

For All of You Are One

SPENCER REECE*

I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. . . . Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.
“Letter from Birmingham Jail” 1963

Honduras made me a Christian. I am a little afraid to admit that to you. But it is the truth. A delayed reaction if ever there was one because I was already ordained by the time the plane landed on the tarmac in San Pedro Sula. Yet the truth is the collar was fastened to my neck before I felt I knew much about Christ. Surely there were events that inched me toward Christ: my cousin was murdered, five classmates died of AIDS, I had read poems to patients in hospice, I had gone to seminary twice and read the Gospels. Grief carved my faith, books had informed it, but I was a little green about how to execute my faith. I was ready to be a messenger. But what was my message? Who was this Christ that was sending me? Why would I turn to the oddball Jew who got himself murdered?

I had doubts. I felt so unlikely half the time to become a priest—not strident enough, not theologically informed enough, and certainly not a willing advocate for social justice. I did not even know what social justice *was* when I went to seminary. Christ had followed me through

* Spencer Reece is an Episcopal priest who has worked at Catedral del Redentor in Madrid, Spain, as the chaplain to Bishop Carlos López-Lozano and in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, as a priest and teacher at the orphanage of Our Little Roses. He will return to Madrid in the fall of 2014 as the *secretario* (canon to the ordinary) for the Bishop of Spain. He is the author of two books of poems, *The Clerk's Tale*, which won the Bakeless Prize in 2003 (Houghton Mifflin), and *The Road to Emmaus* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). He is working on a prose book *The Little Entrance*, which meditates on poetry as a lens for the decision to become a priest in midlife. In 2012–2013, he won the Fulbright to go to Honduras and collect an anthology of poems by the schoolchildren on the grounds of Our Little Roses. This essay will serve as his introduction to the anthology, titled *Invisible for All to See* and co-edited by Richard Blanco, which will be published in tandem with the documentary film release.

an Episcopal prep school without much fanfare. He was always there as an intellectual concept, but the flesh and bone and spittle and guts of Christ never transferred from the canvases of Velázquez to me. I was always a little removed. I tried seminary once in my twenties after college, then for nearly twenty years drifted quite far away to a life in retail and an obsession with writing a book of poems. Yet there I was, ordained in the middle of my life. Not long after the day came when I had to live my faith. Honduras was a hammer where the nails punctured through Christ's skin became awfully real to me.

In Honduras, Christ, like the sun, pressed close on me. Most find the heat nearly unbearable, and by two o'clock everyone finds shade and waits it out until five or six in the evening. Honduras is a country of two hundred thousand orphans. Our Little Roses, where I lived and worked, was the only all-girl orphanage in the country. Girls had been much discounted in Honduran culture, and twenty-five years before the founding of this home, the girls were sent to the state penitentiary for the inmates to look after. A judge, opposed to the founding of the home, in its early days had said to the founder: "If you open this home where will we get our maids and prostitutes?" Injustice pressed on us, too. And if you smell injustice Christ is never far from that; Christ was moving toward me but I could not see it yet. The kids and I just kept showing up in our uniforms—sweating, sweating, sweating, sweating.

Waiting informs faith and in Honduras everyone waits, just as in the Bible. I have often thought of the Bible as one giant waiting room: from Eve to John in Revelation, everyone waits. So, too, with Honduras—all of us who have ever lived in that country know about waiting. We wait for visitors, we wait for food, we wait for light and power, we wait, and in that waiting Christ breathed on the back of my neck.

Truth is I had been reluctant to fill out my sentences with Christ; it sounded fundamentalist, and fundamentalists made my stomach turn. My feelings on this subject had been a private, bottled-up affair. I felt somewhat justified in my silence—it seemed appropriately Episcopalian. But Honduras made me a more public person. Honduras pushed me good. The girls pushed me right out of New England. In Honduras I met Christ and after you meet Christ there is no turning back.



