

Among Schoolchildren

For Father Edmund Harris

The one-story houses were painted aqua, violet, orange, pistachio.
I spoke to the taxi driver in broken Spanish.
I was becoming a priest, I told him, God willing,
as we drove over muddy ruts, pot holes, and alongside hungry dogs.
Much of the taxi's interior had been removed.
Time slowed that summer in San Pedro Sula.
Around the rotary, legless men shook their tambourines,
epileptics convulsed and the blind tapped their sticks
through donkey excrement. Blue mountains and fields of banana trees
shadowed the city's edges. There were the many poor
on the muddy river bank assembling huts out of rubbish.
I had come to work in an orphanage in Villa Florencia.
Inside the ten foot wall with barbed wire, behind the metal gate,
guards fingered their pistols like bibles,
and seventy orphaned girls politely greeted strident Christians.
One had been found on a coconut truck.
She had lived on coconut juice since birth,
had trouble speaking, preferred not to be held.
Two sisters had been left at a street corner on a sheet of cardboard;
their mother told them to wait, then never came back.
It was a landscape both porous and uninviting.
Half way up one mountain was an enormous white Coca-Cola sign.
Rain steadily fell against the tin roofs and colored the chapel windows to plum.
Sweat colored my T-shirt the color of a steeped tea-bag.
At night, grease on my cheeks shone, lit by the Coca-Cola sign
that would redden and whiten like the eye of an insomniac.
The clock on the night-stand was like a face I could not reach.
A world widened in me. But what of my Protestant professors rearranging
furniture in their well-appointed heads,
hunched in their sepia-colored libraries?
Was it true, what they said, that a priest is a house lit up?

SPENCER REECE