THE PANAMA CRAZE

1906
JOB HUNT

Fear is a fierce wind
that sends me reeling
down to the seashore,
where I beg for work,
any work at all,
any escape
to carry me far
from my father’s
furious fists.

Sailor.
Fisherman.
Lobster trapper.
I’m willing to take any job
that floats me away
from home.

I am not an ordinary war orphan.
Papi is alive, but the family part
of his mind
is deeply wounded.
He drinks so much rum
that he believes I am
his enemy – a Spaniard
from the country
that lost the war
and left so many
of its soldiers
behind.

Spanish veterans
flock the seashore, begging
for the same jobs that lure me.

I’m only fourteen, but I’m strong
for a starving boy.
So I shove and curse
along with the crowd
of muscular men, all of us
equally eager to reach
a fast-talking *americano*
Panamá Canal recruiter
who promises food, houses,
and money,
so much money ...

The recruiter shouts and pounds
his fists in the air.
His foreign accent
makes the words sound powerful
as he describes a wild jungle
where men who are hired
will dig the Eighth Wonder
of the World.

He says the canal is a challenge
worthy of Hercules,
a task for giants,
not ordinary men,
but when he unrolls a map,
Panamá is barely
a sliver.

How can such a narrow
bridge of land
be so important?

After the confusing map,
there are pamphlets with pictures
of tidy houses, the orderly dining rooms
offering comforting details
that catch my eye.

Lacy curtains and tablecloths, flowers
in vases, plates heaped with food ...
So much food.

*Barriga llena, corazón contento.*
Full belly, happy heart.
That’s what Mami used to say,
before cholera claimed
her happiness
and mine.

With the flair of a magician,
the recruiter tosses two sun-shiny coins up and down in his hand, until the gold American dollars ring out like church bells or kettledrums in a parade.

Those musical coins lure me deeper into the crowd of pushing, rushing, desperate, job-hungry strangers, but as soon as I reach for the recruiter’s paper and pen, ready to sign my name on a contract, the blond man glares at my green eyes, brown face, and curly hair, as if struggling to figure out who I am.


His words make no sense. Isn’t semi-white the same as semi-dark?

So I start telling lies. I let my skin fib.

I point out that my father is blondish and my mother was the tan of toasted wheat,
her hair long and silky, her eyes
as blue-green as the sea,
just like mine.

Then I invent an imaginary village
in Spain, for my birthplace,
and I give my age
as twenty,
and I show off
my muscles,
pretending to feel
brave ...

By the time I board
a dragon-smoky
Panamá Craze steamship,
I’ve already told so many lies
that my conscience feels
as hollow
as my belly.
MATEO

THE VOYAGE FROM CUBA

Hunger at sea for three days feels like a knife in the flesh – twisted blade, rusty metal, the piercing tip of a long sharp-edged dagger called regret.

But there’s no turning back, and with no food on board, hunger haunts me until we finally reach the slick, wet Panamá docks, where dozens of other ships are all unloading their fuming, angry, hungry human cargo in thunderous rain.
MATEO

ARRIVAL IN A STRANGE LAND

As soon as my feet touch the docks,
I rush toward a pile of burlap sacks ...

The bags are filled with island sugar,
soggy from rain, but it’s food, so I rip
the cloth and plunge my sweaty hand
into the sweetness
of my homeland,
wondering
if I will ever
see the island
again.
MATEO

COLOUR-CODED

A foreman commands us to line up by country:

Americans, Frenchmen, Dutch.

Spaniards, Greeks, Italians.

Jamaicans, Barbadians, Haitians.

Each work crew is a different shade of light or dark, but when the foreman orders us to stand still while we’re measured for our coffins, dark and light faces all look equally shocked.
MATEO

THE LABOUR TRAIN

Jungle heat sends foggy steam rising from my hair, like a thick mist on the towering forest that looms ahead of the train, as we crowd onto a flatcar with open sides.

In order to keep from falling out, I cling to any surface I can find, even when it means leaning toward the jungle, grasping at branches.

Behind us, a cattle car enclosed by a wooden framework is filled with Jamaicans and Barbadians, dark islanders who have to ride behind bars, as if trapped in a cage.

Jamaica is one of Cuba's closest neighbours, but this is the first time I have ever seen anyone from another Caribbean island.
Until now, we have always been separated by the sea.

