

Jennifer Fenn

Donner Summit

Freight trucks stop on the blacktopped lot
where horses once pulled wagon trains.
A lone picnic table sits surrounded
by a jumble of large, slate gray rocks
like a shrine to the traveling pioneers
who died close by.

I stand still, reflecting
on the settlers' gripping starvation,
tears of seeing their families die,
lines in hollowed-out faces
as they agonize
whether or not
to eat the dead,
slow nods as they agree
that their loved ones
would offer themselves
to give life.

I wonder if this place
once marked by cannibalism
is at peace.

Like praying hands
in the early morning light,
pines point
toward heaven.

The Cats and the Footless Grandmother

Barbara and I sit with her mother
on the rest home patio.
We smile at the litter
of tiny, orange, feral kittens
scampering and rolling
in the flower beds.
Their brown striped mother
crouches by,
ready to hiss and scratch
if we get too close to her babies.

A sliding glass door opens.
A tiny, white haired lady
rolls up in her wheelchair,
shaking cat food into a tin,
slides the door closed.

This grandmother
with no feet
smiles from the window.
The mother cat lies down,
allowing her kittens
to partake.

Dia De Los Muertos

A haibun

Over the border, a sweating migrant couple holds their breath, checking all directions. They run before any border patrol agents can spring at them like snakes from behind a cactus to slap them back into the poverty they left behind. The farther they run, the more their aching legs refuse to carry them. Throats parched like the West Texas desert, they collapse with no one for miles around to offer them water.

dreams of a new life,
a place to raise kids, money
for Mamá back home.

Mamá smiles at her three youngest children laughing as they run with cousins around grandparents' graves. She looks down at the swollen joints in her calloused, dry hands, as she thinks of her oldest and his wife. Two months and no word. Her smile fades as she slowly ladles the refried beans onto the corn tortillas she'd made that morning. Staring into the distance, she sighs. They're not here for this holiday.

family gathers
on the picnic cloth spread out,
two spots now empty.

The shadows of prickly cactus mark their graves. With only their clothing for shrouds, the couple lies in the same position they fell in. Two months into putrid decay, they start to disintegrate into the hard, desert soil, with no family to gather.

no wind to relay
news of this couple's passing
this Day of the Dead.

Closer to Home

I. A Sikh professor talks with a friend,

strolling the streets of Manhattan.

A group of raging young men

attacks him, pulling his beard,

yelling out for all to hear,

“Terrorist! Osama!”

Jaw broken, he makes the newspaper

I’m reading here in Fresno.

II. I listen to an elderly friend at church

tell me about walking the streets of Fresno

with her tiny dog and her cane,

about the hat she wore that day

with drapes shielding her neck

and hunched back from the sun,

how a car approached, window rolled down,

driver shouting, “You dirty Muslim!”

not noticing the cross on her neck.

III. At a friend’s wedding dinner,

we raise our champagne flutes in a toast.

I set mine down, while everyone guzzles.

The guy next to me laughs.

“You’re not Muslim, are you?”

Dora

I juggle big bags of groceries
hanging from my arms and hitting my hips,
I sigh at their cost.
A white envelope sticks out of my mailbox.
I add it to my load.

Another letter from a children's agency.
that needs money.
Which one this time?

Bags on my counter, I open the letter.
It pleads, "Won't you sponsor a child
for twenty dollars a month?"

I start to rip the letter to shreds,
but then a photo falls out.
It's a little girl in a dress
decorated with bright ribbons.
She sits outside a bare wooden house
on dry, dirt ground,
remaining grass yellow and dry.
She looks at me with dark eyes,
innocent yet so serious.

Guatemala.
Three years old.
Dora.

Dora.

I stick her picture
on my refrigerator.
I can't throw her away
with the letter.

Jennifer Fenn's poetry has appeared in fifteen different journals, including *Song of the San Joaquin*, *Tiger's Eye*, *Nomad's Choir*, *Medusa's Kitchen*, and *National Catholic Reporter*. She self-published two chapbooks, *Blessings*, and *Song of the Katabatic Wind*, as church fundraisers.