



TACO BELL QUARTERLY

Volume 1
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Taco Bell Quarterly

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Taco Bell Quarterly

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Editor Grande Supreme:

M.M. CARRIGAN

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@cdcurtiss who tweeted at me, “I would submit to Taco Bell Quarterly (TBQ) in a heartbeat” and thus named this brilliant tome of work.

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LOUIS CLEARVIEW

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LETTER FROM EDITOR GRANDE SUPREME

We're Taco Bell Quarterly. We're rule breakers. Well, kind of. Most of us have jobs, health insurance, families. We're sensible. When it's chilly outside, we wear jackets. We're writers. We're artists. We're dreamers. We're totally bored. We decided to write about Taco Bell.

We're a reaction. Against the gatekeepers and the tastemakers. Against health food and hipsters. Against the cool kids, Ronald McDonald and Burger King. Against the "number your pages," and "typed only in our preferred font families, so please see the fourteen-page guidelines for the list of prioritized fonts we find acceptable" for our prestigious publication.

At Taco Bell Quarterly, our only guideline is love. Make shit, hustle it, loathe it, trash it, love it, let it go. Write our odes to the XXL Grilled Stuft Burritos and Chalupas. Eat it, digest it, hate ourselves afterwards. Vomit it out, write it down. Same difference. Send it off into the world. Onto the next colon blow, sonnet, essay, short story, or splatter art with sauce packets.

Everyone approached their material with different amounts of vigor. Some wrote their pieces off the cuff. Some crafted and chiseled away. Some slacked. Some crammed. Some wrote fast quips to crack us up, others slowly pulled back the layers of the burrito wrapper to reveal what's underneath. One kid studies hard for the test, another totally blows off the studying part. Both get the A grade. Taco Bell Quarterly recognizes the merit in all approaches.

The common themes in these pieces are love, longing, nostalgia, loss, and memory, same as everywhere. Even in the silliest of pieces, the authors are haunted by something. Taco Bell is something shared, something taken in solitude, something lost, found, omnipresent and fleeting—much like love itself, like memory itself. When I sat down to make a Taco Bell literary journal, whatever that looked like, I wanted to get past the joke of it and go for the gut punch. In these pages, I promise you will find the gut punch. Sit back, enjoy, laugh, weep. And of course, **live más**.

M.M. Carrigan

August 2019

FICTION

CARMAN C. CURTON

A COMPLETELY FALSE RUMOR

It's not like the portal was scary exactly, it's just that it was plainly - not right. And it sure as hell didn't belong there: right between the stack of drink trays and the drive-thru, just where your elbow would drag through it at lunch rush, when there were two too many people behind the counter, and that fucking box of Fiery Doritos Locos Taco Shells on the floor, which she had told Shawn to take back to storage, and she couldn't carry two bags and two drinks and a box of Cinnabon Delights to the window without brushing up against that stupid portal and -- *dammit!* Couldn't it be enough to not slide some part of her body into an alternate universe of slimy chaos and horror just one fucking day?

"Welcome to Taco Bell. What would you like with your Seasoned Fries today?" the Day Manager screeched into her headset.

"Yes, uh. Um, a Chalupa Supreme and Nacho Fries and two Cheesy Roll Ups and six packets of the mild sauce."

"Mild sauce, six packets," she replied, aiming for helpful and cheerful now that she was a good two feet from the portal.

"Just remember the sauce this time."

"Yes, ma'am. And would you like a Pepsi with that? Or a Mountain Dew? Or how about a Watermelon Candy Freeze?" Vicky went to hell daily through that portal, but she wasn't going to everlasting damnation for upselling overpriced, sugary drinks. That was what kept the Maumee Street Taco Bell in the Top 50 for Individual Window Sales and sustained her bonus checks and managed to employ the location's 27 crew members, such as they were. Besides, most people wanted drinks, and they would just change the order when they got to the window if she didn't ask first.

When the lunch rush died, Vicky sent Amy to the back to straighten and re-stock bags and

boxes, let Bobby go early, and told Tavish to take his break, which is how she was alone for a few seconds between the Combos shelf and the assembly table when the demon squeezed its oblong head out of the portal, slithered wet scaly limbs through in front of itself, and turned a neat little somersault, flipping out of one universe and into realm of Vicky Grimolty, Day Manager of the 47th best Taco Bell in the Midwest for Volume and Upsales.

"Welcome to Taco Bell. What would you like with your Seasoned Fries today?" Vicky whispered, realizing that, when scared shitless and still wearing the headset, she fell back on habit and upselling, apparently.

"Just a semi-millennial surprise inspection." The words dribbled out in sync with the slime oozing from the fat tentacles waving around what was probably a mouth. "Your horsemeat offerings rise and continue to rise on a pleasingly consistent growth curve."

"That is a completely false rumor," Vicky said firmly. "A story idiots spread on the internet."

Bulging lidless eyes rolled in her direction. "The slaughter was below expectations for centuries, but results are more than satisfactory, currently."

"Those stories are totally fake news," Vicky hissed, pointing a threatening finger at the moist tentacles waving in and out among the monstrosity's transparent but quite sharp looking teeth.

The horror shivered once, and something Vicky hoped was a tongue emerged below its tentacles, swiping wetly over the *Dare to Diablo* lettering on her nametag.

"The consumption of horsemeat signals your loyalty and obedience. It is why this institution thrives in the gaping void of your hideous dry and windblown world."

"Uh. No. That's not the reason," Vicky asserted through tight lips, pulling her finger back from the abomination. She didn't want to touch it, but she would stand her ground against naysayers. "The Taco Bell Brand offers a Mexican-style fast food experience at a low price in convenient locations and a family friendly atmosphere."

"Yeah, right," Amy snorted from behind a wall of boxes and paper bags bundled into four-foot high stacks.

A Crunchy Gordita-sized bubble oozed from a flap at the base of the fiend's blubbery body and popped grotesquely. "It is not necessary to believe, only to serve. Your movement of horsemeat in this dispensation is efficient. Consumption is frequent and repeated. Horses are sacrificed, meat is cooked over open fire, flesh is eaten. We Who Are Other are satisfied."

"I told you that dogfood rumor is fake. We serve 100 percent USDA Choice Beef. Not horsemeat. We thrive because we upsell." Vicki lifted one hand to her headset, listened to see if she had missed any customers during this particular portal experience. "And because of Continuously High Scores in Excellent Customer Satisfaction," she finished with a smirk.

The gelatinous thing floated before her in a web of slime, its wet, black form shiny and silent.

"But. . . why would someth-- someone from," she waved her fingers toward the portal, which looked wetter than normal, somehow, "why do you even care what we serve over here?"

The visitor rippled with moist rage. "A heinous violation of an ancient agreement! The Unicorns left. They did not return. The duty and tribute they owed from their time in this realm was not paid."

"Um-- "

"Yes. Unicorns are no more. They no longer rule your forests. Now we watch as others consume the flesh of their nearest descendants. You have done well."

With that pronouncement, it slithered back into the portal with a sound exactly like a wet fart. One that smelled like low tide and Diablo sauce.

"What was that?" Tavish asked, wandering back to his cash register with a mouthful of taco shell. She let the crew snack on the broken ones, and as long as the number stayed reasonable, she didn't care if they broke a few extra during the busy shifts.

"Nothing," Vicki said, turning away from the portal. "Visit from the boss's boss, is all." She pressed one finger to her headset. "Welcome to Taco Bell! Where you can add on Seasoned Beef to any item for a quarter! What can we make for you today?"

Carman C. Curton consumes caffeine while writing a series of microstories called QuickFics, which she leaves in random places for people to find. You can find her on Twitter [@CarmanCCurton](https://twitter.com/CarmanCCurton).

JEFF BARKER

BLUE DUMPSTER CONFESSION

Sometimes you get to touch him. The padding on his palm is smooth. His nail has a healthy firmness to it, always the final part of him to make contact with you as he hands you a plastic cup for the soda machine.

Ben, that's who he is to you, to this Taco Bell on thirty-fourth, to this sticky room with its heavy plastic chairs and bolted tables. It's what is typed on his nametag. He is someone else outside the walls of this Taco Bell. Someone gave him baths when he was a small child, nourished him with warm touch and language. They also did terrible things to him; things that are only topped by what he has done to others who unknowingly came across his path. Mistakes have been made by Ben, big undoable mistakes. You know these things, because he told you once as you shared a cigarette out by the blue dumpster. His shallow acne scars were made deeper by the yellow overhead security light; your head spun from the nicotine, or was it the stench of a congealing grease bin nearby?

That was the one night he let you in, the only time the both of you stopped pretending like you aren't there just to see him. It began when he left the counter and found you alone in a corner booth. He bent over you to wipe the table and discard your tray.

He allowed you to see the snake tattoo crawling along the back of his neck, out of his purple collared shirt, into a crop of dark hair. You imagined the snake has a slithery tongue which is only visible when his head is shaved. The two of you couldn't be more different: your skin, your build, your past, your present, and most certainly your future.

"Do you get a break?" you asked.

"Ten minutes, by the dumpster." There was no friendly banter, no negotiation. He was gone with your crumpled taco wrapper and it was settled.

Then you walked into the humid night to the hidden dumpster, not sure what he had in mind, not even sure what you had in mind.

What happened was much more than you could have imagined. He spoke and you listened. It was a fifteen-minute confession. He gave all of himself and asked nothing. You left dizzy from the sheer abundance he willingly stuffed into your brain, or was it the nicotine?

And so you have returned, as you do most nights, driving around the glass box, hoping to see Ben inside. Then you order a taco and a drink, brush his hand, and go sit in the corner booth. You wait for him to clean your table and invite you to the dumpster, but he never does. Perhaps he regrets how much he has told you. Perhaps he doesn't remember you at all.

Jeff Barker has many short stories published in literary journals and anthologies including Hobart, The Broadkill Review, Crack the Spine Literary Magazine, HelloHorror Journal, Literally Stories, and Jolly Horror Press. Jeff is also a healthcare provider in the field of psychiatry. Before that, he had a nine-year career as a television news anchor and reporter in Texas, Alabama, Florida, and Oregon. He has interviewed three U.S. Presidents, and stood in the middle of five major hurricanes. He lives on the Gulf Coast in Daphne, Alabama. You can follow his work at jeffbarker.com or on twitter: [@JB_JeffBarker](https://twitter.com/JB_JeffBarker).

EMILY COSTA

CRAVINGS

After high school ended, during the hot, empty July when Jenny was retaking Algebra in order to officially graduate, we'd all meet at Taco Bell. Sometimes she would bring some of the other girls from summer school, or sometimes it'd be just me and Jenny and Nick, or sometimes Nick's skater friends would show up and try to get us to pay for their Crunchwraps. It gave some structure to the amoebalike days. We'd sit and talk and mess around until night came, which meant then we'd have to go back home to quiet, or else go do some other dumb thing, like drive to the 24-hour Walmart.

Jenny's boyfriend Ray, who played football with me at my old school, was a trainee at the Chase Avenue Taco Bell. One day he told us about the free food he got every shift, and Nick said "shit dude, I'm about to work here," and then the next week we stood in line and Nick was behind the counter taking our orders. Now he was getting free food for himself and for us. He'd hand us whatever he could take, the mystery food sagging hot in its bag, the wrappers wet with condensation. Usually when we divvied it up, I gave my portion to Jenny. She'd say something like, "don't do that just because I'm the girl, Patrick," or "I don't need special treatment." But that wasn't it exactly, so I just mumbled I wasn't that hungry, and asked Nick for those little cinnamon twists instead because they felt like they were made of air.

This one day it was just Jenny and me, and she told Nick she only wanted tacos and that she was buying her own, and he shrugged and tossed the bag he was about to hand her straight into the trash. It was a huge waste, but Nick didn't seem to care about people starving and the planet dying or at the very least corporate getting pissed, and anyway, like he'd say when justifying the heft of the mystery bags, if food was that cheap at Taco Bell, how much could it even cost to make? That was the week Jenny found out Ray, who had decided he'd rather roll blunts than burritos and quit to play Xbox full-time or some shit, was fucking someone else. Ray had a bunch of shitty

qualities, but he was my oldest friend, or sort-of-friend, and the only kid I still hung around with who knew me when I was fat. He'd never told Jenny or Nick or anyone else as far as I knew. Jenny wanted to stress-eat as many tacos as she could, so I figured that I'd be a good friend and match her taco for taco. I was in love with her, too, which is probably really why I did it.

"I can eat more than you," she said. "You're too skinny."

I didn't know how to take that, since I never thought I was skinny enough and immediately figured she was lying. Maybe it should've felt good, like I'd achieved something, but instead it felt like I was losing any chance I'd ever have with her.

"Then eat more than me," I said.

"What?"

"Let's have a contest." I reached for my wallet, for the money I'd saved mowing my neighbors' lawns, pulling weeds, any outdoor work that could keep me sweating, keep me moving.

She looked down, nodding slowly, the idea unfolding itself in front of her. "Okay, well, first we need to decide: crunchy or soft."

"Crunchy," I said. "Too much tortilla on the soft. Extra chewing for no reason."

"Ah, gotta have a good ratio," she said. "Smart."

"1400 SATs, baby," I said, although I'm not sure who I was kidding, since I was heading to community college in the fall. My guidance counselor had told me my college dreams weren't totally dead, although I wasn't sure I even had any; my parents' only request was that I land some kind of steady job, make enough to move out or pay rent. The guidance counselor said I'd be able to transfer to a "real college" after I finished at Naugatuck Valley, that I was smart, that I tested well, that she knew I had it in me to work hard in school, even though I'd barely skated by. It was nice, hearing that. But trying seemed pointless when odds were I'd just end up back here anyway. I could picture myself navigating a life of stagnancy, this city sucking me in, keeping me here. It didn't feel good or bad, just steady, which part of me felt fine with.

"How many should we start with?" Jenny asked.

"Ten," I said. "Each."

"Dude, what? That's like, a lot," Jenny said, hand on her purse strap.

"Oh." My jaw tensed. "You think? I mean, if --"

"C'mon, Jenny," Nick said. He hit the worn buttons with his thick index finger. "You got this. Beat his ass."

"Yeah," I said, taking a breath. "Plus, you know what? I'll just finish whatever you don't eat."

She smiled for the first time all day. I felt bad hovering around her when I knew she had it bad for Ray, and I felt doubly-bad when I imagined I could be the kind of person who comforted her only to eventually reveal myself to be just another guy like the ones she was used to, some horny asshole. It was like getting anything Fresco-style at Taco Bell; dump some bagged tomatoes and cilantro on it to make it seem healthy, but it's still Taco Bell. And I hated that. I figured after the contest, I'd tell her how I felt.

We waited for our food and tried to drop pennies in the acrylic neon bank raising money for some charity. We lost every time. Nick had his visor off, was folding and unfolding it in his hands, watching a couple of older guys make our food. The woman working the drive-thru gave him a look, told him to refill napkins. After we found a booth, Nick walked the food to us, a gesture against policy, but I knew he wanted to watch.

"Let's go, man," Jenny said, unwrapping her first. The twenty tacos were stacked neatly on two trays.

"We timing this, or what?" Nick asked.

"No," she said. "Just gotta...eat until we puke or something. Until I don't feel, maybe." She smiled exaggeratedly at me, unwrapped my first and set it on the tray.

"Jesus, Jenny, I'm sorry."

"Let's go," she said.

Although I was going to let her win, mainly because I was embarrassed to show the true damage I could do at a Taco Bell, I wondered idly if my stomach had shrunk through the months of denying it any kind of pleasure. I wondered if I'd get sick. So maybe we were evenly matched. In the past, it was easy, shoving sopping-wet taco shell after taco shell into my mouth, same as I used to do the first two years of high school, before I moved districts. Luckily Waterbury was big enough that the Crosby High kids didn't know the Kennedy High kids, and no one really knew the Wilby kids at all, so I could just reinvent myself. That summer before I switched, I worked hard. I stood in the mirror and told myself how much of a fat piece of shit I was, and pretty soon, the words carved into my thighs and belly. I ran around the park, around my neighborhood, sometimes until I'd puke.

I thought about this, and I slowed. Jenny was on her third. Nick was calling me a pussy, trying to get me to break. Jenny got to six before she started swearing through mouthfuls. I

shoveled spilled meat crumbles with my spork and caught up easily.

"Fuck," she said. "I'm done."

"No," I said, "C'mon, you can do this." I reached out and put my hand on the back of hers. She didn't flinch, didn't take it away at first. But then she did, quick, and said Ray's name. My back was to the door, but I could smell him, the weed mixed with Axe. The first thing I felt was sorry for Ray, even though he'd hurt Jenny, because he'd been nice to me. He'd been nice for years up until that point, up until he said, "Jenny why are you touching this fat fuck?"

"What?" she said, looking from me to Ray, back and forth, and he kept on me, hurling word after word at me. But I think I'd done it all to myself for so many years that it just didn't penetrate like it used to. And Jenny. She didn't get up. She watched me, locked eyes with me as Ray postured, as I shoved crumbs into my mouth, this time faster, faster. Nick was saying something, holding Ray back, and maybe even the manager woman was coming out from behind the counter. Jenny kept watching. She watched me like she believed in me, and that's all I needed.

I kept going. I stared at what Jenny had left on the table and then grabbed it, this half-eaten crunchy taco spilling its guts, I ate it, picked up the little worms of cheese and ate them, too, and then she laughed and the only words I heard were hers, cutting through Ray's diatribe, directed straight at him, and they were "fuck off you small-dicked piece of shit." I wasn't eating to beat Jenny anymore obviously, but I wasn't eating --eating like I used to --to flirt with her, to comfort her, to give her some small victory, or whatever the fuck I was doing. I was eating for myself. For the little racist Taco Bell dog up in heaven. Yo quiero, I played in my head, heard it on repeat, and all the things I wanted, really truly wanted, sped through my brain as Nick told me to slow down, that it didn't matter, that I'd won. But I want, I thought, for the first time in a long time, I want.

Emily Costa teaches freshmen at Southern Connecticut State University, where she received her MFA. Her writing can be found in *Hobart*, *Barrelhouse*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Memoir Mixtapes*, and elsewhere. You can follow her on twitter [@emilylauracosta](https://twitter.com/emilylauracosta).

CATHERINE MOORE

IN THE FOLD

The customer pointed to a burrito sitting in its opened wrapper. "I ordered the number five combo, and this is what I got." His brow furrowed.

*Frowning in anger.*² Traci, certain she had filled his order correctly, leaned on the counter to gain a better view of the food in question. The flaps had sprung open and its innards smeared across the tortilla. "A bean burrito?"

"Obviously," the man replied, "but that's not what I mean. Take a good look."

She pulled the food tray closer. It was a comical size—Mike had delivered the product minutes before with a flourish, announcing it to be "The Mother of All Burritos." Its weight busted out of the Taco Bell paper wrap, but otherwise had the appearance of the usual ubiquitous mass. No errant human hair. No signs of vermin.

"Look!" He repeated.

Cranky old geezer, Traci thought as she gave him a smile. The restaurant was slow due to the mid-afternoon hour, so she took her time inspecting the burrito. Wrapped in a fresh, floury tortilla, the ingredients oozed out into an irreparable mess. Inside, rice and cheese and beans blended together seamlessly. Several beans had escaped the cocoon and rested atop, velvety in texture and earthy-hued. A cup of guacamole on the side provided a pop of color.

"There, in the folds." He pointed again, but Traci didn't see any problem to speak of and her frozen smile waned.

"I'll get the manager," she said.

"Yes, you do that." He nodded as she walked toward the office putting distance between the two.

When she reemerged, an older woman in a button-down uniform led the younger girl. The

manager began speaking as soon as making eye contact, greeting the man, introducing herself as Rhonda, and launching into a canned speech of apology over customer service. She stopped when she saw the burrito. "Holy chalupa!"

"Burrito." The man corrected. "A holy burrito."

Rhonda blessed the moment with a sign of the cross. "It's a miracle."

"Precisely," he said.

"What are you talking about?" Traci whispered to her manager.

"The Blessed Virgin Mother Mary." Rhonda answered and pointed where the crease of its folded bottom edge began the vertical flap up the burrito. "Oh." She pressed her hand to her lips. Her eyes misted.

Traci studied it trying to see the pattern: in tortilla folds, in smears, in errant beans. Meaning escaped her in the natural randomness.

Mike came out of the food prep area to rubberneck the burrito in question. They shrugged at each other. Mike elbowed her and confided, "If it's not a Jesus-on-a-tortilla miracle, I ain't impressed."

"Do you mean you see it?" She murmured.

He grinned as he sauntered back to the kitchen.

"Traci, grab my phone from the office," Rhonda said. She directed an explanation to the customer. "We'll snap a photo of the burrito and contact Channel Seven."

