

Poetry by Norma Cantú
Poesía de Norma Cantú

Kansas City Shift

Spring came suddenly—
One day the daffodils bloomed
Defying the snow covered ground
with their impetuous yellow: forsythia.
And then the crocus and finally the roses
Each taking turns astonishing.
I sat dumfounded, mute
Quietly melting like the snow and ice
My heart singing the morning birdsong
Of my being. Jubilant. Alive.
How is it that snow hums as it melts?
That clouds travel making way to sunny days
How is it the robin's egg blue?
And yet...
Throwback Thursday on Facebook and
Pictures of ourselves before greet and
Force memories shoehorned into today's
Gridlock.
Like the weather, life shifts:
Children die – drive bys.
Brown bodies die!
Black bodies die!
Hope dies.

For Virginia Ramón Cantú

Every spring
The explosion of new green
Surprises me.

The mesquite in our yard wears an Easter frock,
Accessorized with yellow blossoms.
Soon, the fruit, juicy and crunchy at once,
Weighs down scrawny limbs.

De niña
On lazy dusky evenings
After homework
After playing a las escondidas*
I harvested bean pods,
la miel from the tree trunk
chewed on sweet mesquite fruit.

We—siblings and neighbors—
Trade stories in the dimming eve
As we go through pod after pod;
The waxing moon can't wait to be full

Soon Mami calls our names:
Norma, Tino, Laura, Elsa, Lety...
Mari, Sandra, Celia, Julio,
Geri, Ricky!

At 90, in her memories, her children still
Crowd the kitchen for a dinner of bean tacos
And cinnamon tea with milk.
The house full of ghost children
Laughing, crying, sleeping
Filling her days with joy
And worry.

*a las escondidas/hide-and-go-seek

Forjando el Destino

For Emma Tenayuca

In the photo you are a young impassioned
speaker
fist raised. I can hear your voice, loud and
clear.
I ask "what gave you the courage, Emma?"
I know the answer.
With youth's passion you fought Injustice
your young eyes saw pecan shellers
suffering.
Women. young and old, and children too.
You worked alongside
and smelled the acrid smell
and felt the stifling heat
and the dust covered your hands and your
hair
in spite of the scarf you wore
and you heard them cough
and you laughed with them
and you cried with them
Until it was time to say no more
No more to wage cuts
No more to unsafe conditions
Time for the struggle to begin.
Time for destiny to carry you on its wings.
You had a gift. And you used it.
Others followed. 12,000 workers walked
away

from poorly paid jobs
and the bosses had to listen
and the papers had to cover the story
and you won. And lost.
Had to go on your way
Destiny led you to California away from the
ex-husband
away from the embarrassed relatives
the nosy neighbors
the prying reporters
And Destiny brought you back
a teacher
a shaper of young minds
to sustain language and culture
fighting injustice in another terrain
Your razor sharp mind never at rest, always
working
always thinking. The words and the thoughts
almost
too much. The books, the papers, your work.

And honor and glory came late,
your memory lives in the hearts of those
who knew you
those who never met you but honor your
passion
and join you in the struggle still not won.
¡Adelante!

Rail Road Worker

My grandfather Maurilio laid railroad tracks
his strong brown body working
side by side with strong black bodies
mejicanos. Later worked in San Antonio in
the yards.

Tejano and proud he'd smoke his hand
rolled Bugler's

Bueli would unsew the tobacco tiny sacks
stitched in red,
and sew them again into bedspreads of fine
cotton manta
muslin sharp at first and smooth after
repeated

washings in the huge black bottomed tub.
Colchas to cover her children from the cool
night air

as they slept out on the porch
In San Antonio, the two children died. And
two survived.

at five, my Mami would come home from
school

and find her sister Eloisa playing with their
cousins

Abelardo and Modesto--Manuel, not yet
born.

The railroad ruled
they ate and slept and partied according to
the yard's schedule
the thinking too was circumscribed by rails
and whistles blowing loud as hopes and
dreams

of moving on

A young girl, walking alone.

The men stared, and sometimes whistled.

The women stared back, sometimes giggled.

But, the little girl afraid of being afraid
would run home,

her strong brown legs under cotton dresses

her trenzas flying in the wind.

The railroad came from the north.
Corpus to San Antonio to Laredo and they
went with it. Los mejicanos built the
railroad.

Tex-Mex. Union Pacific. Southern Pacific.
Bearing cargo of fruit and vegetables from
the south.

Buelito wore his blue striped cap and union
overalls

each morning took his blue--or was it black-
- enameled

lunch box,

portavianda he called the three neatly
stacked pots,

and in the afternoon, took it home and set it
up on the cupboard

el trastero he made with his own hands.

The railroad took his best years
Between sixteen and forty, he worked every
day

Until one day over a spat with the white
bosses who

had always treated him well
made him trust them with their smiles and
their praises for his work, he left.

Or they fired him. He was a union man.

Or he wasn't.

The story is never really clear.

In the end, it doesn't matter.

The deportation hurt so deep, he never
recovered

drank his life away,

A railroad worker no more.