

Where the Sun is Born

Curt Rosenthal
ARTWORK by Stephen Mead

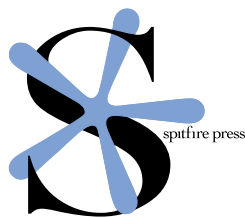


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In the largest country in the southern half of the Americas a handsome fellow was sleeping. His name: Josimar. He had a face perfectly round on a head perfectly large. His remaining features reflected happiness only a seven-year-old could find upon opening his eyes to the morning sun.

His bed was a wood board on stacks of bricks. His mattress a folded blanket. The sun climbed up the mountain and shined through the open window and across his brown chest, hot light across his torso. Watching the rays come inside and on him, he knew the sun was born each day from the sea.

Josimar would wake his head before he woke his body. Laying still. Polite not to wake his bottom, pretending he was floating on top of water.

He lived on a brick and concrete mountainside. High and away from boutique-shaded streets. Unpaved and reckless, in his streets dogs slept; walking patched people, shoeless, carried baskets, and poured cement blocks.

Josimar never brought anything from outside into his room. No football. Nothing up on the wall. No mirror to look at his reflection. The shorts he slept in he wore all day.

When Josimar heard the baby cry he sat up. He forgot about the baby. There she was on the floor. Yesterday he found her in Ma's room and wrapped her in a rag from the bucket under the sink.

Josimar stood up. He was tall, standing over her crying. He looked through his door to where Ma slept. She was gone to a doctor in the center of the country. That's where the bus rolled away to.

Josimar left to go to Auntie Juju's. The baby was crying. The road was never full at the time of sun rising. Josimar liked his feet on the soft dirt after a night's rain, but today the road was hard and dusty. He could not remember when it rained, but the sand next to the sea always stayed wet.

Auntie Juju was in her chair next to the window. A pot on the stove was cooking something, making steam. Josimar looked at her fat legs and up at the table. Today there was a milk pitcher where she usually puts the basket of biscuits.

Every day Josimar took the biscuits to the sea. The Fat Man and the Bald Man with Gloves took him in the Ice Truck to the sand so he could sell biscuits to the people from the Building City.

Yesterday the biscuits were on the table. He got money for them. When he came home Ma was leaving on a bus. She took his money and said goodbye. He told her she looked pretty. He went back home and found the baby in her room.

Josimar asked Auntie JuJu, Where is the biscuits?

Take the milk instead, Auntie JuJu said.

She didn't look at his eyes when she spoke. She stirred the pot on the stove. The milk was to make the baby stop crying. He couldn't sell the milk at the sea, but he put it on the table by the door. Auntie JuJu watched him without saying anything.

If he could not sell biscuits Josimar knew other ways to get money. Juggle a ball in rows of cars at the red-light-change-green. Carry heavy things for people walking from the Building City to the sand. And he got money in ways he never told Auntie JuJu. Taking the powder bags in and out for the Man Inside and Man Outside the Hole in the Wall.

I need to go into the toilet, he said to Auntie JuJu. Auntie JuJu nodded. Then she looked at the milk by the door. She made sure he looked at it too, so he didn't forget it when he left.

Auntie JuJu's house was the best place to sit when his stomach was filled up. But this morning it wasn't. He made a big one last night. The toilet behind his house was dirty and smelled bad. It was filled too high with mess. Flies were thick. But he made one anyway. He held the baby over the hole so she could make one too.

In Auntie JuJu's toilet room Josimar counted his bricks. Auntie JuJu would think he was doing toilet business. Fourteen bricks had made him money. He carried them up to Joao, Auntie JuJu's son. Joao put the bricks together around the toilet with cement. Josimar carried one brick at a time up the Long Road. He took them from the pile behind the gate next to the Church.

Josimar knew what bricks to lift from the floor in the toilet room. There were four in the floor that wiggled loose. They didn't look it, but he knew which ones. Joao laid them loose so Auntie JuJu could put important things under them. In a hole he dug for hiding.

With the bricks to the side the hole was open. Inside was a zip-up carrying bag. Josimar unzipped the bag.

Yesterday there was a ticket in the bag. A ticket like Auntie JuJu gave Josimar to hold when they took the bus to the soccer match. Today the ticket was gone. She cried when he said she looked pretty. He didn't cry back at her.

He turned the bag upside down and dumped Auntie JuJu's pictures and bracelets. They fell in the dirt in the hole. He placed the bricks back over the hole. The bricks looked tight together. He threw the bag out the window.

Josimar took the milk from the table and went to the door.

Auntie JuJu asked, What will you do today?

He said, Bring you some money.

