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Poems by Norma Cantú

War

I am not talking about war
Between the sexes
Or even between nations
I am not even hinting at destruction
Or rape or death
I am not understanding how
You can hold my hand
And speak daggers into my heart.

No

Such a simple word
It has no conscience
Like the way the grass sways in the wind
It holds on fast but bends
So my soul awaits
A yes
A no
Or quizas, maybe.

Grammatology

The grammar of words surrounds
It is a scaffold around the building that is
Your world.
Do not assume grammar is innocent
It is not,
For have not nations lost wars
Lovers lost faith
And seers lost visions
When the transparency of grammar
Parsed a well wrought thought?

There are no parts of speech
Without parts of thought, parts of
Life and of the infinite.
Contained in (in)finite verbs,
They say,
Lie worlds and a universe
Vast as a galaxy of words
Where nouns and names and substantives
Act out and perform roles
Unknown and deep.

But if grammar kills and maims and
even weeps
it also kindles hope, celebrates love
and, most curiously, clarifies it all

The Killing Path

They travel the path cautiously
Careful
Watching out for la migra
Those who will catch and send
Without remorse.

They travel the path hopefully
Hopeful
Trusting that at the other end
Food, drink, clean clothes await,
The end where all will be well.

They travel the path faithfully
Generous
Regretting the choice
But seeing no option except death
Slow and sure

They travel the path
They travel the path
They travel

We travel the path
We travel the path
We travel

Bullfight

I am the bull being dragged
across a sandy bullring in Cancún,
a carcass, spent and bled to death.
The tourists--Japanese, German, Chicano, some Gringos--
don't know that they just witnessed, not a bullfight,
but a travesty, they cheer
a gutted ritual.
I gave my life for this?
I ask.
When I was poked and raced into the ring,
I moved just so,
escaped the ribbon marker
"Saltillero" they named me,
a worthy name, an honorable name.
I despise the puny men who tease,
poke and try to anger me.
They fail.
The bandillero,
on a horse, poor beast of burden,
at least I don't play that role and live,
to carry a man fat as a whale he
pokes and fails to anger me;
too soon, I feel a sharp knife embedded between skins,
and I know what's coming. Feel it
as sure as I breathe,
with nostrils wide and huffing.
I see dark pink--the matador's cape
shiny sequins in black and white.
But I am colorblind, you say.
So I've heard, but I assure you I hear the color,
smell the red of blood and the brown of sunbronzed skin.

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It is not color but movement that I follow.
Perplexed and tired I sniff the earth
Following my scent
to the source of death.

I see him.
He bends like a twig bent by the wind, *olé*
My ear twitches. An ear soon to be cut, I move,
I flick my ears--
the right, then the left,
my tail, I wag like a dog. Proudly I wave it like a flag.
I stand calmly,
appear not interested
then I follow through
to my imminent end.

The crowd roars and stands;
I lie and die
on a Wednesday afternoon
en Cancún;
it's five o'clock
and I die.
the tourists red with beer and sun, cheer
amid the stench of blood and sweat.