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WATER: A ROAD TRIP

Life goes on in the California's parched Central Valley in spite of the state's third consecutive drought year. But how long can farmers in this once-fertile area hold on with the water turned off?

by Lisa M. Hamilton

I-5 South. San Francisco to Los Angeles.

The view out the passenger side window, to the west, shows this place as it once was. Sand-colored grass. Scruffy hawks. Every so often, a metal water trough with the ground around it worn to dust. Thin, hard trails lead in from every direction, the earth packed by cattle that have walked there over and over to drink.

Out the driver's side window it's like another country, the valley broken into countless squares of green. If the air weren't so thick, I could see the fields stretch all the way to the feet of the Sierra Nevada, fifty miles away. Occasionally a dark and leafy orchard seeps west over the highway, as if someone colored outside the lines, but for the most part the highway sharply divides this place in two—before and after.

The difference, of course, is water, and at times the contrast between the two seems almost a caricature. On the passenger side of the road is a rusted old windmill; behind it, a line of weathered fence posts, like stitches basting the seams of this brittle land. On the driver's side, two palm trees flanking a giant Danish-style windmill. It's purely decorative, a flourish marking the entrance to a chain restaurant famous for bottomless bowls of green pea soup.

From the air the missing piece that explains this narrative is visible. It's a pair of black lines that seem to have been drawn on top of the landscape. The thinner one, a ballpoint mark, is the Delta-Mendota Canal; the wide-nib line beside it is the Edmund G. Brown California Aqueduct. I can actually see the Aqueduct from the ground on I-5, a streak of blue that appears at those rare moments when the flat road rises enough for me to look down on the valley to the east. It plays peek-a-boo like this for miles, weaving in and out of my consciousness, in and out of this scene.

Then, just south of Patterson, without warning the road jumps up and I look straight down on it: a current of water forty feet wide and cold-looking even in the paralyzing heat of August. If I steered through the railing and into the stream, I would sink thirty feet before hitting bottom. But instead I steer straight south, eighty miles an hour, and the perfectly straight line of water trails off into the distance. A moment later, it's gone.

My sympathies don't lie on either side of the road; I've come here neither boosting for irrigation nor arguing for the wild drylands. I'm here because lately, a third version of this landscape has been taking shape. Just before I turn off the interstate, it reveals itself. Stuck into the ground is a yellow sign, shouting in heavy black letters: CONGRESS CREATED DUST BOWL. Behind it is an orchard, the trees black and leafless, as if caught within their own private winter. Tucked against one naked trunk is a lone bird's nest; it looks like a tumor of branches.

This is one of hundreds of orchards here that have been left to die of thirst over the past few years. Though the mighty Aqueduct flows by only a few hundred yards away, its water is off-limits. As a consequence, there simply isn't enough moisture to keep these trees alive.

Here in the Central Valley, water is a blessing, for sure. But it can also be a kind of curse.

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In central California, water does not just appear. It is the sum of a complicated equation involving rights, seniority, location and money. In southern Madera County, where much land comes with all but inalienable claims to water, there are places where not an acre is left unplanted. As I drive the roads there the air will unexpectedly fill with yellow butterflies, come to feast on the lush stands of alfalfa. Things change about ten miles down Highway 33 in Fresno County, just south of the town of Mendota. The moment the road crosses an invisible line into the Westlands Water District, it seems that some mighty hand has cursed this place. For miles along the highway the land is effectively abandoned; everybody who was here picked up and left.

To the west is a sea of empty fields, delineated only by a grid of dusty roads whose blocks are a half-mile long. As the afternoon sun burns hotter and hotter, the barren soil appears to melt into a lake of shimmering water, tumbleweeds afloat on the surface. In the right wind, the crumbled earth lifts up from the mirage to form spinning beige clouds, like miniature tornadoes. On the interstate the signs crying out about a dust bowl seem bitter and exaggerated. Here, the words ring true with an eerie timbre.

In 2009, nearly half of this water district's land is fallow—that's 260,000 acres, roughly the area of two hundred thousand football fields. In a few places farmers have sown wheat, the only crop that grows here without irrigation. But in mid-August plenty of those plantings still stand, weedy and way past mature, the price for low-grade wheat so poor it doesn't pay to harvest it. Elsewhere the crop has been cut and herds of sheep moved on to graze the stubble—a low-tech way to squeeze a few cents more out of the land.

