

**UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2011, First-Place Poetry Winner**

**By Kyeren Regehr**

**Bittersweet Bean**

*The Aztec god, Quetzalcoatl, descended from heaven on the beam of a morning star  
carrying a cacao tree stolen from paradise.*

The boy cups the pod, chops the stalk with a machete,  
guides the fruit into his burgeoning sack. He's tall for twelve,  
so he picks while others his age squat till sundown. Slicing pods,  
emptying buttery white seeds into wide-rimmed bowls—  
the cuts on their hands licked with flies.

*In 1513, Hernando Valdez (future bean-mogul) bought a slave  
for 100 cacao beans, a prostitute for 10.*

During his first hour on the plantation the boy thought the pods were beautiful— the way they clung to  
the trunks like inflated caterpillars,  
glossy as his sister's cheeks. Like the wax lanterns  
the village priest hung from strings at weddings—  
before the drought.

*In the 1930's Cadbury's began it's "glass and a half of milk" marketing—  
the average North American child now consumes 11lbs of chocolate a year.*

He stumbles, spills his sack. And then the stick—  
cheeks, gut, all the soft places. Dozens of bare feet pad past his face,  
eyes to the canopy. The rough hand releases his head from the dirt  
long enough for him to scramble up. Same hand,  
the one with the missing forefinger, the one that dragged the body  
from the sleeping sheds, dumped it in the canal.

*In 1793 a Swedish naturalist, renamed cocoa “theobroma,” Greek for “food of the gods.”*

They were told it melts on the tongue, melts  
swifter than the ripest papaya, sweeter than the sweetest mango.  
Wrapped in shiny paper for fat white children— mouthfuls of happiness  
for children on the other side of the world, they were told.

*The first World Shop opened in the Netherlands in 1969, exclusively selling fairly traded goods—  
our fast-paced world moves too slowly.*

A while back, the boy escaped for a day. Recaptured,  
feet slashed, forced to drink urine.  
His mother always fretted he was never fully baptized—  
record number of dunkings, an elbow, a pink-heeled foot,  
a pinky finger breaching the surface. Body refusing submersion.

*Today, over 200,000 pairs of small hands (sold hands, stolen hands)  
harvest cacao on the Ivory Coast.*