How will we work together, when Jamaicans speak English and we know only español?
Ferocious jungle heat
closes in around us, like the blaze
of a glowing oven.

The train steams through deep forest shade, beneath spidery, brilliant red flowers that dangle from sky-high branches, like flames.

Some of the rain-shiny leaves are shaped like green hands, others like hearts, livers, or kidneys, making the whole forest seem like one enormous, magical creature with an endless body and a fiery mind.

Through the chug and churn of the train, I hear clacking cries from black toucans with huge rainbow beaks.
and eerie howls
from big, hairy monkeys
with shaggy faces that almost look human ...

faces with voices
so challenging
that every man on the train
starts howling too.
Exhausted and excited, I jump off before the train even stops. There’s nothing but mud and jungle in every direction.

Each step feels as if the hungry earth is trying to suck my bare feet into its wet belly.

A sunburned *americano* foreman separates us into groups of twelve men.

Each group is led to another train car, this one completely motionless.

Inside, we find twelve cots draped with lacy mosquito nets, and twelve blue shirts, twelve khaki trousers, twelve pairs of work boots ...

Some of the men grumble and curse, but others laugh, impressed by our own foolishness.

Did we really believe that we would live
in nice houses like the ones we saw
in that tricky recruiter’s
pretty pictures
of dining rooms
with tablecloths
and tables?

Our first meal is served outdoors.
Mushy potatoes, stringy meat, soft bread.
But it’s food, and it’s filling.
None of the Spanish men seem to mind
my rapid Cuban accent as I echo Mami’s
old saying about full bellies
and happy hearts.
MATEO

A DIFFERENT HUNGER

Homesickness?
How can I miss the place
I was so desperate to leave?

All night, I lie awake, frightened
by jungle noises. By dawn,
alI want to do
is keep listening
to screeching birds
and howling monkeys –
any wild animal music
to help me escape
from my own scary
human story
of loss.
MATEO

LA YERBERA

While we sit on the train tracks
eating our breakfast of soggy bread
and weak coffee,
a local yerbera – an herb girl –
wakes toward us with a basket
of leaves, flowers, roots, and twigs
gracefully balanced
on her head.

Some of the men call out to her
with rude kissing noises, so she clasps
the handle of her machete in one hand
and spins the big cane-chopping knife
like a warning as she sings her wares,
chanting about the sharp teeth
of strong garlic to ward away
bloodsucking
vampire bats.

She sings about fragrant
orange blossoms to heal
the wounds of homesickness.

If I had any money, I would buy
her whole mysterious basket
of scented cures.
ANITA from the Land of Many Butterflies

VOICES

I listen to the lonely boy’s tale of a mother lost and a father damaged, and then I tell him how I was abandoned in the forest as a baby and how I was cared for by an old Cuban healer who adopted me as her own granddaughter.

Now, when monkeys howl, frogs sing, and wings flap, I think of my forest’s natural music as a serenade by my own animal sisters and animal brothers.

I belong to the trees, and the mud, and the whispering wind ...
THE FOREST

1906
THE HOWLER MONKEYS

PEERING DOWN FROM TREES

PIERCING TRAIN SCREAMS
NOISY STRANGERS
CLOSE
CLOSER
TOO CLOSE
STAY AWAY
AWAY FROM OUR TREES
OURS
OURS
OURS
OURS
GO
GO
GO
GO
GO
GO
GO
THE GLASS FROGS

PEERING UP FROM MUD

you can’t see us
not like those golden frogs
flashing their beauty
because we’re not here
pretend we’re not here
you can’t eat us
we’d taste like clear air
we’re transparent
invisible

until night when stars pass through us
moonlight flows into us
we start to sing
we need to sing
we love to sing
sing
sing
sing
A BLUE MORPHO BUTTERFLY

FLOATING OVER THE WORLD

High enough just high enough

above all danger

except the sharp beaks of birds

but high enough just high enough

to fool the eyes of hungry beings with our blue wings

just a passing shimmer of sky
THE TREES

ROOTED

Only our branches
Can move

So we dance

With our green
While our roots
Are unseen

And all the legs
And wings
And eyes
Of the world

Forget that we
Are here

Always here
Always.