

Honorable Mention

Loretta Diane Walker - *Odessa, Texas*

SOAKING IN SHAME

Since I was old enough to clasp my hands,
fold my body into humbleness,
Mama instructed me to pray.

I prayed:

*Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep
and if I die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take,*

and please let it be dry.

Twelve years old I wake, soaking in shame,
sheets stained with a gold ring of insult;
body, mattress, air perfumed with pee.

I'm thirteen before I wake with only scents
of Irish Spring seeping from my skin.

In San Antonio, in search of a restaurant,
I count at least thirteen souls
stretched along the sidewalk,
clothes knotted together in cotton fingers,
bodies folded in homelessness.

I wonder if they pray
bedded beneath the sky's black awning,
music, money, gaiety dancing in distant darkness.

For a glassy second, a pair of dull eyes dart past us,
and rainbow colored umbrellas line along the Riverwalk
in the shiny summer night.

Their faces are shadows
as we walk around them
hugging our purses in indifference,
the stench of urine, tobacco, fear, frustration
spitting at our heels.