking about something gigantic here. Here's what I figured: something this large cannot be ignored. It must be acknowledged before it can be forgotten. So, I went to the corner bakery and ordered an herbal iced tea with a chicken salad sandwich to go. I grabbed the sack and found a comfortable bench with a great view of what I now could recognize as, yes, truly, Barbara's face. And as I ate, I made myself analyze her pupils, the curve of her nostrils, her lips. Her head was held back at an angle, in a breezy, casual way that has a whole busy life associated with it—jet planes to Milan, a handsome millionaire husband, a chance every weekend to wear a ball gown. I started to laugh, softly at first, chuckling at how ridiculous it was. Because, you see, I know the truth—that we really are only a set of features on a face. I laughed so hard, I choked on a chunk of bitter walnut in

my chicken salad and ran around behind the bench. I flung myself over the top of it and gave myself the Heimlich maneuver until, red-faced and exhilarated; I found that I could breathe again.