

THE THREEPENNY REVIEW

Pastoral

Author(s): Louise Glück

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Anthony?

I think someone’s projecting a little, Cardo said. Ay, Mami, he went on, hauling the scattered cinderblocks of my porch to one side, only in America would an old man’s exuberance lead to talk of revolution.

I stood in the elevated doorway and looked down at Cardo’s white-shirted back, beginning to dot with sweat as he dragged the blocks out of the way.

Exuberance? Cardo, he called them *countries*. He said he had to *conquer* them.

And he was good as his word, wasn’t he? Cardo said, raking smooth the mangy patch of dirt below my door. Words want to be true, he went on, and people want them to be true. He set his rake down and reached for the first block and said, If they don’t start out true then people tend to make them true, and then he laid the first block with a thud in the soft earth.

All I’m asking, Cardo, is for a little honesty, in love, in law. In life.

Cardo edged one block next to another, three wide, three deep. Where’s the fun in that? he said, his voice distant, distracted by the effort of aligning the blocks.

Who’s talking about fun, Cardo?

Mami, Cardo interrupted me as he laid the first block of the second tier heavily on the base, listen to me. The block made a dry scraping noise as he slid it into place. Once upon a time your Texas was part of my country. Your California, your Arizona, your Nueva Mexico were all a part of *viejo* Mexico.

You like the old country so much, Cardo, why not move back?

Listen, Mami, Cardo said, smacking the second-tier blocks in place faster than he had the first, one up against the others, three across, two deep, leaving a block-wide step. There is a reason why your side won. A reason why there is no INS in Mexico, no border guards to keep the Americans out, no dogs sniffing tourists’ pockets for drugs.

A channel of sweat ran down his back now as, grunting, he lifted the first block of the third tier and let it fall in place just a few inches below my feet.

What’re you saying, Cardo, that might makes right? To the victor belongs the spoils? That Anthony got what he deserved?

All I’m saying, Cardo panted, hauling the second block of the third tier over, is that your grandsons wear shoes instead of making them in a factory outside Oaxaca. There was one block left and Cardo turned for it with a sigh. I’m saying that your daughter’s skin is too fair for the Chihuahua sun, he said, pushing the block wearily into place, and then he wiped the sweat from his forehead and smeared a little dirt in its place. I love Mexico is what I’m saying, he said finally, squinting up at me, but for my wife’s sake, my children’s, I live in the U. S. of A., because your greedy gringo government lets me provide for my

family in a way that my poncho-wearing *presidente* does not.

Hmph, I sniffed. Your children won’t even eat my apple pie. I see them once, twice a year, and they won’t even eat my apple pie.

Cardo just shook his head then, held one hand up to me. C’mon, Mami, let’s go pick up your finicky American grandsons from the park and buy them ice cream. When we get back I’ll see what I can do about your carpet.

I had to think for a moment. Then I remembered: the shag strands had gotten tangled in the vacuum’s rollers and I’d had to hack them out with a knife. It seemed to me then that my efforts to tell Cardo the story of St. Anthony of the Vine had been similarly crude, a rescue operation that lost as much as it saved.

I make the pies myself, I said now. Homemade, I said, but then I remembered Anthony’s words. Trailer-made, I said.

But Cardo just shook his head. They like ice cream, he said. Give them what they like, they eat it all. Now come on, you know how your daughter hates to be kept waiting.

But still I hung back. I pointed to the porch. Shouldn’t you test it first?

Mami, it’s fine. It’s cinderblock, it’s not going nowhere, let’s go.

I looked down at the blocks. Yesterday they’d been too heavy for me to lift but today I doubted they would hold my weight. I wanted an assurance that those blocks would be more concrete than ocular myasthenia gravis, a proof against sorrow, not the cause of it.

I can hardly afford a broken hip at my age, Cardo.

Mami, for seven months you climbed in and out of your house on one wobbly block. What is this about?

He wouldn’t even look at me, Cardo. He couldn’t be bothered.

And Cardo. Sweet sweet Cardo. He’d built his three-tiered ziggurat two times, he could build it a thousand times and every time it would come out the same, and now he ascended it like a gold medalist climbing to the topmost platform and looked right at me with eyes the color of the soil his rebuilt porch stood upon.

Mami, my son-in-law said, and he put one of his hands right on top of my breast. He didn’t look at you because he could tell you didn’t need him. He only won those women because they were already lost. He knocked on my ribs with a hand callused from years of honest labor and gritty besides, from the work he’d done for me. Love like that is a dictator, Cardo said, still staring me in the eye, but you are already empress of your own heart. He looked at me until I dropped my head on his warm damp shirt, and then, Viva Zapatista, he murmured as I cried into his shoulder. Long live the revolution.□

Pastoral

The sun rises over the mountain.
Sometimes there’s mist
but the sun’s behind it always
and the mist isn’t equal to it.
The sun burns its way through,
like the mind defeating stupidity.
When the mist clears, you see the meadow.

No one really understands
the savagery of this place,
the way it kills people for no reason,
just to keep in practice.

So people flee—and for awhile, away from here,
they’re exuberant, surrounded by so many choices—

But no signal from earth
will ever reach the sun. Thrash
against that fact, you are lost.

When they come back, they’re worse.
They think they failed in the city,
not that the city doesn’t make good its promises.
They blame their upbringing: youth ended and they’re back,
silent, like their fathers.
Sundays, in summer, they lean against the wall of the clinic,
smoking cigarettes. When they remember,
they pick flowers for their girlfriends—

It makes the girls happy.
They think it’s pretty here, but they miss the city, the afternoons

filled with shopping and talking, what you do
when you have no money...

To my mind, you’re better off if you stay;
that way, dreams don’t damage you.
At dusk, you sit by the window. Wherever you live,
you can see the fields, the river, realities
on which you cannot impose yourself—

To me, it’s safe. The sun rises; the mist
dissipates to reveal
the immense mountain. You can see the peak,
how white it is, even in summer. And the sky’s so blue,
punctuated with small pines
like spears—

When you got tired of walking
you lay down in the grass.
When you got up again, you could see for a moment where you’d been,
the grass was slick there, flattened out
into the shape of a body. When you looked back later,
it was as though you’d never been there at all.

Midafternoon, midsummer. The fields go on forever,
peaceful, beautiful.
Like butterflies with their black markings,
the poppies open.

—Louise Glück