

Red ribbon and brown boots: becoming an agrarian girl

by

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Prologue

We bought the farm. Forty acres of land along a highway, and across the highway, a lake. Two pines and an ornamental apple in the front yard, shrubbery nearly hiding the old farmhouse. A big white barn and a circular gravel drive. A wide lawn, a picnic table, and a cluster of lily-of-the valley tucked against the frame to the root cellar. We kids had only been out here a time or two, and these few details were most of what we knew. Now that the last owner was gone—a widow who was ready for town, for less of land and loneliness to manage—now, we could roam the territory, poke around in its nooks. Learn how to claim it.

She left a pet behind, a fat gray tabby she had called Mama Cat. During an early visit to the farm, in the midst of negotiations, I lost track of the rest of my family. Thinking they must have gone inside—and hearing voices—I came up and sat on the crumbling cement step just outside the door. Mama Cat peered at me, crouching in that settled cat way, at her spot near the door. Did she know, her yellow-green eyes full of disdain and disinterest? I had a keen sense of treading within her territory. She was *of* this farm, and now I wondered if I ought to ask her permission to even consider taking it on as part of myself, too.

After a while of sitting, hoping, wondering—*after all the years of talk, would we finally have a farm of our own?*—I realized that only one voice came out of the house, and it wasn't Mom or Dad's. The rise and fall of the woman's tone, and the long pauses following, indicated that she was talking on the phone. I bit my lip and glanced at Mama Cat, hoping that I hadn't been spotted out here and thought to be eavesdropping. No, this was not our home yet. Mama Cat blinked, looked away from me. Flicked her tail.

But the cat, like the farm, became ours—or we became hers. In the first wooing, squatting and offering bits of food, waiting until she sidled up and let us pet her, head to tail, we considered renaming her. There's nothing especially colorful or creative about the name Mama Cat, but it didn't seem right to give her a new title. She was too old, too defined in her very cat self as she walked along the edge of the steps and looked sideways at us. She belonged with what was before; we were so much newness to her, all these kids, all these plans.

Mama Cat did, however, need to make room for Little Guy and Tinkerbell, our two pets from town. My sister pouted at the idea of turning these previously inside cats outdoors, but Mom said she'd had enough of animals in the house, and wouldn't they rather have all this space anyway? They'll be fine, we all said, to comfort. And they would be, for a while, before the disappearances began, and then though we had an influx of kittens we started losing cats at a rate of at least one a year. Attribute it to the eagles; the splendor of watching them glide and dive over the lake didn't come without a price.

We would learn these things. For now, we still had the shiny edges of town kids on us, were cautious when we stepped into sheds, hesitated just a little over the rough fences and cobwebbed corners. Of the four kids in our family—Craig-Erica-Elena-Chris, we learned to say in one breath, list on cards, the importance of right order and rhythm—I was the most hesitant, and I didn't hide it well. Craig was fine anywhere he had his map with him, navigating its territories in his mind as he paced out others with his body. Elena found the best climbing trees—and the routes up them—before anyone. Christopher ducked into the hidden rooms in the barn. He came out with a snake skeleton, and I recoiled a little, then

went to look for a cozy spot to read. A patch of sun on a few bales of hay turned out nice enough, and no skeletons in sight.

I was the ballet dancer, the dreamer, the one with tulle and lace, who picked pink for her bedroom. I hung vines of faux roses, plastic ballerinas, pin-ups of stallions running through grasses or prancing in a ring. Oh, their bodies gleamed, chestnut and white, sorrel and black, and the soft gold of palomino, my favorite. A bookshelf held *Anne of Green Gables*, *Little Women*, all of Jane Austen, *Ivanhoe*, Shakespeare. When I wrote, poised with a notebook beside a window, I placed my characters on an island in Maine, or the English countryside, or the imaginary kingdom of Talendel. A flute was tucked under my bed and sometimes, playing it cross-legged on the floor of my room, I imagined myself a fairy or wood sprite, like Pauline and Petrova in *Ballet Shoes*, bearing the wings and sparkles of Peas-blossom and Mustard-seed from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

I knew that I wanted to be elegant. Beautiful. I bought pearly nail polish and wished it would make up for everything else wrong, this dirty-blonde hair and these gangly limbs, the moles and freckles, the bargain clothes. I stared at my nose in the mirror and wondered how much surgery really cost. Frowned. Tied a bow around a ponytail and hoped for change.

But it wasn't all about me, only sometimes, in some moments. More important was that a very central part of me wanted the whole world to be beautiful. Always had. My purpose was to make it so. I couldn't imagine any stronger way of wanting, any stronger need for acting. But I didn't know how yet, what I could do beyond my imagination, beyond awkward adolescent attempts at artful music and storytelling. Beyond practicing kindness and making cookies, beyond loving babies and Tchaikovsky and church.

I did know, when we moved to the country, that I wanted nature to be wildflowers and fawns and bare black trees against a pale blue snow. I wanted farms to mean long meadows, tangled orchards, barns full of hay and leather saddles and soft brown horses. The country must not have factories with rotten smells or exhaust from the turkey trucks driving through town. It must be the place with quiet spaces and wide skies. I knew these things: the stories and poems had told me so. I hoped the lake might have water that changed color when the skies shifted, and I would be the one to notice. Just as I would ride horses through the blooming meadows, and be unafraid.

In his book *The Rural Life*, Verlyn Klinkenborg describes life on his acreage in upstate New York. He writes, “I realize that I’ve been caught up in an urge—an atavism really—that reaches well past the limits of my own nature. I’ve discovered a stirring, a restless desire to improve this place—to father myself upon it.” I had not heard of Klinkenborg when we bought the farm, and would not discover him for another ten years, but I did have my own sense of what he refers to. The impulse to tend and to restore. To envision and then to throw oneself into action, less by choice than necessity.

The practice of restoration has always been part of my life. Everywhere we moved my parents found a way to improve the house and the land around it, whether rental or owned, a small yard or acres and sheds. Before I was born, they rented a trailer in the shadiest court in Ames, Iowa, where toddlers ran around with beer mixed into their bottles and neighbors stopped by to show off their new machetes. The trailer was, well, trash, and yet even here my mother sewed curtains and my father refinished furniture and they patched together a decent home. In the old farmhouse we rented for a brief three-year stint in Ohio, Mom put alphabet-train border around our bedroom, Dad painted the walls, and we planted

flowers and vegetables out in the yard. Our house in Melrose, Minnesota—the first one we ever owned—had enough rooms that my sister and I got to have our own, and we took delight in picking out the paint, the carpet, new bedspreads. At this same house we put in a garden, and each of us kids received plots to fuss and plan in. Mom put in a rose garden out front. I picked out impatiens and seeded them around the shrubbery. We settled into places by improving them, as far as we understood improvement. What was worn, leaking, stained, unkempt, we tried to repair and cover and order as best we could.

Until now, these were mostly moderately sized projects: still a good deal of work, but nothing that significantly altered the way we lived or attracted much attention. But this farm would turn out to be the remodel of a lifetime, ripping out rooms, peeling off layers and layers of wallpaper, restoring all the woodwork. And gardens galore! Two for vegetables, three for flowers, plus an orchard. We kids would learn, here, that the greatest play and the hardest work can come alongside one another.

And we would see, someday, how we become a part of these things—that staircase with its intricate carvings, that thick bed of beans, the new-sown wildflowers in the ditch. Klinkenborg might have told us, but we probably wouldn't have listened, or understood, at the time:

. . . you leave traces of yourself with every decision you make, every fence you build, every tree you fell or plant, every quarter-acre you choose to irrigate or leave dry. In twenty years' time, a self-portrait emerges, and it exposes all the subtleties of your character, whether you like it or not . . .

And beyond the literal landscape—the one that has been tilled and planted or logged or fenced or simply let alone—there is the ideal landscape that lives

only in the mind. Every day you explore the difference between the two, knowing that you can see what no one else can.

A part of restoration I had yet to discover was the process of listening to the land. I eagerly collected stories and ideas, but where were they from? Could it be this farm knew what it needed, might tell the stories of itself? Could it be that while I was too young and in the tangle of discovering life, my parents were already paying attention to such things?

Elena and Christopher and I walked up the hill beside the house, just past the place where we would put in a vegetable garden. The grass hadn't been mown in weeks, curled around our ankles, tickled the bottoms of our feet. We loved bare feet. That touch of earth. At the top of the hill, a tree leaned diagonal, thick trunk running north and south. A place to climb, easy, good as a jungle gym, better. It would become a reading spot, complete with a hole in the trunk to store apples and books. Elena was ahead, always, the adventurer, the tomboy. Christopher running alongside, not to be beat, but his legs were shorter. I walked. I was older. I could wait. At the top of the hill there were fuzzy purple blooms, dagger-like stems and leaves. All around the tree, yards out from it, guarding that tree trunk like a sentry their queen. We wouldn't know the name of it until later, this Canada thistle, but we cursed it anyway. Later, we found its plucky offspring in our lawn, in the meadows, a biting surprise. We decided it was sometimes wise to wear shoes.

One of the first departures from perfection. I had been to farms before, enough farms to have learned better. My friends' farms, my father's veterinary visits. I saw. Yes, sweet-nosed calves, orange purring tabbies, big round bales rolled gold in the sunset. But also piles of manure. Kittens crawling, half dead, along the edge of the barn, their eyes squinted, their bodies limp. The smell of scours, rancid, on my father's boots when he came out of the barn,

the yellow of it washing away as he hosed them off before jumping in the truck to treat yet another sick calf. I had known nature, a little, felt the stings of bees and seen the gore of half-eaten rodents. Found nasty ugly June bugs crawling in the sandbox, their bodies like cases for guts, their legs stiff and grasping. I knew these things existed, but it didn't mean I was happy about them. Didn't mean I couldn't try to push them into hiding. If I pretended they weren't there, didn't let them *touch* me, then maybe they would fade into some semblance of nonexistence.

Instead, I wanted life to resemble the stories that I read, and I searched for signs that it could. That circle of trees, wasn't there something like it in Middle Earth or Narnia? The row of cottonwoods, as they moved with the wind, all those shapes I could imagine as different sorts of people. A grandfather, gnarled and thick with age. A pair of lovers, the two trunks intertwined. The three graces, slim branches circling together with such femininity. A shy one, leaning away, leaves fluttering, and a bolder one, leaning forward. Even at twelve I could sense the fear, the camaraderie, the desire. I wove through the trees, and talked to them, and they became my companions.

North of the trees, and a little to the west, we had a pond. The perfect pond. Where the hill turned over, ran back down into a grassy meadow, and down further, there was the small pool, as oval as a brooch. It seemed to wait for me. I walked down to it, lingered around its edges. I considered what Anne Shirley would have called this pond. I called it, The Dryad's Mirror. A slim tree bent over, admiring its smooth pale bark.

Before a storm I watched the sky turn apple-green. I once read about a green sky in one of L.M. Montgomery's books, and loved the image, but scoffed a little. Such a thing was fine for a fairytale story, but hers was closer to a real-life story, and you oughtn't to play with

the natural colors of things. Skies were blue, orange, pink, red, purple, black. Not green. I'd tried to imagine it, shrugged, closed the book. Now, out in the meadow, even the air seemed tinted, edgy, neon-pale. I kept pushing through the grasses against a wind starting to kick up through the tightness. I probably should have been in the house. But out here I could better see the sky, feel its eerie, lovely greenness all around me. So I stayed, in one of those moments when I lost sense of where imagination ends and reality begins.

It was on this farm that I began my wondering and wandering, that movement through the world that somehow ends up connecting to creativity, or solace, or the sacred. In these early walks I was just starting to push out of the make-believe, exploring reality with a new kind of sensitivity, discovering the nuances of observation.

Sometimes, lying near the pond with a book in hand, I felt unsure of where I wanted to be. A few pages of reading, and then I'd start looking around at the tiny ripples in the water, the small tree reaching over to see its reflection, the ladybug crawling up my arm, the clouds scattered across the sky. Another few minutes and I'd turn back to the story of the girl who can breathe fire but wants to fall in love, who's afraid to touch the prince for fear of scorching him. It would be all right in the end. In these stories, it always was. Look, there—she wears a blue velvet gown, and a gold sash around her waist. He offers a smile. Love and intelligence and a little bit of magic come together to make healing and happiness.

I studied the colors of green in the grass, and thought that God and faith were the magic in *this* world. And I had it, then, so if I could be sweet and smart all good things must come through in the end. Right? Yes, yes—it must be so. I hoped, and when now and then I bumped into a layer of doubt, supposed that when I was older, I would know for sure. I did not expect to wrestle. I did not expect to lose every bit of sparkle I might have had, did not

expect to see red and despair in my eyes in a friend's bathroom mirror. Did not know that that is life, sometimes.

Once, in our prowling, we came across a junk heap. Not just litter, candy wrappers or milk cartons, things you could gather into black garbage bags. No, bigger. *Stuff* stuff. An old stove. The hood of a car. Seven tires, at least. Springs, a mattress. Empty old gas cans. Most things rusted. Even a sink. After salvaging what might be useful Dad hired a man to come load up the junk. Three trucks full. Lucky for us, the man said he could sell a lot of the pieces and so he'd call it even. He waved as he drove away. We waved back. Dad, my mellow father, shook his head as he folded his wallet and slid it into his jeans. Who were they, these people, who made dumps on their own farm? I didn't understand. The kinds of people who made ugliness.

Mom and Dad proclaimed, from the beginning, that this land was a gift. We came to believe that all land should be seen in such a light. How fortunate we were, and it was our job, now, to act out of gratitude and honor. We would use this land to bless other people. We would work it in thankfulness. How could anyone do otherwise?

Still—even still—sometimes the farm was not pretty. I struggled with how to live with these things. The best of care didn't keep our favorite cow from dying, our bunnies from escaping and running away. There was still the bull that lowered its head as if to charge my little brother, the rat poison we found lying around, the muddy squelchy shoreline that gave us leeches, the way the guy who bought our extra hay swore with every other word.

It would take me years to realize that stories sifting out all that is common or ugly or sad are only half-stories. That the stories I want to tell would be found here, in my Midwest, even the mud-manure cattle pens, the mosquito-plagued evenings, the junk heaps and the

cobwebbed barns. Life becomes, then, not about avoidance, or escape, not even always (though very often) about restoration. It is not about painting hard and fast the margins of black and white, bad or good, ugly or beautiful. Life becomes about exploration, reaching into the corners and the deep spaces of wherever you are. A watching and learning of what is, what can be, the unending significance of how things fall into place.

Milk and Bleach

Down Winding Roads

On Saturday afternoons my sister and brothers and I ride with our father on veterinary calls, leaving city blocks to take winding roads around lakes and into farmland. Dad drives fast over gravel so that dust rises behind us and we are loud through the land, cutting into fields of corn and alfalfa, passing countless dairy barns and pastures so full of Holsteins we think we'll never stop seeing in black-and-white.

