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Letters of Credit

He looks deeply into the mirror of his children but cannot see himself, though he knows he is there, somewhere in the depths. They speak to him with the greatest politeness, and if there is affection he feels it as the slightest warm breeze in summer, a hot dying breath of presence, not of comfort.

He works their love like his job, studying precedent and applying law to fact, to derive a holding, a balance of truth, justice and equity, completely anomalous in the calculus of emotion. Still there is a sense of obligation, like throwing coins into the tollbooth—regardless of whether they hit, or bounce off the rim and roll away, the debt is paid.

They are gone, glimpsed through materializing letters on the instant messaging boards of computer screens, or in the electronic conversions of voices to ear, heard like the ocean in shell: false, imitative, distant and faint, or like letters of credit, carrying his value into the void of commerce, of life, to distant lands he will never see.

Relocation

Contrary to his lawyerly instincts
Señor Abogado submerges his head
in the coral reefs off Punto Nizuc,
subjugating well-worn faith to snorkel.
His breath becomes a tangible sound
linking lungs to his familiar world.
His back burns in the Mexican sun.

They are waiting for him at the hotel,
but he has found a French angelfish
and follows it beyond the roped limits.
He cannot hear the cries from the surface.
The frantic local guide is upon him.
Señor Abogado swims on, escape
in view, his world no longer big enough.

The Fifth Watch of a Holocaust

Sauber, Esquire, is practicing his argument.
The small clock glows green by his bedside.
It is no longer the Sung Dynasty, he knows,
and his own boyhood is a thing escaped, lost
to the vagaries of shifted river beds. No.
There is no regaining it. It is a thing gone.
Books once read, characters understood, all gone,
gathering dust. Mrs. Sauber sleeps peacefully
on her left side. Bad for the heart,
Sauber knows and, secure in his advocacy,
glimpses the faintest nipple-pink glimmerings of dawn,
and smiles.

Such things survive even the hail of missiles
and sprouting mushrooms. Has this been a dream?
True, it rained the night before, or was it this night?
Worms cover the sidewalk. It is chilly
and his neighbors are all retrieving newspapers,
oblivious to the silent dissonance of light
in the cloud-streaked, sun-naked morning sky.
Droplets of water still cling to dandelions
on the fresh-cut suburban lawns.

Sauber keeps watch these last two hours,
noting the zeppelin-like filaments of cloud,
the snoring of Mrs. Sauber, the anticipation
of court, and prays to shooting stars
in language long discarded, prayers and stars
only viscerally seen and vicariously traveled.

The Old Judge

We are conversing in the soft tones
reserved for such occasions, wine
freely flowing, a few vodkas, but
mainly a discreet crowd, pillars
of the legal community, keepers
of the holy order of things.

The old judge enters, liver-spotted,
bent, hands shaking, eyes rheumy,
born the day the last German left the trenches
in the war to end all wars, to land himself
behind German lines in the next war
to end all wars, Bronze Star, Silver Star,
Purple Heart—all the colors of bravery,
for justifiably killing men.

He is small at the head of the table
as we gaze with fixed smiles,
an assemblage of respect and awe
and wait for him to speak, to impart
what we presume he must have,
after all these years, after all that service,
after deciding right and wrong,
all those cases, those complex disputes
that only people can make for themselves—

He looks over the last of our heads
as if searching for a window in the blank wall:
“They were all guilty,” he says, as if himself
on trial, before a judge we cannot see.
“All guilty,” he repeats, and smiles,
lifting his wineglass and studying
the deep purple glinting
in the flickering candles, and says
nothing more.

Opening Statement

May it please the Court,
I appear for myself,
for who else could I represent?
This is my claim, my suit
for damages against the world.
It's based on negligence,
a failure of the world to act
as a reasonable person would act
under similar circumstances.
I'm aware of the defense,
that I assumed the risk,
but I had no choice,
since the risk chose me.
I'm aware of the claim
that what happened to me
was the result of acts of others
over whom the world has no control.

Nonetheless—

I plead in the alternative an intentional tort,
that the world acted recklessly,
with wanton disregard for me,
in the sense of absolute indifference.

For this, Your Honor,
I claim compensation.
For this the world owes me.
I intend to prove that I exist,
regardless of that indifference.

Your Honor? Are you listening?

The Doyen of Dreams

From the strains of hidden televisions
comes the forbidden evening of respite.
Work, necessary and crushing, storms
at windows, rattling frail panes,
but for the moment, wind skipping
fallen leaves along deserted streets,
Sauber, in his Aran sweater, pauses.

Once there had been dreams, carefully scribbled
on lined paper and turned in, awaiting
a grade by the doyen of dreams. Sentences
parsed in desperate hours of night,
instant coffee growing cold in the mug,
roommate asleep, this time alone.
The trees shook like old country grandmothers,
angry and kind.

In the morning of croissants, small islands
of jam in the middle of the table
waiting to be of service: contracts
are made of this, forced communion of those
pressed together in anonymous hotels
amid the eating and spilling of crumbs.
The city beats against the disappearing fog.

Had there been a God, singular and imposing
Sauber might have abandoned him, but sought instead
the apocalypse of sociable religion
in the comfort of his truth, formed hard
like diamonds that cut the glass through which
his vision, long inured to blasting winds
now fades, glasses kept beside the bed.

Ulysses is upon the night table,
started once a month, a few chapters
read, never finished. Like Sisyphus,
he labors up the hill only to find
his vast boulder rolling back. It is
a project of a lifetime, the reading
of this book. Still. Years remain. Days persist.
Sauber reaches for the remote control,

the vessel into which emotions pour
silently and deeply—a flick of fingers
and new consciousnesses abound. Distant
trains sound their whistles as warnings
to delinquent wanderers in the red-flashing
zones of night as tracks gleam in moonlight.

Who will comfort him now? The doyen of dreams
is long forgotten, asleep in another bed,
and the papers have not been saved. Fire curls
and licks the small hearth, as pressed logs
concede and collapse upon themselves. Abandoned,
lost within the awareness that enters unannounced,
felt but not stated, known, he nods to sleep.

