



English Studies in Latin America

Wisp
How to Achieve Wetback Status
Tino

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“Wisp”
“How to Achieve Wetback Status”
“Tino”

Margaret Towner¹

Wisp

This wisp of a child
Arrives in my classroom,
In a faded pink dress so thin
The wind blows right through it.
She comes with puncture wounds
On her arm from a dog bite,
Untreated, but she is impatient
To tell the story of her journey north,
The crossing of the river,
Travelling among strangers,
With nothing of her own
But her thin pink dress.
My other students have learned
Not to talk about border crossings,
Learned not to think about
The dangers they have faced,
But this wisp of a child
Must tell it all.

November, 2011

¹ Margaret Towner grew up in Long Beach, California. She lived for many years in Latin America, including Montevideo, Santiago, San Salvador, and Mexico City, where her three children were born. While in Chile and Mexico, she studied Latin American folk music and dance. With a Bachelor's degree in Spanish and a Master's degree in Latin American Studies Margaret works as a literacy specialist, participates in a writing workshop, translates, and performs Latin American music. She writes children's songs and provides workshops for teachers to integrate diverse musical styles into their curriculum. Her children's CD, *Oceans Made Fun*, won a Parent's Choice Award. Margaret presently resides in Long Beach.

How to Achieve Wetback Status

She shows up
in my classroom,
one day, a tiny
sliver of life.
Wisps of wilted
plumes frame
her eyes, the color
of the river.
Once left behind
on the rancho
by her mother,
she now carries
buoyant hope north.
School is of no use
when she arrives.
She knows no books,
but she knows
about the river.

The *coyotes*
never asked
if she knew
how to swim.
They blew up
plastic grocery
bags, tied them
to her arms,
you know,
like wings.
At school
she speaks
of the mud,
how it oozed up
between her toes.
How her feet sank
into the sludge.

She speaks of fear
that wrapped around
her skin like darkness,
of stepping off
into nothing
with only plastic
bags around her arms.
She whispers
of haunting voices
that called her
into the river
as she clung
to the embankment.
In search of her mother
where water and night
become just one,
she sought to keep
her hope afloat.

I watch
the other girls
encircle her,
as her words trace
the path of the water.
Like she-dogs
they shield her
from fly balls
on the playground
and hover close,
as if their presence
could erase that
night, so they could
all forget the
journey north.

Tino

He'd charge into the classroom
Always laughing, always late
Always smiling at the girls.

He'd toss his books down on the table,
Always funny, always talking
Always slouching in the chair.

He'd talk about the pressure
Always watching, always wishing
Always wanting something else.

He'd try to sound out words
Always thinking through his answer
Always grinning when he was right.

He'd keep a cautious distance
Always careful, Always curious
Always everybody's friend.

But things aren't always the same
—The girls, they have it easy
Don't have to fight, don't have to join
Don't have to choose a side.—

Sunday afternoon he took his scooter
Went down 15th Street with the hope
Of seeing his little sister.

Florentino was his name
Called Tino by his friends
Revenge intended for another

He was shot by mistake.

*Tino Rivera—16 years old
killed on 1/7/08
Long Beach, CA*