To get a better look at some of the sheep, I turn off the blacktop onto a dirt road. Down a ways there's an old, 1970s-model trailer, all white aluminum and rivets, a single band of pale green down the middle. It seems at least temporarily permanent—there's no truck in sight to pull it anywhere, and the makings of a small, practical camp are set out around

the front and back ends. There's a garbage can and a propane tank, a solar panel facing south and a giant bag of dog food, left open. The trailer door is on the far side, looking out onto the sheep.

I turn off my car and yell, "Hola." Two spotted herding dogs slide out from the shade under the trailer and creep along the ground toward me in a wide circle, unsure. I stand there for a moment, being sniffed from afar, until out comes a man. "Hola," he says.

He is maybe five and a half feet tall, with brown skin and black hair under a ball cap. His face is still young—he's maybe forty, maybe not even—but his eyes are lined with hard creases. He's wearing work pants and long sleeves, even though it's ninety degrees and the workday seems to be over.

My Spanish is patchy and weak, and he doesn't speak English. Still, we manage to squeeze out a conversation.

May I photograph the sheep?

Sure, I don't care.

Are they yours?

No, they belong to la compania.

How many are there in this field?

Thirteen hundred.

Thirteen hundred? Really?

Sí.

As I settle into photographing, he crosses his arms over his chest and leans back. He watches me. He doesn't start any conversation himself, but he's friendly and willing to answer my questions. When we finally complete an exchange that suffers from unconjugated verbs and missing nouns, he laughs and smiles. Two of his front teeth are rimmed with gold.

His name is Jose Ruis Dionicio. He is from Peru and has a family there, including a son who is two and a half years old. *La compania* brought him here for this work.

There are five other shepherders like him who live within this grid of roads, all in separate trailers like Jose's, all year-round. A sixth man, Marcos, has no sheep; his job is to guard giant bales of alfalfa left in the field, and the machinery used to bale it. They make up an improvised community—riding out on their four-wheelers to visit each other, maybe drinking a beer together after work. But here at the trailer, Jose's sole companions are the two spotted dogs. Both have crawled back under the trailer and watch me from there, still unsure.

Are those your dogs?

No, they belong to la compania.

Do you like them? The dogs, I mean. Son tus amigos?

Sure. They're my friends.

Do you like it here?

I guess so. Do you?

As I get in my truck to leave, he tells me to come visit the next time I'm there. I say that I will. He has been here for two months. If all goes as planned, he will be here for three years.

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The annual precipitation for the Westside of the San Joaquin Valley can be as low as seven inches—same as the average for the Gobi Desert. Unless you plant wheat, you must have imported water in order to grow crops here. And that is the simple reason why there is so much fallow land. A portion of it was taken out of production, ironically, because of drainage problems. But for the most part the land is out of production because the spigot has been turned off.

Of course it's more complicated than that, hence the cloud of conflict that accompanies nearly every discussion of water, agriculture and the Central Valley these days. The story begins in the late nineteenth-century, as the Gold Rush gave way to agriculture, which promised to be a more lasting way to cash in on California's natural riches. Indeed, in 1901, Elwood Mead of the U.S. Department of Agriculture predicted the Central Valley would be "the Egypt of the Western Hemisphere"—a font of agricultural prosperity that would launch great civilizations. Especially prized was the lower section, called the San Joaquin Valley after the broad river running down its center. The climate there was warm and dry, and the land was among the richest in the world. What's more, it was flat, making it easy to move water across the surface. This fertile valley was an agricultural mother lode, there was just one obstacle: to unlock the land, one had to find water beyond what the sky gave through rain.

The problem was solved first by straightforward river diversions, then increasingly by gas-powered and electric pumps that allowed farmers to access groundwater. But the true beginning of modern water in California and throughout West came in 1902, with the establishment of the federal Bureau of Reclamation. As its name suggests, the Bureau was created to "reclaim" vacant lands by building systems that would deliver water for irrigation. This would enable small farmers to settle those lands, and together their farms would be the foundation for populating the West with healthy, lasting communities. Instant democracy—just add water.

For decades individual farms pumped groundwater and drew from the San Joaquin River and its tributaries, but it was not until the mid-twentieth century that the Valley was reclaimed on a grand scale. Beginning in the 1930s, the federal and state governments spent millions of dollars on elaborate projects to bring more water to the region. Their method was to pump out of the vast river delta that lies between the Sierra Nevada and the San Francisco Bay, and convey the water to the valley lands using canals. First came the Delta-Mendota canal, in the 1940s. After two more decades (and much politicking), came the California Aqueduct. Before long, the San Joaquin Valley was transformed.

