

## [American Bistro](#) [1]

March 16, 2016 [Featured Poetry](#) [2]

### Hybrid Poetry by Leah Shlachter

Finalist of the 2015 Talking Writing Prize for Hybrid Poetry



*...and frankly, I was born with a silver spoon, which is the greatest gift you could have, which is to get born in America.*

—2012 presidential candidate Mitt Romney at a Boca Raton fundraiser, from a secret video reported in *Mother Jones*

[Close-up of flower stems in a clear round vase. The camera shifts, now the vase is to the left, ice buckets for white wine to the right, a flickering votive candle in the center. In the background, golden chairs and a table full of diners.]

When you wait on Wyoming U.S. Representative Cynthia Lummis, you aren't positive it is her until she gives you her credit card. You poll your coworkers: Should you tell her your views on health care reform and drilling in the Wyoming Range?

*...I guess everybody here is a dignitary, and I appreciate your help. And by the way, I am serious about the food. Bring*

*that...clear the place, but Hilary has to eat her beets.* [Audience laughs.]

She's your civil servant, even though you are serving her tonight.

*...but the point is, women are open to supporting me. They like the president [unintelligible], but they're disappointed. They're disappointed with the jobs they're seeing for their kids, they're disappointed with their own economic standing right now.*

[The servers come and go like ghosts in black vests, white long-sleeved shirts, and white gloves.]

You don't always pay attention to what your tables are saying out loud to each other, and sometimes you let your autopilot wait tables for you while you watch from somewhere else, but not from somewhere too far away, because often you are called back when you catch your autopilot saying a part of the script at the wrong time, like saying "enjoy" when you drop the check.

*...but my own view is that if we win on November 6th, there will be a great deal of optimism about the future of this country. We'll see capital come back, and we'll see—without actually doing anything—we'll actually get a boost in the economy.*

You don't remember that you'd waited on this particular middle-aged white man once before until he orders two Diet Cokes for himself, and flashback! You remember that he and his wife once sat at Table 25, and with every question, asked you,

*If your tip depended on it,  
what should my wife have to drink?  
If your tip depended on it,  
what entrée should I order?  
If your tip depended on it...*

And you say you remember him now. You say you remember he ordered two Diet Cokes so that your tip wouldn't suffer in case he wanted a refill and couldn't find you. He is so happy, thinking he is memorable.

So on his first Diet Coke refill, he instructs: *No yay-lo.*

Excuse me?

*No yay-lo.*

And you realize he is trying to say "no ice" in Spanish.

The second time he wants a refill, he instructs: *and a little yay-lo this time.*

And again, you ask, excuse me?

*No yay-lo. Are you even Hispanic?*

*...my dad, you probably know, was the governor of Michigan and was the head of a car company, but he was born in Mexico. And had he been born of Mexican parents, I'd have a better shot at winning this, but he was [audience laughs] unfortunately born of Americans living in Mexico...and, uh, I mean...it'd be helpful if they'd been Latino...*

Otto, the prep cook, and his wife, worked two jobs six days a week for six years straight, never took a sick day, and went back to Mexico with \$450,000. He taught you to say, *El jefe es malcriado.*

*I'd like to staple a green card to every Ph.D. in the world and say, "Come to America, we want you here." Instead, we make it hard for people who get educated here or elsewhere to make this their home. Unless, of course, you have no*

*skill or experience, in which case you're welcome to cross the border and stay here for the rest of your life.*

[The torso of a female server approaches the bar and takes two empty martini glasses from the hands of the bartender.]

August 2010, Jackson, Wyoming: Eric from the Wild Sage texts Greg at Trio:

Eric: I am LITERALLY waiting on the 4 people who control the entire world's monetary supply.

Greg: ???

Eric: Ben Bernanke is sitting at my table. Tim Geithner too.

Greg: Does his bald head glow as much as it does on TV?

Eric: What should I say to him?

Greg: Talk about the 2 mandates of the Fed, he should focus on lowering unemployment over easing monetary restrictions.

Eric: I just told him.

Greg: Really? what did he say?

Eric: "says who?"

*All right, there are 47 percent who are with him, who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims...who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it. That that's an entitlement.*

Representative Lummis leaves you exactly 15%: \$6 of which is left in quarters that fall out of the checkbook and scatter around the floor, clinking, like hitting the jackpot on a hot Vegas slot machine.

[The reflections in the ice buckets never reveal the identity of the bartender/secret/cameraman.]

*So, the only answer is show your strength. Again, American strength, American resolve.*

Each night, after tipping out the hosts, bartender, and bussers, after putting away your wine key and pens, you untie your apron, and toss it into the hamper, where it tangles with dozens and dozens of dirty dinner napkins.

[The crowd disperses, muffled chatter. The vase of flower stems still to the left, the ice buckets, sweating with condensation, still to the right, the votive still flickering in between. The black marble bar is wiped clean.]

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### Publishing Information

- Romney quotes are from ["Full Transcript of the Mitt Romney Secret Video."](#) [3] *Mother Jones*, September 19, 2012. (The video was recorded on May 17, 2012, at the Boca Raton fundraiser.)
- ["SECRET VIDEO: Romney Tells Millionaire Donors What He REALLY Thinks of Obama Voters"](#) [4] by David Corn, *Mother Jones*, September 17, 2012.

### Art Information

- "[Champagne](#)" [5] © iwishmynamewasmarsha; Creative Commons license.



Leah Shlachter's poems have been published by *Black Lawrence Press* and *Bamboo Ridge Press*. She is a Kundiman Fellow and holds an MFA from Pacific University. She lives in Jackson, Wyoming.

On the hybrid nature of her piece, she says:

'American Bistro' weaves together excerpts from Mitt Romney's infamous '47%' remarks (which were exposed by *Mother Jones* during the 2012 presidential campaign) with cinematic scenes from the secret video and my own personal experience waiting tables in Jackson, Wyoming. I've also included an earlier text exchange between a fellow server and another server/friend at a neighboring restaurant. When I first saw the *Mother Jones* footage, I was obsessed with the fact that the camera was sitting on the bar of a privately catered dinner, and I felt solidarity knowing that the cameraperson was someone from my service industry tribe. The poem highlights the contrast between the political elite and the working class as well as illustrates how the two worlds are interconnected in an attempt to redistribute power.

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### Links:

- [1] <https://talkingwriting.com/american-bistro>
- [2] <https://talkingwriting.com/talkingwriting-categories/featured-poetry>
- [3] <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/09/full-transcript-mitt-romney-secret-video>
- [4] <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/09/secret-video-romney-private-fundraiser>
- [5] <https://www.flickr.com/photos/morganmorgan/8258780703/>