

Odelay Yonquero

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*names have been changed

Hildo Bosquez is gunning his truck down one of Chicago’s back alleys, in reverse. Squirming in the passenger seat, trying to remain casual, I cast a sharp glance to the dashboard to confirm our speed, but the speedometer is broken and buried at zero. We must be pushing at least thirty miles an hour, and the dumpsters whizzing past do nothing to soothe my nerves. With a Marlboro Red dangling from his lips, Hildo catches me slyly trying to fasten my seat belt without being noticed. Exhaling a plume of smoke, he snickers, “No functionando, guero, no functionando.”

As if negotiating this backwards stunt is not distracting enough, ever the nonchalant, Hildo observantly points out in elementary gringo-fied Spanish, “Mira, una puerta metal! Vamos, guero, vamos!” Testing out his new breaks, he stomps on the pedal. When the screeching stops, I jump out of the truck and wrestle a storm door from a dumpster. With a loud clunk and grunt, I strong-arm the storm door into the rear bed of the truck and pause to admire the growing stockpile of salvaged metal



Together Hildo Bosquez, 23 and Ruiz Hernandez, 33 operate the good ship, “Mi Chiquita”—a tattered, but solid 1987 Ford 150 with 8 foot wooden grates on either side of the truck bed, and a loud brawling engine to boot. A pair of black, spray-painted bullhorns adorn the wooden forehead of the truck and a gold baby shoe dangles from the rear view mirror.

Hildo and Ruiz are yonqueros. Loosely translated, yonquero means “the junk man”—a Spanish word known throughout Chicago’s Latino community for those who make a living scouring the

alleys for scrap metal then selling it for profit, identified by their trademark pick-up trucks piled high with metallic jumble. The pick up beds are modified with reinforced metal bars, wooden planks, and particleboard, haphazardly welded or nailed together. A shameless feat of rickety architecture forming towering walls and cages for their precious cargo: scrap metal.

The first stop of the day was a demolition site. A friendly tip from a fellow yonquero advised we try there first. The building, near Ashland and Milwaukee, was being gutted for new condos. Once the foreman nodded his clearance, Hildo, Ruiz, and I began hauling pipe—iron and copper—sheet metal heating ducts, and steel doors. Rather than dragging the haul down two flights of stairs, a gaping hole in the second story brick wall allowed us to throw the metal directly into the alley. For two hours we chucked metal. The clanging of iron on asphalt and shattering of glass was deafening. Hildo kept a watchful eye on the pile as it grew. It didn't take long before I saw why.

“Go away! This is mine!” Hildo screamed at a man picking through the pile. The man was on a BMX bike and has an armful of copper wire, the most lucrative of scrap metal, currently yielding almost two dollars a pound. When he saw Hildo walking towards him, he dropped the copper, and quickly rode away on his bike.

“Good money for copper,” Hildo said, “People like to steal [it] when we load the truck”

Once we finished tossing the debris into the alley, Hildo backed-up his truck and we loaded the pull into the bed. From there, we proceeded to General Iron Industries, a scrap metal recycling company, located in Chicago's industrial corridor, just north of Goose Island.

The area is a hive of yonqueros. Swarms of trucks, empty and full, come and go. Lunch carts feed the hungry men, who congregate on the curbs and loading docks, sharing morning victories and defeats. The area has the feel of a market place, bustling with commerce—and for good reason. This is the place where hours of scavenging scrap metal is finally converted into cash.

With three quarters of the truck's bed full, Hildo didn't anticipate this load to bring in big money.

“Slow morning,” he winced, “no money, I think.”

We patiently got in line behind the other yonquero trucks waiting to unload. Near the weigh station, Hildo put a cardboard sign, with his name and account number, in the windshield. Once a camera recorded his account, Hildo drove the truck onto the scale. The truck was weighed before and after unloading the cargo. The difference is the amount of pounds of metal the yonquero is paid for.

The scrap yard roared with machines. Six story piles of junk metal, full of cars and appliances, towered overhead. The smell of rust stung the nostrils. Giant cranes, with enormous claws, grabbed skeletons of CTA buses, dishwashers, and ovens and placed them onto conveyor belts which fed the scrap into monstrous shredders that minced the metal into chips to be smelted and resold as new products.

Hildo parked and we climbed into the truck bed to unload. A man with florescent orange vest, sunglasses, and straw hat waved us down from the truck and pointed to a crane fitted with a magnet the size of tractor wheel. It hovered over the truck a few times and the bed was empty.

Hildo weighed the truck again and went into an office booth, much like a bank. The teller asked for his name and account number. She checked the database and once he was verified, Hildo was given a plastic card, similar to a debit card, which he then inserted into an ATM machine within the office. On screen popped-up Hildo's weigh-in and weigh-out totals and the going price for scrap. Today, the price for scrap is about 6 cents, meaning the 2,240 pounds we collected before lunch put around \$134 in Hildo's pocket. Not a bad pull for a couple hours of work, but taking into consideration the Ruiz's cut, the price of gasoline, the wear and tear upon the truck, Hildo was somewhat disappointed.

"I make \$350, in one day," Hildo smiled, referring to his record for one day's work, "\$134 is not so good."

Post lunch, we weave our way north, to cruise the alleys near Milwaukee and Elston, Hildo and Ruiz's favorite spot.