Those who don't mind that the Aqueduct is entirely manmade and has banks of perfectly angled cement, they say it's the longest river in California—444 miles long. It is certainly the first river the Westside has known. Previously farmers there irrigated with groundwater, but the land was relatively uncultivated. After the Aqueduct began delivering water in 1968, the Westside bloomed. It was like one of those Magic Garden children's toys: add water and a packet of "solution," and overnight there grows a bright, miraculous landscape where before there was nothing.

Every year but one since 1950, Fresno County has been the country's top agricultural county in terms of gross value of products produced annually—\$5.66 billion in 2008. Since the Aqueduct, Westside farms have been major contributors to that wealth. Today, on the land that still has water, the area grows massive quantities of almonds, melons, grapes, onions, pistachios, and cotton. If you've bought American lettuce at a chain supermarket in April or November, it almost certainly came from a farm in the Westlands Water District. People here will tell you proudly that when you eat pizza in the U.S., chances are very good that the tomatoes in the sauce were grown here, in what was once effectively a desert.

Given that abundance, it's hard to reconcile the Dust Bowl feel along the highway south of Mendota. And yet that's what happens when the water is turned off—without it, the land is effectively worthless.

In early 2009, the Bureau of Reclamation announced that the Westlands Water District would receive zero percent of its water allocation from the Aqueduct in the coming year. Depending who you ask you'll get a different answer why this happened, but essentially it boiled down to three factors: 1) The state-wide drought continued for its third year. 2) Impacts of climate change had reduced the snowpack in the Sierra, which feeds the rivers that feed the Delta, from which the Aqueduct's water is drawn. 3) Most contentiously, the federal government had mandated that preserving the habitat of an endangered, finger-length fish called the Delta smelt took priority over pumping water to supply farmers who got their water from the Aqueduct.

After California had late-spring rains, the Bureau announced that Westlands farmers would in fact receive 10 percent of their water allocation. It was better than nothing, but it still wasn't enough for most farmers. They must plan their year in advance, as early as the previous autumn, in order to secure production contracts with buyers, purchase seed, prepare the land, and so on. Because this type of agriculture is very capital-intensive, part of that planning is getting an operating loan; they borrow from the bank at the beginning of the season, and repay after harvest. This year, with virtually no water to grow a crop, many of those who optimistically took out loans early on will be unable to pay them back. There were plenty of pessimists who didn't gamble by taking out a loan—after all, this is the third year since 2005 when they received 50 percent or less of their water allocation. But how much better off were they? Without an operating loan, most likely their land also produced no income.

Because of both scenarios, it's anticipated that a lot of farmers in the Westlands will go bankrupt this fall. And so a lot of people in the area are sad these days, and scared. They're also angry. Drought and climate change don't offer any one specific thing to blame. But that fish—boy, do people on the Westside hate that goddamned fish. As one resident named Luis Gallegos told me, "You have all these biologists talking about 'The fish! The fish! We gotta save these fish!' But what about the people? I mean, what about these towns? What happens to us?"

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Another hot August day in the Westlands. Under beating sun I'm driving the grid of dusty roads, looking for one that is called Shields Avenue but proves to be no more than another dirt track amidst the countless fields. I turn onto the road and a half-mile down I find what I've come here for: a willow tree. As I drive up to it, nine crows fly out of the upper reaches and circle the sky above. I can hear their wings beating the air—it's the only sound in this still place.

It's odd to have a willow here. They're water trees, their green leaves accustomed to hanging down in the dark cool over a creek; the leaves on this tree hang over abandoned furrows of crumbling soil. But it has managed to get pretty big nonetheless, at least twenty feet tall. Dead branches reaching out from the trunk suggest it used to be even broader.

I learned about the tree from Luis Gallegos, a lifelong resident of the town of Firebaugh, just a few miles east of here. In 1973, his father came to Fresno County from Guadalajara. (Luis, born in 1980, knows this story only through listening to his family tell it.) After two years of working in the fields his father saved enough money to bring his wife, daughter and four sons north. When the family arrived in Firebaugh he didn't have a house for them, so for the first few days they lived right here, under this willow tree. As I stand on the hard road shielding my eyes from the sun, I imagine them shifting their position every hour or so to follow the slice of shade.

