BELONGING TO THE LAND

David Mas Masumoto

The land belongs to those who own it, work it, or use it. Or no one?

In the Sixth Grade

In 1966, while in the sixth grade at Del Rey Elementary School, I sat next to Jessie Alvarado. We had what, I later learned, was a symbiotic relationship. We'd cheat on tests together—he'd open a book so I could read the needed information, and then he copied my response. I provided the answers, he took the risks.

But that was before they told me he was Mexican and I was Japanese. Our cultures were different, they said: he ate tortillas at home and I ate rice. We each had "our own thing" and belonged in different worlds, despite both living in this small farm community just south of Fresno, California.

That was before they told me that my family was the farmers, and his family was the farmworkers. We owned the land; they came to work for us. Nature rewarded us differently. While we talked about profits, Jessie's family spoke of hard-earned wages. We worked in all four seasons in our fields, they came to labor seasonally. My family would pass on the land to
the next generation. His family’s dream was for the next generation to get out of the fields. We were supposed to be on opposite sides, even though we both sweated and itched the same each summer as we picked peaches in one-hundred-degree heat.

That was before they told me he was poor and I was rich. It made me feel guilty yet confused as a kid growing up. I guess his brother’s Chevy Impala wasn’t as good as my brother’s ’58 Ford with a V-8 engine. During lunch, I learned that no one wanted my peanut butter and jelly sandwiches when lots of the other kids had fat burritos kept warm by wrapping them in aluminum foil. We all wore hand-me-downs from our older brothers, and I remember once when a very poor boy in the second grade had to wear a blouse from his older sister. Jessie and the other kids were cruel and viciously teased him until he ran home crying.

That was before an early spring frost hit our vineyards in late March and we lost over half our grape crop. I remember Jessie’s father coming by to check on us the next morning, slowly walking out into the fields with my father. They both stood and silently watched the sun rise over the fragile shoots, now frozen and blackened by the frigid temperatures. Jessie’s father pawed the ground with his feet, knowing he’d have to look for other work. Dad shook his head, figuring he’d still have to work to keep the vines thriving, knowing there’d be no pay for his labor, and he’d have to work for free the rest of the year. We seemed a whole lot poorer at that moment.

Was I supposed to feel sorry for Jessie? Wasn’t nature supposed to be fair and democratic? I wonder what they have told Jessie since the sixth grade when we cheated together, and what stories we have left behind.

White Ashes

At a Buddhist funeral, we chant a passage about white ashes. We may live a full life, yet no matter what, in the morning we have radiant health, and in the evening we are nothing more than white ashes.

I’m a third-generation Japanese American farmer, but am quite sure my lineage in agriculture dates back centuries. The Masumotos are from a solid peasant stock, rice farmers without even a hint of samurai blood. I’m proud of that fact.

My grandparents journeyed from Japan to farm in California. They spoke Japanese instead of English or Spanish or German. They were Buddhists instead of Protestants, Catholics, or Jews. They came in 1898 and 1917 instead of the late 1700s or early 1800s. They sailed east instead of west, yet their voyage was similar to those of hundreds of thousands of other immigrants who crossed an ocean to the land of opportunity. They hoped to farm. They wanted land.

On the west coast of North America, Asian immigrants found the beginning of a new continent, not the end. Traditions had yet to become firmly entrenched, and, if anything, the West had a tradition of conquest and change. Ownership of land became the first step in carving a place in this landscape, controlling nature an essential step in controlling one’s destiny.

My grandfathers left little behind in Japan; both second sons of peasant farmers, they had no claim to family rice plots. Yet in California they discovered Alien Land laws of 1913 and 1920 that prevented “Orientals” from land purchases, singling out the immigrants from Asia and condemning a generation to life as laborers. But they stayed, working the fields for strangers. Some Japanese Americans saved and purchased land by forming an American company or waiting until they had children and buying the land in the name of the second generation, the nisei—Americans by birth. Most, though, waited until their nisei children were grown and working so they could pool their labor and buy a place together as family. They sacrificed so the next generation could have opportunity.

