



Epitaph for a Peach

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epitaph for a peach

four seasons on my family farm

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*For Mom and Dad
and Marcy, Nikiko, and Korio*

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prologue

epitaph for a peach

The last of my Sun Crest peaches will be dug up. A bulldozer will be summoned to crawl into my fields, rip each tree from the earth, and toss it aside. The sounds of cracking limbs and splitting trunks will echo throughout the countryside. My orchard will topple easily, gobbled up by the power of the diesel engine and the fact that no one seems to want a peach variety with a wonderful taste.

Yes, wonderful. Sun Crest tastes like a peach is supposed to. As with many of the older varieties, the flesh is so juicy that it oozes down your chin. The nectar explodes in your mouth and the fragrance enchants your nose, a natural perfume that can never be captured.

Sun Crest is one of the last remaining truly juicy peaches. When you wash that treasure under a stream of cooling water, your fingertips instinctively search for the gushy side of the fruit. Your mouth waters in anticipation. You lean over the sink to make sure you don't drip on yourself. Then you sink your teeth into the flesh, and the juice trickles down your cheeks and dangles on your chin. This is a real bite, a primal act, a magical sensory celebration announcing that summer has arrived.

The experience of eating a Sun Crest peach automatically triggers a smile and a rush of summer memories. Eating a Sun Crest reminds us of the simple savory pleasures of life.

My dad planted our Sun Crest orchard twenty years ago, and those trees paid my college tuition. But now they are old and obsolete. Stricter and stricter quality standards coupled with declining demand cut deeply into production levels. Our original fifteen acres and 1,500 trees have been reduced to a patch of 350.

I'm told these peaches have a problem. When ripe, they turn an amber gold rather than the lipstick red that seduces the public. Every year the fruit brokers advise me to get rid of those old Sun Crests. "Better peaches have come along," they assure me. "Peaches that are fuller in color and can last for weeks in storage."

I have a recurring nightmare of cold-storage rooms lined with peaches that stay rock hard, the new science of fruit cryonics keeping peaches in suspended animation. There is no room there for my Sun Crests, all of them rejected with the phrase NO SHELF LIFE stamped in red across each box.

"Consumers love the new varieties," brokers advise. "They'll abandon your old Sun Crests."

My sales returns at the end of each growing season confirm their comments. Demand remains weak and I have to accept lower prices. But I can't give up. I often picture shoppers picking a Sun Crest out of one of my boxes, not knowing the hidden

treasure that awaits them. When they bite into it they'll say, "Aah. *This is a peach!*"

I've been keeping those old peaches for years, rationalizing that it's worth hanging on to something that has meaning beyond mere monetary reward. But I'm scared. Scared because I can't sell my peaches; thousands of boxes sit in storage, blacklisted with a bad reputation. Boxes that have been paid for, fruit that cost me and my family, a year's labor wasted, unproductive and impotent.

Many family farmers with fruit varieties like Sun Crest peaches no longer calculate how much they earn but how much they owe. Can you imagine working an entire year and having your boss inform you that you owe him money? No matter what you believe, you can't farm for very long and only be rewarded with good-tasting peaches.

This year will witness not only the possible death of this peach but also the continuing slow extinction of the family farmer. A fruit variety is no longer valued and a way of life is in peril. My work remains unrewarded.

When I first started, I realized I would never make a fortune in farming, but I hoped I could be rich in other ways—and maybe, just maybe, my work would create some other kind of wealth in the process.

Part of me knows I'll survive. The family farmer is a tough species, and we will find ways to continue. But when I think of that Sun Crest orchard, it hurts to see a slice of my life ripped out, flavor lost along with meaning. Life will be different without Sun Crest peaches, and with the loss of variety consumers will be the ultimate losers.

I envision my orchard yielding to the bulldozer and the trees tumbling without a fight. I imagine setting a match to them and listening to the crackle of dry leaves as the dead branches

are engulfed by rising flames. I estimate the embers will last for days, glowing in the chill of the fall nights.