How did this happen, that a fifty-year-old gringo with very little Spanish felt so compelled to write an anthology of poems by the

schoolchildren of San Pedro Sula? I will tell you. Pure and simple: an accident. I had gone off to do my CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education) at Hartford Hospital when I was becoming a priest. It is perhaps interesting to note, I did not *want* to go to Hartford. It was my last choice. A one-thousand bed hospital in the inner-city, we had a helicopter that landed on the roof and an emergency room that was like Mai Li. Very often the ER had victims of gang violence, many of whom did not speak English. One night there was a boy and his mother who entered that hospital. The boy had been stabbed in the chest twenty-five times, and the nurses paged a chaplain named Father Spencer in his black clericals and white collar to attend. When I arrived I was told to aid the mother in her grief. The Puerto Rican mother did not speak English. At 6 a.m. the boy died. After being up thirty hours, I called my bishop, a Cuban American who well knew the importance of navigating two languages, and I said to him I had to learn Spanish. I could not continue in this way: I felt a fraud.

The bishop said, "I have just the place for you."

I said, "Where's that?"

He said, "San Pedro Sula, Honduras. There is an orphanage for girls there. Get a grant and go in the summer and you will start learning Spanish."

I said, "Where is Honduras?"



My two months in that orphanage were spent in silence. I did not feel like I was contributing. Spanish was frustrating. I would stand like a telephone pole in the middle of the courtyard with the screaming girls and wonder what on earth I was doing there. I did not categorize myself as a "kid person." Priests and children and gay men had had so much trouble when lumped together that I thought it best I steer clear of children: hospice sounded better.

After two months of verbs and rain and lizards and electrical shortages, my bags were packed and I was ready to return to America. I could articulate little. But there is no doubt the poverty I saw in one of the poorest Spanish-speaking countries in the western hemisphere was a part of me now: the beggars at the street corner, the prostitutes, the grit, the beans and rice had all seeped into my bones. What would I do with my witnessing? The love of the people was in me too: the way they accepted me, hugged me, were grateful for me. As a gay

man who had come to the church with some trepidation, the affirmation I was receiving was changing me. What would I do with it? And would they accept me fully if I said I was gay? For I never spoke of it. In the main, that seemed appropriate. I thought the time there was an anomaly. It certainly did not feel like “call material.” Maybe someplace in New York City or Miami?

Then something happened. The last night I was there I was walking up to my apartment and a young girl was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs.

I said, “What are you doing here?”

She did not say anything. Silence. She looked up at the stars, she looked over the ten-foot wall where someone was burning plastic. The palm fronds blew in the night breeze and sounded exactly like a hand combing through files in a filing cabinet.

Then she said, “Don’t forget us.”

I paused. I think I said something flimsy like, “No, no, of course, I won’t forget you.” I went to my room. I looked at my luggage. And from that day forward I have been unable to get the girls out of my head. It was an unlikely road-to-Damascus moment. They needed advocates, that was clear for anyone to see. How could I honor her request? Maybe she said it to every gringo who passed through there? Maybe I could write a book of poems? Maybe the girls could write their own poems as the children at the Theresienstadt concentration camp had written of their lives? And why was I standing in the middle of my room crying?



Dr. Paul Farmer is a hero of mine. He stresses accompaniment in his work to cure poverty and inequality. Accompaniment speaks to me through its humility. It knocks people off pedestals: we are two people walking side by side, we are two people trying to figure it out together, and I will walk with you until God sees fit. This to me is what the eucharist means. I had practiced the eucharistic liturgy like a diligent gymnast in seminary, but none of it became real until I started putting those wafers into the mouths of the seventy-two girls of Our Little Roses every Sunday. In that moment, I saw them, they saw me, just for a moment, a little clearer, the wafer like some kind of key unlocking a door.

Speaking to graduating doctors at the University of Miami, Farmer said: “There is good in this world, and it’s worth fighting for. So what if you can’t work 37 miracles in whatever time is accorded you? There is so much you *can* do, humbly, persistently. Just practicing medicine can be a quiet miracle.”¹ It was as if Farmer had been speaking to me at my own graduation from seminary. I was rejected from the Fulbright the first year after seminary, and reapplied the second year and won, and back I went to Honduras, for a year. And so I began to understand “quiet miracles” just by practicing my priesthood, which sometimes meant simply standing there in that orphanage courtyard every day for a year littered with decapitated Barbie doll heads.