Luis's mother was a farmworker for nearly thirty years. His father still works on farms, though these days he drives a tractor—several ranks above the hourly employees who pick tomatoes or hoe weeds. As a child, Luis and his siblings spent summer vacations harvesting melons and picking cucumbers, thirty-five cents per five gallon bucket. The money went toward buying school clothes and paying the family's bills.

But that was never their intended future—a better life was the primary reason for coming here in the first place. His parents eventually bought a house; in the backyard they have a willow, planted from a cutting of the Shields Avenue tree. Luis went to college then came back to Firebaugh, where he now works as a pest control advisor and agricultural consultant. He drives a nice truck (indeed, gives me a good-natured tease about how crappy my own truck is). He now has a wife and two kids, and owns a house in the nicer, south side of town, next to the man who was his eighth-grade math teacher.

“When we first came to Firebaugh, they wouldn’t allow Mexicans on this side of town,” he told me. “Now there are three of us here.” He smiled.

Luis’s face is dark—black hair slicked back, heavy eyebrows above dark eyes, a wide moustache curving with his upper lip. And yet he is an overwhelmingly easy, friendly guy, not quite thirty but self-possessed far beyond his years. He doesn’t badmouth people—at least not to my ears—and his only harsh words are for the injustices he sees around him.

For years he has given tours of this place to outsiders, mostly cotton buyers and textile designers, in hopes of educating people about this end of the industrial supply chain. One afternoon at the tail end of the summer cantaloupe season, he takes me for a tour of the area, starting in town. We start at the taqueria, but from there it’s directly to his truck—this is not a walking tour. In the afternoon’s blistering sunlight, the only people outside are a handful of men outside their shops, tucked under the awnings.

Luis is intensely devoted to Firebaugh, and as he drives he lists its outstanding features. The seeming subtext is that these are the things that make it not just a good place, but an actual community. While other towns are simply patrolled by the sheriff, Firebaugh has a police department of its own. Or, as he phrases it, *we* have a police department. Also a pharmacy, two auto parts stores, two hardware stores, and two elementary schools.

At the same time, Luis points out the signs of deterioration here: A woman going door to door selling tamales out of a bucket. A family holding a yard sale on a Thursday afternoon. This year, Firebaugh has held its first ever food drives, bi-weekly events that regularly draw fifteen hundred people to stand in line for free canned goods. In August, the jobless rate was 28 percent—more than one in four people.

The generally bad American economy is part of the problem, but the greater issue is that Firebaugh’s economy is completely dependent on agriculture. So when Luis drives me to the empty fields of the Westlands, his perspective gives the place new dimension. We pass abandoned farm worker housing, long rows of buildings whose windows have long since shattered into piles of glass on the ground. We pass a pomegranate orchard, each tree strung taut with electrified wire to guard against those who would steal the fruit. In time we pass a spot where Luis used to work on a weed crew, using a tool they call a “cry baby” because using it makes a person’s back ache so terribly. “Now look at this place,” he says with disgust. “Erosion. Tumbleweeds. Every time I drive by, it touches me.”

That is his nice way of saying that it kills him, that this land would lie fallow when it could be providing jobs and feeding people. I’m surprised to hear him say it—I’d think he would be less sympathetic toward the system that once worked him to the bone. But clearly I don’t get it.

“It’s in my blood,” he explains. “When my parents came here, it meant a better life. We’ve all done something with it. And my father—I think he would go happier driving

on a tractor than passing away on an old hospital bed. That's who the people in these towns are. Our livelihood depends on feeding the United States."

Luis tells me that if these water issues aren't resolved soon, even he will be out of a job—his whole family will. He fears having to leave Firebaugh, like so many people recently have. I sense from his tone that would be a kind of death.

"And I'm lucky—I mean, I could learn another trade. Without this water, and the farming, a lot of these people don't have life. A man who's fifty years old, he's not going to go back to school if all he's known is farming. But you take a man who's fifty years old, if all he has known is farming, he's not going to go back to school. He can tell you how many acre-feet of water to put on your almonds, but that's it. You're not going to retrain him to be a computer programmer."

Like many people in the community, Luis is indignant that money appears to be flying left and right these days—to banks, to programs like "cash for clunkers"—but virtually none is directed at helping communities in the San Joaquin Valley survive the water crisis. And yet here's the heart of the dilemma: That hypothetical money might support social services that could ease the blow, and it might allow investment in alternative industries that could take up some of the economy's slack. But money alone cannot immediately solve the economic crisis taking place on the Westside. Only one thing can: water.