She said, Ma went away.

He wanted to ask if Ma will come back, but he knew she wouldn't. He could tell by how she cried looking at him. She waved goodbye like she was going somewhere to die.

Auntie JuJu asked, Did she leave anything behind?

Josimar took the milk. He didn't answer because he was left behind; so was the baby. Auntie JuJu said nothing else too. She smelled like onions when he kissed her, but he didn't mind.

In his room the baby was crying, just how he left her. He put the milk down. The bag had a net in the side. Josimar put the bag over his head. He zipped it tight, with his mouth on the net. It was easy to take air. He took the bag off and tossed it on the

floor. It would do fine.

He picked up the baby and held her on his lap. He poured the milk in her mouth. It splashed on her face. It splashed over her chest. It splashed on the ground. She choked on it. She spit it up. It ran under the bed. The baby didn't cry anymore.

Josimar finished the milk and wiped his lips with his arm.

The baby was not heavy in the bag, strapped on his back. He could feel her feet pushing against him. Arms and legs and breathing. He left his room. He did not look back. Now he would go too, go to the sea.

He stood on the front step looking out to the sea, too far away to be real. He wished he could hear it, but he could only listen to the waves in his memory. He turned his back so she could look at the sea through the net in the bag.

He explained, A boy knows as much about the sea as a man. Way out far is where the water is part of the sky. That's where the sun is born, every day. That's where the rain comes from, when the sky gets too wet.

At the road he put his head down. He had to think how to get the baby down to the Ice Truck. They needed to meet the Fat Man and the Bald Man with Gloves. Walking to the right means fewer steps to the bottom. But Auntie JuJu was always at her window. She would see the bag. She would see what Ma left behind.

The way to the left was the Long Road. It took more time down the mountain and had its own danger. Josimar would need to pass through the Square Ditch. Where the Mukakas lived. But less danger than losing the baby to Auntie JuJu. She would put it away with the others.

His steps were small and his way long before him, but his purpose was certain. Passing houses of bricks. Houses on top of houses. Houses on concrete slabs. The morning of the day after the day before another hot day. All the days on the mountain.

He spoke to the baby, he told her, People who live up this mountain don't leave it, and never know the sea.

He instructed her, telling stories of how the sea was different than the mountain.

Stories that started, Fish live in the water and...Waves visit the beach and...

After a short walk he stopped at the Juice House. It was at the top of the Long Road, before it went steep, a hard angle down the mountain, past the Church, right through the Square Ditch. The Juice House was always grinding drinks from apples and bananas and pineapples and oranges and mangos and acerola and guarana.

Workmen in plastic chairs drink the mixed juice in plastic cups. Josimar saw a man turn to stroke a dog. He took the cup from the table so the man could not see, and dashed fast, down the Long Road, balancing the cup without spilling.

The man watched Josimar and laughed.

The baby cried.

Josimar ran and ran. When he stopped he was many steps down the Long Road, and out of breath. He took off the bag and checked the baby. She had her eyes open. They were wet with tears. She had stopped crying to look at him, like she was his, and he drank down the juice. She watched him, curiously. When he was almost done he stopped. He circled his finger in the bottom of the cup, then let her suck the juice from his finger. She smacked her lips like she was okay with the taste.

He said, It's just you and me. Then he kissed her on the nose, sticky with juice.

Before Josimar made it to the Square Ditch he had to cross in front of the Church. He wasn't scared of the Church even though the doors were always open and it was dark inside. No one was ever there but the wind. He heard people say even the Lord never went in the Church.

The day he took the bricks to Joao he stepped through the doors. Each time he passed he wanted to enter, until the night came. He went in after he made sure no one watched him. He sat on a bench near the front and looked up at the Man on the Cross. The Man on the Cross looked dead, hanging there like he had been in pain.

Josimar spoke to the Lord, No one comes in here because the Man on the Cross can't bring the sea to the people on the mountain. They pray to him and wear him around their neck, but he is dead. I see him everywhere around me. The same man is on the big cross up on the mountain, high above the city. He is supposed to do great things for everyone, but why can't he bring the sea to people on the mountain?

Josimar ran up the Long Road after he talked to the Lord. He told Joao how he was brave. That he went in the Church. Spoke with the Lord. Maybe the Man on the Cross will get down and do something for the people on the mountain.

Joao laughed, and told Josimar, The Church is a place people go when they do something wrong.

Josimar heard something ripping at the sky ripping. He looked up and two kites. This meant the Mukakas were down the road. At the Square Ditch. He hated the smell of the Square Ditch, the Mukakas were just as rotten. He closed the zipper. She was quiet from the juice, could be sleeping because the noises she made sounded happy.

