

the GRAPEViNE



DIARIES

Glossary of terms:

Every vineyard has many blocks

 Every block has many rows

 Every row has many trunks

Every trunk has 2 arms (bilaterals), but sometimes 4 (quads), and
sometimes 1(unilaterals)

 Every arm has at least 5 nodes, but no more than 8

 Some nodes push out 1 shoot, some nodes push out 2 (quatas)

 Every shoot grows many laterals, leaves and tendrils

 Every shoot grows 1, 2, 3 or 4 clusters (racimos)

 Every cluster is made up of many, many grapes (uvas)



PROLOGUE

Jale

Literally: Pull

Figuratively: Work

I am a 5'6", white, athletically built American. I graduated high school, then college, then by a series of missed and taken opportunities (which I suppose is how anything ever happens in life), I wound up working field labor in vineyards.

My first job as a fieldworker was in Sonoma. I was assigned to a crew of mostly millennials, just like me. Unlike me, they were all Mexican, male and spoke no English.

Then, after a Winter pruning olive trees, I went back to vineyards again, this time in the Napa Valley. I found myself on a crew of 'lifers', older guys who had been in the U.S. longer than I'd been alive, and whose kids were just as American as me.

El surco

Furrow, ditch

This is the place in between the rows of vines. It is where someone will direct you to when they call out, *Agarrate un surco!*, which means grab a row. It is where you will emerge out of after a long day and stuff a branch or an empty water bottle into the steel tube of the end post, so as to bookmark where you left off. It is the negative space of the vineyard where the workers work, in the dirt and dust, or in the wet and waist-high grasses, depending on which side of the year we are on. It is the blank space between the lines where, while working, listening, talking to myself in my head, I began to write.

It has been a bit harder than expected to translate those mentally-scribbled surco sentences into rows of text on the page. I've realized that this is partially because the voice in my head took on many different voices. Sometimes it was in English, and as time went on and my understanding of

Spanish deepened, it often came out in Spanish. Sometimes it's factual and journalistic, and looking back on it I think, ok well we were clearly suckering that day, but how did I feel about all that? Sometimes it's poetic and impressionistic and I wonder what task we were even doing that day. The following four seasons are an amalgamation of my different experiences over the past five years in the vines.



EL INVIERNO

WINTER

In the winter time, the vines are sticky things, bare and brown. Everything is see-through. The vines are just their wooden skeleton. You can see them as individual entities—trunk, two arms, repeat. It is cold and people feel close to you. The vineyard feels small; like if you took the time, you could feasibly count every vine and see that it is only a matter of multiplying 100 rows by 96 vines per row. You can see that it is not a massive, impossible sea. You can see that it is just a big thing made up of many small components.

January 22

Today fantastically windy, like a movie. We could hardly walk straight. Whipping winds, relentlessly gusting. Like waves crashing. Lucino wore his sunglasses which he never does when it's sunny, only when it's windy.

Buscando jale

Looking for work

When I realized I could get paid to learn Spanish, spend all day outside, not have to deal with finicky vineyard technology equipment (as I had in my previous job) and get off work no later than 4 pm—I felt like I had hacked the system. Why don't more Americans do this? I wondered.

I figured that if someone who had just crossed the border into this country could get hired as a vineyard worker without speaking a word of English, or having set foot in a vineyard, then I could too.

February 10

Ivan got a flat tire and he couldn't turn the wrench to loosen the nuts so he just stood on the wrench and jumped his whole weight into it. I watched and thought how I would have never thought to do that. He wears a silver band on his right pinky finger and an eyebrow piercing, the kind that's a curved barbell. He's always in a rush to leave the field because he works at Shige Sushi at night.

Entrada

Start

Work in winter starts at 7. I pick up Alejandro at the bottom of my street. It is dark on the way there, except for the moon. When I stick my hand out of the car window to punch in the gate code for the vineyard where we're working that day, I feel the cold and the wind and think how unhospitable

it feels out there and roll up the window ASAP, knowing that in a few minutes, I'm going to be sticking my whole body out into that same damp, winter morning wind.

According to stereotype, Latinos are supposed to be late. Wherever that stereotype came from, it's certainly not the workplace. If I show up late, even a minute or two, somebody will definitely say, *buenas tardes*, so be early.

I'm never the first one there, and that's arriving at 6:45. I find where the cars are parked and pull in between two. Turn off my lights. I sit in the dark and wait as the black drains out of the sky. Some people are drinking from thermoses illuminated by the blue-green glow of a Facebook feed. I hear the muffled music that I will listen to for the next 8 hours coming from inside Chino's car. The sky grey-blue now, we get out of our cars.

We put on tall black rain boots. The grasses are knee-high and wet.

We assemble into a circle and do some stretches, now 7 am on the dot, just enough visibility to see faces. Some people don't stretch, they just kind of march their legs in place and smoke a cigarette and talk to the guy next to them.

Encontrando jale

Finding work

I sent my resume to a vineyard management company and got called in for an interview. The boss told me that there would be a big learning curve and I nodded my head. He also told me it would be very physically challenging and I nodded my head again. At the time, I felt I was no stranger to physical discomfort: I grew up dancing – staying up late to force my legs into the splits and my feet into pointe shoes, and swimming – waking up early to hold my breath for uncomfortably long amounts of time. I had also spent the past five months working on a vineyard in Chile, and my body, though after harvest it had been sore in a way I didn't know was possible,

had held up just fine. The boss asked if I spoke Spanish and I said, si (which was true, though I was far from fluent) and I got the job.

February 5

We got up to Chango and it was all white. White caps rounding out the hilltops. So cold grabbing the frosty canes, had to suck on my fingers to warm them up. I felt like I was the only cold one and I asked Dante if his feet were cold and he said, *Helados*, which made me feel better. He wears fashion knock-off Timbaland kind of boots. His music never stops unless we're out of cell signal or his phone dies.

February 16

Finding radishes, picking them, eating them, big white fatty ones, like bones thick as a forearm and cold from the underground. Fruit of last year's cover crop.

Amarrando

Tying

I'm on the tying squad. The tying squad follows in the wake of the pruning squad who leaves the vines neatly trimmed with 2 branches sticking straight up from the trunk like antennae. It is the tiers' job to bend those branches around the trellis wire and then secure them with a twisty, the kind you might find wrapped around a bread bag. The idea is to get the branch in a good supported position in preparation for the fruitful burden it will soon bear. Too many twists around the wire, and the branch snaps; too few, and the branch unravels the second you let go.

Sometimes the branch snaps the moment I touch it, like it was waiting all this time for me to come along and break it. Sometimes I'm distracted by a conversation (see **La Platica**) and SNAP, there goes a branch-worth of would-be grapes. Sometimes an ugly, negative thought leaks like an ink stain out into my work and snap, snap snap, there go 3 more. At the sound

of this snapping, somebody calls out, *Palomitas!* which literally translates to ‘little doves’, but is also Mexican for popcorn. A tier’s hands must be firm yet gentle.

February 20

I’m still slow, but if they’re all talking a lot I can keep up. Cold hands. Cold feet. Ivan had never heard of the Holocaust. He’s 23. He remembers when his town got its first telephone.

Tijeras

Scissors

Tiers must have their scissors with them at all times. They carry them in a leather holster and unsheathe them to snip the end of the branch, so that all the branches can fit next to each other on the wire. Whenever there’s a moment of downtime, instead of unproductively staring out into space, it’s a good idea to sharpen your scissors (with sharpening stone, also in holster).

La cobijita de los pobres

Literally: Poor people’s blanket

Figuratively: The sun

Every morning when the sun spills its first rays over the hillside, Alejandro says, *Allí viene la cobijita de los pobres* and I add, *y los trabajadores!* and it feels so good like getting under a blanket as big as the sky when I cross the line into the warm, yellow light.

El Norte

Literally: The North

Figuratively: U.S.A

My coworkers are Mexican. Some were born here, raised there. Some were born there, raised here. Some are young, here for 6 years on 4-month long visas to earn dollars to convert to pesos to pay the workers in their ranchos building their future homes. Some are old enough to have been here when President Reagan granted amnesty to undocumented immigrants in 1986. Some feel they're neither here nor there. Many, most, want to eventually go home.

They are from states whose names were previously unknown to me (Mexico has states? Yep, 32 of them, all beautifully named): Michoacan, Oaxaca, Guanajuato, Querétaro, Sinaloa, Jalisco, Chiapas, Puebla.

In Mexico they worked in construction, they worked in fields of carrots, strawberries, avocados, tomatoes, sugar cane, coffee, corn and beans. They were butchers, mechanical engineers, nopal (cactus leaves) mongers, seamstresses, dentists, dog breeders, students, coke smugglers, fishermen, forensic scientists, factory workers, marijuana-in-a-backpack-over-the-border-transporters, floorers, history teachers, unemployed and living off their earnings from a previous stint in the North, and just out of high schoolers.

Carrot picker or dentist, the difference in pay that you can make in the fields in the U.S. is astronomical enough to make finagling and overstaying a work visa, buying and dishonoring a tourist visa, or rounding up an enormous sum to pay a coyote (at \$10,000 a ride, the only way to afford it is with help from someone already working in the North), and taking the risk of crossing the border. They have many ways of putting into perspective the strength of the American dollar against the Mexican peso, but the one that has stuck with me the most is how Ismael put it, *in 1 day of work in the U.S., you can eat for 2 months in Mexico.*

Apodos que me ponen

Names I am called (my actual name is Meredith)

Merida

Mery

Merry Christmas (I really don't like this one)

Meredy

Melonie

Melody

Guera (white/blonde female)

Guerita (little white/blonde female)

Cochona (a slur, but a term of endearment coming from Ivan)

La muchacha

La muchachita

Señorita

La gabacha (American, gringa)

La gabachita

La asesina (the assassin, because one day I accidentally flung a baby bird out of its nest and though I tried to put it back, it definitely looked like it had broken its neck and would probably die soon).

February 25

Feeling culturally smothered, like do I even have a favorite song? What's my favorite food that's not an imitation of another culture's food?

I grew up eating:

Veri Veri Teriyaki marinated pork chops and rice

Oriental bag salad mix

Meat loaf, mashed potatoes and green peas

Fried rice

Microwaveable Hot Pockets if I was eating in the car between swimming and dance

Pasta

Del Taco crunchy taco shells with ground beef and canned refried beans and melted shredded cheese

Gushers

Minute steaks and A1 sauce with cottage cheese and tomato slices

Paella on New Year's Eve

Ribs on the 4th of July

La Platica

Chit-chat

In the mornings, it is foggy and people are quiet. Then someone will start to play music and from off those sound waves begin to bounce: the stories, the questions, the sexual innuendos, the gossip, the name-calling, the bursts of song, the glue that keeps the crew advancing together as a unit, the balm to the body's fatigues.

