El Caiman

Antonio Reyes

This story is true.
While my uncle prepared nieve
De nuez, over white, cold cream
Of sugar, coconuts and almonds, he told
Us about El Caiman, el niño loco del barrio. The uncles, surrounding,
   Nodded in agreement, as if they were there, I was there.
With my uncle’s words, I saw El Caiman in the black window,
   And as dinner carried on with his tale, I became El Caiman.

Before the bus station became a neon supermarket,
Before el Cine Reforma became tienda Del Sol,
Before all these things out-populated the stone,
Carved cathedrals and poorly painted
Cantinas of Guanajuato,
In the San Javier neighborhood,
I was El Caiman.
To well-combed, uniform-wearing children,
To their mothers walking them to school,
To the tired officers directing lines of green taxis with weak, pointing fingers,
To the holy sister staring at the dusty, leather-coat-wearing, mullet-haircut, 1960s Rock ‘n’ Roll, head-banging banda known as Los Zorrillos,
To those lonely workers, who’ve never met my mother or spent the night briefly holding her,
To that shattered mundo, I was known as El Pinche Loco,
And I do not know why.

Every day I wore jeans that had a few
Tears around the knees and brown shirts
That used to be white like my mother.
My shirts were like my skin, bruised,
Brown, and dark enough to make boots.
When my lips cracked with the dry
Air, I would spit like a fountain
Until my mouth was soft and red.
When the pigeons or streets bored
Me, I would drum my alligator belly and sing
A song my father once taught me.
I do not know the words, I lacked diction,
The ability to properly pronounce, but that could
Not stop the beat a dead man taught me.

If my song was heard in the streets,
Children would laugh as my fingers flapped,
Some would clap, until tall grim shadows
Would walk and pull the children back
Into the crowd of disappointment and disgust.
They would trace me with the word
Loco and I did not know why. I would
Wave my fingers the same way my father
Waved his after a victorious cockfight.
I would try to say “hola” the same way
My brother met smiling girls, but they
Would stare, and my jeans would be wet
And I would walk home carrying Loco
On my shoulders.

Loco knows of the knife cuts the Zorrillos
Gave me outside the bar. Loco knows
Of the pushes I got from passengers
On the bus. Loco knows of my mother,
Her moans, and knows she wears
Lipstick at night. Loco knows
My father bet too big with his rooster
And lost against angry men in suits.
Loco knows he found me before dying.
Loco knows el mundo wants to prick him
Out of me like shanties
Near developing neighborhoods,
Loco knows how el mundo knows of him,
And ignoring is the world’s gun against Loco.

I do not know why
I am El Pinche Loco.
One morning, before mass,
Before every church bell in San Javier
Woke the sleeping mundo, I joined
The barking dogs of San Javier,
Cold and free.
I stared at the world, while Loco
Waved with my wet clothes
On the clothesline. I danced
With the church bells and screamed
To the walkers while my own
Bells swayed. La fiesta, my only fiesta,
Fiesta de locos.

The gasping mothers crossed themselves
Like speeding taxis crossing streets
And gasped, *El Pinche Loco,*
The tired officer joined la fiesta
With his whistles and the children laughed.
Todos locos en la locura
Viendo el adiós del Pinche loco,
I jumped to the sun and my skin blended
Perfectly with the morning shine over
The brown cerros.
I am El Caiman,
I died El Caiman.
Free like a caiman
In the swamps.

Drips of melted nieve streamed down his plastic cup,
as he explained how the newspaper printed in black,
he died, un loco. One uncle said he was shot
In the back by his mother.
We really did not know
El Caiman.
Verano Vida

Antonio Reyes

*México dieron razón que andabas en la tierra Michoacana*

“Caminos de Michoacan”

Summer’s sunlight over our Asian-crafted,
American-dreamt shoes. From the barred
Windows we see open land *For Sale*,
A soccer field for a moment, filled with wild
Elated escuincles. Some barefoot, toothless,
All drumming dust onto their dirty
Playeras. Flies swarming over their Copa
Mundial, annoyingly buzzing like vuvuzelas,
The swarms agitate the Jehovah and Sunday
School students entering the immortalized
Iglesias. Down the uneven Cuamio road,
A commotion of debates, cerveza
Tall tales and gossip take place outside
The small cantina. Some homeless rancheros
With cereza-like eyes sit inside the shaded
Room. Campesinos and farmers with leather
Skin and black pistols sit outside, underneath
Large umbrellas. The red Sol logo on the umbrella
Fades under the sun. A skinny horse next to the crowd
Defecates and stares at los niños,
Screaming, ¡Gol, no fue falta, me la pelas,
Penal, la tuya, and huevos puto! The locals
Pressing cold, sweaty Caguamas of *Indio, Victoria*
Or Sol onto their tired skin, laugh and converse
With deported Chicanos, the visiting
Chilangos, las Comadres returning
From Morelia with unsold mole powder,
Los Compadres returning from Uruapan
In their 90s pick-ups, Los Carteles,
Hidden among them, and the Cantineros
Cobrando past tabs and serving them all
Below a bright Coca-Cola billboard.
Fruitful moments blending with mariachi
And corridos de Michoacan ramps on,
Until a cool gust ends the joy,
And as the bright moonlight
Marches into the sky, the local patrol,
Young military and men dressed like agents
Fall in at various hours.
Never running into each other,
Unless they have to take down
Or pick up a body. By then most of los
Borrachos have left before the moon could
Hang over their laughs, mumbling songs and guilt.
The kids have left the field, groups of teenagers
Have set hut around the dusty ground.
A perfect cushion for couples to smoke,
Comadriar y andar de calientes.
Los sicarios are still in la cantina and running
Their endless tab. The bartender waits
For a heavy stare from them to know
When to close, serve another round
Or pay an illegal tax. The old men with their pistols
Are still in la cantina, drinking lemonade
Instead. They watch over the bartender
Like an angel, but like everyone sleeping
In their home tonight, they are scared. I left
Michoacan before I could hear their fear
From their beating hearts. I never stay to see
The moon over the monarch-filled hills
Of Michoacan because I am scared, too.

But it is true,
I, too, was and was not
In Michoacan.