The Square Ditch was a burning place. A graveyard for junk and mess no one could use: broken machines; animal carcasses; bones of people; wasted waste, charred black.

Josimar stepped through ashes. He walked softly behind a pile of tires. All five Mukakas were together on a pile of metal and brick. Tin lean-tos and burnt cars in the Square Ditch was their home. The oldest was Xavier, he was yelling at the others.

Josimar could see the Main Road. He saw the top of the Ice Truck. He could not see the Fat Man or the Bald Man with Gloves.

The cars on the Main Road were honking. They made a line like a snake into the tunnel that went through the mountain. On the other side of the tunnel was the Building City. The place in front the sand, the sand in front of the sea.

Two Mukakas on top of the scrap pile sailed kites. Kites built from market bags, spread opened on a stick-cross, tied with string. The Mukakas put up two kites for the Man Outside the Hole in the Wall. Only when the Policia Militar come to cross of the Main Road and the Mountain Road.

That's how the Mukakas made money. When the Policia Militar walk up the Mountain Road they put up two more kites, to make four. Two kites: a warning. Four kites: the Man Outside the Hole in the Wall tells the Man Inside the Hole in the Wall to stop moving powder bags.

Josimar had a good view of the Policia Militar. They put on hats when they stepped out of the car, lights spinning on the roof. Army men in gray pants and black boots. Guns hooked in belts. Holding beat sticks. Passing people who act polite, but are scared.

Xavier was sitting on a tire screaming, Let up two more kites!

Josimar kept out of the way. Silently crossing the back of the Square Ditch.

Xavier turned and kicked dust when he saw Josimar. He ran at him like a rabid dog, pointing at the bag, saying loud and angry, You must pay money to cross my Square Ditch! Pay money or give me half of what you got in the bag!

Josimar told Xavier, I know that rule, but I won't have money till tonight.

Behind Xavier he could see the Policia Militar strolling up the hill. They watched the kids from a distance, and smiled at people they passed, dropping beat sticks in hands.

Josimar said, I need to keep walking. I will be late to the sea.

Xavier looked mad, and curious.

Josimar saw the Policia Militar nearing. Xavier turned around and saw the men in uniform.

He screamed at the Mukakas, Let all the string out or we get hit on the head by the Hole Men.

Four kites were not skied, only three. Xavier took Josimar by the shirt.

He said, You wait!

Xavier went to the top of the scrap pile. He grabbed one of the Mukakas. Holding the little boy's throat in his hand he squeezed it until the boy couldn't breathe. It was Xavier's small brother: Cafu.

Josimar was always sad about Cafu, because he had only one arm. It tore off in an old machine someone left to die in the Square Ditch, although it was still half-alive.

Xavier pushed Cafu down and he rolled off the pile and ran away crying. Xavier let the fourth kite up. He tugged at the string to lift it higher and yelled back to Josimar, You pay me when you come across tonight.

Josimar said, Okay.

But he knew he was never coming back to the mountain. He started his way out of the Square Ditch. The Policia Militar stood on top of the edge of it looking down at the mess.

Xavier turned and said, But you must leave half of inside the bag until then...When you come back with money you will get the half back. If I am not hungry.

Josimar stood still.

Xavier handed the fourth kite to a Mukaka and came down the pile and approached Josimar. When he got close he grabbed at the bag and tried to pull it off Josimar's back. Josimar held tight. Xavier shook Josimar to the ground. The baby cried loud when they fell. Josimar rolled to his side to keep her from squeezing against the dirt.

Xavier yelled loud and excited, Baby in the bag! Baby in the bag!

Xavier got a devil look on his face. Josimar grabbed a rusty nail from the ground. He stood and held it out at Xavier. Xavier came at him, furious at Josimar for holding a nail up to his face. Josimar stabbed Xavier in the eye, then ran up the side of the Square Ditch.

Xavier was shrieking so loud his noise covered the baby's wailing. The Policia Militar saw it all happen. They recognized Josimar's large head bobbling toward them. His polite face was the boy who sold them biscuits at half price. Josimar hurried past their boots. He didn't stop running, and rambled down the Mountain Road.

Xavier chased in a zigzag, with the nail stuck in his eye. He toppled to the ground and rolled in the dirt. He held his bleeding socket in his cupped hand. The nail was stuck and he couldn't get it out. He couldn't stop screaming, or the blood from gushing through his fingers. He stood and chased Josimar again, but ran his neck into the beat stick of the Policia Militar.

The Policia Militar had been looking for a reason to catch Xavier. They would make him show them to the Man in the Hole.

