

Joint Venture: The Jugglers

A story by Virginia Brown,
translated from the Spanish by Tony Beckwith
www.tonybeckwith.com

On a recent trip to Buenos Aires I noticed that, although things have improved since the economic crisis that devastated Argentina a few years ago, some people are still living on the fringes and doing whatever they can to earn a few pesos. At traffic lights all over the city, when the light turned red, jugglers appeared and entertained the drivers, then passed the hat just as the light turned green. This reminded me of “Joint Venture”—the story by the Uruguayan writer Virginia Brown that I translated for *Thresholds*, the anthology of world literature that was recently published here in Austin:

HE’D SEEN HIM BEFORE—or someone just like him. But for once, on that rainy afternoon, Juan did not avert his eyes to look down at his dashboard and rationalize, “His parents will take it anyway.” The kid was wearing a large plastic bag, standing in front of the cars at the red light, juggling two oranges in the hopes that his dexterity, or lack of it, would move someone to part with a couple of pesos.

Juan, caught up in his own anxiety, thought of how he too had juggled percentages, acronyms, and English words in the board room, hoping that when the company’s organization chart was shuffled somewhere on the other side of the world nobody would delete Juan.

The light turned green and the cars started honking and moving, and he inched forward. He felt bad. He turned at an intersection and parked on the side street.

He was sweating so profusely that he felt that he too was being soaked by the rain, as though his space-age car and his stylish suit had somehow dissolved and been reduced to something as flimsy as the improvised raincoat the little juggler was wearing. His hands were locked onto the steering wheel.

Juan pictured the boy smiling as he concentrated on keeping the oranges in the air and then, as he panhandled the cars, wiping the smile off his face to shield it from the indifference of the tightly sealed windows. It occurred to Juan that he, drier and better dressed than the kid, hadn’t smiled either during his presentations. This thought made

him chuckle and he loosened his grip on the wheel. With a sigh of determination he took off his tie, shoes and socks, and got out of his car. He retrieved the tennis balls he always kept in the trunk, ever ready to play a game for the sake of public relations.

He walked back through the downpour to the traffic light and introduced himself. The kid’s name was Jonathan.

“Jonathan, we need to sharpen up our strategy here,” said Juan. “Whatever I earn is yours.”

Jonathan shrugged and smiled. Together they waited for the light to change.

When it turned red they stepped out in front of the cars and started performing, the balls spinning clumsily and bouncing off the road. The kid laughed and said, “Hey dude, you’re worse than me.

Nobody’s going to give us anything.”

But when it was time to take up the collection, Juan summoned up all his sophisticated marketing skills and worked the cars with an amusing and convincing line of sales talk. The cash started to flow.

After a good while Juan, who was tired, drenched, and happy invited Jonathan to have a hot dog and they went to the bar at the corner. They counted up their earnings, then ate in silent complicity. Between sips of Coca-Cola, the bun peeped out through Jonathan’s smile.

When they said goodbye Juan gave him the tennis balls. “They’ll improve your image,” he explained.

Juan whistled as he walked back to his car and was still whistling when he drove up to his house in the suburbs.

His wife opened the door, talking on the cordless phone. Juan grabbed the handset from her with his right hand, tossed it into the air, caught it in his left, took her by the waist, spun her around in a tango step, smiled, and told her.

“I got fired.” ★

