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The Folklore Muse

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Ritual and Custom

Defining the term “ritual” can be problematic for folklorists and other scholars, especially as more secular behavior comes to be included under a rubric once reserved more for the religious. And the terms “custom” or even “folk custom” can be catchalls for a wide variety of things. Yet both seem to encompass a range of repeated, traditional behaviors that are special and capable of being isolated in some way. Ritual, of course, implies the ceremonial, even the liturgical, but rituals can be grand or small-scale, widely practiced or rather personal. Rituals may have a grandeur or just a reassuring familiarity, but their appeal is undeniable, whether we participate in them or write about them as scholars or poets.

In her poems here, Rosan Augusta Jordan uses the backdrop of the rituals for the Days of the Dead (*Días de los Muertos*) in Mexico—the Roman Catholic holidays of All Saints and All Souls in November—which have been the focus for some of her fieldwork. During this annual period, altars of flowers, food, and artifacts are constructed to memorialize the departed and all-night vigils take place in cemeteries as graves there are decorated. Jordan uses the occasion to muse on meanings of life and death in one poem and upon the experience of an accident in which she injured her hand during fieldwork in Oaxaca. Though her response is personal, the rituals in the background are societal and widely observed. The birthday ritual in William Bernard McCarthy’s “The Birthday Horse” is more restricted in scope, drawn not from actual celebrations but from stories the author told his children (suggesting that rituals are so appealing that sometimes we like to imagine them). Ted Olson’s “Christmas Tree” works from one of the most widely known rituals/customs of American society—the decoration of an evergreen tree at Christmas—though the poem uses barely a reflection of the Christmas tree custom itself to look upon the nature of the past and of older generations. Though it is a very personal poem, Margaret Yocom’s “Eating Alone” shows how traditional food customs mark cultural differences, even cultural barriers, that can reflect personal ones. Perhaps differences in eating customs might be said to take on the significance of providing rituals of social inclusion and exclusion. Steve Zeitlin’s “Madhulika” offers a glimpse of the Indian custom of painting a bride’s hands with henna (encountered by Zeitlin in the course of his folklore work in New York City), though he ties the custom to both a larger range of ritual behavior and to the essentially ephemeral nature of this traditional art form, which uses the human body.

Norma E. Cantú's novel *Cabañuelas*, two chapters of which appear here and which she refers to as "autobioethnography," aims in part to reveal the life and culture of *la frontera*, the Texas-Mexico border region where Cantú herself grew up. Cantú's earlier work *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* did the same, and the two books form part of a trilogy. This excerpt deals with much more than ritual behavior, but it does open up in Toledo, Spain, with the rituals attendant on the Catholic feast day of Corpus Christi featuring its procession of horsemen in medieval costume and giant puppets, which make the protagonist think of the much diminished Corpus Christi procession in her own Texas. The second chapter of Cantú's work then shifts elsewhere, in line with its intention of moving between life vignettes that have to do with the cultural encounters of the protagonist, taking us back to Texas and to events twenty years after Spain. However, though centered in particular, specific times, memories and flashbacks take the reader to yet other times and places, while Corpus Christi rituals continue to provide an anchor for the narrative.

William Bernard McCarthy

The Birthday Horse

In our little town in Arkansas,
just as the child comes in for bed
at twilight on the day he's six
the birthday horse appears in the street
and makes his way to the child's house.

Dainty and grey, he steps over the curb,
crosses the sidewalk and takes the walk
up to the porch, lifts one great hoof,
and taps upon the bottom step.

Somehow, in our town, the rule
is only summer birthdays here.
The child comes forth in sandals and shorts.
Some, of course, are scared, at first,
and cling, and even whimper a bit,
as fathers lift them overhead
and settle them into the saddle.

But soon enough they grab the pommel,
waving and grinning, but looking ahead
to follow the course of their birthday ride.

Drawn by the distinctive sound
of unshod hooves on pavement grey,
the people of the town come out
to stand upon their porches and watch
to see who passes, whose day it is.

Children already gone upstairs
to put on pajamas and say their prayers
call from the windows and wave toothbrushes.

