

## CHAPTER 2

# Santos: The Gold Hunter

JACINTO CUVI

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For a countryman like Santos who spent the first twenty years of his life harvesting maize and roping cattle, chipping cement under the eight-lane Mopac Bridge during its construction in the early 1970s hardly constituted an enjoyable task. But, then again, life for Santos was not about enjoyment.

In the half decade that followed, Santos toiled in more than a dozen industries. He washed dishes at La Cocina del Sur, a Mexican restaurant on Burnet Road, for about fifteen dollars a day; he cut wood boards at a factory on South Congress for \$3.35 an hour; he cleared tables at Los Panchos, another Mexican restaurant; and a few years later he worked installing pipes that carried telecommunication cables alongside Oltorf Street. “I’ve had like ten thousand jobs,” Santos told me with a smile. “And I never got in trouble. I never wasted my bosses’ or supervisors’ time.” (Santos used the Spanish word “*mayordomos*” for the supervisors, an old-fashioned term meaning large estate stewards.) “But I always kept looking for new jobs. I wanted more, I was hungry.”

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## Mexico

Santos’s wandering life began sixty-five years ago on a farm near a remote, dirt-poor town in Mexico’s western highlands. The town bears the peculiar name of Cutzamala de Pinzón and lies near the northwestern edge of the state of Guerrero. At the time that Santos was born, it had neither a church nor a school. These institutional voids conspired with the material needs of the household, as they so often do in rural Latin America, to deprive this modest farm boy of a single day of

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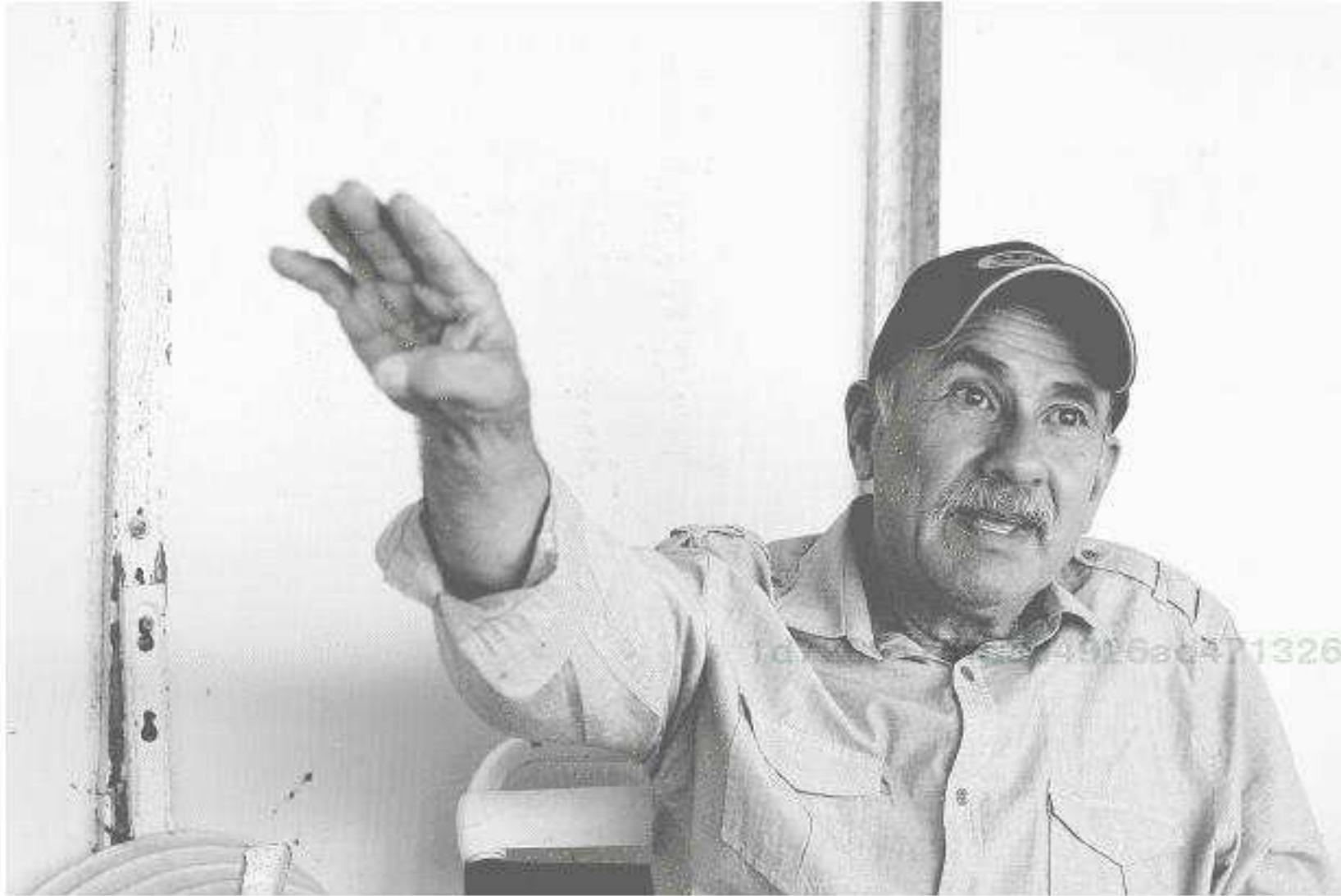
schooling. Santos was the third of three brothers whose dad died of an ordinary cold before Santos's second birthday. Thus, at the age of five, Santos was out in the fields, piling up corn stubble to be burned before the next sowing season. At seven, he was, in his own words, a "full-fledged peon" (*peón completo*), harvesting beans and clearing woods with his brothers and grandfather.

