

On Farming and the Future



I met Paul over a Zoom call in April '21. The video was unstable and ultra low-resolution; we both struggled to make out what the other was saying amid the background noise and distorted signal, but even with the tech issues and limited scheduling we managed to have a conversation that was vibrant and filled with insight. English is Paul's second and my only language, and we worked through slow, deliberate turns using unmuting our microphones to make this connection.

We had spoken once before, over email, when I asked him to tell me something he was passionate about doing. After days of difficulty connecting, Paul responded that *farming makes the mind happy*. The sense of optimism that characterized our talks was already evident, and agricultural science is something of a birthright of mine as a Kansan, so I knew that we would connect on this topic despite the limitations. Paul reminded me to consider our relationship to nature at every level, from an individual apple to the macro systems that make our food supply function.



On our Zoom call, we spoke about America's diverse bioregions, which support various types of crops across the continent. Having experience in rice farming, Paul expressed a desire to learn about the diverse farming practices here. He taught me about biofloc technology - a new farming method for seafood that could be an efficient way to decrease the impact of fishing on the ocean ecosystem. His enthusiasm and desire to learn inspired me; the complexity of ecology is a source of wonder that can affect us all. When we talked about English, which Paul is learning quickly, the role of language became secondary: the ideas behind our talk were nothing but distinct.



At one point in our talk, Paul showed me a picture on his phone that he had taken of a guava plant. The photo, with its webcam quality and compression over slow Internet signals to my laptop screen was almost illegible, but for a moment the image was clear. He said, "Gardening takes a lot of waiting." The truth of this statement goes beyond the simple process of growing plants, as every word becomes pressurized with meaning when there are so many barriers to clear communication. We talked about fruit and the problem of freezing weather, the birds that ate all of the tomatoes, and taking pictures of the papayas as they ripen. I was reminded that I can access local produce and compost my food waste with a little effort. But this conversation was also about hope. Ecological farming is all about the future, after all, and it's clear that Paul is eager to build that future.

I later tried to text Paul again for more information and talk about our collaboration, but our phones failed to connect. The limited conversation we were able to have was fleeting, but also full and thoughtful. I have returned to this conversation time and time again, and hope to return to them in the future we are all building together.

- A. P. Vague, May 2021