



PROSE | SUMMER 2021

## Stretching

By Carver Goodhue

As I step out of my car, my eyes pull to the surrounding fields of crops, and then to the farmworker bunkhouse tucked alongside them. The squat, white building where I can see men coming and going is scarcely 30 feet from the green palisades of a row of corn. I wipe away the sweat already accumulating on my forehead, retuck my button down shirt and start walking over to join the rest of my group.

It is my first month in medical school and my first trip to the countryside to perform service as part of my medical Spanish program. I'm here to teach exercises to migrant farmworkers to help them avoid occupational injury along with three of my new classmates. We were warned by our program director about the limitations of this kind of intervention. Farmworkers labor under notoriously grueling conditions, with little shade or rest to insulate their bodies from the effects of the sun and a million repetitive motions. To counter this, we will offer tips for stretching. It feels a little like we're prescribing yoga to someone in a car crash, while it's happening. Still, a little prevention can go a long way, or at least that is our hope.

My classmates and I approach the bunkhouse and then stand in a semi-circle slightly removed from it, not wanting to crowd the men in their homes as they lounge, cook, and unwind from their day's work. Gloria\*, who works for the North Carolina Farmworkers Project and helped orchestrate this event, is already inside the building. We hear her firm but good-natured Spanish emanating from within as, in ones and twos, she convinces a quorum of workers to attend our miniature workshop.

As we wait, I mentally run through the key Spanish words for leading others in stretching. I quickly settle on physical miming and "estira por aqui" as a handy panacea. My vocabulary is imperfect, but I'm confident in my accent, a thickly European one I picked up studying abroad in Spain in high school. Much of my recent experience speaking Spanish comes from visiting men from Honduras and El Salvador in a U.S. detention center built and run like a prison. For some of the men that I met and spoke to behind plexiglass, this sort of farmwork is what they hoped to find.

The farmworkers trickle out in athletic shorts and tank-tops. It is August in North Carolina, so what they're wearing makes physiologic sense, unlike the long dress pants sticking to my skin and pressure cooking my thighs. None of us wear masks. It is still 6 months before COVID-19 hits the U.S., and 9 months before it will tear through farmworker camps across the state. We greet each of the men as they join our circle. They return the greeting and then wait expectantly. I watch many adopt a wide stance with their arms crossed, like we've pulled them away from their dinner to discuss an exciting business opportunity and they're readying themselves for an onslaught of bullshit.

We explain in Spanish that we are medical students, here to teach exercises to protect them from injury. We divide our circle into two, and I partner up with Sarah, another medical student. We begin by introducing ourselves to the men in our group and have everyone go around and tell us their names as well. We ask what sort of exercises they currently do.

The man to my right, Arturo, explains that it is hard to find the energy to exercise after a full day of work.

“Cuando salimos a trabajar a las siete y volvemos a las cinco, estamos hecho polvo ya. No tenemos ganas de hacer deporte.”<sup>1</sup>

Heads nod in assent, including mine and Sarah’s. Addressing this glaring flaw in our strategy, Sarah acknowledges that it may be hard to fit what we will teach them into their schedule.

“Pero por si acaso, queremos mostrarles estos estiramientos, para hacerlos cuando tienen tiempo.”<sup>2</sup> Now, Arturo nods.

Sarah and I take turns, first demonstrating a stretch, then asking them to copy our movements. It feels awkward. I feel that they are humoring us, that in an unexpected role reversal, this is actually their service to us, to go along with our absurd proposal to do stretches at the end of a 10 hour day spent in 90 degree heat. As I reach down to touch my toes, the irony of the situation is almost physically overwhelming. I have been a medical student for less than three weeks, and I’m representing myself as an authority on occupational health worthy of these men’s precious time. At this point, I know next to nothing about the body. You could tell me that its interior contains a single, omnipotent organ and I would believe you.

But then, when we stretch our quads, one man struggles intensely to maintain his balance on one foot. His friends laugh, I’m brought back to my surroundings and we all relax. After 10 minutes or so of attention to the major muscle groups, Sarah and I thank the men for their time. Then we all stand around and talk. I ask Arturo what they are doing in the fields right now.

“Ahora estamos cosechando tabaco.”<sup>3</sup>

“¿Qué tal con eso?”<sup>4</sup>

“Está duro. Tabaco le mancha la ropa, y si se le toca la piel puede caer enfermo. Se llama el Monstruo Verde. Le da mareos, ganas de vomitar, dolores de cabeza. Cuando está durmiendo puede sentirse como si hubiera un monstruo de verdad aterrorizándole.”<sup>5</sup>

“Dios, que pesadilla.”<sup>6</sup>

“Eh, está bien,”<sup>7</sup> he says, graciously attempting to alleviate the distress painted across my face. He quickly changes the subject. We talk about where he’s from in Mexico and how long he’s been coming to this farm. I tell him I recently moved to this state.

“¿Le gusta Carolina del Norte?”<sup>8</sup> I ask.

“Si, está bien aqui,”<sup>9</sup> he says. Knowing the little I do about his work, I’m surprised to hear it.

“¿Cuánto tiempo pasa aquí?”<sup>10</sup>

“Bueno, eso depende de si voy a cortar árboles para la navidad, pero por lo menos varios meses.”<sup>11</sup>

“Me imagino que debe de ser duro, estar lejos de su familia por tanto tiempo.”<sup>12</sup>

“Sí, pero vale la pena.”<sup>13</sup> Arturo pulls out his phone and shows me a few pictures of his family. I see his wife and their dogs. I see the son studying healthcare who Arturo is putting through school. I see the blue house that his work here built.

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On my way back, I take the highway and, in an hour, I am home. I sit in my living room. It is disorienting to be absorbed in someone else’s story, and then find yourself fully removed from it within minutes. Like driving past a side street, where for one moment I am in its exact center, seeing it all, before I am carried beyond its corner and out of sight.

*Author’s note: \*All names have been changed.*

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