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## Jose

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# José

Mary Dengler

I first saw José, I think, in 1984,  
A nameless, Mexican gardener, silent  
For the Southern California condo fold,  
As shaping growing trees  
He danced in careful step  
Ascending branch to branch,  
And watered brilliant flowers  
Crawling up and down the blue-green banks,  
His darkened skin and faded Levi shirt  
Against small snow-white houses in the noon-day sun,  
A work in motion and relief.

My visits brief,  
I barely noticed him  
Except as part of the hazardous landscape-working-world  
Of dark-skinned men  
Bowed over flowers intent  
As I walked by  
To beach or pool or harbor-side café  
With dreams that all was right.

In passing years  
I think I named him Julio  
To dining friends who used to sit along the patio  
That gave a Pacific sunset view  
Through leafy screens  
Kept green and flowering  
In months of vacancy and death,  
The trash bound carefully too  
By calloused, brown-skinned fingers at the ends of fading days  
And cotton blue,  
The slow dawns drifting swiftly into working nights around the months.

The owner dead, his sister too,  
The years have brought the condo home with mortgage  
Payments for my youthful bliss  
And turned the hair of Julio a salt-and-pepper gray.

One day I stopped beneath his shaping of a tree,  
His clippers sending sprays of feathered green  
Before his light descent,  
An airy ride with one hand on his faded cap,  
The other free.  
I pointed to a pile of branches cleared from atrium and porch,  
With "Por favor, ayuda me,"  
My high school Spanish words.  
"Si, me llamo José," he replied.  
"Me llama Maria, gracias," I said.  
With sparkling eyes, he launched into a wave of rhythmic prose,  
A narrative of life and work, philosophy, opinions  
I suppose,  
While like the nursery child who holds  
A book of dancing rhyme,  
Its illustrations leaping off the page,  
In anguish, not yet having learned to read,  
I grieved, "Where have I been?"  
"Yo no comprendo," I explained  
And "un poquito solamente," I added  
When he paused.  
"Yo no comprendo inglés," he replied.  
We nodded with regret across the space.  
But he continued his narration, spreading wide his arms  
and glancing all around the place  
As if the welcoming guide to paradise.  
I just pointed to my head:  
"Estoy estúpido."  
"Yo tambien," he said.

I feel honored  
By the artist's presence in my yard,  
The cultivator of an ancient place,  
The guardian of an aging Anglo race,  
Deterred by silence, time, nor lack of praise  
From all the serious work of all his careful days.