Looking back on his erratic career—if it can be called as much—Santos regrets that he never received any formal education. Even so, he traces what he sees as his stunted intellectual development to the shock he received from a lightning bolt that struck him, his brother, and two family friends as they walked home at the end of a long day of harvesting. Esteban, the middle child, took a full blow to the chest; he died in the field minutes later. Santos, who was nine at the time, survived the jolt without physical impairments. Yet he attributes his learning difficulties and short-term memory gaps to this childhood trauma.

In spite of the hardships he endured as a young boy, it was not poverty, or not poverty alone, that drove Santos from his godforsaken hometown to the United States. As they grew up, he and his older brother José learned to make the most of the two hundred hectares (roughly five hundred acres) that their dad had left them when he died. They built with their hands an adobe house that Santos describes as a mansion, a "casa de hacendado" (the house of a rich landowner of Spanish descent, normally pronounced "hacendado"), where the two brothers lived with their mother and José's wife.

Memories of this period of Santos's life are still colored by some moments of intense happiness. "Life was hard, but we had fun." Santos recalled for me the days following harvest, when he and other farmers would set up calf-roping contests—he boasted about the rowdiness of the young bulls they lassoed—or grill fresh corn on the range and devour as many as fifteen cobs apiece. "We were poor," Santos said, "but life was rich." What made Santos leave on his first northward journey, ignoring his mother's and his brother's pleas that he stay, was, in a way, curiosity.

Rumors of a foreign land where work was well paid had reached Santos's hometown through the stories of returning braceros, manual workers imported to the United States for temporary work stays, mostly in agriculture. Santos had heard you could make twenty-five cents for each box of strawberries you picked, and he figured he could fill one hundred boxes in a day. He had also heard on the radio news of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and of a revolution on the remote island of Cuba.



By the time the bracero program ended in 1964, however, Santos was still under twenty-one, the minimum age for enrollment. To see that foreign land he would have to make the journey on his own.

“But didn’t you think about finding a wife and settling down, like your brother had?” I asked him.

“Women, sure, I liked them, coveted them. But no, I was in love with El Norte.”

“And what did you expect to find on your first trip?”

“I didn’t know. I just wanted to see what it was like over there, how people lived, and then come back and tell my mother what I had seen. I wanted to tell her, ‘Over there, people live in this way, and this way, and this way. . . .’ That was my dream.”

He left his rancho on foot on a blistering morning in March of 1968 with about thirty dollars in his pocket and a big, fuzzy, northward-pointing dream.

Santos now owns a house in a lower-middle-class, suburb-like neighborhood in south Austin. He lives with his wife, daughter, and two grandchildren. The house has a small backyard where Santos has carved a space for a vegetable garden. In it he grows corn, tomatoes, and red peppers, as well as other plants and spices from his homeland. He bought the house in the mid-1990s with a mortgage miraculously obtained

by presenting a bank agent with pay stubs from his past jobs, at a time when the household was in deep financial straits.