I'll plan on going out daily to watch the fire, my face and arms warmed by the heat of the burning wood. Later I'll plow the ashes back into the earth. The ground will be renewed, and I'll hope that my next orchard will become as rich. Are my Sun Crest peaches obsolete? This, it seems, is my epitaph for a peach.

spring bloom

Frustrated and desperate, I wrote about my peaches and sent the story to the Los Angeles Times. It was published and syndicated across the nation. In the following weeks I received dozens of phone calls and letters, strangers urging me to "keep the last good-tasting peach." These were city folk who care about the foods they eat and sympathized with my plight. For them, food has meaning beyond mere nourishment. They longed to be connected to farming.

The day the bulldozer arrived, I met it out in the fields and stopped it from entering my Sun Crest orchard. I decided to keep those trees for one more harvest.

This year carries special burdens. Working harder will not necessarily be the salvation for my peaches nor will discovering a new market for a single season. Every year my orchards and vineyards

require more and more inputs of fertilizer, pesticides, and labor. I'm forced to try and increase production and find myself eyeing my neighbor's farm with thoughts of expanding and wondering, How long can he survive? But increased inputs do not always result in increased productivity; nature doesn't seem to work linearly. Larger farms are not necessarily more efficient; in good years huge operations may perform better, but in bad years they risk large-scale disaster.

I have been trying to farm a new way, working with, and not against, nature, which always requires a certain risk and willingness to experiment. This year will decide my fate. I can't afford to dabble in trial and error. This year I commit myself to saving those peaches; if I fail, I will have to admit my failure as a farmer. I break the spring earth with a new resolve to redeem not only one block of peaches but also my chosen life.

chapter one

spring work

Breaking Winter's Crust

The challenge begins in early spring with the first work of the year. Disks break the hardened topsoil. The cold winter gives way to the warmth of longer days, life stirs in dormant trees and grapevines. A first irrigation feeds the delicate pale-green shoots of new growth, and legions of weeds awaken from hibernation.

Every year my muscles ache from that first workday of spring. I end by planting myself on the steps of our farmhouse porch. I lean against the rails, kick off my boots, and feel the heat rise from my sore feet. My shirt sticks to my back from the first good sweat of the year. Closing my eyes, I recall a story about work, like the hard work of this first day of spring.

A Nisei, or second-generation Japanese American, recalls his childhood lesson. His father was an immigrant who had carved out a life in America through hard work. The family lived the immigrant's success story, arriving in a new land with nothing but dreams, making opportunities for themselves by working in the fields, and eventually getting a place of their own. Everything was accomplished through one method—the ethic of hard work.

The Nisei explains: "You know how those immigrants were about work. Japanese only happy and healthy if they're working." He pauses, lets out a soft sigh, and grins. "My folks worried so much about me growing up the right way, I swear they planted weeds to make sure I always had enough work to keep me busy."

Every year, my spring work begins with that story.

Planting Seeds

In the early spring, the earth lies bare and naked, with not much growing between the grapevines and trees. Cover crops—clovers, vetches, beans, and barley—can be planted to add nourishment and a green color of life to the fields.

I grew up playing hide-and-seek and other games, with my brother and sister in the lush fields of the cover crops. The family dog, Dusty, would come trotting after me, panting and smiling. I'd shoo her away, begging her not to disclose my location, but she'd stand next to me, wagging her tail. It didn't take long to be discovered. (Later I realized old Dusty followed me because I was the only kid she could keep up with.) Still, it was a glorious few minutes of hiding, the grasses cool to the side of my face. I could watch a ladybug crawling up my arm and feel the goose bumps spreading over my body as I tried not to flinch. I

remember looking up at the pale blue sky and listening to a gentle breeze rustling through the tall grass. Often the wind would be an innocent whisper, at other times it could howl. Enveloped by nature, a child's imagination soars. The cover crops brought another world to our fields of play.

