

The White Hospital

Jan Steckel

Ruben called Rosalia “Morena,” my dark one,
 my little Indian. No one could doubt
 that the son she bore him was his,
 fair as his father, just a slight golden tinge
 from his morenita mother.
 Josecito died in the ICU on Friday morning.
 Ruben took Rosalia out of the white-walled hospital
 to International Avenue to buy a white satin suit
 for their only son to be buried in.
 They carried the suit back to the hospital
 and asked for their son’s body.
 He had been taken to the morgue.
 But the morgue secretary told them
 Josecito had been transferred
 to another morgue at another hospital
 because the doctor there was doing the autopsy.
 You mean cutting into him? whispered Rosalia.
 I didn’t say anyone could cut into him!
 She would have cried and screamed,
 if she had been the crying or screaming kind.
 The secretary explained that an autopsy had to be done
 whenever there was a question about the cause of death.
 Ruben hadn’t known there was a question.
 The doctor had said Josecito bled to death from inside.
 The secretary gave them the address
 of the big hospital where Josecito’s body was.
 They took two buses to get there.
 Rosalia wouldn’t speak, just cradled the little suit
 until Ruben gently took it away from her.
 By the time they arrived, the big hospital’s morgue
 was closed for the weekend. Where is my son?
 asked Ruben. Is he alone behind that door?
 Give him to me so I can bury him.

The white-haired lady at the information desk had pity,
 but no way to give them their son back.
 Ruben fingered the white satin suit.
 When he last looked at his son’s face
 it was so white, whiter than it had ever been,
 white as the face of the white-haired lady
 behind the desk. He took La Morenita
 by the shoulders and led her away.
 His son belonged to this country now.

❧