Whatever prosperity Santos has achieved in this country, however, has come at the cost of a lifelong struggle.

In fact, his first sojourn in the United States lasted less than a week. In those days, nothing more than a barbed-wire fence divided the northern Mexican state of Sonora from Arizona, where Santos entered the United States for the first time. After spending a night at a hotel in San Luis, Sonora, the border town on the Mexican side, he jumped over the fence and found work picking oranges along the U.S.-Mexico border. But he was quickly rounded up by immigration officials, transferred to Yuma, Arizona, for a police check, and finally deported to Mexico by truck. Ten days later, having crossed into Arizona a second time to resume his orange picking job, he was back at Yuma's police station. The treatment he received this time around was far less courteous.

Santos was held for three days in solitary confinement in Yuma and then transferred to a prison in Chula Vista, California, where he spent three months. "I came out of there with white lice like dogs have." The night of his release, he was taken to the airport in Tijuana, handed a folding chair to sit on, and flown to León, Guanajuato, in a cargo plane along with other deportees. Those who had the money were asked to pay thirty-seven dollars for the trip.

His first entrance into Texas was scarcely more promising. To cross the U.S.-Mexico border, he walked alone in the desert for sixteen days, eating prickly pears and drinking water from the windmill-powered pumps that he came across every couple of days. On the morning that he first spotted a ranch on Texas soil, he had been without food or water for four days. He knocked on the farmhouse door and an old woman opened. He begged her for food and water. Using gestures, she told him that she had no food, signaled toward a spigot where he could refill his water bottle, and pointed in the direction of the road leading to the ranch. Santos understood that down this road he would find a place to eat. Instead, after walking a couple of miles, he ran into a police car. As it turned out, the woman had reported him.

In all, Santos was sent back to Mexico sixteen times. He made seventeen return trips to the United States.

"What were you looking for?" I asked him.

"Happiness," he replied. Upon reflection, he added, "But I didn't come to this country to stay. My plan was to go back to Mexico. I came here . . ." He paused. "I came here to 'harvest,' so to speak."

In the United States, he explained, life is only about work. In fact, even when he was young, he seldom attended dance parties organized by his fellow countrymen. “I didn’t come here to drink, to burn rubber.” In Mexico, though, things are different. “Life is good over there [*allá se goza*].”

As I came to realize through our talks and interviews, Mexico also occupies a special place in the imagination of this thwarted expatriate. It is an enchanted place, a wide world with room for heroic gestures and magical developments, events that would be unthinkable elsewhere. This mythical quality of his home country became apparent to me one day when we were riding in a truck he had bought to set up a moving business with his nephew—a short-lived enterprise, as it turned out, which ended when the nephew realized that he could make larger profits working on his own.

“I have a task for you,” he told me. “I’ll pay you.”

“You don’t need to pay me anything,” I replied. “What can I do?”

“I need you to find out the market value of an olicorn.”

“Do you mean a unicorn?”

“Yes, that’s right, a unicorn.”

“You mean those animals that look like horses with a horn in the middle of their foreheads?”

“Yes. I need you to find out how much I can buy one for, or, if I have one, for how much I can sell it.”

I did not dare to ask on what side of the hypothetical transaction he stood, and I felt it would be discourteous to probe the concrete reasons behind his query at that point.

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ebrary “I am not an expert in unicorns,” I told him. “But most people I know doubt they ever existed.”

“Well, I want you to research that too: where they existed, at what time, and whether they can still be found somewhere.”

I had to wait until the following week to discover the motive behind his unusual request. By then, I had read on *Wikipedia* that unicorns were part of European mythology during the Middle Ages, that they could only be tamed by virgins, and that their horns held magical powers, including the ability to purify poisoned water and heal illnesses. It was a sunny Sunday afternoon, and we were sitting in Santos’s backyard, chatting and drinking soda. He was showing me some treasures he had collected during his trips. Suddenly, he pulled out an ivory-colored object, two inches long and resembling an unearthed bone.

“This is what I was telling you about,” he said. “This is from the unicorn.”

He went on to explain that his grandmother had used powder that she ground from the horn to heal stomachaches and diarrhea. She had bestowed the object on Santos when he was a little boy.