The proper protocol for la platica is to first call out the name of the person to whom you're directing your commentary, so they—obscured by 3 or 4 rows of vines—can radio back to establish contact. Then throw your voice, and out it sails, towards your announced recipient, but for all to hear.

Sometimes, because of a certain sloped topography, you can carry on conversations from unlikely distances. When the platica is good, you forget you are even working. When the platica is too good, you squat down to get a good look at your interlocutor, and at this point you are full on socializing and you really should not be getting paid for that. But there are so many things to discuss: music, family, rodeos, other people, who sings this song, describing directions without using any street names, women, narcos and who they killed, the prices of things, women again, doubts, what'd you bring for lunch, and the weather back home.

Of course, the platica can go south and you can start feeling like you're doing two jobs instead of just one. In this case, it's best to just abort by saying, *se acabó la pila* which means, the battery's dead. And now you are free to dip into the internal platica, the silent one where memories dance, sounds echo and light reflects.

February 29

Evelyn's brother, the one that's still in Mexico, is a cock fighter. I asked her, *how does a chicken ultimately die in a chicken fight?* and she said they tie blades onto their feet, so they eventually bleed to death. Then we watched a YouTube video, not of her brother, but of some other highly competitive

cock fighters from her town. Apparently, you can win some good prize money.

Apodos que se ponen

Names they call each other

Guey (guy/dude)

Don/Doña (sir/m'am)

Paisano (countryman, if they're from the same state)

Carnal (flesh, brother, even if they're not)

Primo (cousin, even if they're not)

Pariente (relative, you get the pattern)

Pareja (partner)

Chaparro (short)

Nene (baby, for the especially short)

Cabezón (big head)

Cachetón (big cheeks/fat face)

Perro (dog)

Flaco (skinny)

Gordo (fat)

Gordito (fatty)

Cabrón (badass, dude, bastard)

Pansón (big belly)

Vato (dude)

Payaso (clown)

Pendejo (fool)

Tokayo (if they share the same name)

Viejón (big old man)

March 1

Got my car stuck in mud at Bruchera. Guero had a chain and they towed it out with the truck. Amarrando. Ivan got mad at Aaron because he thought weeks start on Monday and Aaron said Sunday. Listened to Dante's music all day. He likes this song, *Me voy en autobus, con rumbo a la ciudad, mi corazón*

va llena, con pura felicidad. (I ride the bus to the city, my heart is full of pure happiness). Cold feet until rays washed in. Hands fine. Cut off glove tips of forefinger and thumb. Mejor así.

Querer

To want, to like, to care for, to love

A plant will do for sun,
what a person will do for love.
It will twist and arch against laws of gravity and logic.
It will orient its whole being towards,
concentrate all its energies on,
grow, stretch, reach,
as if in magnetic response to,
the first rays of morning sun
pouring out over the East.

March 3

Really good at saying *puedes decirlo otra vez?*, which means, can you say it again? So good that now I just say *otra* and they know what I mean.

Botanas

Snacks

Pepino, manzana, jícama, atun con sal y limón o con tajín (cucumber, apple, jicama, prickly pear with salt and lemon, or tajin).

Chips con Tapatío (drizzled into the chip bag and then shaken up and then extracting the saucy chips).

Sandía con Tapatío (watermelon with Tapatío, I draw the line here).

March 4

Came home feeling very alone, like the inflated thing that kept me going, that gave me meaning & purpose deflated & nothing meant nothing & everything was arbitrary & might just as well not be. Took a shower and washed my hair. It turned scalding hot at the end so I knew it was time to get out. Talked to mom and prepped food for my original squash stew creation. Me salió bien. Felt better, played accordion. Sky still damp lake. Late winter blues. Also, bad forehead acne.

Mojado

Literally: Wet

Figuratively: Undocumented immigrant

I found that my coworkers seemed pretty jaded to life here. Even before coming here, they know more than anyone that the ‘American Dream’ is not all it’s made up to be. The North is as much a part of their culture as Mexico itself is. They’ve got movies about it, and songs that sing about it in a no bullshit country style. One of them is called “Jaula de Oro” which means “Golden Cage”. Here’s a translated excerpt so you can get a sense of what I mean by ‘no bullshit country style’:

*Here I am established
In the United States
10 years have passed already
Since I crossed wet
Papers, I don't have fixed
I continue being illegal*

They say they came wet because many immigrants who cross illegally have to cross a deadly river.

Papers mean documents. The vast majority have nothing official, but by the hand of the same god who makes fake ID’s available to 17-year-olds, they secure a Permanent Resident Card (green card) with a magical

#UCSIS number that any vineyard owner that wants a capable workforce knows better than to investigate the legitimacy of.

Everyone knows the “Jaula de Oro” song. It’s a classic. And yet still they come. It puts into perspective the level of corruption and poverty in Mexico, if even the American Dream, warped and distorted as it comes, is still a worthwhile dream to pursue.

March 5

I told Dad that Mexicans don’t like canned beans and he said, how else can you have beans?

Preguntas Questions

When Joel was 9, he started working in the sugar canes in his village in Oaxaca. When I was 9, I cried because I didn’t get Ana the Generation Girl doll for Christmas. When Joel was 14, he went on a date with a girl and his friend offered to let him wear his shoes so he wouldn’t have to wear his huaraches (sandals) made of car tires. When I was 14, I had so many swimsuits hanging off my bathroom door handle that the door wouldn’t shut.

How someone can adjust to living in a town that has entire stores that sell washing machines when they’ve grown up washing their clothes by hand in the river, is baffling to me. But I guess that’s how assimilation happens, as quickly as possible. For as many questions as I ask them about their hometowns and childhoods, they ask me very little about mine. I don’t know if this is out of cultural etiquette to not pry into someone’s past, or because they just aren’t that interested.

Here are some common questions that I do get:

Are you married?

Do you have kids?

Do you like to dance?

Do you have a boyfriend?

(Follow up question) Why not? You're not ugly.

Do you live with your parents?

You live alone?

Aren't you scared to live alone?

Wouldn't you rather work in an office? A store? A bank?

Did you get fatter?

Did you lose weight?

What kind of beer do you like?

What is that? (*referring to my lunch*)

When do you want to have children?

How many children do you want to have?

How much did you pay for your car?

How many miles does it have?

What do your parents think of you working out here?

Do you believe in God?

Your face is very red. (*Not a question, more of a concerned comment*)

Do you dye your hair?

El agua

Literally: The water

Figuratively: The rain

The crew is gloriously unprepared for rain. Every time it rains, it's like it's the first time it has ever rained. Though there are a few exceptions, no one has a rain jacket and they most certainly don't have rain pants. Ramiro made a rain apron out of a garbage bag and claimed it worked *muy bien*. He showed me how dry (the front of) his pants were underneath. When the clouds move in, Alejandro looks up to announce, *Viene el agua*, which literally translates to *It comes, the water*. We keep on working. Alejandro is very good at predicting rain. It starts to drizzle and we keep working. Then when it really starts to pour, we make an exhilarating run for the pop-up tent and listen to the raindrops collecting in puddles on the sagging tarp roof.



LA PRIMAVERA

SPRING

A time of great upheaval. Out of the dark knobby wood, up they come, out they sprout. Pushing through the air, shoving out little beginnings, fuzzy and white like cotton, and up they climb, shoving ever upward. Buds, folded in on themselves, then unfolding, pink and green, like mini heads of cabbage, fanning out, one layer at a time. Time to cut, mow. There is the sound of machinery grinding all around—mower, gramegna, weedwacker, woodchipper. Mobilization of people, movement. Up. Up. Breezy and sunny with shapely clouds. The sun filtering through the now fully flushed leaves, soft and juicy with life, absorbent and thick.

March 23

A very wet day. Painting with Don Lupe. Poppies and lupins and the mustard maturing into elegant pastels. Purple pea blossoms too, open and closed – like a head in a bonnet. Picking them, eating them, tastes same as a pea. Sprinkling lightly, everything felt far away, distant like behind a screen. Painting pruning cuts with Don Lupe. He kept asking me what time it was because I have a watch and he didn't want to check his phone.

March 30

I thought sad, melancholy for definite arrival of spring – now with budbreak under my fingertips – sorry for all the days I wished it to hurry up and come because now winter is gone gone. Intimate winter, like a secret we shared. Squirming, chirping, convulsing baby moles in a steaming compost heap.

April 1

Now suckering for first time today. Kneeling to pray at the base of the vine. I am a lonely gal in the vines, an outsider on many levels. But I am a lonely gal outside the vines too. Tunneling.

La Soca

Literal: Suckers

Figuratively: Extra, unnecessary shoots

All of the sudden the plants explode. We go from stalling to wait for them to running to keep up. Out of every node, on every arm – the very arms we tied up a month or so ago, though they are hardly visible now beneath the canopy of leaves – pops out a shoot or pair of shoots (quatas).

The job is to remove all the extra shoots: the shoots that burst out of the crinkly bark on the head of the trunk, the shoots that grow in inopportune positions out of the arms, one of the two quatas (*DESQUATA LAS*

QUATAS! The foreman will yell periodically throughout the day), and the shoots that grow out of the base of the trunk (*LA PATITA LA PATITA!* The foreman calls out to remind you).

Some blocks must be suckered very precisely and we leave only 5-6 shoots if the vine looks weak, and 7-8 shoots if the vine looks strong. On days of precision suckering like this, the foreman calls out: *CINCO SEIS CINCO SEIS*, all day long, because sure enough you'll forget and start leaving 7 or 8.

Pulling off suckers is very satisfying. You don't need any tools except your gloved hands and sometimes your scissors. It's easy at first. The suckers are young, translucent jelly tubes, you can knock them off accidentally if you're not careful. They snap off with a delightful little click. All day it's clickity, click, click, click. Like the sound of floss snapping between teeth. Click click. It's a good thing it's satisfying, because there's loads of them, fistfuls after fistfuls. And then, in a month, more. By then, they are tough and lignified, yellowed with age. You have to really yank to tear them from the bark.

April 14

Tamales de Lidia y su papa. Gulped down champurrado. Need to be more healthy/moderate on Saturdays. Feel a bit like an animal. Worked with Alejandro. Laughed really hard cuz Ivan made me. Went to pool, napped. Feel weird and out of sorts, behind on my hobbies. Probably just very sleep deprived due to 3 am wakings. Really fascinated by Cardi B.