When we get to a farm we spill out of the truck and hang around the back as Dad pulls on his rubber boots and sorts through the compartments in his unit. To us the unit seems magical, gassing open to reveal jars and bottles of all shapes and sizes, strong smells, long plastic gloves and all kinds of things we like to play with but rarely know how to use. As Dad talks with the farmer, we clamber up onto the tailgate and slide the drawers back and forth, open the top, peer inside and mess everything up—but that's all right, because it's already kind of thrown together anyway. Dad tosses a glove, a few utensils, and some bottles into a bucket. Then he waves us off the tailgate and we follow him toward one of the barns.

The barns are wonderful places, with large, noisy fans and long rows of cows. We enter through the milkhouse, which smells deliciously like milk and bleach at the same time. In the middle stands a large silver tank, where the milk flows after it's made its way through the clear containers chugging on the walls. I want to open it up and scoop out a dipperful; I imagine the milk will taste more real, somehow, than the milk we buy in gallon jugs at the store.

After Dad has filled the bucket with hot water, we push through a worn swinging door into the main portion of the barn, where the scents of hay, grain, and manure thicken the

air. Once Dad finds where he needs to be, my siblings and I decide whether or not to watch him. Dad handles endless milk fevers and cases of mastitis; if he doesn't have either one of those the next best guess would be a DA, displaced abomasum (or twisted stomach). He cuts a slit in the cow's side and sticks his arm in and works around until he gets the stomach back into position. It's during one of these procedures that I realize what a scary and important occupation my father has, and a part of me wants to try it, but I still find the operation kind of gross, if somewhat less gross than when Dad sticks his arm into other places on animals.

When we don't watch Dad we play around the farm, trampling through the hay bunks or crunching over spilled grain, and we pick out our favorite cows—the ones with the most white, or maps on their sides, or perfect hearts on their foreheads. We're careful not to stand too close to the gutters, though; we know how far those cows can shoot out streams of pee and poop if they get a good start. The gutters are the worst thing about the barns, catching piles of manure and urine and afterbirth and letting them all run together. Nasty, we think, and yet we stare at those stretches of filth in a sort of thrill at the disgustingness.

Dairy farms inevitably have calves, though finding them sometimes means venturing to another barn and, in unfortunate cases, wading through manure-filled pens to get there. We let the calves suck on our fingers and draw away with hands thick with saliva, which we wipe on hay or our pants or the calves themselves. We slap at their noses and bend their fuzzy ears, as curious about their bodies as they are about ours. On good days we happen to be around at feeding time, and the farmer's kids in their scuffed-up boots show us how to feed the calves with bottles of milk replacer and how they've trained several of them to drink from a bucket.

My sister makes sure we search for kittens. The farmer often bends down to point out where a litter might be hiding: “You can sneak in there when the mama ain’t around and try and find ‘em.” We dig through piles of hay, crawl under staircases, even peer into semi-hollow posts until we discover the kittens and pull them out by the unwilling scruffs of their necks. We cradle them in our laps, and look into their streaky-green eyes, and hand them back and forth to each other, getting needle-fine scratches in our skin until we’ve had enough, or Dad comes to fetch us, in which latter case we beg him for ten minutes to let us take one home.

The best farms—like my best friend Sara’s—have big, shadowy haymows. I hope Dad has a long job to do when we go to such places, so we kids can take our time building forts, or swinging from fraying ropes, or climbing and leaping from bale to bale until Dad calls us and we jump down the ladder with hay caught in our hair and scratches bright down our arms.

Yet my sister and I stop riding with our father when we grow toward adolescence, when in the beginnings of womanhood we find Dad strange to talk to, and the farmers are serious when they ask if we’ve come to help, and especially when a tired farmwife yells at us for running around and bothering the animals. We seem to realize that we’ve somehow lost our rights to a world we were allowed to slip in and out of through childhood, so we turn to more acceptable activities—swimming, tennis, theater.

A year or two later, however, our parents buy us our own small farm and fill the barns with hay and new animals. And we find ourselves remembering, for what we thought we had lost we have rediscovered. No longer on the peripheries, we can move deeper into the country life, taking what we already know to help make this place home. We amble through

pastures of cows, we feed our very own calves, we know the best hiding places for Mama Cat's kittens, and we still make pretty swell forts out of hay bales. We rarely climb into the truck with Dad anymore, but when he rounds his pickup out of the driveway to answer another call, we hail him off from the window of our barn.

Stearns County Dairy

My friend Sara's home was, in many ways, the quintessential Stearns County dairy farm. She and her six brothers piled into rooms in the square white farmhouse. Her father was lean, wiry, with squinty eyes, reddish-brown hair, and a ruddy, smiling face. Her mother was matronly, comfortable, soft-spoken and well-meaning, a saint to keep the family in order. Her grandparents lived in a new-ish ranch-style house just up the gravel lane, added onto the farm when Sara's father took over the main management—though father and son still farmed together. They had about 100 cows and sold their milk to Kemps. I thought about it when eating from the tub of vanilla ice cream we got at the grocery store.

Sara and her brothers had their share of chores; the idea that children should be so fully immersed in activities as to leave them no time to help run the farm had not yet saturated this culture. I remember having a conversation in one of my elementary school classes about the idea of chores. This was when I still lived in town—and those of us who did were by far the minority in the room.

"I'd be bored without chores," Allen Herberding said, not smart-alecky but rather matter-of-factly. "I mean, what do kids in town do with all that time? I like having something to do." Others—other farm kids, that is—echoed him, or nodded. Of course part of their response might have been awareness that this was the appropriate thing to say—and politeness was a virtue here, at least in certain situations, such as school. (I would later learn that locker rooms and school buses didn't necessarily maintain such civil standards.) Still, the ready awareness and acceptance of the fact that work was a part of life, and that the reward was not toys or a hefty allowance so much as the knowledge that as a part of the

family you contributed to the family's income and thus earned your place at the table and under the roof.

We town kids squirmed uncomfortably. I felt slightly indignant; after all, I had plenty of chores, and not a cent of allowance in normal circumstances. "If you don't work, you don't eat," Mom would say, pointing to some part of the Bible—very likely Proverbs—as authority. Fine, fine, and we'd grumble through washing the dishes or weeding the garden. So even as a town kid I did what I felt was my fair share of work and, unlike a lot of the other town kids, I didn't get rewarded with money to save up for the latest troll or handfuls of candy from Ben Franklin.

I knew this, yet I also knew that my friend Sara woke up at 6 a.m. every day to go out and help with the feeding and milking. Never mind how hot and buggy the barn could get in summers, and—more persistently in our part of the country—the below-freezing temperatures in the winters. Every day. Then back to the house to fight for her turn in the shower (only one in that home of eight) and scramble to catch the bus for school. Seven hours of school, home again, and chores again. A few hours to herself, dinner, bed. Up early and repeat.

I spent my mornings sleeping and my afternoons playing, reading, daydreaming, dancing. I felt indignant about Allen's statement and yet part of me felt sorry, too—for these kids who had so much work to do that they couldn't just sit down and read for hours on end. Who had this farm work to crowd out their experience of the world. At the time, that was what I thought. I would learn I also had fair reason to envy them.

Allen was wiry and active, like Sara's dad. I later found out they were related. Of course they were. For the native families here it was a challenge to find someone to have a

crush on who wasn't a distant relative. The coarse jokers in the area attributed to the commonality of developmental disabilities to the fact that there was so much intermarrying among the German Catholic families in area. "Stearns County Syndrome," they called it, chuckling into their beers. My mom didn't think it was so funny; her own son, my brother, had a disorder himself, and not from the area's intermarriage or its high concentrations of pesticide and herbicides, since we weren't natives and he'd been diagnosed long before we attempted to transplant and thrive here. No, we were clearly, always, outsiders—but the fact that Craig did have a disability made Mom sensitive to the attitudes of others, and that this laughter continued in the face of a very possible reality made her bristle.

Sara's family, though extensive, was as far as I knew just fine, free of disabilities, its one fault being that her mother kept having boys. Each next time she got pregnant Sara and I would pray for another girl, a sister, and out would come Philip, or Nathan, or Zach. Not that each little boy bundle wasn't loved for himself—we cuddled and cooed them—but Sara and I were at times the girliest of girls and it would be *so cute* for her to have a little blonde look-alike to dress in lace and bows. Plus all those boy brothers made me a little nervous. Unlike their father they were big and burly. Well-fed, strong, rambunctious. "I'll tell them not to walk around in their underwear," Sara would say before our weekend get-togethers. And thanks to a quick imagination for one second I would see that crew of brothers in nothing but briefs—and shudder, wanting to close my mind on itself. How could I help feeling awkward around them after that? They were friendly boys, smiling, teasing, curiously interested in this town girl their sister was such good friends with—but such *boys* all rough around the edges and I wasn't used to their good-natured banter, so I'd shy away.

Dinner was most awkward, all of us forced to sit together, with darting eye-contact around the table. I would stare at my plate. Eat my ribs and mashed potatoes. But first, all of them praying in Catholic, and me not knowing the words or even the right way to cross myself. I'd bow my head and try to pray silently in my own way, but I always end up peeking out the corners of my eyes at them, at this ritual. After a few years I started to learn the words, and murmur them along. But sometimes I'd hesitate, thinking that perhaps if I wasn't Catholic I shouldn't be praying that way after all.

Once Joe, who was four years younger than Sara, noticed my face and said, "Don't feel bad." Though I didn't particularly like this extra attention I was grateful to him for noticing and caring. It wasn't as if I normally felt inadequate not being Catholic—after all, I was *sure* we Protestants were more right—but here in this home the reverence and respect for the older faith permeated the walls, filled the air, and I felt like a yellow stain on their well-bleached cloth.

I wondered if they thought so, too, when on the times I spent the night they would dab Holy Water on my forehead, too, and pray us safe till dawn.

Outside Sara and I explored. She loved having me come over Saturday afternoons because she got out of the weekend's extra chores. It was an acknowledged fact in her family that as the only girl she sometimes had special privileges. We went through the meadows and pretended to be Indian maidens, making campfires and picking wild grasses. Her father still believed in having pasture for his cows.

Sara's family farm was, then, still holding on to some of that old-family-farm mentality. Along with pasture, the cows had names. The kids helped with the work—and the vast majority of the work on the farm was done by family members, allowing for only a

few outside hands hired for seasonal activities like picking rock or possibly baling and storing hay. Chickens and a threatening rooster pecked and strutted around the yard. Cats and two dogs—one big, old, black, slow and one small, white, young, yippy—had a place on the farm eating leftover milk and grains and bones. Apple trees grew tall and gnarled in the yard; Sara’s Grandpa Hank had planted them eighteen years before. Sweet Sixteen—we reached up into the branches and tasted the sweetness, imagined sixteen.

It wasn’t a perfect place; it might have been a bit cleaner in places, there might have been more open pasture (some of the heifers were kept in deeply muddy/manured pens), the milk was certainly not organic, and I’m sure Sara’s family used pesticides like everyone else in the farming community. But it was still a family farm, and as far as I know, it’s still hanging on as one. Even as a child I saw something there—in that place—that was compelling. I’d beg to visit and we’d ramble around the haymow and visit the cows and calves and it was all hers, and a part of her. Her family made the place and the place made her.

In a recent lecture at Iowa State University, John Ikerd, an agricultural scholar, author, and researcher at the University of Missouri, claimed that the definition of a family farm is one in which the family and the farm are inseparable—they are parts of the same whole. That is, without that family, the farm would be significantly different; and without that particular farm, the family would be significantly different.

Part of what compels me to support today’s sustainable agriculture movement is concern that if the current dominant agricultural system doesn’t change course, and quickly, we won’t even have families on farms to be discussing in the first place. Instead we’ll have teams of workers taking shifts on corporate factories, where animals are production units and

land is little more than a commodity. Certainly, there will be a lifestyle there—one of power and subordination, of impressive quantity and shift-driven efficiency—but is that the kind of lifestyle we want to perpetuate? Further, is it the kind of thing we want to have replace the traditional interdependent, family-oriented lifestyle so many across the Midwest are clinging to, even as their farms and financial security slide out from beneath them?

Sara's farm wasn't my farm, but in many ways I found pieces of ownership in it. I learned its spaces and cherished its existence. I loved that place not just because it was Sara's home but because we made it alive by knowing it and experiencing it. Her family, and those others who came and knew and experienced, made that farm what it was. I would hate to see her family have to sacrifice that land to Cargill or Monsanto or some other corporate giant. Even if these corporations tended the land well—which is questionable—even so, it's impossible that the farm would have the same value, the same cultural and biological identity, as it has now.

South of Grey Eagle

I am sitting in the haymow. It is empty. The old owner had no reason to fill it, no livestock, no business to do. She must have rented out the land. I don't think of this at the time; farm economics are not yet a part of my reality. Imagine: Who was here. Did they play in the bales, her kids, if she had any? Does she remember her husband, when he was alive, working with the other men, tossing bale after bale, the hay sticking into their shirts and scratching at arms and neck? The fathers before, the generations back. And now, me. This is our farm. Dad, Mom. Craig, Erica, Elena, Christopher. Small for a farm, only forty acres and the house and outbuildings, but still, ours. It stretches along the north side of Little Birch Lake, a few miles south of Grey Eagle, Minnesota. I sit in the dim, against the worn wooden walls. The boards are rough against my back; I can feel a nail head, not quite in straight. The light comes through the open door. I think, maybe one day I will be kissed in here, tucked away behind bales that my father has stored for our cattle. The mow will be full, heady with the smell of dried grass. I smile to myself. Rays of light catch the dust floating around in the air.

**

We know spring is coming when we see them on the lake, hundreds of white birds walking on stretches of ice or bobbing on black water. Bird book and binoculars in hand, my mother and siblings and I spend nearly a quarter of an hour trying to decide if these travelers are snow geese or swans. We eventually decide on swans. The day is still cold, wet with

snow, but not so cold that we need to button our winter coats, and we walk along the shore of the lake marveling at the birds in their instinctive, cooperative migration.

The geese come, too, of course, in their usual V's, honking their confident return. We run out to see them the first few times they fly over, but somehow migrating geese seem to fit autumn better than spring, and we find ourselves more entranced with the first robin tugging out a worm or the pair of loons out on the nest Mr. Berscheidt put out last week. The loons are the same ones we've known before, or at least we think so, and we come to consider them ours, at least as far as anyone can ever own something wild. Later in the year we will drag out the canoe and paddle out to where one of the birds rests on the water, and then we will pull in our oars and let ourselves drift within yards of her. There is quiet.

At night the loons sing for me, sometimes high laughing notes that give me the chills, other times long, mournful strains. The contrast between the calls reminds me of a story I read once about a madman who spends his life searching for his beloved and never finding her. In his madness is both danger and a sort of dearness, for between intense and frightening fits of desperation he goes about like a grieved child, confused and pathetically hopeful. Yet I often don't want to listen to the madman, and instead I think of the laugh as a thrill and the song as a lullaby, a sad one, with such unspeakable beauty in the sorrow that you won't wish away whatever pain brought the song.