Hand resting on the tray, Rhonda contemplated its contents. *A sign. For sure. And just in time -- my resignation letter still in my purse. How long had she waited for this sign? Six months? Months of listening to her father berate: dead-end job, a loser's living. And now a spotlight -- I'll be on every newscast in the area. If I can spread the word about the Blessed Virgin's image on this tortilla, then thousands from nearby communities would drop in for the holy vision. Maybe even people across the country will come to venerate. And they would all have to eat. Increased sales meant bonuses. Praise be!*

The man stood, arms folded, considering the situation. *Wish I'd let my son give me one of those fancy phones so I could take my own photograph; I'll ask this woman to email it to him. Maybe we could sell the culinary manifestation of Madonna on eBay? Wonder how much it would go for, a thousand dollars? Wait; is she pulling my burrito closer to herself?*

He grabbed the side of the food tray. "That's mine. Bought and paid for."

Rhonda tugged back. They both yanked causing the tray to become air borne. In their tug of war, it tilted and they heard the sorrowful slide of wax paper across plastic, followed by an unholy splat on the floor.

The adversaries looked at the mess splotched on tile—its filling far flung and its soft tortilla in a folded mound.

"Blast it all, woman," he shouted.

She groaned in disbelief.

Traci arrived with Rhonda's iPhone in-hand. "Well, crap." She kneeled for a closer view and shouted, "Oh, oh, I see it now." She first bowed her head, then began snapping photos.

Catherine Moore is an author and a poet. Her work appears in Tahoma Literary Review, Southampton Review, Mid-American Review, Broad River Review and in various anthologies. Her honors include the Yemassee Fiction Prize, the Southeast Review's Poetry Prize, as well as Pushcart, Best of the Net, and VERA Award nominations. Her fiction has shortlisted in several competitions and was selected for inclusion in the juried **BEST SMALL FICTIONS**. Her upcoming collection of lyrical pieces in the voices of bog bodies is forthcoming from Unsolicited Press.

DW BECKNAR

GOODBYE SURFING, HELLO TACO BELL: A BRIEF ORAL HISTORY OF THE BEACH BOYS LOST-EST RECORD

There's not a whole lot of evidence left anymore of what Brian Wilson had planned after Pet Sounds in 1966. A few pages in yellowed teenybopper magazines, a few secondhand interviews of people who say they were there, claim they provided Brian with Baja Sauce or a spork, a few autographed Grilled Stuft Burritos wrappers (many claim forged by Rick Henn of the Sunrays) and the ailing memories of the principles.

But what we do know is that for perhaps, one short weekend in the summer of 1966, Brian's next magnum opus was to be called "Taco Belladonna," a love letter to the growing taco chain, Taco Bell.

"Brian was sitting at the piano in the tent, surrounded by piles of dog poo and saying 'What if we just drove down to San Bernadino to Taco Bell and ordered a taco for every single person in the world? And we would really bring joy and a smile to this whole world, right?' That's what Brian was all about, Meximelts and smiling. He's a true dumb angel, ya know." - David Anderle, Cheetah Magazine, 1968

"Brian had us all in the bottom of the pool working on new lyrics to Vegetables based on this new fast food place that opened in the Valley. It was insane, I didn't even eat meat, Mike was on a juice diet and he wanted us singing about Fire sauce in 5-part harmony." - Al Jardine

"Now, why do YOU want to ask ME about that? I told Brian that we needed to write about Tippy's

Taco. The sunken burrito they offered was the future and that company was poised to take over the country." - Mike Love

"Whatsa matta, boy? Get a little Bell Beefer to the brain and you have delusions of grandeur? YOU GOTSA SYNCOPATE IT!" - Murray Wilson, from booted session tapes for the yet unreleased "Taco Essence."

"I don't know, I wasn't around much, Charles Manson bought me a bean burrito and I loaned him my car that month." - Dennis Wilson

"I came in and they paid me union scale to say 'beans and rice' over and over for ninety minutes. I didn't care, it was more fun than working with Phil Spector on his Bob's Big Boy concept record."
- Hal Blaine, Wrecking Crew drummer.

"Tacos are true spirit. That and Diet Mountain Dew. And maybe a mini Quesadilla. Yeah, that's God's voice." - Carl Wilson.

"There's nothing left. I destroyed all of the tapes, I ate two Nachos Bellgrandes and got scared, like really scared, like I thought my intestines would fall out. I told the Boys we could carry on, and Carl cried because I told him I wouldn't give him a ride to Taco Bell at one A.M. anymore for Cinna-Twists." - Brian Wilson.

Sadly, Brian would never return to his much anticipated (for two days) record about the future Yum Brands chain.

DW Becknar lives in the woods behind the Honey Bee Diner in opiate addicted and tranquil Glen Burnie, Maryland. He enjoys anything but kayaking and Billy Joel records. He has been a Taco Bell fan longer than the Beach Boys, but they are his favorite California exports.

NATASHA CABOT

A TASTE DEFERRED

"We no longer sell the Chili Cheese Burrito," said the disembodied voice with a southern twang, crackling from the large menu board at the drive-thru.

"Well, I'm Canadian. They're still sold there," I replied, disdain dripping from every syllable.

"We no longer sell the Chili Cheese Burrito," the damned voice repeated. "Would you like something else?"

I stared at the menu, trying to find a suitable substitute for my Chili Cheese Burrito craving; alas, I could find none. I wanted the zest of the spicy beef with dashes of cumin coating my tongue. I wanted to feel the clogging of my arteries as the cheese strained to make its way down my gullet. Yet, here, now, I only had disappointment. As usual. Such is the story of my life. One large disappointment. The fact that the Chili Cheese Burrito had been discontinued in the United States only reminded me of the futility of my life.

"I'll take two hard shell tacos and two soft shell tacos," I replied mournfully. My stomach rumbled out a curse, and I looked down at it.

"I'm sorry, Seamus," I said. I'd named my stomach Seamus years ago due to its fury when encountering spicy foods. I fooled myself into pretending that Seamus's rumbling was one of sadness even though, deep down, I knew it was pleased. I'd tortured Seamus for years with innumerable Chili Cheese Burritos, only to have my stomach respond with immense amounts of gas and a strange burning sensation which spewed up my esophagus and scorched the back of my throat - my own personal Krakatoa.

A horn honked behind me, and I felt a river of guilt course through my veins. I'm preventing someone from ordering their beloved Taco Bell. I'm almost as bad as the idiot who decided to discontinue Chili Cheese Burritos in the United States. I gave a small, apologetic wave, slowly pulling up to the window.

A teenager with a pimple in the middle of his forehead handed me the bag containing food for which I'd settled. He didn't care about my inner turmoil; he gave me my food with a lackluster, "thanks for coming to Taco Bell," and sent me on my way.

The smell of the beef—though not the essence I truly wanted—wafted within my rental car. I pulled into an adjoining parking lot and watched as Americans strolled in and out of the store. Are they sad that Chili Cheese Burritos aren't offered any more? Do they even remember them? I took one soft-shelled taco out of the bag, undressing it, and stuffed it into my mouth. I looked into the rear-view mirror, my green eyes staring back at me. Don't worry, I told myself. You'll be back in Canada next week. And then you can eat all the Chili Cheese Burritos that your maple-soaked heart desires.

*Natasha Cabot is a Halifax-based Canadian writer. Her work has appeared in numerous literary journals including *Thrice Fiction Magazine*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, and *Page & Spine*. She recently completed work on her first novel, *Patriotland*.*

REED SCHMITZ

THE TACO BELL AT THE END OF THE WORLD

The clock struck midnight as J. Robert Oppenheimer walked into the last pure Taco Bell in the world. Leo, who sat across the lobby, back to the wall, watched him come in. She wondered why anyone would bother wearing a suit like that in the pouring rain.

The restaurant itself hadn't changed since the late 1990s. Its white walls were adorned with godawful paintings of cowboys roping bulls from high atop their steeds. Powdery blue paint wrapped itself around the room. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, crackling over the omnipresent fuzz of a speaker creaking out old country songs. It was the diner you read about in strange books or saw in old movies about people running from their past. But this wasn't a diner, and it wasn't a story. It was the Taco Bell at the corner of Ottawa and Iroquois. It was Thursday night and J. Robert Oppenheimer had just walked in.

It appeared he had run to the restaurant, like a man about to miss a train. His desperate eyes scanned the lobby, eventually landing on Leo. He gave her a significant look before walking over to her table. "Where am I?" asked J. Robert Oppenheimer, his accent betraying his east coast heritage. "Where is this?"

Leo chewed. "Taco Bell," she replied dryly.

J. Robert Oppenheimer looked Leo up and down. "This is Taco Bell?"

Leo stared at him. "Yeah. Sign's right there," she said, pointing out the window to the neon sign above. J. Robert Oppenheimer gazed upon it with awe, then nodded.

"I'll be right back. If that's okay."

Leo gave him a quick glance as if to say, "it's your life, man."

Leo watched J. Robert Oppenheimer order five tacos and a Coca-Cola. He appeared mildly upset when he discovered that Taco Bell only offered Pepsi-Co products, but accepted the

change without protest. He returned to Leo, eyes wrapped in a haze of anxious nausea, and sat down across from her. "It's alright if I sit here?" he asked. Leo nodded.

"Thank you," J. Robert Oppenheimer said. He unwrapped a taco and began to eat it quietly.

Leo chortled to herself. "You're going to eat it dry?"

J. Robert Oppenheimer stared at her blankly. "What else can I do?"

Leo slid two packets of Fire sauce across the table to him. "You can Live Más," she replied. J. Robert Oppenheimer eyed her suspiciously, then opened one of the packets. He spread the sauce across his taco and took a bite. His face twisted.

"It tastes like nothing," he said and ate ravenously, as if it were the last food he'd ever eat. Leo observed him, amused, and wondered if it was. "Let me tell you a secret," she said. "There's this drink called Baja Blast. It's made to be eaten with the food here. Literally. Scientists like, made it that way. It's the best. You've gotta try it."

J. Robert Oppenheimer blinked. "Scientists 'made it'?"

Leo waved her hands dismissively. "Something like that. Point is, it's good. Try it."

J. Robert Oppenheimer kept his eyes trained on Leo before rising from his seat. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Leo."

"Hello, Leo. I'm Julius."

"Nice to meet you, Julius," Leo said, sticking out her hand. J. Robert Oppenheimer shook it, then filled his cup with Baja Blast.

He sat back in his seat, eyeing his drink with well-earned reluctance. "It's green," he said. "Like a lake."

"Yeah," Leo replied. "But it's good. It's better than Mountain Dew, which just looks like piss anyway."

J. Robert Oppenheimer took a hesitant sip. His eyes lit up. He shrugged. "Not bad."

They ate in silence for several minutes, the only sound the blasted speakers above crooning old doo-wop hits and forgotten country singles. Occasional bouts of profanity from the kitchen filled the air with trace amounts of humanity. Rain streaked down the windows until the inhabitants of the restaurant couldn't reasonably be sure that there was even a world beyond the walls of the fast-casual establishment. There was only the Taco Bell, and those stuck inside it. Perhaps that was

how it had to be.

"What brings you up here?" Leo eventually asked. She'd been wondering since J. Robert Oppenheimer walked in in his neatly pressed grey suit, east coast accent dripping with money and privilege.

"I don't know," J. Robert Oppenheimer replied. "I had a nightmare. Flashes of light and shrieking. Unending shrieking. Perhaps my own. It was hard to say. And when I awoke, there was a man standing at the foot of my bed. His face was obscured, but he wore a cloak like starlight and had eyes like fire. He told me to come here and order the chalupa supreme."

"That's weird," Leo replied. "The chalupa supreme isn't even that good."

"Anyway, after that, I decided to take a walk to clear my head and--" he looked at Leo significantly. "I found myself here. Wherever here is." He nodded out the window. "We don't often get rain in New Mexico, not like this."

"You're from New Mexico?" Leo asked, bits of ground beef dropping to the tray beneath her chin. "You walked here?"

J. Robert Oppenheimer nodded. "And ran. Where am I now?"

"Michigan," Leo said. "Northern Michigan. Lake Haven."

J. Robert Oppenheimer stared at Leo. "What's Lake Haven?"

"Oh, Christ," Leo grumbled. "Are you okay?"

"I feel fine," J. Robert Oppenheimer said, raising his arms as if demonstrating his physical acuteness, "I'm just lost."

"Uh, yeah, Jesus," Leo sighed. "How the hell did you get here?"

J. Robert Oppenheimer gnawed on a fingernail, then stretched back in his chair, as if shifting a weight from his back. "Sometimes, I believe, even if it's typically obtuse and malignant, the universe gives us a gift. A mercy. I believe it has given a gift to me now"

"What's the gift?" Leo asked.

"I've been sent to hell," J. Robert Oppenheimer said, and took a sip from his Baja Blast.

"Oh," Leo said. "Why is that?"

J. Robert Oppenheimer sighed. "I have done something terrible, Leo. I have knowingly created something malevolent and evil. The cat is out of the bag, as they say, and I'm the one who let it out. And I don't think I can put it back in."

"Cat's got claws," Leo said.

"What?"

"Cat's," Leo said, holding up her curled fingers, "got claws."

J. Robert Oppenheimer nodded and looked out the window, at the passing cars and the pouring rain. "I only wonder if the universe might sense a change coming, a catastrophic, unknowable change, and do what it could to remove an integer from the equation. Maybe this is where they send us when they want us gone."

Leo shook her head. "I doubt it. This is Taco Bell. Taco Bell can't be hell. What is a Taco Bell if not a Taco Home?"

J. Robert Oppenheimer stared at his companion. He silently wondered to himself what it was like to be this fabulously unconcerned with the world. "Do you happen to have the date?"

Leo checked her phone. "July 14, 2018."

J. Robert Oppenheimer put a hand to his temple. "God help me," he mumbled.

"Maybe He is," Leo said. "Or She. Whatever you want. They. I like 'they' a lot. Look, man, here's the thing: if anything, I'd say Taco Bell is the way station before you get to hell. It's where you go to think on your sins before the eternal torment and suffering can begin. It's where you go to repent and ask forgiveness."

J. Robert Oppenheimer gave Leo a significant look. "I've made something that could kill thousands in an instant," he said, snapping his fingers.

Leo shrugged. "Oh. Well. Fuck you, then. The universe will kick your ass for it later. But until then, you've got tacos and Baja Blast and shit. Take a breath."

J. Robert Oppenheimer pursed his lips. "I don't know if I can breathe with this weight on my chest."

"Then don't. Have a taco." She slid a soft taco across the table to J. Robert Oppenheimer, who stared at it idly. "Besides," Leo grumbled. "If the universe wants us to pay a price, who are we to say no? Gotta take responsibility. Maybe we're all just born to carry the weight. 'Save the hammer for the man' and all that."

"I think I'm the man," J. Robert Oppenheimer said grimly.

"Well, the hammer will come," Leo said. "So, enjoy the tacos now."

J. Robert Oppenheimer opened his mouth as if to speak but, unable to find the words, he reached across the table and took a taco instead.

Reed Schnitz was born and raised in central Michigan, but he never let that stop him. He studied film and English at Central Michigan University and in his spare time enjoys playing the banjolele and listening to doom metal.

MARLA EIZIK

THE MEATAMORPHOSIS

Caleb Hupa woke one morning from an ugly nightmare to find himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic Chalupa. He looked down at his greasy body lying in bed and noted the crispy hard taco shell, the fried tortilla where his torso used to be. His arms, if you could call them that, were now simply strips of iceberg lettuce, and his legs were completely absent, his newly transitioned body was one that didn't seem to have a use for legs, the bulk of his movement to be done by his new crunchy stump. He wondered idly how he would use the bathroom. He waited and realized he did not need to go to the bathroom. This day was strange.

Could this be a dream? he wondered. He looked about his room, it was the same room as ever: posters of the late, great Gidget the Taco Bell dog plastered across the walls, bookshelves full of books about the rise and reign of Taco Bell, biographies of the great founder R.M. Tostito, a desk strewn with plans of what will surely be his life's greatest accomplishment: a triple decker Chalupa-quesadilla hybrid triumph. Maybe the plans were getting to him. He had been up till 3am hunched over his paper, redoing the calculations again, and again, and again. It had to be perfect. No, the same old room, the same old bed and walls and windows. Only Caleb was different.

He glanced at the alarm clock next to his bedside, his eyes feeling as though they were encrusted in sand. 7:15, meaning he was already running late to his job, a top junior engineer position at one of the best firms downtown. He had risen from worst junior to bottom junior to okay junior to top junior and he had done it in only four years. The cold nacho cheese of his life was pouring slowly from the can of promise, but it was coming, and soon it would take its place under the coiled warming lights of success. He would be made a full-time employee soon. He sighed heavily. If only his body wasn't found on the Value Menu.

Using his spindly arms, he heaved his body out of the bed, leaning unsteadily against the bed, unsure of the structural integrity of the bottom half of his shell. Would it hold his weight? He felt it and tested it incrementally, releasing the pressure of his arms pushing against the bed,

allowing his full weight to rest on his bottom half. It held. "Of course," he muttered out loud. "The chewy texture of the Chalupa shell means extra holes left for air in the dough, allowing for extra cushion and bounce." Caleb raised his head. "I can hear myself," he cried. "I can talk!" He raised his lettuce arms to where he thought his face might be. "The mirror," he whispered, and his eyes darted to the desk. He moved as quickly as he dared, the shell rubbing a dark stain into the carpet. He made it to the desk and raised his eyes to the mirror above it. He gasped. There was a giant Chalupa before him, as he feared and suspected. His beady black eyes blinked out from within a bed of lettuce, tomato, sour cream, and cheese, his once-ordinary chest and stomach now a giant shell of deep-fried tortilla, burnt in spots and glazed in a dull grease. He once hated his body. He thought he looked weak, and boring, and his skin covered in too much acne, and he watched all the women in the office flirt with the buff Samuel Sanderson. They were always touching his chest lightly and laughing. They never touched Caleb. And surely now they wouldn't even look at him. How he wished for his normal body once again! Caleb began to weep at his horrid reflection, and as the tears rolled from his open canyon of filling down to his hard-shell exterior, he watched in amazement as what fell from his eyes was... "hot sauce," he whispered, sniffling. He lifted his finger to the red tear rolling down his fried chest and brought it to his tongue. "Diablo sauce, to be exact." He reached for a brown napkin with the words "Live Mas" stamped on the front and wiped the condiment dripping down his body.

There was a knock at the door. He stopped still, holding his breath and wishing he had heard wrong, it was something else, his roommate was surely still asleep. It came again, knock-knock-knock, and he heard her voice "Caleb, your ride is here! Are you awake?"

"Candace!" he hollered, and his voice sounded strained and hoarse. "I'll be right there."

"Why do you sound so weird?" she asked through the door. "Were you jerking off again? Oh God, I really gotta learn to not bother you during your special time. And you need to find a new hobby."

"Candace! Just...come back in a second." Caleb pulled away from the mirror and searched his room for something, anything, that would cover this up. He spotted an over-sized t-shirt he won at a taco eating contest once, sticking out of his drawer. Candace jiggled the doorknob. It would have to do. "Candace, just one second, jeez!" he hollered, and grabbed the shirt, struggling to pull it over his frame. His arms had such poor muscle strength. Were there even muscles? How did they move, did they have tendons? He whimpered as he watched himself struggle in the mirror. "Why

is this happening to me? What did I do?" The t-shirt rubbed and stretched across the shell, sticking to the sour cream and cheese. He pulled the shirt down to keep his eyes and mouth clear, and the scent of fried tortilla wafted up to where his nose should be. His stomach growled. He looked at his eyes in the mirror, realization and horror making them wide. He had a stomach. He would need to eat soon. And he was hungry for himself.

A loud slam against the door jolted him from his dark thoughts. "Caleb!" a male voice shouted through the wood. "What are you doing in there?"

"Samuel?" Caleb cried back in astonishment. "Why are you in my house?"

"We have to go. We're late! What are you doing in there?" The doorknob jiggled again.

"One second," Caleb muttered, and he looked one last time in the mirror. His giant oblong body, his tiny eyes almost imperceptible next to diced tomatoes and globs of sour cream. The t-shirt barely covered what his body had become, the grease already making the cotton go nearly translucent, revealing a hint of tortilla beneath. "Might as well face the mariachi music," he said, and waddled to the door, halting the pounding coming from the other side. He turned the lock, opened the door, and his life changed.

Candace took one look at him and collapsed in shock. She could barely open her eyes and when she did, the blood drained completely from her face. "What are you? Where's Caleb?" she gasped.

"I am Caleb," he replied. "I don't know what's happening, and I don't know what I'll do next, but this is just going to have to work for now."

Samuel's eyes bugged at Caleb in horror. "Is that you in there, Caleb? Tell this monster to let you out!"

Caleb rubbed his lettuce against his eyes. "I don't know what to tell you, man, but you can tell our boss to expect a very different Caleb in the office today. I guess lunch is on me!" He forced a chuckle as Candace gaped at him from the floor.

"There's no way you're going into work today," said Samuel darkly. "There's no way. You look insane. Your work isn't fit to handle this. You'll be ruined."

Caleb started. "What is that supposed to mean?" He took a step towards Samuel. "I've been the top junior for way longer than you have!"

