Under the Feet of Jesus

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A PLUME BOOK

The white light of the sun worked hard. Even the birds wavered on the crest of the heat waves. Under the leafy grapevines, the grapes hung heavy. She had readied the large rectangular sheet of newsprint paper over an even bed of tractor levelled soil, then placed the wooden frame to hold the paper down. Now, her basket beneath the bunches, Estrella pulled the vine, slit the crescent moon knife across the stem, and the cluster of grapes was guided to the basket below.

Carrying the full basket to the paper was not like the picture on the red raisin boxes Estrella saw in the markets, not like the woman wearing a fluffy bonnet, holding out the grapes with her smiling, ruby lips, the sun a flat orange behind her. The sun was white and it made

Estrella's eyes sting like an onion, and the baskets of grapes resisted her muscles, pulling their magnetic weight back to the earth. The woman with the red bonnet did not know this. Her knees did not sink in the hot white soil, and she did not know how to pour the baskets of grapes inside the frame gently and spread the bunches evenly on top of the newsprint paper. She did not remove the frame, straighten her creaking knees, the bend of her back, set down another sheet of newsprint paper, reset the frame, then return to the pisca again with the empty basket, row after row, sun after sun. The woman's bonnet would be as useless as Estrella's own straw hat under a white sun so mighty, it toasted the green grapes to black raisins.

Alejo snipped his own flesh and dropped his knife. He pressed the wound between his lips, tasted mud and salt and tin and then heard a lost child's wailing over the hundreds of rows. The vast field of grapevines was monotonous—without beginning, without ending—always the same to the piscadores and then to their children. Another child had wandered off and he could hear the scolding of a mother who was so relieved to find her daughter, she was angry.

Alejo thought of his own grandmother working in Edinburg, Texas, ironing, babysitting, cleaning houses, cutting cucumbers with lemon, salt, and powdered chile to sell at the Swap Meets, or making tamarind and hibiscus juices to sell after Sunday mass. She would do

anything to allow her grandson to get schooling. Right this minute, as he pressed his lips to his wound, he imagined his grandma walking down Chávez Street, cutting across the park to get to the bus stop. Alejo readjusted his L.A. Dodger cap and tried to set the wooden frame with one hand. The other, with its torn skin, seemed painfully useless.

Estrella was not more than four when she first accompanied the mother to the fields. She remembered crying just as the small girl was wailing now. The mother showed pregnant and wore large man's pants with the zipper down and a shirt to cover her drumtight belly. Even then, the mother seemed old to Estrella. Yet, she hauled pounds and pounds of cotton by the pull of her back, plucking with two swift hands, stuffing the cloudy bolls into her burlap sack, the row of plants between her legs. The sack slowly grew larger and heavier like the swelling child within her.

Today was Alejo's turn to bring the lunch. He had packed burritos made of fried potato and French's mustard wrapped in flour tortillas, with fresh jalapeños crunchy like apples, that he and Gumecindo ate quietly under the shade of the grapevines. His Dodger cap rested on his knee.

Estrella sat under a vine. The sun shone through, making the leaves translucent. She could see their bones. And she could see the inside of her water bottle when she held it up to measure its contents. The water

was tepid with particles floating like pieces of exploded stars in space and she drank in deep gulps, long and hard.

Alejo struggled with a piece of newsprint paper. His grandmother had reassured him, this field work was not forever. And every time he awoke to the pisca, he thought only of his last day here and his first day in high school. He planned to buy a canvas backpack to carry his books, a pencil sharpener, and Bobcat book-covers; and planned to major in geology after graduating. He loved stones and the history of stones because he believed himself to be a solid mass of boulder thrust out of the earth and not some particle lost in infinite and cosmic space. With a simple touch of a hand and a hungry wonder of his connection to it all, he not only became a part of the earth's history, but would exist as the boulders did, for eternity.

