

PERSONAL VOICES

HARVEST VALLEY

LISA HANSON

THIS TIME OF YEAR in the Willamette Valley is full to bursting, glutted with the harvest. Hazelnut trees, tassled and drooping with nuts, trail their branches in the fat green rivers; grain and corn line the roads, poking through the wire fences, too full for the fields; tomatoes and cucumbers bask in the garden, and ripe pears beat the pickers, falling with soft plops to lie split and dripping on the ground, food for bees. In our kitchen we capture them in rows of gleaming bottles to guard against winter. This is the season I love, and I remember best the harvests I spent in the valley, at home.

We used to spend our afternoons with strawberries and apricots brought up in lugs from The Dalles, using our early mornings to whirl Astrikhans through the collander for sauce. Dutifully we put up Royal Anns, laced them with almond and lined them against the back cupboard as testimony to our good intentions. But it all was a trifle; we were holding our breaths for fall.

Fall starts with the peaches we've saved our wide mouth masons for. You wait and wait for the orchard lady to call. "The Elbertas are ripe; please remind your children to eat only the wind-falls and not to climb the trees." That's the sign. We pack our nine in the VW bus (if they can eat wind-falls they won't ravage the picked boxes), tuck bushel baskets in the corners, and we're off, hair blowing through the windows, to the river.

The richest farms lie in the thin, lush crease along the river's edge, a swampy maze of kaliedoscopic precision. They are sectioned by webs of field roads and policed by bosses in matching pickups zipping back and forth. There are no road signs to mark the turnoffs, but if you don't know where you are going, you've not been invited. We have come before and can drive straight by the silent clapboard

LISA HANSON is a BYU English major.

houses with no mail boxes, the slack-doored migrant camps sprawled in the trees.

Across the road from the orchard in the middle of the cabbages a wetback crew works, a dark swatch of rhythm that steps and hoes and thins. But in the trees our kids roll and play in the tall grass, peach juice shining on their bellies while we pick. We go two by two, one hand to pick and three to catch all the jostled that fall, fruit that fills up our hands and stretches our fingers. Each one is lovelier than the next, each tree fuller until we must stop, laughing, and eat the ripest and reddest before it loses something sweet and goes wasted in the jar, pitted, sliced and unknown.

When the leaves and the little boys begin to droop, and the orchard gets quiet with only the katydids singing, it's time to go home. Always slower going back, the car drives like an old mare, groaning up the hills. In the back, mother and the boys nap among the boxes, and in the front we sing and count the blue herons in the river shallows, feeling rich and sleepy and like dinner.

It's a lovely feeling to wake up in the morning with your kitchen smelling of Ambrosia and looking like the farmers market. It's good to wash, blanch, slice and pack all day and to go to bed at night with piles of peels in the garden and your table set with yellow and golden jars that go "pop" softly all night as they seal.

After the peaches and pears and beans (and whatever else the blight hit and is going for a good price), we do apples. Ten different kinds of apple trees grow on our hill, and there is a whole valley of them feeding worms and cows and passerbys—there for the asking. We do Gravensteins and Baldwins and Jonathans and any number of splotched and speckled varieties. They are cooked down for sauce and sliced for pies, dried for leather, or shook down and brought up in the wheelbarrow to be pressed for cider. Our press sways between two oak beams grown black and pock marked with use. Apples that are dropped into the top, crisp and red, emerge at the bottom, to trickle over the cracks in the baseboard and ooze into bottles, a pond green sludge. We set those heavy gallons of thick, dark cider far back in the corner to settle and mature. Just before Halloween, when the juice has cleared, we bring a bottle out to test. My father is the judge and if he smiles and smacks his lips we know it was another good year. "It's got to have a little nip" he says, "a little tingle to be good." We can only enjoy it for a short time—there's a thin line between jack and vinegar. So while we can, we sip it in tiny tastes, and giggle when it bites our tongues and sparkles down our throats.

"If you do tomatoes last they'll clean the canning stain out of your pans" my grandmother said; so we do, just before the first hard frost. We take our VW and grandmother out to Buena Vista to the tomato fields to glean what the pickers have left. We need hundreds of them, and there are plenty, lying in wide open fields that run along the driveways or fall in soft slopes behind the houses.

Picking tomatoes is different; you know because you have to wear jeans and a sweater out to the fields, and you go to get them after school. All the oaks have gone brown, the wheat is cut, the geese are back, and even the land is a weary, dusty brown; everything spent and rotting. Vines in shock from the cold have fallen back and the fruit is exposed. Anything we don't get, the slugs and birds will eat or will melt back into the mud with the little snapping nightshade berries