To see girls go from abandoned with bloated stomachs to having self-esteem was a quiet miracle. No, more than a miracle, it was a *resurrection*. Every Sunday in the little chapel, those girls, aged two to eighteen, stood before me like seventy-two resurrections. So can you begin to see what I mean, when I say to you in Honduras I met Christ? Unlikely, it was. Christ in the form of a girl without parents. Every Sunday there was a chapel full of Christs. Looking at those girls brought new meaning to the term “born again.”

The press has perhaps unfairly dubbed San Pedro the “murder capital of the world,” relying on statistics questionably reported. Certainly violence exists, but I felt no more in danger there than in the United States. After all, the day I left for Honduras was the day of the Newtown, Connecticut shooting, over twenty dead, mostly children, and there I was that night sitting at a dinner table with the exact same number of little girls. And so it came to pass in the world’s murder capital that I would be smothered with love. Smothered.



The girls kept showing me love in off-hand ways. Every day that we ate together the littlest ones repeatedly wanted to know who was my girlfriend. When I would point to one and say, “This one is my girlfriend,” that girl would reject me. Back and forth this conversation would go. *It went on for days*. We laughed often. I think we were

¹ Jonathan Weigel, ed., *To Repair the World: Paul Farmer Speaks to the Next Generation* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2013), 98.

trying to figure out love. And, truth be told, there was my shame, a shame that mirrored theirs: for I was a gay man in a homophobic country, a country where gangs shot gay people. But of my sexuality I did not speak. Not yet. It was a topic I rarely lead a conversation with, perhaps because for my generation the shame I came from had often caused me to leave such things unnamed. Or perhaps I was on the shier end of things when it came to disclosures.

One day I left for a week and said to one of the little girls, Patricia, that I was going but I would be back in *one week*. She nodded her head like she was a secret agent taking instructions. When I got back the following week I saw her coming back from her school. She was in a Catholic school uniform impossibly big for her, white shirt with blue skirt. It made her look like a Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade float. Her backpack was heavy. When she saw me she looked at the ground. I hugged her. I was always circumspect about touch there, but in this case, it seemed right. Then I noticed she would not let go of me. I thought it was the heat, our unending heat—sometimes it felt like we lived in a frying pan. When I turned to look at her face she was crying. I said, "You, Patricia, you are my girlfriend; *Vos, Patricia, vos eres mi novia.*" She nodded and did not reject me. She just leaned into me in that too-big uniform in the middle of the dusty street with donkeys and carts and taxis.

On Valentine's Day I walked the perimeter with a girl who asked me who loved me. I said, "My mom, my dad, and my brother." She paused and said, "No, there's more." "What do you mean?" I asked. She said there were seventy-two girls there who loved me. They kept loving me even though I looked and acted quite different from them, even though my Spanish, acquired in middle age, could get impossibly tangled. Rarely had a man lived with them and for so long. They loved me the way Jesus loved the lepers, loved the prostitutes. I was an oddball. And they loved me.



Christly love spreads; you cannot contain it, keep it to yourself. No, you cannot. My mother had often mentioned the fact she would have no grandchildren. My brother and I are both childless, both gay. Yet something began to change in her as I would Skype with her over my year in Honduras, each of us leaning into our screens, the way people lean into confessionals. She wanted pictures of the girls, she

wanted names. She would often say, "How's Sandy?" Two friends of mine, a gay couple in Rhode Island from the first church I had served, had begun to sponsor Sandy. Was not this exactly what Christ was talking about when he said his family was more than biological in the Gospel of Mark? Mom in her dotage has had greater difficulty walking. She went out to buy a set of walking sticks and began practicing in Old Saybrook to come and visit Sandy at Christmas. She looked like a mountaineer. Her world got bigger just as the evangelists' worlds in the Bible got bigger. Although Mom never did make it to Honduras, she did come to a fundraiser in Miami in a wheelchair and she still asks about Sandy.