Estrella remembered the mother trying to keep her awake, but the days were so hot, and the sun wanted her to sleep so badly, she became cranky and angry. Finally, the mother gave in, laid a four-year-old Estrella right on top of her bag of cotton, hushing her to sleep and Estrella never realized the added weight she must have been on the mother's shoulders as she dragged the bag slowly between the rows of cotton plants. At least this was how she remembered it: being lulled to sleep by the softness of the cotton, palms pressed together under her cheek, and the mother's pull almost gentle

and pleasing, remembered how good it felt to close her eyes, to rest, to be this close to the mother's pull.

A young boy of ten hobbled onto Alejo's row. It was the same boy, he recalled, who mimicked the hawk a few days before. Alejo greeted him with a wave of his cap, but the boy continued walking, punching holes in the soft soil with his steps, barely lifting a hand to return the greeting.

Ricky found Estrella's row. He looked feverish and she put down her basket of grapes and pressed the water bottle to his lips, tilted it to the sky, asked him *where is your hat and where are Arnulfo and Perfecto Flores anyways? No sense walking home when the sun is the meanest. You don't know how to work with the sun yet*, she told him and she set him down under the vines. *Sit until you hear the trucks honking, go that way, okay?* Estrella turned and pointed, but her eyes fell on the flatbeds of grapes she had lined carefully, sheet after sheet of grapes down as far as she could see. Her tracks led to where she stood now. Morning, noon, or night, four or fourteen or forty it was all the same. She stepped forward, her body never knowing how tired it was until she moved once again. Don't cry.

Estrella carried the full basket with the help of a sore hip and kneeled before the clusters of grapes. The muscles of her back coiled like barbed wire and clawed against whatever movement she made. She closed her eyes and pulled in the memory of the cool barn, its

hard-packed clay floor where she had gathered straw to sit, her knees to her chin. The swallows ticked their claws against the slope of the roof, the breeze wheezing between the planks like wind blowing over the mouth of a crater. All the day's clamped heat, all the cramping of her worked muscles would ease and hum above her like the music of a windpipe and she opened her eyes and spread the grapes and did not cry.

Alejo's grandmother had reassured him; he came from a long line of intelligent people, not like his cabeza de burro father, God rest his stupid soul; seize the chance and make something of yourself in this great and true country. He imagined her at the market by now, carting a few discarded *Reader's Digests* for him to read, fingering the crookneck squash or maroon yam she would roast in foil on top of the comal and eat with a little margarine for dinner while sipping her daily cup of hot pinole or the cornsilk tea she said was good for her kidneys. His grandmother's hands turned cold at night and if he were home, he would be rubbing them with camphor balsam as thick as vaseline right this minute, then wrapping them with a towel warmed in the oven. He took her words seriously and wanted to do what was needed to continue the line and tried not to think of tomorrow. Alejo hoped she had received his money order.

The piscadores heard the bells of the railroad crossing somewhere in the distance and they stopped to listen. The trabajadores like Señora Josefina who might

be thinking about what to make for dinner; Ricky, his arms clasped over his stomach, thinking of a Blue Bell ice cream sandwich, artificially flavored; or Gumecindo who might be planning his Saturday night. Piscadores like Florente of the islands who might be pinching his nostrils to blow his nose; Perfecto Flores who might be thinking how hard this work is for such an old man; the children who might be pulling and tugging the rope tied to the waists of their weary mamas so they wouldn't get lost; Arnulfo who might be afraid of the snakes that loved to jump out at him by surprise; Alejo who might be searching beyond the vines, and Estrella who might be kneeling over the grapes with her eyes closed—all of them stopped to listen to the freight train rattling along the tracks swiftly, its horn sounding like the pressing of an accordion. The lone train broke the sun and silence with its growing thunderous roar and the train reminded the piscadores of destinations, of arrivals and departures, of home and not of home. For they did stop and listen.

