

## **Sometimes, When a Child Smiles**

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mouth open wide and greedy, even the molars exposed,  
it reminds me of a single afternoon when I'm passing

through an orphanage in Ecuador, distancing myself  
with one-armed hugs and toy store gifts. I tour

cafeteria-sized bedrooms guarded by bougainvilleas  
scratching at windows, frowning palms standing shoulder

to shoulder. Outside the girls' windows, under the garden's  
uncut hair rested a secret everyone knew and no one believed.

And I know the rules: I should not repeat it, should resist  
telling a story about orphans, yet how can I ignore it when

the sun angles from the west at five o'clock in May, when  
light's neither new nor old, color of freshly-squeezed lemons,

and it slices across a child's face at that silent moment  
between a grin and laughter when the open smile reminds me

of the girl who led me through the garden to where she found  
the baby. But that's too common for a story. It is this:

for two months, the six-year-olds hid the newborn.  
They snuck cartons of milk under their navy cardigans

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and let the baby suckle off their fingertips. One girl chewed  
her food and spit it inside the baby's mouth like she'd seen

stray dogs feed their pups. They named her Caramela,  
a candy they wanted, and made her so content, the nuns

never heard her cry. Sometimes, when a child smiles,  
I have to look away, for I know I could not do what

those girls did: accept a secret without fearing it;  
spit into a child's mouth and know this to be love.

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