

# The Poor

By Roberto Sosa, translated by Spencer Reece | Volume 4.1 Winter 2018

The poor are many  
and so —  
impossible to forget.

No doubt,  
as day breaks,  
they see the buildings  
where they wish  
they could live with their children.

They  
can steady the coffin  
of a constellation on their shoulders.  
They can wreck  
the air like furious birds,  
blocking out the sun.

But not knowing these gifts,  
they enter and exit through mirrors of blood,  
walking and dying slowly.

And so,  
one cannot forget them.

— *Translated from the Spanish by Spencer Reece*

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## Translator's Note

Anglican missionaries first arrived in Honduras in 1768. Sponsored by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, which, in turn, was backed by a royal charter from England, these missionaries introduced themselves with the explicit aim of enlightening the Hondurans, whom they referred to in their tracts as “infidels” and “heathens.” In the nineteenth century, American banana companies established plantations, and by 1913 these companies controlled most of the production.

Today, Honduras is one of the poorest countries in Latin America. In the cities, legless beggars plead around the rotaries. The hills in the country are denuded and look like poorly shaved chins. Thousands of Hondurans leave the country every year to find work.

In the summer of 2009 I went to San Pedro Sula as an Episcopal priest in training. One night after

dinner, I was introduced by my bishop to his favorite poem, Roberto Sosa's "Los Pobres." He felt "Los Pobres" captured the tone of long-silenced Hondurans. I had come to work in an orphanage for abused and abandoned girls. There were seventy girls I lived and worked with that summer. The stories of their pasts were terrible. Some had been so malnourished that their intellects were damaged. But after receiving food and permanent shelter, these girls came to life the way Lazarus must have.

Most evenings I spent alone in my room with dictionaries, flashcards, and lizards. I first memorized Sosa's poem, then, bit by bit, tried to put it into English. I spoke the poem in Spanish to myself before I completely knew what I was saying. Spanish generally felt lush in my mouth, but the music of "Los Pobres" was sharp and blunt. As I began to comprehend more Spanish, I found the poem's tune magnifying its harsh intent. The poem became my anthem. I began to want to bring the words into English for others to hear without it becoming one more pillaged thing. I wanted it to be about Sosa and Honduras and the girls and not me. First published in 1969, "Los Pobres," in its sparse language, captures the pain of that overlooked country. Stripped of baroque excess, the poem hangs on the page like a crucifix. — SR



**Roberto Sosa** (1930-2011) spent his early life working menial jobs to support his family. Sosa published *Los Pobres*, his first book, in 1969, which won the Adonais Prize in Spain. He edited the magazine *Presente* and taught literature at a university in Honduras.



Photo © Rosanne Olson

Born in Hartford, Connecticut, and raised in Minneapolis, poet **Spencer Reece** is the son of a pathologist and a nurse. He earned a BA at Wesleyan University, an MA at the University of York, an MTS at Harvard Divinity School, and an MDiv at Yale Divinity School. He was ordained in the Episcopal Church in 2011. Reece's debut collection of poetry, *The Clerk's Tale* (2004), was chosen for the Bakeless Poetry Prize by Louise Glück and adapted into a short film by director James Franco. He is also the author of the collection *The Road to Emmaus* (2013), which was a longlist nominee for the National Book Award.

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