There is something else you need to know. My year in Honduras was a year of firsts: first time I ever taught; first time I ever lived with children, let alone girls; first time I ever was navigating in two languages to get kids to write poems; first time I had ever put together an anthology. Simultaneously, a documentary film was being put together. I had realized that if the world was going to know about this place, a poetry anthology would be one thing, but how many people would buy it? Yes, I loved poetry more than most things, but few bought it or sought it out, I knew. A film, though, people would see that. I began asking who could do it. And before I knew it I had a five-team crew with a documentary executive produced by James Franco and music by Dar Williams.

The film added at times an annoyance to my life. Poets spend their days being unseen. Filmmakers spend their days seeing everything. And sooner or later, I knew that would include me. I had no idea how squeamish I was about talking about myself. The whole year they had filmed the girls: telling their stories, writing their poems, living their lives. In one of the final shoots, the director turned the cameras on me, and said it was time to start filming me, to tell the girls more of my story. I put up many defenses and was intractable. The girls did not need to know about me, I said. I was better kept in the background, I said. The girls did not need to know. At the same time, the girls began to ask me more questions. Where did I grow up? Was I in love? What was my story? Just as some of the girls had been resistant to write about themselves, now my own resistance matched, if not surpassed, theirs. Curious.

Something began to gnaw at me. Honduras has been a land decimated by imperial forces: the Spaniards, the British, the Americans. Each came to make this banana republic more flimsy, pillaging it for what they wanted or needed, exploiting the locals and leaving. I began to feel I could not be one more gringo with good intentions, asking the schoolchildren to bare their souls in their poems and not bare my own. Finally I chose to tell my story, the whole story, to one of the girls, before I left. Someone from the film crew said later I was brave. But I do not think I would have been pushed to do so had there not been a film. I would not have been brave, I would have left the home without speaking about myself. I had self-effaced myself a hundred times. I could easily have been a coward—if that word is too harsh, then “an introvert”—hid behind my poetry anthology and a need to keep a teacher-ly distance. But was I making up these rules to keep a distance because I was uncomfortable? And was it not unfair for me to stay spiritually clothed while everyone else was being asked to strip?

I would have kept my invisibility; after all, I was comfortable being invisible, I had survived that way. And guess who else knew a thing or two about that? Oddly, I had not put that together as something I had in common with the girls. Half my life seems unconscious sometimes.

In a city where three people are killed every day, invisibility is just part of life; you turn around and a trap door opens on someone you had just seen the day before. Three months before I arrived one of the *tias*, the ladies who work around the clock in the home, had lost her husband: he had been gunned down outside his front door by young boys.

One girl asked me why I did not fear being with them when so many gringos were not coming. Maybe, I said, it was the ghost of my murdered cousin. He had died so young: twenty-three. His death made me want to make these invisible girls visible. My cousin's sister said they had killed my cousin because he was gay. We'll never know. The police did not care. My cousin was not an important person. Invisibility hurts and I did not want anyone else to experience more of that hurt if possible: the injustice of it, the horrible forgetfulness visited on people whom the world deems unimportant. No more of that.

What's more, the girls knew an art of invisibility to match their country's invisibility. It was an art connected to their shame of

abandonment. So missionaries might spend days, weeks, years with these girls and not really quite know them at all. And guess who knew something about that art, too? The film was asking the girls and me to come forward: this was a eucharist, after all, a dance of two. You could blame it on the film, but I think Christ was asking to see us. And there is no shame when Christ is in the room.



My mother delivered me in Hartford Hospital, fifty years ago, on the very hot August day Martin Luther King had delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech. His hope and his dream have been there from the start of my time on this planet. In that same year, King could not sit idly by in Atlanta; he had to go to Birmingham. I suppose, fifty years later, I felt some of the same urgency once I had visited Our Little Roses: I just suddenly could not sit idly by in New Haven. I had to do *something*, even if I seemed the most unlikely choice. I had to go back. I had to honor that wish: Don’t forget us. The world forgets Honduras, forgets the girls, forgets the poverty. It is easier to forget than remember.

