

Melon Harvest

At two in the afternoon I drove the five miles from my apartment complex into downtown Texarkana to drop off voter registration forms and mail paperwork about my recent change in residency to my employer. My husband's job had brought me to this small city straddling the border of Texas and Arkansas, where everything still felt quaint and unfamiliar.

Driving home down Jefferson Avenue on the Arkansas side of town I passed a grocery store parking lot where a farmer had parked his beat-up truck and shoddy trailer under a faded awning. The trailer was loaded up with the last of his watermelon harvest—late season, probably sweet as they come. The truck bed held early season sweet potatoes. End of the summer fare and beginning of the winter stores, all in one load. The farmer's back was facing me as he helped a woman buying watermelons. His arms were huge and his shoulders wider than a yardstick. He was tall, big, sunburned on his neck and upper arms.

Without warning, tears filled my eyes. Although this farmer was a stranger to me, I recognized his profile. I knew his stories, including the toil, drudgery and poverty that too often mark a hard-working farmer's life. That life was just two generations back for me: my Grandma Wanda grew up a farmer's daughter. Great Grandpa George was a farmer and cowhand and blacksmith and sheep shearer and whatever else he could do to put food on the table.

Although rural communities surrounded Texarkana, somehow I was surprised to see this hardscrabble farmer here, now today. He was the real thing. This man wasn't like the hippie organic growers at the Santa Monica farmer's market I visited every Saturday before I moved from L.A. He wasn't a part-timer coming to town only seasonally with a load of grapes or melons. This man was no immigrant laborer from Mexico or El Salvador or Guatemala who came in the 1990s to work the farms on behalf of the white owners. He was not the descendent of Latin American or Asian laborers who came three generations ago and now own farms themselves.

This was a homegrown, Caucasian, American farmer, but the not-quite-Norman Rockwell kind. He was a "dirt farmer," as my new neighbor Billy described the type, himself the son of a sharecropper. He grew whatever he could coax out of the land, working those acres generation after generation to hold onto the family homestead. This farmer was young, early thirties perhaps, close to my own age (although you can't really tell after awhile because farmers take on the age of the earth). Seeing him hit close to home for me, too much a reminder of the hardship and poverty of my own family's roots, uncomfortably manifest today in another family's ongoing hardship.

Wiping my eyes, I realized I was projecting all this onto some random roadside farmer, and I didn't even stop to buy a melon. I thought about it, but I didn't really want to have

Comment [J1]: In narrative essay, the protagonist is the focus of the story. Some conflict will surface, and the essay will tell the story of how the conflict is recognized and resolved.

In the set-up, the narrative should provide the protagonist's world view and set up the transformation that will take place as the essay progresses.

Comment [J2]: Focus on a single event: a drive from downtown home.

Comment [J3]: Good detail, invoking multiple senses: sight, taste, touch.

Comment [J4]: The problem or conflict: This unknown farmer makes her cry. Why?

Comment [J5]: Emotional tie: The farmer reminds her of her antecedents, whose stories she knows.

Comment [J6]: The introduction is really the first three paragraphs, framing the story and setting up the "conflict" that must be resolved. What do we know about the protagonist so far?

1. The protagonist is a married, working woman.
2. She is new to the area, an outsider.
3. She is trying to get her bearings
4. She comes from a larger city.
5. She notices and empathizes with poor, hardworking people.
6. She emotional ties to her family's background of hard work and poverty.

Comment [J7]: Learning more about the protagonist's world view: The farmer isn't just a farmer. For the protagonist, he also represents the American Dream. Here is the conflict: This isn't the stereotype, "work hard, get ahead" version of the American Dream we all expect, that many growers and farm laborers experienced in the past. Something hasn't worked out the way it was supposed to.

Comment [J8]: Protagonist sees herself in the farmer. Is she afraid something will go wrong for her version of the American Dream as well?

Comment [J9]: Another conflict: Her own hypocrisy not stopping to buy a melon even though she feels this emotional connection to the farmer's plight.



to eat a whole watermelon on my own. More than that, I didn't know how I would explain to him the tears I knew would stream from my eyes as I hefted the melon and counted out the bills.

Turning the corner into our apartment complex I passed the Greyhound station just in time to be a voyeur viewing a private moment between a mother and son. She was sending him off, probably to a city somewhere. He was a big, overweight, sloppy but good-natured looking boy. For the second time tears sprang to my eyes, and I couldn't say quite say why. After all, my parents put me on a Greyhound bus to go back to college after the holidays one winter. My father said it was a mandatory life experience, taking the bus to school. When I complained, he told me it was good motivation to finish college and get a good job. I can't say he was wrong about that.

But here in Texarkana my tears flowed again for that mother and son and the harshness of the big city world out beyond this place. I cried for the harshness of my citified eyes judging these homespun people in their quaint small place with its oddities and familiarities, its first names and slow-moving afternoons and churches bigger than stadiums.

I cried for how God must love the humility of a place like this, a town that unobtrusively preserves a Bible in the courthouse and trusts this nation could never do wrong. Perhaps in some ways this is a better place—better than me and the world I'm from. But in some ways it's also a dying place, dying like a field of vines after the melons are harvested, wilting in the sunlight of America's finest hour.

Comment [J10]: Singular focus shifts here to other people she passes on the drive home. Is this distracting? How essential is it to include this second anecdote? Would the essay be more powerful without it?

Comment [J11]: Conflict is further exposed: More people for whom the "American Dream" hasn't worked out?

Comment [J12]: Learning more about the protagonist, deepening the internal conflict she feels:

1. She is self-conscious about her emotion and unable to control it
 2. She has financial means; she went to college; she isn't in poverty today
- She feels like a voyeur in this plays, seeing things that should be private for the locals

Comment [J13]: A long sentence, listing details she is just beginning to see and appreciate about this place.

Comment [J14]: A transformation occurs as the protagonist finally recognizes what is triggering her tears and emotion – and her own culpability in the problem.

•**Privilege:** She is part of the privileged class that judges and fails to come to the aid of people and places like this one.

•**Hypocrisy:** She sees the problem but has not taken action to alter the situation for those the American Dream has missed.

•**Empathy:** She wants to protect these people from the harshness and unfairness of the broader world.

•**Appreciation:** She acknowledges there are strengths and things to appreciate about a community like this

• **Humility:** She recognizes there is a better way to live, one that does more to share the "harvest" and the "sunlight of America's finest hour" more equitably with people left out of the American Dream.

Comment [J15]: Moral of the story: The American Dream is not alive and well for everyone.

By truly seeing and acknowledging this fact, perhaps we may rise to a new "finest hour" and address this discrepancy.