One season my dad stopped growing cover crops because of the extra work of planting seeds, irrigating, and battling weeds. Like many farmers, my dad believed that cover crops were just a cheaper source of plant nutrients until he could afford synthetic fertilizers. He explained that work was easier when plant nutrients came in bags, with guaranteed nitrogen contents. And with synthetic fertilizers, the kids could help spread the granules. I remember sitting on the back of a vineyard wagon with Dad while my brother drove the tractor (he drove because I couldn't reach the clutch pedal). Dad and I would clench old coffee cans and scoop out the fertilizer with them, tossing half a can at the base of each peach tree. My old work gloves felt like oversized baseball mitts, and my little fingers could barely bend the leather into a curl around the can. After a few hours, though, I could hold it more easily; something in the fertilizer caused the leather to stiffen, and the gloves became frozen in a death grip around the metal can.

I hope to renew the practice of cover cropping. I am part of a generation of grape and tree fruit farmers who never planted clover or beans or barley. I plant a vine and expect it to last a lifetime; a peach tree should last decades. Annual crops feel odd and peculiar—I don't know how to prepare beds and am not used to planting something underground that would be out of sight for weeks. Many of my generation never learned how to sow seeds.

I planted my very first cover crop eight years ago when my first child was born. I didn't do it because cover crops would be good for the soil and build up organic matter. And I didn't do it

to provide a habitat for beneficial insects to overwinter and make my land their spring home.

I did it because my wife would be home with a new baby and she was tired of seeing only the gray earth of winter outside our kitchen window. I did it for her dreams of spring walks through the soft clover with the baby in her arms, breathing in the fresh scent of spring growth. I did it for reasons that seemed disconnected with farming at the time.

I planted my cover crops in autumn, motivated by a vision of lush fields by spring. I didn't have a seeder, so at first I tried using an old fertilizer spreader to broadcast the seeds. It sort of worked, but the seeds poured from the outlets at the beginning of a row while near the end the flow was reduced to a trickle. Instead of a nice blend, most of the smaller seeds fell first, leaving the larger ones behind, with some of the largest seeds, like the fava beans, sliced in half by the spreader gears.

Caught up in a pioneer spirit, I then tried sowing a row by hand until my arm ached from carrying the bucketfuls of seed (I was planting at only twenty pounds an acre but I had eighty acres to plant). I ended up on a tractor, throwing seeds over my shoulder with one hand while steering with the other. "Let them fall where they may," I said to myself.

Our daughter was born in early November. By Thanksgiving we had a smiling, cooing child and a germinating cover crop, its green leaves poking through the soil crust. Both child and crop grew through the winter and by spring we took walks through the fields, picking fresh peas and beans and letting ladybugs tickle her soft baby skin.

Later an organic farmer friend introduced me to the real benefits of cover crops, how they improve soils and work as a habitat for insects. "You start with the soil and build from there," he explained. He called it "growing your way back to natural farming."

Cover crops have a multiplier effect. Their lush growth adds organic matter to the earth. Earthworms return to my farm because of the healthy jungle of roots to crawl within. Moisture from the winter rains is held by a dense underground mat of clover roots. Insects breed, prolific in their wild and rank homes.

Planting these cover-crop seeds is my first step to save my Sun Crests. I begin by planting hope—hope that the seeds will germinate, hope that they will add life to the farm and even help save the wonderful taste of my fruits.

I had no training to be a father, I could only hope I'd learn quickly, on the job. As I grew my first cover crop, I had a similar feeling. I hoped an enriching harvest would follow. Babies and planting seeds: they demand that you believe in the magic and mystery of life.

Planting cover crops is more art than work. Subtle differences in each field will affect my seed selections. Some areas of my eighty-acre farm have sandy soils, others have more clay, one area is a low land, another we call "the hill" stands four feet higher than its neighbors. They all add to a diversity and create a patchwork, arranged into small five- or six-acre blocks of vines or peaches.

I like growing a variety of cover crops. The vines on "the hill" are designated for crimson clover, my young peach trees need a healthy start of vetch, the wine grapes enjoy a solid stand of strawberry clover and New Zealand white clover. I feel like Georges Seurat and his "dot, dot, dots," each seed becoming a dot on my farm canvas.

