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 sto-unfamiliar...n.

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 descendant 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...
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 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.