Mud. I forget about it each spring until suddenly it's there, thick on the paws of our dog, coating the soles of my shoes, splashing on new white socks. We start taking shoes off outside the door, but then they sit outside and if we forget about them when it rains they're close to ruined. So we start wearing them inside—just inside the door, Mom!—and leave

marks in the entryway. Our mother loves that. She tosses us cleaning rags and we go after the mud, but the effort seems pointless; someone else walks in a second later and they've got to wipe the floor all over again.

Some of the young calves get out in early spring, when the snow is still melting into the fields. Dad is gone, the builders are working on the roof, my brother and sister and I are just home from school. Spring shopping has resulted in new shoes for us, and we have proudly worn them all day—but when we see Lottie, Dottie, and Swissie out in the field we go running urgently after them.

We aren't well-trained in handling cattle, not yet. Intelligence or simple experience would suggest a bottle or a bucket of grain to be used as a decoy. Instead we attempt to chase the calves back to their pen. Right. Instead we run them all through the northeast alfalfa field, which is black with wet soil. We sink deep into the mud, pulling hard at each step, until we eventually run the calves out onto the gravel and somehow manage to get them back to where they need to be. Our new shoes are more than broken in at this point, and we have mud up our legs and backs from running, hair streaked brown and falling around our faces, and builders standing on the roof laughing.

A huge lilac bush shadows the vegetable garden in the backyard. I wonder who has planted it, maybe some woman years ago who loved the scent of the flowers as much as I do. In the warming afternoons I like to stretch out under the shade of the bush, with those loose bunches of purple bobbing above me, and I think or try to read, except that the out-of-doors keeps talking to me, distracting me with its sights and sounds and smells. The bees, unfortunately, love the lilacs, too, and when I become aware of their droning around the

blossoms my skin suddenly feels too tight. I lie farther down in the cool green grass and deliberate whether to stay or run.

Later I am working near the lilacs with my brother and sister when a bee lands on my elbow and begins to crawl up my arm. I automatically stand still—don’t bother the bee and it won’t bother you, right?—but I know that’s not going to help because, according to a local beekeeper, I happen to be one of those individuals whose scent first attracts bees and then provokes them to sting. This fact explains the unreasonable number of bee stings I’ve had but it doesn’t offer any comfort (nor does it explain why my stings seem to hurt and swell twice as much as anyone else’s). I stand there growing cold and yelling for my brother and sister to go find Dad, quick, so he can get it off for me. Elena and Christopher run out to the fields to find our father and I stand shivering in the sun, feeling every calculated movement of the bee’s feet on my skin. He’s crawling somewhere that I can’t see unless I move my arm, which I don’t intend to do, and that makes everything worse because just when I begin to think he’s flown away I feel those feet again.

For some reason I think that bees, like horses, can sense and respond to what a person is feeling, so I am caught between fear and the determination to keep calm. These two sentiments war against each other so that by the time my father shows up, looking annoyingly amused, I can’t decide whether to laugh or cry at the comfort of his nearness. He cups his hands and knocks the bee off my arm—the bee is stunned and falls to the ground—and I’m suddenly safe. I wonder at my father’s confidence and knowledge of all these living things, especially the ones I avoid, and I sometimes find myself resenting his skills as much as I appreciate them; so many things that he finds second-nature cause me discomfort. It’s as if he was born with some quality that he forgot to pass on to his own daughter.

**

Summer in Minnesota is a short season of approximately two and half months, maybe three if you're lucky. By the end of August cold winds blow down from the north and west. No one swims much anymore, except for those of us who, at the risk of our health, want to hang on to the season as long as possible. Four lakes within a ten-mile radius from our house allow us to swim in a variety of places, which we choose depending on the lake's own dynamics or the number of fishermen or sunbathers we can expect on a given day.

Fairy Lake, outside of Sauk Centre, is favored for its sandy beaches and nearby park. This recreational spot has a fire pit and picnic table every few yards along the shoreline. Visitors claim a location and spread out towels, unload plastic floaty toys and rafts, and bring around a boat or Jetski for tubing and waterskiing. The sand beach only stretches on for so long, and then the lake is left in its natural state, with grassy banks and scattered pebbles, and minnows daring around in schools. When we get sick of the smell of suntan lotion and the sound of fuzzy pop radio coming from beat-up boom boxes, my brothers and sister and I wander down by the grassy parts, kicking through the water and picking up red and purple stones.

Lake Sylvia is nearly as popular as Fairy Lake, but smaller, less sandy, and more inviting to leisurely fishermen. Clusters of Melrose teenagers and families with young children gather for swimming, fresh fish, and picnics. The lake actually made its way into a National Geographic feature titled "In Search of Lake Wobegon." My friends Emily and Sara also made it into that shot, and the shot found its way into a picture book about the

region, with text from Garrison Keillor himself. I will remain ever jealous that I wasn't there to share the moment of fame.

My favorite lakes, though, are Big Birch and Little Birch, two of the region's great fishing spots. Though we don't fish, my family lives on the shores of Little Birch and we know the lake through all its moods and seasons. We swim in Big Birch (there's an access three miles away) because it's not as marshy as its smaller cousin. While we usually see several boats out on these lakes, swimmers are less frequent (and less obnoxious). Sometimes we get jiggers, nasty little creatures that thrive in the muddier, fishier, less-trafficked lakes, and which get into our skin and make us itch for days with big red welts. Yet we like that these are our lakes, ours for wading and exploring and keeping just a little bit wild, and not the lakes of the too-tan girls in string bikinis and the loud-mouthed boys tossing beer bottles into the weeds.

Summer means remodeling. We actually start remodeling in the spring and continue in the fall, but with school out we find ourselves thrown fully into the project. We spend long days pounding nails out of worn woodwork, sanding until our hands grow rough, putting coats of stain and varnish (if we've completely stripped the wood) or Danish finish (if it simply needs to be touched up). We tear out walls we don't want, put new beams in the ceiling, pull off paneling and scrape wallpaper off the walls. We find square nails in rotten siding and hidden doors behind the 1970s paneling, and we wonder when we're going to uncover a skeleton somewhere.

We take hammers and hatchets and anything else we can pound with to knock out plaster and old slats. Insulation and bat feces rain down on us to settle in our hair and

clothes. Why are we doing this? A bat flies out in wakened fright, and Dad kills it even though killing bats turns out to be illegal in Minnesota. The bat lies like a strange unraveled black ball on the yard. I stare at it, this dark dusty thing that seems to be from another world.

In the afternoons we take trips to The Junction convenience station in Grey Eagle, to pick up Fritos and gummy worms and grape soda, and then we stretch out for a half hour break on the grass, listening to the water and the wind in the trees. We are full with the feeling of tired muscles from making something good, something important to this place, and the earth pressing firm against us.

**

When the end of August grows cold we pretend these are just a few chilly days. The calendar hasn't declared autumn yet. Neither will we, stubbornly continuing summer traditions such as bare feet, swimming, and campfires by the lake. But now dark comes on us while we're still roasting hot dogs and marshmallows. We pull on sweaters and study the moon falling over the water.

In early September we sit close around the fire pit to reach the heat of the flames. My brother holds out a roasting stick, and I pull some marshmallows out of the bag for him. In less than a breath, I grab the end of the stick and yank my hand away, a line burnt into my thumb and two fingers. The family stirs with concern as I run toward the house—it's locked—I grit my teeth and hold my fingers in a puddle of water in the driveway while Christopher fights with the lock on the door.

The burns last for a long time, white and raised; after the pain goes away I run them over each other while I'm thinking. Eventually the burns heal into dark scars before disappearing entirely. At odd times I find myself missing them—when studying, running a finger along a page, washing my hands under the faucet. Those marks of a memory, the good and bad that can come together here.

We never miss the mosquitoes, which leave along with summer's high temperatures. My mother says Minnesota has to have mosquitoes and snow because otherwise it would be too much like paradise; we wouldn't want to leave it for heaven. She speaks with a smile, yet part of me knows she's not entirely wrong. As the cold comes in fits we manage to savor days with the sun soft through crisp air and a few melons still warm off the vine.

The cold comes fast after the autumn equinox; the trees are orange and yellow and red for only a couple of weeks before their leaves fall to the ground, leaving the branches naked until the first snow. Snow usually arrives around Halloween, which is supposed to be a fall holiday. It can't quite fit into that category here. Outside shouts winter as flakes sink through the sky. Children begrudgingly wear heavy coats over their costumes and trudge through drifts to reach the front door. Carved pumpkins throw candlelight over the blue-white.

We only get a handful of trick-or-treaters out in the country. Not like in town, with kids banging on the door one after another, gusts of wind chasing their smiles, their chorused language, the eager buckets. No, out here Halloween is quiet. Only a few trucks or vans pull into our drive, people we know, neighbors with kids or Dad's clients. The first year we sit by the door with a silver mixing bowl full of Butterfingers and Sugar Daddies. I dress up like a cat. So does my sister. We paint whiskers on each others' cheeks and pin cushiony black

tails, sewn by Mom, onto the seats of our leggings. We end up eating most of the candy ourselves. The bowl still has chocolate in it at Christmas.

It is the first time that I feel somehow cut off, out of the circle. Pushed beyond some small sense of belonging.

I go outside, hold my coat close to myself. Cat ears still in place. Look up, at that dark, clear night, where the stars spread themselves out over that great curve of sky.

**

Winter in the country means bigger drifts, more treacherous drives to town. The season settles in through November and by Christmas the snow isn't a novelty, yet it hasn't been around so long as to make us tired of it. Snow falling on Christmas Eve is still a kind of magic. One weekend, not long into December, we invite friends out to the farm and Dad starts a fire by the pond. We spent hours earlier shoveling the snow off the surface and now we pull on skates, those of us not too young for them and not too old to be boring. We are all ages, couples from church in their twenties and thirties with their young families, friends from school, middle-aged neighbors and families from down the road. It's like a book, like *Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates*, all of us out here on the ice or tumbling down the hill in this holiday time. Elsie, our dog, racing up and down, her tail windmilling in happy circles. It hardly matters that we wear swishy neon colored coats instead of nice, natural dark browns and blues in wool. Here we've gathered all those people we care about, from everywhere, and they don't know each other, yet now we're sharing this—the snow, the stinging hands, the hot apple cider and party mix back at the house.

I love blizzards, in these days, everything about them. They are bigger out here, reaching out over the lake, back beyond the house, the barns, long white stretches and drifts that reach up to the roofs of the dairy barn. I love them, the feel of them coming, being, and leaving. The air is still and icy. You know this unnatural quiet can't last; too much energy throbs beneath it . . . then the wind pushes in and the snow rides it to the ground, piling everywhere, never minding traffic and buildings and streets. Outside is a lovely blue howling and you can sit near the window to watch the patterns in the white winds. I hibernate happily here, letting nature have her way. Unaware of this blessing: that I can enjoy this interruption, this splendid performance, without having to count the minutes until I can return to my carefully ordered life.

In January our father leaves for a conference. We've been on the farm a year, maybe. Dad trusts us, for some reason, to handle the cattle chores he leaves behind him. We have our share, the bottle feeding, grain for the calves sometimes. But he does most of it, and for the big cows, the obnoxious ones that move out of the way for him but won't necessarily do the same for us. Now we must carry it. Have our chance at responsibility. Character-building, probably. Mom's teaching is obvious. Dad works in subtle ways.

Of course, while he's gone, we have a huge snowfall. And for some reason the water isn't hooked up to the northwest shed so we have to haul it in buckets from the pump down in the southeast corner, over by the big barn.

We try not to groan. But we don't try very hard. We just groan more quietly. We signed up for this; we wanted the farm, too. We know, we know, thanks Mom and Dad, for the reminders. We pull on snowpants since we don't have the insulated coveralls our father

does. And out, one, two, three; Elena and I will take the big gray seven-gallon buckets and Christopher will take the white five-gallon one. We tramp down to the barn to let the water spray ice-cold into the buckets. Stamping our feet. Crinkling our fingers, preparing them for the cut of those thin metal handles.

Water is heavy. It gets heavier when you're trudging through thigh-high snow, a gravel lane that hasn't been plowed due to Dad's absence and our lack of a Bobcat. The buckets get filled about three quarters of the way full and then we get our hands on them. In the summer, and with grain, we can carry a bucket in each hand to distribute the weight. In winter, with water, we can only take one bucket, and try to find a way to make it work with our own weight. The buckets bump up against us and throw us off balance. We could balance out the weight of one bucket by holding it out in front and trying to walk with a leg on either side, but it's kind of awkward and it looks like ants (we thought); so anytime one of us tried that one or another of us would start singing "The Ants Go Marching," and giggle.

So we lug, tramp, forward. It's really cold out. At least the wind is down. We walk three in a row, large slow steps through the snow and up the hill, stupid cows, why can't they just eat the snow and save us all this trouble? The water spills onto our snow pants and freezes almost instantly, and we get hot inside our clothes from the effort. A modernized system sounds lovely right now, automatic feeding machines, automatic waterers, even hired men to plow the snow almost the minute it falls. This patched together hobby farm method is a lot of work, extra work. Who would have known? Good thing Dad has us to do it. We oughta be paid. But ringing in our ears: *If you don't work, you don't eat.* On we go, up that hill. Might as well get it over with. But there is a moment after the grumbling, when we

look at each other half-stuck in the banks, and we have to stop to laugh before we go the rest of the way.

We walk out to feed the horse in the winter evenings, when dark falls early and the snow heaves with silver under the moon. Our boots make paths for the cats to follow, little paws dodging in and out of footprints. With the lake frozen our world has an extra stillness to it, so that we are inclined to speak more softly in harmony with it, or in opposite moments, to shout in attempt to break it.

Dannyboy is an Arabian, a clever one who knows his riders are inexperienced and how well he might push us around. We love and resent him at once. But in these times he comes up to the fence in his white winter coat, mane shimmering, nose soft and reaching for oats, and he becomes not himself but every horse on a quiet black night and I become every girl who ever loved one.

**

Spring again. I stand at the top of the hill. We have a new orchard, pears and apples and peaches. They won't bear fruit for a while. They're just thin sticks now, putting out hopeful leaves. I am learning the difference between them, what you can tell from leaf to leaf. The waxy green of the apple. The long, inward-curving leaves of the peach. Down by the barn are two new cherry trees, a better place where it would be warmer. Two so they can cross-pollinate. In a few summers we will make cherry pies. My favorite.

But now, the hill. I look down that long stretch of green to where the vegetable garden is in, the plants up, beans and lettuce and peas poking small out of the plot. This new bounty. Sometimes, at lunch or supper, I like it when the dirt doesn't get entirely washed out of the lettuce and you get just a crunch of it. Just a little, enough to remind you where this came from. Not a supermarket, not a big truck, not tons and tons of hands in between. Just our ground, from that seed one of us dropped in a few weeks or months ago.

And behind the garden, the lilac is there, her full self. The blooms nearly all gone, just that dark green. Beyond, and off to the north, stand the sheds and barn, growing shadowy with the twilight. Dannyboy, our horse, pokes his head out past the shed, white in the falling blue. My farm, my horse, is this all real?

