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### **Coming to Terms with Tomato Thievery**

At the beginning of this past summer, I had just moved into a new house in South Park - a rarity, too: a nice corner lot with the sun hitting it from two sides. For the first time in my life, I had the opportunity to garden! I had always lived in apartment buildings in Los Angeles, sharing concrete walls with hundreds of other residents. The thought of having a full garden hadn't even crossed my mind. Maybe when I was in my fifties or sixties and finally able to own a home, I could try growing a few tomatoes and watermelons. It wasn't until I was sitting on my newfound porch looking at the small patch of lawn that I thought - "hey... I can grow something!"

That was in early June. I went out that day to get tomato starts and some other seeds: squash, beets, and peppers. I planted them. I watered them diligently every day. In August, much to my surprise, I had full grown tomato plants! Me! Having never gardened before, the Earth had lent me literally hundreds of red, round, juicy, delicious, perfect tomatoes. The peppers and squash and beets had a lackluster turnout and I finished them inside of a week. But the tomatoes... the tomatoes were flourishing! Then I realized that I wasn't the only one reaping the benefits of my hard work.

People who were taking walks down my street were leaning down to admire the perfect red spheres. To some, however, admiration took the form of ripping off the arms and legs of the plant, carrying 15 tomatoes in their arms and hurrying back down the street! How dare they take my tomatoes! I worked so hard to grow these and they were taking them without even asking! (Had they would have asked, I would have said "yes, please, help yourself!") I was mad! My

screen door was open. I was at home. In fact, the tomato thieves probably saw me sitting on the couch and still didn't ask me!

And then it hit me, what am I possibly going to do with two hundred and fifty-plus tomatoes? Am I a tomato hoarder? I had already made sauce countless times and eaten Italian dishes for dinner more times than I could count. So, I made a sign on a stake right next to the garden for everyone to see: "FREE! Take some tomatoes, please!"

I think at this point I had made the sign partially (maybe even fully) out of spite - killing the tomato thieves with kindness--but also because I figured, hey, I'm not going to eat all of these so they may as well go to someone who will!

Lo, and behold, the sign worked in a way I hadn't imagined. People didn't decimate my hard-earned plants anymore. Now that they were officially free, they took two or three tomatoes. Not even enough to make sauce out of! Not one more branch was snipped off *our* beautiful plants.

I honestly didn't understand what was occurring. What psychological phenomena was happening to these people to make them take *less* of a free item? Then I read a great essay by Robin Kimmerer called "The Gift of Strawberries" from her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Kimmerer talks about connections to the land, gratitude for what is plentiful and thankfulness for what can be redistributed in a so-called gift economy. If you replaced the word "strawberries" in "The Gift of Strawberries" with the word "tomatoes", I swear the essay could have been written about my little garden. In this text, Kimmerer and other academics explain the gift economy I set in motion: "objects will remain plentiful because they are treated as gifts" (Kimmerer 39). As I kept reading, I realized that I had experienced a gift economy - in practice, no less! Kimmerer alleges that "for a plant to be sacred, it cannot be sold... practices such as posting land against

trespass, for example, are expected and accepted in a property economy but are unacceptable in an economy where land is seen as a gift to all...” (Kimmerer 27). I had unknowingly, unwittingly and inadvertently created a gift economy on a piece of yard smaller than fifteen by fifteen feet. It felt good. And I believe the people treasured my tomatoes more - they had more value and more life.

One way or another, the tomatoes would have ended up back to the earth in my compost bin, but that wasn’t the optimal ending I had for them. I was glad they made it to people’s bellies instead. I felt a bond with these people, and I hope they felt a bond with me, or at least with my work. Some even knocked on my door to have a quick chat. I don’t think I would have gotten the same satisfaction had my spite led me to erect a small chicken-wire fence and a sign saying “tomato thieves will be chased down the street until one of us gets tired!”

This summer I will have a community garden.

### Work Cited

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. “The Gift of Strawberries.” *Braiding Sweetgrass*. First edition.

Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2013. Print. 27-39.

**Max Ostrow**  
Winner of the  
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**MAJOR**  
History

**HOME**  
Los Angeles, California

**ESSAY**  
"Coming to Terms with Tomato Thievery" explores my first experience with Appalachia's land personally giving back to me as a quasi-outsider and now resident of Appalachia. I'm grateful to Dr. Ann Pancake for opening my eyes to a new and noteworthy amount of West Virginian and Appalachian literature this past semester.

**WHY WRITING MATTERS**  
Writing gives someone else the opportunity to hear your voice, internalize what you've said, and then make their own assumptions and opinions based on the words and messages you've written. That is so profound, and to be able to reach a wider audience with a noteworthy and empathetic message should be held above all.

**SPEAKWRITE**