THE LAST FARMER

David Mas Masumoto, in *Wisdom of the Last Farmer:* Harvesting Legacies from the Land (239pp, Free Press, 2009) takes us deep into the world of a Japanese-American family growing organic peaches and grapes on a small farm south of Fresno. Dad (Masumoto's father) has just suffered a stroke, and much of the book reveals what that means to such a family, engaged in such work.

Masumoto's grandfather bought the farm after returning from an Arizona internment camp. A photo shows them there, behind the electric fence, holding an American flag and a picture of Masumoto's uncle, a G.I. killed by a German bullet in World War II. Masumoto describes his heritage as love and fear, his sansei generation uprooted from Japanese culture – very American.

The day of the stroke Masumoto follows Dad's contorted route – gouges in the earth, uprooted grapes. Disabled, he's become a "weed." Now the family, which can't imagine working the farm without him, struggles with rehabilitation, precisely so that he can work again. Partially paralyzed, he masters shoveling, then running the tractor, hour after hour every day, until a second stroke fells him. Dad, falling and rising and falling again, becomes a symbol of the Masumotos' endeavor. "We get back up to tell the story."

Work on the farm is hard, from dawn until well after dark, many days, an unending struggle against Johnson grass and hardpan, hail, wind, peach-blossom killing frosts, rains that destroy the "scent of optimism" – grapes drying into raisins. "Hard sweat," Masumoto says, "drains me of

the moisture and resilience of youth."

And even with the hardest work, no more than two out of three harvests will bring a profit. What nature spares, flooded markets may destroy. Marketing is hard: distributors have taught consumers to want perfect looking peaches, not the great-tasting heirlooms the Matsumotos raise. "Americans spend less on food than any other nation in the world." Yet the family would embody fair trade, by paying their workers a living wage. They would sell "progressive peaches," "radical raisins." The farmer holds things together with baling wire and duct tape, with spare parts out of the junk pile.

And with tradition. Matsumoto tries to learn welding as Dad has always done it, to grow the best heirloom peach varieties, to keep the farm in the family, and to take risks. That's what farming is, Matsumoto says, using older equipment, working too fast, taking shortcuts, working one row beyond the point of exhaustion. "Everyone eats dangerous food because the farmer and the farmworker are endangered as they cultivate it."

Part of what sustains them, in spite of strokes and danger and ruined harvests, is community – silent, distant hand waves to neighboring farmers saying, "You matter," gathering to soak in the *ofuro*, a Japanese version of a hot tub, enjoying Mom's heirloom peaches from the freezer in midwinter, or Dad's handpicked raisins – the sweetest of all.

Matsumoto would have us be preservers. "We work (on the orchards and vineyards) with the intention of returning the next year and the year after that. Imagine how much better the world would be if we all grew relationships

with such intentions." So preserve, he says – the farm, land, tradition, flavor, memory, integrity, authenticity, culture, the past, trust, the art of farming, the art of food, the romance of work, the story.

Who is the last wise farmer – Dad, David Mas, or his daughter Nikiko, who may or may not return to take over the farm? Masumoto never tells us.

"Over time, my work will not be missed. In the end all we are left with are stories and memories that are acts of love." (609 words)