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President James Rethinks Ordelia

Mark Foster

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President James Rethinks Ordelia



Mark Foster

[26]

These Sundays when Ordelia comes
to church, we wince. Anemic
milky blotches spot her chocolate
skin, like someone shook over
her a half-cup of bleach. She must
have been years without a bath—
unless you count her baptism
eight months ago. I remember when
the plug was pulled that day—
the font drained slick as sin,
left her as residue.

Now she sways out of rhythm
in the back rows, where she hisses
and spits during prayers. Bird-like,
she scavenges the sacrament first,
then the fast offerings. She laughs
hysterically at odd times and perpetually
praises Jesus. Sweat congeals in the
worn rivulets of her evangelical dress.
She can hold no calling.

In public, she screeches and scolds
the missionaries,
then scares their investigators away
when they walk for the first time

on a sacred Sunday morning into
the true and living welfare system,
where her pew reeks like a sump;
her rags and stench, squeaks and snorts,
broods of dusty children squealing
like mice in the aisles.
Mildew seeps from the ceiling.
Every solid man sits with me
behind the pulpit.

These Sundays when Ordelia worships,
we remember that each baptism is a child
who outlasts a hundred transfers.

But what true church is this?
This pure religion that fills its pews
with the helpless,
with the widows and the fatherless.