"Exactly," Sanderson sneered. "I'm actually making a difference in this company. I'm making a name for myself." He jabbed Caleb in the shell, making a sharp snap sound. "You're just

a giant taco, a **FREAK.**"

Caleb felt the rush of heat fill his entire body and wondered if that sensation was actually a burst reservoir of hot sauce flooding his system. "I am not a taco," he seethed, raising his lettuce fist. "I am a **CHALUPA!**"

Caleb pushed Sanderson against a wall, pummeling him with his tiny fists, only to realize Sanderson was screaming in terror, not in pain. He was actually afraid of him. The absurdity of this struck Caleb as so hilarious, he couldn't stop laughing. The horrid sound came from within his pool of sour cream and cheese, garbling up and making him laugh even harder, as Candace huddled on the floor and covered her ears.

Sanderson ran. Caleb chased him. It took him too long to make it down the stairs, but thankfully Sanderson tripped and fell, which bought him some time. He was nearly on him when Sanderson finally pulled himself up and out the front door, with Caleb screaming at his heels. But in the sharp light of morning, it all wasn't so funny anymore. Sanderson was weeping in horror, Caleb's neighbors were gathering, pointing at him and hollering, screeching, "What is it? What is it?" So many voices surrounded him, all of them angry, and scared, and was that someone saying, "get him!"? He didn't know, but he had to get out of there, and when he turned to head back inside, everything went dark.

He woke up in his bed, his head rolling, so dizzy he felt he could float to the ceiling. He brought his lettuce fingers to his head, and winced. When he pulled his lettuce away, Lava sauce showed up bright red against the green. He lifted his body and groaned. His shell was split nearly in two, the crispy top layer cracking in a spiderweb across his body, but as he touched his torso, he sighed with relief. The foundation was still there. The integrity of the shell was sound. "Thank god for that chewy texture," he breathed, and fell back asleep.

That day no one came to his room. He called for Candace, his one hope. She was just in shock right now. She was his friend. She would come to his aid. He called and called, but she never came. He tried to lift his body, but always fell back against the pillow in pain. Halfway through the second day, he found he was able to prop himself up just enough to see out the window to the front yard. People were gathered there, neighbors talking to Candace. Sanderson stood at her side, rubbing her back. "Candace!" Caleb squawked. It looked like she lifted her head. "Candace! Candace, please! I just need some water! Some food! Candace!" He screamed with all his might, and she even glanced towards the window, but Sanderson turned and pulled her to him,

and she collapsed against his chest, sobbing, as Caleb cried along with her. "No!" he yelled, "no! Candace, no! I'm still here!" She touched Sanderson's chest, and Caleb knew in that moment, he was a goner.

Another day inched by. His mouth completely bereft of any moisture, his stomach growling constantly, but still unable to pull himself out of bed without wrenching pain. Caleb began to panic. "How long will I be here?" he muttered to himself. "How long will I be this?" He stared at his salty body. "What did I do to deserve this?" He watched the sweat ball up and slide down his chest as little pools of grease, heating the outer shell, and the warm scent made him even hungrier. "I have to calm down," he said. "I have to stay calm and cool, and think about something other than food. I can outsmart this." He tried to think about anything else. He tried to think about Candace. That usually did the trick. Or engineering, that worked sometimes too. His plans, he could still finish his plans, just because he was most likely fired from his work and possibly bed-ridden for the foreseeable future didn't mean his life was over. His breathing got heavier, his mouth got drier, his whimpers turned to sobs and for a while Caleb Hupa felt very sorry for himself, while the shell of his body warmed from within, the ground beef at his base sent out a perfume that travelled through his insides of cheese and hot sauce, reaching his nose with such a heavenly scent that it turned his stomach into a wave of cramps.

"I can't take it anymore!" he screamed. "I can't take this life, this body! I won't lose in this bed! I will win!" His eyes blazed, his mouth turned into a grimace of anguish, he pulled off the covers with all his might and stared at the traverse of his body, baking before him, tempting him. "One little bite!" he cried, and thus sealed his fate. His lettuce arms reached for where his toes would be, the lowest part of his body, the chewy Chalupa shell. He grabbed at that shell, and pulled, and ripped, and a sizeable chunk of his own taco flesh came with it, and he marveled at the sight. It had hardly hurt at all, in fact, he had felt nothing! What a strange miracle. He brought it to his mouth, hidden in a swath of tomatoes, and chewed and rejoiced. It was too good. The salty, dense dough, fried to perfection, the perfect amount of crispy and chewy, it was heaven. He looked closely at his toe shell. Warm ground beef fell from the hole he created and began to stain the bedsheets. "Well, we can't have that, now can we," said Caleb, and he scooped at the beef with a finger, and brought it to his tongue. He closed his eyes. Hot salty meaty goodness spread throughout his mouth and set his synapses firing. His eyes snapped open. He scooped more of the beef, then more, pawing at the bottom half of his shell and bringing his insides to his mouth,

sucking his fingers clean. He gasped. "I have to stop this," he said, staring at the growing hole at his feet. "This is too much." His stomach growled in protest. He groaned, and set to the shell, ripping another chunk and scraping it full-on in the warm beef pool. He grabbed another chunk and raised his lettuce arm to dip it into the sour cream and cheese about his head and shoulders.

The taste was otherworldly, the hearty protein of the beef, the tang of the sour cream, the zip of hot sauce, the refreshing crunch of the iceberg. He took bite after bite, stuffing his face with his own body, feeling nothing but the exhilaration of a perfect meal, a perfect Fourth Meal, after going so long without a morsel. He groaned in happiness, each bite one of exquisite balance and simplicity. "It's perfect," he cried out loud, to no one. "God's greatest creation!" He ate and ate, his stomach filling and emptying at the same time, up to his shoulders, then the lettuce of his arms, then whatever his mouth could reach. The light began to dim in the room. "Is it evening already?" he croaked, his voice thin. He licked at the spare tomato near his cheek, the dollop of sour cream he could still reach. He ripped at the remaining shell and was startled that he could feel that bite. The room grew dimmer still. He chewed, his eyes closed, and sighed heavily. "I wish I could've shared myself with the world." He squinted at the plans on his desk, still waiting for him. "Maybe someday." He took one last bite, taking care to reach the shell, beef, cheese, sour cream, and tomatoes in one. "Yo quiero Taco Bell," he whispered. The light was gone completely. It was the best Chalupa Caleb Hupa had ever tasted.

Marla Eizik creates next to a park in Portland, OR that an old man once told her was full of fairies. She works daily toward getting published and thrives in her day job as an executive assistant at Image Comics.

POETRY

JOSH OLSEN

THE SHREDDED CHICKEN QUESARITO

so much depends
upon

a shredded chicken
quesarito

served with baja
blast

beside the dollar
general

Josh Olsen is a librarian in Flint, Michigan. He is the author of two books, *Six Months* (2011) and *Such a Good Boy* (2014), and he is the co-creator of Gimmick Press.

ROSIE ACCOLA

I'VE BEEN/ AFRAID OF CHANGING/ SO I CRIED/ INTO A CHEESY GORDITA CRUNCH

with love to both Stevie Nicks and the Dixie Chicks

I.

With little to no provocation, I will lay my body down at the altar
of sobbing profusely at one's minimum wage, vaguely artsy job.

On this day, I lock the handicap stall door -- scratched, green and fading somewhere between split pea and puke green. I sink down onto the grimy, tile floor.

My breath does little flips like a professional swimmer getting ready to take another lap as I try to
remember to breathe.

II.

Is the absence of effort analogous with acceptance?

When I tear into a crunch wrap supreme, sub meat for beans, I am comforted by the feeling of
non-food:

soft and warm, with a hint of nacho cheese, maybe a mealy tomato. The tostada shell hints at my
potential for growth, consuming solid foods at an appropriate time.

The crunch wrap knows nothing of my failures or desires.

There is no promise of productivity or health (salads).

No shame that must be tamped down, the top layer of garbage in an already-full bag (ice cream when tipsy that I forgot about halfway through.)

The crunch wrap takes me as I am;
even the name connotes protection -- a solid layer between the self and the outside world.

Rosie Accola is a zine-maker, editor, and poet who splits her time between Michigan and Chicago.

Her first full-length collection *Referential Body* is out now via Ghost City Press.

[<https://ghostcitypress.com/books/referential-body>] You can follow her on Instagram @rosieaccola

DEREK BERRY

AUBADE WITH BAJA BLAST SPIKED WITH GIN

in the morning, the sunlight oozes
thin between blind slats like cheese
from the edges of a quesadilla.

i wake booze-bamboozled,
blood still sluggish with last night's
clumsy desire. how easy
to mistake refried
dreams for stomach trouble. to
territory the space between skin
into something other than
fear. somehow,

you still
here—i admit
last night may have benefited
if i had not scarfed taco bell
before we made love, but listen,
i didn't know you'd want to top.
i didn't know you'd want to mouth
my neck. let me tell you
about loneliness. it is
a drive-through

window & not enough
change. i am so clueless,

my brief darling. it is possible
to be gorgeous & still regret
everything listen—i didn't
plan to drink so much, didn't
anticipate—lurch!
gut plummet!
the exhausted gasp spilling everything:

bless the tumult of spew, holy sphincter
made uninhabitable by the passage of
doritos-shell tacos one hour later. do you
know what shames
i have evacuated for you,
tonight? do you know the contours
of the belly, how it feels better
to eat nothing at all, let my body
become a hollow bell singing?
i know, i know, you refused
even the morsel of a nacho fry,
sudden ascetic. you
denied yourself
every pleasure except
my mouth.

Derek Berry is the author of the novel "Heathens & Liars of Lickskillet County" (PRA, 2016). They are the founder of the literary non-profit The Unspoken Word, host of the

GLOSSOLALIA podcast, & poet-in-residence at the East Aiken School of the Arts. Their recent work has appeared in Beloit Poetry Journal, The Blue Mountain Review, Yemassee, Gigantic Sequins, Lackadaisy, Emrys, BOAAT, & elsewhere. They live in Aiken, South Carolina where they work at a Cold War Historic Curation Facility.

BROOKE KOLCOW

BLACKOUT POEMS



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If you're looking for a delicious breakfast in your area, Taco Bell® has got you covered! Come inside or visit drive-thru at your local Taco Bell® restaurant. Hungry for more delicious options? Make sure to check out Mexican inspired foods including our iconic burritos, quesadillas, and tacos.

Find breakfast near you at Taco Bell® today!

Prices and items may vary at participating locations and with substitutions. Tax Extra.



TACO BELL® CRAVINGS VALUE MENU

ORDER YOUR FAVORITE TACO BELL® CRAVINGS
ONLINE OR VISIT US AT THE TACO BELL® LOCATION
NEAREST YOU

Do you have a craving for Mexican inspired food and have a dollar in your pocket? If that's the case, do we have a menu for you! At Taco Bell®, you can find a wide variety of your favorite menu items for only one dollar. With our completely customizable Taco Bell® Dollar Cravings Menu, you can create the ultimate meal for you and your friends with all of your favorite sauces and add-ons.

Got \$1? Well, now you have an entire three course meal. Start your meal off with an appetizer like the Spicy Tostada or Triple Layer Nachos. For the main dish, give the iconic Beefy Fritos® Burrito a try or enjoy the Beefy Mini Quesadilla. Top off your meal with a mouth-watering, baked dessert from the Taco Bell® Dollar Cravings menu such as Cinnamon Twist or a Caramel Apple Empanada. Order from the Taco Bell® Dollar Cravings menu online and skip the line!

Prices and items may vary at participating locations and with substitutions. Tax Extra.



TACO BELL® VEGETARIAN MENU

ORDER YOUR FAVORITE VEGETARIAN DISHES ONLINE OR VISIT THE TACO BELL® LOCATION NEAR YOU

No Meat? No Problem! Vegetarians **rejoice** - Taco Bell®'s Vegetarian Menu is certified by the American Vegetarian Association (AVA) and includes vegetarian options that **will satisfy all** your cravings.

From the [Power Menu Bowl-Veggie](#) to [class - Cheese Quesadillas](#), get your taste buds **ready** for ultimate feasting. For the burrito **lovers**, our selection of vegetarian burritos include the [7-Layer Burrito](#), [Power Menu Burrito-Veggie](#), [Bean Burritos](#) and more or you **can try** any of our delicious vegetarian sides.

Our vegetarian selection includes 13 menu items that are totally customizable with a variety of sauces, delicious upgrades, and more popular add-ons. Taco Bell®'s Mexican-inspired vegetarian menu includes options with vegan refried beans or black beans, so that you can **still get** your protein fix.

Once you've **found** your favorite vegetarian orders, you can create an account on [tacobell.com](#) or our mobile app or **log in and save** your personalized orders for easier **ordering** next time.

Visit a **Taco Bell®** location near you for delicious vegetarian options or customize your order online and **skip** our line **inside**.



ORDER TACOS NEAR YOU

ORDER TACOS ONLINE OR VISIT THE TACO BELL® LOCATION NEAREST YOU

Think you can dream up the best taco? With Taco Bell®'s completely customizable taco menu, the options are nearly endless!

At your nearby Taco Bell® restaurant you can find all of your favorite Mexican inspired tacos, from classic crunchy tacos and steak tacos to you new favorites like the Double Decker® Taco Supreme®, Chalupa Supreme, and Flaky Doritos® Locos Tacos. Customize any of our tacos with a variety of sauces and add-ons to create the ultimate taco for you and your friends. With breakfast options at select locations to late night, Taco Bell® serves made-to-order and customizable tacos so you can satisfy your taco craving through out the day.

If you're looking for a delicious taco in your area, Taco Bell® is nearby! So come inside or visit our drive-thru at the location near you. Looking for other options? Make sure to check out our other Mexican inspired foods including our Iconic burritos, quesadillas, and nachos. Don't forget, many of our locations open bright and early for breakfast. Make sure to visit our locations locator to find the Taco Bell® breakfast closest to you.

Prices and items may vary at participating locations and with substitutions. Tax Extra.

Brooke Kolcow always orders the number 7 with a crunchy taco. Their work has appeared in *Hoot Review*, *The Southampton Review*, and the anthology *An Unlikely Companion*. Ms. Kolcow currently volunteers with teen writers at the Just Buffalo Writing Center. [@bkolcow](https://www.instagram.com/bkolcow)

JC REILLY

GHAZALING DOWN THE MENU

The bored drive-through guy, a teenager, drones our choices:
two Diet Pepsis, two dozen Chalupas. We own our choices.

As a winter rain pelts the windows, we dispute philosophy over Veggie
Power Menu Bowls. What is truly known but our choices?

We can still order eight items total for under ten bucks, if we try--
the dollar-ish Cravings menu has really grown our choices.

In secret we suck Mild Sauce from packets we hoard after each visit;
peppers and vinegar zing our tongues--no one to chaperone our choices.

At two a.m., after too many Jager shots, and too much D&D, we sneak
out to inhale trays of Nachos BellGrande--then bemoan our choices.

A crunchy Taco Supreme disintegrates in my hands, cascades
of sour cream on your shirt--your sudden laugh condones our choices.

Spicy tostadas, like love, need a strong foundation: tomatoes, lettuce,
cheese, beans--the two of us, never alone, happy in our choices.

Carve our epitaph: "Here lie JC & Chris, buried with Beefy Fritos burritos
so we can gorge in the underworld." Our headstones, our choices.

TACO BELL ROMANCE

I wouldn't choose the Bell for our first date,
when I am dressed all fancy-chic, like a star,
but then, you are always running late.

We'd never reach the theatre by eight,
if we stopped, as planned, at the hotel bar.
Really? The Bell? For our official first date?

(Tacos and nachos, while tasty, do seem to hate
my clothes, spilling Fire Sauce like a scar
across my chest.) You are always running late,

to class, to work, to meetings--it's our fate
tonight as well--45 minutes behind: on par.

I wouldn't choose the Bell for our first date,

but a border run does hike my heart rate--
as do you, smiling, on your third burrito so far
(and counting). So, you are always running late:

that's not the worst sin in a budding soul mate.
Plus this'll make a good chapter in my memoir.
I wouldn't choose the Bell for our first date,
but then, is love truly ever running late?

GRAD SCHOOL DAYS

I've learned to like eating packets of sauce.

In random kitchen drawers I keep my stash
for such times as when I'm low on cash
and they a sleeve of saltines gloss.

Don't be too horrified there, hoss--
when you're poor, it's a meal--in a flash.

Call me what you will, call me white trash--
but a month is sometimes hard to cross

when your campus job cuts down your hours
and all your bills come suddenly due
and your few last coins must feed your cat (Chubu).

Over "dinner," how I dream of tacos I'll devour
when payday comes round--a welcome to-do--
and gladly will I dine at Taco Bell anew.

*for Chubby Butt
(who also liked TB sauce packets)*

JC Reilly's favorite menu item, besides copious packets of Mild Sauce, is a Spicy Potato Soft Taco. Follow her on Twitter (@aishatonu), Instagram (@jc.reilly), or her blog (jcreilly.com)

ADRIAN SLONAKER

SEVEN LAYERS OF SATISFACTION

Sun-speckled snow nestled against
the windows of the early-nineties
North Western Metra Station food court,
where the wigless judge and jury consisted of
a stern gastrointestinal tract and attentive taste buds.
I sat and wrapped my right hand around Taco Bell's
meatless masterpiece, the 7-layer burrito,
pulling a paper peignoir off the soft cylinder
while terminating its siesta on a nondescript tray.
The pallor of the tortilla,
rivaling the fairness of my fingers,
concealed a Wagnerian complexity of textures and notes
that matched my mercurial moods and flighty fantasies.
The starchy duo of refried beans and rice
played a game of gustatory red rover
with the emerald alliance of lettuce and guacamole
while morsels of tomato refereed
over cheers from the three-cheese blend
before squirts of sour cream soothed the
conflict with a reduced-fat coolness that
Susan Powter might have praised.

Criss-crossing North America on copywriting and copy-editing assignments, Adrian Slonaker is fond of opals, folk revival records, fire noodles, *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*, non-alcoholic blue drinks and cuckoo clocks. Adrian's work has been published in *WINK: Writers in the Know*, *Ariel Chart*, *Introspective Collective* and others.

JOHN HOMAN

THE UNITED STATES OF TACO BELL

mixing cultures	culturas mezclando
languages combining	lenguas combinando
so many combinations	tantas combinaciones
with so few ingredients	con pocas ingredientes
never gonna be perfect	nunca sea perfecto
not authentic-just us	no autentico-solo nosotros
doing what we can	haciendo lo que podemos
with what we have	con lo que tenemos
proud of who we are	orgullo en quien somos.
who we are is enough	quien somos es bastante
Live.	Más.

CARAMEL APPLE EMPANADA

earthbound dark sticky magic
contained in that flaky pastry shell
the real danger of burning my tongue
so worth it...

JOY IN A FIVE DOLLAR BOX

embracing the silky mouthfeel
ground meat drips terracotta grease
adding white onion and hot sauce
nacho chalupas bring me to tears.

John Homan is a poet and percussionist from Bend, Oregon. He is a graduate of Indiana University. His work has appeared in Chiron Review, Former Cactus, and Misfit Magazine among others. He is the founder and coordinator of WordPlay Open Mic Night in Elkhart, Indiana where he lives with his wife and two cats, Henry and Lucy.

John's Website is: https://about.me/john_homan

ARTURO DESIMONE

CRUST AND CRITERION

It always constituted an issue,
Matter of dispute,
in the oneiric realm, between
oblong graves shot up from foreheads
of buried patriots in their hero-groves:
as a pubescent, on patrol,
did I hate or did I crave,
this outpost: smooth cube
on humid cut grass, drive-thru,
scarlet banner and sodium lights,
near the hotel hi-rise district
of my tropical home-island:
the Taco Bell, cars line up, a honk,
here and there leaning out the car-window
a brown diabetic arm, in which five
of these rolls could enter—perhaps join marrow.

roundabout, the Dick Miller show
on the radio, advising tourists
about Mahi, Wahu and grillrooms,
the passing, barefoot
and bare-chested if breastless throngs
have accents of all States

where package tour-deals to Aruba advertised.

They who look ever forwards

at the freights upon horizon

wear their caps on backwards.

Taco Bell,

outpost

on a small incline; medicine men—

behind tinted wind-shields

mouths gnaw, intestine fried,

little dog that resembles:

a man, a bat,

Sugar in the lettuce in the face

of a friend of mine,

sauce dollops adorning

his elbows, talks to me

through the cinnamon

tentacles like walrus teeth

in his mouth, he tells me a joke

he pretends he heard from a Mexican:

how the doctors tell the newborn infant's

predestined path at birth:

they pinch its ass

before the bloodied mother,

and if it kicks: a futbol warrior,

if it laughs: a mariquita mariposa butterfly boy

and if it screams--

a Mariachi.

None of these options include

the glum faced teller

at the drive-thru,

who wishes

she had kept her curfew,
rather than becoming
at 17, mother of two.