In the sixties Americans rallied, marched, and sang, while boys grew their hair out and girls wore mini-skirts. I grew up to the tunes of Pete Seeger, Peter, Paul and Mary, Janis Joplin, and the Mamas and the Papas. Mom, Dad, and I saw The Beatles and The Supremes deliver their first songs on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in black and white. We saw everyone assassinated: the Kennedys, King, and Malcolm X. As a child I remember how helpless I felt to see my parents so distraught. We saw the boys come back in body bags from the Vietnam war. The evening news would count the dead and the TV would go off around midnight, to be replaced by a grainy snowy static that covered all the little towns across America. That is how I started in the world. And from the start there was always the hope from King at the edges. All those sights and sounds are in my nerve endings, Pete Seeger singing, *A time for peace, I swear it’s not too late. . . .*



In these poems by the schoolchildren the invisible speaks. Their words lead you to what you cannot see, and that moves rather closely to the world of Christ. The book is not about me, but of course it *is*

about me too, just as a church service is not about me yet I am in it and a part of it.



Perhaps when that girl asked me not to forget them it was bigger than the girls—it was the boys, the people begging at the street, those murdered by gang members, the seven million in the country, the one million out of it looking for work, the twenty-four thousand kids who tried to cross the Rio Grande in search of work, the cleaning ladies, all of them. Our book began to feel like it was containing invisible millions.



Students memorized Antonio Machado, Jane Kenyon, W. H. Auden, Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, William Blake, William Shakespeare, the twenty-third psalm in the King James version. While they memorized poems, I memorized their faces, the joy I saw when they got something, when they held their heads a little higher. Local Honduran poets came to the classroom. Roberto Sosa, a well-known Honduran poet who had died the year before I arrived, said: “It is practically a poetic country. There are more poets than anyone.” That gave me hope. Sosa was with us in that classroom. For if Honduras is a country of poets it is a country of ghosts too. The ghosts and the poets were with us in our season of singing. A dentist and an engineer who loves windmills walked out that front metal gate, so why not a poet too? Our season of singing had come. Why not an army of poets?

My students wrote poems about the meaning of home living in Honduras. We wrote them in all kinds of ways: first in Spanish, then translating them into English, or first in English and then in Spanish, or sometimes both. We laughed and we cried. It was challenging work. I found girls from the home protective of their stories. Trust took a while to build. Some were truculent, intractable, stubborn. One said, “What is the point of this? How is poetry going to help me in the future with a job?” Well, the truth was, I did not know, maybe poetry would not help at all. I realized their personal stories and the beds they slept in were what they had, so exposing that to strangers did not happen instantly. Exposing feelings is delicate surgery. We could get grumpy and snappy. One girl wrote: “It is horrible to

know you've been thrown away." Some of the girls would only publish anonymously: like Emily Dickinson before them, exposing their souls in print was undesirable; they would evangelize only under the condition of not being seen. I intuitively understood that.



I knew few back-stories. I was told one by the founder of the home. She met with me when I was two months into my time there and exasperated, still unsure of how to run a classroom and faltering in my belief this anthology could get done. She said, "Wait until I get there. There are things you do not know." Our talk gave me new reserves for patience. She told me about one of the girls in my class. At the age of four her mother gave her away to a stepmother. The stepmother tied a rock around her neck and threw her in a well. She screamed for days. A neighbor found her and brought her to our doorstep. No more stories, I said. I went back to the classroom. There was the girl, smiling shyly, holding her pencil, her uniform pressed. My teaching eerily improved immediately; the girl sitting before me was a miracle. If she wrote a poem, wonderful; if not, fine. She went on to write one of the most majestic ones.



Why me?

Why this?

Good questions. I have asked myself those questions so long, I realize they probably have no answer. I would not have predicted it. There were far more capable, competent educators and priests. Why me? I asked myself that question especially when a day of teaching frustrated me. And in the beginning there were many of those days. Why was it frustrating? Because I was navigating two languages and they are quite different for all their cognates, because my Spanish was sometimes weak and I felt like an idiot, because the student population is not ordinary, because school supplies were scarce, because some days we had no water and some days we had no class, because the tyranny of heat living that close to the equator was debilitating, because the girls from the orphanage have deep issues of abandonment, because they could be moody, because they live in dormitories

and their concentration is not always there, because there is no end to this list.



