

Good Robert Coles

By Richard Baldwin Cook

Good Robert Coles my zealous interest pricked
his Crisis Kids I read as sacred text
the Garden State in '70 was quick
to move the migrants on before their wrecked

and battered cars and lives could stop in town
the man-made Stream made man work dark to dim
was for their kind no place in Vineland found
the Migrant Stream was fine you see for them

Good Robert pointed gently to the souls
of children in a crisis not their choice
said specially for the poorest life unfolds
so quickly and is gone we'd best give voice

to small ones whose childhood is snatched away
by purposed, harsh and yes cruel abuse
their dads and moms at hard labor all day
in fields that plied the nation's high produce

Good Robert not alone to sound the knell
to warn that children must be given more
than six inches of topsoil where some fell
and got six feet of earth 'til Heaven's door

swings open to receive them on that Day
when earth entire promised by Christ at last
theirs and dead Mom's and Dad's such deferred pay
like dust seems meager for a life-long fast

since food enough to live not theirs to tout

life on the Migrant Stream imparts slight hopes
for kids Good Robert chose to write about
for answers to these puzzles wisdom gropes

The other my pole star a stranger child
Unknown to me, but his reported de'f
and placement in the ground forced forward wild
and dismal thoughts his homeless folks bereft

they on the Stream, but Charlie left behind
in graved in Delaware forever lost
no locals would or could visit his kind
the migrant kid whose death a slighted cost

Some others offered up a hope with prayers
young Cesar and the workers plainly dressed
sang arm in arm then marched and tipped the chairs
made quake the agri-power in the west

came east they pitched a boycott had their say
don't buy the food and produce we would cut
and pack for decent wages they won't pay
this hopeful note got us out of the rut

of migrants streaming north from Floriday
the poorness of the boycott staff impressed
the prayers appealed to us who swing that way
with the UFW our hopes would crest

Our jump into this welcome stream secure
the Migrant Ministry blunted the edge
of poverty that volunteers endure
who aren't ordained before they reach the ledge

Chris Hartmire alter egoed Cesar's push

to trim the power of Calif agri-bis
but tempered with a charismatic rush
of love for us fools who signed up for this

new stream of work and play but industry
was why we'd come two thousand miles to be
told what to do and where to go each day
life that old song played in a grand new key

Unscrupulous in hope marked us as young
Incorrigible love seeks no amends
Nosotros Venceremos anthem sung
clasped happy hands bonded with new friends

Cesar the man in charge held all the reins
at first this pattern worked out to a tee
compellingly Chavez made wondrous gains
marked ordinary tasks with filigree

Disarming candor potion that confused
he'd pick his feet and talk of life long hate
for bosses who his grandad they'd abused
he'd set things right soon or maybe too late

The second tier of leaders brilliant too
LeRoy Jim Jerry Marshall none held back
from ceaseless duty exemplary few
were followed by an energetic pack

of bright and eager staffers not a few
could hold their own as dedicated men
and women who matched up quite well we knew
for workers' rights and union power its twin

We lived our little family at La Paz

solitary head in San Joaquin
the bastion and HDQ that was
or could have been my resting place I mean

I loved the winter crispness in that air
Union Pacific trills sweet spoke to me
of countless hobos riding to somewhere
to make a better life than they could see

I loved the desert harshness of that ground
the lack of color bright and varied seemed
the work was mediated by the sound
of children's laughter this place was my dream

but no some crisis percolated all
save one or two no one would get to stay
the rest of us would quickly heed the call
to Arizona go or to L.A.

This rootless up and out tossed us about
and took the very meat right off the bone
of tireless then tired staff who came to doubt
had we turned not the tide but just the foam?

For us invited to live for the poor
the work beasts unrequited on this earth
a deep design good Cesar had in store
a commune or an Order he'd give birth

and turn it over to the Vatican
the autocrats of other people's souls
this leaves aside the strong woman or man
for whom a workers' union was the goal

Pues Cesar oye dinos what you mean

pull us away from Charlie Thomas' grave
the migrant boy whose death was so obscene
your fight's for wages or for souls to save?

And if I'd stayed behind to do what good
for kid like Charlie any case was dead
systemic powers had beat us where we stood
Good Robert might just as well go unread

Cesar devout so quick to bend the knee
to court Mahoney's cynical good will
no clinic contraception he'd decree
but girlfriend gets the condom or the pill

US Labor power is grafted on
subject to ruin by legislative whim
rebellions in Europe guard gains hard won
since 1848 those ranks have thinned

Sacramento, a sacrament became
pilgrimage of talent, money too
made sense to fix this tiresome dance for gain
stick labor law with constitution glue

It did not work for reasons that apply
to other propositions we deride
but Cesar thought to win was as to try
and lose meant rot was buried deep inside

Purged those kids a deed surely ironic
the very ones whose work back in the day
had made the union's label iconic
were marched out of La Paz sent on their way

Like me some kept our heads we kept them low

but this is not the mission of the brave
righteous we self-envisioned long ago
we came to help the workers not self-save

Not one thought but a thousand fill each hour
a busy forward looking plan was urged
at bay kept somber musings from power
to notify the purger bro you're purged

Sublime vision our noon devil became
LeRoy long gone Jim Eliseo too
postulants from La Paz increasing lame
the worst of it so many now too few

My mentor Chris moved to the fortress high
our shattered ranks to me looked for a sign
expected All's well from me but a sigh
I offered them before up and resign

All faithful were we and all traitors too
In solitude each measures down the love
the balance once expended well you're through
You're strangers now who once worked hand in glove

Of my one thousand thoughts cascade each hour
one troubles me more than the last or first
my opt for Califa to fight the Powers
was that my best decision or my worst?

Together yoked we labored how we worked
In the deepening sunset sharpness lost
Recall no task too tiresome to be shirked
or questions asked but still there comes the cost

Is life tainted if you intend for good?

Severe inquiry dare not pose the grave
fanatic who will kill you if he could
pray weeping o'er your corpse whose soul he'd save

Your blind allegiance tolls on you its cost
won't be shifted to the one who beckoned
we answered then now looking back have lost
the lifetime we better might have reckoned

Life unobstructed if the backward look
brings out a chorus dear whose spectral aire
praises our efforts inscribed in the book
of small deeds, as no larger are writ there