Arturo Desimone, Arubian-Argentinian writer and visual artist, was born in 1984 on the island Aruba which he inhabited until the age of 22, when he emigrated to the Netherlands. He relocated to Argentina while working on a long project about his Argentinean family background. Desimone's articles, poetry and fiction pieces have previously appeared in CounterPunch, Círculo de Poesía (Spanish) Acentos Review, New Orleans Review, and he writes a blog about Latin American poetry for the Drunken Boat poetry review and he recently performed in poetry festivals in Nicaragua, Cuba and Argentina. Two poetry collections are in the works this year with a UK and an African publisher.

CODY RUKASIN

TACO BELL V. A MOTHER'S LOVE

I first saw the Nintendo 64 in a commercial for Taco Bell:
Gidget the Chihuahua was pressing random buttons
to insinuate that she was playing Star Fox.

I begged my mother for the N64 and a kids meal.
Once I had the console, we drove to Taco Bell,
where my mom paid extra for a Star Fox demo.
The demo didn't work, so, a month later,
my mother bought me the actual game.

I spent hours in the Lylat System,
beating Andross and saving thousands
of pixel creatures in the process.

It wasn't until my mom passed on, years later,
that I realized I always thanked Taco Bell
for introducing me to video games.
It was actually my mom who paid
for me to experience a world beyond my own.

Cody Rukasin is a poet and gamer who recently graduated with his BA in Literature at UCSC. Cody has also started streaming on Twitch as Aerobicsvictim. He loves his wonderful fiancé, his family, role-playing games, and, of course, Taco Bell. If you're so inclined, follow him on Twitch (<https://m.twitch.tv/aerobicsvictim/profile>) and/or twitter (<https://twitter.com/aerobicsvictim>).

ALANA SALTZ

DREAMS FROM THE BELL

For so long, I thought of that place
as not being worth my time.

It had been years
since I'd been, and I'd forgotten
what it could be.

You took me there,
your love and devotion
overwhelming me.

We spoke promises
into the speaker, explored new depths
in paper bags, tearing
into thin wrappers
with so much hope.

We weren't disappointed
in what we found
within-

a warmth and taste
I'd never known before.

AN ODE TO NACHO FRIES

You emerge
and then disappear
without warning or explanation.

That unpredictability is alluring,
and it's also a curse.

Whenever I see that you're back,
glowing brightly on the screen,
everything changes.

You aren't perfect.
I don't expect you to be.

But you're there and you're mine.
That's all I really need.

Alana Saltz is the editor-in-chief of [Blanket Sea](#), an arts and literary magazine. Her writing and poetry have appeared in a variety of publications. She lives near Seattle with her fiancé and many houseplants. You can find out more at alanasaltz.com and follow her on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

K WEBER

BELL OF THE BOWL

* screams this poem into your intercom *

i twist my cinnamon hair
around my fingers
and get wild as a sauce
might wild. i go fourth
meal and be merry; walk
into the night air, fresco-
style. these dreams, this cheese
and beans linger like pintos
and chevys in a parking lot
paved with crunchy shells.
like midnight on a beach
i cool with mango syrups
and fresh mountain
diet dew slush icy breeze
degrees yum burrito
supreme. sup? shit. i am
in a drive thru not even
driving just want a lot
of straws. dude. i can
barely see. can you hear
me? just get me a cantina
bowl, man, i can puke in.

The first Taco Bell items K Weber ordered were two bean burritos with no onions and extra cheese with an order of Cinnamon Crispas. Her 4 self-published books of poetry (in PDF and audio) and writing credits can be found at kweberandherwords.wordpress.com

DANIEL DAGRIS

TACO BELL OF YORE. TACO BELL NO MORE.

I don't
recognize this place anymore.
You've reduced the chip that gave
us the best commercials of the 90's, to
swaddling ground beef and iceberg lettuce.
Lava sauce. I thought you Lava'd me back.
BLT taco. At least you were Trying. Oh,
destroyer of dreams. My stomach swollen
with your food songs. Remixes all, the notes
the same. Hot. Fire. Diablo. Inferno. Atomic.
Plague. Wrath of the creator. Armageddon. Sauces,
squeezed liberally, differentiate each bite from
the last. Looping in my mind and guts. Restless,
I pine for the before times. When I was hungry. What
have I
Done.

Daniel Dagrис was born on the mean streets of Las Vegas, raised in the backwoods of Winlock, Washington, and tear-gassed in Thessaloniki, Greece (because, college, right?). His work has received honorable mention from Glimmer Train and appeared in the Buckman Journal, Flash Glass, and Chaleur Magazine.

LYNNE SCHMIDT

AN ODE TO THE GRANDE SCRAMBLER

My partner's love language is acts of service,
And as such,
Because he works overnights
he comes home in the morning he makes me breakfast
puts a pot of coffee on
pours the creamer
and waits until I stumble out of bed.

Months ago,
when we first began
we frequented the local Taco Bell,
for breakfast,
for lunch,
for dinner,
and sometimes, for snack time.

When my partner ran late,
he would call and ask
What do you want instead?

The first time we couldn't decide,
He encouraged me to be brave and try the breakfast menu.

After that, he would sometimes surprise me,
paper bag, fire sauce in hand,
with that thing you like
that I could never remember the name of.

We frequented the establishment so much
the woman behind the counter
could remember I didn't eat cheese
that I only wanted two packets of fire sauce
that my partner doesn't take ice in his Baja Blast.
Occasionally, she wouldn't charge for the guacamole.

Until the morning,
my partner called to tell me
There's a sign on the door that says they're closed.

Now, we no longer have a fall back
so we struggle to know what to eat if he's running late,
And I wonder if our relationship starts with a grande scrambler
And ends with the loss of it.

LITTLE EMILY AND TACO BELL

A million years ago,
I went to a school room and proceeded to
Expertly dissect myself in front of students,
Careful to edit the parts
The teacher decided needed censorship.

When I came back the second year,
A shy girl with blonde hair stood toward the back,
Shifting weight from one leg to the other,
Until, I asked, *Do you need a hug*,
and she did.
Flash forward a century
And this woman and I have traveled across states,
Met the first lady when she was worth meeting,
And then, I taught Little Emily to snowboard.

Along the way, we made a pit stop where
She confided, she had never had taco bell before
and I introduced her
To a crunch wrap supreme.

Lynne, she asked, *is this going to make me shit myself?*
I shrugged, and like with many things I've taught her replied,
It's a risk you have to take.

MISSING THE MAGIC OF 3AM

There is something to be said about the drunken 3am run
To taco bell --
some sort of magic that gets sprinkled across the lack of sleep
in your eyes
the world stilling because you and your drunk friends are the only ones awake.

As a Designated Driver,
Your sister turns the music up,
Finds a stuffed animal,
Dances with it
Sings at the top of her lungs to a Madonna song
After screaming her order out the window.

This is a woman
Who never got a childhood
And is making up for it now.

In the back seat, Amanda places her order,
Though she puked fifteen minutes ago,
and it looks like she might fall asleep soon.

Your sister, continues to dance,
pulls at the steering wheel as you make the turn
back to the apartment
enough times that you have to swat her away.

You'll do this for a couple of years,
before you're old enough to drink yourself.

And by the time you do,
you'll find yourself uprooted from the center of Michigan
To the coast of Maine,
And wonder why
none of the Taco Bells are 24 hours here

and feel as though you've lost a rite of passage.

Lynne Schmidt (she/her) is a mental health professional in Maine who writes memoir, poetry, and young adult fiction. Her unpublished memoir, The Right to Live: A Memoir of Abortion has received Maine Nonfiction Award and was a 2018 PNWA finalist, while her poetry has received the Editor's Choice Award for her poem, Baxter, from Frost Meadow Review. She is a regular contributor for Marias at Sampaguitas and her work has appeared in RESIST/RECLAIM, Royal Rose, War Crimes Against the Uterus, Sixty Four Best Poets of 2018, 2018 Emerging Poets, Alyss Literary, and many others. She is the founder of AbortionChat, and has been and continues to be a featured poet at events throughout Maine. When given the choice, Lynne prefers the company of her three dogs and one cat to humans.

Twitter: [@LynneSchmidt](#) [@Abortion Chat](#)

Facebook: Lynn(e) Schmidt

GERARD SARNAT

BIRDS AND BEES

Pick-up from nursery school

Taco Bell's drive-through genre

Loaded Nacho Taco Box at the park

nixed, take-out from El Burrito Jr.

rice and beans on the curb,

"I gotta go quick!"

"Por favor, pretty please,"

key on a can to the can in the back

during the prolonged turd emergency

my grandson grunts, "What're those?"

about all the FUCK, PLS CALL

can key wall scratchings

that some way launch us into

the epistemology of symbols

and the nature of human angst

as conveyed in modern urban art

and got me into hot water pon-
tificating about love and hell

after which detour we have
quite a nice conversation

of when and why he spread
his left hand in wet cement?

and could I buy a plain long
red Cherokee Ultimate T-shirt

with a pocket just like his
on the Internet?

and what's inside chorizo
if the casing bursts loose?

then Stegy and TRex and Ice Ages
leading to saber tooths, mammoths

and wooly cave drawings and how
did Cro Magnons get rid of their trash?

as I wipe his ass and toss
the toilet paper in the can

before we return to the curb
to finish up our chips and soft tacos.

Gerard Sarnat MD's won the Poetry in Arts First Place Award/Dorfman Prizes; has been nominated for Pushcarts/Best of Net Awards; authored **HOMELESS CHRONICLES** (2010), **Disputes**, 17s, **Melting The Ice King** (2016). He's widely published including recently by academic-related journals Stanford, Oberlin, Wesleyan, Johns Hopkins, Harvard, Pomona, Brown, Columbia, Sichuan, Canberra, University of Chicago as well as Ulster, Gargoyle, Main Street Rag, American Journal Poetry, Poetry Quarterly, New Delta Review, Brooklyn Review, LA Review, San Francisco Magazine, New York Times. Mount Analogue selected **KADDISH** for distribution nationwide Inauguration Day. Poetry was chosen for a 50th Harvard reunion Dylan symposium.

gerardsarnat.com

R. GERRY FABIAN

CALIENTE CRAVING

Te amo
my fiery Doritos Locos,
no frosty - you.
Dance-
the salsa and chips.

Quench me,
you brisk mango fiesta.
Your taste
is nacho supreme.

From morning
Cinnabon delights
to
chipotle late nights,
you are my
amante.

R. Gerry Fabian is a retired English instructor. He has been publishing poetry since 1972 in various poetry magazines. His web page is <https://rgerryfabian.wordpress.com>
He has published two books of his published poems, Parallels and Coming Out Of The Atlantic

ROBERT SIMPSON

HALF A PARTY PACK OF HAIKUS

two soft tacos please
okay, anything to drink?
a small baja blast

i remember mom
her dying words were "live mas"
matriarch supreme

Mexican pizza
Offensive, or delicious?
Porque no ambos?

"Think outside the bun"
"Make a run for the border"
My advice? Live mas.

Working the late shift
Dreaming of the best to come
Taco Bell breakfast.

Bought a party pack.
Drove to the beach where we met.
Wept as the sun rose.

Robert Simpson writes a little, draws a little, and slams a crunchwrap supreme about once every three months. He lives in Arkansas.

ASIAHMAE

THE DAY THE OG FREEZES LEFT THE MENU

There was Strawberry and Mango, the perfect pair.

Then along came Pina Colada, and the trifecta was complete.

We were complete.

With you.

Our third, our perfect flavor.

Late night drive-through sessions after long hours of editing film and building portfolios

Helping you master sewing and playing The Michael Jackson Experience counted as cardio

Ending in the Taco Bell line for our perfect three

Plus the Caramel Apple Empanadas for an extra sugar rush

To carry us over into the dawn so we could try to get some sleep.

We'd spend so much time together in your apartment

Cramped up on your vinyl futon

Crying about over boybands on your purple laptop and dreaming out loud about what the future held.

We were supposed to grow old together

Still making late night runs to satisfy our sugar cravings after curfew at the nursing home.

We were each other's people.

We were the perfect flavors.

Yet, things change.

One night I found myself in the drive through

Longing for a taste of that summer

And when I was offered Watermelon, Baja Blast or Skittles

I knew it was really over.
Those flavors are ok
But they aren't you
They won't get our inside jokes
Or the routine to "Remember The Time"
They won't know not to order me a straw
Because I always bring my own
Or to remember to grab me fire sauce
Just so I can read the packets.
You'd always pick out the wild ones
And dare us to eat them to see who could last without water the longest.
I'd rather just stay out of the drive through
If it means I can't have the flavors I want.
Maybe one day they'll bring them back
The Strawberry, Mango, Pina Colada
The trifecta of flavors.
It'll be a surprise
But we'd welcome it with open arms.
Maybe one day
You'll come back too.
And summers will be sweet again.

AsiahMae is a queer southern poet, pluviophile, and Scorpio cohabiting in Charleston, SC. She is the author of "oxygen" (2016) and co-creator of now defunct online mag For The Scribes. She hasn't been to Taco Bell in years, but she still collects packets of fire sauce in memorandum. When she's not writing poetry on the back of receipts, she tweets wandering thoughts [@_asiahmae.](https://twitter.com/asiahmae)

website: asiahmae.com

JULIETTE SEBOCK

GASTROINTESTINAL FAST FOOD MALAISE

It took me far longer than it should have to
realize that I'd developed a tendency
for motion sickness.

College kids and Taco Bell
go hand-in-hand, so it made sense
that my best friends would decide
to drive into the closest little city
for cheap tortilla-based meals,
except I'd inevitably end up curled up
in the backseat, wondering why
he insisted on driving so fast
while my stomach churned.

I've always heard people say
that Taco Bell led them to
digestive disasters,
but it was always the trip
that invited me there.

I'M A BETTER VEGAN THAN YOU

When a group of vegans
is brought together on the internet,
the same conversation will inevitably ensue:
Someone will tout a snack from Taco Bell...
Someone will compare it to dog food (or something far less pleasant)...
Someone will defend its budgetary benefits...
Someone will ask (yet again) what it is fresco means...
Do I have to ask for no sour cream?
Someone will share a recipe, for their own version, something allegedly healthy...
Someone will argue that OP's not really vegan if they eat there in the first place...
Someone will chime in to remind them that they exclusively claim to eat salads...
Someone will probably step in and shut off the comments.

I'M ON FIRE

Once upon a time,
Taco Bell didn't sell fire sauce
by the bottle.

Instead, we'd do the unthinkable
and order inside the nearest franchise;
We'd toss a handful of bright red
packets into our brown paper bag;
We'd come in a group so each one could contribute;
We'd slip some into a pocket,
a purse.

Every so often, I'll come across a stray
red Taco Bell fire sauce packet.
It'll ask me to marry it,
and all I can think of is the mounds
we'd gather after an old-time Taco Bell trip.

Juliette Sebock is a Best of the Net-nominated poet and writer and the author of *Mistakes Were Made, Micro*, and *Boleyn*, with work forthcoming or appearing in a wide variety of publications. She is the founding editor of *Nightingale & Sparrow*, runs a lifestyle blog, *For the Sake of Good Taste*, and is a regular contributor with *Marías at Sampaguitas* and *Royal Rose*. When she isn't

writing (and sometimes when she is), she can be found with a cup of coffee and her cat, Fitz. Juliette can be reached on her website, juliettesebock.com, or across social media [@juliettesebock](https://www.instagram.com/juliettesebock).

KYLA HOOBOLT

ROAD TRIP LOVE

Oh let me be your taco
and let me be your bell.

See how I flow with hot sauce,
my meat a mystery, my shell
so thin and crisp it breaks
at your tongue's caress.

The bell will ring
when the rattlesnake fries,
when the bright cheese drizzles hot,
and all shall be stuft
with such goodness
as appetite may conjure
in a plastic menu's surprise.

Oh, you jalapeno of mouth feel,
glad luncher of all my days,
come to this dear stopping place
of rest for your traveling ways,
where you shall be fed
something.

Come my cholesteroled darling,

my weary heart of the road,
drive on, drive in, be hungry,
give in to the nacho's spell,
for I will be your taco,
and I will be your bell.

Kyla Houbolt lives and writes in Gastonia, NC. Though she's not been a frequent Taco Bell visitor, she enjoyed her research for this poem. Some of her other work can be found in various journals including Black Bough Poetry, Juke Joint Magazine, Neologism, and others. She's working on her first chapbook. All her current published work can be found at https://linktr.ee/luaz_poet. Follow her on Twitter [@luaz_poet](https://twitter.com/luaz_poet). Meanwhile, be kind to each other and don't eat too much.

LANNIE STABILE

7-LAYER PURGATORY

Cars at some point began resembling crispy domed Chalupas
Hunger swiftly baked in the stuffed Escape, as we
inched along,
cutting the seconds with high school punk rock
Khaki pants and the Sadie Hawkins Dance did little to
erase the animal
noises erupting from our middles, like turtles boiling in their own

shells

One thing I remember well, as we crawled to the speaker, was
feeling a deeper certainty
that we would never reach the summit of a

thirty minute mountain climb to marinated shredded chicken
and a medium fountain Baja Blast whose enormity
could easily quench a gassy four-piece family
of impatience
Some bellies - like wheels in a drive-thru - need to rumble

Lannie Stabile (she/her) was a finalist for the 2019/2020 Glass Chapbook Series and semifinalist for the Button Poetry 2018 Chapbook Contest. Works are published/forthcoming in Glass Poetry, 8 Poems, Kissing Dynamite, Monstering, Okay Donkey, Honey & Lime, and more. Lannie currently holds the position of Managing Editor at Barren Magazine and is a member of the MMPR Collective. Contact her on Twitter [@LannieStabile](https://twitter.com/LannieStabile).

TYSON WEST

UNTITLED SENRYU

she tests my passion
how many salsa packets
must I steal

UNTITLED SENRYU

concave menu signs

burritos look bigger

tacos taller

UNTITLED TANKA

my vegan girlfriend
refuses the Bell - dairy
will not cross her lips
her hero I order
power menu - hold the cheese

GATHERING

Some older woman – hunger alone
Left the comfort of the smoldering wood fire
Her daughter kept alive with damp limbs
To wander afield for plants, nuts and seeds, berries and fruits, if any
To carry the clan a day further without a hole dug in forest or steppe.
With eyes alert for fer-de-lance or adder, ears set for a large cat's step
Her head the sun of the whine of orbiting mosquitos and biting flies
Sweat dripping off her greasy hair onto her breasts
She found the grasses – their yellow seeds hardening in the sun
Poison? Crush one and feed it to a dog
Not bitter – warm and pleasant taste
She gathered all among the thorns and rough plants
By the fireside she and daughters and sisters crushed
And ground the seeds between
The flat and rounded stones
Then caressed the powder with water between their palms
Fire sparkles and pops with dry brush
To heat the flat stone where the paste of the seeds
Becomes a membrane that carries meats, berries, leaves and the detritus of the land
To the teeth of the tribe
So all will rise to see the sun rise
Above the Mexican valley mist –
The Anatolian plateau – Or Ganges.
Would these generations of women
Of whom we are the survivors
Understand electronic cash registers
Cell phones – the plastic signs
Showing the combos looking far larger

Than they fall on the formica table tops
The packets of hot sauce - drive thru?
Confusion and disorientation in glass walls and doors but soon they would circle on seats
Amid the whining children that the sauce is too hot the meat too spicy
Silent males eating the most and grunting the miracle of nacho fries
Now within the Bell the grains toast warm
And the mothers of mothers of mothers eating with full fingers
Would all in an instant sense
That save for no wood smoke or wind gust rain
And the need to clap dough between their hands
They are home.

RULE 34

I love the Bell's tortillas shaped from wheat
My Aztec lover always orders corn
She feels that sour cream and cheese shreds borne
In spicy crunch pair best with seasoned meat.

Citlalic loves Diablo sauce's heat
And quesadillas hot – not cut but torn
I love the Bell's tortillas shaped from wheat
My Aztec goddess always chooses corn

She thinks my mild soft veggie taco sweet
As I do her, my spicy unicorn.
Together trading bites we make food porn
We nibble, her toes curl against my feet
We love the Bell's tortillas born of wheat
Together we share soft as well as corn.

MARIA AND THE MENU

I'm moved, Maria, you are here to guide
The spirit of my weary hunger through
The tastes and textures of this menu maze
You kindly answer not the least bit snide.
That taco with Doritos must be new
Such complex combos leave me in a daze
I was unsure of Nacho Fries Supreme
And Kick Start orange citrus Mountain Dew
Until you gently showed me all the ways
To add guac and reduced fat sour cream.
I graze.

Tyson West, born in Boston, MA a few months before the police action in Korea, has degrees from the Universities of Virginia and California and New York University. Publishing speculative and literary fiction and poetry distilled from his mystical relationship with noxious weeds and magpies in Eastern Washington, he has no plans to quit his day job in real estate His poetry collection “Home-Canned Forbidden Fruit” is available from Gribble Press. A lover of basic food he is excited to participate in this great literary enterprise.

RACHEL TANNER

ON A SATURDAY

The day we drive to Decatur
to look for our second apartment,
we eat Taco Bell in my car.

"Do you think we could down
a whole taco 12 pack?" you ask.
My answer is, "Obviously." My answer is
the same as it was last time you asked,
the last time we were at Taco Bell two months ago
when we had to stop for food on the way home
from your anger management classes four cities away.
From the anger management classes
that weren't working.