And suddenly I want to roll down the hill. The way I used to roll when I was little, any hill at a park or someone's house. A slant full of grass just asked for it, that was all. The world spinning and swirling, hair flying out, arms held tight to chest. Grass crinkling beneath. But that was then, in the days when everyone did that, all little girls. Not now when I should be doing my hair and putting on sparkly lip gloss, learning how to walk like a lady and look like Emma Woodhouse, or the sisters from *Sense and Sensibility*, all those ribbons and curls.

I press my lips together.

No one will see.

It doesn't matter if they don't know.

But I will know.

Dannyboy nickers across the way to me. That whisper-rumbly note of familiarity, that plea for oats. He is so, so white. With the property light overhead he becomes blurred around the edges, angelic. I hate that I am afraid of him.

I shake my hair back from my face, take a quick breath, and lie down in the grass. The spin catches me in its pull. I fly in a blur, long to the bottom. The earth draws me to itself. Here I am.

Absence

I lay curled up on the bed in the guest bedroom. Clenched with cramps, the worst kind, like some foreign object was lodged inside, radiating pain outward from deep in the tissue. I imagined reaching in and taking it out. Sometimes, in the irrationality of pain, I have wondered if, beyond the teenage girl talk, this truly is a curse of some kind, some periodic reminder of our sin and what we really deserve. Other times, I have cried through it towards thankfulness, this reminder of the blessing of future babies. This day, I mostly just wished it had better timing. My mother sat by me, spoke comfort, rubbed my back.

Outside the door, the aunts were chatting. I could hear their muffled tones. So normal-sounding. Until, finally, finally, my grandmother let out a small sob. “It’s hard, knowing it’s the last time.”

She was ironing my grandfather’s suit. He would wear it tomorrow on his final journey, to his place in the South Dakota soil.

When we lived in Ohio, a few days a week, my three-year-old sister went to daycare. She made a friend, the daughter of her caretaker. Leah.

One evening Leah spiked a fever. So high that her mother put her in the bathtub to cool her down, to sponge her hot skin. Then the baby cried. For a few minutes, the mother ran to get the baby. In those few minutes, Leah had a seizure, slid under the water. Drowned.

We saw her at the wake wearing a lacy pastel dress and holding the kind of stuffed puppy I had coveted on TV. I didn’t know this girl. I did touch her arm. Cold. My sister slid down against the church bench and buried her face into the stiff back.

My mother left me, now, to go to my grandmother, that strong mother of boys, whose tears had always been private before today. Hers was a pain full of old memories, without the promise of new ones. I imagined babies, and curled my knees close to my chest.

**

These early memories of death close-by. Animals became our greatest teachers. After moving to the farm in Minnesota, we learned to be careful about which ones we got attached to.

In town, Kit-Kat became the first animal to die; the first family member we would have to let go. On the farm in Ohio, we'd had kittens die before, but maybe I was too little to feel the effect. I remember Tabby quivering on the verge of death outside on the lawn. Our rambunctious mutt, Patches, had injured the orange kitten. Mom and Dad explained that she didn't know any better and simply played too rough with the kitten, but I didn't want to go outside to see poor Tabby. Still, I don't remember crying.

Kit-Kat was a surprise from Dad, a gift from one of his client farmers. She was a tortoiseshell with a checkerboard nose—black and peach on top, then peach and black on bottom, in four squares. The displaced farm cat didn't take well to four antsy children and a house in town, at first; her scratches and hisses brought us crying to our mother. But we wore her down with persistent affection and eventually she would come and purr with us in a patch of sunlight, or curl up around our heads on our pillows at night.

Her inability to master the litter box earned her the status of outside cat, a change she probably preferred. She made comfy places for herself in the rafters of the garage, where we

would climb up to find her, in this world above the world of so much practicality: the lawnmowers and tools of daily life. We could see why she liked being up there.

Four older bachelor brothers lived across the road from us. They had a tidy garden and purple martin houses and an apple tree, and used to sit outside in lawn chairs watching us play. We took little notice of them, but they must have gathered plenty of data on us in the four years we lived in that house. Our bikes left out on the lawn. Our garden bursting with produce, separate patches for us kids to poke around in. Our squabbles with friends and each other. Our contests at swinging higher, faster! Our playhouse, up on stilts with a sandbox beneath, where we'd dig out June bugs and Kit-Kat's misplaced poop.

The bachelor brothers first found her flattened on the road. They called our mother and she sat with us on the floor. Quietly. "I have something to tell you."

My sister had always loved the cats the most. After the mourning she drew pictures to remember Kit-Kat by. We made up stories about Kit-Kat's adventures. Trips to Paris, or through the woods. She became a show cat. She discovered a thieves' den. She bought pink purses.

**

My father is the type of man who feels much beneath his quietness. He carries emotion with fortitude. When my aunt called to tell us Grandpa had died, succumbed to his failing heart at last, my father gave a shout and dropped to his knees like he'd been shot. My mother followed after him—"Jim. Jim."

I felt afraid at the intensity of this pain. In a man who seemed unbreakable, my father, who had a sensitivity so like my own, but contained it far better than I could. That was strength, I thought; what awfulness of pain managed to push through it?

I loved my grandfather, but did not know him well. Visits two or three times a year led to affection, but not a remarkable bond. I ran downstairs to find my siblings. We would know how to grieve together.

Later, we found each other. Dad, not red-eyed but speaking softer and avoiding our eyes a little bit. Mom stood close to him, and after a while she asked us what we had to say to our father. I thought it strange at the time; we had just lost Grandpa, too. But we said, “I’m sorry, Dad,” and gave him hugs. We stayed close, stood there together, in the kitchen, with the blackness of night pressed up against the windows.

**

Mitzi became the first death on the farm, and the event was, in all adolescent understanding of the term, tragic.

She would never be called a bright dog, but every little bit of her pint-size body quivered and wagged with love for her family, and that, to us, meant far more. She was christened in fond memory of a book Mom read over and over to us in childhood: *Tell Me a Mitzi*. Our Mitzi belonged in our small yard at the house in town. From her leash she barked at everyone who dared come too close. If you seemed nice, she would lick and let you pet her. If you seemed mean, she would rip your pants.

She escaped one day and made the one-block journey to our elementary school. Either the door was propped open or some oblivious person didn't notice her sneaking in; but she found her way inside the building and, even better, found my sister's classroom. Poked her head in, grinning, tongue lolling out, tail wagging.

Small towns tend to relax the rules. Mr. Mahn excused my six-year-old sister from the classroom in order to walk her triumphant dog home. Mitzi surely felt pleased with herself as she trotted alongside her person, the girl with the burgundy glasses and long brown braids.

Mitzi seemed smaller at the farm, though no less enthusiastic. She raced through the hills and ditches gleefully. Still, she was first a town-dog. All the squirrels and chipmunks were never quite as satisfying to chase as the cars that whizzed across the highway running between our house and the lake. And though she usually knew her boundaries—coming terribly close to those spinning tires—she once failed to see the car coming in the other lane as she chased a semi away from our home. Good little protector.

The grandmother who stopped at our house came in tears. Her granddaughter crying in the car.

I only heard the knock. Dad calling Mom. Muffled voices. Then. The yelp was enough for me to know. "Mitzi!" I went running upstairs to where Christopher and Elena were gluing magazine pictures into notebooks. They looked up but couldn't understand me, only enough to try, and then "Mitzi—car" somehow got through enough to make sense. Down we went, in dread. Craig sat quietly by the piano, looking up with the grey-green eyes that absorb far more than he shows. Mom stared out the window, her hand over her mouth.

Our dread turned to screaming tears, to the fullness of grief as we could know it. The choking, sobbing, irrationality of paired realization and disbelief. Into questioning: How could this happen? Didn't God love us? Our mother trying to calm us, to answer, to console.

Our father had gone out and opened the back of his truck. After he gave Mitzi a shot to ease the suffering, to put her down, he went back and found her still breathing. Second thought: she might have a chance at survival. But we had to get her to the clinic; she needed a small animal vet, more than his large animal expertise could do here.

Just then the phone rang—a cow in troubled labor, a call Dad would have to answer.

My mother sat with three tearful children on the stairs. My father stood above us. She looked at him with the receiver still in his hand. “Really?” she said. “You have to go?”

I looked up at him, too, and tears worked their way, just a few, very slowly down his weathered cheeks. The first time I would see him cry.

He lifted Mitzi in the backseat, and my mother drove her the ten miles to the clinic in town. She was angry with my father for leaving, ill with the sound of this dog gasping and struggling for life, furious when the small animal expert merely shook his head at the sight of our beloved pet, even while the vet techs worked desperately at massaging her heart to keep her alive.

We sat at home alone. The quiet after crying. Nothing to do now.

Craig plunked keys on the piano. Rubbed the carpet with his open palm.

I still wish I'd had the courage to go along. I hid from Mitzi in her suffering, unable to bear the idea of her that way. I abandoned her.

Later that night, Mom returned empty-handed. No one slept well. The emptiness hovered like a darkness.

The next day I would dance in *The Nutcracker*. Two performances, a matinee and an evening show. A whole day of glitter. The weekend I looked forward to each year from July to December.

Backstage, I moved among the ballet dancers, our hair pulled into tight, smooth buns. Lovely pinks and golds streaked across our eyes and cheeks, dark flashes of mascara, gloss on lips. Little girls fluttered about in soft shoes, older ones pressed and stretched the hard boxes of the pointes. I sat in the corner and leaned into one leg, that good pull of muscle.

Everyone could tell. Wanted to know what was the matter, why such a somber face. I wished I didn't have to explain, to keep *saying* it.

The Nutcracker opens with a lively Christmas party at Clara's house. We wore cotton-print party dresses over white frilled pantaloons. In the background stood a glorious tree adorned with shining ornaments; banners of cloth hung like ribbon from eave to eave. The music lilted in, merry and blithe, carrying with it well-practiced sequences and movements. I put on a smile and remembered my steps.

**

Before the day we went to visit my friend Kimberly, Mom spoke to me several times. Reminded me, in the car, on the way there: "Don't say anything about it."

Kimberly's grandmother volunteered for our family, one of the hundred or so that came over to our house to help with Craig's daily therapy, a series of activities that battled his body's cerebral palsy. Kimberly didn't usually come with her grandmother, but once we knew each other she became an occasional playdate. We liked girl things, playing pretend.

We both had long blonde hair that our mothers put in neat braids with plastic barrettes. Once I went to Kimberly's grandmother's house to ride the ponies. I held on to the pommel and felt ecstatic in the simple round and round of the small corral.

I was six, maybe. Mom was going to talk to the mother and grandmother and Kimberly and I would play. But I knew something very sad about her, and this time play might be different.

We got out our Cabbage Patch dolls and arranged them in high chairs for a proper tea.

I was careful what I said.

But she wasn't: "My daddy killed himself."

I looked at her. I wasn't supposed to talk about it.

I said, "I know," and turned my face away, reaching for a tea cup.

She set out spoons and we continued with our play.

My mother still swears I went to the funeral for this man who became so overwhelmed with life that he hung himself, left his wife and daughter to grieve in his absence.

I still swear I did not, that I only saw my mother afterward with the cookie she brought home for me.

**

Outside the funeral home, I pressed my face into my father's chest.

I was afraid of the body of my grandfather. The building. This part of the path from life above ground to life below it. Shy of so many who grieved for him. This man I wished I had known better.

At the wake, my grandmother walked up to the casket. Her hand shook as she laid it on her husband's body. My cousins and I sat together and watched her, our tissues crumbling in our fingers.

I realized then that I was crying, above all, for my grandmother and my father, for their loss. A husband: to my grandmother, wedding him just out of childhood, her porcelain cheeks and gentle, trusting smile framed and hung in the guest bedroom, to be studied by inquisitive, imaginative grandchildren decades later. A father: to *my* father, the third son, running alongside in boots and jeans to help feed the cattle. Grandpa shaped these two in ways he could not shape me; he contributed essentially to who they were.

**

On the farm, we learned not to grow attached to the steers. They were destined for the feedlot, eventually the butcher's shop. Sometimes they went straight to the knife from our farm, and we'd eat them at dinner: "Dopey turned out pretty good." We tried not to pet them as much when they were bottle calves, just held the nipple up and let them suck until they got old enough to where we could completely ignore them.

But the heifers we liked, patted their pink noses, gave them names worth remembering: Arizona, Dimples, Sunshine. These calves would stay, become cows, have more babies.

And Red was the most important, our pure Hereford, ruddy with a curly white face, Dad's favorite. We gave her extra petting, thick handfuls of sweet green grass torn from ditches. So when her first calf, born dead, paralyzed her and she had to be dragged with ropes onto the trailer—even Dad with all his veterinary magic couldn't fix it—we stayed inside, standing by the back picture window with covered mouths. Watching our queen of the pasture headed for execution, her neck straining like some kind of plea for justice.

**

In the years on the farm, we would cry over the series of cats, one accident after another, the hawk, the vicious stray tom, the cars. But by the time I got to high school, and Dad had to tell me that he'd run over Tad—my favorite, the perfect smoky gray kitten with six toes on each of his big dinosaur paws—by then I could pause, frown a little, and say, "It's okay, Daddy."

**

Ballet classes do not generally attract many boys. We had three. Justin, Mike, Daniel. Daniel was so enthusiastic it could, sometimes, become too much, but his love for dancing carried him high in leaps and smooth passes across the floor. He was beautiful. And he would be our next big thing, the boy who would take on the important male roles in all our productions. We needed these guys to lift us and woo us, to act as heroic soldiers and pursuing princes. Daniel would know how. His energy filled the studio.

I missed ballet class one Monday.

That Wednesday I showed up to class and saw that someone was handing out pins to commemorate Daniel's death. Everyone had mourned together on Monday. He'd been struck and killed over the weekend by a drunk driver.

So often death seems to happen young to these, the ones that stand out as almost too perfect. One of my ballet friends said, as we stretched at the barre and remembered how Daniel laughed, that you died after you had done God's work for you on earth. I couldn't understand. Did she mean once you had done something good enough, off you went? So the most angelic went first?

Chantelle was my sister's friend, a gentle, sweet, princess-like little girl with silky long hair that swished when she walked. If I hadn't known her, I wouldn't have believed her to be a real person; she was a story kind of girl, someone written by Frances Hodgson Burnett or Shannon Hale.

But she was real, and her fall from the three-wheeler was, too. She tipped backward and landed at a fatal angle on her neck.

Her funeral, a Catholic funeral, was open to her third-grade classmates and their parents. My mother went, with my sister, and listened to the tearful prayers for her soul, that it might make its way through purgatory towards heaven.

**

In between moves from one city to the next, I come home to walk with the dogs. Three of them now: Tassie, my own, a two-year-old golden retriever. Emma, the newest

puppy, a Shar Pei/Lab rescued from between the roaring lanes of traffic on Highway 60. And Elsie, our alpha female, deep reddish brown with a nose reaching up for petting and affirmation of love.

When we got Elsie I was fourteen, on the cusp of the expectations and risks, the slips and falls, the building and collapsing along that road of dream-chasing. I would cling to her in tears, in self-hatred, in defeat. I would run with her in the thrill of new summers and tall grasses. We sat together in the straw, her puppies piled around both of us, all white-tipped tails and velvet ears.