Reflecting on this incident, I realized that the horn came from that same geographic and symbolic place where, Santos swears, he had once encountered the devil in the form of a red-eyed goat, the place where he had once escaped from a crowd of forty armed men, carrying his gun-wounded cousin on his shoulders in the middle of the night.

Whatever the reader may think about these wondrous anecdotes, they are an intrinsic part of how Santos sees the world. They coexist, moreover, alongside very detailed and realistic memories of his past travels and work experiences, which he recounts with surprising consistency across time and which he often buttresses with pictures and documents. Even his quixotic rescue of his cousin and their escape were related to me by him and his wife with such detail and in such a casual, candid way that I cannot help but think that most of it was real.

While Mexico captivates Santos’s imagination, the nostalgia that he feels for his homeland stems from distinctively less miraculous experiences. “In Mexico,” he once told me, “you can own a piece of land, and you can choose what to produce. Whether you farm maize, or beans, or raise pigs . . . it’s your choice. And everything you produce on that land belongs to you. Here, in the United States, you work for others.”

After a pause, and somewhat wistfully, he added, “My life has been working for others.”

### **Working for Others**

Santos’s slim body bears witness to a life of hard labor. At 5’7”, he gives a peculiar and endearing impression, sitting in his Austin living room in a loose, oversized flannel shirt, sharp jeans, and polished cowboy boots. His skin is tanned and hardened, his gait not as light or brisk as it was in those early days. When he smiles or winces, crow’s-feet frame his dark brown eyes. Santos seems accustomed to motion. He constantly sets forth to rein in a wayward grandson or lowers to retrieve a photo that will help him better tell his story. Yet his frame shows blatant signs of frailty brought on by years of lifting, pounding, and pushing, as well

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as by a recent car accident, recounted below. When he speaks, however, he has an excitability, a stubborn sense of optimism that leaves its imprint on his audience.

Of all the jobs that Santos has held, the one he claims to have liked the most was at a chicken processing plant in San Antonio. He landed this job randomly (like most jobs he has had) after a conversation with a well-meaning Chicano at a cantina. Santos was stranded in San Antonio because he could not afford the final stretch of his trip back to the ranch of his *patrón*—an American rancher named Bill Pope who had taken Santos under his wing and who regularly rehired him when he returned from Mexico—a few miles west of Austin, near Oak Hill.

On the morning that Santos arrived at the processing plant for the first time, he was assigned (“with God’s help”) to the final stages of the work line. He remembers how his coworkers at the opposite end—where loads of live chickens were delivered by truck—would walk out covered in feathers and chicken excrement at the end of each day. Santos’s task consisted of pulling defeathered carcasses out of a small wash-basin and hanging them onto hooks attached to a conveyor belt. At first he shared the task with two other workers. In time, however, they were either dismissed or relocated, and Santos was left to process the full load on his own.

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Santos speaks with pride about the thousands of carcasses he hung each day, his efficiency in adapting to new equipment, and the admiration that managers developed for his work. The job lasted until immigration officials raided the premises and Santos, who was deported to Matamoros, decided to stay his southward course and go visit his mother and check on the family land.

“But wasn’t it boring to hang those chickens all day?” I asked him.

“That’s the job I enjoyed the most [*el que más dominé*].”

This was neither the first nor the last time that being from another country would cost Santos his job. In fact, his immigrant status continued to undermine his prospects of stable employment even after he obtained a green card in the wake of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, as the following events illustrate.

In the early 1990s Santos had settled in on a ranch in central Mexico with his second wife and their three kids (his first wife died giving birth when Santos was twenty-four). He had bought the ranch with his savings and owned about sixty pigs, two horses, and a dozen dairy cows. “I was prosperous. I wanted to die on that rancho.”

However, a series of misfortunes, including the near death of and expensive surgery for a son who was kicked in the face by an untamed mule, left the family in near financial ruin. To pay their debts and secure an income, they decided to move to Austin, Texas, where they hoped opportunities would be more numerous and generous. Following a month-long unsuccessful job search, during which the family ate on the floor and used Styrofoam containers for kitchenware, Santos and his wife found jobs with a local real estate developer. Santos painted walls while Sirila, his wife, worked as a cleaner at an apartment complex under construction near the corner of South Congress and Riverside—a few blocks from the heart of downtown Austin.