But today, we don't talk about that.
Today we eat Taco Bell in my car
in the parking lot so we can sing along
to the playlist I made just for today.
You squeeze mild sauce into your mouth
straight from the packet and laugh.

Rachel Tanner is a writer from Alabama whose work has recently appeared in Moonchild Magazine, Barren Magazine, Peach Mag, and elsewhere. She tweets [@rickit](#)

TODD SMITH

HOW CAN I HELP YOU

Green Monte Carlo idling
at the drive-up window: are
those inner unmoving things
only (yes they are) the heart-
shaped shields of two pacifiers,
pulled by their sour gravities
toward the twin bunting-
bags of someone's (only) children.

Todd Smith's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Quarterly West*, *Meridian*, *North American Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Palette Poetry*, *Crazyhorse*, *The Yale Review*, and elsewhere. Truth be told, he's more of a Taco John's guy.

KARI A. FLICKINGER

SAPPHO AT THE DRIVE-THRU

So the couple fled from their home for nachos.
Car brake light, and summoning beans, un-showered.
Well-defined beat of the line thrums a rhythm.
Open past midnight.

[After Swinburne]

O TACO

Sent from Olympus with suck and with shudder.

If cheese, like wing, reveals as beaming.

Cheddar flight, o lettuce, cream o sour.

Talk, o creation.

Kari A. Flickinger was a 2019 nominee for the Rhysling Award, and a finalist in the IHLR 2018 Photo Finish. Her poetry was published in Written Here, Riddled with Arrows, BHP, Door-Is-A-Jar, Ghost City Review, and Mojave Heart Review among others. She is an alumna of UC Berkeley. When not writing, she eats tacos at her unreasonably large Highlander cat. Find her: [@kariflickinger](http://kariflickinger.com).

THE SODA JERKS

THREE HAIKUS ON BAJA BLAST

What is Baja Blast

Some radiator fluid

With sugar and fizz

This is Baja Blast

Tropical lime with fructose

Fierce carbonation

I crave Baja Blast

Nectar of the MTN God

Savior of my mouth

The Soda Jerks have been reviewing sodas for over 11 years with over 800 reviews under their belt. Baja Blast is but one of those sodas. To check us out go to <http://www.TheSodaJerks.net>

TOM SNARSKY

SONG OF CONSTANCY

College was a difficult time
So when I had a car
And a little money
I would drive to Norwell
Where there was a drive-
Thru Taco Bell open
Not quite 24 hours but
Close enough for my
Purposes and I would get
A T8 and a Crunchwrap
Supreme so three soft
Tacos and a Crunchwrap
Supreme and probably also
A Diet Coke because lying
To myself was one of my tools
At that time and I would sit
Alone in the parking lot
Of the Donald
E. Ross Elementary School
I had attended as a child
And eat the tacos and
The Crunchwrap Supreme
Beneath stars I couldn't
See because of all

The light pollution
I would feel my body
Hum with preservatives
Ignore my commitments
And think
About how poetry felt
Like enough of a way to hold
You so even if I never did
I'd be fine
I'd be fine I'd be fed
There'd be stars I'd be
Fine it'd be / all right

Tom Snarsky is a special education math teacher at Malden High School in Malden, Massachusetts. He is the author of *Threshold*, a chapbook of poems available from Another New Calligraphy. He lives in Chelsea, MA with his wife Kristi and their two cats, Niles and Daphne.

WILLIAM BROWN

ODE TO THE TACO BELL DRIVE- THROUGH WORKER

For someone other than Matthew Porto, who, when asked if this poem could be dedicated to him, said, "No."

I never thought I'd meet a siren--
not out at sea on a salty, creaky ship,
or even at the town watering hole--
but by god, Poseidon or otherwise,
the voice coming out of the speaker
made me want the whole menu.

I don't know what she swallowed
as a child, some golden maraca
while I chewed pennies and pine needles,
but its rattle uplifted like a snake's.

I was finally ready, eager even,
to fill out a customer satisfaction survey,
except I wasn't given one. And the voice broke
her promise to see me at the window--
the promise that made me comb my hair,
check for deodorant, and question
if it was appropriate to leave a tip,
or my number, with a drive-through worker.
No, the lady who gave me my quesadilla

was a rusty blender in an anechoic chamber.
Some non-gilled Ursula surely plotting
to rip the voice from its speaker with eel fingers.
And just like Odysseus, I was too weak
to break from my seat belt, my car driving
away from taco island, back to the highway.

William Brown has a master's in poetry from Texas Tech University, and his poems have appeared in journals such as *Copper Nickel*, *Crab Creek Review*, *McNeese Review*, and elsewhere.

Website: <https://wbrown81194.wixsite.com/wbrownpoetry>

JOSH LEFKOWITZ

A CERTAIN PRESENCE OF DEATH

I need to have a certain presence of Death,
said Cheryl, my neighbor from Montana,
who'd spent twenty years in Yellowstone,
running an old motel, shoveling snow
off the roof ten months out of the year.

These suburbs, they're all too safe,
she said – and it's not that I want to die
in the mouth of some mother grizzly, but
without at least the threat, life feels too
manicured and not real. I need a reminder
of the wild chaos that governs our days.

I didn't say a word. Just kept quiet
behind the wheel of the Camry.
Then, at the corner of 15 Mile and Maple,
I saw the suburb's remedy for her itch.

You hungry, I asked,
pulling the car into the
Taco Bell drive-thru.

Josh Lefkowitz received an Avery Hopwood Award for Poetry at the University of Michigan. His poems and essays have been published in *The New York Times*, *Washington Square Review*, *Electric Literature*, *The Millions*, *The Rumpus*, and many other places. His Taco Bell order is two chalupas and a hard-shell taco.

C.C. RUSSELL

PHOTOGRAPH – JENNIFER 1993

She looks up from her soft taco supreme,
lettuce falling like a slight snow
as the flash
snaps her skin to white.

She raises her middle finger
towards the ceiling
of the trailer, the hand
thrust forward
towards the lens
and who stands behind it.

If I'm right,
this is the final picture
that I ever took of her.

If I'm right, I deserved
the gesture.

C.C. Russell grew up in a town small enough that it didn't have a Taco Bell. He first sampled the Bell the same summer that Batman (with Michael Keaton) came out. It was a pretty good summer. You can read more of his writing at ccrussell.net

ART
&
MULTIMEDIA

DAN KAVALHUNA

MILD SAUCE



Dan is [@ETbeeegood](https://twitter.com/ETbeeegood).

ANDREA MCENEANEY

DEEPEST TACO BELL

Link to watch film:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siKRm8_6SsM&t=5s

"Deepest Taco Bell" is a sonic and visual exploration into an experience very often looked down upon by the large part of society. Taco Bell is known by most to be a site of sub-par fast food, fluorescent lights, and commercialism. However, what co-exists with these negative notions is a positive: a diverse array of people. Customers and employees come from all walks of life to interact in spaces such as Taco Bell. Many find themselves walking through those smudged glass doors, whether a hipster ironically stopping in, a family looking for a cheap meal, or a couple friends who just really like Taco Bell (because it somehow reminds them of home and is oddly comforting). This experimental documentary sound piece attempts to evoke a wide range of feelings. Aural metaphor and collage are at work, causing the viewer and listener to pay attention more closely to what is normally seen as a contemptible, "throw-away" place.

Andrea "Zeld" McEneaney is a visual artist and drummer who also works in instructional design. She's lives in Nashville, TN (for now) with her husband, toddler, and a black chiweenie named Marie Andouille Laveau. You can follow her on Instagram @zeldmac and see some of her art @zeldmacart or learn about her 40-minute experimental documentary, "We Lived Alone: The Connie Converse Documentary" by emailing connieconversedoc@gmail.com.

KELLY PHILLIPS

TACO BELL DINNER THEATRE



Kelly Phillips teaches high school art in Victorville, CA. She is passionate about her students, Art history, and burritos.

ESSAYS

ROB O'HARA

HOT SAUCE SOUP

I was broke, alone, and nineteen the night I invented Hot Sauce Soup.

It was my second year of college, although according to my official transcript, technically I was still a freshman. I lived in an apartment complex overflowing with crime and cockroaches. I worked nights at a local pizza restaurant. The most valuable thing I owned at that time, my car, was a piece of shit Monte Carlo with primer-covered fenders, a rear end sculpted from bondo, and a fake vinyl top with someone else's initials carved into the side. The windshield was cracked, one taillight was missing, and the catalytic converter had been stolen--most likely by my next door neighbor.

I drove this car daily to school, work, and back home. Each night around midnight, I climbed into that clunker and drove down to the bank with the restaurant's nightly deposit bag wedged into the gap between the sun visor and where the headliner used to be. On a typical night the bag contained somewhere around two thousand dollars--roughly four times the value of my car.

Nobody thought that car would last another six months, and they were right. Death was sudden one hot August night; a sudden lurch followed a loud clang, and the four-wheeled patient was pronounced dead at the scene. It was ten past midnight and my car was leaking more fluid than a murder victim when I realized I had left my cell phone back at the restaurant. After collecting all the spare change from my ashtray (just over a dollar's worth of nickels and dimes), I stuffed the locked deposit bag down the front of my pants and walked the final two blocks down to the bank.

Few things feel as conspicuously embarrassing as walking through a drive-thru on foot. Many establishments have signs barring walk-up customers from using their drive-thru; fortunately for me, there was no one at the bank at 12:30 a.m. to enforce any such rule. With the bulging bag of someone else's cash safely deposited into the overnight slot, the next (and only) item on my to-do list was to use my "phone a friend" lifeline and call someone to come pick me up.

The neon lights of an after-hours Taco Bell glowed like a lighthouse in a sea of foggy desperation. Located at the end of an interstate off ramp, this particular Taco Bell depended heavily on cross-country travelers to keep their doors open. Even at this late hour the line for the drive-thru coiled around the restaurant like a snake, but the lobby, like always, was completely empty.

I was walking slowly up the sidewalk and trying to build up enough courage to ask to use the store's phone when I spotted it: a payphone. An honest-to-god working payphone, attached to the side of the building. I picked up the receiver, placed it only as close to my ear as anyone would place something that sticky to their ear, and heard a dial tone. It worked! No lights lit up and the whole thing was covered in graffiti and stickers, but the damn thing worked! I shoved half my nickels and dimes into the starving slot and dialed a friend of mine. He was asleep and I don't think he truly believed my story, but somehow, I convinced him to come pick me up.

As I was hanging up the phone, I saw them. Three teens, crossing the street and heading toward me. My most valuable possession was now a broken-down car that wasn't worth much more when it ran, but there was no way for them to know that. I didn't know what they wanted but surviving off of pizza and breadsticks for the past year hadn't done my cardio much good, and there was no chance of me outrunning any one of them. Instead, I entered the sanctuary of Taco Bell.

I believe, or at least I believe the employees of Taco Bell believe, that most post-midnight customers arrive at Taco Bell knowing that they want. I'll bet it's a lot easier to upsell drinks and suggestively sell Cinnamon Twists to the noon crowd than it is to late night patrons. I suspect very few of the people you encounter inside the lobby of a Taco Bell after midnight are eating there for the first time. These are the people who already know what they want.

Except for me. As a sweaty, beat-down man stared at me from behind his cash register, I methodically counted the small collection of silver coins I held in the palm of my hand. Then I scanned the menu board for items that cost less than that. I recounted my change and rechecked the menu board several times, hoping one or the other would magically change. When neither did, I ordered the first thing I found that I could afford: Pintos 'N Cheese.

"And a cup of water," I added.

When I was a kid, everyone joked that Taco Bell only had a few ingredients (beans, beef, lettuce, tomatoes, and cheese) and every item on the menu consisted of some combination of

those things. The Bell has diversified their menu a bit since then, but Pintos 'N Cheese is literally a small cup of the chain's most basic ingredient (beans) with a light dusting of cheese on top. There's so little cheese that it could be considered a garnish more than an actual ingredient of the dish. In the pizza business, the equivalent to Pintos 'N Cheese would be a cup of pizza sauce served with a spoon and a burnt pepperoni on top.

As I walked back to a corner booth with my beans and water in hand, I grabbed a handful of hot sauce packets. These were the old school ones with pink, purple and yellow printing; not those new ones with funny sayings printed on them, designed for Millennials who need to be entertained every waking moment of the day, even when staring at a packet of hot sauce for three seconds.

The crusty guy behind the counter must have felt sorry for me, because my cup of Pintos 'N Cheese runneth over, dribbling over the edge of its container onto the green plastic tray below. I was about to get up and grab a napkin when I had an epiphany. After gulping down my water, I used a spork to transfer the beans and cheese into my now-empty cup. Since the cup was only half full, I emptied the ten or so hot sauce packets I had grabbed into the cup on top of the beans. The more I stirred, the thinner the beans got. I went back and grabbed a few more packets of hot sauce and added them one at a time until the cup was almost full. When I was done stirring, I had a cup full of spicy, runny beans.

Hot Sauce Soup.

I had been too preoccupied with mixing my new concoction to notice that the guys I had mistakenly thought were following me were now also inside the restaurant, minding their own business and sitting as far away from me as possible. In my story, they're the midnight bandits that almost robbed me, had I not ducked into Taco Bell for safety. In their story, I'm the crazy white dude sitting in the corner of Taco Bell that one night, stretching a fifty-cent order of beans into an entire meal like I was Nacho Libre.

It's been a long time since I made Hot Sauce Soup; twenty years at least, maybe more. It's been so long I don't remember how much I sold that Monte Carlo for, although I'm sure I've had bar tabs that cost more than what I got for it. And these days, it's way more likely you would find me sitting in a classy Mexican restaurant, sipping on a margarita and checking the calories of each item on the menu before ordering.

But sometimes, man, sometimes when it's really late at night and the kids are over at a

friend's house and my wife is either asleep or out of town, sometimes I'll drive all the way across town back over to that same shitty Taco Bell and order a bag full of tacos and memories from their drive-thru. And on that final stretch after ordering, that little section after you've collected your food and you drive past the lobby, I always go real slow and look through the window to see if anyone is in there eating. Because if I've learned anything in life, it's that everyone eating at Taco Bell after midnight probably has a story to tell.

Rob O'Hara is a writer, blogger, and podcaster from Oklahoma who grew up in the 1980s and mentally still kind of hangs out there. Over the past few years, Rob has put his Master of Professional Writing degree to good use by blogging about old computers, ninjas, arcade games, bad movies, and Saturday morning cartoons. For hot sauce packet-sized nuggets of spicy goodness, follow Rob on Twitter ([@Commodork](#)). For links to Rob's books, podcasts, and other random musings, visit [RobOHara.com](#).

AMY BARNES

WHERE'S THE BELL BEEFER?

Where's the Bell Beefer?

There are urban legends. And then there are urban fast food legends. According to one of the most famous fast food legends, Bob in the 1970s Taco Bell ordering department accidentally ordered up a year's worth of buns instead of taco shells. It is hard to understand the horror of this nonrefundable order which lead Bob to getting demoted to grease trap cleaner at the Detroit store. Faced with never-ending piles of buns, Taco Bell did what it had to do: they created a new menu item and used those same no-expiration-date buns for the next two decades.

For a few years in the 70s and 80s, Wendy's and Taco Bell also played menu switcheroo. My Midwest Wendy's had old timey catalog pages pressed under clear-ish laminate tabletops. The black and white tables were an odd Wild West compliment to the all-you-can-eat salad bar precursor to their current Taco Salad: piles of tortilla chips, questionable ground beef, shredded lettuce, cheese and sour cream. You didn't really have to make nachos because the short-lived Mexican smorgasbord was basically instant nachos anytime a customer served themselves.

Around the same time the Wendy's burger-heavy menu was getting a Mexican makeover, Taco Bell had been trying their hardest for some unknown, implausible reason to get a burger update. They hadn't quite gotten the message to stick with what they knew like: don't make a McPizza because the ovens cost a zillion dollars and are harder to maintain than a shake machine. Bob's bun error was the perfect timing to push the Taco Burger idea. However, it was a little like putting lipstick on a sombrero.

Taco Bell was just a little ahead of their time. Taco burgers exist on all kinds of yuppie boutique hamburger restaurants with Angus beef and locally, sustainably sourced veggies. Before a little old lady asked "where the beef" was, Taco Bell introduced their Bell Beefer. Even the name sounded kind of like puke or a rodeo clown's nickname. The visual image of the eponymous Taco Bell bell covered in ground beef was a little odd and unappetizing. Who had thrown the beef?

Quasimodo? A toddler mad because Taco Bell had no creepy McDonald's Playland? Who let the dogs out? Who wrote the book of love? The world may never know.

Even with a name that was off-brand marketing and potentially lead to its demise, the Bell Beefer itself was actually good. The combo of pre-pink-goo seasoned taco meat matched well with the soft bun. While it was billed as a sloppy Joe substitute, it was more of a Sloppy Jose. Taco Bell even went with two versions to keep with the burger theme and compete with Wendy's long before truffle or ghost pepper burgers. The regular offering featured taco meat, diced onions, shredded lettuce and a mild border sauce while for just a little bit more, you could get the Supreme version with grated cheese and diced tomatoes. And just like the music of The Supremes, the Supreme Bell Beefer was all melty goodness that fed your soul, all for around a buck.

Those ordered-by-Bob buns? They are quite possibly the reason the Bell Beefer slipped in and out of the Taco Bell menu. A Taco Bell franchisee would find a pack of buns in the back and the Bell Beefer would return for a week or a month with the same fanfare as the McRib. And then one day, all the buns were gone; taco shells and tortillas and chips were the standard again.

Occasionally, someone in front of me at Taco Bell requests a Bell Beefer. My mouth waters and I think of my childhood love affair with the briefly popular taco burger. And then it all gets ruined because the diner continues . . . but hold the bun, I can't have gluten. The cashier is confused and asks the manager (who has worked there for thirty years/moved in because Taco Bell is his apartment): "What is a Bell Beefer?" The manager smiles and I imagine a cartoon bubble with a Mexican hamburger popping up next to his face before he responds.

"Just put some taco meat on a plate and top it with cheese."

It isn't the Bell Beefer I knew but it is the Bell Beefer we've got. However, I still don't order a Bell Beefer because I prefer to confuse and torture the cashier further by asking him for an Enchirito.

Amy Barnes has words at a variety of publications including McSweeney's, The New Southern Fugitives, Lucent Dreaming, Robot Butt, Tiny Essays and Botnik Studios. She has two teenagers, which means she eats a lot of Taco Bell whether she wants to or not.

JASON IRVIN

**THERE'S NOT A GOOD LAURA
NYRO SONG TO ILLUSTRATE HOW I
FELT WHEN I WENT TO TACO BELL
AFTER DISCOVERING MY WIFE HAD
CANCER -OR- TACO BELL BLUES**

The day I found out that my wife had cancer, I went to a combination Taco Bell/KFC. I love Taco Bell and will generally go to this location to get something tasty for my family and me – but not today. Today was a bad day. I needed something to fill the void. Taco Bell has always been part of the good times. Finding out that your wife will need to go through surgery to have a breast removed, as well as chemo and radiation, just two months after you have bought your first family home together is not a time for bean burritos.

I have a lot of fond memories of going to Taco Bell. I recall going to Taco Bell for the first time in the 80s. This location was out at the beach. It was one of those old Taco Bells that had the actual bell on top of the restaurant. The kind that was brown with all kinds of "Mexican celebration" décor. When you stepped into the restaurant, you went up to a closed off counter with little windows to order and receive your food. I was disappointed that they did not have a kid's meal – at least that I knew about – but forgot all about it after getting my first Mexican pizza. The idea that you could have a pizza made from taco fixings blew my mind and remained a staple for years.

They eventually built a Taco Bell closer to my house – which was on the other side of the intercoastal waterway that separated the beach from the city – so my family frequently went there for lunch on Saturday or Sunday. I can even remember my family's regular order. I would get two

beef and bean burritos, my brother's choice was two MexiMelts (RIP), two taco supremes for my dad, and my mom would get a taco salad. I loved that she chose that as her meal, because she would always give the shell to my brother and me. We would fight over it, working hard to win delicious oily bottom. I am sure blows were dealt more than once, most likely from me – the older brother.

As I grew older, Taco Bell became a cool place for my friends and me to visit after hours or when we had nothing to do on the weekends. One night, while waiting in a massive line at 2 a.m., a girl in the car got out with balloons in her shirt over her breasts to ask my brother and I if we had a lighter. We were very polite and did not laugh at what she assumed was a hilarious joke, so she stood there, smoked a cigarette, and made small talk with us while we waited in line. I couldn't tell if she was embarrassed or drunk. Maybe it was both.

Eventually, I moved away from home and found new Taco Bells. The one on Baymeadows Road. The one on Normandy. The one on Southside. Each of these Taco Bells became my main Taco Bell. I got to know employees at some of these locations. There was the guy who looked like Bobby Hill. The nice girl who ended up working at McDonald's. The tall guy who made oddly sexual comments about middle-aged women you wouldn't assume got these comments too often. These people were part of my life.