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That is not to say that money can't buy water. A person with enough capital isn't forced out because the supply from the Aqueduct ceases. Wells can be drilled and groundwater pumped up from the depths—there just must be a good reason to do it. In the Westlands that most likely means a cash crop such as pomegranates or honeydew melons, which sell for a high enough price that the investment is returned.

To wit: just a few miles away from where Luis and I toured the dust bowl, about eighty acres of almond trees were being drenched in water. Their crop was already ripe and ready to be picked; the irrigation's purpose was to pump up the nuts with water weight. No matter that that moisture would be immediately lost in the drying process, the point was to maximize the harvest weight and, in turn, the check the farmer would receive. More than ever, farming these days is a business of numbers. If the bottom line works out, the water can be found. Nearly half of the Westlands may be fallow, but still more than half of it is fully in production. At the right time of year, double-trailer harvest trucks are more common here than passenger cars.

The obvious danger is that groundwater is a fragile resource, and one that can easily be exhausted. Indeed, a primary reason for building the California Aqueduct was that the Central Valley's water table had been lowered so drastically by pumping, largely for agriculture. In the 1970s, water delivered from the Delta did correct the situation temporarily, both by relieving the need to pump and adding to the total "water budget" of

the Valley so that groundwater was naturally replenished. But that solution works only in wet years, when it's possible to import water from the Delta. In dry years, the mass pumping begins again. During the last three years' drought the water table has dropped as much as four hundred feet.

What this means, locals will tell you, is that the lower the milkshake gets, the longer your straw must be to get a drink. There's currently a booming business in adding extensions to existing wells to send them deeper. Those drilling new wells on the Westside regularly go to one thousand feet below the surface. Even then, there's no guarantee that the straw won't soon be sucking up air as the milkshake continues to drain.

A consequence of all this groundwater pumping is the phenomenon known as subsidence. As certain layers of the earth lose the water that once filled their non-solid spaces, they compress; at ground level, the land sinks. A 2009 U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) report entitled "Groundwater Availability of the Central Valley Aquifer, California" estimated that half of the San Joaquin Valley has sunk at least a foot as a result of subsidence. In one place within the grid, the earth sank more than twenty-nine feet.

A geologist from the California Department of Water gave me directions so I could go see that spot, though he told me I would be foolish to visit. The subsidence there happened during the groundwater overdraft that took place before the Aqueduct began delivering water. There's a USGS photo of it from 1977, which shows geologist Joseph Poland next to a telephone pole marked way up high, where the land would have been in 1925. The image is shocking, and yet the man giving me directions insisted that my trip was not worth the gas. "It's not like there's a big crack in the earth," he said. "The truth is, you won't even know you're there."

Once there, I see he is right. The landscape is no different from that which surrounds it for miles around: almonds to the west, melons to the north, grapes to the south. If he had directed me to a spot two miles down the road, I would have believed that just as well. I pull off into the gravel, get out of my truck, and try hard to notice something remarkable about this place. There is nothing.

Remembering the photograph of Joseph Poland, I walk up to a telephone pole and lean against it. I tilt my head back and look up to the top, roughly thirty feet off the ground. *If I were standing here in 1925, I would be this deep underground*, I think to myself. A sort of vertigo sets in with the idea and I turn my head to look straight forward. Another thought occurs to me. *In another seventy years, will this spot right here be thirty feet high in the sky?* I imagine looking down over my feet, dangling in mid-air.

I suppose that's feasible, but it doesn't seem likely. There can't possibly be enough water left in the ground for it to sink another thirty feet. In fact, it's hard to imagine how much longer this system can go on at all.

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The USGS report on groundwater in the Central Valley projected that in the future, climate change will only makes things worse. It is predicted that snow pack will decrease and temperatures will increase, meaning less fresh water and yet more demand. Rising sea levels will make the Delta water more saline, meaning more compromised fish habitat and thus probably less pumping for the Aqueduct. Add in urban populations that continue to grow and demand more and more water themselves, and it's hard to see how this issue will be resolved.

Now, multiply that scenario by twenty or a hundred—whatever factor reflects the reality that in some form this is going to happen throughout the Western United States. In some places, it has already begun. And in each case, the collapse will pose a choice as it does here on the Westside, between subsidence of the land and a sort of subsidence of the rural community.

In the case of the Central Valley, some people think the choice is clear: places like the Westlands Water District should simply be shut down—we never should have started farming there in the first place. I mentioned this to a farmer whose land is on the east side of the Valley, and he countered with his own logic.

