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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.