April 21

The trellis wire strung up, loose and sagging in some parts from all the yanking of pruning. Low afternoon light glinting off, so it glows like strands of a spider web strung up between the posts. Ivan kept trying to get me to say *lagartijas* which means lizards, and also push-ups, but I couldn't get it right.

April 30

Vines dripping wet with dew in the morning, sun still behind the hill. Suckering with cold hands in wet gloves. Lucino wasn't wearing his gloves, he told me *mejor sin guantes*, so I took them off and he was right. Hands warmed up and then sun came out.

Ya

Literally and Figuratively: Now, Already

If I was to sum up the Mexican language in one word, it would be ya. You can say it at pretty much any point of pretty much any sentence, and it will make sense. It is maybe a bit like the anglophone's overindulgence in the word 'like', but to my ears, it adds spark and relevancy to your meaning, rather than dulling it. It is a word that conflates the past into the present, so that when someone asks you *Ya son altos?* it can mean *They're tall now* and/or *They're tall already*, or maybe best put, *They're already tall now*.

It's also perfectly good as a stand-alone word.

Loquieres? Do you want it?

Ya. Now/Already/Yes/Duh.

It's the antithesis of the perceived 'mañana culture' that Americans seek out when they vacation down South.

We need this done by tomorrow.

Ya.

Las Flores

Flowers

Flowers, as soon as they come,
they are not.

Seemingly simultaneous bloom, wilt
already on their way, as soon as they come.

Ya.

May 2

After a long time of shoveling in silence, Ivan made a *heuuhhh* sound right as I was lifting my shovel out of the dirt, which is exactly the sound I was trying not to make, but was making in my head because the shovel was heavy. It made me laugh so hard I couldn't stop and every time I went to lift another shovel full of dirt, I thought of that sound and burst out laughing again. Dante and Ivan just stood there, leaning against their shovels, watching me try to shovel and laugh at the same time and Dante said, *Comiste el payaso plebilla?* which means, did you eat the clown like plebe? (Dante calls everyone a plebe) and by then I was crying from laughing.

May 4

Don't kneel at every vine. It will feel good in the morning, like I can do this all day. But then it will hurt after lunch. The vines that need it will let you know, otherwise default to butt-out/engaged tilted squat.

Lonche

Lunch

Lunch happens early, 10 am. It is better this way because later when it is hot, you don't want to waste energy digesting.

Tacos

Tacos

Everyone bemoans the tortillas here. The food in general, but mostly the tortillas. In Mexico the tortillas are hand-made fresh, from dough that is freshly made, from flour that is freshly milled, from corn that is freshly harvested.

But they make do with the factory print-out tortillas of the North. At every lunch, out comes a bag full of them, out comes the charred skillet atop a

canister of gas lit stove. Fling a few tortillas on top and in less than a minute there is a stack of warm toasted tortillas piling up and steam is rising up out of the thermoses of whatever people cooked up that morning (tomatoey potatoes, saucy beans, pasta, potatoey tomatoes, nopales (cactus leaves), lentils, diced hot dogs, unidentifiable fatty bits of beef and pork, tomatoey eggs) and into the tortilla it goes (unless it is shrimp or tuna salad, which per Mexican law, have to be eaten on tostadas).

The most common size of tortilla is by American standards, the mini soft taco size. It is a good way of making a little bit of food go a long way because you really can't put too much filling in the tortilla or it will squish out all over your pants. Just put a little in, bring the ends together and then fold them over to one side and bite into it with your arms extended in front of you. When I eat with the young guys, we eat standing up, using the truck bed as a table. When I eat with the old guys we sit on upside down buckets. Except Gutierrez. He sits on the bucket right side up because according to him, it's more comfortable that way.

May 8

The sky moving in slow motion, as if underwater, pushing through its own humidity.

La Placa de Trailer

Literal: The trailer license plate

Figurative: The slowest

I am only hands on wood, the part where the tough bark of the branch gives way to the smooth fibrous stem. I am feeling, grabbing, ripping, pulling, deciding, quickly now, count to 6, 6 shoots per branch, but don't lose yourself in counting, snip out doubles, clear out middle, scrub bark clean with hand like sponge, get shoots at bottom of trunk, stomp them off with foot if possible, save time, save bending over, now go, move, adelante, keep them in ear shot and if not that, then in eye shot, then they get away. I look up and they are gone.

There is a related rates math problem in here. If Luis Antonio suckers vines at a rate of 3 vines per minute and Meredy suckers vines at a rate of 1.5 per minute, how long will it take for Meredy to fall 10 vines behind, 20 vines, 30? The longer the row, the greater the number of vines I will fall behind. I think there is something instinctually unsettling about being the slowest in the pack. I think somewhere deep in my body, I remember that the slowest gets eaten and there is a frantic desperation that washes over me as I realize I am falling farther and farther behind with every vine I move forward.

I try to speed up but there is no way. Like someone telling you to be happy when you feel you are as happy as you can possibly be, when you weren't even aware that you were unhappy in the first place. Walking faster doesn't help, moving my hands faster doesn't help. There is a frustrating lack of correlation between athleticism and fieldwork. I have one speed.

There is a sinking sense of loss when this acceptance settles in and I bear down and carry on, perhaps even slower because now I have nothing to even strive for. Eventually Ismael, Luis or Gerardo, the fast guys who are already done with their row, come into my row to help me out and I feel very embarrassed, but still I manage to say, "Thank you," because for some reason "Gracias" sounds a little corny. On bad days, there is a certain feeling of dread upon entering each row because I know just how it will go. I will stay afloat for the first 20 or so vines. Then I will begin to drown. Then I will begin to sink. This is why I don't like long rows.

On good days, we are working in a vineyard with short rows so the disparity is not so apparent.

May 11

4 am woke up, it did not feel like it was my birthday, that's how I remembered that it was my birthday, by it not feeling so. PT shoulder exercises, good, improvement. Drove to Keller. Suckered vines, very behind, expressive emotional clouds. Didn't look up much, not even when

it started raining. Had to pee a lot in the morning, but porta-potty was far. Lunch leftover Chinese, tamale from Ismael, shortbread cookies. Rain, home early, pool, yoga, sore knees, people called.

Azufre

Sulfur

Sulfur is the magic fairy dust of vineyards. It has been used for years and because it's an element straight off the periodic table and not a chemical, it classifies as organic, so you can bet your bottom dollar that the grapes that went into that organic wine were sprayed up the wazoo with sulfur. Organic and elemental as it may be, it's still a force to be reckoned with. Sprayers suit up in white haz suits and haz masks to spray at night (when there is less chance of wind) and the vineyard is off limits for the next 48 hours.

The sulfur sprayed in vineyards is not the rotten egg smelling sulfur you smell in hot springs. It has a very particular smell that I've come to identify as "metallic chocolate". When a breeze sifts through the vineyard and stirs up the sulfur dust, it sets off a round of sneezes and the complementary rounds of *salud, gracias, otra*.

For a while, there was an on-going joke and people were saying paletero instead of salud. The paletero is the ice cream man, but also the man your wife is cheating on you with. What makes you sneeze isn't the sulfur dust powdering the vines or the pollen floating on the breeze. It's actually the paletero, who in that very moment of the sneeze, the very cause of the sneeze itself, is chingando tu mujer.

May 17

Very unusual May rain but feels perfectly timed given built up emotion, anticipation, energy, waxing, changing and now ahh, it was for something, it happened, it's now passing, it wasn't ever forever. Got period. It all makes sense. There are arches always arching, overarching & under

arching, but always an arch. That is how things move through time and space.

Break from routine has unleashed things that were forming in routine. I think this is good to do, although it's hard to plan it into the routine, the break in routine. It'd be nice though, if the break didn't have to happen as a stressful crisis, but that's kind of how they come about. It's your birthday or you hurt your essential rib muscle doing la pala or you don't sleep for 2 weeks or you pull over to barf on the side of the road.

I'd like to plan these swerves in, but now maybe I will pick up on cues earlier and know to not keep pushing ahead, but easy to say when all seems obvious now. The next time will be an impossibly new beast. I feel calm and more normal now. Danced to a sweat, swam in the rain.

May 19

Ivan wanted to know how to say, *Te quiero hasta la luna y vuelta*, in English so I taught him to say, *I love you to the moon and back*, and now we practice when we're leaving work.

Vocabulario

Vocabulary

When I mentioned to some fellow anglophones that I'd been learning Spanish on the job, some said, well I imagine it's a pretty limited vocabulary. I disagreed.

What I realized about Spanish is that they use Strong Verbs. A Strong Verb is the action itself, which Spanish speakers use in normal conversation. A Weak Verb is what English speakers use, which consists of some blah catch-all verb paired with a tacky preposition, which is probably what makes English at once so easy to learn and yet so difficult to master.

Some examples that illustrate the difference between Strong Verbs and Weak Verbs:

English: I get up at 4.

Spanish: Me levanto a las 4 (I raise myself at 4).

English: I could get into that.

Spanish: Yo me animaría (I would animate myself).

English: I can't tell the difference.

Spanish: No puedo distinguir la diferencia (I can't distinguish the difference).

English: Got it.

Spanish: Te comprendo (I comprehend you).

English: You get used to it.

Spanish: Te acostumbras (You accustom yourself).

This is the answer I get to a lot of the questions I ask. How do you work for 15 hours a day? Te acostumbras. Doesn't squatting so much hurt your knees? Te acostumbras.

Don't you miss your life in Mexico? Ya me acostumbré. There is a Mexican saying that goes, 'a todo se acostumbre uno, menos a no comer', which means 'you can get used to anything, except not eating'.

English: I got Covid.

Spanish: Me pegó el coronavirus (It hit me the coronavirus).

English: Get a shovel.

Spanish: Agarrate una pala (Stemming from the word garra which means claw).

English: You didn't say hi to me.

Spanish: No me saludaste. (You didn't salute me).

English: Don't get mad.

Spanish: No te enojes (Don't anger yourself).

English: I just got here.

Spanish: Apenas llegué (I just arrived).

English: My hat gets in the way.

Spanish: Me disturba mi sombrero (It disturbs me, my hat).

English: Want to come over?

Spanish: Te invito (I invite you).

English: You're getting old.

Spanish: Estás envejeciendo. (You're oldening).

