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**El sonavabitche**  
(for Aishe Berger)

Car flowing down a lava of highway  
just happened to glance out the window  
in time to see brown faces bent backs  
like prehistoric boulders in a field  
so common a sight no one  
notices  

blood rushes to my face  
twelve years I'd sat on the memory  
the anger scorching me  
my throat so tight I can  
barely get the words out,  

I got to the farm  
in time to hear the shots  
ricochet off barn,  
spit into the sand,  
in time to see tall men in uniforms  
thumping fists on doors  
metallic voices yelling Halt!  
their hawk eyes constantly shifting.

When I hear the words, "Corran muchachos"  
I run back to the car, ducking,  
see the glistening faces, arms outflung,  
of the mexicanos running headlong  
through the fields  
kicking up clouds of dirt

see them reach the tree line  
foliage opening, swishing closed behind them.  
I hear the tussling of bodies, grunts, panting  
squeak of leather squawk of walkie-talkies  
sun reflecting off gunbarrels  
the world a blinding light  
a great buzzing in my ears  
my knees like aspens in the wind.

---

I see that wide cavernous look of the hunted  
the look of hares  
thick limp blue-black hair  
The bare heads humbly bent  
of those who do not speak  
the ember in their eyes extinguished.

I lean on the shanty wall of that migrant camp  
north of Muncie, Indiana.  
Wets, a voice says.  
I turn to see a Chicano pushing  
the head of his muchachita  
back into the nahuas of the mother  
a tin plate face down on the floor  
tortillas scattered around them.  
His other hand signals me over.  
He too is from el valle de Tejas  
I had been his kid's teacher.  
I'd come to get the grower  
to fill up the sewage ditch near the huts  
saying it wouldn't do for the children  
to play in it.  
Smoke from a cooking fire and  
shirtless niños gather around us.

Mojados, he says again,  
leaning on his chipped Chevy station wagon  
Been here two weeks  
about a dozen of them.  
The sonavabishe works them  
from sunup to dark—15 hours sometimes.  
Como mulas los trabaja  
no saben como hacer la perra.  
Last Sunday they asked for a day off  
wanted to pray and rest,  
write letters to their familias.  
¿Y sabes lo que hizo el sonavabishe?  
He turns away and spits.  
Says he has to hold back half their wages  
that they'd eaten the other half:
sack of beans, sack of rice, sack of flour.
_Frijoleros sí lo son_ but no way
could they have eaten that many _frijoles._
I nod.

_Como le dije, son doce_—started out 13
five days packed in the back of a pickup
boarded up tight
fast cross-country run no stops
except to change drivers, to gas up
no food they pissed into their shoes—
those that had _guaraches_
slept slumped against each other
_sabe Dios_ where they shit.
One smothered to death on the way here.

Miss, you should’ve seen them when they
stumbled out.
First thing the _sonabitch_ did was clamp
a handkerchief over his nose
then ordered them stripped
hosed them down himself
in front of everybody.
They hobbled about
learning to walk all over again.
_Flacos con caras de viejos_
aunque la mitá eran jóvenes.

_Como le estaba diciendo,_
today was payday.
You saw them, _la migra_ came busting in
waving their _pinche pistolas._
Said someone made a call,
Guess who? That _sonabitch_, who else?
Done this three times since we’ve been coming here
_Sepa Dios_ how many times in between.
Wets, free labor, _esclavos._
_Pobres hijos de la chingada._
This the last time we work for him

no matter how _fregados_ we are
he said, shaking his head,
spitting at the ground.
_Vámonos, mujer, empaca el mugrero._

He hands me a cup of coffee,
half of it sugar, half of it milk
my throat so dry I even down the dregs.
It has to be done.
Steeling myself
I take that walk to the big house.