So, years later, I found a new main Taco Bell. It's a combo KFC and Taco Bell that just sucks. I've seen employees in the back coughing into their hands and preparing food. I've been through the drive-thru only to discover that I'm missing parts of my order on more than one occasion. But it's my home Taco Bell – at least for now.

When she called with the news that the tests were positive for cancer, I drove home like a robot. I didn't listen to any music. I just drove. I went into automatic. I had that kind of feeling where you know there is no point to let your emotions out because you will be showing them in about 20 minutes when you get home.

Once I got home, I met my wife in our bedroom, and we cried. We cried for about half an hour or so when I realized I hadn't eaten lunch that day. My mother and brother were there watching our kids, so I ran out to grab something easy. I went to Taco Bell.

#

So, what did I get when I went to my Taco Bell on one of the scariest days of my life? I ordered hot chicken from the KFC side.

Jason Irvin is a part-time writer, part-time musician, and full-time other guy from Jacksonville, FL. When he is not writing about music for Folio Weekly, he performs weirdo music under the name Creep City. You can find him on Twitter [@creep_city](https://twitter.com/creep_city) or on Bandcamp at creepcityforever.bandcamp.com. His wife completed chemo in 2018 and is currently doing well.

VRIESS

BAJA BLAST ZERO

It was 2004, Shrek 2 and M. Night Shyamalan's The Village were the biggest phenomenon to hit the silver screen in decades. Peppa Pig was about to take the world by storm. Most importantly, Taco Bell changed the world.

My wife and I were married in October. I remember that year well, and I can't pretend that it wasn't mostly due to Taco Bell's decision to unleash a new flavor of Mountain Dew upon civilization, Baja Blast.

Back in '03, there were slim pickings for Mountain Dew flavors for those of us needing a citrus rush but also wanting to stand out in a crowd. We had Code Red, a sickly cherry concoction that reminded me of expired cough syrup, and if you were able to score some from a scalper outside a Wawa, Livewire. Livewire was fine if you enjoyed battery acid going down your throat. For that, I won't judge.

By spring of 2004 Livewire was no longer available, and there was civil unrest growing due to the lack of Mountain Dew Flavors. This was evident by the development of the TV show "Lost" which I have never seen, but I understand it was about strangers who come together due to the severe lack of diversity in their Mountain Dew products. They were "Lost" without it.

PepsiCo knew this was about to become a worldwide catastrophe that threatened the human race with extinction, so they planned something unusual. They contracted with NASA to provide us with a new flavor that would satiate the masses, especially those that eat primarily Taco Bell.

That flavor was Baja Blast.

Baja Blast was exclusively found in the fountains at Taco Bell beginning in 2004, and it was universally agreed to be a lime-flavored hydrating caffeinated nectar of the gods.

You see back then, they also offered a larger XL size which was essentially a bucket for your Baja Blast. This was of course to keep with the refreshing cool sandy beach theme. After

drinking your Baja Blast on the way to the beach, you could use the XL cup to build sandcastles with your family. Of course, each would have their own XL cup to allow a veritable city to be built as your family bonds.

Baja Blast continued to be exclusive to Taco Bell restaurants for a decade, dramatically improving their bottom line, changing their business completely. Their food quality improved as it was demanded from the well-to-do individuals enjoying their Baja Blasts between business meetings.

There was a period of time in 2010-2013 when Taco Bell stores would shut down if out of Baja Blast, leading to overturned cars and flaming trash cans in many states, and there were at least three reports of cult-like activity in smaller communities. These cults were ensuring a safe and bountiful harvest of Baja Blast Syrup with their rituals, as one does. This is what led to Baja Blast being released as a canned and bottled product in 2014 to the masses.

Fast Forward to 2019. My wife and I had yet another fight. I cut out sugary sodas from my diet, and it had made me difficult to be around. I tried diet sodas, but none satisfied me as the lime-citrus blend that went so well with a Nachos BellGrande or even a side order of Cinnamon Twists. I found each and every one of the sugar-free sodas would just leave me shaking more violently, short-tempered, seeing visions of Joe Don Baker talking to me, and most importantly, I would be thirstier than before I began drinking.

I think this fight was about how I didn't understand why her mother had to stay with us for three weeks and we had to drink nothing but plain room-temperature seltzer water. (It is a religious choice and we have to respect it.) I went to buy an apology caramel apple empanada from Taco Bell, and I remember it was a Tuesday since her mother was at the local co-op purchasing individual peanuts as she always did on Tuesday.

Anyway, I went into the store because the drive-thru was full of kids listening to their Waylon Jennings albums. There I saw it, and I had to rub my eyes to be positive what I was seeing was real. It was Baja Blast Zero. This meant it was a healthy alternative to the regular Baja Blast. Quickly, I shoved aside some guy that was taking forever to count change out of the fanny pack attached to his walker. I purchased a large cup. As I filled it, I could feel myself salivate in anticipation. I had to take a breath and calm my nerves. I was so excited I didn't even remember to add the 4 oz of ice that I always have in my drink.

I don't remember much past the point where I lifted the light turquoise broth to my lips. I

woke up with people surrounding me and my wife above. She was rightly upset, as she had no idea why I was in Taco Bell, violating her visiting mother's traditions. All I could get out before blacking out again was a weak "Try....the Zero..." and pointed at the soda machine.

I woke up the next morning, my wife sitting next to me on the bed, holding a large cup of Baja Blast Zero in her hands, offering it to me as I came out of my stupor. She understood, as she tried it herself and she realized Baja Blast Zero was what was missing in our lives, it was what completed us, and it even allowed me to return to my job at the canning plant, no longer shaking and speaking in languages I wasn't even aware I knew.

A few months have gone by since I discovered Baja Blast Zero, and life has never been better. I have heard some people aren't even aware this exists. Others that do speak in hushed tones in fear it may disappear if confronted directly, like some kind of phantasmal being. This is why I write this, so everyone can discover the glory and truth of Baja Blast Zero.

Regardless, I know the truth, and the truth is delicious.

ALLISON WALLIS

TACO HELL - OR WHY I FUCKING LOVED CINNAMON CRISPS

Every once in a while, my family would find ourselves both too broke to afford to eat at a sit-down restaurant, in a part of town that had a Taco Bell.

"Wanna go to Taco Hell?" my mom would ask my brother and me.

The answer was always an enthusiastic yes. I knew great Tex-Mex food, growing up in San Antonio, Texas. I didn't care that Taco Bell was sub-par, low-bar, white-people Mexican food. I was after the Cinnamon Twists. At Taco Bell, the beans didn't have lard in them, and they had a sort of a grayish hue. The bland one-note flavor of mild cheddar cheese couldn't hold a candle to the mix of queso blanco, sharp cheddar, and cojita that even my elementary school used in its enchiladas. And the poor goddamn tortillas. The tortillas were so sad. If we were to walk a block in any direction from that Taco Bell, we would find fresh, homemade tortillas, still dusted with flour and warm enough to melt butter. I didn't care about any of that. I didn't mind that I couldn't even tell my Mexican friends where I ate lunch that day, for fear of the teasing that would be sure to come my way.¹ All I wanted was those fucking cinnamon twists.

There's not a lot online about the history of Taco Bell Cinnamon Twists. I read a bit about their predecessor, the Cinnamon Crispas, which were discontinued before my time. I'm going to operate under the assumption that the Twists are an inexpensive to produce, easy to cook and package version of the churro. I think they're better than churros. Churros are great for the first ten minutes or so, but as they cool, they get hard and the grease sort of congeals, and the sugar and cinnamon gets fucking everywhere, and how do you store half a churro anyway?

Cinnamon Crisps avoid that issue entirely, by making them crispy and more of a chip

¹ A viewing of this video, and the fact that Taco Bell has twice opened stores in Mexico and failed helps explain. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWSOjZrs3oA>

consistency than a pastry. They would shatter in my mouth as I bit down, becoming an explosion of sweetness and spice. The internet did tell me that for a while there was a rumor going around that cinnamon twists were actually dried rotini pasta that Taco Bell would fry and sprinkle with sugar and cinnamon. There's still a piece up on Foodbeast from 2013 about it², even after Snopes investigated it and found it to be false this May.³ People love these Twists so much they're willing to deep-fry dried pasta at home to get them. I'm gonna guess none of these people have done the math. A serving of Cinnamon Twists costs a buck. Oil plus dried pasta winds up being more expensive. Plus, it doesn't work.

It's been thirty-odd years since my last Cinnamon Twist. I actually remember the last time I had them. My mom and I had been having a tough time with each other, and I pointedly ignored her as I slurped down my Sierra Mist and picked at my bean and cheese burrito. I'd turned it vinegary with too much Fire Sauce. The kitchen had been out of Cinnamon Twists when we ordered, so about ten minutes into our meal they brought them out, piping hot. We shared them, in near-companionable silence, as we crunched along together.

"These are so fucking good", my mom ventured.

"Yeah" I answered. "They really, really are."

² Foodbeast. <https://www.foodbeast.com/news/the-secret-behind-taco-bells-cinnamon-twists-revealed/>

³ Snopes. <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/taco-bell-cinnamon-twists-pasta/>

JASON GLOR

ANECDOTES FROM A TACO BELL LIFE

I've probably eaten at Taco Bell more than all other fast food restaurants combined. There was a time in the late 1990s, early 2000s where I ate lunch at Taco Bell every day. Here are a few anecdotes.

For a while, my go-to meal was the taco salad. I love the giant tortilla shell, and the way the beans make the bottom soggy. You can convince yourself that you're eating healthy. It's a win-win. Of course, Taco Bell knows that it's not healthy, and so does everyone else, so at one point, they tried to make a lighter version of the taco salad. It came in a plastic bowl and had a few tortilla chips on top. No giant shell. It was a travesty. An insult to the one true taco salad.

Once I was eating a real taco salad, and there was a woman across the way eating the light version. She kept eyeing mine. I could tell she wanted that shell too. I always wondered what was going on in her head. Did she deliberately choose the light version, but was jealous of my crispy shell? Maybe she didn't know there was a difference and ordered the light version by accident. I felt like she didn't know why my salad had a delicious crispy shell and hers had a plastic bowl and some chips. I felt bad for her. I still do sometimes.

When the movie Demolition Man came out, Taco Bell had an offer for a "Demo Deal." It was a Burrito Supreme, nachos, a drink, and an exclusive Demolition Man movie poster. I was with a friend (a rare Taco Bell occurrence for me, usually I went there alone), and we both wanted the meal. The Taco Bell that we went to had the poster in the window for the deal, but the cashier had no idea what we were talking about. "Demo Deal, what's that?" he asked when we tried to order. "It's right there on the sign," I pointed out. He had to ask the manager. The manager was clueless also. He examined the sign. Eventually we got the burritos and nachos, but we never got the posters.

In the mid-1990s, Taco Bell offered a Christmas CD for a few dollars extra with any purchase. It's called The Stars Come Out for Christmas, Volume V. Volumes I - IV apparently exist but weren't sold by Taco Bell. It's a weird album. It's got a little R&B, a lot of country singers, plus a reading of The Night Before Christmas by Rush Limbaugh. I still have it (imported into iTunes now), and still listen to it every year. It was one of the first Christmas CDs I ever owned, along with A Very Special Christmas Volume 2 and Ren and Stimpy's Crock o' Christmas.

There was a Taco Bell by my work in the early 2000's that I went to every day for a while. The manager was a man named Lucky. He was great. Always friendly, always in a good mood. One day a woman got upset because she wanted a taco with no cheese and expected to get a discount. Her reasoning was that since cheese costs money, getting a taco with no cheese should be cheaper than a taco with cheese. She was really mad. She went off on Lucky and just started yelling at him. He eventually offered to comp her whole purchase, but she was so pissed, she just left. She told him that she was going to complain to corporate and asked what his name was. He told her his name was Lucky. She said "Well, you're not lucky today" and he responded with "I'm Lucky every day!" I wish I could be as happy as Lucky.

I've always called the "\$5 Buck Box" the "Five Dollar Buck Box." If you don't want me to say the word dollar, don't put the dollar sign in the name.

"Chillax your Chalupa" is something I regularly say to my son. He's never had a Chalupa and has no idea what I'm talking about, but that doesn't keep me from saying it.

Jason Glor is a software engineer who used to eat at Taco Bell a lot. His writing credits include Taco Bell Quarterly, and that's about it.

MICHAEL LYNN

TACO BELL. SUMMER. 1997.

The summer of 1997 was a life changing season in my life. Oddly enough Taco Bell would play a huge role, it'd be my own Peach Pit, a place where my friends and I gathered to afford summer meals since most of us were teens with limited funds. It would be a summer of exploring the vast menu and trying new things; breaking away from my usual tradition of gobbling as many crunchy tacos as I could. It'd also be the summer that I learned more about myself, who I was and who I wanted to become.

I'd finished my freshman year of high school and I was finally connecting with my group. A tribe made up of alternatives, those who embraced difference and expression no matter how loud it needed to be. We were a group of unique individuals coming together to survive life in a closed-minded little town.

Our soundtrack that summer were songs from various movies like The Lost Highway, Empire Records, and Batman and Robin. Hole, Republica, Garbage and Lords of Acid sang my personal anthems that I would belt out in divine delight. I was busy trying to perfect my Gwen Stefani look with lots of tight cropped tees and vintage trousers from the 60's and 70's.

When the last bell rang and school was out, I worried I'd lose those friendships. After all, they had been my lifeline that school year. I had been the freshman ingénue hanging out with the older kids, those who would be in their Junior and Senior years once summer was over. I simply could not lose touch with them. As we all gathered in the commons to say our goodbyes, I was asked by my friend JJ to accompany him to lunch at Taco Bell. There'd be a group of us going. I nervously said yes. Having only a few dollars on me, I figured I could get a taco or two as well as a large drink. There had to be a large drink on account of the Batman and Robin promotion they were running. I had hopes that the piece I would peel off would be Poison Ivy. Dear reader, you must understand, I had not been this excited for a Batman movie since Batman Returns. To see a movie that would have Poison Ivy in it as well as Batgirl; the only thing that could have been better was if Catwoman returned too.

JJ drove. He was one of the first to drive and as long as I provided the CD's he'd pick me up and we'd just ride. Tall like a giant with longish dark hair parted down the middle, he was always talking about music and sharing all kinds of bands and songs that were exciting to me. Driving up to the Taco Bell I smiled as I saw more of my friends. Samantha was there with a mane of Manic Panic purple that I admired, she and I gossiped about boys and our dreams of adulthood. She was with two other girls that were the cool older sisters I'd always wished for: Kitten, soft spoken in bell bottoms and funky jewelry with long bleached wavy hair and Mars a tough as nails take no prisoners bad ass with hair a vibrant red and a penchant for shimmery blue eye shadow and liner. No one called them by their real names, always a whimsical alias. Looking back, I am not even sure how they came to have those names. I just knew I was thrilled to be included in their lives.

Then there was a surprise to this lunch event. Adam was joining us. Dreamy Adam. With sideburns and wavy hair, looking like an alternative post-modern Dylan McKay. Accessories included chain wallet, tattered shirt and boots. He worked on cars in his spare time and his scent was a mixture of mechanic stuff and sandalwood. I wanted to melt every time we hugged. We'd been talking on the phone and hanging out here and there. To be eating Taco Bell with him, it was all my 15-year-old heart could take not to explode.

"What do you usually order here?" He asked, those piercing blue eyes smiling into my soul, lighting up all kinds of corners I never knew existed. I smiled, "The crunchy tacos."

Laughter broke from his lips, "You're missing out on so much."

I shrugged, "Well I sometimes share an Enchirito with my dad." With a silly look, Adam leaned into me, the scent of his sandalwood cologne teasing my nose, "The Nachos BellGrande are outstanding." It was an unexpected phrase to be sure, right down to how he said it, but that would be the hallmark of our connection: always using words in conversation to bewitch and bewilder. With that said I think we can all agree that Nachos BellGrande are outstanding. They are also extraordinary and magnificent. I just had not realized it yet.

Falling into familiar patterns, I ordered my crunchy tacos and drink. I tend to stick with what I know, especially when a menu is vast. Much like a new world in a Final Fantasy game, it usually takes me awhile to venture out. Not one to give up on sharing the culinary experiences at Taco Bell, Adam shared some of his nachos with me. I took a bite and paused, "They taste incredible." Bliss to be exact. I felt like I had opened up new taste buds. Everything I was

experiencing that day felt so brand new.

There I was, eating my tacos with my Dr. Pepper, sitting in all that pink, purple, and cream decor already plotting my next trip and how it would include the Nachos BellGrande. Maybe even the Mexican Pizza I had been eyeing on Mars' tray too. I was ready to live!

As an added bonus, the game piece that had been on my cup was of Poison Ivy! It was simply a divine Taco Bell dining experience, one that would kick off a life changing summer. There'd be pool parties. Watching my friends get high. Falling in love. Listening to music and toy shopping. Feeling like the world would end. Almost ending my world. Meetings with a priest and a therapist. Struggling to find myself and become the young woman I so hoped to be.

There was a wave of life crashing down all around me and the one constant that helped me through it all were those trips to Taco Bell. Exploring that menu. Taking chances on new things while also forming memorable bonds with my tribe. A magical thrilling time the summer of '97 was.

The dreamiest dorkette around, Michael Lynn has been sharing her memories and love for toys, pop culture, and other melodramatic musings for 8 years. She can be found on social media under Diary of a Dorkette or at her blog diaryofadorkette.blogspot.com.

JESSE MOAK

SO LONG, AND THANKS FOR ALL THE WRAPS

Call it delusion. Call it mass hysteria. Call it a Berenstain Bears alternate reality. Or call it one of the single biggest cover-up conspiracies in human history. Either way, the disturbing truth I have to live with each and every day of my life, is that I remember Taco Bell Fajita Wraps, and not many other people seem to.

In the mid-to-late 90s, before Gorditas and Chalupas and Grilled Stuffed Burritos dominated their menu, Taco Bell had an item that I and only a select few others seem to bother remembering. It was called the Fajita Wrap, and it came in either Steak or Chicken. It was more or less a kind of burrito, filled with meat, bell peppers, onions (which I didn't hate yet as a teen), and some unique kind of "fajita sauce". It was delicious, and an item that I got most often, along with Double Decker Tacos (which were also pretty new at the time). It came in a foil wrapping, back when that was not at all the norm for TB food. And it was also a "healthier" menu item, way before Taco Bell started trying to cater to that in more recent years.

But here's the problem. As stated, I seem to be one of the only humans left, who actually remembers Fajita Wraps even existed. Most people remember crap like Jolt Cola, and 3D Doritos, and War Heads, and Fruit Gushers. But no memories, let alone love, for the almighty Fajita Wraps. It's so bad, that I actually can't find a single picture of one on a simple Google search, as if they've been erased from history. As if we aren't supposed to remember their glory. As if someone wants us all to forget. But I'll never forget.

And neither should you.

Jesse Moak has been writing in various forms since his teens in the late 90s. And he was daydreaming and getting lost in his imagination long before that. He is a fiction writer, still chipping away at what he hopes will someday be best-selling novels. And he also has been writing a neat little ditty called “Retro Revelations” since October 2012.

You can find his articles on various retro entertainment here:

<http://retrorevelations.blogspot.com/>

You can also find his retro content, including dumb gaming videos with his friends, under the “Retro Revelations” banner, on YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Pinterest, and Instagram.

JOE LA DOW

CONFESSiON

"I wake up covered in burrito wrappers... and guess what? It wasn't even my car!"

"Epic one, man. Hey Joe, what is your craziest Taco Bell story?"

Oh boy. Here it comes. I've been through this before. I look at the expectant faces of my co-workers as they size up my Hutt-esque physique. I know they are expecting to hear about nearly drowning myself in nacho cheese or maybe The Great Gordita Massacre of '99. I debate inventing a tale, but don't. I go for the truth.

"I've never eaten at a Taco Bell." A librarian mime would make more noise than the crowd I'm facing.

Finally, one speaks. "How is that possible?"

How indeed?

I grew up in a small town in Southern New Hampshire in the 1980s. I guess it was small compared to other towns in the country but for the area it was decent sized. We had a department store AND a grocery store. Eventually we even got a bowling alley. We had a few different pizza joints. We had Mom and Pop video rental places. There was McDonald's. If you wanted Burger King, be prepared for a good half hour drive. Anything else chain-wise, forget about it.

Even today chains that thrive in other parts of the country are non-existent here. Long John Silvers? Sonic? Waffle House? They exist merely as legends, stories that people bring back from vacations. You know those cell phone coverage maps? How there are always those blank spaces near the Rocky Mountains? Most chains see this area as one of those blank spots, especially back then. There were some burger joints, Friendly's had a good foothold, and Dunkin Donuts might as well be the official religion of the state. Taco Bell though? Didn't exist. I don't even recall seeing a Taco Bell until middle school. Even though I could have gone, I didn't.

Why not?