In a pattern that is sadly familiar among informal workers in Austin, twelve days later they were still waiting for their payment, which had been due at the end of the first week of employment. A series of tense encounters with their employer ensued, and Santos and his wife decided to stop working. “That amigo just used us,” Santos concluded.

Santos made several attempts to recover his and his wife’s unpaid wages. He once went to the house of his former boss, who had told him they could meet there and settle the dispute. Santos knocked on the door several times; no one answered. He then moved away from the door to peer into one of the nearby windows but suddenly got scared.



“What if the man called the police and told them I was a thief?” he told me, recounting the thoughts he had at the time. “What was I going to say?”

Santos left the house resigned and empty-handed.

Frustrated, Santos decided to seek redress through institutional channels. In this quest, he would experience once more the weight that a vertically structured social world exerts on the lowest rungs of the social ladder—where he consciously sits.

“What do you expect? To be treated like a little golden coin?” asked a man, whom Santos refers to as the consul of Mexico, on the other end of the phone.

The official was irritated by Santos’s queries about measures taken by the consulate against the conning employer. Indeed, following the advice of a local nonprofit organization, Santos had reported the abuse to the Mexican consulate in Austin and was hoping that they would help him obtain some sort of reparation for the abuse he and his wife had suffered.

“I don’t need you to remind me that I’m a fool!” Santos claimed he responded to the man. “I know that already. I’m asking for help defending my rights!”

Still shaken by the recollection of that incident, he told me, “The Mexican consul, he doesn’t give a damn about people like me. I don’t care how educated he is, I don’t need him!”

Despite these moments of apparent helplessness, the notion that his checkered professional trajectory has been shaped by structural forces seems outlandish to Santos himself. When talking about a neighbor who stuck to his Wal-Mart job for more than twenty years and who, as a result, enjoys a small but secure pension, Santos pondered:

“I’m not like that. . . . And you know how much they pay you at those jobs? I have a cousin who’s worked at the same company for eighteen years; he’s lucky if he makes fifteen dollars [an hour]. It’s not worth it. Besides, I had to go visit my mother. I never let a year go by without going to Mexico to check on her. To me, my mother was more important than any job.”

As if his loyalty to his mother needed any justification, he added, poetically, “I didn’t know how to write, you know. My visits back home . . . those were the letters I sent.”

On a different occasion, he stressed his unsubmitive nature: “I never let anyone boss me around. As soon as they shouted at me, I took off.

That's why I've had so many jobs." He even went as far as to claim, on one afternoon when he felt tired and sick, that working "annoys" him (*me fastidia*).

There is, of course, more than a single cause or reason behind Santos's broken trajectory in the labor market. In fact, the reasons he invoked during our interviews speak as much to the motives behind past decisions as they do to his efforts to make sense of those decisions in the present. They also convey efforts to reclaim agency over events in which his personal wishes and attributes may have played only a marginal role—if any.

Where the actual line falls on the spectrum between structure and character is a matter of perspective. Conservative thinkers and politicians like to paint the successes and failures of individuals as a mechanical reflection of their personal choices. Sociologists, on the other hand, have warned against a blame-the-victim narrative that casts poverty, joblessness, and other social ills as the result of willful action taken by those who suffer the most from them (Bourgois 2003). Pervasive as it is in the media and public discourse, this blame-the-victim narrative can lead the "victims" to blame their own disgrace on themselves. Beyond anyone's ideological or methodological inclinations, however, the fact remains that Santos began working when he was five years old, and he has worked all his life, more and harder than many "successful professionals," at whatever job was available.

Santos worked all his life, that is, until an intoxicated driver going over the speed limit hit the side of his truck on March 29, 2012.

The accident took place at night, when Santos was driving home with his wife in his red Tacoma truck. As he came to a stop at the corner of Berkett Drive and Buffalo Pass in south Austin, he saw the headlights of a car coming from his left. The distance seemed to give him more than enough time to cross, and so he did.

The car slammed into the left side of his truck, just behind the driver's door. "Had it been on the door, I would be dead."