Earlier this year, Elsie started walking in crooked lines, falling when she tried to get on the porch. Mom called to tell us. My sister burst into tears. I bit my lip and pushed away that ominous feeling. Fourteen. A long life for a dog.

Only an ear infection, then. A bad one, yes; a more recent ear infection built on prior damage to leave her partially deaf. In the rain, today, I call her as she walks into the garage. “Elsie! Elsie!” The other dogs dance up around my legs. I’ve already gone for a walk with them; I couldn’t find Elsie to come along. Now I push them aside and call again. “Elsie!”

She turns around. Stretches and walks slowly my way.

I go out to her, barefoot on the gravel, my pants absorbing the rain. She is shivering, though it isn’t that cold. I pick her up and hold her close, walk the rest of the way into the garage. The eyes in her face are just the same, searching for mine.

“Elsie. Such a good dog.”

Back in Minnesota, running in the fields, Elsie and I were two little girls. What now? She has found it first, old age. God allowing, I shall follow. So it goes.

I stroke her fur, rest my cheek against her head. Watching Tassie and Emma wrestle
in the grass, the mud, the incessant rain.

Beauty Is

At first my sister and I scorned the Schwartzentrubers. Later, we felt sorry for them, and tried to bury the remaining scorn under empathy. In truth, we couldn't fathom why they were as they were, and why they didn't try to do something about it.

The family went to our church, which was about twenty minutes away from the town where we went to school. Rather than being full of the German Catholics we knew in our more immediate area, Upsala was composed largely of Swedish Protestants—even blonder and stockier than the Germans. Only a handful of non-Swedish people filtered into the church—a few Dutch, a few Germans, a few American mutts.

Some of the people in our church were stunningly beautiful; we wanted to be like them. The three Sundquist girls drove me to jealousy each time I saw them—each one different from the one before, and all of them tall, sunny, glistening with confidence. But some of the people in our church were the polar opposite. Like the Schwartzentrubers.

The father was one of those belly-hanging-over-the-belt-buckle types. Pale-eyed, pale-faced, passive and silent. The mom smiled and was trim and kind, but she had a curly mullet and wore large-print floral shirts with shoulder pads. The son seemed okay; he was a little boy, so his cowboy red shirt and boots and the fact that he always seemed a little dusty wasn't such a big deal. The daughters were the ones that concerned us most, since they were our ages and we could compare them to, well, ourselves. Or, more importantly, to what we wanted to be.

Both Emma and Ruthie were heavy and, frankly, frumpy. Not only did they wear clothes that might have been acceptable about twenty washes and ten years ago, but whatever

they had on just didn't seem to hang right. It stuck in spots, or drooped, or rode up, or rumpled. Their hair usually seemed as if it needed conditioner and a good trim. Emma's fleshy skin pulled her mouth and forehead down into a frown. Ruthie, to her credit, had clear skin and rosy cheeks, and her eyes were bright with optimism; but her over-eagerness combined with social awkwardness made her, in our opinion, laughable and a touch annoying. They lumbered, like cattle. And sometimes, well, they smelled like them, too.

We were most definitely snobs about these girls in addition to a handful of others, despite our mother's insistence on kindness and generosity towards everyone. Mom couldn't see the way we acted when she wasn't around, the things we said in whispers in our rooms or while out riding our bikes. Other than the fact that kids can have a tendency to little prejudices and cruelties, our attitudes were, I'm convinced, due in part to the knowledge that we weren't at the top of the ladders of local fashion and society ourselves. We had to fight to keep from getting dragged down to the lower rungs. Psychologically distancing ourselves from these "lower" types helped us out. We weren't "them." In those days the biggest signifier of one's "level" was how one dressed, or at least we thought so. Grades were a small factor, sports a bigger one, but for us, as females, clothing and appearance held the most power by far. Unfortunately for Elena and me, Mom and Dad weren't into spending money on clothes; they thought it was frivolous and silly when secondhand items could be had at a third of the price and in perfectly good condition, so except for two or three JCPenney outfits a year we had to scour the bargain-stores and put together what we could. The fact that we didn't have Z.Cavaricci jeans and closets full of preppy plaid button-ups, beaded necklaces and silver earrings distressed us into noticeable degrees of insecurity. I want to laugh about it now, and tell that shy, watchful eighth grade version of myself to

relax, to let herself become herself, to keep in mind that sometime in the future all these junior high stratifications won't matter; that even perfect Britta Becker will have her share of grief, and that while wonderful Justin Johnson will fall in love with someone else it won't hurt her because she'll be miles away. And besides, it couldn't possibly be a love bigger than what she'll have herself someday.

But what irritated my sister and me beneath everything else, I think, is that those Schwartzentruber girls didn't even seem to try. We tried. We kept our hair brushed and clean. We observed the trends and tried to copy them. We took ballet and gymnastics and swimming; we ran around the farm and danced in musicals and swam every other day all summer to be strong and healthy. Those girls didn't. They seemed to have resigned themselves to their state. Didn't their parents ever teach them about self-improvement? Or how if you didn't like something about a situation you shouldn't just let it stay that way and complain about it, but instead do something to change it?

When we'd passed the purely scornful stage and had moved on towards and slightly more "Christian" attitude (a.k.a. attempted understanding), we would sit in church and think about what we would do if we could give them a makeover. We felt quite pleased with ourselves when we played this game, as it involved not only creativity but also caring and selflessness. *We* were willing to put forth effort and time to help *them*, even while it might have threatened our fragile status. Never mind the self-righteousness and superiority lining the whole situation. Sigh. Well, we were growing up. If only, we thought, if only we could somehow do this for those poor, ugly girls. But really, you couldn't just walk up to someone and ask if you could give them a makeover. Particularly if it started with a rigorous fitness plan. It was too bad.

At some point I stopped paying much attention to the Schwartzentruber girls. I was making my way into high school, too preoccupied with having crushes on the older boys (two years seemed like such a big deal, an impossibility, but gosh weren't they cute, and *so* tall). I never could seem to manage to have just one crush at a time, and it got a little complicated when the boys were related, which at my tiny church they usually were. It got less complicated with the reality that they never liked me back. I was far too caught up in unrequited puppy love and self-pity to care much what Emma Schwartzentruber and her sister were up to.

Except. Once, on one of those rare afternoons in high school when I hopped in the truck with Dad to go on a call, we ended up at the Schwartzentruber farm. It was a hot afternoon, deep into summer, and Dad's air wasn't working so we had the windows down and gravel dust blowing in our faces. We passed horses, three brown mares that I sighed over—lucky. They had a corral and a decent shed, nothing fancy, but still. Three horses. And I knew the family was horse-crazy; I envied them for not having the fear accompanying it the way I did. So the horses were nice. But then we got to the end of the lane, and there was the farm.

Riding with Dad as I grew up, I learned to compare farms, one with another and all those following. A lot of them were pretty similar—organized enough, a little muddy around the edges, usually a few random trucks or wagons sitting around, with some mucky paddocks and a few ruts in the dirt paths between buildings. But now and then we'd come to one so clean and uncluttered that I'd remember it in my mind as white and shiny, like a smooth stone I might have found down at the lake. As a town girl in those early days, I sometimes wrinkled my nose at the more typical farms, but these pretty ones were farms where I felt I

could live. Once we moved out to our own acreage I relaxed some, and learned to be comfortable with mud and a little bit of disorder. But here, down the lane at the Schwartzentruber place, I had the urge to bolt.

Flies. Flies like I had never seen, and I'd been in summer dairy barns since I was a little girl. They were always thick then, but nothing like this. Dad climbed out to do his job, but I stayed in the truck, gasping in the heat. Looking around, through the dusty windows. This was where those Schwartzentruber girls *lived*.

The house seemed decent enough, not in need of paint or anything. But the porch was cluttered with stuff, spilling out into the surrounding lawn—jackets, buckets, broken toys, tires, who knows what else. The dirt paths between the buildings and house were nearly entirely ruts, dry now with summer, but deep and worn and containing small puddles where they had gone deepest. Cattle loomed up not far from the window, brown up to their bellies in mud and manure, standing knee-deep in the stuff themselves. The barns and fences were worn, not beyond anything I hadn't seen before, but surrounded by such disorder they appeared worse somehow. All this was bad, but the worst part was a) the flies and b) the smell. I sometimes think a smell tells the truth of a place. I like to organize but it takes the right mood and attitude for me to get down and really clean. Because of this I often keep my apartment neat, but not as deep-clean as it might be. If I leave it for too long the smell tells on me, and I'm embarrassed for myself. Then I whip out the supplies, pull up my hair, crank up the music, and get to work. Smells too often signify a layered dirtiness. And here, at the Schwartzentrubers farm, the smell of feces was so strong that even I, a small-farm girl who's seen (and smelled) her share of calves with scours, had to breathe out of my mouth instead of my nose.

The smell in combination with the flies, in addition to the fact that I had the windows rolled up in the sweltering summer just to keep both assaults out, drove me through a series of emotions. First, distress. Who could live in a place like this? Second, irritation. This was seriously rude. You shouldn't even ask anyone to come out here. Not even the vet. No wonder your animals are sick. Third, desperation. I needed to get out of here! What was taking Dad so long? Fourth, sadness. Sadness extending to pity, but not the I'm-better-than-you kind of pity so much as the What-was-it like-to-grow-up-in-this? kind. No one should have to live like this. How could Emma and Ruthie handle it? I was screaming inside after thirty minutes. And after all those years of judging them for their frumpy church presence, I could see why they were the way they were. Their surrounding environment, their home, what they'd known all their lives, was the same way. I wondered how those girls would learn to be confident and put-together. More importantly, I wondered how they could find their own vision to better the world with such dilapidation and filth reinforced in their lives every day, even treated as normal.

Wendell Berry, in “The Making of a Marginal Farm,” describes the process he and his family took on in purchasing Lanes Landing and realizing the changes necessary to practice what he calls, “a life that . . . would be responsibly agricultural.” They developed a vision for the place and for themselves in that place. He writes,

As we have continued to live on and from our place, we have slowly begun its restoration and healing. Most of the scars have now been mended and grassed over, most of the washes stopped, most of the buildings made sound; many loads of rocks have been hauled out of the fields and used to pave entrances or fill hollows; we have done perhaps half of the necessary fencing. A great deal

of work is still left to do, and some of it—the rebuilding of fertility in the depleted hillsides—will take longer than we will live. But in doing these things we have begun a restoration and a healing in ourselves.

It must be acknowledged that as a successful scholar and author, Berry has had the means and time that others, including the Schwartzentrubers, may not be privy to. He has the luxury to take an ideal and operate with that in mind, whereas many others must operate primarily on the concept of survival. Yet Berry touches on a key idea here, one that I am convinced might be integrated in small and purposeful ways even by the very busy or economically limited: that is, how one lives upon one's landscape affects not only the health and habits of the landscape, but also the health and habits within oneself.

I ran into Ruthie at Bible camp years later, where I worked as a staff lifeguard and she volunteered as a counselor. I hadn't seen her for several years, since our family had moved to Iowa, but this camp was back up in the part of Minnesota I loved, and affiliated with our home church. So here I was for the summer, and here was Ruthie, confident, laughing, followed by a cabin-full of adoring little girls. She greeted me with a wide smile and I had to smile back, squinting a little in confused recognition. Her hair was smooth, chestnut-brown and shiny, and her skin bronze with summer, and she dressed the way the trendy camp people dressed, with cute little t-shirts and wrists of beaded and braided bracelets, messy buns, silver rings with crosses on them. As I watched and interacted with her for a few weeks that summer I saw that this Ruthie drew people to herself. She was warm and genuine and cute as heck. Somewhere she found some footing; and it seemed to be here, at this camp. Ruthie loved Lake Beauty like no one else, had been volunteering here since high school, knew everyone and had their affection. She tended to the people in this place as well as to the

facilities. In addition to counseling, we might find her doing trail maintenance, cleaning bathrooms or kitchens or cabins, organizing the gift shop, or addressing a variety of repairs. The camp had an extra component of fun and creativity when she was around. She had found a new way of being in this place, found herself, bloomed here. *I* certainly wanted to be her friend.

Of course economy plays a role here: a teenage Ruthie surely had another job, learned how to dress well as she gathered her own money and looked into how to spend it. Even, interacting with other girls at work, flipping through fashion or home magazines on breaks, might have showed her other approaches to using material and space. As she grew older and sought her own identity, she could decide how she wanted to present herself with the somewhat expendable income of most teenagers. I would know this same thing, in my own life, and my self-esteem would improve far more than it should simply with a new wardrobe. In our younger years we are so at the mercy of our parents and their circumstances, and can so easily resent them for it. How could I look at that farm, overrun with flies and disorder, without considering that this family might be doing all they could simply to get by, to eat each day?

Still, the part of me that remembered being poor, the part that had watched my mother insist on order and cleanliness in all circumstances—that part knew that beauty did not depend solely on income, and rather, that a good deal of it simply involved care and time. Ruthie somehow learned this lesson on her own. Perhaps in part from observing the other camp volunteers/friends, sharing clothing, picking up on the little bits of prettiness they could work even into play clothes: a messy bun with a bit of ribbon, a tiny silver necklace with a turquoise pendant, carefully paired tank tops. These girls dressed well, but not expensively.

And found their way to a camp that operated on these same principles, with simple, sometimes rustic, always put-together ways of doing things. Ruthie, especially, matched the campground in the way only certain staff and volunteers could. She *was* Lake Beauty, in my mind: this joy that radiated from the quiet confidence of self.

I've heard it said, and I've said it myself, dozens of times: our places shape who we are. And we shape them. In a way this relationship can be beautiful, but it can be problematic as well. Sometimes we become stifled. Sometimes our places limit us, or push us to extremes. What we need to do, I think, is become of *aware* of our places and how we relate to them. We need to learn about and experience places outside of those that we know. We need to open our eyes, analyze, consider. Who do we want to be? What does a place want, or even need, to be? How does where and how we live contribute to or detract from those ideas? And if it does detract, can we do something to even moderately change the place, to bring it closer to what we feel is right? When is it simply better to move, to grow and interact with another location?

When I visited the Schwartzentrubers farm, I wanted to yank those girls out of there, to get them to fresh air. I wanted to show them—look, the world doesn't have to consist of muddy, smelly, fly-infested farms. Learn otherwise. You can create a place, or invest yourself in a place where people want to come. Make it home to you. And therein you can become a person who attracts others—not primarily, as I initially thought, by appearance, but more importantly, by cultivating and sharing the best parts of who you are, just as you draw out what is best about a place. A gesture of love to the earth and its people. Ruthie, against my childish predictions, did this very thing—and I hope, in all my wanderings, I might do so well.

Calico

When the corn stands tall, the leaves arched and waving green above our heads, then we run and hide in it, the fields of friends and uncles, pushing through the rows into this other world. This is a world that hides what is outside, all troubles and chores and normal things. In the corn there is just the slick of leaves, and the stalks that seem to unfold out of themselves like telescopes. And there is the dirt, the smooth but cracked patches that sometimes rise up into hard clumps and make you stumble. The ears of corn can be hard to notice at first, so camouflaged by those wide leaves, but they are there, carefully wrapped in their husks, like little papooses held close to their mothers.

