

Evan Rogers

Varietal

All the grapes at Blackwater Estate are pressed using the old Greek method. Once they are picked, the workers place them in large vats and stomp on them to crush out the juices. The workers themselves are mostly women, migrant workers without green cards or passports. They toil together each day in the hot sun, skin burnt, fingers raw. They pick the grapes, press the juice, and send it to be fermented. Each day at sunset, the foreman arrives by car for inspection. He walks among them, surveying their work, slicked back hair and ornate gold watch glittering in the sun. When he is displeased, he takes one of them out behind the storehouse. Some cry out, some are silent, some do not speak for days. There is nothing they can do, they have decided; technically they do not exist.

It is early June when the girl arrives, the chatty one named Nina. She laughs as they tromp through the vats of grapes, squealing as the juice runs through her toes. Then, the picking begins. She is new, and her hands are soft; she does not pick enough. The other women give her some of their harvest to fill her barrel, but even this does not save her. That evening, the foreman takes her out behind the storehouse. And again the next day, and the day after that, and even after she fills her barrel daily and her body has grown hard and tough in the sun. Her words and her laughter grow fainter with each passing day.

One particularly hot morning, Nina is silent. She watches quietly as the women begin pressing the grapes picked the day before, wading knee-deep into vats of crimson fruit, grapes popping and squelching. One of them, an old woman, feels something foreign beneath her foot. She pauses. Murmuring in Spanish, she plunges her hand into the press and closes her fingers around something slick and slender. She pulls it out and screams, flinging it into the grass. It flops down, pale skin splotched with the red of blood and wine, five manicured fingers juxtaposed with a jagged humerus. On the wrist, a gold watch glistens in the sun.

On the other side of the field, Nina is laughing.