Santos got out of his truck, feeling dizzy. He stumbled and had to lean on the hood to keep his balance. His lower back ached. The other driver also got out of his car, visibly intoxicated. The man asked Santos not to call the police—or at least this is what Santos, who never learned English, understood. The man said that he would pay for the repairs. Santos, who had grabbed his cell phone, tried to explain to him through



gestures that he was calling a nephew who could come to the site and serve as an interpreter. Yet the man either misunderstood or did not believe Santos, and he reported the crash to the police himself.

When the police officer arrived, he offered to call an ambulance that would take Santos to the hospital. Santos, however, refused; he was worried about his truck. The car was to be picked up by a private towing company and delivered to his house. “I had to be there to make sure that they would bring my truck home,” he told me. “I could not take that risk.”

“That risk,” one is left to infer, is the risk of there being another misunderstanding, of being cheated again, and of losing one of his few valuable assets.

Besides, Santos hoped that his pains would vanish on their own. The following morning, however, the pain in the nape of his neck and lower back was so acute that he had no choice but to go to the community clinic. He spent the whole day there, undergoing a range of medical exams, and walked out with a \$2,000 bill—most of which was covered by Medicaid.

Since I met him three years ago, Santos has complained about a wide array of chronic ailments. Despite the pain, however, he has never stopped working. I was surprised to hear that during the winter of 2012, on days when the temperature dipped below freezing, he was still work-

ing at an open-air construction site at Lakeway Medical Center northwest of Austin, despite what sounded like whooping cough. Sweeping was the only task he felt strong enough to undertake, and his boss had agreed to keep him on the job.

Ever since the car crash, Santos has been unable to engage in any sustained physical activity. He still winces as he lifts himself off his sofa to grab a glass of Coke and hobbles when he crosses his garden to show me his corn plants. Yet his aspirations to reenter the job market one day have not dwindled. "I want to keep going," he said. "I have to. Before that amigo hit me, I felt like I was thirty."

Due to these setbacks and the resulting loss of income, Santos is now supported by his daughter, who waits tables, and his wife, who works for a costume-renting and party-organizing business. He cannot help but feel a certain shame about his situation of material dependency. To fill his time and make some money of his own, he has taken to collecting empty cans on the streets of his neighborhood, aided by a mechanical grabber that allows him to remain upright.

The gig is not new to this jack-of-all-trades. During the month-long period of unemployment that followed their return to Austin in the mid-1990s, Santos and his kids resorted to picking up cans to put food on the table—or, as was the case then, on the floor. "In a week," he once told a stranger sitting next to him at the community clinic, "I was able to gather about seventy dollars worth of cans. I took my wife and the kids to the supermarket and told them, 'Alright, we'll do this nice and cheap. Let's get some beans, some rice, a little bit of oil.' The whole family ate."

Nowadays, with the basic needs of the household covered by the salaries of his daughter and his wife, the money Santos makes through his can-picking efforts finances an old habit: buying lottery tickets. Two or three times a week Santos purchases scratch-off tickets. Since he does not know how to read, he usually takes the tickets home after scratching them and shows them to his daughter so she can decipher the results. Even though he seldom wins and has never made more than fifty dollars on a ticket, the hope of a drastic improvement in his living conditions has continued to fuel his lottery purchases for more than fifteen years.

In November of 2013 Santos bought a Weekly Grand lottery ticket at a convenience store not far from where he lives. He brought the ticket home and waited for his daughter to take a look at it, suspecting he had won some kind of prize. The daughter, however, came home late that night, and Santos did not get a chance to show her the ticket. Still, the

next day, wanting to buy more tickets, he took the ticket with him to the gas station convenience store where he had purchased it.

“I never wanted to cash it!” he told me, visibly shaken. “I wanted my daughter to look at it first. If I had wanted to cash it, I would have said that to the cashier. I just wanted him to see the brand of tickets I wanted to buy. That’s all I wanted!”

The problem, of course, was that Santos could not read (or even pronounce) the name of the brand of lottery ticket he intended to purchase. When he took the ticket out of his pocket and, holding it in the palm of his right hand, asked the cashier for another ticket from that same brand, the cashier looked intrigued. He asked to look at it more closely and, when Santos drew closer, he reportedly snatched the ticket from his hand. Santos was irate but could not utter a word. The cashier then swiped the ticket under the barcode reader and tossed four dollars on the counter. Recovering his breath, Santos shook his head, protested, and asked for his ticket back, but the cashier told him that it was too late; the ticket had already been entered in the system and Santos’s prize had been redeemed.

