

America the Beautiful, Revisited

*O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!*

Brown dirt, red juice. Permanent, blood-like splotches stain my hands, radiant against the green, fruited plains – a tell-tale sign that my summer days are spent in the fields. Though each piece of fruit means a strawberry pie, a strawberry smoothie, a strawberry short cake to someone else, to me each means a penny towards next year's tuition, this week's food, my sister's wedding dress. As I pick each piece of fruit, the steady rhythm of agricultural work lulls me into a false sense of relaxation. I mentally plan out my evening and consider sneaking a Cheeto from my pocket. Lean back on my heels, pulling my long sleeves down over my wrists. My mother looks at me, her brow covered in sweat, asking from beneath her face mask, "*Mari, estas bien?*" I nod. She leans over again, knees in the dirt. Every day, she reminds us that she brought us here for a better life. Every moment she spends in the fields, she imagines better-fed versions of her children sitting firmly at a school desk, attentively scribbling notes with the enthusiasm of top-class students. You can be president, she says, you can be a doctor. You can be a lawyer. Down the row, a man lays on his back, eyes covered. His daughter leans against his knees, his son picking next to him. I turn back to my work, and stand up, bucket in hand (how many today?), to get my timecard punched. I wipe my stained hands on my pants.

*O beautiful for pilgrim feet
Whose stern impassioned stress
A thoroughfare of freedom beat
Across the wilderness!*

They say it takes a day to cross. The desert ... it's very hot during day, cool at night. *No hay sombra*. He's going with his cousin; I'm with my wife. Riding on top of trains, that's how she broke her wrist. Two children in El Salvador; yes, *con su abeulita*. I trust my *coyote*, he took my uncle last year. A thousand dollars before and a thousand dollars after. A few years, that's all. I have family in Nevada, Florida, Virginia. Two jobs at eight dollars, construction maybe? Pay for my daughter to go to school, pay for new shoes for my son. Yes, I know it's dangerous. *Pero la necesidad*. In the backpack: a blanket, a Snickers Bar, a few crossword puzzles. Gatorade, a used roll of film. An extra pair of socks, a rosary, *un milagro*. A black water bottle that doesn't reflect at night. A lighter, to catch a tree on fire if you get separated, so someone, anyone, can find you.



Usually, I only find what migrants have left behind: empty water bottles, discarded backpacks with one strap broken, holey sandals that leave telltale footprints. It was in this graveyard of memories, the Sonoran desert in southern Arizona, that I found him leaning against a tree, delirious with the heat. He had been lost for four days. My partner and I gave him water and asked if we should call Border Patrol to come pick him up. Shaking his head no, he told us where his pick-up ride was supposed to wait for him; it was surprisingly close. What did he need? He pointed at his feet, covered with swollen blisters: *Casi no puedo caminar*. I reached into my backpack, fumbling past the granola bars, baseball caps, medical kits, and emergency flares. My hand eventually found the pair of socks and tennis shoes. They fit. In our training, we were told that blisters on migrants' feet are the foremost cause of death in the desert. Because of

them, you can be left behind in the wilderness with nothing more than a handwritten prayer in your pocket and the promise of *compañero*'s return to find you.

*O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears!*

It's dirty work. Twenty-one million immigrants work in the United States, making up 15% of the labor force.¹ 1,300,000 are housekeepers and janitors, cleaning our alabaster cities. 680,000 are construction workers, building our patriot dream. Although the future may be undimmed by human tears, the present and past are flooded by them.

Before industrialization, employers found cheap labor at the margins of the labor force – native-borns who needed employment such as youth, housewives, and minorities were quickly recruited to work in the fields and kitchens. However, the turn of the twentieth century saw a turn in the labor force, and guest worker programs began around the start of World War II. The landscape of cheap labor became more colorful with immigrant laborers from the Bahamas, Jamaica, and Barbados working in sugarcane and citrus in the South. Puerto Ricans replaced Italian farmworkers in the Northeast. The Bracero Program, from 1942 to 1962 brought some 4.6 million workers to build railroads and pick and pluck in American fields. The program became even more successful as the US Department of Labor relaxed regulations on housing, wages, and food allocations in the mid-1950s.

Jumping over the hurdles of the sixties and seventies, the increase of migrant labor in the eighties, and the consequences of the NAFTA nineties, we arrive at the 1,951 mile-long Border

¹ Most of this information comes from the Student Action with Farmworker's Fact Sheet on immigration, found on their website (www.saf-unite.org).

