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TORTILLA

Lou Mathews

On Thursday nights I take a class at the junior college. Philosophy 101. I know, I know, you're supposed to call them community colleges, but they've only been community colleges for, oh, maybe fifteen years. For thirty years I knew it as East L.A. Junior College. It still sounds better to me. Looking up is better than looking down.

This Philosophy class is pretty good. The teacher is young, Dr. Lascola; he just graduated from USC. He still gets passionate about ideas. He doesn't know this, but he trembles sometimes when he can't make us understand.

He likes to give us puzzles to make us think. The second class he gave us a Zen Koan, it's like a riddle. He said, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" I thought about that, and I gave him the answer. I said, "A tortilla."

He said, "What?", and I said, "It's a tortilla. That's the sound of one hand clapping." He didn't understand, and I had to explain it to him.

If you get an old woman, I told him. She's probably from Michoacan, and she's been making tortillas a long time. You watch her in the morning. The sun is barely up, just a red glow in the east, but she already has the fire going. You can smell that mesquite and then the wet masa. She gets the comal hot, and then she rolls some masa into balls, and then she starts to pat the tortilla into shape. She doesn't even look at her hands; she watches the sun taking shape. You watch her hands; they're very fast, but if you watch closely you'll see that only one hand touches the tortilla at a time. As the other hand touches the tortilla, the first one leaves. They never touch. And yet, there is the clapping noise.

No soy mentiroso. It's true. You can see this even in the city. You go to an old fashioned place, like La Luz de Dia at the end of Olvera Street. You hear those abuelitas before you even walk through the door. Clap, clap, clap. You watch carefully and you'll see. The palms never touch. That's the sound of one hand clapping. One tortilla.