JUDITH CLARK

PANIC

I
Papa, driving the family car
debates politics with Saul
Mama next to him
navigates
in the back seat
Brother pinches
me scrunched
between him and Saul

Papa’s voice rises
hysterical
as he turns
red faced and furious
jabbing his finger at Saul
his bullet words
flying
scatter-shot

all the grown-ups are screaming
no eyes on the road
no hands on the wheel
the car speeding
down the highway
on its own

II
Driving
breakneck speed
around Mexico City’s plazas
one broken down Volks
four Mexicanos
five gringos
playing chicken with cars
cabbies
strollers
scattering roosters and goats

24
nine students
nine kids
    on a roller coaster ride
    laughing and screaming
    unaware that

    as the days speed by
    two of us will die
demonstrators
shot down
by soldiers on rooftops
in one of these very plazas

III
Now it's me behind the wheel
driven by blind panic
adrenaline pumping
    lungs constricting
praying this chase to end
to end
to turn back the clock
to be home with my baby
to be home

but I've lost my way
    lost my mind
careening down this highway
toward the brick wall
    the shot gun blast
    the billy club
    the accuser's finger

stop me
womb/tomb

My daughter says,
"Draw me a picture of your room
Mommy."

What shall it be?

Glaring white enamel sink and toilet
squat against cement block walls
Do I live in a cellar bathroom?

Small, louvered windows
constrict the light
fracture my view
fenced-in yard
thin thread of highway on a
distant hillside

But then
there's the purple paisley bedspread
apricot pink towel and washcloth
green state shirts hung on the wall
my watercolors
blue skies
rust red deserts
endless turquoise seas
a chaos of color
renews the claustrophobic order

Shall I draw
the books and books and books and books
each a ride over the razor wire fence
a friend whispering intimate secrets
late into the night's solitary silence

Or my plants
green limbed children
I water each day
till they preen their lushness
hum their assurances

I'm still a good mother
How do I draw
my door
  clanging open
  clanging shut
by an officer's hand and command
or the bustle and clamor of
fifty-nine neighbors
  I can never escape?

What do I draw for my daughter?
a tomb
  or a womb?

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early Saturday morning

early Saturday morning
  like a child
  fleeing a nightmare
I creep to your room
  your bed
  your arms
We lie
  back to front
  two spoons
me
  tucked snugly
  into the soft folds
  of your body
your heartbeat
  a gentle metronome
  slows my breath
takes the tension
  of a long sleepless night
  days holding tight to
bitterness
  rage
Your soft words
    "It wasn’t fair"
    release my
tears
    rain
    on parched fields

Uncurling our bodies
    we rise
    make coffee
settle down to knit
    leaning on plumped up pillows
    at opposite ends of the bed
amiably
    facing
    each other

I peek at you:
    concentrated,
    counting stitches
you look up
    our eyes
    meet
love
    swelling my heart
    like a dandelion
    cracks a city sidewalk
blooms
    into a smile
    gentle
    genuine
for you