Wall of the 21st century. Our modern-day solution to militarize the border attempts to stem the flow of a valued resource, labor (while still promoting the free trade of goods, of course). The problem is age-old: American corporations need cheap labor and non-American laborers are desperate to give it. Meanwhile, since modern pursuers of the patriot dream are made nearly invisible in our contemporary social structure, the public struggles recognize that alabaster cities are built on the backs of color, and usually during the night shift. When those who build the patriot dream and make our cities gleam are invisible, replaceable, dispensable, how can you learn and teach to value their work? Native-born Americans can look to this dream beyond the years and imagine our hands grasping the handle of the giant door to the future. It is our generation's inherited challenge to welcome hands that write another language, tap a different beat on the steering wheel, stir a soup with different spices into our future.

*O beautiful for heroes proved
In liberating strife.
Who more than self their country loved
And mercy more than life!*

I'm a twenty year old college student – what do I know about sacrifice? I've held part-time jobs to pay for my part-time expenses; I study full-time which, quite honestly, often ends up being “fool around time.” A safety net is below, above, and on either side of me. The lowest I can fall is onto my parent's couch.

I've learned about privilege before. I have the privilege to not have to be a hero. I spent ten short weeks interning with a community of migrant workers in central North Carolina. I was paid more to document their lives than they were paid to live them. In the field, I met the men who pick my food. I shook their mud-coated hands and ate their beans and rice. I photographed not only their daily lives, but also their distance from home. Their worries – not having a TV, a

ride to the hospital – I did my best to fix. Now, when they call me on the phone to have someone to talk to, that is all I can provide. Perhaps that’s all they wanted in the first place.

Spending a summer in North Carolina required dedication on my part, sure, but not *sacrifice*. I didn’t leave my mother, brother, or lover for a nine-month season. I didn’t cross any borders only to work in unsafe working conditions. I wasn’t threatened, taken advantage of, or unable to file a complaint about my boss. I didn’t absorb thirty-seven cigarette’s worth of nicotine every day in the tobacco fields. I worked ten hour days but in an air-conditioned office, with a break for lunch (my organic salad in a tupperwear) and afternoon yoga.

Some nights, my Salvadoran-American roommate would tell me of her childhood *en el campo*, her parents’ cancer (from pesticides?), her father’s graveyard shift. She told me about her boyfriend’s father being deported. She told me that her sisters think she has an ego because this summer she worked at a migrant clinic and not in the apple orchards. Driving from camp to camp, my Venezuelan-American boss told me about the racism she experienced growing up in a small town in North Carolina. Her name, her long dark hair, her heritage were all perfect targets for racial slurs. Church-going girls with ponies and ponytails eyed her and her family, their attentive eyes noticing the same three daughters wearing the same three dresses every Sunday at church. My Mexican-American friend told me about his family’s reaction to his desire to learn – “You’re a man! Men don’t study – they work.” He did both, attending high school from eight to three and working from three to midnight in the kitchen of a Mexican restaurant.

Heroes make sacrifices that a common person would not, and that is what makes them remarkable. They put something ahead of their own pride – their country, their children, their community. In the case of the migrant worker, our necessity for cheap labor and their necessity for paid work find a brilliant harmony. But, what sort of sacrifices are we making, as an

honorable country, to serve those who deserve the most mercy? If the lowest we can fall is our parent's couch, then what stops us from opening the door to those willing to sacrifice the most?

*America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!*

It is the spring of 2010, and I am in a crowd of 200,000 people on the National Mall. A year ago, I would have been a sympathizer to the cause, but today I am consumed by it. Perhaps it's my personality, perhaps it's the shared passion of my fellow citizens: I am shouting, dancing, beating on drums. I am hugging, and leading chants. I am representing my college, my state, *la raza*: *Se ve, se siente, Ohio está presente! Se ve, se escucha, Ohio está en la lucha!*

I pause to take in the scene that surrounds me. A broad-backed man stands firmly before me with his hands buried deep in his pockets, facing the giant stage. He pulls them out to clap as a speaker demands immigration reform: *What do we want? REFORMA. When do we want it? AHORA.* An American flag is tucked into his pocket. The back of his shirt reads, "If the migrant is not your brother, then God is not your Father." I stare. Some would see this as an ultimatum: but, in this moment, I instead see it as an invitation. Suddenly, without fanfare, my family grows. I walk in solidarity among grandparents, cousins, and siblings on our two-mile march – drums beating, voices shouting, posters waving. My family is not only four people in suburban Michigan but also a strawberry picker paying for tuition, a Salvadoran couple with a desert journey ahead of them, and a migrant tobacco worker who calls to *platicar* every third Sunday. In this moment, I find a place of pride and honor in a nation that accepts many gods' graces and spans from mountain to valley to desert to sea to shining, hopeful sea.