



Wherever People Are Hungry

SCOTT AND I WERE TRAVELING THROUGH THE VALLEY with overlapping but distinct spheres of interest. At first, we didn't even have a name for what caused us to stop the car and walk about. We defined our quarry in terms of exclusion. Smallness seemed to be the key to everything. The soft tenets of edibilism were only discernible in the dissatisfaction I felt with the current debates surrounding food and ethics. I sought an ethos of eating that could give rural America back to itself, and, as a consequence, break the bonds of global predation that diminish rural places worldwide. But I am not dogmatic, nor expert, and I lack both the talent for research and the patience for sustained argument. I am just a young man from the Smoky Hills of Kansas nursing a quiet vengeance in his heart. So instead of facts and figures and the famous, we sought people we didn't know until we found them, and whatever truth inheres to life as it's seen by accident.

Scott's calling, on the other hand, was as honest as the Rolleiflex camera he carried. The Central Valley has for decades been a curious and provocative subject for photographers, and every time he passed through it those photographs and future visions of his own obsessed him. He had photographed Cairo, Budapest, and the Dakotas, and when I suggested a modest three-day survey of roadside stands in the Sacramento Valley, his enthusiasm was immediate. We still did not know the magnitude of our project as we followed our scrap-paper directions to the home of Ramón and Lucy Cadena.

PUTAH CREEK WENDS NORTH AND EAST towards the Vaca Range, loses its modest singularity in the broad waters of man-made Lake Berryessa, and then regains it in the peaks beyond. The lake heaves and billows in a range of shallow mountains, but it is served by a nearby valley town: Winters, California. It was here that we first noticed the extreme permeability of the Central Valley. The various boating and fishing outings inspired by the nearby lake support innumerable bait and sporting goods shops, which add a dimension of middling wealth and mild festival along the edges of the municipality. With San Francisco but a forty-minute drive away, enough traveling cosmopolitans with bulging wallets and heavy purses pass through to help sustain a boutique winery with tasting room, the award-winning Buckhorn Steak & Roadhouse and the Palms Playhouse, an old opera house converted into an intimate concert space featuring largely blues, folk, and traditional country music. This arrangement is beneficial for townspeople, Valley travelers, and coastal day-trippers alike and has created a charming if slightly discordant town.



PLATE 1.5

We turned north from Winters and headed up a lonely road to desolate Esparto, took a left at the abandoned post office, and were soon pulling into the driveway of a two-story farmhouse in the porch-swing style. We found Ramón and Lucy Cadena sitting in the shade of their toolshed, shelling walnuts with slow, steady hands. Buckets of walnuts sat at their feet, picked early that morning. Ramón and Lucy had begun shelling at eight and, had we not interrupted them, would have shelled until mid-afternoon, gaining a whole bucket of walnut meat for their trouble. I have never seen a young man or woman shell walnuts by hand. Old man Muir would conscript me every fall on pretext of my family's poverty, and I would grudgingly sit in his basement, helping him crack the hard round shells and

gardens created a much more familiar pattern. Roses of all hues and sizes had been pruned and shaped with love, and the eye was drawn not to the broad brushstrokes of Ramón's farming, but the gardener's pointillist obsession with detail. The line between the two worlds was sharp and definite, but without any discernible animosity or signs of border skirmish. All the treaties held.

We apologized for interrupting him, but Ramón said he was happy for an excuse to quit, and Lucy, also pleased to be freed from the task, left her half-shelled bucket of walnuts and went into the house.

"See those peach trees over there?" Ramón said, pointing towards a short double row of fruit trees, now out of season. "These are my wife's trees. She loves peaches,

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extract the ear-shaped meats of the truckload of nuts he had gathered from neighborhood and countryside trees. My payment for shelling walnuts was never anything but walnuts, and one year I lost a baby tooth on a hidden piece of shell. As long as walnuts can be shelled by hand, I suppose they will be.

Ramón and Lucy's parcel of land was only just over an acre, little more than a cultivated lawn, but shaped by two hands. Ramón's work was a verdant chaos of edible splendor—kale and chard and basil mixed in with onions, peppers, and tomatoes, and all surrounded by and intermingled with various weeds. The sheds were a mess, with tools perpetually laid down randomly after use and abandoned or half-finished projects. Bits of cars and engines were overgrown by golden grass along the edges of his buildings. This abundant disorder ceased abruptly near Lucy's house, from whence radiated a shock of floral cleanliness. Here, trimmed green grass and intricate

and whenever she tastes a perfect peach, she saves the seed and I plant it. All of those trees are different."

Ramón's farm was a bit like an Easter egg hunt, or a game of hide-and-seek. Each fruit and vegetable waited not only to be observed, but discovered. Several kinds of winter squash, red onions, hot peppers, sweet peppers, dull green and purple and forest-colored greens, eggplants, and tomatoes appeared as Ramón knelt and waved weeds and overgrowth away from his produce.