“The reason people began farming there in the first place was the soil. There's a saying that the Panoche clay-loam they have there is so rich, you could eat it with a spoon. Where here you could grow, say, two bales of cotton or five tons of grapes, over there you could grow four bales of cotton or ten tons of grapes. It's just that much better.”

He stopped to make sure I wouldn't mention his name—you wouldn't want to get quoted on this—then continued. “Don't get me wrong,” he said, “I don't want to give up my water. But if we can grow twice as much over on the Westside, why are we wasting our water growing over here?”

The very simple answer, and one that he offered dolefully, is that there aren't enough people on the Westside. The lands of the Westlands Water District and places like it never lived up to the Reclamation ideal of farms, communities, and democracy. Back in 1959, when Congressman Bernie Sisk of Fresno made the winning case for the project that included building the Aqueduct, a key element of his pitch was that the water would lead to the creation of six thousand one-hundred-acre family farms in the region—and, it was inferred, a robust community would follow. Granted, the Westlands is just a portion of that area, but it still has only about six hundred farms. They average nine hundred acres apiece, and many are much larger than that.

Advocates argue that nearly all of those six hundred Westlands farms are run by families, and that to make a living in this food economy each one needs far more than a mere hundred acres. Detractors insist that those family farms are used as a veil, and point to numerous studies showing the vast majority of the land is in corporate hands. It's a fight that has been going on for decades.

Practically, though, the whole thing comes down to votes: there just aren't enough people on the Westside to sway public policy in its favor, and voters from the rest of the state feel little reason to be a sympathetic ally. Seen through the lens of drivers running up and down I-5, this is a place without people. It appears that the community here consists of Jose the sheepherder and the tightly packed vans of farmworkers traveling from one field to the next. Outsiders may feel compassion for the individuals they see within this landscape, but almost without exception they feel no need to save the communities that they comprise.

Countless popular songs have been written about Los Angeles and San Francisco, but there is just one about this place. It's "Firebaugh," by the punk band the Circle Jerks, and its lyrics sum up the prevailing attitude:

*If your car breaks down
Don't take a tow to
Firebaugh, Firebaugh
A place where no one dreams
Where either race is human waste
It's here that silence screams ...
Pass on by avoid this mess.*

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As much as the face of this place has changed, it is still a desert at heart. This means that even when the afternoons are witheringly hot, it can be bitterly cold by midnight. The transition between the two, though, as the sun sinks and all that hot air begins dissolving into the evening sky—those hours are the golden time of day. Finally, for a moment, life seems to ease up.

Every Thursday in summer, at just this point in the evening, the main street of Firebaugh grows thick with people. The occasion is the farmers market, though the weekly festival is not exactly like what that term conjures for most people in California. (The only small, organic farmer in the area gave up selling here after coming twice and making only fifteen dollars each time.) Nasty people deride the event as "a California version of Tijuana," but it seems they are just projecting a resentment that this town is no longer composed primarily of white people. As far as I can see, the Firebaugh farmers market is like a sudden and wonderful breeze that blows into the two city blocks between Gorgeous Beauty Salon and the Casa de Oro jewelry store and, at least for a couple of hours, breathes life into them.

In the tents lining the street tonight there are piles of peaches, onions, and watermelons, then peanuts, grapes, and big, meaty squashes, their skins covered with warts. Fresh, fleshy nopales scraped clean of their spines. A paper plate of pineapple slices showered in crimson chile powder. There are burritos and churros and quesadillas for sale. Bags of pinto beans and leather belts and cowboy boots. CDs, DVDs, and cheap nail clippers made in Mexico.

And people. People! Young couples holding hands, old couples eating *lengua* tacos. A cluster of girls in matching Jonas Brothers concert t-shirts. A gang of boys who throw snap pops at the girls and run cackling through the crowd. The CD salesman cranks up a record of Mexican pop, and the taco cart owner across the row tries to drown him out with mariachi music. A man in clean clothes with a part in his hair hunts the trash barrels for cans and bottles.

At the south end of strip is a stand that's less busy than the rest, just a tent over a card table holding three paper plates' worth of homemade carrot cupcakes and a blender for making cantaloupe smoothies. Running the booth is a woman of about fifty, her short hair dyed dark with a magenta tint. She is feminine but strong, gold necklace at her throat and comfortable brown shoes on her feet. Her name is Marcia Sablan, and if Firebaugh were a book, she would be its heroine.