To Main Street, first he makes his way,
past hardware store and drug store too,
both open late, and the movie house,
where teens in line don't even turn.

And in an older neighborhood
widows who live with leaking roofs,
broken fences, and sealed off rooms,
take note of the hoofbeats on the street,
but they are waiting for a different horse.

So back and forth, up and down,
street by street, through the whole town
the great horse paces, arching his hooves,
curling them under in dressage,
and rocking the rider perched on his back.

In an hour or so the horse returns,
stepping again across the curb.
Full dark has come, cicadas buzz
and lightning bugs are signaling.

The young poster to the pommel clings.
But, deep asleep, he'll not recall
the moment home, sliding down,
and riding a shoulder upstairs to bed.

And by the time the parent returns
from tucking the birthday child in,
all trace of great grey pacer is gone,
save for a whiff, barely there,
mingled with the smell of grass
and the hint of a coming thunderstorm.

Rosan Augusta Jordan

In Praise of Bodies

As the bells of the parish church
Toll the hour of departure,
The whole village gathers
In the cemetery of Teotitlán del Valle.

Being in the body, we feel—
 Our pleasure, our pain,
 The little aches in aging muscles,
 The touch of friendly hands that greet us,
 Offering food, drink, comfort.
Those others, though, the *muertos*—
Those spirits without bodies—
 They no longer feel what we feel.

For these few hours they have been welcomed
Back in their old homes,
Their presence honored with candles on an altar
And ritual offerings of their favorite foods.
They consume the pungent flavors and smells,
But never feel the full belly of the incarnate.
They consume the pungent fumes of the mezcal—strong liquor—
But do not share in the intoxication which the living seek—
 Abandonment of the senses,
 The possession of the spirit.
After all, these *muertos* are already all spirit.
 —No bodies.

And now it is time for them to leave again,
A departure perhaps less poignant each successive year.
And yet, mingling with the living gathered to say goodbye,
There inside the walls of the village *panteón*,
Where sunlight filters through the flowering groves,
 They linger. . . ,
 Relishing the smell of marigolds
 And freshly-cut oranges
 And cups of mezcal poured out for them.
They are reluctant to leave
Even this shadow version of sensate being.

But as the droning chant of the paid mourners fills the
 cemetery,
And the smoke of the burning *copal* incense rises,
Their tenuous connection to their earthly homes loosens,
And the wandering spirits drift off once more.

To have a body.
 To feel.
 They remember.

Hands and Hearts in the Days of the Dead in Oaxaca, Mexico

My blood flowed on the streets of Oaxaca,
in front of the Magic Hand,
on this the day the dead walk among us
and the living feed them.

What unseen force pushed me forward
and wielded the invisible but deadly sharp obsidian knife?

Was it my heart they wanted?

Instead my little finger took the blow,
deflected by some sympathetic opposing force for life.

The Indian women wrap the bloody torn flesh
in a tattered handkerchief,
and follow me back to the sign of the Magic Hand,
urgently repeating, "A curandera waits nearby."

Instead, I am taken in a taxi
to the doctor/priests at the Clinica Carmen.
I am stretched out on the altar in the center of the room,
where they huddle over my still bleeding hand
and prepare for the ritual to come.

They examine the bone, the ligaments;
They know the knife that cut me;
They know the ritual that feeds the gods
and keeps the forces of the universe in balance.

My heart races—
I have had this dream before.

They consult the oracle:
The bloodthirsty gods are satisfied.
The hand is cleaned and repaired,
the healing draughts assembled.
The rest is up to me.

Christmas Tree

I'm winded yet warm
right now, having climbed
to bring them a tree:

though the thin air hurts,
I came here because
my body still works—

I thought I'd use it
to help old neighbors
endure this Christmas.

* * *

This winter's vista
little resembles
the one they valued

when they saw green:
their mountain's standing
out from its shadow

like a gravestone,
marking their absence
from future landscapes.

* * *

With my shovel I scoop
a scrawny fir,
barely a sapling—

its trunk narrow,
its roots shallow:
my cold hands cradle

what's left of the earth
that nourished giants
before I was born.