Dad explained the advantages of land ownership. “It’s American!” he claimed. “You keep all the profits.” But I knew him better. He also meant you had a place of your own, a place the family could plant roots. A piece of the earth with time—he’d work one season, gradually improving the soils, replanting grape vines or peach trees, with the intention of returning the next year and the year after that. Owning your own farm meant you had “next years.”

My family were quiet folk, preferring to communicate through their actions rather than their words. I was born in the fifties, and only learned of their lives through the occasional story.

Once, during a dreadfully hot day in a summer with daytime readings of 105 degrees and low temperatures that never dropped below 70 degrees, Dad told me a story of our family during the Great Depression. “We knew nature
very well," he said, "almost too well." He explained that the family were farmworkers, laboring in the fields, living in shacks, constantly exposed to the elements, feeling each minute change in weather. In the heat of summer the family would sleep outside on a low wooden platform my grandfather built, staring up at the stars. "You could hear a breeze rustle the grape leaves," Dad told me. "The sound makes you feel cool." Life was hard but they knew their lands and how to work and live with nature.

Dad then revealed to me another side of nature, this time human nature. For the first few years of his education, he jumped from school to school, the family moving from field to field, working and leasing different pieces of land. Profits were thin for everyone in the 1930s. Japanese Americans had it rougher. He explained: "Had to rent on a 50/50 percent agreement with owners. Others got at least a 60/40 split, the ones working the land got the bigger share like it should be. But Japanese didn't have an option, they couldn't own land. We were still good farmers though, took care of places. Not a whole lot of choices."

The Masumotos eventually found a place to rent on Manning Avenue, just outside a small town called Selma (about ten miles southeast of Fresno, California). The fields were productive, with grapes that were dried into raisins. Despite the meager earnings, they leased the same place for years. They could "stay put for a while," although Dad said they still hoped for their own place. "If it was ours, we'd do a lot better 'cause we could plow back the profits into the land, like adding manure after harvest, build up the soil for better crops. For the future, years down the road," Dad said.

The Masumotos were optimistic by 1940. My uncle George, the oldest son, had finished high school and was working full-time in the fields. Dad, the second son, would finish soon, and there were two other younger boys old enough to help during the summer harvest season. Together, as a family, they started saving money despite half their income going for rent. They began to pull together and pool resources, until they could afford a place they could call their own. And then, all plans changed in the fall of 1941.

Uncle George was drafted into the army; the oldest son left to serve his country. The family kept farming, still planning for a future on the land, until December 7, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. Overnight, everything changed and was turned upside down. My family was suddenly considered the enemy. Dreams of the land—forging a relationship with nature, working with her bounty—were shattered and lost. By the late summer of 1942, the United States government had commanded all persons of Japanese ancestry to be evacuated from the West Coast and imprisoned in relocation camps located in desolate areas of the country. The Masumotos were exiled to Gila River Relocation Center, in the high deserts south of Phoenix. But the farm we were renting stayed behind; so did the harvest of 1942.

They were given weeks to pack up and leave. Even on rented land, they had gradually accumulated various household goods, which had to be sold, given away, or left behind. Desperate emergency sales were held, buyers knowing well the sellers had to part with their processions. Uncle George had just purchased a new car. Gone, sold for half the price. Clothes, kitchen goods, farm tools—pennies were exchanged for them.

But the biggest concern was the grape crop of 1942. Military orders decreed that by mid-August, all Japanese Americans were to be herded on trains to depart for unknown destinations. No one knew when or if they'd return. But grapes would need to be picked in September and dried into raisins. A year's worth of labor harvested in a month, a year's worth of hope and work bundled into a single moment each year. It was the calendar of farming, part of the rhythm of working with nature.

My grandfather and grandmother had immigrated from Japan and never learned English. As the August deadline neared, Jiichan/Grandpa Masumoto grew nervous about the vines he had pruned, irrigated, and fertilized. He and Baachan/Grandma Masumoto had "made" the crop. Only harvest was needed, the most rewarding time of the year.