Of course, all this articulate verb usage comes embedded in a slew of slang, namely the repeat use of the word *guey*, which strictly translates to bull and cuckold, but loosely translates to dude. *No mames guey* literally means, *don't suck dude*, but is the figurative equivalent of, *No fin way man*.

Another other common slang term is saying *a la verga* after anything, particularly, *Vamos a la verga!* Literally: *Let's go to the dick!* Or figuratively: *Let's get the hell out of here!*

I also hear a lot about the *hijo de tu (pinche/puta, depending severity) madre*, which I'm sure you can figure out on your own.

But then again, this verb studded slang comes neatly wrapped in a very well-mannered greeting, as Mexicans address each other (particularly those older than them) with Don (like calling someone Sir or Mister) or Doña (M'am or Missus) followed by their first name, or a nickname, so you can at once be respectful and familiar. For example, one older guy is named Tranquilino and people call him Don Tranqui. There's also Don Chino for Arnulfo (because he has curly hair and chino means curly) and Don Chava for Salvador.

Te acostumbras

You get used to it

Though this was the answer I got to my questions, I don't believe anyone's body truly gets used to inhaling sulfur or anyone's knees feel *good* after a day of suckering. Some days are harder than others, but there are no easy days. I think what my coworkers get used to is mustering up, digging down for the physical, mental and emotional fortitude to push through in pursuit of their goal.

May 28

Not where I thought I'd be. Struggling through el campo todavía. No break throughs, nothing becoming easier, everything feeling fragile and breakable and like I have to stick very strictly to the routine or else everything goes awry and I'll go into deficit or end up in Diego's stupid car watching dumb music videos on his cracked iPhone in the graveyard parking lot.

Hecho a mano

Hand made

There are many things that are still done by hand. I think growing up in a mechanized, digitalized, semi-automated world creates a false sense of modernity. We think well, we went to the moon, we invented the Internet, we have smartphones, we have AI, we are technologically capable of anything. But there are so many things, basic things—seemingly more basic than going to the moon—that still require the human hand.

Here are some other jobs my coworkers have worked in the U.S.:

Juan worked in a factory where they made bike helmets.

Francisco worked in a factory that made the fans that go in computers.

Livia worked in a factory that made some kind of orange circular pill.

Alejandro worked in a fish packing plant in Alaska.

Sarai trimmed marijuana in Oregon.

Raquel worked in a Coca-Cola plant.

Lucino worked in a plastic bag factory, where he packed the plastic bags into boxes.

Evelyn rode on the truck for lettuce harvest and got the heads of lettuce thrown to her, while she put them in plastic bags and taped the bags shut. Arnulfo picked strawberries and packed them into the plastic containers right there in the row.

Magdalena cleaned hotel rooms.

Alma picked chili peppers and wore an acrylic nail on her thumb to snap off the stem.

Enrique worked in a factory that makes the little baggies with a spork, knife and napkin in them.

Mauricio picked pears, apples and plums.

Soledad washed dishes at night.

Toribio pruned lemon trees and olive trees.

Alfredo worked in a factory that makes plastic, like the kind that is on a stoplight.

Dante worked as a prep cook in a pizzeria.

I wonder how long it will take for all these jobs to be replaced by AI. I wonder if, on the contrary, these jobs will be the last ones literally standing, once AI has swept out all the white collar work, all the artistic work and yet they still can't figure out how to program the humanoid to correctly sucker a grapevine.



EL VERANO

SUMMER

Bright mornings. Longer days, longer hours. Late afternoons thick with the heat of the sliding sun. The canopy full, leafy long vines, tilting, slanting, bowing over. The grapes squishy and sticky to the touch, tart and sweet to the taste. The leaves dry, snap off easy now. The sun splitting down the middle of the sky. Full exposure, the radiant peak.

June 4

Full body fatigue.

After day of much heat. Lots of things ache and sore, right ankle, left bicep. I want to feel whole and durable and alive like yesterday.

Metiendo Guias

Shoot tucking

Vines, when left to their own devices are nasty, snarling tendrilled things, that cling onto anything in their midst. Where there were once neat little rows of pink and green sprouts in Spring, there now is a chaotic jungle of vines spilling out over the corset of their trellis.

Here, the humble shoot-tucker places themself, beneath the arched canopy of the bowing vines, not unlike a surfer in the curl of an endlessly cresting green wave. The nice thing is that it is shady beneath the canopy. The not nice thing is that you're looking up all day so your neck starts to hurt and your hat is useless.

The job is to tuck each vine into the wire. Some vineyard tasks, when taken out of the context of labor, sound ridiculous. Look at this massive sea of tangled, slanted, falling, twisted vines, he can't possibly mean *every* vine? But then consider we have a crew of 6-8 people and 10 hours to do it. We have water and food and a 30-minute lunch break and two 15-minute breaks. We have music to listen to, our minds to let wander, and our coworkers to talk to when we come across something interesting, like a thought, a bird's nest with featherless baby birds tucked in it, a question, a baby bunny to catch, pass around, hold, let go. We have only one responsibility for the day and it is to tuck in the vines. Every last one.

The shoot-tuckers are loaded with pocketfuls of plastic clips that can be snapped onto the trellis wire to keep the shoot upright, but per the entropic tendencies of this universe, the vines have a way of slipping back out from under the wire, despite the clips' best efforts.

June 12

Don't force, be nice, be gentle, be calm. When something hurts, be easy. Breath, relax, know that you will not pee your pants. Must believe I am strengthening. Evelyn came today. Freaked out a bit, comparing myself to something I am not. She said, *how old do you think I am?* She was on her knees, I was looking at her through my row of vines. Removing the bottom two leaves from every shoot. I said, *about my age*, even though I thought she was a little older because she said something about taking care of a family, so I thought she maybe had kids. She was wearing a black hoodie with the hood up over her blue baseball hat and a tan bandanna over her face and tight jeans tucked into leather boots. She said, *how old are you?* and I said, 27. Too old to be doing this, I suddenly feel. She said, *me ganas por 7.* She is only 20. Her dad died when she was 17, and she came here to work. First she was in Salinas with her aunt. Now she's here with her brother.

June 13

Later with Don Chava. Evelyn told him that I thought she was 27. I said, *that's because I didn't act like how you act when I was 20.* She said, and Don Chava agreed, *well it's different.* Like it was something normal and understandable, that obviously I would not act how she did. I didn't feel that they passed any judgment on me. They didn't say anything about me having the luxury to linger in childhood because I was a privileged American. It just was.

June 24

Partridge, taking out the weaklings, quatas and the suckers.

The vines are such an everything that they become a nothing. Grapes are hardly worth mentioning. But they're here, swelling in the heat of late June. Green, firm, the clusters assembling themselves. Pulling into formation. The leaves green, the grapes greener, the soil dry, the irrigation on, dripping, less sulfur now, less sneezing.

June 27

First, I didn't drop enough shoots and Gera walked me back down the row grabbing all the ones I should have pulled and collected them in one hand. Then, out of the carpet of dropped shoots covering the vineyard floor, he picked one up and matched it perfect as a puzzle piece to the spot where I had, as it turned out, mistakenly snipped it off. *Uvas tiradas a la basura* (Grapes thrown in the garbage), he said without a hint of malice in his voice, but still I had tears welling up in my eyes. When we got to the end of the row, he had a bouquet of my mistakes in his hand, and he dropped them at the end post. They fell softly, my mistakes, green against the brown bristle of cut weeds.

Cuerpo Body

Becoming more aware of mine.

Its big-boned, northern European frame.

They watch me when I'm putting on my sunscreen. And then again later when I reapply.

I get more cases of poison oak than everyone else combined.

I am the biggest consumer of water in the crew. Although there are a few others that fill a flattened-down plastic water bottle, and stick it in their back pocket to quench their thirst mid-row (rows can be very long).

Depending on the task and the length of the row, it might take over an hour, or an entire day, to complete just one, in which time a tremendous thirst can develop, especially if there is mucha platica going on), I am one of the very few to carry a water bottle on a shoelace slung over my shoulder. Although, often I am working so hard to keep up with everyone else, I can hardly afford to stop and drink, out of fear of falling even farther behind.

My coworkers often inform me that my face is very red. I respond to this by saying *si, es por el calor*, which (on the very hot days) translates in my exasperated anglophone head to—THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS TO WHITE PEOPLE FACES! WHEN THEY LABOR! IN THE HEAT! But then after thinking about it, I realize that they probably haven't seen many faces as white as mine laboring in the heat. Once a coworker reported to me that he could see a large blue vein going up my neck.

I have ugly adult acne on my chin and am jealous of their smooth tan complexions. As if acne wasn't embarrassing enough, Mexicans believe that acne is a sign that you're horny, or caliente as they put it, which by that model makes me *muy, muy caliente*.

I have seen my coworkers do things that I know my body could never handle:

Luis in 94-degree heat, walking up and down the rows with his black sweatshirt dangling from his head by the hood, a cigarette dangling out of his mouth, a diesel-powered hedger held at shoulder height, his speaker looped to his beltloop, his phone in one pocket connected to his backup battery in the other, so that he can continue draining his phone battery to play music all day.

I stopped and watched him for a while. He wasn't crawling or barfing which is what I certainly would be doing. I walked away feeling empty, hollow. Like I had only ever lived in this thin sliver of life. That my roots had never had to grow deep.

El Calor

The heat

Heat affects the brain first. It sparks and sputters and can't compute. Keep a cool, clear mind. The friction of thinking will only make it hotter. Then the muscles go. They go loose and lazy and slacken their grip on the bones.

A deeper door opens into people. There is a thick soupiness that we are all in. We're allowed to do what we feel, the rules slip away in the grease of the sweat.

June 25

Today the straw that broke the guera's back. I just cracked and couldn't hold it in, back and everything was frustrating and useless and I'm just spinning my wheels and everyone else seems to do it just fine and it just feels so shitty and I'm overtired, overworked and why aren't they and a slight dull headache in the morning, cured by the outdoors. Almost falling asleep on the drive home. It's too, too much. I am only just.

Los elementos

The elements

Laboring in the elements,
is to fully appreciate them.
The shade of a tree
The breath of a breeze
The passing of a cloud
Over the unrelenting sun.

June 29

So many times do I want to freeze things as they are, to say stop, there now, stay just like that. This is how it is, this is how it will always be. I am good like this. It's all figured out once and for all. But then it changes on the outside, it gets hotter, it gets darker, the vines get stiffer, which changes me on the inside. I don't like the food I liked before, I get sick, I get up earlier, I gain weight, I go on birth control, my skin clears up, I lose weight, I break out again. It changes, so I change. Freezes, then melts.