Recounting these events as we sat in his truck, Santos recalled how his shaking hand tried to find its way into the pocket of his shirt to pay for his other purchases. “I even told [the cashier], ‘Look! I can’t even reach my wallet.’” Then, waving a threatening finger toward the dashboard of his truck, an infuriated Santos yelled, “I should have told him, ‘Hum! You want it? You want a ticket? Well buy one!’”

“Why didn’t you tell him that?” I asked him.

“I don’t know . . . I get nervous. When things like that happen, I can’t find my words. . . . But that guy stole my money.”

The language barrier was not, in this case, the main problem; the cashier was Hispanic and apparently spoke or at least understood Spanish well enough. Yet, as French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has uncovered, speech is a social act, enabled and determined by the speaker’s sense of authority and entitlement to speak. You learn and exercise the practice of saying what you want to say. Santos, an uneducated foreigner who is self-conscious about his illiteracy, was made speechless by the cashier’s brazen move.

I learned the details of this story about three months after it happened. Santos had called me shortly after the incident and given me a somewhat confusing account of the events. He believed that he had won a big lottery prize and had been robbed by a cashier. He said that he could remember the numbers on the ticket and that he needed “some-

one who knew how to defend himself,” which I understood to mean a lawyer or legal expert. He was hoping I could help him contact one.

I could not help but feel some skepticism about the whole thing and, in any case, did not know of a lawyer who could take up his case. I offered to accompany him to the Texas Lottery Commission (TLC) headquarters—a step he had suggested himself at some point over the course of our phone conversation—but he turned down my offer. “God knows what could happen. What if I get in trouble? I don’t want you to get embarrassed because of me.”

I was busy then, preparing for a trip overseas, and so I did not insist. Before hanging up, I simply reassured him that contacting the police was not, contrary to his fears, “an offense.” I also told him that the odds of obtaining help in this matter seemed rather slim to me.

Three months later, when we resumed our interviews, he showed me a copy of the complaint form a relative had filed on his behalf with the TLC. He told me about his attempts to report the incident to the police (who sent him back to the TLC) and described to me his two encounters with the investigator appointed to his case by the TLC. He explained to me how, in his memory, the numbers and corresponding prize had been displayed on the ticket. If his recollections were accurate, his ticket was indeed the winner of the grand prize of \$1,000 per week paid out over twenty years. He complained, however, that the investigator was not responding to his requests and that, on the two occasions in which he had paid a visit to the TLC offices to try to meet with him, clerks had kept him at bay. He asked me for help with his case for a second time.

The facts, of course, remained dubious. Yet his efforts to recover his prize, against all odds and in the face of an overpowering institutional apparatus, were compelling.

A broader notion of justice also seemed to be at stake, one that extended beyond his personal struggle. Santos expressed outrage at the idea that a store clerk would “take advantage of the fact that I do not know how to read.” Adding to the experience of abuse, there was the expectation of living a comfortable life on the part of someone who had more than paid his dues. “If I can retrieve my prize,” he told me, “I could pay for my house. And you know what I have been wanting to do for a long time? Learn English. That money could pay for an English teacher.”

Rehashing a recurring sentiment, he added, “If I spoke English, I wouldn’t be working for others . . .”

Partly out of sympathy and partly because I felt intrigued, I decided to get involved.

Given our limited resources, we sought free legal aid with a local nonprofit organization. Santos had visited the nonprofit once before but had been required to fill out a check-in form before he could speak to a lawyer. On that occasion he had simply taken the form and waited on a bench near the check-in table. He had hoped that someone would talk to him or that something favorable or unexpected would happen as he waited. When neither came true after half an hour, he left.

When we returned together, during a near hour-long wait in line, Santos stressed what seemed to be a crucial point for him: he did not want to sign any document. He insisted that we had only come for an “orientación”—a Spanish word meaning something close to “directions” or “guidance.”

When the doors finally opened and the line began to move, we were directed across a huge hall to a table where two rather serious-looking assistants were checking in clients. I handed the sign-in form to one of the assistants, who glanced over it, laid it down on the table, and put his finger next to the empty signature spot. I told Santos to sign it. He scratched his name in a few practiced, simple, and shaky strokes.