Josimar could also have shown them to the Hole, but they didn't know Ma made him go there and get her small bags of powder.

On the Main Road Josimar approached the Fat Man. He stood next to the open door of the Ice Truck smoking a cigarette. His other hand reached inside the truck and turned the key to start the engine.

A bag of ice dropped to the ground from behind the truck. The Bald Man with Gloves jumped to the dirt.

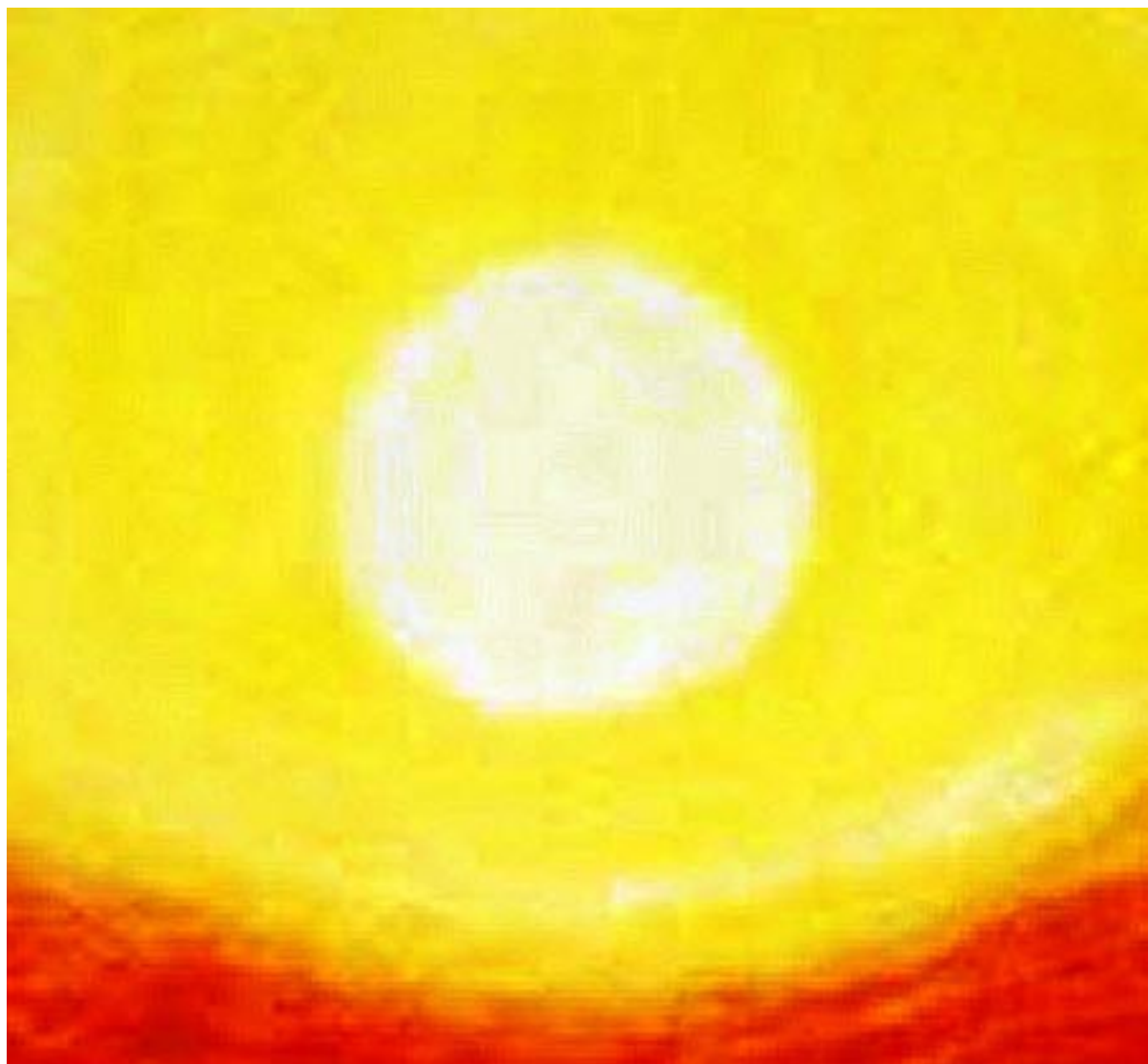
The Fat Man told Josimar, I am hungry. Give me three biscuits. We are late.

Josimar told the Fat Man, I have no biscuits today. Only a bag of clothes.

The Fat Man said, Clothes don't move unless they are on a body.