July 3

Now working 10 hour days, and 5 hour Saturdays. There are beautiful times, beneath the thick wool of heat when everyone, everyone bursts into laughter and their locations are all made audible, a few in front, a voice behind you, everyone here in it, although maybe it's been an hour since anyone has said anything, everyone accounted for by their laugh.

Tumbando Fruta

Literal: Dropping Fruit

Figurative: Cluster Thinning

Now we're tumbando fruta. La fruta! Fruit! It's here! Turning from pale minty greens to soft shades of lavender. From lavender to deep, dark purples, fat and sticky. The jungle looks slightly more manageable now, everything hardening, settling into place, like something we could feasibly harvest. The canopies are thick and lush, dark green curtains partitioning each worker into private little tunnels. No more than 2 clusters per shoot, let the rest fall. Snip the wings off the clusters, make streamline the grapes. We have small, bottle-nosed scissors now and the focus too is small and bottle-nosed. The harvest suddenly feels tangible and real. It is hot and dry and rocky. The breeze comes and goes. We leave a trail of cuttings like green pearls in our wake.

July 16

Luis works backwards. He walks forward 10 vines then works his way back, then walks forward 20 vines, and somehow always comes out ahead. I asked him why, and with his head he referenced how I and everyone else work and he said, *porque así no.*

July 30

Knees hurt. Dropping fruit. Temperature gauged by how early drops of sweat start rolling down my back. 8:30 am. Wish I was a hummingbird, no knees. Big, big thighs I have.

Temperature gauged by how hard it is to peel off jeans from sweat thighs when going pee, and then how hard it is to pull them back up over sweat thighs in the sauna of the porta-potty.

Much fluid build-up in knees. Felt better because I could keep up with Evelyn. Grapes juicy, can pop out of their skin when pressure applied. Edible.

La Quadrilla

The crew

Well-oiled laughs

A gift for gab

A fascination with huskies

Distrust of tap water and credit cards

Good singing voices and ability to blurt out songs acapella

Intrinsically good sharers

Intrinsically good team players

Good whistlers

Gratitude

A little bit country (love a rodeo) and a little bit hippie (not in the tie-dye and weed-smoking sense, but more in the in-touch-with-peace-and-nature sense)

Comfortable with death

A dark sense of humor

A relationship with God

August 12

In this state of I don't know what, waves of desperation and strange bursts of abnormal strength and coordination. Gloves wet with grape juice dyeing my fingers ugly and black. The soil hot through my pants. Dragging myself along on my knees.

August 15

Extreme heat, driving home. Cloud.

Evelyn

Evelyn

Evelyn is very good at fieldwork. She never complains and she wears a black hooded sweatshirt on even the hottest days. Sometimes she wears a white sweatshirt and I asked her if she felt the difference and she said, *No guera*. She always wears her blue hat that says ‘Snap-On’.

She hardly drinks any water and when she does, it is only a few disinterested sips out of the paper cone cups that come out of the dispenser hooked onto the Igloo at the end of the row.

I try to discretely question her about what in her past life could have possibly prepared her for doing upwards of 300 squats a day in the blazing heat. She told me she played volleyball for two years. Later it came up that there was an orchard behind her house where they grew pretty much every kind of fruit, except ironically not grapes, she said. We could never get those to grow.

I figured she might have been downplaying her exposure to agricultural labor a bit. It’s not like they were hiring gardeners to take care of the backyard. But I don’t know, it’s hard to tell with Evelyn because she’s so matter of fact and nonchalant about everything. She said people can still hear for a while after they die, so that’s why it’s a good idea to play music at a wake.

When I cried because I got corrected by Gera and had to redo my work, she told me, *tu desesperas*. You exasperate/despair. *The same thing happened to me*, she said. She told me when she first started as a bag taper at the lettuce harvest, she was slow and some harvester yelled at her, *Why did you come to work if you don’t know what you’re doing?!* which sounds even meaner and snippier in Spanish.

Break (el primero)

The first break

15 minutes. Gutierrez is showing something on his phone. I am watching people watch. I can't tell what it is. They're making impressed faces and he's not showing me, so maybe it's boobs. I say, *Dejame ver!*, which means *Let me see!* He passes his phone to me. It is a video of people outside, some shirtless, some barefoot, some singing, about 10 of them, positioned around a large contraption. Raw carrots are going up a conveyor belt on one side and then they come out on another side where they are sorted and put into bags. *Eso es lo que trabajan en Guanajuato*, Gutierrez told me. This is what they do Guanajuato.

Ropas

Clothes

Layer up. Sweating is your friend. What you are really protecting yourself from is not the heat, but the feeling of the sun beating against your skin. If you wear a t-shirt under your long-sleeve, your sweat mixed with the occasional breeze will feel like air conditioning. Many people take this concept to an extreme I never could and wear thick hoodies in the spanking hot heat, and swear they feel muy fresca beneath it all.

All vineyard outfits are accessorized by any of the following head wear:

Hoodie over baseball cap

Pro: Neck shade, side face shade (if your hood is sufficiently deep), front face shade, looking "cool".

Con: Poor breathability.

Bandana tied at two corners, tented and draped over baseball cap

Pro: Neck shade, front face shade.

Con: No side face shade. I don't know if this looks cool or not.

Baseball hat or sombrero with bandana draped underneath

Pro: Front face shade, neck shade, head sweat absorption.
Con: No side face shade.

Large straw hat

Pro: Full coverage, breathable.

Con: Compromised field of vision and ability to stick your face up close into the vines (often necessary, unless you are very experienced and have developed eyeballs on your fingertips).

Rotating baseball cap

Pro: Very resourceful full coverage method. Wearer simply adjusts baseball cap, depending on the ever-changing angle of the sun's rays. Inadvertently look very gangster in morning and afternoon hours.

Con: No neck shade.

Wide brim neck flap hat (my hat of choice, inspired by pilgrim bonnet)

Pro: Full coverage, flexible, breathable.

Con: Look very nerdy, like you're wearing a pilgrim bonnet with a neck flap.

Most all women and some men tie bandanas to cover everything but their eyes to protect themselves from the sun, and also from breathing in the dust and sulfur.

Some people wear gators or in extreme cases, full ski mask type things that go over their heads and around their face.

Luis is the only guy I see out there with no accessories – no hat, no glasses, no gloves. Just his speaker, phone and cigarette.

Break (el segundo)

The second break

Sometimes the shade is too far from where we are in our rows, and it's not worth it to walk all the way there just to turn around and come back, so we

just plop down on the hot soil and wait out the 15 minutes in the meager little shade of the vines.

Aug 17

Make way for this big boned woman body that is blossoming out of me. Big legs, big shoulders, narrow hips still despite it all, a bigger under booty, still rather flat and unannounced at the top, big calves, big abs...but not in a held, refined way, big hair, broad chest. I guess this is me surviving. I guess this is how I look when I'm surviving. My face is fine. Bags under eyes, chin skin clearing, rest of me very tan.

Agachar

Kneel

The difference between working in a vineyard all day with vines that are table top height versus vines that are regulation carry-on luggage height is very drastic. Either I come out feeling the same level of exhaustion as someone who's been on a long, hot hike speaking emphatic sign language, or I come out feeling like my knees are bleeding on the inside. I know it contributes to the quality of grapes if the vines are kept short, something about sap flow efficiency, but I wonder if the resulting difference in grape quality is proportionate to the resulting difference in knee health. I know people get used to it and develop techniques to not have to kneel so much, but at a certain point, it's really unavoidable. Some people drag along crates or buckets to sit down at each vine, but you can only get away with doing this if you are an extremely fast worker, because moving the crate slows you down.

There's this one vineyard I saw with vines that are only about a foot off the ground. Joel told me that the people who work there can only work there for 5 to 6 years, then they get sick.

What do you mean sick? I asked him. *Sick in the knees*, he said.

Terceras

Third crop, green harvest

Pick the third cluster for rosé. Not every shoot has one. Hard to find. Kicking our bins along. Evelyn was going faster and filling up her bin faster and I asked her, *Ev, how are finding them so fast?* and she said, *Luego, luego se ve* which literally translates to *then, then it is seen*. I skipped a few vines to catch up to her, thinking, typical enigmatic advice, but didn't bother to translate.

Tierra

Land, Terroir

If you go wine tasting or read the label on the back of a wine bottle, there's a lot of talk of terroir. Terroir is the essence of the land – the geological and climatic spirit that is captured in the grape and then squirted out to give character and a sense of place to the wine.

Terroir makes the farmland out to be this naturally, luscious soil, studded in grape clusters like nuggets of gold. While I do believe that some of California's most valuable agricultural land is sanctioned off for grape production, I also have reason to believe it didn't get to be valuable all on its own.

Millions of gallons of water are pumped into every vine. Each vine is flanked by 1 or 2 drip emitters that it is someone's endless job to check for clogs caused by a grain of dirt, or leaks caused by tractor nicks, high water pressure, or coyote bites.

Millions of gallons of diesel are burned up in order to run the generator that runs the pump to pump the water out of the wells. They start out by digging a well 60 feet deep. Then when it dries up, they dig deeper.

In order to get to this rich and juicy terroir, the top 10-20 feet of land has to be excavated off. There is one place I work that is very remote. You drive off the main road, then up a side road, then out of society and into

Vineland, where there are only dirt roads and fences and vineyards and no cell service. When you drive through Vineland you often pass by large mounds of pinkish grey rock. This is the rock that used to be the Earth's uppermost crust, that has been dredged out in order to get to the farmable topsoil. Often times when we are working in Vineland, it is to the far-off drone of a backhoe or some other heavy machinery built to move mountains.

August 20

Pretty easy. Snipping the shoulders off the clusters, also called the earrings. Lucino and Ivan and I played Monkey in the Middle which they call Gato with a cluster until it was just a battered little stem.

Feminismo

Feminism

I've never identified too strongly with the feminist cause, mostly because I've been lucky enough to have never felt too oppressed by the patriarchy. I'm sure a staunch feminist would be quick to point out all the ways in which I've been subliminally stunted by the male gaze, but it's never been an obstacle in achieving my goals.

This is the very empowered American female attitude I showed up to work with.

At the beginning, I felt I had to prove myself and refused to accept any modifications they would make for me.

But after working many hours on the shovel and weedeater, and realizing how woefully athletics had prepared me for this variety of physical strain, I began to see these modifications as not an insult to my strength, but a form of consideration, especially since the pay is all the same. They understand the work is damaging to your body, and they'll spare the females if they can.