Growing up, tacos came in two distinct forms. The ones that my Mom would occasionally

make for dinner (which tasted like an angel kissed you on the lips), or the ones from the school cafeteria (which tasted like Satan jizzed in your mouth). I avoided other Mexican dishes like the plague, mostly because I was scared of spicy food. One of many reasons I would like to slap younger me.

Even when I saw a Taco Bell, I was too nervous to order anything. "What if it is too spicy and I don't like it?" "What if they use disgusting ingredients like olives—or worse, jalapenos?" "What if they taste like the ones from school?" "What if I just go get a burger instead?" So I avoided Taco Bell. Wasn't hard, at least at first. Tacos weren't the hip food they are now. They just kind of existed. They didn't have any cool toys or commercials to make me want to go. Until high school that is. Until that damn dog.

I'm sure everyone around my age recalls those commercials. From the first "Yo quiero," that dog was a hit. Suddenly Taco Bell was the in thing. Suddenly Taco Bell was cool. I still couldn't bring myself to go, but I wanted to fit in. So I faked it. I would laugh with everyone else and crack "drop the chalupas" and "here lizard, lizard, lizard" jokes until I am sure we put at least one teacher into rehab. But I still avoided the restaurant. Most of my friends lived in different towns than I did, and we rarely got together after school.

Soon I was off to college and things got harder. Friends were on campus, we had easy access to wheels, some spare cash and free time. I got asked to go several times but made up excuses and didn't go. Eventually my tastes changed, I started enjoying spicy food, and Mexican dishes seemed exciting, not scary. I could have gone but still didn't. I wish I had.

What, really?

Now I am an adult, I have kids of my own, a car and a steady, if not spectacular income. No one can stop me from doing whatever I want. I pass Taco Bell at least twice a day, I could stop at any point and order anything I want. I could put down the lap top right now, throw on a hoodie, drive over and order one of everything. Why don't I? Because I couldn't eat 90% of their menu now even if I wanted to.

A few years ago, I started having some stomach issues. Finally, after passing gas at work that was so nasty a manager called in the plumber thinking the grease trap was backing up (wish I was making that part up) and having pains so severe I was sent home, I looked into it. I discovered... I had developed lactose intolerance. It sucks, but I have learned how to work around it and what to avoid. Big thing to avoid? Cheese. Makes it impossible to eat at a restaurant that is famous for

wrapping its cheese-filled delights with other cheese-filled things and then putting sour cream on it.

Where now?

So Taco Bell and I can never have a fling. We stare at each other from a far, like two exhausted wrestlers at the end of a match, trying to figure out what it will take to defeat the other. We would be perfect for each other, everyone knows it. But like star-crossed lovers we are just not meant to be.

"I don't believe it man; how can you never have eaten Taco Bell?"

"I don't know, I guess the chance never really came up. It is really not a big deal."

I speak the words I have spoken before, but they are lies. It is a big deal. Yo quiero Taco Bell, but I will never get to have it.

Joe "pureval" La Dow graduated from Goucher College in 2002 with a BA in English and Theatre. He can be found under the handle of @pureval on Twitter, PSN, Nintendo, Fortnite and pretty much anywhere else. "Thanks to my parents, my wife and kids for the encouragement throughout life. Special thanks to my buddy Will for the kick in the pants to start writing again.

KAREN H. CURRAN

FIERY DORITOS LOCOS TACO SUPREME—HEAVY ON THE LOCO

Overwhelmed by the many Taco Bell menu choices, I told my husband, George, to order first.

“I’d like two Fiery Doritos Locos Tacos Supreme,” he told the young cashier. “And a large Pepsi.” The girl nodded as she punched in his choices, then turned to me.

“And for you, ma’am?”

“Um...I’d like the same thing except...well...I can’t eat that much. Just give me one taco. And I want a regular shell, not the hot one.”

“Do you want the Nacho Cheese Doritos shell?”

“No. Just a plain shell. I don’t like the spiciness of Doritos.”

“So, you want the Crunchy Taco Supreme?” she asked.

I looked up at the menu again. “What does Supreme mean?”

“That it includes sour cream and tomatoes.”

“Hmmm. No. I don’t want sour cream or tomatoes. Leave those off. And leave off the lettuce. Oh, and the meat. That would have spice in it, so leave that off, too.”

The girl’s eyebrows rose a bit higher with each of my requests, but she smiled sweetly as she continued taking my order.

“And what to drink?”

“A cup of water, please,” I said.

She rang up our total and as George was paying, one of the guys putting orders together came up front and spoke quietly to our cashier. He seemed to be asking about a taco with only cheese.

“That’s correct,” she said with a nod and another quick smile at me.

Yes, I’m a picky eater. Always have been. And I’ve learned to appreciate restaurant

employees who go along with whatever I order. Thank you, nice people at Taco Bell, for serving what I want regardless of how *loco* it is because I don't often eat Mexican food. Hot peppers set my mouth on fire, tomatoes upset my stomach, onions give me bad breath, and I cringe at eating anything the texture of dog poop. Yeah, well, that's what beans look like in my opinion. I pick up enough after the dog on my daily walks to notice the slight resemblance.

Recently, though, I've opened my mind and my mouth to taco seasoning, daring to add ground beef to my cheese taco. Never hurts to get a little more protein. A good meal for me these days? A hard taco containing meat and lots of cheese, a cup of ice water, and some of those Cinnamon Twists. Fills me up. Satisfies. Yum.

A retired accountant, Karen H. Curran lives near Nashville, Tennessee. Always ready for a new adventure, she enjoys capturing life's unique moments through words. Her stories can be found in potatosoupjournal.com, howtopackforchurchcamp.com, and oldkaren.com.

TIMOTHY TARKELLY

CHOICES

Carter likes beef burritos. Big greasy things, regardless of the arteries laid as ruins in their wake. He doesn't sleep much, either. He prefers the steady hum of a young brain fueled solely by caffeine, taurine, ginseng; the aluminum giver of chemical lexicons. And of course, junk food.

We are in the drive through, but Angie is driving. She jokes about how she hasn't been brushing her teeth lately, she keeps falling asleep on the couch before she means to, waking up too late to tend to her teeth in the morning. Like Carter, she also lives on energy drinks and coffee that has more sugar than an actual cake. She orders two tacos (fresca) and a pintos & cheese. But her roommate takes the cake. She orders everything, and then returns to her story: this last weekend she snorted coke for the first time, had unprotected sex for the second time. I don't judge these people. I love tacos and hate sleep, too. However, every once in a while, I get wind of mortality, or tire of the groans my body has started to involuntarily unleash when I do pretty much anything, and decide a little moderation is in order.

"No food for me. Just a Diet Pepsi."

All three turn to me, eyes set for piercing judgment.

"Um," Carter so brilliantly begins. "Do you have any idea how bad diet soda is for you?"

Timothy Tarkelly's work has been featured by Philosophical Idiot, Haunted Waters Press, Cabinet of Heed, The Might Line, Sludge Lit, Cauldron Anthology, and others. His book *Gently in Manner, Strongly in Deed: Poems on Eisenhower* was published in April, 2019 by Spartan Press. When he's not writing, he teaches in Southeast Kansas.

KEVIN DECENT

TOUCHSTONE

I've had the grilled options at Taco Bell, but never has my order been burnt or charred. A pity, because without that level of carbon I can't accurately date certain momentous occasions in my life. Thankfully changing menus and movie tie-ins provide all the information I need. Taco Bell isn't where we go for Wuzzles-like creations of beef and Doritos. No, Taco Bell is a touchstone for all of Generation X.

For many who grew up in "the heartland" or just outside of any form of mass transit for a major US city, this was our first taste of Mexican food. Every time a new menu item was added—burrito, chalupa, chimichanga—the previous generations had to learn once more how to roll the hard R's in ignorance. The concept of a McDLT was easier to comprehend than a rolled tortilla filled with meat, beans, and vegetables. We grew up and experienced authentic south of the border delicacies, but Taco Bell needs to be given credit as the gateway. How else would a generation that grew up on blue box mac and cheese or Micro Magic fries find willingness to try an entire menu of new tastes?

Movie merchandise tie-ins go a long way, too. I know how long my lunch break was in 1998. Long enough to walk to the mall food court and get a refill on my Godzilla cup. I'm not sure how much of my paycheck went to comics or movies in 1997 but I know how much of it went to Taco Bell. Enough to get multiples of every single Star Wars toy, cup, and box.

I begged everyone I thought would be sympathetic to take me to Taco Bell back in 1989 for the Batman cups. We were all Bat-crazy and these cups would have looked great next to my comics, official movie novel, official magazine, and the toys. Unfortunately, Taco Bell was not yet in my hometown, and no one was willing to drive me at least an hour to the nearest one. Shocking to think of a time pre-internet when none of us drove great distances for the latest tie-in. I do know that by the time Batman & Robin came around, I collected all the Unmask the Bat collector cups. My tacos have never made me sick, but this was a spoiled trip. Somehow, I didn't know Bane was

in the movie until seeing his image on one of the posters inside the restaurant.

Taco Bell also introduced the idea of getting crazy with the menu. Who else remembers the era of bacon? Not only a chicken bacon club but also a bacon cheeseburger burrito. I wept the day bacon and its menu options were removed. Had I known the days of crunchwraps, Doritos, and box meals were near, I would have taken the change easier.

It is also the place for bonding during that early adult/starting to go to bars age. No one says no to Taco Bell. The perfect place to meet up, sober up, or reflect the next day. A way to ground all of us post-high-school-hierarchy, learning to function in the adult world. Everyone drops a glob of sauce on their shirt. Everyone has a hard shell break apart. From billionaire to bellhop, the Bell balances both.

Now when Generation X has kids and would rather drink at home than go out, Taco Bell still draws us in. Witty sauce packs. A feature item every month. Hotter spices and sauces. Breakfast. Even their beverages—hey, Baja Blast might not be our exclusive anymore, but she's still here and have you met her sister, Sangria Blast?

Taco Bell may just be the only fast food chain that recognizes the nostalgia and keeps innovating for today. As Generation X takes our children and even grandchildren out, there are dozens of defunct chains they will never experience, but we'll always have cinnamon twists.

Kevin Decent has been writing about pop culture since 2006, with specialties in comics and wrestling. He can be found at his online home TeamHellions.com every day and throughout the week on other sites and podcasts. He thinks the Big Box is the greatest deal in all of fast food.

LUC TREMBLAY

THE TACO BELL OF THE MIND

Taco Bell occupies a special place in my heart and my memories, pristine and warm and covered in orange cheese even now. As I've gotten older and come up against every awful thing that entails—responsibilities, debt, losing people I've cared about, and pretty much everything from the last two years—the Taco Bell of the Mind has always been bright and weird and good.

The real Taco Bell, the one that I still visit when I want to take my time eating a big box of supreme-somethings, is still fine, but it can't quite compare to how it feels to remember the ones I'd been to as a kid. My town didn't have one, but I got to go along with my mom on little trips *to the city* often enough that I was able to worship at the Bell pretty regularly and could taste the cinnamon twists before we even pulled up. Was Taco Bell my mom's way of keeping me quiet for even the slightest chance of a brief reprieve from my shit? Oh, definitely. Thing is, I didn't care or question it because I got to eat chalupas.

It was a treat in a way that was similar but somehow totally different from going to McDonald's and getting a Happy Meal. For one thing, a taco beats the hell out of a cheeseburger, even now. It's crunchy, it's cool and warm at the same time, and even the worst taco is never bland. The second biggest draw was how insanely colorful everything was; every Taco Bell in the 90s looked like it shared a color palette with the X-Men, and there isn't a single thing cooler than that. I need things to look forward to in life, no matter how old I am, but there are only so many birthdays, holidays, and vacations to fill that purpose. Visits to Taco Bell were like little pit stops to keep me going while I waited for the next substantial waypoints—things like the Mortal Kombat movie or summer vacation.

As an adult, it's tougher to find the pit stops in life; everything moves a lot quicker than it did back then, and even if I do manage to find some time to take a breather and relax, it's pretty likely I'll end up half-watching something on Netflix while I read through trivia about *Recess* on my phone for four hours rather than do anything remotely special.

The simple joy of a taco supreme, a Pepsi, and maybe a metal Digimon card (losing that stupid thing is still a sore spot for me) is never going to feel exactly the same as it did, but that's ok; you find new things to get excited about as the old ones sort of fade and then come back with crystal clarity every once in a while when something brings them back.

That big bell is symbolic of some of the best times in my life, and I'm glad that I can still walk in, spend five dollars for three pounds of taco meat and sour cream, and just take it all in again before it inevitably all comes firing out like molten lava.

Luc Tremblay is a digital content producer at a TV station in Edmonton, Alberta. He spends an inordinate amount of time at flea markets and could tell you way more about *Mama's Family* than you'd ever care to know.

JAMES SWIFT

BALLAD OF A BELL BEEFER

AN ESSAY ON A CULT FAVORITE DISCONTINUED TACO BELL ITEM AND THE GREATEST SIDE DISH OF ALL -- NOSTALGIA

The Bell Beefer is one of those things I remember, but I don't remember. The older I get, the more I question if it ever existed in the first place, but there's this one part of my subconscious that keeps trying to remind me "yes, this was a thing and you did indeed have it when you were a kid."

To the uninitiated, the Bell Beefer is a long-discontinued Taco Bell menu item that was, effectively, a Sloppy Joe, sans the sloppy. Basically, they just took a whole buncha' seasoned ground beef, tossed it under two buns and called it good enough. Of course, it was augmented by the usual Taco Bell dressings -- lettuce, onions, shredded cheddar, etc. -- and a proprietary "border" sauce that was similar to the chain's mild hot sauce. I want to say there was a deluxe, supreme edition with tomatoes and sour cream and all that accoutrement, but if there was, I don't recall ever personally trying it -- or, more importantly, whether or not it came with those sliced black olives the Bell used to put on their enchiladas. (It's an aside, but why did Taco Bell seemingly stop putting those things on its products? As with all things decent that were lost in the 1990s, I tend to blame NAFTA.)

If you want to get way deep into the lore, the Bell Beefer was actually the chain's second go-at it with taco burgers. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Internet tells me there was this thing called the Bellburger, but that was all before my time, and therefore completely irrelevant. Doing some Web sleuthing, I've learned that the Bell Beefer actually had a roughly 20-year run on the T.B. menu, with some chains serving up the technically-not-a-burger as late as the mid-1990s.

Now, considering I grew up in the backwoods of perhaps the backwoodsiest part of the country, I suppose it's not surprising that our local Bell was serving the "passe" foodstuff well into

the Bill Clinton administration. I'm sure corporate edicts took way longer to pass from franchise to franchise back then. So if there was a memorandum to discontinue the item, my hometown Bell didn't get it until, say, '96 or '97.

Not that I ate the Bell Beefer that often. Like I said, my memory is fuzzy, but over my childhood I may have consumed, four, five -- six or seven, tops. It was the kind of menu item you had to be in a certain mood to really want, and I guess that mood happened only once or twice a year. But what I vividly recall was the bun itself, which was way fluffier than anything you'd get at McDonald's or Burger King. It's sort of an instinctive thing. I legitimately can't remember my third-grade teacher's name anymore, but I can still vaguely recall the texture and mouthfeel of that damn Bell Beefer bun.

I don't recall ever seeing any commercials or in-store ads for the product. In fact, seemingly the only surviving marketing material for the Bell Beefer is this solitary, oversaturated photo that's like that one picture of the Loch Ness Monster or that one home movie of Sasquatch taking a jog in the Pacific Northwest. To the best of my knowledge, it's the only existing visual evidence that the Bell Beefer was ever a real product, although the proliferation of nostalgic Bell Beefer fan clubs all over social media tends to convince me that I'm not dreaming the taco burger up, either.

It's either that, or we're all experiencing mass psychosis brought about by tainted Diablo Sauce packets. There really is no "in-between" on this matter.

And that's such a fascinating thing to me. Here I am, longing for a piece of fast food ephemera I can only barely remember, with recollections so faint I sometimes find myself questioning if that obscure object of desire did in fact occupy the same space-time continuum I did in the 1990s.

There's a surprisingly large contingent of other people out there with clearer recollections of the Bell Beefer than I, doing their damndest to get the suits at Yum! Brands to resurrect the hyper-obscure fast food offering that -- for all intents and purposes -- died a fat, greasy death around the apogee of Ross Perot's first presidential campaign.

Would I like to see the Bell Beefer make a comeback? Of course I would, despite the fact that I probably wouldn't be able to tell how authentic the relaunched product would be compared to the original. But you see, that's the power of nostalgia, and really, the Taco Bell brand itself.

I spent so many of my elementary school weekends at the local Bell that now it's kind of hard to separate the sentimentality of Taco Bell from life. The older I get, the more it all blurs

together, like a collage instead of a single snapshot. My first kiss with Nancy Klinghopper twirls around my first order of Cinnamon Crispas. That time Dwayne Kernudle let out the loudest fart of all time during the Iowa Test of Basic Skills is inextricably tied to my first BLT soft-shell taco taste test. Hell, my fifth-grade year WAS the Steak Burrito Bellgrande, complete with that one Taco Bell commercial with Johnny Cash serving as the background music.

I guess, deep down, we all want to be able to hold onto the fleeting. As we get older, we seem to drift further and further away from "the good old days," and anything that even remotely resembles an anchor for yesteryear becomes preposterously desirable.

Such, I believe, is the appeal of the Bell Beefer, which is quite possibly the zenith of ephemeral Taco Bell products. It's not just a buncha' meat squished between two pieces of bread—it's a gustatory reminder of what once was and never will be again. As people and fast food patrons alike, our only choice is to move forward—and further away—from the antiquities of our youth. Which, in turn, makes utter novelties like the Bell Beefer all the more desirable; we don't just want to relive the taste of the long, long, long-gone item, we want to relive the equally bygone experiences that accompanied it way back when.

Sigh ... one order of wistful remembrances, coming right up.

James Swift is an Atlanta-area writer, reporter, documentary filmmaker, author and on-and-off marketing and P.R. point-man whose award winning work on subjects such as classism, mental health services, juvenile justice and gentrification has been featured in dozens of publications, including *The Center for Public Integrity*, *Youth Today*, *The Juvenile Justice Information Exchange*, *the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, *The Alpharetta Neighbor and Thought Catalog*. His 2013 series "Rural America: After the Recession" drew national praise from the [Community Action Partnership](#) and [The University of Maryland's Journalism Center on Children & Families](#) and garnered him the Atlanta Press Club's Rising Star Award for best work produced by a journalist under the age of 30. (Fun fact: Wikipedia also lists him as an expert on both "prison rape" and "discontinued Taco Bell products," for some reason.)

MARC ALLIE

THE NEWLYWEDS

As I swept the scrubbing brush back and forth over the hood of the car, my back started to ache. On the other side of the soapy windshield sat my bride. She was a new bride. Still in her wedding dress new. Two, maybe two and a half hours new. As befits a new groom, I wore the customary tuxedo. Most of it, anyway. The jacket had been tossed in the back seat of the car. The cuff links were somewhere in the car, too. The sleeves of the rented shirt were rolled up to my elbows. I groaned from the exertion of brushing down the car. That paint stuff used for writing on cars at weddings doesn't come off easily. I scowled at the thought of the times I had painted friends' cars like this. It had seemed funny, even hilarious at that time, but it sure wasn't today. Today, my wedding day, my sense of humor had disappeared like one of these soap bubbles.

The car was nearly covered in foamy soap now. It was time to swap to power spray before my meager supply of quarters ran out. Keeping the foam off my rented clothes was easy enough, but keeping the tux dry from the reflected high-pressure spray was a lost cause. Back and forth I wagged the spray wand, pressing close where the paint was thickest. The one-minute beep sounded, and I dashed over, plunked a couple more quarters in the slot, and flicked the switch to rinse. Gooey suds cascaded down the panels of the car, revealing the fruits of my efforts and quarters: nearly all the paint on the car remained. "Old man", "ball and chain", "just hitched", every message was still clearly readable. If anything, the car looked worse now than it did before I started.

I gritted my teeth in a feeble attempt to reign in my frustration. All right, so the car won't be totally presentable. At least I can remove the soda cans trailing behind the car like a noisy aluminum tail. Kneeling on all fours right beneath the license plate, I grabbed the string or yarn or fishing line or whatever it was that kept the cans connected. I yanked and pulled and pulled and yanked, all to no avail. The wedding partygoers had used some type of wire, no doubt to make can removal difficult. Mission accomplished, in that regard. I stood, the knees of my tuxedo pants now

soaked with soapy water. I needed some sort of tool. Who takes tools to their own wedding? I sure didn't. My wife might have something in her everyday purse, but surely scissors, wire cutters, and blowtorches wouldn't fit in her fancy wedding purse.

I had been a married man for roughly the same amount of time it takes to watch *The Empire Strikes Back*. My first task as a husband had come along, and I had failed. That sounds nuts, looking back on it now, but that was how I felt right then. To my stress-addled brain, cleaning the car was equivalent to providing for my wife. I had failed her spectacularly my first time out. It didn't bode well for the future. I opened the driver's side door and sat down heavily, gripping the steering wheel tightly.