"These," Ramón said, holding a distinctively curled pair of peppers upside down, "are called 'horns of the bull.'"

"See this?" Ramón asked, pointing to a waist-high stalk with wide, spade-shaped leaves and no visible bud, berry, or blossom. "This is Mexican wild yam. You eat the roots. It grew on the riverbanks where I lived with my brothers as a kid. Now they found that it's healthy for you. They call it Mexican ginseng I have been remembering it for years, but I just now got some seeds. In a month, when I

dig it up, there should be thirty or forty little yams under this plant.”

“What does it taste like?” I asked.

“Well, William, you’ll just have to come back and taste it for yourself.” I told him that I might just do that, and we continued the hunt. Ramón pronounced his words with easy care, with a seductive tone that hinted always and without urgency at unspoken wisdom. It lulled me, not into sleepiness but into a slower kind of wakefulness. Smoking a pipe on my front step as I stare at passing clouds produces the same effect.

Scott and I play a game in the Valley, a reading game. Whether on the road or walking through a friendly stretch of land, our eyes interrogate the earth and its inhabitants for coded information. What has been touched, and why, or left conspicuously untouched? What is the scale of things, what has been touched by machines or by hand, what by an accident? This game, the single rule of which is

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that the landscape is legible, has revealed much to us and directed us to the people, farms, ranches, and questions that made this journey possible.

On the edge of Ramón’s acre grew a kind of living fence of broad, green paddle cactus. He had planted cactus, I thought, because it can and will grow without water and is at worst a weed, at best decorative. However, the branches reached uneven heights and the top and sides of each paddle were heavily scarred—clear evidence of human knife work, of harvest.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“I’ll show you,” Ramón said, and unfolded his pocketknife. He carefully inspected the paddles, explaining his actions as he went along. “This is too big,” he’d say, or “This is too small. What you want is these soft, bright green paddles, like this one.” Ramón cut off a pliant paddle at its base, deftly shaved the furlike thorns off the face and edges of the plant, and cut Scott and me each a thin, glistening slice.

“They’re just like green beans,” he said, and Scott and I put the oozing, gelatinous slices in our mouths and began to chew and make noises. They were nothing like green beans, but they were refreshingly sour, and we both reached for another slice. The curiosity was pleasant, and the taste and texture not unpleasant: more data was needed. I began to get a sense for their virtues, and imagined them sautéed quick and hot with sliced serrano peppers and strips of skirt steak, or puréed and added to a soup of pinto beans and ham hock.

“What do you make with them?” Scott asked, on a similar train of thought. Ramón seemed a bit lost by the question and talked about omelets and frying them in pans with the vagueness of a man who has been banned from the kitchen for several decades.

This was our first encounter with the half-wild, half-cultivated nopales cactus. We would meet it again, consorting with rosebushes in an empty lot in Isleton, being carefully poached along Highway 5, and growing in rows on a small lot on Kings Canyon Road east of Fresno.

“Where does it grow?” I asked, wondering rather forlornly if it could survive a Kansas winter and ugly up a couple of hedge-applied ditches on my land back home, but Ramón’s answer surprised me.

“It grows,” he said with unwavering eyes on mine, “wherever people are hungry.”

I broke Ramón’s gaze and looked again at the scarred desert fence, and saw, through Ramón’s eyes, the manifestation of a benevolent God. I was reminded, with



PLATE 1.6



PLATE 1.7

new devastation, of Rilke looking at the broken torso of Apollo and seeing through its dismemberment to the god himself, and writing:

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

and with all the energy endemic to blasphemous youth, I changed the subject.

"You don't use any pesticides, do you Ramón?"

"No, William, I don't."

"Do you have any trouble with insects or gophers?"

"I'll tell you, William, what I do. I always keep weeds on the edges of my plantings, so that everyone has enough to eat. And then I say a prayer to St. Francis that these poor creatures will not be so hungry that they must steal from me," Ramón said, his hands clasped behind his back, a nopales-wet knife still drawn, and his head bowed in an attitude of deference and trust.

On our way back to the rose-hedged patio where Lucy would serve us coffee, we passed a shady enclave that Ramón used to store his winter vegetables, and judging by the reclined lawn chair, used also for his own midday naps. I pondered the strange providence of this fall harvest. Squash and onions are heavy, ursine sleepers. But it is their slumber on which we feast when the earth no longer bears its green burden; they dream so we may not starve. They are unlike their summer cousins: peaches, strawberries, and tomatoes hurtling towards rot, hosting insect hordes, leading brief grasshopper lives. Among his winter vegetables Ramón might be overcome with languor and lie down, letting his eyelids fall among the mingling of red onion skins and autumn leaves. A discarded soda can, even, did not lessen the beauty of the scene.

Lucy brought out a tidy tray carrying cups of coffee and a honey bear. The bottom quarter of the bear was honey, the rest contained cream. Ramón asked her to sit with us and began to tell his story.