One assignment came out of nativity figurines I found in the trash. These clay figures are called *adornos*. Each child had to pick one and write in the voice of what she picked. One picked a cathedral. One picked a donkey. Another exercise was having older children write stories to the younger children. They wrote fairy tales with Honduran twists: Honduras and the five dwarves attacked by a witch who represented Spain, and how Columbus's main discovery was Honduras. The third semester we wrote prayers for everyone who had left the country. When I asked them to raise their hands if they knew someone who had walked out of town and not come back, everyone raised their hands. I have organized this anthology the way it was written. The last semester we had visitors from the States, poets and students of poetry, and by then, the children were ready for them. God had been generous in the timing. Visitors at the start would have been a disaster; they needed to trust me first.

I came up with bizarre methods for teaching poetry. Textbooks seemed to kill the energy in class and so we dropped those books, heavy as bowling balls on the floor, never to pick them up again. What worked was me saying the poems to them. What worked was memorizing them. A memorized poem was like a strike to all the bowling pins of doubts in their heads that they could not speak and know English; the poem was now inside of them, they could take that with them anywhere. That is why poetry I feel is so close to the spirit, so close to Christ: it is almost invisible.

I could tell the students had trouble with meter. After all, Spanish is accented differently with actual accents, and English rhythm is subtler to follow. I wanted them to understand the meter of Auden and Dickinson. One day while I was trying to figure this out I heard the sounds of salsa out the window. I asked my students how many beats were in salsa. Four, they said, usually, and glared at me with exasperation because this was plainly so *obvious*. I said, "Perfect." So it came about that my students danced and recited Emily Dickinson's "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" with a salsa machine in chapel.

I could tell the students needed to move. They liked to dance. After every exam we started dancing. For every vocabulary quiz we would do twenty minutes of dancing to Diana Ross and The Supremes.



One day a girl from the home came to me—one who had been stabbing her pencil into the sofa when we met privately and saying that poetry was boring. She came to me and said, yes, yes, she wanted to recite the Langston Hughes poem on Helen Keller. When she did, she did so flawlessly. She had first wanted to go into the book anonymously with her own poems. Later she came to me—and she almost never came to me—and said, “I want my name in the book.” And so it shall be: Leyli Karolina Figueroa Rodriguez.



Honduras literally translates as “the depths.” The land got its name from Columbus when he was trying to navigate himself out of there through the deep barrier reefs, and he said how grateful he was to get out of “these depths.” Ironic that the depths that discoverer disparaged over would be the depths where I would discover joy.



We wrote in the depths of violence. I did not believe writing could stop violence. But I believed it was adding something to the country where there was so much subtraction. I had felt that with my cousin’s death. When I wrote about him it gave solace to the ache of his expanding emptiness, for his murder was unsolved: dead after a bar fight of some sort, floating in the Saint Augustine River. *A time for peace, I swear it’s not too late. . . .*



Honduras was, in the end, my mission work, but not in the old-fashioned sense of that word. Honduras had instead turned me on my head; I had embarked on a reverse-mission—they changed me.



Estimados Tania, Astrid, Bianca, Stacie, Ana Ruth, Ana Cecilia, Paola, Cristopher, César, Sara, Leily, Valery, Daniela, Katherine, Marcela, Marie José, Vanessa, Francisco, José Adriano, Jozsef, Juan Manuel, Ricardo, Staci, Celea, Rocio, Juan Carlos, Jesus,

Lizzie, Roberto, Birdee, Aylin, Astrid, Victoria, Cindy, Diana, Emely, Greisi, Ismelda, Abel, David, Rafael, Gabriel Alonso, Gabriel Fernando, Selim, Kevin, Leonardo, Jacob, Wilfred, Angel, Perla, José Alonso, Dayana, Elsy, Jacobo, Gabriela, Josué, Laura, Luis, Michael, Mario y Valerie:

Are you still sitting at your desks? I am far from you now. What are you thinking about in your classroom, ten feet by ten feet with stone floors and bright blue walls? An interior room without windows, we had a small blackboard where I wrote English and Spanish words. Remember? You sat in a half circle and I sat on the other side of the circle. You wore uniforms, blue skirts and pants and white shirts. I was the sweating balding priest with coffee breath. Remember? Remember me? I remember you.

