

GABRIEL SPERA

Romas

“Kill these yellowjackets,” he says, gesturing to the winged shards of flint and gold converging on the edge of the folding table all but buckling beneath the weight of squat mason jars and stockpots brimming with parboiled tomatoes. He hand cranks the sieve that squeezes pulp into a bowl and sheds the rinds like a molting snake. His bare arms, like an army surgeon’s, are mucked to the elbows, the gray threads on his chest now stark and coarse against the backdrop of skin gone hazel in the unshirted hours spent tending the heat-breathing vines, staking, twining, pinching the rampant shoots. In one hand, he lifts a green sweating bottle to his lips, while the other readies a dishrag to smack a syndicate of insects vindictive as a frayed lamp wire. “Damn these wasps,” he says, flicking the dazed and dead with his slotted spoon. He tops off one more jar and screws the lid ring with a sound like tires on gravel far away, and holds it aloft to let the sunlight fuse through it, transform it to something molten, pulsing, like the heartflow of Vesuvius, or a blood-oil pressed from twenty suns to grease the engine of the day. “That’s gonna be good,” he says, gently nodding his satisfaction before setting it down with the ranks already marshaled on a bench. He drains his bottle, still sweating, and towels the bright gore from his hands. “Someday when I’m gone,” he says, like someone who understands at last the dry wisdom of advice he didn’t heed, “you’ll remember me with all these pots and jars, up to my chin in fresh tomatoes, swatting these damned yellowjackets like some kind of fool.”