

Leslie Monsour

The Sloth

The mugginess had soaked us to our skin.
The man who brought the rental car was rude
And spoke a lazy Spanish with a grin.
We set out in a dilatory mood.

Our talk was idle: "I don't care . . ." "Perhaps . . ."
"Could you turn up the air conditioning?"
We swayed and bumped along, comparing maps
And routes, or drowsily envisioning

The might-have-beens of old or failed affairs,
Occasionally nodding off in twisting,
Ascending, and descending scenic lairs
With sudden rivers frothing through the misting

Volcanic chasms, glimpsed through missing planks
Of rusted, narrow, questionable bridges.
We passed the wild impatiens on the banks
Of moss along the road, the crimson ridges,

Tobacco-ruled, till something up ahead
Made us slam on the brakes. We met a sloth,
Unfairly named, midway, in arduous tread,
Its shabby shape, a hunk of burlap cloth

That groped the yellow line, the halfway point
Of where it had to go. Its chances poor,
It labored forward like a battered saint
Expecting pain, determined to ignore

The perils and the treachery of asphalt
And humans, heir to an instinctive code,
As several drivers coasted to a halt,
Intrigued by the enigma in the road.

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Doors swinging open, iPhone shutters snapping,
The eager paparazzi of the cloud
Forest emerged to marvel, almost clapping
At every inch of progress, sharing aloud

Their knowledge and surprise, advancing near
And commenting: “The two-toed ones attack.”
“Moths feed on algae growing in its fur.”
“It carries ecosystems on its back.”

The sloth, with solemn resolution, gained
The other side — the grasses and the grove
Of palms and rubber trees — while we remained
Pinned to the spot, watching the branches move.

White Christmas

I drove my father to the Desert Palms
Medical Plaza where we took a seat
In the air-conditioned waiting room, after
His name was added to the sign-in sheet.

Epiphany had passed, and still the fake
Tree blinked above the dummy Christmas gifts,
While palm trees decked the parking lot outside
Through windows stencil-sprayed with snowy drifts.

Some plastic evergreens were gathering dust
And fading on the sill. An orchestra
Over the intercom played standard tunes
Of peace on earth and fa la la la la.

While others in the room swiped at their phones,
We chose a magazine and leafed through news.
Something about a famed comedian's death
Prompted my dad to start in on the Jews.

I'd heard it all before, but even so,
Could not believe my ears. "Jews can't be trusted,"
He said. "They're always favoring their own."
"You're right, they're just like us," I hissed, disgusted,

Hoping no one had heard, then flipped the page to
Vacations in Japan, and, as I feared,
He muttered something else about the Japs.
How fitting when an Asian nurse appeared

In fiercely spotless polyester white
To lead my father back to Dr. Stein,
While *Walking in a winter wonderland*
Accompanied the cooling system's whine.

I studied the Potemkin Christmas scene
And almost laughed, because it was so sad:
The polyvinyl greens, the sprayed-on snow,
The empty gifts, good will towards men, my dad.