The Caucasian widow who owned the land was worried too. Not over the departing "Japs" but rather who would pick the grapes and manage them as they dried in the sun into raisins? She was scared. With thousands of Japanese Americans leaving, a cheap source of labor would be lost: vineyards could lay unpicked, harvests lost. The Fresno County Farm Bureau had issued a resolution calling on the government to delay evacuation at least until the grapes were picked. Then the Japanese aliens could be hauled off, the crop safely in.

So Dad had to do the negotiating. He'd talk with the widow. She didn't say much. He'd try to explain the situation with his folks, already traumatized
by the sudden orders to leave. "How can this happen in America?" Jiichan whispered.

Without warning, Dad was informed that the widow had found a tenant. An "Okie" would take over the ranch and harvest the grapes. Stories circulated in the farming community: because of the war and the potential opportunity for food demands, the price of raisins could double from a year before. In 1940 raisins sold for fifty-six dollars a ton. They'd be worth over a hundred in 1942. The depression was ending for farmers and landowners.

(Raisins prices indeed soared during the war, boosted by government support and the reduction of imports, especially of sugar and sweeteners. From the decade of the thirties, when prices hovered between $39 and $60 a ton, prices per ton rocketed to $109 in 1942, $157 in 1943, $194 in 1944, $195 in 1945, and a high of $309 in 1946, the year Japanese Americans began to trickle back to the San Joaquin Valley, released from their wartime prisons.)

The "Okie" had a demand though—he wanted a place to live with his family. So the landlord "kicked us out," Dad said. "Hell, we'd be leaving in two weeks—maybe forever. But the owner told us to get out now." Dad managed to negotiate a settlement; for the year's worth of work the Masumotos would receive twenty-five dollars per acre or about twelve dollars a ton for the crop. The owner and the new renter would split the profits from that bitter harvest. "No wonder the 'Okie' wanted to move in so fast. All he had to do was pick the damn grapes and count his profits for a month of work," Dad fumed.

My grandparents were hurt. This was the landlord they had been with for years. Dad grew angry. He felt that at least nature—bad weather, spring frosts, hail storms, rain on the raisins—was democratic. It didn't matter the color of your skin or your religion or where your family came from. But human nature was worse, it left scars that would not heal.

My family was homeless. A sixty-year-old immigrant and his fifty-year-old wife were once again aliens in a land they had called home for thirty years. A number-one son caught in the United States Army, Uncle George wrote: "After Pearl Harbor, they didn't know what to do with us. Finished basic training but they wouldn't issue us guns to keep training. No one knew what to do with us."

On a neighboring farm across the street, the Nakayamas, another Japanese-American family, prepared for departure. But their landlord was a good man. He had heard of my family's situation and felt awkward; he allowed the Masumotos to stay in his barn for those final two weeks. He even gave a ride to the Masumotos to the train station where they were to report. He was a good neighbor.

So to this barn the family dragged their few suitcases and packed boxes, all tagged "No. 40551." What couldn't fit or be carried, they would have to leave behind.

But Dad would not go quietly. He was not the reserved father whom I came to know later—the man who could silently watch a rainstorm devastate a crop or slowly shake his head as he felt a wicked summer wind topple peach trees and batter nectarines a few days from harvest. This humble man who fought with nature, knowing well who would ultimately win, responding the next day by walking his fields with a passion to start work over again. Dad didn't leave quietly.

As he vacated the house, he smashed every dish and cup they owned rather than leave them. He broke every piece of furniture they had bought or Jiichan had made, including the family's "summer platform" and tossed them into a pile. Then he burned them. The flames danced into the evening sky and glowed in the night's darkness. They would be used by no one. All he'd leave behind was white ashes.

**Bitter Melon**

"Let's eat," Francis said.

Marcy, my wife, and I weren't expecting supper. We had dropped in to chat with Francis, a Nisei woman in her sixties, recently widowed. Even though their farm was miles from ours, we still considered them neighbors. Her late husband, who had died in the early 1990s, and Dad had known each other for decades—together they had learned to farm through good times and mostly bad. More than once I heard the silence they shared after a rainstorm or freeze, two farmers standing next to each other staring into empty fields. Our families became friends for generations and now Marcy and I were paying a visit to see how she was coping alone.

