

On Making Papier Mâché Puppets

In March 2000 at the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, we who were buena gente made papier-mâché puppets of César Chávez, leader of the farmworkers' union, and Emma Tenayuca, organizer in San Antonio of striking pecan shellers. At the César Chávez March, César and Emma would sit serenely side by side on the flat-bed truck like an old married couple, though sometimes they would jump up and down or raise their arms in defiance of los patrones. ("Dale shine al Westside!") We tore long strips from *La Prensa*, *The Current*, and *The San Antonio Express-News*. As if swinging a scythe, we shredded stories about primary elections; falling internet stocks; and Elián González, the little Cuban refugee scooped from the sea but kept from his father, who stayed on the island. Curls of newspaper print added up to half a dozen bags. The project leader taught me to soak the paper in a paste of harina y agua before pressing each strip flat onto a huge balloon. Seeing the balls sticky with plaster, I recalled projects of childhood—my sister's Groucho Marx mask as well as the green and blue model of earth we made in fourth-grade science class. The heads of César and Emma, too, were worlds we created. Their hair and eyebrows were black yarn

that we glued to the balloons. Emma's hair was a bun, while César's was dusted with talcum powder to make it salt-and-pepper. These puppets were old as the earth: wise, worldly, satirical. Even their faces, which we painted brown, were old, the dried plaster creating wrinkles and creases. Invisible beneath brown paint and black yarn were collages of words in newsprint:

Gaza Beijing wolves
stocks women bomb
Juárez checkpoint global
immigrant coal transport
factory whales
lettuce oil police
environment Border
drought fossil

Words lay beneath their skin. Another language could be heard in Emma's eyes, which were simply pecans pressed in her sockets by an Esperanza artist. Emma's old eyes were a world.

—Rachel Jennings