**

We had corn where Laura Ingalls had grass. Our corn in neat rows. Laura's prairie in a wild tangle of its own.

Our family read the *Little House on the Prairie* series out loud together. Our mother used it to teach us to love story as well as each other. The books grew worn with our readings, as we formed pictures of this other life on yet this same land: square dances at Christmas in the big woods, with maple syrup candy in the snow, and women with tiny waists and long skirts spinning around the room. The wagon crossing a wide, wild river, and Laura's face peeking out the back flaps, in worry that Jack the Bulldog won't make it across. Pa playing his fiddle by the fire under a black sky with white stars, Laura and Mary cuddled

together beside the wagon. But the strongest image, the one that flashes into my head with the title, is of Laura and Mary walking barefoot, in bonnets and calico dresses, through grasses that stand tall and yellow-green above them.

As a child, I wanted desperately to know what it might be like to be so surrounded. To hear the rush of wind through the leaning, slender stalks, the tickle of tassels bending down and brushing my face, my neck. These were the days I still lived in town, with every lawn clipped clean. Even when we let ours grow out of control, it only flopped over and tousled like messy hair. Still, then, I would lie on my stomach in the cool shade and let my eyes settle into that small world, where ants scurried under cover. How was it, so hidden and enclosed by nature?

Eventually, I came to the conclusion that I would never know this feeling. At eight or nine, and tall for my age, I supposed that grasses would never reach any higher than me, even if I could find the places where prairie grasses still grew. If they even existed. I remembered that life was full of disappointments. Like the time I discovered I'd gotten too big to swing on the branches of the willow tree, and sunk heavy to the ground, surprised at my own weight, scuffing my knees.

But, then, the cornfields became a substitute. The order so man-made, yet still, this other place. Stiffer than the prairie we imagined, the stalks like sentinels, the ground hard-packed and bare. Yet good for running through and playing tag, or sitting close and whispering secrets. We buried ourselves inside the leaves. Sometimes, their sharp edges sliced our skin.

When my family still lived in town, we grew corn in our garden plot. The garden wouldn't seem complete without corn along the north edge. We grew lots of kinds, different colors like blue and red and multicolor popcorn, juicy yellow and white varieties of sweet corn. When the sweet corn was ripe we knew summer's bounty, that simmering pot on the stove and then the lid, lifting, the cloud of steam a starchy sweet, and then Dad or Mom taking the tongs and giving us each an ear, or two, to slather with butter and speckle with salt. We were so anxious to bite in that often we didn't wait long enough for the ear to cool, and burned our mouths, in the spaces of gum right behind the teeth. The popcorn we learned to shell with a metal ring, and soak the kernels in oil, and sometimes it popped, sometimes it didn't, but when it did the flavor was thick and rich, almost heady. This was not the light popcorn we would discover later in microwavable bags at our friends' houses, but a popcorn that favored taste over fluffiness and size. Mom melted butter in the pan and drizzled it on the top. We even chewed on the unpopped kernels—Mom loved them especially, these "old maids," though I found them a little ash-dusty in taste and hard on the teeth. We even decorated the windowsills with the popcorn, arranging according to ear size and color, each kernel like a little bead.

**

The Mayan culture worshipped corn, or *Zea mays*, which means "that which sustains life" or "life-giving." These "children of the corn" believed they came into being when the gods added their own blood to corn flour. Blood and corn are paired often, and used symbolically, in Mayan art, story, and tradition. The ancient Maya fertilized their corn with the blood of their enemies and of their kings. Corn, the material of their creation, the crop

that determined the work of seasons and routine of days, this crop reached into the essence of humanity. Thus, to cover it with blood was a natural and even holy event. In *The Story of Corn*, Betty Fussell writes, “For the Maya a single kernel of corn is symbolic of what Christians symbolize by the holy cross—the tragic and monstrous truth that the seed of life is death.”

In one Mayan tale, twin brothers plant a stalk of corn near their grandmother’s house before departing for the underworld. She is to observe it in their absence. If the corn dies, it means that the men have died, but if it droops and then revives, they have made their way out of the underworld back to life. Even in more modern practices of Mayan spirituality, which frequently blends Catholicism with ancient traditions, kernels of corn that have fallen to the ground must be picked up and kissed, then placed appropriately with other corn. Each kernel contains the soul of a woman, and so the person who fails to honor the corn and leaves it lying on the ground—or worse, steps on it—consequently puts his or her own soul in danger.

The original Mayan varieties of corn, growing out of thinner, grassier plants like teosinte and gamagrass, had few kernels per stalk and diminutive stature compared to what we know now. The color and shape of kernels varied, and these varieties could be used according to functionality or preference. One Mayan storyteller, K’iché, says that once the black corn plant felt inferior to the other ears, as the Maya feared eating too much of it would turn their skin black. But when the black corn went to God and asked to be eliminated from the species, the turnip intervened. “You are more important than I,” said the turnip, “simply by being corn. Yet see how in the right time I, too, am harvested and celebrated. So you cannot complain.” God heard the turnip and agreed that corn, of any color, was important. And He refused to let the black corn disappear.

In *The Ancient Spirituality of the Modern Maya*, Thomas Hart writes, “The four colors of corncob—red, black, white, and yellow—are the four colors of the universe, each one oriented toward one of the cardinal points. Some Mayan Priests also point out that these are the four colors of the races of humanity, proof that we were all made from corn; the four colors of corn are also found in the human body.” The modern Maya might still cultivate many kinds of corn, in the colors that signify so much for them. Yet a good portion of the world, and certainly the vast majority of the first world, does not maintain such diversity. As the plant moved through the centuries, maize into corn into yellow-dent hybrids, preferences and politics would cause it to change as much as the hands that worked it.

Our family moved from Minnesota to Iowa and suddenly it seemed corn owned everything, corn and soybeans, no lakes, no woods, only a few slight hills. At first this was devastating. We hated it, we searched for months for an acreage and finally found a little triangle of land about 7 acres, with wild roses and wild plum and prairie grasses stubbornly growing in the less-than-prime soil. The blossoming plum tree reminded me of those we had on our property back home. I had followed their scent for an entire day to find the flowering source. So we took the land and built a house. On this acreage we would have some space, places to wander. We planned to cultivate part of it, gardens and an orchard. But we would leave the prairie grasses to grow, cutting them only for hay, and we would let the trees stand, adding a willowy line of poplars between our garden and the neighbor’s cornfield. Sometimes, I felt like our triangle of earth was a ship in a sea of grain.

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The tallgrass prairie covered 250 million acres of the Midwest for over 8,000 years.

This prairie had been dominated by over 30 species of grasses and over 250 forbs, which had been kept alive by the natural prairie fires. Willa Cather describes the prairie of copper drenched in sunlight in so much motion as if it were running to the sea.

By the 1900s this prairie was on the brink of destruction after only half a century of intervention by the steel moldboard plow. There was less than 1 percent of native prairie remaining in Iowa.

-Shirley Shirley, Restoring the Tallgrass Prairie

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The Maya worshipped corn. The small-scale organic farmer worships the soil.

And grass becomes the salvation of the soil, contributing to the health of the rest of the farm. In an interview with Makenna Goodman, of Chelsea Green Publishing, farmer Joel Salatin says, “The soil is the only thread upon which civilization can exist, and it's such a narrow strip around the globe if a person could ever realize that our existence depends on literally inches of active aerobic microbial life on terra firma, we might begin to appreciate the ecological umbilical to which we are all still attached.” Salatin certainly does, so much so as to base his entire farming operation on the health of this bit of active aerobic microbial life. As Michael Pollan has recounted in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, and Salatin explains in his own works, the diversified farm operation involves a good deal of farmer awareness and

adaptability. This kind of farming is about close observation, intricate knowledge, and listening—turning to the soil, and the organisms upon and within it, for cues on how to proceed. The grass farmers are revising their trade. What it is. And what they believe it should be.

The corn now replacing much of the pioneer's prairie is itself categorized as a grass. But size, high productivity, and current methods of planting do not give it the same qualities or capabilities as smaller native grasses. Corn has become a grass of its own kind. Corn's high yields—especially from today's vigorous hybrids—come at the cost of vast amounts of nitrogen sucked from the soil. In conventional agriculture, satisfactory yields are seemingly inseparable from synthetic fertilizers, wide bare spaces, and heavy machinery. Synthetic fertilizers work to replace the loss of the nitrogen, as well as encourage growth with the addition of potassium and phosphorus. This application of fertilizer can be somewhat beneficial, but tricky, as excess amounts lead to harmful runoff. With heavy machinery, open spaces between rows, and loss of organic matter, the soil subsequently loses its strong aggregate structure and becomes compacted, vulnerable to erosion, and poor at containing water. Even in organic agriculture, with the aid of manure and green fertilizers, farmers recognize that growing corn simply asks a lot of the soil.

Detasseling—removing tassels from the top of a corn stalk—offers fourteen-year-old kids in corn states short-term, well-paying summer employment. They say every Iowan should do it at least once. Our move to Iowa did not, in my opinion, make us Iowans. Even

with the happiness of new friends and activities, I still romanticized the sound of the loon and the lake rocking at the shore. I'd still lie awake missing them.

But my sister needed a job. I had part-time work at the local pool and no interest in walking the corn rows. Elena's great strength is persuasion, and since she didn't want to detassel alone she got me to sign up. So, in late July, we woke at 5 a.m. to go to the high school and wait for the bus. In the blackness of the parking lot we sang along with the radio to hide our nervousness. When the bus came, we cracked open our car doors and wandered over, exchanging awkward glances with the other teenagers emerging into this dark morning. Some of them obviously knew each other, their laughs and comments unnaturally loud for this time of day. Others were almost grimly quiet. I slid into the seat, beside my sister, glad she was there. But as I gripped the handle of our red plastic lunch cooler I couldn't help wishing that I wasn't.

We were working for a company that contracted with Pioneer, one of the major seed companies in the nation. Once we reached our field, we divided into crews and were given a row to follow. Every five rows would be followed by a sixth row, slightly taller—we should leave that row alone. The plants in these sixth rows were meant to be the pollinators, playing the male role in this process of hybrid seed production. But the stalks in the other five rows needed to have the tassels pulled out so that the plants wouldn't self-pollinate or pollinate those near them. So, gloves on, we went to work.

I found myself slower than the others. Often, the crew leader called after me, chastising me for missing the small ones. Some of the tassels were tough to pull out. I didn't understand how I could be so far behind, what I was doing wrong. Even my little sister outpaced me. Those who did well this year might be crew leaders the next—or even later in

the season. The crew leaders had a less labor-intensive job, walking behind and pulling those the others missed, checking up on everyone, making sure the field got cleared out. I wished I were doing that instead of this ceaseless grabbing and pulling.

I didn't like it. I spent most of the time anticipating lunch, then anticipating leaving. Still, I went back. After a few days of detasseling I couldn't get the images of corn out of my mind. They seemed to be painted inside my eyelids. When I closed my eyes I could see the stalks and the leaves and those darned tassels. This was so involuntary that it almost frightened me. Even when I lay in bed at night, the corn pushed into my dreams.

I only detasseled that one summer, then took on the more pleasant job of lifeguarding and teaching swimming lessons nearly full time. But my sister detasseled for two more years, at least, getting promoted to crew leader, making good money down those trips through the corn.

The odd part is that we—meaning those of us on the bus, some I even came to know as friends—didn't stop to consider much other than our task at hand. I wasn't sure who ate this corn. Or how it was grown. Or even what variety it was. Honestly, I didn't much care. This was a way to make money. That was all.

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What shall I call out? All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass.

-Isaiah 40: 6b-7, NASB

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I don't remember the first time I discovered that grass still grew tall, above a man's height, in places where the prairie was being preserved or reclaimed. I do remember the feeling, though—of surprise—of amazement at that slim strength, reaching above my eyes, such an effortless stretch to the sky. And I remember pressing through it, some of the stalks slick, others dusty. I ran my fingers along them, listened to the sounds. After wandering slowly for a while, letting the grasses bend and brush around me, I stopped. I sat down and looked up at the sky, a small blue space in this green-yellow world, my world, Laura's world. I leaned back into the grass and I felt safe there, cradled.

After the move to Iowa, I minded the cornfields for a long time. Everything seemed so flat and industrious. The drives into town from our acreage didn't have any fancy turns or glimpses of water or rows of cottonwoods. Just corn. Growing.

But toward the end of college I started to discover running as a sort of retreat. I ended up going to the private Christian school in my hometown, and after a turbulent year of living on campus decided to save the money and the stress and stay at home. Yet at 20 living with your parents gets to be tough, no matter how good a relationship you might have with them. I felt insecure, immature. I felt dependent when I wanted desperately to be independent. I felt like a failure in many ways. And I felt, often, rebellious, as I had rarely

felt in my teen years. Scraping, striving, for some way to be an adult. The emotions and the tension built and I began to run away from the house, to somehow find myself in the outdoors.

I have never been a “real” athlete, despite the years of ballet and a few attempts at track. I never believed I could run far but here I found myself out in the fields with my own distances and goals to set. As running became habit I developed a routine, a certain route, a certain time of day, a rhythm for breathing.

One time, in particular, I threw on my shoes in the kind of anger that doesn’t know whether to come out in yelling or crying, and went out in the spring chill. The fields were black but corn was poking up already, green and hopeful. Dad’s words echoed in my ears: “Barb, let her go;” Mom’s before that: “Don’t you run away from me.” Dad knew, he was like me, that I needed to cool down or words I didn’t mean would come flying out, nasty spiteful things. Let me think, first. Let me be.

Elsie, our golden/collie mutt, came along, romping through the grass, her tongue lolling out, her eyes flashing in satisfaction. It helped to see her, such loyal love, such joy in running and being with one of her people.

The sun was down, just under the horizon line, and that magic hour glow settling over the earth. Gold, everywhere, against the white houses, brightening the new greens, making the earth hallowed. A deep peach of sunset, reaching up, yellowing just a little before the sky eased into a blueish-violet. The lines of the hills were soft, like a blanket rising and falling over human curves. The houses and their few surrounding trees stood still, quiet. Everything so clear, and yet all that was harsh had been muted. The corn caught the light and held it on its leaves. The repeating rows made a mosaic of sorts, beauty in repetition, the lines that

follow the earth, the plants in careful order. This is the way of things. All right. I let out a long, slow breath.

Corn puts high demands on the soil, so instead of growing corn on one field year after year, farmers might rotate corn with other crops. This means that one year, a farmer will grow corn in a field, and the next year, he will put a different crop in that field, and possibly the next year, yet another crop; the number of rotations the farmer has depends on his specific plan. Some farmers employ a simple two-year rotation: corn, then soy, every other year. Other have more complex plans, extending to five and even seven years, incorporating wheat, oats, hay. Some even involve sowing more than one crop in a field, stretching variety across the growing season.

