

## Three Poems by Patricia L. Hamilton

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### Home Economics

That week with my sister in Modesto,  
the kitchen radio played an endless loop  
of The Doors' "Riders on the Storm"—  
Jim Morrison's deadpan chant the anchor  
for moody riffs on the Fender Rhodes  
haunted by rain and claps of thunder—  
alternating with Carole King crooning it was too late,  
both songs pulsing along the same hypnotic 4/4 groove  
in a minor key suited to the duplex's dimness,  
the shades pulled to block the fiery afternoon sun.  
While the baby napped, I read,  
savoring the breeze stirred up by an oscillating fan.  
I could hear my sister muttering curses at the weevils  
she'd found in her flour, her second year of marriage  
marked by cloth diapers and other domestic economies.  
Like a cryptic prophet, Jim warned  
of a sinister killer lurking in plain sight,  
Carole's prognostication of imminent break-up  
seeming equally remote.  
When the news came on at five, I headed to the kitchen  
to peel potatoes, an eager helper.  
My mother thought cooking from scratch an absurdity,  
but my sister relished creation and innovation.  
That week I practiced rolling out pie crusts  
and beating egg whites. Twice we treated ourselves  
to French toast for breakfast.

That week I made a dress under my sister's tutelage.  
I'd been dogging her through fabric stores for years.  
Eighth-grade sewing had been wasted  
on useless drawstring bags, but now I was learning

how to match plaids and clip curves  
before ironing them flat. When my brother-in-law  
returned from his long shift running peaches  
at the cannery, I fed the baby his strained carrots  
while my sister put a meatloaf on the table,  
the radio tuned lower but Jim—dead in Paris  
of a heroin overdose—still intoning that a girl  
should love her man. Carole sadly replied  
she could no longer fake it. Once we'd dried  
the dishes, we sat on the front stoop as the sprinkler  
doused the hibiscus. When my brother-in-law  
retired to bed, his alarm set for four a.m.,  
my sister gave the baby his bath, I at her elbow  
observing the rituals of powdering. At fourteen  
and twenty-three, listening to that soundtrack,  
what did we know of nihilism parading about  
in the tatters of flagrant excess? Or slow-simmering  
heartache scorching love and boiling it dry?  
We knew only what we'd been told mattered:  
gratitude for shelter, appreciation for nourishing food,  
thankfulness for well-constructed clothing  
that would last.

## **Last Light**

Imagine yourself in a foreign land, one  
where the midday sun melts all to mirage,  
the few cars scattered around the square  
shimmering, windshields white-hot,  
the sea in the distance a pane of crazed glass.  
Even the palm fronds' incessant rustling is still.  
Tomorrow you will leave here, perhaps forever.

You cannot cup your hand to catch time.  
You can only breathe in, breathe out  
as you watch the pigeons sleep-walking  
beneath the statue of the General.  
Still, if you listen, the rhythmic whisk  
of a shopkeeper's broom will answer  
questions you have no words for.

Inscribe this moment in memory:  
deep scallops of shade under bright awnings,  
prism-scaled fish fanned out on an ice-bed,  
pale patty-pan squash piled up like a trove  
of children's tops, blushing peaches,  
bundles of fragrant rosemary,  
a lazy horn riff wafting from the corner café.

Then drink the light before it drains away.  
Let the glimpse of someone's grandmother  
knitting in a doorway dissolve on your tongue.  
Immerse yourself in the holiness  
spilling from a busker's saxophone.  
Raise your hands to a child's shy smile.  
Allow the incense of joy to fill your lungs.

## *Viva La Raza*

Saturdays I would wake to tuba-heavy  
Mexican polka music thumping from  
someone's car radio across the street. Too early,

but it was a free country, and my duplex—  
Spanish-style stucco with a flat, red-tiled roof—  
was on the fringe of a *barrio*,

not gang-ridden like you'd hear about on the news,  
just shabby, with wrought-iron window bars  
and graffiti-sprayed cinder block.

Commonwealth Avenue—a name in which  
I saw no irony—was a busy, four-lane buffer  
for all but sound waves. On my side

the haves were barely hanging on,  
mostly college students, single moms, a few retirees,  
the tiny lots crammed with cottages,

vibrant hibiscus and blowsy roses  
in even the smallest yards. I would indulge  
in \$1.99 pancakes and coffee at Zono's

to gear up for my weekly ordeal at the laundromat.  
I didn't mind the steamy heat, the cloying smells  
of bleach and fabric softener,

as much as the bold stares of the *cholos*  
whose eyes slid down my bare arms to my breasts  
and lingered. Laborers, they slouched

in white undershirts with wide armholes  
that revealed their ribs as their work clothes released

the week's grime into sudsy water.

Nose in a book, I'd avoid their smoldering gazes,  
pretending a dotted line no one could cross  
encircled me. No one

followed me home. But later,  
when I'd take my bike for a spin, the catcalls  
always came from an ancient pickup truck, bulging

with young Hispanic men, slowing as it passed.  
A woman in public, I was subject to comment,  
or ululation. Eyes focused

on the bike lane, I kept pedaling  
toward the railroad bridge emblazoned  
with "*Viva la Raza.*" It never occurred to me

*cholos* didn't have the right to share  
the street, or the laundromat.  
There were machines enough, and lanes, for all.

**Patricia L. Hamilton** is a professor of English at Union University in Jackson, TN. Her most recent work has appeared in *Red River Review*, *The Windhover*, *Illya's Honey*, *Not Very Quiet*, *Bindweed*, and *Whale Road Review*. Winner of the Rash Award in Poetry in 2015 and 2017, she has received three Pushcart nominations. Her first volume of poetry, *The Distance to Nightfall*, was published in 2014 by Main Street Rag.