Hildo's wife, who is 9 months pregnant, calls him every fifteen minutes on his cell phone. He asks, "Tienes contracciones, mi amor?" Last night she began having false labor contractions. When the baby never came, the hospital sent her home, where she now waits. Hildo stayed at the hospital all night with her and has only slept two hours.

"Me? No tired. I have one daughter and one boy coming," he smiles, as he taps the baby shoe hanging from the rear view mirror, "maybe today, maybe tomorrow. They have to eat. My wife and I have to eat. No work, no eat."

"Big alleys, no metal," Ruiz points out. He's right— the alleys look picked over.

Hildo agrees. The best hours, he says, are at night and early in the morning. "Too many yonqueros in the day. Today, too late", he says, referring to the late night at the hospital, which rendered the usual 6 a.m. start time impossible.

En route to a convenience store for drinks and snacks, we drive by the well-manicured lawns of Niles and beyond. On the sidewalk, a woman glares at us as she walks her **Doberman Pinscher**. A group of children in soccer uniforms look upon us sourly. They are drinking from juice boxes with straws.

"Sometimes people think we are dirty—especially the ladies," Hildo answers when asked if he's ever experienced animosity from the general public because of his procession. "In **Skokie**— many problems with police. They don't like the trucks. They tell us to get out. I listen, because I don't have a driver's license, and I have no papers."

Hildo (and Ruiz) are undocumented immigrants and came to the U.S because they were "tired of only making \$10 a day." Despite some communities' unfavorable view, Hildo simply avoids

neighborhoods where he knows there is friction and abides by what he says is the yonqueros unspoken moral code of “only work, no stealing” and maintaining a clean public image.

Upon arriving in Chicago 8 years ago, Hildo bounced to and from jobs in various tacquerias—cooking, cleaning and bussing tables. But after years of working nights, 72-hour weeks, and bringing in only \$400 (per week) Hildo sought a more flexible schedule that offered more money. Of which he says is possible being a yonquero.

“Sometimes I make \$2,000 a month and work less than 60 hours a week. I am my own boss. If I want—no work on Saturday and Sunday. And I can send more money to my family in Mexico. I try to send \$600 a month. But with a new baby coming, now, maybe less.”

Suddenly remembering his wife, Hildo suggests we call it a day after the pit stop, so he can be with her if the baby comes, which is exactly what we do. He apologizes for the slow afternoon and invites me along for one more ride.



Two day later, I reach Hildo by cell phone. I find him and Ruiz behind a school building in **Wrigleyville**. Like a mountain goat, Hildo is atop crags of file cabinets and steel desks resting in the truck bed. He hacks away at an air condition unit with a fire axe as coolant spews from hoses. Around Hildo’s wrist is a plastic hospital bracelet, which can mean only one thing.

“My wife, she have the baby. Hildo Jr.—a boy! 7.9 pounds, last night!” He is beaming.

Ruiz appears from a doorway wheeling a film projector. Though his English is limited, the look on his face is anything but, as he surveys the loot and flashes me a rare grin. It is the look of we

are going to get PAID today! A sentiment echoed by Hildo, who chimes, “this is big metal...big money!”

The school, obviously liquidating out of date equipment, had provided a veritable wealth of scrap metal. Hildo’s friend, a security guard at the school tipped them off. And now before us, strewn on the blacktop—computers, vacuums, chalk boards floor waxers, lockers, pencil sharpeners, shop-class vices, and intimidating desks that take three of us to lift. We attack the chalkboards with hammers and strip them of their metal frames.

When the entire load is packed like a jigsaw puzzle and tied down with rope, the back fender of the truck sags so much that it nearly touches the ground. Hildo does a Hail Mary and gingerly eases the bloated truck onto the street, keeping it steady at 15 miles an hour.

As we slowly pull away from the red light, the dense, unmistakable sound of shifting heavy metal screeches and we all freeze in panic. The few seconds of calm that follow deviously soothes us into thinking everything is fine—that is until a steel push cart breaks free from the rope and wallops the side of the truck, narrowly missing oncoming traffic. We stop and quickly secure the cart before anyone sees or reports us as an unsafe vehicle.

“That scared the shit out of me,” huffs Hildo, “I swear that never happened before.”

It starts to drizzle and we are anxious to rid ourselves of the albatross in the bed of the truck. At the scrap yard, we go through the same routine of weighing in, unloading, and weighing out. This time, I wait with Ruiz in the truck while Hildo takes care of business inside the exchange booth. Ruiz is silent and we watch the rain on the windshield.

The silence breaks when Hildo knocks on the window, grinning like a Cheshire cat. He waits until he is inside the truck before he fans out the twenty-dollar bills on Ruiz’s lap.

“Mira, Ruiz, three hundred dollars!” boasts Hildo.



“Esta bien,” nods Ruiz, “Esta muy bien.”

Day two is all ready a triumph and there is much to be thankful for—no accidents, a morning payload in what could turn out to be a record setting day, and a newborn son to carry on Hildo’s name. All before lunch.

We drive away, in search of the next find. Hildo radiates happiness and rolls down his window. He sees a group of men he knows, honks his horn and waves. His hospital bracelet slides down his wrist.

The men smile and, with a resounding shout camaraderie, yell, “Odelay, yonquero!” ♦

