

Grace C. Ocasio

## PROBATION OFFICER INSIGNIA

Dad, when you flash your badge—a miniature Captain America shield—we become docile as chicks. We promise not to remind you of offenders who stock their tongues with half-truths, covet freedom the way a brand-new three-year-old prays for double-chocolate layer cake on a birthday plate.

We pledge to strip our tongues of sordid words, each time you shamble home from work, fuzzy as fog at midnight.

When we hold up our arms—straight as beams—to honor you, our tendons unzip. No, we cannot fathom crime facts you harbor in the special collection of your brain.

All we know is that when you flash your badge at lawbreakers, they are supposed to succumb, like gang leaders' rivals, yielding to switch blades.

We revel in your badge's light, best friend that keeps you from scuttling down a footbridge thick with your kudzu past.

JACK PETERSON

One day, you rescued me from a boy prickly as pine cones.  
He struck me with the spike of his hand,  
tore my adolescent skin.

I startled when your breaths erupted as snorts.  
You strode in front of me like the Minotaur,  
hedged me off from the gargoyle the boy became.

Weeks after that bully's attack,  
no amount of lotion or cream  
could subtract the tracks on my face.

Six months later, I spotted you,  
ambling up the front door of a neighborhood girl's house—  
Sara's. One year older than I with skin the color of flan.

The next day I witnessed how a neighborhood boy,  
midday, shouted, *Nigger lover*  
in front of Sara's home.

I could only remember how you collared that mishap-boy,  
waved me on, yelled, "Go home," as if *Gulliver's Travels*  
and *Jane Eyre* kept me from dialing you on my mind's phone.

I could never quite command my mind  
to conjure you straddling Sara,  
your bronzed hands gripping her sheets.

## CICELY

Your braids intricate as baskets woven  
by Charleston womenfolk,  
I forgot how you wore youth bright as sequins.

Eight-year-old black girl  
sporting two thick plaits, I treasured the gift  
of your hue, exotic as jacaranda.

You, regal as a snowy egret.  
I spotted you in subtle gowns  
on TV award shows.

The night of the Oscars,  
when your name wasn't announced  
winner, for *Sounder*, my heart slammed shut.

At nine, I marveled when,  
as Miss Jane Pittman your hands enacted ritual:  
right hand baptized oak with a cane,

left hand arced  
as if set in prayer  
like an Anglican priest's.

Years shot up between us, like weeds.  
Still, I claimed you as kin  
even as some later roles you played stumped me.

As matriarch in *Mama Flora's Family*,  
you said, *Harm will come to him*,  
repeating a long-ago lover's warning.

I squinted into the set, the logic of this lover's taunt  
lost to me. You'd adopted an accent as distant  
to my adult ears as the River Thames.