

Of No Fixed Address

By Michael Moreno

According to Maryland State Police, the worker died during a robbery at a secluded farmhouse just before midnight on Aug. 6, 2009. They said a white woman and two black men drove to the farmhouse, used to house 10 migrant farm workers, and parked at the end of its drive. One of the intruders hit one of the migrants in the face with a gun. Another migrant who argued with the intruders was shot fatally.

By the time I read in the news about the slain worker in Preston, on Maryland's Eastern Shore, I had been living in the state for two months. The migrant housing part of the story made me think about the different places I had stayed season by season as a child and the different people I had lived with as a young man. I knew what that was like. I thought of different workers, both young and old, I had worked with, lived with, dreamt with, ate with, and laughed with. We were different and the same.

During winter breaks from school in my teens, I went to work in the cotton gins, really loud and dirty factories that clean the cotton brought in from the fields with sticks and dirt. The machinery pulls the fiber from the seed and then compresses it into a bale. You have to wear dust masks, or you'll inhale pure dirt. The machines leave you deaf and numb. The noise isolates you. You are your function: *Get those wire ties secured around the bale and your hands out of there before the hydraulic press releases the 800 pounds of cotton and tears your fingers off.*

I decided I wanted to see the farm where the worker had died. I just kept thinking that he could have been me or someone I once knew.

On the way to the Eastern Shore, I thought about where I had been on Aug. 6 when the worker died at the farmhouse. I had been finishing my last semester at the University of Houston and turning in an assignment. It was a story in Spanish about going to church. (My parents had argued in the front seat of the station wagon. I stuck my head out of the car window to get away from my father's cigarette smoke and the fighting only to have the cigarette fly into my face as he flicked it out the window.)

A detail in news reports had struck me: The intruders parked the getaway car off the road, instead of in the drive. It reminded me of a courtesy I learned early in my youth. I had been riding with my father before he left us. The sun was setting in the West Texas sky, and we were driving past a house sitting a couple of hundred yards off the road outside of Post. He honked the horn, and having seen him make the gesture before, I asked why. I wasn't sure why that house and not the next. He explained that he had seen a car parked off the side of the road, not up the drive, and that could mean that they want to sneak up on a person. "You can get their attention or the dogs'," he said.

When I arrived in Preston for the first time, Bell Creek Road had little traffic. At 6451 Bell Creek Road, I felt the car slowly sink into the soft dirt of the drive. Barren fields surrounded the white farmhouse. The rows lining the land created patches that looked like colored pieces of a puzzle, all a faded kin to the colors of the past crops harvested there. A pair of sweat pants and a pair of slacks hung motionless on a clothesline. A dirty soccer ball sat in the yard. The house stood beaten and deserted. Its nearest artery for life was Bell Creek Road, the road that brought in the murderers.

I caught a ride one winter to Cordele, a central Georgia town with a few cotton gins. I worked the night shift: twelve-hour stretches, seven nights a week. I was tired, and I was cold, but I wasn't alone. There was a man transitioning between military and civilian life, a mechanic without a shop, and a guy from Mexico.

We stayed in a cold, empty warehouse kept by one of the cotton gin owners. The concrete floor may as well have been ice and the warehouse a fridge, but we were sheltered from the wind. We fashioned scratchy mattresses out of large yellow bags ordinarily used at the gin when one of its many moving parts pushed a compressed bale of clean cotton into it for protection during travel and storage. Sometimes it was too cold to read in the warehouse; all I could do was fall asleep.

One night the guys from the gin invited me to go out with them. I think we had a couple of days off for Christmas. We filed into a hole-in-the-wall bar. The front room had old, dark wood paneling and tacky red lights. The guy at the door stopped us, told us the drink minimum and took our cash for the cover charge. He looked at my I.D. and said, "Sorry, you have to be 17 to get in here. There's shadow dancing back there." I was under 17, but I had seen naked girls before on television and even had had a girl lay naked before me. We had kissed, but I couldn't stop thinking about God. I didn't want to tell her that, so I told her that she tasted like chips.

On Aug. 12, WBAL, a Baltimore television station reported: "Police have identified a Caroline County migrant farm worker slain last week during a late-night robbery and are still looking for three people involved." The report identified him as "Virgilio Morales Hernández, 37, of no fixed address."

"Of no fixed address" resonated. As a child, I mistook the name of a cotton gin yard, "Hackberry," for the name of my town. Hackberry was a gin, not a town or a place. It was where the local farmers ginned their cotton, but for me it was a sort of home. I was, had always been, of no fixed address.

On the day that officials identified Virgilio, I had been packing for the move from Houston to Maryland. I had given my acoustic guitar to the neighbors' son, because the U-Haul was getting full, and I remembered how much I wanted a guitar when I was a kid. One day, when I was about 11, my father came home with an accordion he had picked up somewhere -- my guess is the dump, because we'd found things at the dump before, and it looked a lot like trash, now that I think about it.

The *Times-Record's* Aug. 19 story reported that police believe the suspects fled in a gray or silver car, a new detail on which I could fixate. The story repeated those words I'd become acutely sensitive to: "no fixed address." I also learn from the report that Virgilio was Guatemalan, and a relative "currently" working in New Jersey identified his body.

Now more than five years after Virgilio's death, I still think of him. I scour the Internet for more information but find little. I know that the place where he died is Wings Landing Farm. It's possible that he had been staying at Camp #2, known as "Ivan's House." In 2011, thieves stole 31 appliances and copper piping from the migrant camp. It was vacant at the time.

Without much hope, I have contacted the public information officer for the Maryland State Police, Gregory M. Shipley, two years in a row. Last year he told me there had been no arrests. "The case has not been closed," he said. "As information comes in about the case, it is being worked. However, all leads currently available have been worked to exhaustion. No viable suspect information has been developed."

This year, he told me: "I have to report we have had no new leads in the past year. However, the case remains open. Our criminal investigators continue to seek leads and regularly

ask persons they encounter during investigations in that area if they know anything about the murder. Our investigators continue to be diligent in their pursuit of justice in this case.”

I imagine what Virgilio and the others in that farmhouse were doing before the intruders arrived. Maybe they were telling stories about their families. Maybe Virgilio was asleep and dreaming. Maybe he was drinking and playing cards.

I've lived like Virgilio lived. I've had the cold steel rim of a double-barrel shotgun pressed up against the base of my neck. I've stared at the face and down the arm of a person pointing a pistol at my face. But I am not Virgilio.