

# Human Beasts of Burden

By PETER NABOKOV

Twenty miles from my home is hot evidence that three of these five books about agriculture's lowest practitioners, migrant pickers, are dated. Two months ago Cesar Chavez brought his farmworker movement north from the San Joaquin Valley vineyards to the Salinas Valley lettuce fields. Many of the merchants in the locality would now consider all these five books Communist-inspired. The unmistakable note of social crusade which makes Chavez's cause so much more than a traditional labor brawl has unfurled American flags and polarized communities. The white teen-age volunteers (many of them the children of growers) now stoop-laboring for the first time, would not be allowed to take these books out of the library. One wonders, however, if they would be so joyfully scabbing on weekends had they first, through such introductions, come to know the farmworkers as people. That particularly goes for the best of the lot, Sandra Weiner's **SMALL HANDS, BIG HANDS** (Pantheon, \$3.95).

Avoiding treatment of the migrant question as another "plight," these autobiographical profiles of seven Chicano migrant workers are not dependent for pertinency on a dateline. After a third reading I am convinced that the short preface should stand—Mrs. Weiner explains that once in the fields she found the migrants' "unbreakable spirit" more compelling and photogenic than their working conditions. Her subjects are very much individuals, and in their brief space for telling their lives they speak with composure and style. Mrs. Weiner's photos are similarly unmelodramatic, nonpropagandistic, memorable — a rarity of photo-journalism in these days of jarring, dismissable images. Their connection to the text is almost always a fine balance of illustration and evocation.

Her lens captures, without underlining them, the details of a toilsome existence in oven-hot dusty fields, orchards, temporary housing behind screendoors and over plank kitchen tables. In the written accounts, transcribed from tape, there are revelations of equivalent subtlety: "I like it better in the United States but we have to get some rest so we go to Mexico," comments 12-year-old Albert Reyes. "I am a Catholic myself and believe in God but now when I see something that is unjust I speak up because I don't want my grandchildren to live the way I did and my mother did," reflects bearded, 73-year-old Antonio Lopez. This is a

Mr. Nabokov, who lives on the Monterey Peninsula, is the author of "Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior" and "Tijerina and the Courthouse Raid."

tidy, timeless document for all age levels.

A grimmer picture of the migrant trap is painted in **MIGRANT GIRL** (McGraw-Hill, \$4.95), a novel for teen-agers by Carli Laklan. Taking us along the eastern American migrant route of her heroine, Dacey Cotter, Miss Laklan shows Dacey's family and fellow pickers working the grueling ground from Florida to Maine and back. It is all here in unrelenting, if two-dimensional, detail—the redneck, watermelon-gutted field boss who exploits his crew, the squalid camps, the spine-cracking bending and hauling. Juan Aguilar, a young migrant,

**NORITY: America's Tenant Farmers and Migrant Workers** (Crowell-Collier, \$4.50), encompasses not only the people of its subtitle but becomes a general history of agrarian America. Commencing with lyrical overkill to evoke the rugged existence of independent prairie farming, Mrs. Holland follows her plowers and tillers through the organization of the Grange, the overproduction of World War I, the Depression and dust-bowl years, the New Deal and into the glimmer of hope for migrants through unionization.

Just where the problems of the farmer become the plight of the farm-

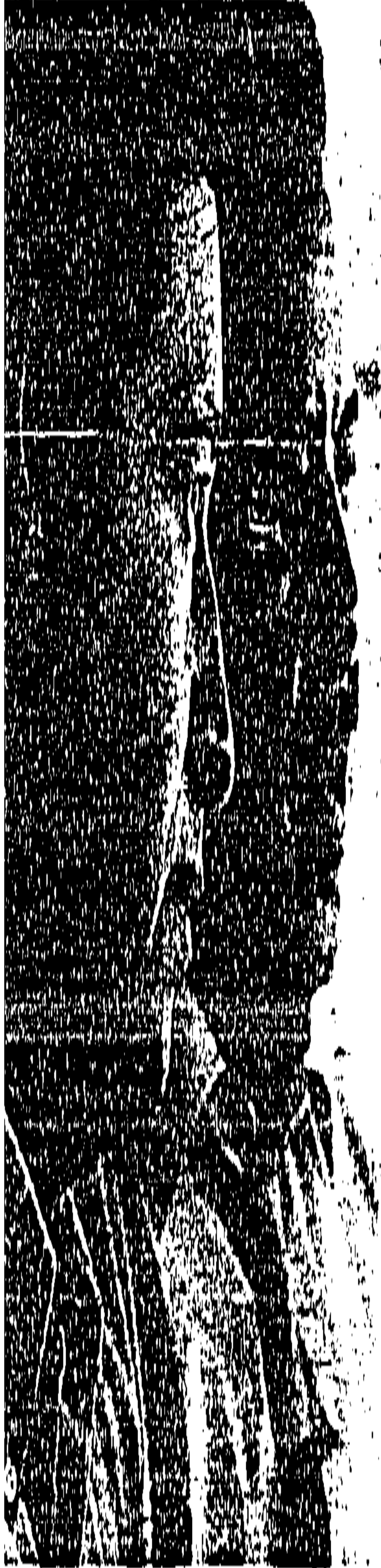


From "Small Hands, Big Hands."

idolizes Cesar Chavez, and before leaving to train with him in California makes his own stand against the field boss, not, however, until he suffers a beating and inspires Dacey to pursue her dream of becoming a schoolteacher. Miss Laklan does not pretend to nuances, but neither does she shirk describing the subhuman realities of the migrant cycle.

The other three dated works all end with Chavez signing California wine-grape contracts and, in one hasty postscript, triumphing over table-grape growers. The most ambitious, Ruth Holland's **THE FORGOTTEN MI-**

hand is not always clear. Mrs. Holland relies on hefty passages from Hamlin Garland, the diary of Rose Wilder Lane, New York Times reporters H. H. Bennett and Harlan Miller, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Carey McWilliams—to such an extent that at times her work reads like an annotated anthology. Between the selections is that telltale, slightly hyperthyroid prose used to convey the "sweep" of history; it often hides shallowness of thought and research. Irritating, also, are staccato sentence fragments used to conjure, through rhythm, what should have (Continued on Page 46)



From "Mighty Hard Road."

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