While women may be very capable of weedwacking, loading a woodchipper, operating a hedger or running a chainsaw, the fact that they are excused from such activities because they might one day give birth, should not be taken for granted.

My theory is that the role of women as child-bearers is much more prevalent in Mexican culture and as a result my co-workers seemed to better understand the differences between a woman's strength and a man's strength. Power, yes women have that, and they know it. Most of them have seen their mothers wring a chicken by its neck. But power to slam a steel post into the ground with an iron pole-slammer, pues...no gracias.

The rest of vineyard work is very androgenous—there is very little heavy lifting (aside from harvest) and most of the tasks depend on quick decision making, precision handiwork, tolerating uncomfortable weather conditions, hiking up and down steep hills, and crouching into inconvenient postures—all things a woman has as good of a chance at excelling at as a man does.

So, to all my 21st century Rosie's out there, remember that just because we can do it, does not mean we have to.

August 25

I told Joel I was nervous for harvest because I was going to fall too far behind the tractor. I cried a bit again. He said he thought I was getting low self-confidence. He squeezed my hands in his. He said being slow has nothing to do with being a good person.



EL OTOÑO

FALL

This season of readiness. The vines draining their life into the grapes. Draining, so that they stiffen into a rigid, brittle scaffolding, draining so that the grape skins soften and blacken, draining so that the grape juice sweetens. This season of palpable ripeness. Grapes hanging heavy on the branch. It starts slow, the champagne grapes, the sauvignon blanc, the chardonnay, the trucks driving up and down the valley loaded with bins of grapes. Then it's the pinot noir, the merlot, the malbec, the syrah, the grenache, we're getting into the swing of it. Then comes the petit verdot, the cabernet franc, the trucks are caravanning now. Last is the cabernet sauvignon.

La Pisca

The pick, the harvest

There is a big relief because we know the hardest of the season is behind us. There is much excitement and hubbahubba for the first harvest. We get headlamps and bins and a partner. 2 pickers per row.

Here's how harvest works:

We get there and it's still hot from the day. The sun sets. I notice only when I come out of the row and it's all pink and red and so beautiful I want to take a picture or cry, but then Agustín is yelling *YA* and the tractor is towing away the two macrobins (1 ton of grapes total) that we have just filled and the new tractor driven by Gutierrez is chugging down the middle of the next set of 8 rows, towing 2 empty macrobins for us to fill. Luis is counting the rows so we know which pair's turn it is to be closest to the tractor and which pair has to be on the outside, farthest from the tractor. Each position has its pros and cons, which is why we rotate.

September 1

The trees in the glow of the headlamp like ghoulish fakes, like the set of a bad scary movie.

Bandeja

Crate

Listening to *Run Rabbit Run* on audiobook. This line reminds me of harvest:

"He has broken through the barrier of fatigue and come into a calm flat world where nothing matters much. The last quarter of a basketball game used to carry him into this world; you ran not as the crowd thought for the sake of the score but for yourself, in a kind of idleness. There was you and

sometimes the ball and then the hole, the high perfect hole with its pretty skirt of net. It was you, just you and that fringed ring...”

That is harvest. You reach a wall. Then, you push beyond. There is me, my scissors, my bandeja, and the stems, tough and sinewy like an umbilical cord. It is the stems you want to focus your eyes on, direct your scissors toward. Then there's the tractor in a rumbling idle, now's the chance to empty, get a few more clusters in there, ok, do it now before the tractor pulls ahead, lift up the heavy thing, up and over your head, lean into the trellis wire, with your thumbs now flip the crate over, empty it onto the heap, run back to your spot, kick the bandeja, now light and squirrely at your feet.

E1 Subjuntivo

The Subjunctive

A beautiful verb tense, heavily used in Spanish, that accounts for the uncertainty of things by designating a different verb form, so that the things you're sad about, the things you hope will happen, the things that are uncertain, belong to a different lexical reality.

Por donde me voy cuando salga de mi linea? Where should I go once I exit my row? The verb for ‘exit’ lives in the special subjunctive tense, in a different reality, a hypothetical one, because who knows what could happen, you may never come out.

September 10

It turns out Ismael is blind in one eye. He's the fastest picker I've ever seen. I always thought he wore sunglasses to hide his wandering eye. But now at night, I can see that his wandering eye is blind.

Uvas Gratis

Literal: Free Grapes

Figurative: Grapes O' Clock

Wine grapes are very edible raw. They are to table grapes as Flavor Blasted Goldfish are to Goldfish. You can't eat too many though because they make you incredibly thirsty and also, if you really overdo it, you will get a grape hangover, similar to a wine hangover, but hits you immediately.

Under the glare of the headlamps, the grapes look like a greyish, globular alien fungus that we, a crew of highly-trained alien fungi exterminators, have been sent to remove as quickly as humanly possible. At first, I don't think of them as edible, or something that will eventually be squished into expensive wine. I just think of them as these Pacman pellets that I must make disappear in order to move forward.

Then after the hype of nightfall has settled, and the stars are out and it's some ambiguous dark hour, I start getting hungry, which is when the grapes become not alien fungi, but instead convenient little sugar bombs that are most definitely edible.

September 20

Agustín jumping up and down on the trailer hauling the two macrobins to make the mounds of grapes level out so we could keep dumping more on. It was making the metal clank when he jumped and he kept yelling, *Es la mezma* which is like saying, *es la misma* (it's the same), but with a hick accent. I don't know what he was referring to that is the same. Now it's stuck in my head and I keep thinking *es la mezma* after everything and it's kind of liberating and depressing at the same time, like no matter what I do, it's all the same in the end.

September 23

Warm evening faded into chilly night. The lights of the distant piscas across the valley shining like satellites. Started at 8 pm. Left at 7 am. The morning, the pale horizontal stripe of gold that it first appears as, is

beautiful. Then the blue of dawn, same blue as the blue of dusk. Rich, sparkling and creamy.

September 24

Moment when sleepover giddiness sets in. Crazed and energized by the improbability of the situation. Coworkers' bodies contorting into the various stages of fatigue, their night faces, illuminated by the glare of the headlamp, completing, adding another layer of depth, explanation, to who they are in the day. The underbelly.

September Something

Lots of fog. Started in sweatshirts, then t-shirts. Joel told us that Luis woke him up burning chili peppers at 1 am.

September 30

I got wildly tired after lunch around 3 am, like I couldn't move my hands. The rows at Sklar are long and narrow. Barely enough room to get past Ismael with his butt sticking out in picking posture. Clouds of fruit flies.

It got cold like I knew it would. Then I looked up and the sky was turquoise and we were in the final rows of the Petit Verdot which was all feo (ugly)—big lillypad leaves and scrawny scraggly crop, puny clusters. *Que feo, que feo* everyone was saying right up til the end.

October 1

It feels dark and stressful, rushing though I know I'll never catch up.

It feels fast and easy, the time flies by.

It feels like a game of coordination. How to snip at various compromised angles, how to direct the downward fall of the cluster squarely into the

bandeja. How to do it without letting any leaves fall in. How to keep up with the rest.

It feels like fall, now that the smoke has lifted. Still warm, but not hot. The sun low, slight breeze, crunchy leaves, the stems lignifying, dryer, harder to cut, sometimes easier to just yank off.

October 12

Telling time at night
Orion's belt ticking across the sky
nocturnal sundial.

El Túnel del Tiempo Time Warp

Lauren called me to ask about acutane.

I asked her, *guess where I am* and she said *where?*, and I said, *in the porta-potty!*

I had just eaten some food that I guess you could consider breakfast. I told her we were about to start picking grapes.

When are you off? she asked.

However long it takes, I said. *Probably around sunrise tomorrow.*

A whole vineyard (a small one, 2 blocks, about 3 acres) in one night.

That long? she asked. *I don't understand how it takes so long!*

If you think about spending 12 hours to harvest a vineyard that would take you 10 minutes to walk the perimeter of, yes harvest does take a long time.

But, if you think of going through every row, every vine, every shoot, every cluster—harvest goes insanely fast.

We come in like pillagers in the night and swipe the vineyard clean – with 10 people (4 rows of 2 pickers with 2 alternating tractor drivers towing the big bins that we dump our grapes into) we can pick a ton an hour. 10 tons in a night.

The speed at which we wipe out vineyards seems disproportionate to the entire year it took to grow the grapes, disproportionate to the hours of work we put in, guiding the growth into straight shoots, cutting back the excess, thinning the crop so that what remained were two fat clusters, dangling like two wads of cash off the thin branches of these little money trees.

And yes, from the outside it seems like these laborious tasks happen quickly. *It's like I blinked and the whole valley was harvested*, someone, not a fieldworker, once said to me. You did blink, I thought. It's called closing your eyes to go to sleep at night.

I have seen some frighteningly fast pickers. Bobbing their hands under and over the trellis wire like a needle in a sewing machine, snipping off four clusters in one go, collecting them all in a hand, and dropping them into the bandeja, pushing the bandeja full of grapes through the dirt with the instep of their foot, guiding it over rocks and weeds as if it were a soccer ball, stamping their full bin down with their foot like a trash compactor, grabbing my bin out from under me, flipping it swiftly over the top of their own, hoisting the double-loaded crate over their head in one fluid motion, raising it over the trellis wire to dump it into the tractor, just now advancing forward, its lights pulling ahead, heaving its heaving load.

October 16

Looking at the cuadra (crew) sitting on their turned-over bandejas on the weed stubbled hillside in the glow of the floodlights, the smoke of their cigarettes illuminated by their headlamps, the rumble and whirs of tractors and forklifts, so much life in the dead of night, somewhere between yesterday and tomorrow.

Aguantar

Tolerate, withstand

The hardest harvest was when we picked during the day instead of at night and I was just hanging on by a thread. I had to tell my body very methodically to execute every step, or else it might've collapsed. I had to ask Nico, my picking partner, a stream of non-sequitur questions so as to not lose my grip on reality.

What day does the trash come for you?

What's easier to slaughter, a pig or a goat?

Can you drink the tap water in Mexico?

Why do they say buenos dias if it's just one day?

Did you have a donkey in Mexico?

What's harder to harvest, pears or apples?

Does anyone ever eat owls in Mexico?

Is your stove gas or electric?

Do you think there are more people in the world with curly hair or straight?

He answered each question calmly and thoughtfully as if we were on a walk in a park and not in the 7th hour of harvesting in N95's in over 100-degree heat with a wild fire burning a few miles away.

Compañeros

Coworkers

There is a bond that forms among coworkers that is not possible in other professional settings.

