

DEREK OTSUJI

Last First Meal

On New Year's there are four foods we must eat:
a bowl of clear-broth soup with cakes of rice,
sweetened black soybeans, salted herring roe,
and the dry-roasted fish called *tazukuri*.
My aunt prepares each dish as she has done
each year, as her mother did before her,
and as no one since has troubled to learn.
The soup is good fortune. The black beans, health.
The salted herring roe, many offspring.
And the little dry-roasted fish, plank stiff,
candied, and sprinkled with sesame seeds,
a strong back that will not bend with age.
She jokes about her slow cooking that gets
slower with each year, apologizes
for this "lonesome talk," then, with a bad hip,
hobbles to the kitchen on uneven steps,
like a parable of good and hard luck.
My brother will not eat his sweet black beans.
He doesn't like the taste, wrinkles his nose.
It seems like we go through this every year.
My father is chagrined, says, "Eat your beans!"
"Why?" my brother snaps. He hates the taste.
My aunt makes an excuse on his behalf,
in Japanese, something about young ones
nowadays not being used to this kind of food.
Father continues to wheedle and cajole.
"Just five, that's all, and they will bring good health."
But no, he will not eat his sweet black beans.
Will not even try. As for the business
about good health, with that he'll take his chances.

Derek N. Otsuji is a writer from Hawaii. His poems have appeared in *Poet Lore*, *Sycamore Review*, and the *Threepenny Review*. He is near completing his first book of poems, tentatively called *The Rabbit in the Moon*.

ANDA DUBINSKIS

Japanese Beetles, 2007
Gouache on Indian village paper, 22 x 15 in

