

SAVE ELLIS ISLAND

The Literature of Immigration

Required Readings

“El olor de cansancio” (“The Smell of Fatigue”)

Melida Rodas

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What We Hold in Common: An Introduction to Working Class Studies

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El olor de cansancio (The Smell of Fatigue)

Melida Rodas

My father hangs up the phone. He puts away our colorful new kite. He puts away his smile and his Tuesday clothes as he prepares for a *new* battle. I watch him put on the white shirt. The checkered pants. The boots. He folds a crisp white apron and places it in the pocket of his jacket. I admire the fresh white shirt, the crisp crease that runs down his black-and-white pants. Smelling like soap and shaving cream, he returns to the restaurant where he has been slaying ever since we moved to New Jersey from Guatemala in 1979.

I see him walk slowly, tired. Another cook has left. Another dishonorable discharge, I suppose. My father is brought in to hold down the fort on his day off. The way he always does, like a respectable soldier.

Each day I see my father's hair get grayer. It won't be long before it's silver, like the buttons on a new cadet's jacket, silver like water in the sun. His hands are small. Always callused. Always pink. He holds my face like a moon before he says good-bye. "Next week," he promises, as he points to the drawer that keeps our kite. I wish that he would stay. I try to keep my eyes from telling him as he holds my face. His hands feel so strong. Strong from carrying pots of heavy soup. Strong from fighting the ambush of dinner specials, lunch specials, breakfast specials with eggs, home fries, bacon, silver dollar pancakes, California cheeseburgers, Caesar salads, BLTs, mashed potatoes, French fries with gravy, toast with marmalade, jelly, butter, cream cheese.

My father has always worked hard. Ever since the age of seven when he sold peanuts, which he carried in small bags on a cardboard box. Ever since he shared the streets with the other children who sold Chicklets and shined shoes. With the blind man who sold *tickets de lotteria* and the *viejita* who; begged for money outside El Palacio Nacional. He's worked hard ever since his toes were small and wrinkled in the rain because the leather from his shoes had finally surrendered.

Life has always been as hard as the soles of my father's feet. Like the callused hand my face melts into. He holds it like the cantaloupe before a fruit salad. Like life before America. Before it's sliced, devoured, consumed. Guatemala feels like a memory, just a memory. A humble memory that moves slowly and peacefully. It is a place not so gray with buildings. It is a landscape with green mountains, blue skies, and sweet air. It is a place where you don't fear the *Migra*. The force. The clan that comes to take you away. They search in kitchens and factories for their *victims*. They send them back with suitcases full of postcard of the Statue of Liberty that never got sent, subway tokens, wrinkled letters with Spanish writing decorated with exotic pressed flowers, stamped with colorful: postage, smelling like perfume and crayon. Everyone who is here on borrowed time, with expired visas and false documentation, fears the *Migra*. Because it doesn't matter that you have spent all your centavos to buy a piece of the American pie. So what if you risked your life crossing the desert with a coyote, the man who guides you through the desert and river to the American border? Once you reach the line, once you dodge the bullets that the border patrol has fired at you, once you say *El Salve Maria*, you crawl to American soil. *Mojado*.

indocumentado. No visa. Your wet clothes stick to your tired back. Pictures of your children, of your family, stick to your almost empty wallet.

We come to America by bus. It takes us five days to reach Los Estados. We leave our colorful beautiful Guatemala for gray buildings and a promise that here we will have a better life. Here my father doesn't wear a suit and tie to work. Here there is no garden, no fruit trees, no space. Here we live in an apartment. People don't smile. People don't say hello, except for the Puerto Rican lady my mother calls Donna Ortega. She's the only one who is friendly with us when we first arrive. Americans don't want to know us. Not even the children. Patrick, who lives next door, calls me a spic. One day he spits on my face on the way home from school.

Today my father leaves our apartment for the restaurant. The awful place that fatigues him. His shoulders are small and round. His feet are heavy. The image is familiar. I realize that I've seen it before. It is the picture of a wounded soldier who returns to the battle. I feel a large *jocote* in my throat as I try to imagine the number of potatoes my father has peeled. Oh, the difficulty of surviving an infantry of dishes, a Sunday morning rush! And the heat of August days. The sweat on his brow, the napkin he wraps around his forehead to prevent it from blinding him. How do you endure the battles, such battles, Father, with pans and pots as your only allies? Vegetables, meats, oil as your weapons? When is it time to surrender the ladle, the whisk, the spoon?

My father's boots. They alone tell the story of the war. With their greasy suede and vegetable pulp trapped underneath them. When he enters our home, he sheds the boots on the floor, as if never wanting to see them again. A reminder of the American Dream gone sour. Of times that don't get better, just get harder. Every day I've seen life take the years from my father. Years taken with unsympathetic conviction. As I walk past restaurant alleys, I remember the smell of my father's clothes when he comes home.

Sometimes the hours are so hard and so long that he asks me to take off his heavy boots. Proudly, I reach for his feet and try to give him a sense of home and gratitude. I untie the hardened laces. I dispose of the fragments of lettuce and tomato caught between them. I remove his boots like a heavy cast. His feet give off the heat of labor and cansansio. His socks I peel off with the delicate care of an archeologist revealing precious Mayan fossils. His pale feet wait to be freed from their torture. I squeeze fatigue away from his toes. I rejuvenate his ankles. I make his beautiful rough heels feel like they can carry him to the front line again tomorrow.

My father leaves our small apartment when the sky is still purple. He leaves when the newspapers outside the candy-store are still wrapped with string and the bakery rolls are still warm in large paper bags. He leaves when the chill of Aurora glues me to a poncho my *abuelo* has sent. My father leaves when the house doesn't yet smell like tea, syrup, and eggs. When the only one who hears his footsteps is my mother, as she tries to keep the warmth he has left in their

bed.

My father returns when the sky is purple again. When the first stars are saying hello. He comes home when homework is done. When you've brushed your teeth. When dishes have been used, washed, dried, and put away. My father comes home when others have taken off their ties or panty hose, have eaten dinner, paid their bills, and read their favorite book. When the day has simmered and night begins. When the enemy has ceased fire. My father comes home when you grow tired of waiting. When you surrender to the weight of your eyelids and you wish you could have told him that you made honor roll again today.