After a short wait, a diligent young lawyer who only spoke English called Santos’s name and asked us to follow her to a table. I did my best to explain my companion’s problems to the lawyer, noticing as I spoke how the bareness of the setting and the demands of the interaction—a short and to-the-point exchange that left no room for mistakes or digressions—had filled even me, the supposedly laid-back observer and educated interpreter, with a nervousness that was filtering into my voice.

When I finished, she explained to us what, over the course of my recount, had become all too obvious: our evidence was flimsy; it was unlikely that any lawyer would take the case without payment; suing the state of Texas, to which the Texas Lottery belongs, was doomed to failure; and our best bet was to try to get in touch with a TLC supervisor and request a formal response to the complaint filed by Santos six or seven months earlier.

Following a series of fortunate coincidences, I obtained from an efficient and highly cooperative TLC official an electronic log of all the prizes registered at the store where the incident took place within the one-hour time window that spanned Santos’s visit. Among them was a four-dollar cash prize.

I gave Santos an oral account of those email exchanges, and I relayed

to him a copy of the documents, but he was not convinced. He described to me one more time what, in his memory, the order of the numbers on the ticket had been. I told him that if I were in his shoes, I would let go of the fight. But Santos still believes, with the conviction of a man whose life has been defined by struggle, deception, and disappointment, that he was done wrong that day. Regardless of what the actual numbers on the ticket were, it is hard, knowing Santos's personal story, not to think that he has some grounds to feel that way.

Some readers could be tempted to dismiss the stories of a man who believes in unicorns as not credible. It is even likely that some factual details in the stories recounted by Santos are not accurate. Yet these stories are true in that they define the way in which Santos sees the world and his place within it. More importantly, the general facts, like his deportations, dismissals, and incarcerations, along with the physical structures that he helped build with his labor, such as the bridge and the hospital, are true.

These experiences had to be dealt with and made sense of by a man who does not understand the dominant language of the country where he has spent most of his adult life. His supernatural notions and beliefs are, in this regard, as much a cultural legacy of the land where he was raised as they are a window out of a reality that would otherwise be too hard to cope with on a daily basis.

Why and how Santos ended up in Austin, a city that he helped build "for others," is a question with no definitive answer. He says that he likes Austin, and that he somehow chose it. Of all the cities he has been to in the United States, he finds it to be the liveliest. "I've been to Tampa, Charlotte, San Antonio, but the streets there are . . . desolate, I guess," he once told me. "Here, the streets, the people . . . they feel warmer."

And yet, when I asked him about the places in Austin where he likes to go, he shrugged his shoulders. "I hardly ever go out," he said. "Going out is expensive, and I can't find the streets by their names. I only go out to visit a few friends, my compadres." Urban life is still trying for his rural soul. "Here, the town was imposed on me [*me vi obligado al pueblo*], but I'm from the countryside, the rancho. I'll never get tired of the rancho."

"Do you plan to go back to Mexico some day?"

"Well, I'd like to. But I can't, not until things cool down over there. Maybe in a few years . . ." Santos is afraid of the drug violence that is ravaging his homeland.



“And what about the adobe house that you built with your brother, for your mom?”

“It’s now in the hands of an enemy of the family, a bad man.”

The cornfields where he grew up are also gone. Corn is no longer the main crop in the area. The house now sits at the center of a large marijuana plantation.

Santos always seemed to enjoy our conversations. If anything, they offered him a break from his ongoing struggle for material stability and an enduring sense of purpose that, after a lifetime of hard work, continue to elude him. When our last interview came to an end under the porch overlooking his disheveled garden, Santos stood up to walk me to the front door. On the back of his baseball cap, an embroidered slogan read, “Success is no accident.”

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### Recommended Readings

- Bourdieu, P. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. An illuminating treatment of the intricate and obscured relationships between politics, power, and language.
- Bourgois, P. 2003. *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A moving and disturbing ethnography of the political, economic, and cultural dynamics of one particular sector of the U.S. underground economy.
- Smith, R. C. 2005. *Mexican New York: Transnational Lives of New Immigrants*. Berkeley: University of California Press. A detailed study of Mexican migration to the United States—and of the transnational lives at its center.