Madhulika

Drawing floral designs on Indian courtyards
under a full moon

Painting with henna on a young bride's hands

Your art is not locked in masculine mausoleums,
shut up in temples carved in stone,
but proffered daily through an open doorway
in ritual offerings to the Gods

the henna fading on the hands,
powdered designs blown heavenward
towards an evanescent Goddess of ephemera

Margaret Yocom

Eating Alone

I am from fields of manure and wheat,
from cow corn high enough to hide in, from
creek beds of violets, daffodils

I am from stone springhouses, from
bottles of milk and cream
shuttered, cool in August noons

I am from smokehouses, from
hooks and hatchets, from
blood and feathers

I am from farms with two houses,
one for grandfather, grandmother
when deep-veined hands turn from tractors, from

cauldrons of corn meal mush
I am from winding staircases, from attics, from
gauzy curtains in summer's night breezes

I am from jar after glass jar of tomatoes, green
beans, peaches, applesauce, but
I am also from chow-chow, dried corn, scrapple

shoo-fly pie, schmierkäse, sauerkraut, souse, and
all those other foods you
won't eat with me

Norma E. Cantú

from *Cabañuelas: A Love Story*

These two chapters are from *Cabañuelas, A Love Story*, the third in the Border Trilogy that includes the award-winning *Canícula; Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (University of New Mexico Press, 1995). The novel is set over a period of nine months, January to September, but in two geographical locations twenty years apart: 1980 in Spain and 2000 in South Texas. The protagonist is a Chicana folklorist from South Texas who is in Spain researching festivals and is involved with an artist, Paco, who lives in Madrid but hails from Asturias, the northern region of Spain. In the longer chapter, she is back in Laredo, Texas, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In both pieces the protagonist, Nena, fuses her childhood memories within the narrative structure and weaves time and place into an (in) coherent whole. Chapter 25 is set in Toledo, Spain, in 1980 and Chapter 26 is set in Laredo in 2000, but in flashbacks and flash-forwards, the narrative goes off to Mexico—Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guadalajara, and other locations there and in the U.S.

Chapter 25 *Corpus Christi*

Toledo, 1980

It's June. A Thursday. And they are headed to Toledo for the feast of Corpus Christi as are so many others, both Toledanos and not, who go back annually to admire and enjoy the fiesta. The day begins gray and rainy in Madrid. They drive in Paco's apple green SEAT, Nena calls these cars the Volkswagen of Spain. Paco is driving and singing Asturian folksongs and laughing; Luis and Astrid join him. Along the way, the weather turns sunny and by the time they arrive in Toledo, it is a bright sunny day. During the drive in her usual morning quiet, Nena just listens and retreats into herself. Last night's dreams are still with her, although they slowly fade as she looks at the highway, the red poppies, and the yellow wildflowers she thinks so appropriate for this country whose flag has those very same colors, same shades of red and yellow. They arrive and park away from the Plaza Zocodover; traffic is already quite heavy, and Paco wants to make sure they can get out when they choose to leave. He has made this trip before. With his ex-wife . . . well, not quite an "ex," but the wife he doesn't live with because she went off with another

woman . . . there is no divorce yet; too difficult to get one even now, after the dark times of absolutely no divorce.

Plaza Zocodover is carpeted in thyme and rosemary, and altars are set up along the route where the procession led by the huge monstrance will travel. The narrow cobblestoned streets called callejones are full of excitement even though it's only about eight in the morning when they arrive. They stop at the Café Toledo for café con leche and churros. Nena asks for a tortilla española, and the others laugh. That's not for breakfast, they chide. I know, she says, but I like it; she enjoys the freshly made omelet of eggs and potato and a dash of garlic fried in olive oil. Paco says the best thing is to find a good spot before the Mass ends. But she wants to attend Mass and take pictures of the service. So she goes off alone while the others find a spot where they will wait for her to join them after Mass.

