



The Muddy Fields

a short story by manuel tzunum aparicio

In the muddy fields of Moss Landing, the campesinos were digging with machetes. The sun hid behind the dripping gloom of the winter sky above the fields. It was early in the morning, the never ceasing labor of the campesinos mixed in harmony with the pouring rain. I was just another worker in the heavy mist of the fields, cutting leeks at their roots under the storm. We dragged our feet in the cracks of the earth, searching inside those roots for the true meaning of our presence in this “golden” state of California. “Undocumented” workers, “illegal aliens,” “wetbacks”--these and others were the names given to us for not having the official right to work in this country. Despite it all, we toiled the land and picked its fruits and vegetables with great dignity and arduous labor. As the rain whipped the pungent green vegetables and our plastic rain-suits, we steadily moved through the million puddles in the fields. Like the hidden rainbow, our bodies arched with the hope of finding treasure in the colors which soaked the earth. We were cutting leeks with sharp-edged machetes, forming piles for the rest of the crew to begin peeling. Our sight was devoted intensively to the gloom of the fields--watching the handfuls of leeks and the muddy machete coming out of the earth. As we continued dragging our feet of clay in the eternal furrows of the fields, a puddle of silence grew until it reached the ocean of our souls.

The skin of the land was drowning in tears, tears that had fertilized this land for many centuries. We were part of this harvest; our brown skin blending in harmony with the color of the land as it sung to us a silent song within our hearts. Long ago in these same fields, los viejitos, Don Rito and Doña Eustraberta, had once knelt down to peel leeks for the first time.

These two elders seemed to have grown roots in their soles, for not even a sharp machete could cut them from the muddy fields. For these two elders it was just another storm among a million others, sweating their last drops in the fields of Moss Landing. “Los viejitos will never die,” we believed, “they will just dry up and fly away.” In times we felt

our souls weakening, we would turn to them for a breath of inspiration, and in their cracked brown faces, we saw a long journey under many ancient suns and moons. It was their spirit of survival from which we gained the strength to continue our labor in the fields.



I took a pause, inhaling the gray skies and the moistened air; a river met in ecstasy with the sea of my lungs. Suddenly, the rain began to splash more intensely upon us. Rain washed over my brown Indian face, soothing the tears of my irritated eyes, pouring down my neck and onto my chest until it reached the very soles of my callous feet. Lowering my eyes, I saw through the veil of water the silhouettes of cars rolling down the asphalt road. Among them, I distinguished two green cars from *la migra*, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), reducing their speed to turn into the work fields.

The earth began to tremble; the beat of my heart sounded like a drum of alert. Startled, my lungs emptied into the winds: “¡La migra se vino! La migra se vino! The INS is coming! The INS is coming!” The arched bodies of my countrymen immediately

straightened. They fled, throwing machetes from one hand and leeks from the other, pursued by the hungry wolf, *la migra*. The INS officials, in their recently polished solid boots, ran through the mud of the Moss Landing fields to arrest undocumented workers.



The tumultuous veil that covered the sky seemed to collapse on us, but I stayed--stilled like a sculpture of clay staring into the faded horizon. We were undocumented workers and there was no way we could convince the INS of our human right to work in this land. I just waited for the clay figurine created by the storm to be destroyed as the beast wished. From my eyes, a river of tears erupted, and in my right fist, I could feel a river bursting out of sadness and anger. The handle of the machete seemed to crumble in my hands--as if it was made of dry earth. Stilled in the soaking earth, I observed my countrymen being chased by the INS officials. Sounds of handcuffs spread throughout the fields and only the chanting of prayers from those of us who remained there helped vanquish the darkness of our despair.

Many had already been apprehended, but others sweated every drop of will to elude *la migra*. Some, like Tolin, were not lucky enough in their attempt to run away from deportation. With black stallion hair blowing in the wind, Tolin's wife came out of a trailer, a small child at her side, an infant in her arms. Though both Tolin's children were born in the USA, his wife could only wave goodbye to her husband from the distance, for she was

undocumented. Other workers also apprehended had recently arrived, like Claudio and Carmen. They did not have any family in El Norte, but for certain they held dreams of working for a better life in "this promised land." The dream collapsed as they were caught and thrown into the INS vans.

I watched, my feet and soul sunk deeply into the mud. I could not stop the questions: is it a human right, the right to migrate to another land in search of a better life? If my grandparents were once taken from their homeland to work as *braceros* in El Norte, why then are we—their children—not welcomed? Why every time the United States has an economic or political problem they blame us, the Mexican migrant workers. These and other questions kept echoing in the rain of my saddening soul. Mis *paisanos* were already behind bars in the back seats of the INS vans, their brown eyes shining like stars in the pupil of a dark sky. They looked out, bewildered through the perforations of the car's window cells. Now, it was time for *la migra* to question the legality of those of us lingering in the muddy fields.

Resigned to stay this time, I let destiny show the might of its strength. I grabbed tightly the machete and continued to pull out leeks from the muddy fields. The rest of my co-workers remaining on the fields also continued their work. "¡Paren! ¡Paren! ¡Dejen de trabajar! ¡Dejen de trabajar! Stop working! Immediately!" One by one, we were being stopped and interrogated. From the cracked lips of *los viejitos*, a soothing chant began to emerge: "*Caminante, no hay camino; se hace camino al andar*. You who are walking, there is no path; you make the path as you walk." But the sudden harsh imperative voice of the predator broke the harmony of the song.

Behind me, I could feel a gloom darker than the clay of my eyes. "¡Pare! ¡Deje de trabajar!" The INS official ordered me again as he walked clumsily through the mud. He slowly found his way to where I was. I straightened my body and began to raise my eyes; then, I sighed deeply to blow the clouds away. Still with the machete in one hand and leeks in the other, I turned around to face the INS officer. In front of me was a white man wearing a green

rainsuit with big initials in the back that said INS. My brown eyes and Indian face finally met his blue eyes and pale face. I could have been the cold wet weather that made him tremble when he asked me for my documents. Or maybe he was fearful of a swing from my sixteen-inch machete blade around his neck.

With a voice that broke the silence, I responded: "I've never needed any papers while I was working before, why should I carry any with me now?" Silence spread throughout the fields again, and the rain began to die. "Next time, if you don't bring your papers with you, I will personally deport you back to Mexico, were you belong!" The INS agent had spoken. I thought gleefully, "Maybe he had mistaken me for a Chicano brother who hasn't had the opportunity to continue his education."



I looked into the gray skies and saw the sun breaking through the clouds. I stood sad but thankful, while tears streamed down my face. "¡Gracias Tonanzin!" I whispered prayers into the increasing wind. Thereafter, the INS left the fields of Moss Landing with its cargo of "unwanted *ilegales*." And my people kept transcending physical boundaries to take the still available jobs that no one else wanted in this racist Empire of *El Norte*.