

This Land: Deportees

In the desolate terrain of the Diablo Range near Los Gatos Creek, twenty miles west of Coalinga, California, there was a plane crash.

The Douglas DC-3 took off from Oakland Airport on January 28, 1948. On board were Mexican pickers being deported, along with some whose braceros contracts had ended. I cynically wonder if the undocumented Mexicans were turned into immigration before they were paid for their labor? These were folks, whether from desperation or promise, who sweated, labored, picked, so we could bite into a sweet peach, an orange. Over the Diablo range the left wing ripped off. Bodies spilled from the fuselage. The plane, afire, crashed into these isolated hills.

We mess up by calling things tragedies when they are more literally calamities, atrocities, crimes.

When radio and newspapers reported the plane crash they failed to report the names of the twenty-eight deportees. The newspapers and radios duly reported the names of the gringos -- Francis "Frank" Atkinson pilot, Marion Harlow co-pilot, Lillian "Bobbie" Atkinson stewardess, Frank E. Chaffin immigration guard -- but omitted the rest, simply lumping them together as merely deportees.

Woody heard the news and felt they needed to be remembered, valued.

*The crops are all in and the peaches are rott'ning,
The oranges piled in their creosote dumps;
They're flying 'em back to the Mexican border
To pay all their money to wade back again*

*Goodbye to my Juan, goodbye, Rosalita,
Adios mis amigos, Jesus y Maria;
You won't have your names when you ride the big airplane,
All they will call you will be "deportees" *

*My father's own father, he waded that river,
They took all the money he made in his life;
My brothers and sisters come working the fruit trees,
And they rode the truck till they took down and died.*

*Some of us are illegal, and some are not wanted,
Our work contract's out and we have to move on;
Six hundred miles to that Mexican border,
They chase us like outlaws, like rustlers, like thieves.*

*We died in your hills, we died in your deserts,
We died in your valleys and died on your plains.
We died 'neath your trees and we died in your bushes,
Both sides of the river, we died just the same.*

*The sky plane caught fire over Los Gatos Canyon,
A fireball of lightning, and shook all our hills,
Who are all these friends, all scattered like dry leaves?
The radio says, "They are just deportees"*

*Is this the best way we can grow our big orchards?
Is this the best way we can grow our good fruit?
To fall like dry leaves to rot on my topsoil
And be called by no name except "deportees"?*

Who were the rest? Who were these unnamed deportees? You can find them buried in a mass grave at the Holy Cross Cemetery in Fresno. They finally were named and given due respect:

Miguel Negroros Alvarez
Francisco Llamas Duram
Santiago Garcia Elizondo
Rosalio Padilla Estrada
Tomas Avena De Garcia
Bernabe Lopez Garcia
Salvador Sandoval Hernandez
Severo Medina Lara
Elias Trujillo Macias
Jose Rodriguez Macias
Tomas Padilla Marquez
Luis Lopez Medina
Manuel Calderon Merino
Luis Cuevas Miranda
Martin Razo Navarro
Ygnacio Perez Navarro
Roman Ochoa Ochoa
Ramon Ramirez Paredes
Apolonio Ramirez Placencia
Guadalupe Laura Ramirez
Alberto Carlos Raygoza
Guadalupe Hernandez Rodriguez
Maria Santana Rodriguez
Juan Valenzuela Ruiz
Wencealado Ruiz

Jose Valdivia Sanchez
Jesus Meza Santos
Baldomero Marcas Torres

In Shakespeare's play "Romeo and Juliet," Juliet's remark was the typical remark of a silly adolescent: *"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet."* She soon would discover that names matter – it's what led these foolish children to kill themselves. Pathetic, not tragic.

Names matter.

I've heard many a woman ask to be called by their name. What woman wants to be constantly referred to in the diminutive?

I have a name.

Visit any graveyard, memorial park, or memorial garden. Note the names. We name places, we name children, we name things. By their names they are known. By their names they existed. By their names they exist. By their names they are remembered. We address envelopes by name. Pastors fill in the names of the couple on the wedding certificate. The best mail is the mail that arrives with your name handwritten on the envelope.

Nicknames can be fun and a sign of acceptance. Terms of endearment can be cute and fun. Honey, sweetie, snookums. Names, however, matter. Names mean existence, respect, appreciation, identity, value.

We are never anonymous if we have names.

Yes, we deportees had names. Yes, we deportees lived, we loved, we twenty-eight struggled, we worked, we drank, we fought, we made babies, we lived. We were people who grasped onto a promise, albeit extinguished through no fault of our own. We did our best given the lousy poker hand we were dealt.

What I wonder is: what are the names of all the others we have forgotten to name?