



Falling in Love with Fellow Prisoners: Poems

Gwendolyn Zepeda

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"Drive back and forth/A rush-hour tide/I strive to regain that feeling I felt/When I thought that this was worth it./The drive is gray./I cry." Gwendolyn Zepeda, a Houston native who has struggled to escape the inner-city barrio she grew up in, wonders why she's crying about her long commute to the suburbs. "I'm driving towards something I sure/Can't complain about, something my/Parents could never have had."

Single with three sons, Zepeda made her way in corporate America, "the cold, beige womb of a money-grubbing mother," in the fight to provide them with better opportunities. Along the way, she has had to come to terms with the guilt of working in physical comfort while others work outside, trapped in dangerous jobs; the realization that the quality of her work doesn't really matter to anyone; and obnoxious male bosses who need "a wife on the side," or worse, proudly report their sons' sexual exploits. She's afraid, because "My whole life depends/On satisfying this man's needs ... My own son is my everything. He's the/Only reason I'm here now this/Afternoon listening to this man [pee]/Into my brain."

She's an astute observer of people: her elders, full of bitterness; the stranger on the elevator, who exudes the smell of hate; the needy girl who's broken and screams like a bird in her ear so that "I turn and slip away. I've/Had my fill. I'm in the water/Where it's warm and deep and/She can't follow./Goodbye. Good luck." She's compassionate and considerate, but Zepeda always chooses survival.

She has survived, even prospered, but her innermost fears still haunt her: "I like lying safe with you/Here in the dark, but still/Keep planning in case/I'm left alone." Whether musing on dysfunctional relationships or parenthood, Gwendolyn Zepeda, the first Poet Laureate of Houston, captures the aching loneliness and vulnerability of contemporary urban life.

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