They say your wedding day is the best day of your life, and that's certainly true. But it's also the most stressful day of your life. My wedding day, like most everyone's, was an emotional wringer. Not necessarily bad emotions, but strong ones, and lots of them. The feelings of all the events of the past day came crashing down on top of me as I sat there in the car. Juggling time with my family, my wife's family, and our friends at the rehearsal dinner the night before. Not falling asleep for hours from excitement and anxiety. Freaking out when I nicked myself shaving, fearful that the pictures would be ruined. Suffocating beneath too many layers of fancy clothes.

Wondering why we'd decided on an outdoor wedding on a hot, humid Saturday in the Ozarks. Swallowing a lump in my throat when I saw my wife in her dress for the first time. Giddiness as my wife walked to me, escorted by my new son, four years old and cute as could be. Praying my Grandpa, who was officiating, would stick to the script we'd written for him, then being unable to keep my cheeks dry when of course he hadn't. The thrill of our first kiss as husband and wife, followed by embarrassment at the loud wolf whistles and cheers. Making small talk with all the guests in the greeting line. The pictures, an endless procession of poses with every possible combination of friends and family members. Eating cake even when my stomach was full of butterflies. The bouquet, the garter, and then the mess of a car. It was the proverbial emotional roller coaster. The feelings swelled until I was ready to collapse under their weight.

I closed my eyes, leaned back against the headrest, and took a deep breath. Any one of these emotional events would be no big deal. But when they kept coming one after another for more than twenty-four hours, it's too much. My wedding day wasn't a bad day, by any means, but it certainly wasn't normal. At that moment, all I wanted was for things to get back to normal. Fixing the stupid car was a step towards things being normal, and I couldn't get it done. Were things ever

going to be normal again?

I opened my eyes to look at my new bride. She was smiling, holding back giggles. That's when I realized that my life would never go back to normal. Not the normal it had been before. Life would be totally different from here on out. I was no longer a single guy or an engaged guy, I was a married man. The two of us would be figuring out what the new normal was together. Our new normal started right then, as we sat in the still-suds car (you never have enough quarters) and laughed until we nearly cried.

In the ten minutes it took to drive into town, it occurred to us that cake and punch aren't filling, and we needed some real food. And so, for the first time as husband and wife, we went through the ritual of choosing a place to eat. "I don't care", "neither do I", "whatever", "that's fine", you know the drill. We'd practiced this while dating but it was our first meal as a married couple, which made it special.

What special place did we choose that night? Taco Bell. Some might question our decision. Taco Bell... very common, right? It's a fast food place, and a franchise, at that. Taco Bell is not quaint or fancy or expensive. There is nothing special or unusual about Taco Bell. But you see, that is exactly why Taco Bell was the perfect place. After a day that was as un-normal as it could be, a normal meal was just what we wanted. Taco Bell is exactly what it is, and at that moment it was the right choice.

I knew what my wife wanted before we even pulled up: Mexican Pizza. I always have to look at the menu for a bit before I decide. Honestly, I can't remember what I chose that night. Probably a burrito of some sort, maybe a delicious beef and bean combo, and Nachos Supreme to share. Normally I'd remember this sort of thing, but something else on the menu overshadowed my choice of food: Taco Bell had Phantom Menace Cup Toppers.

Our wedding day was near the end of May in 1999. For the first time in sixteen years, a new Star Wars movie was in theaters. The hype for The Phantom Menace was off the charts, topping anything I could recall in my lifetime. Marketing was a huge part of that hype, and I was a most willing participant; we had watched the commercials, seen the trailers, and waited in line for hours to see the film on opening night. I'd taken several trips to Toys R Us and Target with my son-to-be, looking at the picked over selection of action figures, searching for the perfect addition to our (technically, his) collection. We were big fans of the saga that took place a long time ago in a galaxy far, far, away. So of course, I wanted a Phantom Menace Cup Topper for my Mountain

Dew.

I struggled with this desire for a minute. I was a married man now, after all. This was my wedding night. Was it the right time to be picking up Star Wars stuff? It wasn't. Yes, I was a grown-up now for sure, and I could live without the silly plastic Cup Topper. I mean, it wasn't like they wouldn't have them later. They'd have plenty. Probably. Yeah, I could definitely wait. It's what a husband and father should do.

I'd just made my decision when my bride whispered in my ear. "Just get them, Marc. Get them all."

Three minutes later, I was sipping cold, tangy Mountain Dew from a cup shaped like Darth Maul. My wife's Diet Pepsi was topped by young Vader-to-be Anakin Skywalker. Watto and Sebulba were tossed on top of my tuxedo jacket in the back seat. As we pulled onto the highway to drive to the hotel, my new wife opened the sacks and unwrapped the food and we chowed down on cheesy, savory, crispy goodness with a side of hot sauce. How many times had I eaten at Taco Bell? Dozens? Maybe hundreds? Yes, but never as a husband. That's what made that visit to Taco Bell the best of my life.

Twenty wedding anniversaries have come and gone. We have Taco Bell to celebrate every year. Sometimes, especially early on, Taco Bell was all we could afford. Other times we simply hit the Bell for lunch before going out to a "proper" restaurant for dinner. Taco Bell on our anniversary is a tradition for us. People might laugh at such a mundane celebration, but whatever. Let them laugh. We are Taco Bell people, and perfectly happy to be so.

We don't always make it to Taco Bell on the exact date of our anniversary. Sometimes life gets in the way. Perhaps it's the end of the school year, and I have to pack my classroom up. Maybe there's a new baby at home and we're too tired to go out. Or maybe the oldest son is all grown up and getting married himself and there's no time. Weddings are stressful, after all, even for the parents of the groom. Whatever the situation might be, sometimes we just can't make it to Taco Bell on our anniversary. But eventually, life goes back to normal, and then, we make a run for the border. Because sometimes normal is exactly what you need.

Marc Allie is a geek, author, and educator living in southwest Missouri. He owns dozens of Optimus Prime toys, has watched every Godzilla film multiple times, and keeps a lovingly bagged collection of over 1800 comic books in his office closet. When he's not rewatching the original Star Wars trilogy or planning his next Dungeons & Dragons session, Marc is always working on his next book. Check out marcallie.com/books for Marc's currently available titles.

SHERRY MORRIS

GREAT CHICKEN MEXIMELT EXPECT-TASTE-TIONS

My love affair with Taco Bell's Chicken MexiMelts has lasted over thirty years. That's longer than some marriages. A lot of marriages, actually. Certainly, my own.

I'd had no idea I was forsaking Taco Bell when I ran off to London with an English bloke twenty-something years ago. But let's face it, there were lots of things I didn't know back then. Maybe if I had known there'd be no Taco Bells to greet me once I arrived in the UK, and that what Brits considered Tex Mex food was inedible gloop, I might have made different choices. But my mistake became clear when I was served my first soggy, sagging, *toasted* chimichanga alongside a plate of 'nachos': stone-cold corn chips with an insipid cheese sauce nuclearized to the top. I was glad I had not ordered what they called salsa -- chunks of raw green pepper afloat in sweet ketchup. I understood these sad, imitation cantinas would now be my only option when I craved spicy, round enchiladas and burritos. I swallowed my passion and my tears. Took comfort from the fact that MexiMelts were unknown in the UK. At least I would be spared having to witness a mangled Mexi body or taste a repugnant, mutant version should I grow weak in my resolve to avoid impure imposters.

The upshot of living in the UK for all this time meant that my relationship with Taco Bell has been long-distance, which, if I'm honest, has probably helped keep the MexiMelt magic alive. Truth be told, I haven't spent that much time over the years thinking about soft flour folds, juicy insides or the rapturous taste of melting cheese and fresh tomato -- until now. Now I've got Taco Bell on the brain: MexiMelts have been discontinued. Soon, I'm embarking on a pilgrimage to try and reunite with my beloved MMs. (There is no such plan with the bloke.)

This is not to say I have been deprived of MexiMelts for the past two decades - au

contrario! On visits back to the States, I'd schedule an afternoon rendezvous for just me and Mexi. There, holed up in a corner of a nameless Taco Bell, I'd slowly unwrap her, feel the weight of warm tortillas filled with hot grilled chicken, lashings of pico sauce and gooey melted cheese, first on my fingers, then in my mouth. I'd become completely lost in ecstasy. MexiMelts were simple, yet so tasty. If only I had used that criteria when choosing a husband. Instead, I went for the equivalent of a Taco Bell Taco Salad – overly complicated and stuffed with lots of things I didn't particularly like, all packed into a fragile shell that cracked far too easily.

I can't remember entering my first Taco Bell or eating my first Chicken MexiMelt, but I remember exactly where I was when I learned they were off the menu – completely. Even the secret menu everybody uses to order Black Jack Tacos, Cheesaritos, or even those lame Taco Salads if they're chump enough. Chicken MexiMelts had dropped off regular Taco Bell menus some time ago. Heathens had made the standard MexiMelt beef. Whatever. The disappearance of chicken Mexis had never been cause for alarm. They may not have been on display, but like me, they were still available.

Then my sister-in-law texted me with the news. It was a Tuesday afternoon in May. MexiMelts were now off the secret menu as well. I became distraught. Depressed. Devastated. I'd have no last cheesy chicken goodbye. I became a melting puddle of sorrow, weeping on the couch of the remote farmhouse where I now lived in the Scottish Highlands, and contemplated a world without MexiMelts on my own.

Eventually, it occurred to me to check the internet. I had a feeling I'd find other like-minded Mexi lovers to share in my sorrow. I was not disappointed. And even if the people I found there were not actually people I fancied dining with, whose rantings and ravings and probable foaming mouths brought on by the injustice of having MexiMelts ripped from the menu of their food lives without notice or consultation gave me slight pause, it still helped me feel better and not so alone. (It actually made me feel a tiny bit glad I was far away from any other Taco Bell MexiMelt fans – but only just a little.)

For the most part I took comfort in discovering a vast number of also-devastated MexiMelt devotees. I wasn't alone in my profound sadness, questioning why and how such a once-loved product could be taken away. I joined the cry of the interweb masses: Hands off our Taco Bell MexiMelts, happy there was no one to hear me in my remote Scottish farmhouse and question my sanity.

Then lo and behold, I discovered these cries had been heard. There was a Messiah bringing hope, salvation and a YouTube video explaining a hack he devised that recreated a Taco Bell MexiMelt in all its glory. Better still, placing this hack order would cost only half the price of a Meximelt when it was a secret menu item. Best of all, this Messiah, dhak7, had truly lovely green eyes and seemed to be single. I watched the video <https://youtu.be/1htOkyq3s8s> again and again, enraptured by the sacred words he used to resurrect MexiMelts. (I also became slightly spellbound by his well-developed arms.) I read the comments of others singing the praises of this savior and his video. I added my own praise (and phone number) to the growing list of messages. I became the number one follower of dhak7.

And Dear Reader, I was rewarded. Yes, the tacos aligned.

He messaged me. With word that there was a newly opened branch of Taco Bell *in central London*. I decided at once to make the journey from Scotland to London and visit this particular establishment where I'd use the sacred words of dhak7 in an attempt to recreate and reunite with my first true love. It also transpires that dhak7 is thinking of meeting me there. Should this dream come true, I plan to live out the rest of my days in chicken MexiMelt bliss.

The date for our rendezvous is set for early September. The anticipation is great. Should any fine readers of Taco Bell Quarterly wish to send me MexiMelt chicken prayers, they would be much appreciated. What I had not realized when I first fell in love with such beauty was the wild ride I'd find myself on.

Do wish me luck! And with the Meximelts as well!

Originally from America's heartland, Missouri, **Sherry Morris** happily consumed many chicken MexiMelts in her youth. She now writes short stories, flash fiction and monologues which have won prizes, placed on shortlists and been performed in London and Scotland. She lives on a farm in the Scottish Highlands where she watches clouds, pets, cows, goes for long walks and scribbles stories. Her published work can be found on <http://www.uksherka.com> or follow her [@Uksherka](https://twitter.com/@Uksherka)

TERRY KIRTS

FIVE ESSAYS ON SURVIVAL AT TACO BELL

1.

Good Friday, between services, you can't drive far, can't eat much, your faith a combo menu with half the dishes crossed out. You need something to get you through the intercessions, the kneeling, the adoration that drags through every lingering hand or kiss. So you try the shrimp taco, thinking of the fried ones you had on the beach in San Diego, the cabbage, the radishes sharp with vinegar and chile. But just as the day's a temple curtain pulled across the flame of the sun, your lunch is a damp sponge with rubber shrimp that fall, bite after penitent bite, onto the papered tray. In this way, you'll make heaven?

2.

Late December, West-Central Indiana looks carved like a crypt. Gray upon gray, scrub under snow dust, leaves refusing to fall. You thought by now you'd have someone to take home with you, to talk you through the looping miles, someone your mother looked forward to as much as her son. Not the podcasts you drift off to, tires grazing the rough. The only color neon purples and that jaundiced eye, glowing above the hollow where truckers pull off for diesel and hot showers. In this oasis, the Cravings menu is the last whisper of the city, and you cling to the thick hilt of a cheesy roll-up, a moment only for you before the onslaught of starch and forced smiles.

3.

A week later you'll find him on a site for bad teachers. Fake name, fake degrees, a child seducer at high school music camps, convicted the summer before. He's broken probation twice, run up the cable at a friend's house, binging on pay-per-view porn. Even his orientation is a fake, knowing men will buy his lies more readily than women. That night, after choir, when he invites you to his apartment to see his scores, all forged, then suggests chicken gorditos you know you'll pay for, you imagine hanging up your sauté pan for evenings like these, perched at a high top, watching him tear sauce packets with his teeth like the impetuous boy you never were.

4.

After the surgery, you need fiber, forty grams to last a day without landing on the couch. Cool baths at night to calm the cramps. Tylenol by the bottle. You double the exercise, drinking water until you run clear. But you tire of the lentil salads, the cauliflower soup you do not fortify with butter or cheese. There's a joy to this essence, your minutes plotted into a grid, yet days when you're good you treat yourself to a bean burrito with a gut of sour cream so delicious you whimper.

5.

Your sister loves it, even when the menu is all "light," even when the college town she works in is rebuilding with brewpubs and cantinas. She meets you there, paying with a twenty, when you pass through, avoiding her basement apartment or the campus with its ghosts of late adolescence. This is before chalupas, before quesaritos, before double decker and stuff. Two boyfriends have left her, and you aren't surprised, though you can't tell her this. You do not tell her about the Big Macs you ate after David stopped calling, the breadsticks you binged to get through the semester. She sighs at the mess of your nachos bel grande, your pintos, her back stiff against the banquette as she swallows a food that does not nourish yet soothes her.

Terry Kirts is the author of *To the Refrigerator Gods*, published by Seven Kitchen's Press in 2010. He is a senior lecturer in creative writing at Indiana University-Purdue University in Indianapolis. His poetry and essays have appeared in such journals as *Alimentum*, *Another Chicago Magazine*,

Crab Orchard Review, Gastronomica, Green Mountains Review, Presence, and Sycamore Review, and he is currently a contributing editor food at *Indianapolis Monthly*.

LOUIS CLEARVIEW

BOCA RATON

I can think of few things better in a pinch than a discontinued chili cheese burrito ordered off menu served piping hot with one packet of mild and one fire mixed to dipping perfection. Keep in mind these can be rare to find in some locales.

Every facade of one of these TBs strewn across the Midwest that still sell these seems to be stuck in a different era of decor depending on external factors I have yet to speculate. Believe I've seen at least three different variations come to think of it.

There is this one location "Up North" that sticks out due to its exquisite service, warm ambient lighting and updated seating. Not like those where they have that crane arm disc swivel seat thing that always seemed broke.

Nah, this place so good and fancy they call you by name when ordering. So I decided I'd call the hotline into corporate in Boca Raton or wherever, to praise this kid from Brainerd for his biblical service and his literal tip of the cap gesture to me upon exiting one night.

SO fresh SO clean; place was immaculate like it had just been built. It's one of those that have the local baseball teams and such, with slogans about a State tourney plastered on the updated cobbled dark marble wall. You almost want to root for them, it's so tastefully done.

Figured someone had to know about this lad's potential in management, and of course, I misplaced the receipt smeared with the guts of a nachos bellgrande and a QR code on it almost immediately. I'm like, oh well guess "that's that" and go on about my Friday night.

The next morning over coffee and a smoke I'm feeling a bit randy and decide to give it another shot. I call in and was told to speak with Carl. I relayed that Noah was good people and was going places. Told him to tell the kid the Marines always looking for a few good men and was a good place to start if this "Taco Bell shit" didn't pan out. He laughed and agreed. Once I had the website and new survey code, I hung up prematurely and began feverishly entering the digits from memory into the Taco Bell Academy site, saying a prayer for them both.

Not as tasty as the ooey gooey deliciousness of a match made in Heaven that is the Chilito, but every now and again it feels just as good serving up some warm fuzzies for the folks serving us.

Yo quiero Taco Bell.

Saying I would do something knowing I couldn't or wouldn't follow through, but still knowing I could if I would, just do. Better to burn out than to fade away.

THOMAS TILTON

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OUTSIDE THE BUN

I lost my virginity to the girl who showed me how to properly consume the Taco Bell sauce packets. You do it one small strip of sauce at a time across the bite of burrito you're about to eat.

It takes me two sauce packets to get through one beefy 5-layer burrito. I like to have a third on standby, just in case I want a little extra to go with that last thick floury bite. So if I order, say, two burritos, I would need six sauce packets to go with, just to be on the safe side.

#

The Taco Bell on W. Ben White Blvd. in Austin was notoriously slow to make a Nachos BellGrande. At least that's how it was in 2008/09. My friend Cole and I used to joke that it must have taken an authorization from Corporate to sanction a Nachos Bell order at the Taco Bell on Ben White.

One time it took so long for Cole that he said he was about a minute away from climbing into the drive thru window and making the Nachos BellGrande himself. To this day, when I'm ordering at a Taco Bell drive thru, I still get an unstoppable case of the giggles if I picture Cole pulling himself into the belly of the Bell by the collared shirt of the disaffected Taco Bell cashier working the drive thru window, determined to get his Nachos BellGrande made in a timely manner.

#

FourthMeal. Is it one word or two? Do they capitalize the "M" if it's only one word? I'm going to, because it feels right.

I got my FourthMeal most often from the Taco Bell on Oltorf in Austin in the mid-2000s. This was back when I drank. And nothing tastes better at 2am on a Wednesday than Taco Bell.

#

Here is my current drive thru Taco Bell order:

2 beefy 5-layer burritos

2 Doritos Locos tacos (nacho cheese)

1 chicken quesadilla

Mild sauce

If I'm dining in, I might replace the chicken quesadilla with a Nachos BellGrande, since I'm eating it fresh and it won't have time to get soggy in my car on the drive home.

#

Some couple did their engagement photos at Taco Bell. Remember that?

I also remember college students who publicly mourned the shutdown of their campus Bell. One student played taps.

Both stories went viral.

#

There has been at least one Taco Bell in every city I've lived. Cities include Austin; Houston; Corpus Christi; Fayetteville, North Carolina; and Detroit. As ubiquitous as AA meetings, as predictable as the Catholic liturgy, as steadfast as my appetite.

#

The one-thing theory. I first conceived of the one-thing theory at the Taco Bell on Nile Dr. in Corpus Christi. This is the theory that, aside from a few key menu items, the majority of Taco Bell is derived from the same paste, dispensed via one of those stainless-steel cake-icing dispensers, an irresistible concoction of grade-D beef, refried beans, and red sauce. With or without sour cream. In a comic essay I wrote for friends, I named the one-thing "Nyarlathotep," aka the Crawling Chaos, after the Lovecraft deity.

#

I get sick of pizza. Rarely do I get sick of Taco Bell.

Here is my dollar menu order:

1 spicy potato soft taco

2 beefy Fritos burritos

1 triple layer nachos

The Fritos burrito, incidentally, is what persuaded me of the merit of a crunch in your soft taco or burrito. It taught me what a difference texture makes. When I make tacos at home with flour tortillas and chicken and maybe some sautéed onions and bell pepper, I crumble some Tostitos chips over the meat and fixins to give it that extra something. Now I can't have it any other way.

#

As intimate as this piece is, I have only scratched the surface. I equate so many things in my life with Taco Bell, some of which I'm too timid to share publicly.

Is Taco Bell a metaphor for something? I'm not sure. I'm not sure it means anything more than what it is: fast, cheap, and easy. Maybe those aren't the words you would want used to describe something dear. But I do, and I love it.

Thomas Tilton's fiction and poetry have appeared in a few different places online and in print, including *365 Tomorrows*, *Disturbed Digest*, *Speculative 66*, and *Star *Line*. A native Texan, he now resides in Michigan with his wife, son, and two dogs. He was a big fan of the recent TB offering, the \$5 Grande Nachos Box (w/ shredded chicken) and was bummed to see it disappear from the menus of his local franchises.

“As everyone knows, all the best poets eat at Taco Bell.”

- David Orr, Poetry Columnist, *New York Times Book Review*
Beautiful & Pointless: A Guide to Modern Poetry