I have seen my coworkers at all hours of the day—in early mornings, in the middle of the night, in the heat of late afternoons. I have seen suns rise and set behind them. Together we have paused to watch clouds and birds and airplanes pass overhead. I have seen them chilled to the bone in the rain and dripping sweat in the heat. We've shared food and water and gum. I

have listened to the music off their phones for hours on end. I have seen how they shovel, how they squat, how they warm up their bodies in the morning. I have seen their entire repertoire of work clothes. I know who it is by looking under a row and seeing a pair of boots. I know their laughs, their coughs, their sneezes and the sound they make when lifting heavy things. I have seen them trip and fall. I have seen their faces when gulping down water in moments of extreme thirst and their faces of satisfaction after a good lunch.

I know bits and pieces of their personal lives—the name of a sibling or aunt mentioned in passing. But it is almost irrelevant in the fields, this work life that somehow goes beyond your personal life and into your physical being; your grotesque sphere that maybe even you have not yet encountered.

Once I asked Cecilio what his wife's name was and he said, *I don't remember*. He was joking, but still.

It feels weird when I see them out of the fields, and I realize how much taller I am.

October 26

Everything is sticky: my hat, my steering wheel, my belt, my shoelaces.
Craving salt.

Los Reyes del Campo Kings of the Field

There is no sense of shame about working in the fields, no self-deprecation or woe-is-me-I'm-just-a struggling-peasant attitude. If anything, they're doing the job expressly *because* there is relatively good money in it. As far as entry-level, no-English required, 'paperless'-friendly jobs go, fieldwork is one of the higher paying jobs. I started out at \$17.50 and my wage went up periodically in fifty cent increments, and ended up at \$19 an hour. I got

health insurance, overtime pay, and 3 sick days. Harvest rates are higher because the hours are sporadic and the work is harder. I made between \$25 and \$35 an hour for harvest; tractor drivers make more.

There are also the people that pick *por contrato*, piece-rate and are paid by bandeja or by weight. I worked with some *por contrato* pickers at night, who would leave at sunrise to go catch another harvest.

The other advantage of fieldwork is that you start early, which means you get off early, which means there's still time left in the day to *tardear*. A lot of my coworkers have afternoon and weekend side hustles, in landscaping or restaurants. So while it's not easy money, there's money to be made, a large chunk of which they send back home to Mexico.

Beyond the money, there is great pride in their work and skill. *Somos los reyes del campo*, a coworker explained to me. For many of them, growing things is second nature. Look at the back, side, front porch, driveway of many Mexican households. They've got plants growing everywhere. I once dropped my coworker off at the trailer park in Napa where he lived, presumably amongst lots of other Mexicans. There was a little decorative flower bed at the entrance of the park and someone had gone and planted cornstalks in it.

In their world, agriculture is as much a part of life as cooking. Sure they had grocery stores in their ranchos (a house stocked with grocery store items by whoever had made a trip into the city that week), but they also had beans, corn and peppers growing out back.

What I'm getting at is farming is still a part of the quotidian life in many parts of Mexico. Of course not everywhere. I asked Enrique if he had farmed growing up and he said, *yo no*. He was a floorer in Mexico City.

November 14

The last harvest. It felt like it didn't even matter. Es la mezma. It was as hard as all the others though. But in the morning, in the final rows, there

were hardly any grapes and it was taking a while to fill up our bins. I just walked with my bandeja on my hip and when I came to a cluster, I stopped to yank it off. Evelyn dumped 3 clusters out her bin when the tractor passed and she said, *algo es algo*. Something is something.

November 19

Warm, easy warmth

Gentle rays carried on the wings of a breeze

Vines a glow, almost hollow the leaves.

All light, illuminated

As if from within.

The vines light

Relieved, breathe in.

November 20

It's calm, things go back to normal like how they were before the harvest and I remember the majority of time is not harvest. Finding forgotten clusters, eating them.

November 21

Throwing hay on the hillsides. Lucino had a special way of cutting the twine off the haybales and looping it into a tight figure 8. I tried to copy but mine didn't turn out as neat. Then Lucino said, *cada mundo es una cabeza*, every world is a head, but he was trying to say it the other way around.

Las Necesidades

Needs

Are needs really needs? Is it true that the more privilege you have, the more needs you have? So wouldn't that make a need a relative desire? Where is the cutoff between need and desire?

A need to someone may be a desire or indulgence to another.

I have never heard a coworker say, *I need 8 hours of sleep*. Or, *I need to see a therapist*. Or, *I need physical therapy for my rotator cuff*. I'm sure many of them could *use* these things, but they don't consider them as things they need.

I have never heard a coworker say, *I'm not a morning person*. I don't think this concept exists. And if the concept does not exist, does that type of person also not exist?

How much of our person is determined by what we are taught is necessary for survival? The habits we form that build things into us. The tolerances we form to keep things out of us.

What is survival?

I do believe privileged people have to fight for survival as well. But it is somehow abstracted from basic survival. Whoever you are, there will come a moment in life, irrespective of wealth or status, that brings you to your knees praying in your own words, dear God, please help me through this.

Mis veintes toma uno

My twenties take one

Pretending like things were my destiny and pursuing them.
Convinced myself of destinies and pursued them.
Pursued, what I convinced myself was, my destiny.

Mis veintes toma dos

My twenties take two

In pursuit of pretended destinies.

November 25

I got sad and had tears in my eyes and in my voice and Don Tranqui looked at me and said, *No llores. La vida es bonita.* And I looked around, and saw that it was: the crew in their denim, walking backwards up the hillside, shaking out armfuls of hay in their wake, painting the ground golden in the hazy low light.

Dante

Dante

Dante went back to Mexico. He fathered a child and then came back to Sonoma. On the first attempt, they got caught in LA because there were a lot of them packed in the back of the car and it looked suspicious. The second attempt he made it and went back to work in the vines. But in the time he had been away, a law had passed that said agricultural workers had to make overtime after 8-hours, which meant that their employers, rather than paying them overtime for the 9th and 10th hours of their days, just cut their hours down to 8 and no work on Saturdays. *Only 40 hours a week,* Dante said. *How many do you want?* I asked. *Nah guerrita, unos 60 à 80, asi bien che gue,* Dante said. He went to go work in landscaping with his brother. He makes everything sound easy and Che Guevara, like crossing the border twice and working 75-hour weeks was nothing. But his eyes looked tired and dark and I could see that it was not nothing.

Dichos

Sayings

A quien le dan pan que llora (Who gives bread to a cryer?)
Beggars can't be choosers

Un hombre preparado vale por dos
One prepared man counts for two

Donde uno come, comen dos

Where one can eat, two can eat

No hay pedo (There's no fart)

No problem

Como uña y mugre (Like nail and dirt)

Attached at the hip, go hand-in-hand

La misma gata pero revolcada (The same cat but rolled around)

Same same, but different

Si ya te la sa, pa que te la cue?

If you already know it, why'd I yell you?

Echarle mucha crema a sus tacos (Puts a lot of cream on his tacos)

He exaggerates

A mover el bigote (Move the mustache)

Let's eat !

Se prendió el cerro (The hill caught fire)

Things are heating up

Che Guevara (The communist revolutionary)

This is not a universal saying, it just got to be a saying amongst the crew because Dante says it to mean 'chill' or 'groovy'.

Es viernes y el cuerpo lo sabe (It's Friday and the body knows it)

TGIF

Echale ganas (Put in the effort)

Get after it!

Comunismo

Communism

There are times when I've thought—there is no amount of money that can compensate for putting your body on the line. For wearing out your joints prematurely, for weathering your skin in the elements. No amount of money that can compensate for the skill of these workers—perfected by years of repetition to a level of artistry. Is there anyone that is this good at *anything*? How many people practice the same repetitive tasks for ten hours a day, for thirty years? Even Steph Curry doesn't practice sinking 3's for 10 hours a day. Perhaps factory workers are the only other humans that achieve a similar level of mastery.

But at the same time, it's an easy job.

So long as I am well-rested and bring my tools and my lunch, I'm pretty much set for the day. I don't have to plan ahead. I don't have to make difficult decisions or problem solve or troubleshoot or do hard math or respond strategically to delicate emails. I am not uniquely responsible for anything. If I miss work, there is no make-up work. If I make a mistake, which I do (hundreds of them) I just move on to the next vine and start over and over again.

Within the microcosm of a field crew, there exists a certain communism. Because we are paid by the hour and not piece-rate (by the vine), we all make the same amount of money, even though some people do more, higher quality work.

Is it unfair that the physically hard jobs get paid less? With the exception of professional sports, why are jobs that are mentally challenging valued more than jobs that are physically challenging? Would the world keep going on just fine if the cerebral jobs were paid a bit less and physical jobs (again excluding professional athletes) paid a bit more? What if they were all paid about the same? Would people still be incentivized to get educated, take on more responsibility?

If there were no workers, there would be no grapes. If there was no boss, the grapes would probably be rotten with mildew (because it's the supervisor that figures out the sulfur sprays) and sitting in a big heap with nowhere to go (because again it's the supervisor that coordinates who buys the grapes). They'd be worth nothing. So it'd be the same as having no grapes.

I asked Joel the vineyard manager (who started out as a fieldworker same as everyone else) if he could do what he does without having gone to school. He said no, I had to go to school. He had only gone up to third grade in Mexico. Now he can do long division in his head and negotiate share-cropping contracts for some of the valley's most expensive grapes.

Inherent to every separation of labor, there is a hierarchization of labor. As much as I would want the workers of the world to unite, from my experience in the vines, I could see how that would be a complete disaster (see above rotten heap of grapes).

But sometimes I wonder if we are really better off, with our hierarchies and our whizzing machines that allow us to do more work in less time. It's not like we have more time as a result, we just do more. So the ratio is always the same. I call it the Wallace and Grommet effect. Like building this crazy contraption, to do something faster. But now you have to factor in the amount of time it takes to build and maintain the crazy contraption. Es la mezma, la mezma, mezma.

Gerardo

Gerardo

Gera's commute is twice as long as mine. He wakes up at 3:30 am. He drives 15 minutes out of his way to pick up Luis. He's always early. He doesn't drink coffee or energy drinks. He doesn't yawn or have bags under his eyes or talk about if he's tired or how little sleep he got. He has two kids here (an 8-year old and a 2-year old) and one there. We're almost the same age but I feel like he's lived several lifetimes more than me. The

payroll lady in the office told me that he's never once been late on submitting the time cards. He was studying to be an electrician before he came here, but then he had a kid and needed to make money. Now he's studying English at night. He grew up working in coffee bean fields. His hands are quick and precise, a lefty. His eyesight is exquisite and he never wears sunglasses. His work clothes are always clean, including his hats which are frayed at the brim from going through the wash.