She manages to sneak in and is awed by the cathedral with its priceless artwork and so much gold. The place is already full, and only dignitaries and a few locals are allowed in. The organ is magnificent; before the Mass, the music booms, deep, tugging at heart and mind. Some women are wearing the mantilla and the peineta, the fancy high comb that holds the delicate lace scarf in place. She's glad that the laws have changed, and she can attend with an uncovered head. Remembers when she would have to use a hairpin to hold a piece of Kleenex tissue on her head to hear Mass, the time in Monterrey when she was escorted out of the church for not wearing a head cover. And how she loved to wear them, too, the small circular lace ones and the fancy longer ones. She had them in various colors. She remembers them all: the Easter crocheted hat her Tía Luz made for her when she was nine, the many chalinas her mother had bought or made for her. What acts of love, she thought as she daydreamed, waiting for Mass to begin. She finds a seat upfront right behind the authorities—military and civic—where she can observe the archbishop, the bishops, and the visiting priests. There must be over twenty officiating. It's the ritual she knows well and mouths the prayers; she stands and sits and kneels in unison with everyone. Their Spanish sounding familiar yet alien.

As soon as the Mass ends, she dashes outside with her Pentax ready to shoot as many pictures as she can. The first-communion boys and girls are all lined up, the cofradías, the stern-looking gentlemen and women, the nurses, the religious orders, everyone in place for the procession. The horsemen in medieval dress escort the first processioners. In the distance, she spies the tarrasca and the gigantes, the giant puppets, that have already paraded down the path earlier that morning, as they did the night before. Centuries old, the figure of Anne Boleyn atop the green monster, la Tarrasca, confuses Nena. She had not read anything about that. The gigantes, yes, the queen and the king and the others. Giant figures as tall as the white tarp that covers the area where the procession will parade. The outside walls of the cathedral are draped with rich tapestries depicting religious and mythological scenes. The Annunciation with Mary amidst the angels. The child Jesus before the rabbis in the temple. There are over fifty, and they are old and not very well cared for. The next day, the workers will pull them down,

fold them, and put them away for next year. There is a festive air although it is a religious celebration.

After scurrying through the crowds of Toledanos and tourists who have come for the Corpus, she finds her group. They have indeed secured a good spot on the steps of a church, and they eagerly await the coming procession. She tells them of the Mass and who is coming, and in what order. Paco has found a program of some sort, and she keeps it. He is helpful, telling her stories of what happened when he last saw the procession and how it seems changed and yet is the very same thing. And too soon it's over. She has taken two full rolls of film. He has offered advice on how to hold the camera for certain shots, pointed to particularly interesting photo ops, and for the first time, seemed really interested in her work. When she wants to go interview some folks he tells her who are the leaders, but she decides to not go after all, has decided instead to stay with the group. After all, the Corpus Christi processions in Laredo have stopped, not much sense to compare this one to one that, for all purposes, has ceased to be. The grand processions of Christ the King Church remain in her mother's memories and her own. She remembers as a child walking along with the group, candle in hand, in the procession. The priest intoning in Latin and the people responding. The old joke her mother tells. When the priest would intone, "Ora pro nobis," Alicia, her mother's childhood friend, would interpret it as "ora por dónde?" and laugh and say, "Well, if they don't know where we're going, we sure don't." And her mother remembers the old women, Catalina, Simona, and Altagracia singing off-key, Viva Cristo Rey! Nena decides not to interview anyone. What's the point?

Chapter 26

Los maderos de San Juan piden agua piden pan

Laredo, 2000

En Junio en Laredo the noon heat warns of the summer's worse time, la Canícula, the dog days. June 2000. It's time for weddings and time for summer vacations to Corpus Christi and Port Aransas to the beach, to San Antonio to party, to Guadalajara para conocer. And on the 24th, el día de San Juan, Mami cuts her children's hair, so it grows out full and beautiful. Nena keeps the practice, so her hair grows out beautiful, thick, and wavy, not too curly and not straight. Good hair. And it is time for riding around on Saturday afternoons listening to the radio and singing along with her favorite band, Chicago, "Saturday afternoon. . ." and stopping by the Glass Kitchen for a burger and fries after a morning at the library studying, writing papers for her college classes during the fall and spring, night school after long days at the office. Childhood. High school. College. All measured by summers. On Saturdays, the days stretch long and hot and the nights are full of fun, drive-in movies, and double dates. Nena and her college friends, mostly those that have already gone off to universities and colleges away from the border and come back to Laredo to work or merely for brief visits. With these friends, she