Selecting seeds is simple; planting them continues to be a challenge each year. Hand sowing from a tractor works well for a few acres but grows tedious for eighty acres. Looking for an alternative, I located an old set of Planet Jr. Seeders, a modern implementation of a simple old tool—a hopper with seeds and a roller

wheel. With each turn of the wheel, a gear opens a hole and a seed drops from the hopper. The Planet Jr. Company improved the idea, adding gears and a few more moving parts while trying to keep the basic concept simple. The machine works well in smooth, clean fields like the one a vegetable grower may have prior to planting. But vines and orchards are filled with bits of trash—twigs, stems, and sticks—which take time to decompose and love to lodge themselves in Planet Jr. gears.

I discovered this one year in the spring, six months after I had seeded a field. I noticed gaping bare spots in the rows, places where little was growing. At first I thought some disease had ravaged the cover crops, then I imagined birds stealing my precious seeds. But upon closer examination, just where the bald spot ended, I found a tuft of clover or vetch, as if the seeds were piled upon one another. I concluded that the seeds must have jammed in the planter, then poured out all at once when freed.

I've thought of buying a better planter, something adapted to vineyards instead of vegetable beds. But I've become attached to my Planet Jrs. They remind me of a simple age, and I like the name. I also enjoy controlling each individual planter. Unlike an eight-foot-wide, single-hopper machine that uniformly plants an entire field with the same seed mix and in the same pattern, these individual units can be adjusted to create different patterns with a variety of seed combinations. I play artist in my fields, painting with a blend of clover and vetches with a splash of wildflowers. Next to a vine I can plant dense cahaba white vetch that would dominate in the early spring canvas with its white blooms but may begin to wither with the first heat of summer. Along another edge I might weave in some crimson clover with its deep red seed heads or scatter strawberry and red clovers for variety. I would add a combination bur clover and a blanket of yellow flowers with the green hues created by different medics, low-growing but sturdy plants that

creep along the surface and replace the wilting vetches and crimson clovers in our valley heat.

My fields have become a crazy quilt of cover crops, a wild blend of patterns, some intended, some a product of nature's whims. The different plants grow to different heights and in different patterns, creating a living appliqué. The casual passerby might not notice my art. From the roadside, it often looks like irregular growth, bald spots, breaks in uniformity. But the farmer walking his fields can feel the changing landscape beneath his boots, he can sense the temperature changes with the different densities of growth and smell the pollen of blooming clover or vetch or wildflowers. He appreciates the precarious character of nature. As if running your fingers over a finely crafted quilt, you can feel pattern upon pattern. Just as a quilter may stitch together emotions with each piece of fabric, I weave the texture of life into my farm.

Wildflowers

I plant wildflowers because they look pretty and because my wife, Marcy, likes them. Marcy believes farms should be green the year round. She was raised on a goat dairy where they grew alfalfa most of the year. She met each spring and summer day with a view of lush green growth. Now she wants our farm to be green all the time. She wants to see things growing in the fields even in winter. She longs to look out her kitchen window and see life. During the winter most of the farms in our valley lie dormant. Even in spring while the grapes push new buds, the rest of the landscape lies barren, stripped of weeds and life. Not ours.

In 1984 the market for peaches and grapes collapsed. Farms all over the San Joaquin Valley lost money, which often resulted

in the birth of “the new farm wife,” not a worker in the fields but a main source of income from *off* the farm.

Since Marcy and I married, the IRS has classified me as a farmer only half the time. For the other years, Marcy’s off-the-farm income has been higher than mine and the farm revenue has been relegated to “other income” status. One result: in order to keep farming I had to please my banker, in this case my wife. Hence the wildflowers.

I visited other farms with lush green stands of cover crops, long slender stalks of rye or barley shimmering in the spring breeze, waves of grain growing dense and high. Farmers walk through the seas of green, plants often waist high, and hold up their arms as if fording a river. A biologist friend and I watched one farmer show us his fields and proudly speak of his newfound belief in the magic of cover crops. Later my friend whispered, “I guess it’s hard to change a lifetime of farming.”