Mis paisanos

Literal: My countrymen

Figurative: Fellow Americans

When I came to terms with my shortcomings in the field, I began to realize how doomed California's (and dare I say, the country's) state of agriculture would be if not for Mexicans. Even if by some miracle, Americans rallied and traded in their 'I-was-born-here' jobs for a job in the fields, even if we were able to muster up the critical mass, we'd still be doomed. Though not all my coworkers (see dentist, mechanical engineer, seamstress) worked in agriculture, the majority of them were planting corn or picking tomatoes, even if on a small scale, from a young age. A household chore for me was 'load the dishwasher' whereas a household chore for my Mexican counterpart was 'go help your grandpa sow the corn field...and then wash the dishes by hand'.

There's no way you can make up for that experience. As Joel told me, *it is like a bike going against a motorcycle. You will never catch up.* There were many times when I felt ashamed of my upbringing. Like every advantage I had had growing up was working to my disadvantage. Like I had been raised without knowing what hard work was. And honestly, though I would consider myself a hard worker, I was raised in an environment where hard work was a contrivance. Sure, swim practice was hard, but that was by design. It was also only an hour and a half out of my day and dinner was waiting at home.

And even if there was an equally skilled group of U.S. citizens, you'd be hard-pressed to get them to work in the fields for \$19 an hour. *No tienes el chip activado*, Joel would tell me. *You don't have your chip activated*, by which he meant, you are not working for something larger than yourself, you do not understand sacrifice and I'd feel like a shell. No matter how hard I tried, somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I had a safety net and it didn't really matter if I wasn't a fast fieldworker. I thought of the line from *Hamilton*, when Lafayette says to Hamilton, 'Immigrants, we get the job done' and I showed it Joel on Youtube.

My stance on immigration reform is that it should definitely be reformed. I don't get why we're all playing this game and being all hush hush, let's pretend this crew of Mexican fieldworkers are all U.S. citizens. I don't get why the government continues to spend money on border control, when they need look no further than to the 75% of California's agricultural labor force to see that it's a complete waste. The country's simultaneous dependency on and denial of undocumented workers reminds me of a functioning alcoholic; it's toxic, but it works. Mexicans have good enough fakes to get a job, to get taxes taken out of their paychecks, but not good enough fakes to leave the country and get back in again. When Trump was still president, I asked Aaron what he thought about his threats to build a wall. He laughed and said, *then we'll just ride in on jet skis*.

Most of all, I don't get why, once you have immigrated illegally, there is no path to citizenship beyond getting married, a stroke of sheer circumstance that has nothing to do with the 30, or even 10 years of labor someone has put in on American soil.

Mexican immigrants want to be citizens, not so they can stay, but so they can go home, and come back when they want to work. As it is now, without papers, going home is like ripping up the golden ticket it took for them to get here in the first place. The risk of not being able to get another golden ticket is far too high, and the alternatives far too expensive.



EPILOGUE

Dios God

In Chile I lived in a house with a woman named Estela. One day she asked me if I thanked God for all he has given me. I said, *I feel like everything I have, I've gotten through hard work.* At this she turned from me and said, *Miiraa, la gringa ingrata.* (Look at the ungrateful gringa).

February 10

Joel is a model citizen, but the irony is that he's not a citizen. When he got raised into a higher tax bracket, he felt proud, like he was finally contributing. I asked Joel what his childhood home was like and he pulled up a Google image of a quintessential 3rd world home – the kind with a corrugated metal roof and slats of wood on the sides. It sometimes feels unfeasible; synthesizing this backstory into the tissue of the person before me; this successful, shrewd businessman clicking through Excel spreadsheets and sympathizing with the owner of the winery, who was on speaker expressing his lack of time due to the fact that they were downsizing their Carmel home. *That other one...*, the owner said. *It was just too much.*

March 5

The vines,
they keep time & it is not too fast,
it's right on time,
and everything only happens
when it is time.

April 16

Joel told me to read this thing about how people choose to be poor. *What do you mean?* I said. *Your parents did not choose to be poor.* I said people like him have to first find the ladder and then climb it from the bottom. People like

me were born onto the upper-rungs. All we have to do is not fall off. Both are hard, but where you start is not a choice.

Joel

Joel

If you are walking in a vineyard with Joel, you will most certainly have a fun time. One minute he is investigating the chew marks on a drip line and muttering *pinche coyotes*, then he is looking at the tire marks left by the tractor revealing the angle at which the tractorista took a certain turn and muttering *pinche chaparro*. Now he's looking at a rock and deciding that years and years ago there was water flowing through here, and now he's looking at a branch and predicting when it will fall. He's asking, *what does a grape leaf taste like?* and plucking one off to chew it up and then spitting out the purple anthocyanin spittle it turns into. He's walking fast so you have to trot to catch up. He's at the edge of a sharp drop-off and co-starring you in a made-up scene from a movie, *Don't do it, there's more to live for, don't jump!* He's picking up a vine that's fallen off its stake and saying, *Come on baby*, and then to you saying, *He drank too much*. He's looking at a bird and wondering aloud, *does it even think?* All the while calculating yield estimates based off how many clusters he's predicting from each vine. *Now tell me*, he turns to you to ask, *what's the difference between no and not?*

December 25

I am a web of indecision though, doubts leading to questions, to more imagined futures when all I want to do is write and make dance videos. I know so clearly what I want but am so unsure about how I will get there that I come off as being directionless.

Lucino

Lucino

Lucino got an offer to work the late-shift in a plastic factory. He decided to take it because they pay bonuses every 3 months and he would end up making more than in the vineyards. He got a second job to fill the mornings in a tortilla factory. One night in the plastic factory, his hand lingered a moment too long and the automated knives that cut the sheets of plastic tore into his finger and cut two tendons. He got surgery in the ER and they did their best to stitch it back together but it looked horrific, black and bloated, like a dead person's finger had been glued onto his hand. They told him he may never be able to make a fist. His house in Michoacan is complete, including the repairs that were needed after a shower of bullets came down on the roof, courtesy of the mafia whose presence now looms much heavier over his childhood home, so that now people don't go out at night. *Or if you do, he said, it's with fear.* Friends from his town have found their way to Sonoma and reported that he built a big ol' house, but to him it's as if it doesn't exist, since he's never seen it, nor does he know if he ever will.

January 2

Telling Joel about studying. Our heads pressed against the sun-warmed window of the sliding glass door in the office. I said, *I'm not that young and I'm starting over.* And he looked at me and said, *but see how easy it is for you to change.* For the first time, I get what he means when he says that I'm *preparada*— that I have this vague and undefinable set of skills that, although I can't do math for shit or convert between ounces and pints and grams, qualify me as 'educated'. He said for me to not put my education to use is like having a Lamborghini in the garage and never driving it. He said he'll stay in the pond, while I go out to sea.

Ahorita

Nowish

I ordered bleach to bleach my upper lip hair, because suddenly and somehow being in an office makes me realize it looks bad. Now I put make-up on to go to work and tinted moisturizer to cover up my acne. We listen to music in the office and I know the songs and they bring up memories of high school swimming or driving to school with my sister.

Mi Raza

My race, my people

Getting lunch and there is a table of Mexican dudes all sitting together with their high-vis vests and I have a sad, secret smile when I realize how in some way, it feels more natural to go sit with them. But instead, I go sit with my new coworkers: white, female millennials who talk about TV shows I have to watch because they're literally so good, and what did Elon Musk name his child, and being Celiac, and fml had to wake up at 6:30 am, and how many calories are in a Hagen-Daaz bar.

Recursos Humanos

Human Resources

Working in HR at a hotel. They hired me because I speak Spanish. Unlike in vineyards, they do E-Verify which means if your primo hooked you up with your Permanent Resident card and your Social Security card, the system will likely reject you and the hotel can't legally hire you. But no one with legitimate documents wants to be a night cleaner or a housekeeper or a dishwasher.

So the hotel hires a contract labor company that hires undocumented workers, that pays them less and doesn't provide benefits. The contract laborers are always coming in to HR to ask for overtime. Meanwhile the legal hirees are flakes and no-shows. I get that E-Verify was put in place to

prevent companies from exploiting undocumented workers, but if they're relying on undocumented workers in the end, who's winning?

Contratista

Labor Contractor

Want 0% Risk, 0% Responsibility and 100% Skill?

Call 1-800-LOOP-HOLE

La orilla

Edge

When the rows were long, we'd enter on one end knowing we'd be in a completely different place when we came out the other side. We'd have shed a few layers, gone somewhere with a few going nowhere conversations, we'd have pulled the lateral leaves or tucked the vines or snipped the third cluster or whatever the task was of hundreds of vines. From the orilla on the other end, we'd look back on our work. We'd drink some water out of the Igloo and file into the next set of rows.

That's how I feel coming out on the end. Like this whole time I've just been going down one very long row and now I'm at the end of it; I'm at the end post realizing I'm not the same as when I entered 5 years ago speaking minimal Spanish, nervous about my North Face looking too flashy and expensive, and nervous about being judged for the food I brought for lunch, and nervous about gaining weight from eating too many tortillas.

I am not the same, I got older, mostly in my eyes. I speak Spanish, but never again as fluently as when I was immersed in it, shouting it from

hilltops, singing along to songs I'd never thought I'd like, whispering it under my breath, hearing my own voice in it, inside my head.

Lo que me queda

What stays with me

Still have in my car
my scissors, my handsaw,
uno nunca sabe.

A pair of gloves, a pair of thick wool socks, a sweatshirt.
Two hats, sunglasses, safety glasses.
My gallon water bottle.

How to make beans.

Nostalgia when I hear corridos, cumbia, norteño, banda.
Nostalgia when I hear the easy platica of a group of workers in the morning.

A left shoulder that will never be the same.

Gratitude for work, that there *is* work.

Nothing seems too early.

Lo que dejo

What I'm leaving behind

Feeling the day, every bit of it, every day.
Feeling time pass by me,
not through a car window or a screen,
but passing through me,
incorporate itself into me,

breath, muscles, bones, become me.
How the fog hung, how the sun rose, how the wind hummed.
How Spring grew up into Summer matured into Fall.
How time happened
touching it, the texture of time.

People that were never my people, but who are a part of me.

For more platica:

meridablanca707@gmail.com