Josimar was set to run. Then he looked at the soft eyes of The Bald Man with Gloves reaching out to clamp the back doors shut. He wouldn't know why Josimar ran, and would be sad and confused. His head was dented. He would think Josimar didn't want to look at him anymore.

Josimar whispered to the Fat Man in the truck, It is a baby in the bag. She is mine, but don't worry, she doesn't cry all the time and she likes pineapple juice. I am taking her to the sea.



The Fat Man looked at him like he knew he was lying. He also looked at him like he wanted to get going. Josimar stepped inside. He held the bag on his lap. He opened it to show the Fat Man the baby. She was sleeping. The Fat Man threw his cigarette out the door. He yelled to the Bald Man with Gloves.

Then he told Josimar, A boy doesn't know what a baby needs. A baby does not belong in a bag. A bag is for ice.

The Bald Man with Gloves got in on the other side. He grinned real big when he saw the baby. Josimar was glad to see him so happy. It was the right choice not to run. The Bald Man with Gloves could now see that he could be kind to someone young, like how the Bald Man with Gloves was kind to him.

The Bald Man with Gloves told the Fat Man, The truck is broke and the ice is melting.

The Fat Man said to Josimar, We will not come back to the mountain today, or tomorrow.

Josimar said, Okay.

Josimar stared at the dent in the head of the Bald Man with Gloves. He did this when the Bald Man with Gloves was looking out the window. When the Bald Man with Gloves was sleeping Josimar would study the dent even more closely. He wondered what had happened, if that was why the Bald Man with Gloves acted like a child.

The Bald Man with Gloves unlatched the door behind the seat. He took a piece of ice and held it in his leather hand. He rubbed it on the back of the baby's neck. Josimar watched the baby to see if she liked a cold neck.

The Bald Man with Gloves asked Josimar, Can I hold the baby.

Josimar wanted to tell the man that he had to first take his gloves off, then decided the man left his gloves on because he didn't like how his hands looked.

Josimar handed the baby to the Bald Man with Gloves. He held the small girl in both gloves like a cradle. She looked happy. Josimar knew the gloves would cool her down if she was hot, another reason he did not ask him to take the wet gloves off.

When the truck made it through the tunnel Josimar put his hands out to have the baby back. The Bald Man with Gloves gave her to him. He had protected the baby from his hands like he did the ice.

He said, I made a prayer.

Josimar knew that the Bald Man with Gloves liked to make prayers and they usually came true.

It happened every day.

When they dropped Josimar at the beach the Men in the Ice Truck said goodbye and drove away. Josimar was a long way from home, where he wanted to stay forever. In the shadows of the glimmering Building City he took the baby in his arms and held her against his chest.

He dropped the bag to the ground.

The sun hovered above them, as hot as it could get. Josimar walked from the concrete streets of the Building City onto the soft sand. Crossing the beach to the water he stepped around bodies. Oiled and dark. Pulsing like the baby breathing.

Josimar walked to the flat wet sand. The cool sand where it meets the rushing water washing up at his feet. He sat down and held the baby between his opened legs and let the water run over her. He let it splash her face. Splash her chest. Splash over her like the milk.

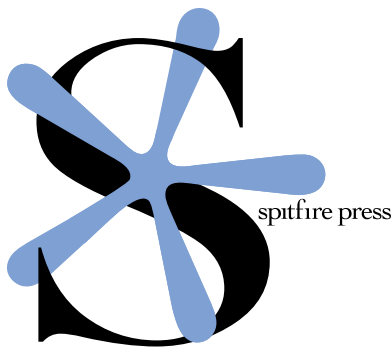
They looked out to the end of the ocean, to where the sky meets the water. Josimar held his baby there for hours and told her everything he knew about the sea.

While every wave swept them up in a joy that never ceased.

Curt Rosenthal lives in New York City. In December of 2005 he will graduate from the MFA program in Creative Writing at Antioch University in Los Angeles. Curt has a short story called "Shark Attack" published in the anthology, "Outlandish Affairs." Currently he is at work on his first novel. And when he isn't writing he is on the soccer field as Director of Coaching for the Manhattan Kickers Soccer Club.

Stephen Mead is a published artist/writer living in northeastern NY. A resume and samples of his artwork can be seen in the portfolio section of Absolute Arts and 123soho.com. Mead also has several title pieces of e books online at www.scars.tv. These pieces incorporate both image and text, as does his e book "We Are More Than Our Wounds", <http://www.newagedimensionspublishing.com/>.

Stephen's book "Blue Heart Diary" is scheduled for release in 2005 from Stonegarden.net. Films of the piece can currently be seen online at <http://stephenmead.neptune.com>



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