

LOS PAYASOS

– Dancing at the Bedside of Death

By Victoria Millard, Seattle Washington

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*Death came slowly,
revealing his bones.
He could barely wave or clap
or sit upright,
a skeleton boy in a white bed
in a white room,
breathing frost,
his hands full of Popsicles.
Finally, there was nothing to hold onto.
He simply floated away
out of reach of hand or heart.*

*I thought our music and dances, our crazy medicine
might hold him, give him color, flesh him out,
dress him up in such delight that Death, come calling,
wouldn't even recognize him.
I'd hoped for a miracle administered by clowns.*

*One day the nurses told us we couldn't see him,
So we hung rainbow streamers in his doorway.
He saw them when he woke,
asked for "Los Payasos," the clowns.*

*And somehow, not even speaking the same language,
we shared a moment of mirth
with this child about to exit the world
as everyone circled into a sterile space,
silently saying goodbye.*

*They say he passed quite peacefully, on a Saturday.
I must have been walking in the park or running errands.
Our last visit, he did not wake to see the sign in the doorway.
He did not ask for us.*

*His mother gave us ice cream bars,
her sad face, even if I'd had words,
unanswerable.*

*I wanted to give her a hug.
Instead, I handed her a banana –
the plastic kind filled with seeds,
the one he liked to shake as we played concertina and violin,
and the social worker danced with the doctor,
rainbow streamers fluttered in the doorway,
and Jose and his parents and his little sister laughed.*



Victoria Millard is a clown and a poet living and working in Seattle, Washington.



I was so impressed with Victoria's poem that I was compelled to read it at the final workshop at *Gateway to the Heart*, the COAI International Convention. However, I could not read the whole poem without choking up, so Patty, Camila and Korey each read a paragraph.

To me the poem expresses the reality of our service. We walk through these children's lives. We share, we play and sometimes we cry with them. Sometimes the children die, sometimes they live, and then we go on to other children. Sad, yes, but whole and beautiful in its own way.

We form very special relations with these children, unlike medical personal, relatives or siblings. We are there with them in their play and in their fantasy. I will never forget any of them. But it is not with sadness that I remember them. Children when they die are very sweet in their innocence. It is their sweetness that I remember.

–Shobi