plans trips—to Monterrey to visit her family, Mamagrande, tías, and cousins. To Guadalajara to visit Palmyra's grandmother and her extended family. To Corpus Christi on the Gulf Coast to visit Mirtha's brother. They plan the trips carefully, and plan their fun as if planning a wedding. Palmyra, who has come back with her degree and is teaching elementary school. Mirtha, who works for a car dealership and is going to night school with Nena. Tere, who is about to leave for college after community college in Laredo. They are not children, these young women, so the parents relent and allow them these vacations. Es para conocer. Y es con las familias. Although Nena's Papi is opposed to the trips, he gives in. After all she is over twenty-one and earns her own money. But he fears for her, for his eldest daughter. What will happen if she doesn't marry? Why does she insist on leaving her good-paying job to go to school? What will happen to her?

It's 1970. And off they go to Guadalajara for a week. It's not Corpus but another festival, la Virgen de Sapopan, that they attend. They take the long bus trip and arrive tired but expecting great things. They will stay in a hotel this time. Palmyra's family home is too restrictive, and they want to go to discotecas, dance all night with strangers. They want to feel free. And Palmyra's boyfriend shows up. Drives all night to be there a few hours and drives back to be at work. What love! He must really love her. But a few months later, they have broken up, and the girlfriends get even and put a piece of gum on the side mirror of his precious car, a maroon Stingray, for he's gone to A&M and is loyal. And they use Nena's red lipstick to write CABRON on his windshield while he's at the RoundUp with another woman. Revenge. It's so sweet. Palmyra moves to San Antonio to another life, another teaching job. Tere goes off to college; Mirtha applies for and gets a job, and off she goes east somewhere to work for a federal agency. Her father and her stepmother stay, and Papi and Mami see them on and off at the bingo and they send regards to their daughters. The girlfriends go their separate paths and marry or not and move on.

In Guadalajara, one photo at Lake Chapala captures Nena's hair flying in one direction, their laughter, their joy. Strong bodies. Healthy bodies. They eat birria in home restaurants with makeshift tables covered with bright oilcloth and in fancy restaurants and get homesick for flour tortillas; they never tire of the fresh fruit drinks and the horchata at the fruit stand en la plaza. The girlfriends are madrinas to Tere's daughter—why not?—she can have four madrinas! It's not customary, so what? The priest thinks it odd but allows it nonetheless.

When they go to Corpus Christi, the town named after the religious festival, they stay with Mirtha's brother, who married an Anglo woman; his children are rambunctious boys. They go to the movies, watch *Dr. Zhivago*, they tease Nena for crying. She's read the novel and was expecting more. Not the schmaltzy love story that ends up making her cry yearning for a love as grand as Lara's. When they see *Love Story*, Tere says, that reminds me of you. Nena denies any similarities. Well, they are in college, and she's so smart. They tease and laugh. Nena wants to cry but won't. It's not funny.

The year she leaves the utility company job, finally resigns so she can continue her education, she takes her vacation to help her make the decision. She goes with her friend Paul, who is the priest at San Luis Rey Church, and her friend Sandra, who works as a social worker, off to Oaxaca, to Chiapas, to visit Monte Alban. When they get to Monte Alban, they miss the bus back and have to walk the kilometers to Oaxaca City. Along the way the children greet them, shouting, "Hello, gringos." And they are invited to a small hut where they are served warm corn tortillas and black beans, the poor farm family shares what they have with them, and it is delicious. The father speaks Spanish haltingly but communicates and is curious about these gringos who speak Spanish and who are not americanos but are not mestizos either. *Qué son?* So hard to explain. Nena is humbled by the dire poverty, the beauty of the scenery, and the differences. Sandra, Paul, and Nena have long deep talks about the indigenous people, and the way the locals use them for labor, how they abuse them, how the mestizos continue the oppression of the European conquerors. This can't last forever, Nena thinks, someday they will rebel.