I asked what he meant.

He answered, “That farmer has a fantastic stand of rye and barley. But he still thinks of simplistic monocropping. He needs to think of complexity and diversity.”

My friend further explained that adding a cover crop helps soils regain organic matter. It also provides habitat for insect life. But like those of the proud farmer, my first cover crops also lacked diversity. I still grew them the same way I farmed the rest of my fields: one crop, one method, one goal. My farm lacked the chaos of diverse plant life. It was easy to see; my fields lacked blooming flowers.

Our farm changed a decade ago, with lousy prices and a realization that if the land wasn’t going to make money, I might as well try to enjoy not making money. At the same time I better make life pleasing to those who are earning an income.

Once, out of desperation, Marcy bought some flowers from Kmart and stuck them on the grapevine berms. Without daily watering, they began to wilt until I began to hand water each

one. For a few weeks they continued blooming and I cursed each time I had to carry a coffee can of water for them. There had to be a better way to grow flowers in the fields.

Soon afterward a friend gave me some wildflower seeds and I tossed in a handful with my cover crops. In California we've experienced periods—sometimes several years—of prolonged drought, and with the lack of consistent winter rains, my cover crops did not grow well, but the wildflowers bloomed magnificently. Marcy and I watched their sequence of bloom, the poppies first, then lupine, bachelor buttons, and daisies. She was happy, I was content, and the farm began to look better.

Now each year I scatter new seeds, the wildflowers reseed, and we watch the fields repaint themselves. The wildflowers have little to do with better prices for grapes, raisins, or peaches, but they start each year with beauty.

THE WILDFLOWERS ARE always the first plants to bloom. I sense a race for survival as they germinate and flower quickly, sprinting to procreate before the harsh, desertlike valley conditions doom a family of poppies or lupines. They also are the first to attract insects.

"Flowers open up a new world of life," said my biologist friend. "Anything blooming attracts life from miles and miles. The pollens and nectar act like huge welcome signs."

My wildflowers are early-season welcome mats for insects riding air currents, journeying into the valley from their winter homes, often in the nearby foothills. My farm sits along their tradewinds, a beckoning landfall in the barren, lifeless desert landscape. I imagine these insects to be like explorers, setting forth and sailing into the sea of vineyards and orchards. My wildflowers are sirens luring these sailors to safe and friendly islands.

After years of drought everyone has finally become concerned over the use of water. At last we're treating water as a limited resource. Nothing knows this better than the wildflowers.

Wildflowers like the California poppy continue an ancient struggle to maintain a niche in the arid ecology of the San Joaquin Valley. I've talked with allergy specialists who claim that some plants actually create extra pollen in drought years. With a lack of rain, germination, pollination, and seed production must take place within a limited window of opportunity, and I have noticed that my wildflowers seem to produce more pollens with cycles of drought.

How does this fit with my farming? I'm not sure. I water my farm artificially, so I don't think my vines or trees really feel the drought. But in the last few years, there hasn't been a bumper crop of grapes, and old-timers claim it's the vines reacting to a reduction of irrigation water.

Which brings me to the realization that my vines and trees and irrigation practices are abnormal to the region. There are no natural survival mechanisms triggered on my farm. Everything I do is manipulation. I can't expect a miraculous, truly natural farming system to automatically replace my old system. Wildflowers won't just grow when I start farming naturally. Likewise, my farm won't "naturally" solve its problems without my intervention.

When human beings first began to take care of a plant food source, instead of simply foraging and gathering, when a clan started tending its first berry patch, when farming was born, so was the manipulation of nature. Farmers all manipulate nature, some more than others. And some practices are more destructive than others. I may believe I can fool mother nature, but it's more as if she lets me get away with a few things. She'll naturally take care of her wildflowers and let me struggle with growing peaches and grapes in a desert.

THE YOUNG MAN had a bunch of wildflowers in his hand when I drove up. Golden poppies ringed his bouquet, lavender lupines stood erect in the center, with wild baby's breath and

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