

*During the 1950s the federal government supported a work furlough program for Mexican men, braceros, to harvest apples in Sebastopol. Don Mills, a local labor contractor, would make the arrangements for these men to come to our place to pick our fruit. This is my attempt to pay tribute to those men, saviors of our crop, and perhaps California agriculture, then and now. ~ ~ Vince Pedroia*

*A Mano*

The men came from Mexico  
To pick our fruit  
*A mano*, by hand  
Our fragile Gravenstein apple crop falling  
Hence our need, our haste

To the ranch in the station wagon  
A '56 Mercury, green and yellow  
Everything in a little sack between their legs  
Inside two rubber bands their papers,  
A few photographs and a few *pesos*

On the way, to the market  
For beans, flour and lard  
With an advance on their work  
*A mano*, by hand

The next day already to the orchard  
After the fog lifts  
Both hands picking  
Gently into the bag

Swiftly down the ladder  
Sandals with tire tread soles  
Bending on wooden steps  
The sound of snaps  
The sound of apples rolling into a wooden box

Each box with a ticket  
With their number  
Like a business card  
Piece work  
*A mano*, by hand

Then the whistle from the far-off fire station  
Noon, *lunche, comida*  
The sound of cracking dry limbs  
Then the cracking of the fire  
*Burritos* onto the embers

Brush away the black ash  
Quiet now  
The joy of hunger served  
By real Mexican food  
*A mano*, by hand

By the end of the second day already  
On their white cotton shirts  
Over their shoulders and across their backs  
A brown sweat stain  
Beneath the strap of the apple bag

By Sunday, rest and to the market  
Checks cashed for money orders  
With signatures or X's for marks  
To Mexico  
For the *rancho* they said they'd buy  
And how I hoped it was true

Later in the sunshine leaning against the corral fence  
Tempting Grandpa's horse with tufts of grass  
They all seemed to know horses  
But never were they invited on

By six weeks, over and gone  
Cleaning up the cabin  
A white cotton shirt over the back of a chair  
The stain deep and dark now  
And a single button there sewn on with blue thread  
*A mano*, by hand