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Two Poems

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HOLDING YOU

for Danielle

This Fall the frost snapped early
and for your fourth year
the almond flowers will not be back
nor the starlings who built nests.
Even if I were with you
I'm not sure I could explain.
It is like the day
a bird came in the open window;
I put him in your hands
and for a moment he did not stir.

Here, the leaves slide up the wind. . .
Sister Caritas prepared me for 1st Communion,
the Host would bleed if bitten or touched—
it was thin as a leaf or flower
pressed dry in an almanac.
I was 16 when a blade of grass fluttered
along my forearm, then a girl's finger. . .
Whatever we take to heart
slips sharp and neat beneath the ribs—
your mother put her fingers inside my chest
and shook me out like a dry sack of leaves.

The cottonwoods are a bare twist of branches.
A bruise-red leaf of the Chinese maple
blows over my shoulder—the wind swirls
small tides of dust, and this is as much
embrace as words will make.

**SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS,
CHIAPAS, MEXICO**

on a photograph by Lin Romero

It has been some time
since they reapportioned saints—
this child of ten despairs
knows nothing of that
or eternal Rome where they cut
St. Christopher adrift.
She knows lime and sandstone
houses once held on hope
and weathered chubascos busting
loose from Golfo Tehuantepec
in his mis-blessed name.
Centuries of amulets and
holy mentions, some safety
from the hundred hazards
and hurt ends in a road
are now so many wings torn
from bees in a wind storm.

The walls rain dust, cough chalk,
a thousand minute shells
blowing nowhere with the sand.
He shouldered children over
a river's swollen heart,
through small or chicken pox,
with the medallions scarred
across their skin, but living;
and for a while he held off
the blank clouds of poverty
from entering their eyes—
bore the world's weight
and held each beam in place.

But now her eyes lift
to where the dust drifts off;
it's as good a place as any
to find relief. A small mirror
aimlessly in one hand,
she is tired of what it reflects—
the other bunches back
her crow-black hair—the ancient
attitude of last questions,
“What becomes of it all?”
A dog watches with her.
Stone-white flames of eyes,
twin streaks below the chest,
recall a totem of the Mayas—
their gods must have also aged
and likewise left them
with the stopped tongues of relics.

What of a patron who had
a staff, and a back of muscles
coiled like mountains,
now a shadow chased around
the fallen corner of home?
Faith dies in a slight
remembrance, an image
in someone's forgotten name,
prayers repeated into clouds.
Something in this photograph
and the dog that licks and guards
by this child's bare feet,
will save her before the medal
hung for years around my neck.