The Iowa farmer is most likely to rotate corn and soybeans. Sometimes alfalfa can find its way into the schedule, if the farmer has a buyer for hay. But soybeans will always make the list because, as a legume, they fix nitrogen to return it to the soil, and perhaps more importantly, they bring a decent price at the market.

Sometimes, I imagine Iowa as a quilt of many colors. The state already looks like patchwork, from the seat of a plane. But what if the patchwork were even more patchy, with even more textures and shades? What else might we grow amidst the corn, if we could get the market and infrastructures in place? Apples, first, to remind us of our orchard past. Too few people know that Iowans developed the Hawkeye, the predecessor to the Red Delicious.

Might we carry on, develop more? Even as we preserve and celebrate the hundreds of heirlooms in existence already, carrying bushel baskets home, to market, to the neighbor, spending days in applesauce and pie.

Vineyards are already springing up, the tangled vines and live music a surprise on a few acres amidst the corn. Next, bring on blueberries, raspberries, strawberry fields. Send out workers in straw hats, teenagers looking for a tan and an income. Or make them pick-your-own, with parents and leggy, freckled children rifling through plants, bringing home full crates and stained fingers.

Fields of tulips around Orange City and Pella. The Dutch still live here, surely still have a knack for tending bulbs. Can't we fill our greenhouses with the bright blooms our own good land produces, instead of imports from Holland? Beyond tulips, revive wildflowers, haul them in bunches to every Main Street florist, offer them as gifts in place of plastic balloons and cheap trinkets. It's proven that the beauty of flowers increases a person's happiness. Imagine if our country drives offered glances of fields all yellow and purple, flecked with red and white, the colors taking turns as spring moves to fall.

Oats and wheat to be interwoven with the corn and soybeans. Is it so impossible, so impractical, to create the necessary infrastructure? To share machinery to balance the cost of diversification? To revive a mill for each township or county, and grow and process the oatmeal and flour within a hundred or so miles of where one lives? Toss in some rye, some barley. Teach us how to use these grains, again. Show us how to identify them on walks down gravel roads.

And, of course, I imagine a return to the prairie, with grass in luscious blends, each afternoon meadow walk a lesson in diversity. Some spaces set aside for wilderness—prairie

for habitat, prairie for its own sake. Maybe picnics, community burns, stargazing, nature hikes. Other prairie meant for grazing, managed for ruminant nutrition, still rich in what this soil loves. Tread by cows of all shades and breeds: Red Holsteins, Brown Swiss, Black Angus, White Park, up to their knees in sweet and white clovers, bluestem and switchgrass, hairy vetch and rye. I would go out and walk with them, the grass brushing against my skirt, like some contented milkmaid in the morning sun.

The corn-soy rotation employed by most of the corn belt is certainly better than corn on corn, yet soybeans unfortunately fall low on the list of most efficient nitrogen-fixers. Further, legumes cannot give the soil everything that it needs; yes, they fix nitrogen, but what builds the soil, feeds the microorganisms within it?

Here, the farmer turns to grass. The organic farmer often has a multiple-year rotation, three or four or even up to seven years in a plan, with only one of those years in corn and several others in grass. Often, the farmer mixes grass and legumes and even forbs (or wildflowers) in imitation of the prairie Laura Ingalls would have walked through. The dense root systems of the grasses build the soil structure, allowing it to hold water and nutrients. As the grasses and parts of their root systems die over the winter, they become beneficial organic matter, and as such eventually decompose into the kind of topsoil that early settlers broke apart in wonder.

Often when I pick up books on prairie plants and prairie restoration, the words draw me in even more than the images. They form sounds that I want to feel on my tongue, create scenes beyond a snapshot or drawing, reach into some kind of story or culture or aesthetic belonging to each plant. Porcupine grass, spiked lobelia, milk vetch, cardinal flower. Some indicating their effects on humans: feverfew, sneezeweed. Others indicating their place of discovery or prominence, such as Canada wild rye and Missouri goldenrod and Eastern prickly pear. Some species have more than one name, all of them splendid: harebell, fairy thimbles, witches thimbles, bluebells of Scotland. Even the scientific names can be a tumbling kind of lyrical: *Symphyotrichum ericoides* (heath aster), *Rudbeckia hirta* (black-eyed Susan), *Lithospermum canescens* (hoary puccoon). Is it possible J.K. Rowling had been reading guides on wild plants when she came up with Harry and Hermione and their magical spells? This is not technology language, numbers instead of names. I want to go outside and find the fire in prairie blazingstar, to feel the brush of old man's whiskers, to see the bowl of the cup plant and discover if it can hold water.

Walking through pasture, occasionally kneeling to study the collection of plants growing together "like a good salad bar," the grass farmers smile a little at the question of profit. For those with integrated crop/livestock operations, they can graze their animals and further nurture the soil with manure. The farmer without livestock can harvest the grass as hay or till it in as green manure. Both practices further subtract from the cost of externally purchased fertilizers, while the very practice of growing grass, forbs, and legumes puts deposits, literally, in the topsoil bank. These profits may not be as immediately satisfying or

as large as the corn check from the grain elevator. But as Bill McKibben has argued in *Deep Economy*, sometimes the concept of profit needs to reach deeper. An immediate benefit at the cost of an irreplaceable resource fails to be justified.

Several decades of erosion will take centuries to undo. Even so, the grass farmer makes a start, offering his soil as a gift to the coming generations.

A few mornings ago I went walking with my golden retriever and found a long stretch of yellow grass, out in a wilderness restoration project west of Ames. There was a path around the outside of the grassy area, and I should have stayed on it, but a few yards I went astray to let myself feel the grasses pressing and bending. The sky was a deep gray blue and the grass an almost brilliant gold. Beyond, trees were black and bare with early spring. Tassie followed at first, not sure about this deep-grass navigation, then grew impatient with my slow pace and bounded on ahead. Her fur caught the colors of the stalks. I felt happy.

Abundance

I weave my hair into braids and dab some Coppertone Water Babies sunscreen on the part on my scalp, that little line I learned to remember after the pain of a harsh burn and the flakes that peeled off in my hair like dandruff. This far into June, early evening can still heat and burn. Then I am out the door, to walk, a mile or so to Onion Creek Farm, to spend some time in the dirt, between rows of vegetables. I could bike more quickly, but I prefer to walk most days. On bicycle wheels the series of hills to Onion Creek presents a challenge—you *must* exert to get up them and I'd often rather not in the hot sun. Walking, the pace remains more even; the body locates a natural rhythm, stays there, moves comfortably in itself through the creek-woven fields of central Iowa.

While walking, I think of my grandmother, whose body came to know the rhythm of babies: five boys, one girl. When she married my grandfather at age 18—and he, already an established farmer at age 28—a family soon followed, and with it determined the course and patterns of her days.

As a farmer's wife, she also knew the movements of seasons: spring planting, summer droughts and storms, fall harvests, winter winds. And the swells and valleys that came with life on the Great Plains, or rather at the very edge, on a farm just east of the 100th meridian. The land spread out flat and long until it came up to the Missouri, where the town nestled itself just above the banks of the water. The surface rocked and rolled then, down into bluffs, and the river moved through speckled with grasses, not yet striped with sand bars.

Southeastern South Dakota, the land of my father's childhood, was a place of small white houses and red barns and tall grass pasture and beef cattle. The families grew large and

Emmanuel Reformed Church packed itself full of hearty Dutchmen. Many farms fed many farmers; and sweaty hours of labor ended in weekends of family dinners with *all* the cousins, everyone in one house and potatoes steaming in kitchens, women chatting in aprons and pressed blouses, kids chasing each other outside and hollering with youth.

Community came with food, glass casserole dishes and creamed corn. Abundance can have various forms, even as poverty can be difficult to define. My father says he and his siblings did not consider themselves poor, though each had perhaps four or five shirts and pairs of pants apiece. Many people they knew had just the same. Still they ate every night. Often they ate well. My grandmother knew to follow the right patterns, the right motions, to keep it this way. Her family needed her to know the rhythms of life on this landscape, and in truth her culture expected it. The garden my grandmother set her body to yielded cupboards full of food. These movements—crouching in the dirt, guiding water and smothering weeds, the crisp snapping of beans—fended off hunger. Survival skills.

When my mother makes bread, she kneads the dough with strong hands. I see her motherhood in those hands: the certainty, the liteness, the care. As a child I helped her knead, but my hands were small and too gentle. “Come on honey, get into it. Push *hard*,” she’d say. There would be smile in her voice, but I would give a few presses, look at her, and after a minute slide the dough over, my fingers dusted white and tired.

Her hands were ready; they would take the dough into their space and into motion. When my mother kneads, the turn of the ball of dough makes a certain *thoosh* through the flour sprinkled across the counter. The following press of her palm is quiet, but with a kind of underlying *thump*. *Thoosh-thump. Thoosh-thump.* Round, and round, and round.

This rhythm makes sure the yeast gets worked through the dough, and the consistency is light. This bread rises. I would watch the rising take place over the next hour, peeking under white towels at sun-drenched loaves.

Sometimes, walking to Onion Creek farm, I cheat at rhythm-finding. I suppose a good nature-girl would find the birds sufficient, or the sound of the wind through the cottonwoods. I wander through these sounds in the right reflective moods. But some days I want the energy of an iPod in my ears; music piping can make me walk a bit faster, to the tune of a different culture. I light that electric apple, sing and swing-step down the side of the road.

The road's shoulder barely exists; I walk a narrow line of gravel, but cross it often. The songs sometimes make me think of God, and me, how we love each other. I know this faith is crazy and criticized by so very many, but in these times I don't care; I know He hears me singing and jives in my joy. Other times, rollicking love songs make me laugh and hope over that boy at work, the one who's moving away yet who stays in my thoughts and teases at my dreams.

Most days, I can't help breaking out of the walk to dance, just a few steps. The music wants me to. I sashay and hop and spin; rocks grind beneath my feet; only sometimes do I glance behind me.

As often as I peer into the past, I will never know the vastness of her canning. I saw a bit, as a child, when Grandma only had herself and Grandpa and Uncle Paul in the house: jars

and jars in that basement pantry room. All that food just from the garden in the house in town, the house of their retirement. Grandma's retirement canning filled walls, shelves three to four jars deep.

My cousins, the ones who lived in the same town as our grandparents and saw them all the time, took plenty of liberty to poke into those jars and suck the syrupy cherries. We, the outside cousins, remained more cautiously inquisitive. Who knew you could put beans and corn in jars? Our parents froze them in Ziploc bags and packed the freezer full. Our canning remained in the realm of jams and sauces and three kinds of pickles. We made a lot, but nothing like this.

How many shelves. Shelves to play hide-and-seek behind, in the dusky dark. In our closets at home, we had books and books on shelves like that. What then, was the count of jars for that full family of my father's youth, for the harvest of that garden on the farmstead? How many hours did Grandma stand in the steam over the stove, her hair curling around her forehead and her hands red and wet?

I have canned as a craft, a tribute, even an ethic. I started out of memory: pickling and saucing and jamming with my family were fun, story-making times in childhood. Our produce took a new form, a new taste, something beautiful and delectable to put on our own shelves, to open doors and admire later. The smell of vinegar and onion and mustard in that cool bite of cucumber. The thick bright red of raspberry on a silver spoon.

Out of college, I continued canning with a sense of carrying heritage: Grandma, Dad and Mom, now me, on my own. I had moved to the Twin Cities, signed the lease on my first apartment, and was determined to create home in my grown-up life. Little things made home: a patchwork quilt, wooden star-hangings that I'd designed and cut with my father, the picture

my brother gave me and that my mother helped me frame. Patterns, too: the days for cleaning, the method of organizing the cupboards, the right way to fold towels. And, of course, food: Grandma's pumpkin pie, Mom's health bread, Dad's cucumber slicers. Jam and applesauce would need a place on the table, in the Mason and Ball jars with shiny gold lids.

In the Cities, though, I had a miserable time finding canning supplies, and nearly threw a tearful fit. Target and HyVee carried jars, but not the canning jar lifter or the rack or a sufficiently big water bath canner. The only Farm Fleet in the surrounding suburbs was forty-five minutes away. That first summer, with crates of strawberries sitting on the counter and softening in the afternoon heat, I made do with an ordinary big pot and some sweet-corn tongs. The tips of my fingers reddened with irritation from steam and water. When the lids "pinged" their well-simmered seals, I couldn't keep back successive grins of satisfaction.

Several months later, I would volunteer at a dairy farm and inherit the owners' parents' canning supplies. The older generation had recently moved to assisted living; the subsequent generation, still sorting through the remaining items in the old farmhouse, already had canning supplies of its own. Several years later, I would share these items with eager roommates. In spring, the cherry tree in the back yard spilled red all over our porch; we canned sugary round orbs in the sweet heat of the kitchen. In the fall, we scavenged for apples and lugged them home in bushels. We were students of sustainable agriculture and food filled our minds at least half the time. We chose to can because we liked it. But reason backed our love; canning meant saving instead of wasting; produce that might otherwise go bad, preserved in reusable containers. Canning meant carrying on tradition that could be honored in its sense of economy and, we were finding, its sense of community. Three of us, in aprons and bare feet, simmering, pouring, scooping. Tasting all flavors of satisfaction.

My grandmother pulled tomatoes from her plants with the thought of winter and hungry farm-worked boys. Even with sticky applesauce fingers, cinnamon dusted across the table, I wonder how much we could ever know her.

Onion Creek Farm, a small vegetable CSA farm that feeds the people of Ames from front porches and posh restaurants, is the home and handiwork of Joe Lynch and Lonna Nachtigal. He is tall and wiry with a salt-and-pepper beard, contagious optimism, and strong political opinions. She is a graphic artist who reflects her own drawings, with a wide-brimmed straw hat, a just-as-wide smile, and a twinkle in her dark eyes.

I amble down through the gardens, the posies, onto the deck where there's a lineup of boots, rakes, straw hats, a watering can. This barn-shaped house is owner-built and solar-paneled, with south-facing windows and an attached greenhouse, and a north-facing porch with a rocking chair. I peek through the door's window, into the main living-dining-kitchen area: neatly designated spaces within a compact room that so efficiently holds heat in winter and keeps cool in summer. Various pieces represent the larger world: a tapestry from South India, an Islamic prayer rug, batiks from West Africa. Amidst so much that expresses life in this place: garlic hangs from beams in the ceiling; sweet potatoes rest in a basket on the floor. Black-and-white photographs contain past events like baling hay and savoring homemade ice cream; an old haymow trolley and a disc from a rotary hoe keep farming and history tangible even indoors. In the living room, the woodstove gathers chairs and couches around itself. The computer tucked into the corner seems almost out of place, but that it is nestled into copies of farming magazines and seed catalogs—a useful tool for enterprise.

Upstairs, a few rooms make up the bed-and-breakfast; downstairs, their private room, the entrance to the greenhouse, and the clever composting toilet. Throughout the house, on stairways and railings and decks and shelving, Joe has incorporated wood from eleven native tree species: honey locust, black locust, Eastern red cedar, silver maple, black maple, burr oak, red elm, white elm, hawthorn, mulberry, and black walnut. This house to me is eco-American, everywhere, little bits of creativity, inventiveness, practicality mixed with art. These are Americans who *do* things. Americans who think, and act. Who make, and share.