We sat around a polished cherry-wood dining table the couple must have
used daily. The finish had faded in two spots at the corner of the table; the natural, lighter grain matched where elbows and place settings must have rested. I believed I was seated where her late husband had sat.

Parts of the room were immaculate, free from clutter and dust. In other areas—a bookshelf near the phone, the counter beneath the china cabinet—sat piles of papers, stray envelopes, old magazines, and Japanese newspapers. I was surprised by the clutter because whenever I drove into their yard, their vegetable garden was pristine. Cucumbers were nearly tied up a lattice, tomatoes were staked and grew upright, squash plants flourished with huge leaves that dominated one corner. Clusters of bright flowers grew, rows of bulbs along one edge, even wildflowers scattered along the fencelaw. The soil was damp but not muddy. Weeds grew only in a few places and didn’t compete for nutrients—they looked as if they too had been planted. I was reminded of a joke the late husband had once told me. “Work ethic,” he said. “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.”

From the kitchen, Marcy carried three glasses filled with ice water and small bunches of dark purple currant grapes floating in them.

“What’s this?” I asked.

Through a small window that connected the kitchen to the dining room, Francis poked her head and answered, “We’ve had them for years but even after retiring and selling the place, he still took care of that one outside row, right next to the garden.” She pulled her head back into the kitchen and continued. We leaned forward and turned our ears toward the kitchen. “I once saw in a gourmet food magazine, a place setting with crystal glasses and sparkling water filled with currants—they called them ‘Black Corinths’ but you know they were just fresh currants floating in the water. Well I always wanted to try something fancy like that! I don’t think Herb would have minded. He actually smiled when I talked about the idea.”

Herb was a quiet man and very hardworking. He had a grin, even when I passed by in my truck and he was at the end of a row, leaning on his shovel, using the excuse of a neighborly wave with a dip of the head to take a brief break from his work.

But he’d smile, wave, and dip his head. In my rearview mirror I could see his gray work shirt was soaked with sweat, a deep stain across his chest and along the spine. Maybe the gesture made him feel a little cooler, help to tolerate the heat and accept the daily tests of nature.

At the table, Francis opened three of the serving dishes and we watched steam escape out of them. Two were filled with zucchini, one appeared to be fried in butter and the other steamed. The third bowl was filled with hot corn on the cob.

She smiled and announced, “From his garden.” Francis spooned out the zucchini and a huge gob plopped onto my plate. “Personally I like mine microwaved, keeps it as natural as possible.” she whispered. “Help yourself to the corn, picked it this morning.”

“How you doing with the garden?” I asked.

“Two hours in the morning, two in the evening,” she answered. “It’s a lot more work when you’re by yourself. Much more than I thought. I never realized how much we did together. I’m exhausted.”

She smiled gently, her lips tight but grinning and showing no teeth. I poked at a cob and set it on my plate.

Francis said, “Go ahead, taste it. Tell me how sweet it is. Really how sweet.” I bit into it, knowing I’d agree with her. But I was surprised. I couldn’t help but raise my eyebrows. It was sweet, very sweet. The natural taste exploded in my mouth.

Marcy’s bite seemed just as pleasantly surprising. “My god, you can eat this for dessert,” Marcy mumbled with her mouth full. Francis glowed.

“The hardest part is the watering. I tried keeping all these little notes taped on clocks and doors, telling me when to start or shut off a hose. He had so many different furrows and raised plots. No one knew how he kept it all on schedule.”

Marcy and I devoured the food and looked up for more. Francis smiled and brought out a chilled platter with thin slices of some type of yellow melon. We eagerly grabbed for the fruit with our hands and bit into the flesh. My left eye squeezed closed, and my lips puckered. Francis giggled out loud.

“He used to trick us too.” Her voice dropped as low as it could, mimicking Herb’s soft voice. “It’s not all sweet like candy.”

“What is this?” Marcy asked.
“I think it’s a type of Chinese melon. He was trying to breed them for years but no one knows if this was what he sought. I think he just wanted to leave behind a taste, a different flavor.”

I sucked on my tongue and swallowed.

“Wait a while,” Francis advised. “It’ll start tasting better, sort of bittersweet.”
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