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“Abogado!”

A small round woman clutching
a small round baby, another
child clinging to her dress, staring
at me with doe’s eyes—the woman
calls me, and the interpreter says,
“She says she’s Mrs. Hernandez
and she wants to talk to you.”
And I know everything she’s going to say before
she says it: My husband didn’t
hurt me that badly. We need
his job to keep food in the apartment.
The children are scared, one of them
is sick. The boy had problems at
school. They don’t understand why
their father is in jail, and if you
let him out he’ll never do this again—

(I stop her.)

I tell her I don’t “let” anyone out, I’m
a Public Defender, I represent her
husband and can only try to work
out a good deal for him. She nods.)
“Thank you for
all your help,” she says
through the interpreter, with
that submissive manner Mexican women use to
show they understand that the government, whatever
government they happen to be under at the time, is
going to do what it damn well wants to do, and they know
that if they piss the government off,
it’ll get worse.

I get the guy 30 days, with
Good time work time he’ll be out
in another week unless INS
gets ahold of him.

He looks beaten himself,
in his sagging orange jumpsuit, shrivelled and
powerless. I look back
and see her staring,
hope still in her eyes,
at the man who had given her
that bruise on the side of her face.

As I leave the court
I hear her small voice calling,
"Abogado! Abogado!"
running to me with that solemn-eyed
baby still on her hip,
still asking for hope
in a world in which hope
remains in custody.

Miracles

He keeps waiting for a miracle, even
though I keep telling him that
the two year state prison offer
is the best he'll get.

He clutches religious pamphlets
and talks about the Virgin Mary coming
to Vietnam, and that he needs to see the pope
by satellite this August, so that
his sins will all be forgiven
forever.

Who knows
what heaven wants out of him?
All I can tell him is that the State
of California wants its two years
before they'll even think about
absolution.

They are jealous of his time,
as if he were being taxed on it.
Just so: It may be easier for him
to get into heaven than
to get out of doing time.

Singing in the Courtroom

There was singing in the courtroom
a light, rambling
rhythmless child's tune.
Hummed loudly by the boy
in the back. The judge
stumbled on the plea,
pausing before sending
some guy to the pen
for nine years. The bailiff
rushed back,
the handcuffs clinking on
his belt like a tambourine.
The lawyers and the guys in the
cage all looked back as the
boy skipped away from his
mother, singing even when
the fat bailiff shushed him and
frowned. He was not impressed
with the tedious majesty of the law.
Finally, his mother
caught him in her arms, and whispered
to him and took him
from the room. And the courtroom
heaved a sigh and went back
to the business of putting men
in prison.

Later in the hall
I heard him again, and said
"you can't have fun in here,
it's not allowed." But he smiled
at me, like he knew
I was joking and
I wished I was.

“Good Morning”

I had seen her before on the sidewalks
near the Orange County Jail, her shopping cart
full of plastic bags and secret treasures,
her bulbous coat, her little dirty stocking cap
allowing an underbrush of wild gray hair
to billow around her reddened face.

Today I was walking to OCJ
and she was coming up the sidewalk with her cart,
muttering angry retorts to the air, to herself,
to fate, to someone I didn't see.
And, as I passed her, not looking, walking fast,
she interrupted her diatribe
and said, “Good Morning” to me
as cheerful as a schoolgirl.

Confused, I said “Good Morning” back to her,
unsure which of us had been blessed
with a moment of lucidity.

Comet

You would stand on the curb
as we talked at night, about
poetry, and songs, and people
you knew and didn't like, and you
would flick your cigarette
a short arc to the street, like
a comet, flung across a local
universe.

So when
the call came one night,
unpredictable and inevitable
as rain, and I knew
you had slipped the planet
and were now causing trouble
in the heavens, I thought
I saw a small flick of
red, discontented cigarette ash
disturb the stars.

In the Bookstore

"Oh, God, Poetry,"
she says, with
that tone of someone
who has stumbled across
a bad photograph
of themselves, taken
when they were unready.
But soon
she is saying to
her husband, a thin
tone of complaint and
wistfulness in her
voice, "I still have
that poetry I wrote
in school, you know."
She pulls decisively
a book of Robert Frost
from the shelf, then,
as decisively
puts it back.
As if poetry
could no longer
save her.
And I,
with three books
of dead poets
in my hands,
keep wondering
when or whether
poetry can save me at all.

During a Power Outage

Somewhere there is light, and it will find me
Though I consort in darkness with my dreams
That till now, have treated me unkindly.
Something shining baptizes me with streams,
Sharp-watered hope, an icy tongue that shocks
And fills my ears with finely sanded silt
And stuns my heart with cold and jagged rocks,
To wake me. As for now, I have been spilt
Into the half-light just before the dawn
When I believe that we've misplaced the sun;
When time and fortune waver, then are gone
Before the morning star begins to run.
Wide awake and dreaming, a pilgrim I
Will search for omens in the morning sky.

The Jury Returns

They slowly feel their way into the box
As if blinded by what they know they've done.
Not looking at us, file one by one
With passive faces, sad and blank as clocks.
My client's hands are folded tight, shaking.
He searches every eye, then knows he's trapped.
He sees the verdict of their faces, mapped,
And hears the cell door shut. As if waking
From justice's slumber, the Judge now stirs
To ask the clerk to read the fatal note,
The jury form, which seems to slowly float
Into her hands. But then the crash occurs:
"Guilty." "And this is what you each do say?"
Each nods "yes"; all then quickly look away.

