

# The Coke Works: “a thousand Mexicans came”

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read by the Gadfly:

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# COCO - A

by  
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photographs

by  
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and  
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stoumen

Around the head of the South Mountain  
In the notch of the valley  
Next to the river  
Like a lizard asleep  
Sprawls the mills of The Steel.

Up from the lizard  
Like steam from the hot animal body  
Rise many colored smokes and stenches  
And in a husky voice, it speaks.  
Distinct at night  
Fused with the voice of the city  
by day  
A monotonous clatter and clang;  
punctuated by shrieking air  
and dull explosion.

*This is the thing the student sees  
As he sits with his date  
at the Lookout on South Mountain.*

Trolleys clatter between Bethlehem and Hellertown.  
Some stop at a road

that leads to the Slag Division  
of the Steel.

The wavy macadam strip wanders by  
long heaps of slag  
nondescript shacks  
a big gas tank

Past the piping, stacks, and black cylinders  
of the Coke Works

Pauses by a string of small wooden buildings  
each with its own outhouse

And loses itself in the lazy Pennsylvania  
countryside rich in old hewn barns  
and massive stone farmhouses.



and children who lower their heads and smile



In the shadow of the tanks

*Sad and heavy with the stuff of life are these  
monotonous grey shacks*

*Beside whom the road paused  
in the shadow  
of the tanks  
of the coke distilling plant.*

Here live people not known to Joe and his date  
For the two can not see the head of the lizard  
From where they sit

in the convertible coupe  
at the Lookout  
on South Mountain

Some people call this place The Camp.  
Others, The Mexican Village.  
People who live there call it  
"Coco-a"

*A strange growth is Coco-a  
in the jaw of the lizard  
Born of the strikes of a post-war steel boom  
which were broken  
by men sitting at glass-topped desks.  
Men who said,  
"We'll ship Mexicans up to break the damn strike."  
"We will probably need a thousand."*

A thousand Mexicans came.  
Men, women, children.  
In box cars to Bethlehem,  
from Guadalajara in Mexico  
from drowsy, sunny, dusty, Mexico  
to America, the land of promise,  
to Bethlehem, the town of steel.



But the smell of Coco-a—

But hard is the stock  
of those who live in the shack,  
and proud,  
Spanish blood and Indian.  
Hard workers.  
Ask their foremen.  
Hard drinkers.  
Ask the law.  
And healthy.  
Look at the fat brown babies  
and children who lower their  
heads and smile,  
and laugh the laughter of healthy  
children,  
and run on fat brown legs.

Strange that such should live and play  
beside and in grey wooden shacks  
about the wooden outhouse  
by the galvanized fence of the steel.  
"Temporary shelters" did the man at the  
glass topped desk say?  
But the smells of Coco-a don't reach  
Fountain Hill  
And twenty years is a long time to remember.



Have you met the greasy, dirty, lousy, drunken Mexican?

Have you met the greasy, dirty, lousy, drunken,  
Mexican?

"Come  
"Hello Jesus Goyasha. How are you?"  
"How are the little ones?"  
"Good, Good. One more pretty soon make it nine —"

*After my woman have it you must come to my  
house.  
I can not offer you much.  
Something to eat  
A little wine  
And a good time as our friend,  
You promise, eh?"*

Pride  
and tough bodies  
builds anti-toxins  
to disease, filth, lice, and squalor.  
Hard liquor, cheap liquor  
helps too.  
As does good humor  
stoicism  
generosity.  
Happy people live  
in two room shacks  
with their children  
who play in the shadow of tanks and  
piping.  
Four hundred yards from the city dump.



Four hundred yards from  
the city dump

Lehigh University students view the wave of Mexicans working in and living by the infamous Coke Works.

What are you thinking?

Written 80 years ago.

Imagine Gadfly reading this today (with his Mexican accent!) to an audience of many colors.

What discussion might ensue about the meaning of “history” and

how “history” is written?

What would a poem by one of the Mexicans look like?

*Thanks to follower Ilhan Citak for supplying the copy and for permission to print.*