She came here twenty-seven years ago from Hawaii. She and her husband had signed up with the National Health Corps, which paid for their medical school and then, as repayment, assigned them to work in clinics on the Westside—her husband, Oscar, in the town of San Joaquin, and Marcia in Firebaugh. After their service was complete they opened their own clinic right here on O Street. In 2009 the two still run it together, stethoscopes around their necks five days a week.

When she's not at the clinic, Marcia doubles as the town's mayor. This two-part identity gives her a unique perspective on Firebaugh in the twenty-first century.

At the clinic, she witnesses the intimate consequences of the collapsing farm economy. For instance, many of her patients have diabetes, and a growing number of them can't afford to treat it. "It's the most heartbreaking thing we see," she says, "because that's the future of their health—you can't take a break from diabetes for a year." Meanwhile, more and more patients (chief among them unemployed older men who have little prospect of finding work outside of agriculture) are asking her to treat them for anxiety and depression. When it got to be too much for her and Oscar alone, they hired a full-time counselor.

At the same time, as mayor, Marcia must be pragmatic about the future. She hears the farmers whose hearts are breaking as they suffer through these fallow years and pray against seemingly imminent bankruptcy. And yet, she recognizes that things will never be the way they used to. She sees no point in arguing over whether choices made in past were right or wrong, whether irrigated agriculture should have happened here in the first place. What matters is that the decisions made in the past created this economy, and now everyone in the community depends on it for his or her livelihood. In her opinion, the energy spent arguing would be better used envisioning the future.

As we talked in a back office at the clinic one afternoon, she fiddled with her stethoscope and candidly tried to balance her optimism and her realism. "When you look at the history of Firebaugh, it has gone through a lot of different regrowths," she said. "This

type of industrial agriculture has come lately—it hasn't been the history of Firebaugh. There are plenty of people who believe we shouldn't sit back and just hope the water will come. Instead, we should be looking at what the next stage could be.”

There's a big push to train the town's children to use computers, both in school and at a community-supported center in town. (Today, only around 20 percent of locals have private access to a computer, and even fewer have high-speed internet.) The hope is that this will allow them to take part in the modern economy. Recently the solar industry has been conducting trial projects in the area, and people are banking on the idea that they will train locals to do the work.

When I ask if agriculture will be part of that future, Marcia answers without hesitation. “Definitely. This is the most fertile land in the United States, I just can't imagine that agriculture wouldn't be a part of its future. The question is what kind of agriculture will it be? Is it going to organic agriculture? Is it going to be more value-added?”

A growing number of people believe that rather than trying to design ways to bring as much water here as ever, the solution is to figure out how agriculture could survive with less. More and more farmers are focusing on water efficiency, doing things like adding compost to the soil to increase moisture retention and monitoring plants' temperature to make sure they're irrigated only when absolutely necessary. Of course the unspoken truth is that no amount of conservation will help if there's no water at all, but that final reality is still a ways off. For now, there's still hope in squeezing a few more years out of what land and water remain.

What will this place be a decade from now? Nobody knows. Some farmers have placed their hopes in a lawsuit filed against the U.S. Department of the Interior, arguing that the fish-related pumping restrictions are unconstitutional. Others are reviving the decades-old call to build a peripheral canal that would pump water from sources upstream of the Delta, thereby avoiding the damned fish altogether. Meanwhile, more and more of the unemployed are moving out of town, to wherever they have relatives who can offer a place to stay and the prospect of a job.

As autumn comes on, there is silent prayer that the winter storm season will bring enough rain to end the three-year drought. With meteorologists predicting an El Niño year, chances are good that California will have above-average rainfall. If that happens, it's possible that in the spring of 2010, the Bureau of Reclamation will grant Westlands farmers 100 percent of their allotment from the Aqueduct. Once again, the Magic Garden would bloom.

And yet, one good year cannot solve for ten that are bad. No deluge could be big enough to guard against the long-term effects of climate change and all its consequent challenges. Indeed, those with the hardest hearts might say that a wet year would be detrimental, because it would distract from building a new vision for the future—it might give people false hope that the way things were might somehow continue to be. It's true that if six months from now there is water in the Westlands again, the blessing would be felt by

everyone. But what happens when, twelve months later, the land is once again dry? Wouldn't the suffering simply begin anew? Really, that is the curse of water in a place like this: Once you've had it, surviving without it becomes all but impossible.