*Cuidense,
Padre Spencer*



One day, I worked on a poem with César. César was a very tall and large teenage boy, for Honduras—about six feet three inches tall—who would easily have been picked for a quarterback if they played football there.

After we finished his first poem, he said: “This is my first poem.”

I said, “What do you think?”

He said, “I think I like it. It is about my dreams. I want people to know about my dreams.”

I said, “Now you need to go home and read it to your mother and then translate it into English for tomorrow.”

“Okay, Mister,” he said (that’s how they referred to me).

Then he said: “I want to go to the United States one day. I’ve never been, Mister. I’d like to see your country. I hear it is beautiful. Thank you for taking time with us, Mister. We have God in our hearts when you are with us. I am happy with my poem, Mister.”

He really said that. The world stopped for a moment for me. It humbled me, the emotion sounded so pure. I felt unworthy to be the bearer of God. Maybe everyone does. Maybe that is part of the deal. It was what a priest had asked of me back in Rhode Island in our check-in meetings when I was training to be a priest as a seminarian: *How did I see myself as an icon of Christ?* Such questions often stymied me. I wanted to answer them correctly if I could. I wanted

to be an icon or a bearer, but I was not always certain I could be. Yet with poetry I often have had that sensation that the poems bore divinity. And when I shared them with others I felt the joy of some spiritual midwifery. Surely that was priestly? So maybe that is what poetry does? Or can help to do? Put God in your heart.

But Christ, to know *him*, that was going to take all those teenagers I had been so terrified to teach. That was going to require guts.



Joszeff Ramos, a student from my ninth grade, wrote a poem that remembered his father, who was shot in the back twenty-five times in Guatemala. That was one less person forgotten, words undoing bullets.

A time for peace, I swear it's not too late. . . .



I stayed long enough in San Pedro Sula to see the beauty behind the headlines of “most dangerous city” and “murder capital,” which, like any other label, diminish people. The beauty was in those girls. Paul wrote in Galatians that he imagined Christ’s church as a unified whole. He wrote: “For all of you are one.” Paul is a gritty, tough-love kind of guy, and for me to feel his words “all of you are one” in Honduras I had to sit down with Tania under the tin roof of the orphanage, with the cameras rolling, and say: “It is time for me to tell you about myself. I am afraid to do it. . . .” It felt like a bone was about to be reset.

And so I spoke, out and out it came, I spoke of being a gay man, spoke of attempting to take my own life twice, spoke of being locked in a nuthouse, spoke of being estranged from parents, spoke of being homeless for a time, spoke of living for three years in the living room of my psychiatric nurse. I paused. This was not the resume I usually led with in any type of interview. What parish would hire *that*? What would she think of all this? What would the seventy-two girls think? What would anyone seeing or reading it think? What would she make of my long silence?

Tania said—her bright curls shining in the moonlight, her eyes shining like airplane windows at night—she was surprised to hear me say all this. She had no idea. But she understood why now I came to the place where she had lived for fourteen years, to the place where

not one single relative had ever visited her. She said, “You understand us. That is why God brought you here.” Talk of God in Honduras is without irony: God is a force, not window dressing, not a hollow custom. She was my priest then, you see, my Christ—listening, not judging.

I said, “Tania, I don’t know if this makes for a good resume for a priest.”

Tania said: “No, you, you are a good priest.” She said it without hesitation. How could she *know* such a thing? Was she as smart as all the people on those committees who had met and screened me for priesthood for over five years? Was she smarter than they were? Our little crumbling cement table with tile chips embedded into it was feeling an awful lot like an altar.

I was stunned by her affirmation of me. I had waited fifty years for it. I felt a little more in my body, more integrated from my skin to my bones. We were on sacred ground. I had struggled so in seminary. Distant regatone music thumped from inside a tin shack over the wall. A cockroach crawled across my sandal. I never felt up to the high standards of seminary, everyone more strident in their faith, articulating themselves so clearly in their exams. How I bumbled through liturgical moves, feeling watched and inept.

I said, “How can you say that, Tania, that *I* am a good priest?”

Tania said, “I have been watching you.”