It begins on the streets of Guadalajara, where Ramón and his brothers roamed as orphans. Ramón began working in the fields for pesos a day and lived off food he could gather and catch himself. Through this hardscrabble and feral existence, he came to be a young man and started looking more deeply into the world around him. One day, on his way to the fields, he saw several old women gleaning food from the edges of the fields and herbs from the ditches. When their baskets were full, they went to the city and sold their goods directly to citizens on the streets, thus making many times the money he was being paid for his rise-to-set days in the fields. So, enterprising young Ramón got a basket and started gathering and selling whatever he could glean himself. Being younger, he could make several trips from the country to town to sell every day. This lasted a lucrative week or two before he was set upon by a mob of old widows who accused him, a strapping young man suited for real work, of stealing bread out of their helpless mouths. So he had to give up his new career. Shortly after, he met and began courting Lucy.

Lucy had been listening restlessly to the story so far, breaking in occasionally to tell Ramón that he talked too much and fussing over his pant legs, which she pulled lower towards his shoes, and his socks, which she pulled higher up his calf, but now she spoke with the kind of genuine affection that requires a mask of annoyance.

"Oh, he was an impossible boy. He wouldn't leave me alone. He would come to our street and shout up at our window, and I would tell him to go away. Then he would go away but come back the next day! I'd never met such a man, and I stopped coming to the window. I sent my mom to tell him to go away, to tell him that I didn't like

him at all. He said that was fine, and that he'd be back tomorrow."

Ramón interrupted her and finished the story of the courtship with sudden economy. "And so we got engaged and I went to work in America through the bracero program so that I would have enough money to support my wife."

He worked a summer season and then his employer asked him to stay that winter. That winter, alone in a bunkhouse, looking for something to read to ease his loneliness, he found a matchbook advertising a program for learning English. He had some money saved, so he sent away for the books and began to learn English. Ramón continued to be valuable to his employer, who

stones around each one," Ramón continued, and put a hand on his wife's leg.

But years ago Ramón was badly injured and could not work as much, and so he couldn't afford to drive from that house to work every day. He had to move closer, and they sold the house he had built and bought the one they live in today.

"It bothers me," Ramón began, changing tones, "all these oil problems, and this development. Where do the people of this country think they'll get their food? I know that as long as we're here, on this land, that we'll never starve. I don't know what others are going to do."

I realized then how much hunger informed Ramón's relationship to the land. Hunger, for Ramón, was a very

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sponsored him for citizenship, and he began to build an adobe brick house for his wife, in the Capay Valley.

"How did you learn how to build an adobe brick house?" Scott asked.

"I'll tell you, Scott. One day, in Mexico, I saw a man building a house out of bricks all by himself and I shouted at him that I wanted to learn how to do that. He said he would teach me if I bought him a bottle of whiskey. So I went out and bought some whiskey, and he drank the whiskey and taught me."

"Oh," Lucy said, rubbing suddenly teary eyes, "don't talk about that house. It was so beautiful. I first saw it and knew it was the most beautiful house I had ever seen. I still dream of that house."

"I planted fruit trees all around it, one of every kind, for her. I painted the trunks white and put a ring of

real evil. He did not talk about going hungry, but an orphan on the streets must have done without more than he did with, and Ramón never forgot the feeling; he didn't even wish it on the insects and animals that might nibble his fruits and vegetables. He worked the land, after all, not only to feed himself and his family, but the people who shopped at the Davis Farmers' Market as well. In hard times, he could share with the bugs if they needed the food. His belief seemed to be that everyone should farm so that no one should starve. It was a compelling and sobering understanding of agriculture, that the farmer should seek to feed himself and then the world, not the other way around. Hunger lives, in Ramón's mind, just days away from all of us without well-worked land and could strike at any time. How could one live with such insecurity?

“Have you seen our pomegranate trees?” Ramón asked. “They are right out front. They’re over one hundred years old. You can tell because they are different from any pomegranates you’ve ever had. They don’t plant them anymore. The seeds are sweeter than the others.” So I went out to harvest my own ancient pomegranates, found a handful in the shaggy tall trees, juggled the fruit while walking up and down the empty dirt road, and then took the Cadenas’ mail into the kitchen while Scott made a final sweep around the acre, looking for pictures.

As we were leaving, Lucy asked us more about our book, listened with interest, and then told us with a serious and giving voice that she would pray for the success of our book and for safe travels. We bowed our heads and gave her our gratitude.

As we drove back to Winters we talked about Ramón and Mike, their very different yet somehow mutually sympathetic methods of farming, the solidity each possessed, and their relationships to their land and how it provided for them. It became clear, then, that our purpose in the Valley was somewhat more than being spectators. Once we began to know the people and the intimate corners of this land, grand, vague ideas began to take shape.

We decided to create a portrait of the Valley composed not of its dominant landscapes and activities, but only of those that bore a human, rather than mechanized, imprint. A collage of moments, the intersection of time and place and people—irreproducible, but alive in ways that anonymous portraiture of a line of field hands is not.