Finally the big man lets me in.
How about a drink? I shake my head.
He looks me over, opens his eyes wide
and smiles, says how sorry he is immigration
is getting so tough
a poor Mexican can’t make a living
and they sure do need the work.
My throat so thick the words stick.
He studies me, then says,
Well, what can I do you for?
I want two weeks wages
including two Saturdays and Sundays,
minimum wage, 15 hours a day.
I’m more startled than he.
Whoa there, _sinorita,_
wets work for whatever you give them
the season hasn’t been good.
Besides most are halfway to Mexico by now.
Two weeks wages, I say,
the words swelling in my throat.

Miss uh what did you say your name was?
I fumble for my card.
You can’t do this,
I haven’t broken no law,
his lidded eyes darken, I step back.
I’m leaving in two minutes and I want cash
the whole amount right here in my purse.
when I walk out.
No hoarseness, no trembling.
It startled both of us.

You want me telling every single one
of your neighbors what you've been doing
all these years? The mayor, too?
Maybe make a call to Washington?
Slitted eyes studied the card again.
They had no cards, no papers.
I'd seen it over and over.
Work them, then turn them in before paying them.

Well, now, he was saying,
I know we can work something out,
a sweet young thang like yourself.
Cash, I said. I didn't know anyone in D.C.
now I didn't have to.
You want to keep it for yourself?
That it? His eyes were pin pricks.
Sweat money, Mister, blood money,
not my sweat, but same blood.
Yeah, but who's to say you won't abscond with it?
If I ever hear that you got illegals on your land
even a single one, I'm going to come here
in broad daylight and have you
hung by your balls.
He walks slowly to his desk.
Knees shaking, I count every bill
taking my time.

¿Y sabes lo que hizo?—And you know what he did.
Frijoleros si lo son.—Bean eaters they are.
Como le dije, son doce.—Like I told you, they're 12.

Corran muchachos.—Run boys.
muchachita—little girl
naguas—skirt
el valle de Tejas—Rio Grande Valley in Texas
mojados—wetbacks, undocumented workers, illegal immigrants from Mexico
and parts south
Como mulas los trabaja.—He works them like mules.
no saben como hacer la perra.—They don't know how to make the work easier
for themselves.
**En mi corazón se incuba**  
*(para Sonia Álvarez)*  

Todo comienza a partir de este día,  
Una tristeza me invade y  
Algo extraño se oculta en mi vientre—  
Un golpe de soledad que me consume.  
En mi corazón se incuba una espina.

La luz de las luciérnagas se retira y  
De los árboles me llaman las lechuzas.  
Inmersa en un abandono, tragando miedos,  
Me siento muy lejos  
De la huella del amor.

En tumbas huérfanas gasto largas noches,  
Los minutos pasan como agujas por mi piel.  
Soy una sombra pálida en una noche opaca.  
Hondo escondo mi pena, hondo.  
Hondo se enraiza un sueño noconfesado.

En este oscuro monte de nopal  
Algo secretamente amado  
Se oculta en mi vientre  
Y en mi corazón se incuba  
Un amor que no es de este mundo.

---

**Corner of 50th St. and Fifth Av.**

Taking my usual walk  
I run into sirens flashing red, turning  
and a small crowd  
watching the dark-haired man  
with the thin mustache,  
PR about 30,  
maricón, a voice in the crowd shouts.

Two uniforms have his head  
wedged down in the gap  
between the bucket seats,  
red sirens turning turning  
just over his head.

Another pulls down his pants  
holds him tight around the waist  
till the PR’s face is flushed  
the cop’s fist red  
the sirens turning turning.  
The first two look bored  
eyes drifting slowly  
not meeting our eyes.  
He just thud got out thud of jail  
I hear a Rican say  
thud, the cop’s arms like baseball bats.  
Finally the thuds end.  
They pull his head  
out of the crack,  
pull pants over livid cheeks,  
manacled hands going down  
to cover his buttocks  
the sirens turning turning  
I wade through the thick air thinking  
that’s as close as they let themselves get  
to fucking a man, being men.