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Back at the farmers market, Marcia's attention is fixed on the present, which means manning the blender. Proceeds from the cantaloupe smoothies and the carrot cupcakes (which she baked last night) will benefit the Firebaugh Regional Health Council. That's the way a lot of public services around here are accomplished: When the community needed a kids' swimming pool, volunteers raised the money and then built it. When someone's house burns down, the next night there's a chicken dinner benefit at the church. When someone dies, family members collect the funeral expenses by putting a homemade donation box at the gas station or the taqueria.

Proceeds from the farmers market booth will go toward the volunteer-built pre-school in town and toward the free holiday dinner they throw every year on Christmas Day. Sales tonight are okay, not brisk. But then, at three cupcakes for a dollar, they can't be in it for the money. I'd guess what matters more is the little community that gathers here every week. Even before the tent is fully set up, people arrive with folding chairs and plant themselves in a loose semi-circle off to the side. They face the market and sit there watching it offhandedly, from early dusk until long after the taco stands have turned on their strings of 100-watt light bulbs in the night.

As they sit and watch they talk, about anything or nothing in particular. If one person releases a comment into the air, it seems anyone can throw one along behind it. I strike up a conversation with Phyllis Baltierra. Like Luis she is a lifelong resident of Firebaugh, but from much further back. Born in 1935, she was alive long before the Aqueduct, even before the Delta-Mendota Canal. I've bought a historical postcard that shows a black-and-white photograph of the town's volunteer fire department from around 1900, and she tells me the name of each man; only two aren't related to her.

Making small talk, I ask her how she liked the recent heat wave—100 degrees or more for twenty-six days in a row. "It didn't used to be hot like this," she replies. "The only reason it could be that hot for that long is that the water is all gone."

But by this she doesn't mean the Aqueduct's allotments. She means the San Joaquin River, which used to flow right through town. As a kid, she swam in it every day of the summer. And that's not all. It had a healthy salmon run, the southernmost in the United States. And great, big steamboats, running all the way to here from the Delta. Indeed, the town is named for Andrew Firebaugh, the man who rose to prominence locally by running a ferryboat that shuttled people from one side of the river to the other.

I'm confused when she tells me this. What I know here is fallow fields and concrete water conveyance systems. I didn't even know there was a river in town.

“Well, there’s not anymore,” she says. “It’s just a sand bar now.”

One of California’s many water projects dammed the river in the 1940s, to create hydroelectric power, control flooding, and divert water into canals so that it could be neatly distributed to farmers for irrigation. At first the whole thing strikes me as sad, and ironic—imagine what they could do with that water today. But the reality is that the fate of the San Joaquin River is just one thread in a terrible knot of decisions made about water in the Central Valley. To believe you could untangle it from the rest and somehow lament it separately would be naïve.

A man on a chair to the right offers that on October 1 they will release water into the dry riverbed for the first time in decades. A woman to the left chimes in that it’s the result of lawsuits brought by people seeking to restore the salmon run. I am surprised enough that there was once a salmon run here, but I am incredulous that they think there could be one again in the future.

“Well, it’ll be a long time before any water actually reaches here,” the man concedes. “There’s a lot of riverbed to fill between here and there.”

“And even if it does reach here,” Phyllis says, “I doubt it will ever be the same.”

I buy a cantaloupe smoothie for the road and head for my truck. By the time I’m at a stoplight a block away, I can hear only the throbbing bass of the Mexican pop, the music itself replaced by a rattling refrigeration system behind the supermarket. Out here the wind is up, and the warmth of this place has been sucked up into the black night.

I drive across Highway 33 and onto Nees Road, the path back to I-5. It’s dark here except for the occasional flash of life: A crop duster plane, its wings lit up and swinging wildly as it dips and turns, back and forth along a field. A tomato harvest rig, its workers picking and sorting under floodlights. And the trucks, of course, barreling along with their double trailers of tomatoes or melons or onions. Coming toward me they have a blinding effect, but in front of me they serve as a useful, if slightly hazardous, guide to the nighttime road.

I settle in behind one and follow it all the way to the interstate. As the driver negotiates the curve of the on-ramp, I see a wave of tomatoes wash over the side of the trailer and onto the ground. I jerk the brakes and go forward slowly into the curve myself. In that moment I glance back to my right, toward Firebaugh, for one last look, but all I can see is a field of black broken up by a few smudges of light. I take the rest of the curve with increasing speed, and within a minute I have fallen into line with all the other travelers, driving eighty miles an hour toward home, and away from here.

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