Once in Tapachula they take a bus to Villaflores to visit the small hamlet where Sandra had done a summer-abroad program working with the local clinic. Tomas, a ninety-something Indian, guides them up the mountain for a day hike, and they pick up shards of preconquest worlds that come colliding into their 1970s world. That night, the marimba's soft music plays on and on. It's Saturday night, and the community is hosting a party for the foreigners, for Nena and her friends. . . . The doctor, who is their host, is gracious, his family had also hosted Sandra years before when she was a college student come to work here. He is paternal with them as he is with the indigenous people of the town. But they have such knowledge, she wants to tell him but holds back, mustn't be rude. She allows him his patriarchy and feels sick. Tomas has married five times and has been widowed four. Has over twenty children. He smiles and winks when the doctor shares these facts of his life. He won't speak directly to them because he doesn't speak much Spanish, but Nena knows he does, he just won't. The marimba is as strange as the food—the music so unlike the accordion and the guitar of her homeland. But this is Mexico, too. Chiapas. She reminds herself and her companions. Keeps the shards of pottery and the images: a face, a torso, and a child's toy, a dog, in a special place for many years until in one of the many moves they disappear, never to return. Just as well, she sighs. The trip remains in her heart, as she thinks and thinks about what to do. Resign her job? Leave the office and finish college? Go to what? Teaching? Won't pay more, and the benefits are worse. After all, when she began working there that was why: because teaching paid less than working in an office, although as a teacher she would have summers off. But the benefits were so much better at the utility company. Plus, after the scholarship money ran out, she didn't have the money for tuition and books, and her siblings needed shoes and clothes for school. So after one year on a community college scholarship she gave up and began working, to help the family, to help her sisters and brothers. But only for five years. And the years stretched to seven. And her brother goes off to Vietnam and comes back

in a coffin. And her father's arthritis becomes disabling; the family needs her. So she gives in and works. In Mexico that summer, she made the final decision. On the feast of Corpus Christi. But no one understands. Why? It's a good job, with good benefits. And you have a chance to go on to study and advance with the company if you want to. But. How can she explain the anger that working there has germinated? How can she tell them that the office is using up her best years, her mind, her hands, and that there is nothing to show for it? How can she share her innermost fears, that she will grow old there. That she will become like her coworkers, Pepita or Betty, bitter, old, having to do without. Without what? She doesn't know, just knows that there is more to life. More to living. More for her. And in Oaxaca on a warm summer night with the marimba playing she decides. I must leave. But I will come back. I can't be gone forever. And later she will have to make the decision again. To leave or to stay? The border is like that. Pulling and tugging at your heart and also rejecting and off-putting. Difficult.

The Zapatista uprising did not surprise her that January 1995 when NAFTA went into effect, the treaty that rang the death knell on so many small businesses along the border. It was sure to come, how could it not? Wondered what the good doctor thought of it all. And his teen daughters who were waiting to be married and his young son who collected stamps. How are they celebrating this Corpus Christi?

That trip was worth more than gold, Nena muses as she remembers years later in Laredo with her friend Sandra, "Tanto que aprendí. And the decisions I had to make. Seems every time I have to make life change decisions I take a trip. ¿No crees?"

"Well maybe that's your way of getting away from the energies that bind you to the old."

"Maybe."

It's the feast day of Corpus Christi in Laredo in 2000, and the fiesta is the same as it has always been. And different. No longer are there processions at daybreak, but in some parishes, the adoration chapel is bedecked with flowers, and the perpetual adoration society celebrates in its own way. The procession path is around the block, prayers and songs by a few faithful, perhaps a guitar. But in Toledo it is solemn faces and a brass band leading the procession for a small parish. After the large citywide procession, they wind their way through narrow streets praying the rosary. After all, for over seven hundred years, the feast has been celebrated and has undergone changes. And it all started with the thirteenth-century French nun Juliana of Liege whose visions and voices asked her to celebrate a feast day in honor of the Holy Eucharist. She had no idea that for centuries the faithful would be holding pageants and processions as she dreamed. But even that is changing. While in Toledo the procession is as solemn as always, in Laredo it remains in the elder's fuzzy memory. The processions are now limited to some parishes and are much smaller than they used to be. And Nena dreams of another move. Should she leave? It's time to take another trip. Make decisions. Stay? Leave? The borderlands are like that: like the come and go of the Gulf waters, constant movement. Coming. Going. Coming back.