

Verna George

IN MIAMI IMMIGRATION



I wanted to say to the Immigration Officer,
as my mother would say to me,
'If you give a cup of water to even the least of these' --
at our kitchen door she'd always give
a cup of water -- but I was from a kick-stool country
at the end of the almighty boot,
and corralled with a friend into a pen
where fathers with stripped eyes gave sons quick tips
in how-not-to-be-a-man-though-you're-not-yet-a-man,
and mothers, zipped up in body-bags of silence,
stuffed babies' mouths shut with milk.
Beside me, my friend had fallen silent too,
worrying a red-on-brown bead on his hand,
and I should have laid my hands
on his and said, 'With a friend here, it's not so bad.'
But I was pretending the wait was only
like back home at some civil service office.
Three tired hours from the plane, where he'd eaten salt,
my friend, without a sip of water,
popped his heart pills. And I kept begging,
Please, God, no strip search, remembering stories
about knives poking Mama's Christmas pudding.

*I have come to a still, but not a deep center,
A point outside the glittering current...*

'This isn't the place,' he said, 'to read Roethke.'
For we'd crossed over river to black water.

Hours downstream and two mock questions later

they let me go. I waited outside for him like
one of those women watchers who,
with the patience of cattle under a sodden tree,
line our Penitentiary's sullen walls,
each hoping prisoners will appear by day's end
so she can go home knowing *he* is safe.
Every time the door opened, once every minute
for three hours, and his silver hair and yellow T-shirt
did not appear, another chance slipped
into a pit emptied of everything
but waiting, like a defeat unspoken because,

as my mother said, 'With the mouth you make confession.'
So it was best to avert the eyes,

but look for a room for the night and eat
ashes. (It was eight hours and he hadn't eaten, no water,
and the ticketing agent had said,
'If they don't come out after five hours, that's it!')

Returning to my watch, I found
everything flipped
over, a revolving billboard. The air clanged shut.
The young guard who could have been my son
was gentle, but 'You can't go back';
he must keep to the rules. I was grateful
for the dew-pond in his voice, like a sip of water
after fever, the first rain on the *skellion* beds
of a St. Elizabeth farmer, or the wine and wafer,
grief-bread on a parched tongue, after nights without tears –

And I took it all
into my body.

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