

Birds Die, Remember the Flight
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Extract

“I don’t know,” said Demet, “We have to find a way. The water’s heating up. Soon everyone in the neighborhood will be at each other’s throats.” Soon those working to build a solidarity network fell into hopelessness. Solidarity required a mutual working relationship. To be in solidarity both parties had to have at the very least some kind of lifeline. But in those poor neighborhoods where even malnutrition, the leading cause of infant mortality, could not be stopped and where everything was run by charitable and auspicious donations from extreme right wing parties seeking votes, it was impossible to build any kind of solidarity. And so we hit our heads against the wall, cursing ourselves for our inactivity, saying, how could this ever... really how could this ever... but then fearful someone might hear us and jump down our throats we could say nothing more than that. “Look,” said Demet, “they’re robbing us of our imagination, our freedom of expression not just our labor.” Looking up from books filled with words we didn’t know, we stared at her. Three days a week after work we would gather in a kitchen or in a back room of someone’s home where our pale-faced budding young labor leader in coke bottle glasses gave us books to read. For most of us it was a complete mystery where these books would take us; they seemed to have been written so we couldn’t understand. Coming together like that as a group of intellectual working class women made for a nice picture and everything but for us it seemed like a picture from another time, a time when organizing the base of society could pave the wave for global changes. We were of the opinion that the chaotic, corporate obstacles all around us prevented any real struggle for social change from emerging and when we squarely faced the barbarity of the situation the idea of working class women becoming intellectuals after reading a few books did not only seem nostalgic, it seemed incredibly naïve. But Demet insisted, “you aren’t the first women to think the situation is dire. But people in power always want you to think the situation’s dire and that there’s no way out.” And she said that under no circumstances should we leave our reading groups and that she wanted us to see our reading as a part of our fostering self-defense; she said we had to altogether radicalize the labor we applied to these matters. “If an intellectual working-class woman conscious of class, history and sexuality isn’t the most frightening profile of a worker the industry can imagine then who is?” she asked. “Alright then but there’s so much work ahead of us,” we replied. “That’s right,” said Demet, adding, “that’s why we can’t lose any time.” And she was right. Everything was happening so fast it made our heads spin. Every time we said, ‘now that’s the last straw,’ it happened at such lightening speed and then normalized at the same lightening speed. In a situation when priorities were always changing if we ever asked for overdue wages or wages that had been skipped altogether or for the improvement of now deadly working conditions and more safety in the work environment we were usually charged with resorting to ‘luxury behavior.’ People were no longer worried about putting bread on the table, they were worried about staying alive. In the eyes of newcomers who owned nothing we were considered the privileged in the neighborhood because we had a job but in reality our situation was exactly same, in fact it

was only getting worse. Everything already turned upside down was now showing another face. We constantly had to lower our demands. We had to fight for even the most basic human rights. In essence this was an offence: we poured out into the streets for the right to live and for the right to bury our loved ones and we were met with nothing but pepper gas, water tanks and plastic bullets. The emotional strain was heavy as they pushed us into a corner, stripping us of any worth, leaving us with no choice but to start all over again. In the face of this systemic degradation we knew the greatest trap was to confront it with subaltern pride and rage. We knew that reactionary protests would be quashed and after every crackdown came a wave of inertia. And as long as we did not come in mass protest they would portray us weak and alone, nothing more than that. Negotiating with the state, police or bosses was a serious loss of time and energy, and most of these meetings were dangerous. Poring over all of our options, we started working on a different organization model, in the first stage creating “women only” spaces and then rolling up our sleeves to expand them. The back rooms and kitchens were already ours and from there to living rooms and from living rooms to front door steps and across our neighborhood and from our neighborhood to other neighborhoods and finally to the city center we drew up a long-game road map. The reactions we got from men who at least looked positively on our work or who were engaged in similar organizing efforts were not exactly constructive: women’s issues were important but weren’t we going to have a revolution first? Why would we want to divide the movement? Was it the time for feminism? And then there was Demet, or whatever her name was, that butterfly, she was no longer coming to the neighborhood. We weren’t having discussions anymore. We gave those men our strategy and tactical plans - most of which were bad but with good intentions – and the case was closed. In any case men everywhere were already taking up enough space and time. We were still powerless against them in our homes, disproportionate violence continued to be a part of our daily lives and disobedience only led to more of it; but we knew all too well that if we didn’t have other women in solidarity we would never be able to solve the problems at home and for this we took all kinds of risks because there wasn’t much left to lose. So whenever we felt the need we did our organization and commune work apart from the men and we saw no harm in that. The men who spoke with in raised voices, who constantly interrupted, who grabbed every opportunity to dig in and give a speech, slowed down meetings, made them less efficient. We needed faster, nimbler, more focused tactics and strategies that would strengthen our neighborhood movement. “Our organization has to address those places that suffer from class difference and somehow try to heal them; in some small way we have to rehabilitate the offended, the oppressed,” Demet would say. “But raising class consciousness isn’t enough in itself. We need new means to promote gender consciousness. And a new vocabulary.” That night we were nine women in Güldane’s kitchen. Tea after tea and cigarette after cigarette, we listened to Demet with rapt attention as we ran our fruit knives over the rough edges of defected cases of voltage regulators. We set aside the money we got per case for any stationery needed for neighborhood organizing. Waving her fruit knife back and forth, Demet was saying we needed to come up with tools to overcome the double reduction of woman and proletariat and that we couldn’t pick ourselves up in a history of class struggle written by men – we had to create those tools. We were not only going to struggle against industry, we were going to struggle against the language and tone of a working class struggle that did not take into account its inherent sexism. “This is only possible through a women’s resistance/solidarity that runs across class,” added Demet as she put her knife down on the table and got up to refresh the water in the teapot. “Nothing

happens unless we really want it. And if we hadn't wanted it none of it would have happened."

This extract was translated from the Turkish by Alexander Dawe

For the occasion of The Scar exhibition, HOME Manchester, February 2017

<https://homemcr.org/exhibition/noor-afshan-mirza-brad-butler-scar/>