

*Reginald Gibbons ·*

A Large Heavy-Faced Woman,  
Pocked, Unkempt, in a Loose Dress

. . . and her mute shadow touching me  
made me look up, the glass panes  
and squatting aircraft like a movie screen  
behind her, and she smiled, held out  
a small orange card that I took  
with my hand from her hand—

the deaf-and-dumb alphabet on one side,  
hand-signs, and on the other her plea,  
her exhortation, her prayer, her pitch:  
SMILE. With the hand that took my coins  
she drew a blessing in the air and  
like a tired usher walked away  
down the empty seats and dirty ashtrays

to a young woman with a baby, the orange  
card hovered till the child stirred,  
reaching up, reaching, the mother lifted  
her head from her worries to frown,  
say no. Maybe someone was late.  
Or hadn't caught the right plane or had  
caught it, leaving; or left with bad words.

The big woman shaped another smile with her lips,  
touched the baby's curling wafting hand,  
traced her blessing again, wasted no words.  
Her limp fingers invisible with the silence  
of their stillness, down the narrowing corridor  
she went toward the next gate, where some  
gathered oblivious drunk traveling men

wearing cowboy hats and boots after their convention  
were singing the loud song she couldn't hear  
as she approached them like the stage messenger  
whose surprising words will signal the end but  
who says nothing this time, and the singing stops,  
the actors stand in place waiting and the audience,  
restless and embarrassed, begin to bark into their hands

willing now to welcome any word, even the bad news  
The Queen is dead or The old shepherd  
whom you summoned knows or I alone escaped to tell thee,  
but she doesn't speak, only her hands can—like yours,  
you accoutered conventioners and young griever,  
you tired mothers, you healers and whores on trips,  
wife-beaters and tormentors of children,

you shoe-salesmen, cooks, polite cold freeway toll-takers  
with warm palms, you men making fists  
in your compulsive pockets around coins or keys,  
you women groping in purses for cigarettes,  
for candy and gum and lipstick confused,  
here is your herald! Some message is come.  
Even the worst she can say will be touching.

And your being still could be a kind of listening.