Alejo placed the frame atop the sheet of paper haphazardly. He flattened a few vine leaves to watch the freight cars race past him in the distance. Only after the train disappeared did he see Estrella wiping the sweat from the inside of her straw hat with a bandanna. She retied the bandanna across her nose and securely fastened it with large black bobby pins which weighed it down to protect her lungs on days like today when the fields were becoming dust-swept. All he could see was

her bandanna fluttering with her moist breath. Alejo had been working right next to Estrella all along. How could he not have known?

Under his cap, a breeze raked wisps of hair which fell on his forehead and it felt so good on his face. He wanted her to notice him and figured if he hoped enough, she would. But all she did was continue her work, spreading the grapes evenly, then lifting the frame. His own paper slipped from under the slender frame and tossed and bounced away like old news down the long row of grapevines and he dashed forth to retrieve it.

For a moment, Estrella did not recognize her own shadow. It was hunched and spindly and grew longer on the grapes. Then she noticed another overshadowing her own, loitering larger and about to engulf her and she immediately straightened her knees and rubbed her eyes. She went over to the vine clutching her knife.

She saw a piscador running down the row, as if the person was being chased by something. The hot soil burned through her shoes as she made her way to the other side of the row. There she saw the bend of a back, and at first could not tell whether it was female or male, old or young, and Estrella called out. The back unfolded and it was Toothless Kawamoto. He pressed his hand on the small of his back and arched. Estrella sensed the awkwardness as he stood there uncertain as to why she called. Estrella thought quickly, and offered him the one peach she had saved to eat after work, a

reward to herself. She held it up and he nodded and she tossed it to him, a long arc in the air, and he caught it with crooked fingers and placed it near his water jug with a smile so wide, his mouth looked like a vacant hole. He thanked Estrella, but it was she who was thankful.

The honking signaled the return of the trucks and the piscadores gathered their tools and jugs and aches and bags and children and pouches and emerged from the fields, a patch quilt of people charred by the sun: brittle women with bandannas over their noses, their salt-and-pepper hair dusted brown; young teens rinsing their faces and running wet fingers through their hair; children bored, tired, and antsy; and men so old they were thought to be dead when they slept. All emerged from the silence of the fields with sighs and mutters and, every now and then, laughter. A mother fingered a kerchief and poked the horns in her son's ear, while another teased the chin of her baby. The piscadores slapped themselves to chase away the dust of the day while children proudly hooked the necks of their fathers. A teenage girl playfully pounced on the shoulders of her boyfriend and laughed.

The Foreman produced a tablet of tables and columns of numbers, scribbled rows completed, names, erased calculations while the piscadores climbed the flatbed trucks. Gumecindo stood on top offering a hand to pull a piscador up. Alejo shoved his cap in his back pocket, fixed his hair in the side view mirror of the

truck. He waited near the rear bumper to lift a child up by the waist to the outstretched arms of a mother.

Alejo sought Estrella. The trucks followed the railroad tracks which passed the orchards and fields, rumbled and rocked and jerked to a stop whenever someone knocked on the rear window. Before the last truck departed, Alejo's glance finally fell upon her. He watched her stooped body step on the ties of the railroad track as if she were cautiously climbing a ladder.

[redacted]cause of the playing field, her bas-
[redacted]ndled under the crook of her arm. She waved to the piscadores and the children waved to her from between the side panels of the trucks, then continued her walk along the tracks, almost regretful she had not taken the ride.

She reached the baseball diamond before dusk, the skies like whipped clouds with linings of ripe nectarine red. Estrella sat on the rail track, still hot from the day's sun, and hugged her knees to her chin. Two Little League teams played on the green of the lawn, behind the tall wire mesh fence. The players had just run out on the chalked boundaries. Parents and other spectators sat on lawn chairs behind the batter's bench or scattered about on the bleachers, ice chests at arm's reach. Estrella wished she had not surrendered her peach and thought how perfect the evening would be if she had the fruit to eat.

She squinted at the batter in his bleached white uni-