Today I can't find them, the proprietors of this landscape, but that's all right; there's always weeding to do. I walk down past the chicken coop, dark brown with a blue-trim door, little lady-hens scratching and pecking and letting out chirrupy, gobble noises. Past a man-made pond for filtering water, through a green archway, like doors in the wall of forest, out to the acre or so that provides the produce at Onion Creek. After the lush shaded area of lawn this space seems bare, so exposed to the sky. The plants have struggled this year due to a rough beginning: Iowa's spring was shocked with floods, rain on rain. The tomatoes, in particular, have been upset ever since. Yet the lines of onions and lettuce and kale have become strong rows of green, red, and purple.

I kneel down between the rows of radishes: French Breakfast and Crimson Giant are keeping too close company with crabgrass and purslane. I brush aside just a bit of dirt and look at the cheery red tops forming beneath green stems. Weeding can become tedious and, in the hot sun, exhausting; but often that clearing away of upstart plants becomes therapeutic. The methodical process, the being deep down close in the green of growing things, the satisfaction that comes when looking back at a long clear row, with perky little plants better finding the sun.

Some days I like having others around; friends who also volunteer at the farm. When we're there together we can weed and chat; and what could be just work becomes social time as well. But today is a quiet day, and I like those, too. Especially as sunset moves to dusk. I am sad today, this not-skipping-down-the-road day, aching over the boy who's moving, having just discovered that he's got a girlfriend, anyway. The world feels like a hard place. I don't want to weed today. I am glad to be alone.

During Decembers when I was a kid, my mother would bake while I spun pirouettes around the kitchen.

Every year Mom would sit down with the four of us, and we would make a list of the goodies we wanted for the season: wedding cake cookies, peppernuts, tiger candy, gingerbread, fudge, sugar cookies, butterscotch marshmallow bars. Mostly, we kids cared about the sugar cookies, the ones we got to cut out into shapes and decorate with frosting. The artistic side so cultivated in us found satisfying expression here. Mom could make the other kinds—the kinds we hadn't yet realized were art, as well—and we would come alongside and help with those as we wanted, even if just to lick the bowl.

The Nutcracker meant Christmas to me, three performances a year, and we started learning steps in July. I didn't often practice my ballet at home but *The Nutcracker* music could woo me into it, especially as red ribbon and spruce wreaths began appearing on doorways and streetlamps. The smell of fudge-rich brownies wafted through the house as I slipped on my shoes and hit play on our clunky tape player: then, *The Dance of the Reed Pipes* trilled through the air, and I spun around with visions of sequins and bright lights.

Christmas at Grandpa and Grandma Romkema's. A small, artificial Christmas tree at the ranch-style house in Springfield; our uncle had taken over the family farm when I was a baby, and Grandma and Grandpa retired to town. Piles of presents for all the cousins. Wanda, Erica, Lisa, Rebecca, Elena, Kayla—everyone laughed at us, how the names of all the girls ended in A, how down the row we were all about six months apart.

Elena and I were the strange cousins, the ones who didn't live in Springfield, the ones whose father and mother had professional degrees yet who still didn't have much money. We were the ones who talked about other places and other people; or else, who didn't talk at all, just listened to the cousins talk about the people *they* knew without leaving much room for us to chime in. We probably did the same to them. In younger years, not caring, we cousins romped around the basement together on hands-and-knees, playing wild horses, wearing proudly names like Sparkles and Wildfire.

In older teen years we tried to connect, with games of darts and pool and talk of varying fashion trends from Minnesota to South Dakota. When boyfriends began invading the scene—burly rural boys more interested in sports than their girlfriends' relatives—we gave up altogether.

Only in later years, with the broadening experiences of college and the maturing experiences of marriage, would we adopt politeness and even, eventually, regain genuine interest in one another's lives. Somehow we all ended up learning Midwestern nice and how to back it with something real.

What remained the same, despite these shifting relationships, were Grandma's iced tea and jams and pies. Pumpkin pie, apple pie, sometimes cherry. The smell of coffee hovering around the kitchen. Even while Grandpa was still alive—a strong figure with years

of caring for the land worn into his hands, and his humor with crinkling eyes so like my father's—even then Grandma carried in her short figure the stature of a matriarch. In the center of all these people milling, chatting, unwrapping presents, there she moved, her dark curling hair fading to gray and then to white, as she fed us turkey and rolls, pumpkin and whipped cream, these her many offspring, a sign of her success.

In my twenties, I make bread when I feel defeated. Or suffocated. Or alone.

I move my hands in the circles my mother taught me. *Thoosh-thump. Thoosh-thump.* I leave swirls in the flour on the counter. Outside, traffic. Strangers in strange cities. A bad grade lingering in the backpack. A bust of a lesson plan.

The yeast works its way through the grains. I hold the dough close to my face. Pat it into loaf pans. Set it in the sun to rise.

They made things in the world. Grandma. Mom. From their bodies and their hands grew life and love, reaching beyond momentary passion into the consistency of patience and hard labor. These women are not the same: my grandmother so willing to keep the world at peace that she nods and smiles where my own mother would apply serious critical thinking and, often, a challenge and active response. Still, they both learned the ways of production and nurture.

I could not help but imitate their movements, but en route to adulthood, my choices of college and career somehow push men and relationships to the side. Behind the bright lights, the sparkle of sequins and well-turned phrases, I stumble backward, reach for the old blueprints, find them disintegrating in my hands.

The sun falls low and long in the evening with a warmth that reminds me of freshly baked bread; a kind of fullness, a happiness not as exuberant as joy but just as strong, though softer. Still I want to cry; I am sure that life is going to be hard for a long time now. I hadn't expected to care for a boy as much as I did this one; I had been determined not to fall for that foolishness again. But here, I just did. No. I won't think about it. I pull at the purslane. The plant is so pretty, its waxy leaves deep green and shaped like teardrops, that I am sorry it's a weed; as such it's largely lost its edible value in our culture.

I set my goal: several rows of radishes, lettuce, kale. As I move along I see the work of my hands. Doing something good. A simple good. Fresh produce to find its way to plates in Stomping Grounds and The Café, to friends of Joe and Lonna's, to my own plate. Good food, local food. A reminder of what we can grow and how we might eat.

As I walk back to my apartment with a bag full of small onions, I think about how I want to change the way things have turned out. Still that sunset, that space, that was a breath. A place where my mind could set itself aside for a moment, and I could feel the way the earth moves on.

Soil and Water

wanderer

I press on down
through grasses
so thick I can feel
them strain against
me in their space.

the rain runs off
my coat, soaks into
pants, slides inside
rain boots, sloshing
water around wet feet.

over the hill's curve,
away from the house,
away from the gray
overcast to the trees,
ash and plum.

I kneel at wood's
edge, to the gentle pink
of a wild rose, bearing
drops alone, turning
its face up to the sky.

Melrose, MN, 1993

We tear around town
on our pink and purple
dream machines, eight
and eleven and into
the summer, the wind
tossing our hair, cooling
our skin. We race out
to the pool, the Jaycee
Park with all its pines,
the bridge over the rocks,
that curve in the Sauk River
where the boys all fish.
Scuffing over gravel,
rumbling across railroad
tracks, flying down the
steep thrill of Molly's Hill.
My sister and I are on the
way to our places. The
spin of pedals echoes
our shouts, our laughter.

my father's hands

take the brunt
of winter, find
the wind, snow,
biting ice; battle

fences, cattle,
cars, firewood,
another drift
in the lane.

they crack.
tight, slick, red
and even black-
blue in places.

as a child i held
them at the table,
traced the cracks
with my thumb.

Notes on Wood

1.

A birdsong repeated itself
all through the afternoon.
I hummed the notes to hold
the melody, searched hours for
the feathered color in the green,
but I never actually found the bird,
or someone who knew its song.

2.

Where the birch bark peels
away from the trunk, I traced
the curl of the paper, ran a finger
along the markings that grow
brown against the slick white,
that I might learn the forest-
script, uncover its messages.

3.

Deep in spring the plum sent out
a heady-sweetness, frothy, ripe.
I wandered half the morning
after it, the sun warm on my
head. Then pressed my face into
those white blossoms, the petals
flicking, brushing at my skin.

Daisy, Daisy

Pedal
 Pedal
 Pedal
 Pedal
 Pedal
 On the sea-sea-sea-sea

I sing at the front
 of the tandem bike, this
 tune one of us patched
 together from other
 lyrics, other melodies.

They say songs help
 the disabled; we know.
 My brother loves
 the words, the music,
 poetry in sound.

“Keep pedaling,
 Craig!” He laughs
 from the back and
 I can feel the bike
 sway as he tosses
 his head from side
 to side. “Pedal

on the sea-sea-sea-
 sea,” he echoes.
 The bike surges forward.
 Here is no such thing

as cerebral palsy, only
 the turning of wheels,
 the slap of flip-flops,
 the way summer holds
 our notes in its heat.

Finding

1.

Across the road, the neighbors
ploughed up clay pots,
arrowheads, a skull, learned
they lived on part of an old
Sioux Trail. Some warrior-
traveler must have died
right on their property,
and now here he was, white
and hollow-eyed, an artifact.

A small green sign hoisted,
marked the spot, but behind
stayed the machinery, old
implements kept for parts.
And a white barn, dismal
as white barns become
without regular painting.
A herd of Holstein cows
confined to a manure-thick lot
overlooking one man's
burial ground.

2.

A hundred yards away,
I sat on the hill gazing down
into our meadow, to where grass
reached pond and marsh, our small
wilderness. The wind, coming up
over the rise, found my hair
and tangled into it. And I
wondered if that same wind
remembered, before, the black
locks of some Sioux girl
who wandered from the trail
to listen to tree frogs
singing in the wetlands.

3.

The grove behind
the alfalfa field gathered
deer bones, skulls and
the long femurs of legs.
Smaller skeletons too,
rodents we couldn't identify,
guessed, studying the neat
ivory organization of those
remaining partially intact.

We climbed on the pile
of rocks at the edge of the
grove and our dog sniffed
around madly—rabbits hiding,
maybe. Deeper in the trees
the soil dipped in concave
circles, odd places, like bowls
carved in the dirt by human
hands, though not ours.

The grove beckoned those
bright afternoons, in the
mystery of ancient things.
But night warned us away,
starred, shot with moonlight
grasses, rustled, twigs cracked
in the restless quiet. Foliage
heavy with the dark. From
our windows in the tall white
house, we could hear a wind
wailing over whatever
had been lost.

July

1.

Twelve crates of raspberries
warm in the back seat, the car
wine-heady with their red aroma.
Our fingers stained fuschia, our
tongues tangy beneath the lingering
sweet of samples hot off the vine.

2.

Glass jars lined up, catching light,
steaming from the dishwasher.
Then, raspberries and sugar in
a pot on the stove, bubbling. Red-
stained recipe: how to capture, save,
reclaim for winter's thick loaves.

3.

Five more jars in the cabinet.
I take one out, open in pale light,
set beside the pot of tea. Jewel
red behind the glass. A knife glints.
I spread the jam over butter, bread.
Warm, bright summer in the mouth.

grey

rocks clamber up on top
of each other as if in a hurry
to get somewhere, but frozen
into place.

pines are quiet. pointing
all together where the rocks
climb. the lake finds the sky
in a blurred horizon. a liner,
a black, long mark against
the blue.

only the falls rush downward,
white, copper, green, over
mossy-grey rocks. pools in places.
my dog dips her paw in. drinks.

I want to get in, somewhere,
the sky, pinecones, the wash
of water.

september. cold. I clamber up
on top of the rocks and
taste the spray.

Ritual

What made her come back
was the sound of the waves.

Long summer days, she
spread her grief out on the sand.

Sometimes, the sun burned it
into a tired, smoldering stranger.

Other times she studied every
grain by grain, to know the heft

and shape and sum, one beside
another. Always, she ended by

wading in the shallows, like some
penitent seeking forgiveness,

yet without white-clad choirs or
inspired clichés. No: only water

murmuring its doctrine slow,
dark, soft against her skin.

Dawn

Cattails through the dusky air,
spear straight, soft near the tops,
gather snow from the sky,
don it like feathery cloaks.

I push cold hands into pockets.
The dog darts around, bites at
yellow grass, her eyes dark
and bright.

“Hurry up, girl,” I say.
Light pushes the shadows.
Across the rails, a farmer’s
field lies quiet under snow.

The cattails shiver. Snow
drifts. Now the cars come,
barreling under a whistle
long with morning.

In the Field

The sunburn reaches like a smile
across my lower back. I twist
to look in the mirror and think,
huh, well, no hot tan lines
this year.

Maybe it's okay not to care.
The care this summer is somewhere else
on cattle on grass, on spring rains, on getting
the weeds out, on getting the farmers in
the fields.

The care is in how many hours, how many names,
too many, I need a course in taxonomy,
or less tendency to daydream. Filing
information of this place, its people,
how to know them, how well.

The care is on the land, Iowa split in floods,
Iowa helping itself, Iowa still full of fields
of the corn

we grow.

knee-deep in it

the garden takes
shapes

little curly garlic
scapes

plucky green onion
tops, straight angles

over round moons
of pearl and purple

radishes like tear drops
in red, white, pink

carrots thick as a thumb
down to fine hairs,

and lacy tickly soft
atop, cheeky fringe

in these harvests,
pause, hands full,

a-plenty, cornucopia,
utopia of art.

Weeds

Everyone waxes poetic
about that little green
sprout pushing up
through the soil
virile and determined
yet oh so frail.

funny, though, how
none of that sweet
ness reflection comes
when weeds persist
on living, despite
the anti-nurture
we give them.

shouldn't something
be said for such
pluckiness, such
stubborn strength?
they at least,
can't be accused
of failing to bloom
where they're planted.

freckles and sparks

two fistfuls of onions,
the green tops
held tight in glove-
clad hands. I know,
walking home, I
am a sight:
what some might
see as a mess, others
as picturesque.
I think the latter-
I hope, anyway,
those pigtails,
the dirt-stained
knees, ripped jeans,
sun-kissed cheeks
maybe charming to
some car passing
by, some guy in
a pickup. vain.
oh well. I shrug,
laugh, it's just me.
dump the onions
and their tops,
in a hot hot pan,
the oil sparking
and hissing. brown
the edges, then,
oh, that layered
flavor, the fullness of
good fat and the
lighter sweet bite
of onion and tops.
me, I am a gardener,
a little bit, and
good gosh, all this,
why not soak it up?

creek walking

the gasp of cold. we walk creeks
springs into falls, pebble bare
toe lapping trickle down water.

one golden retriever. one young
writer dreamer love seeker.
pennies drip dropping like

a trail of wishes. we move
deep into high banks, green
wood. dog bounds, looks

back. moss on boulders. black
and wet. I strip off my shirt,
shorts. shoulders find freckles.

one rock. one girl. it angles
soft against the arch of a foot.
slick, slip, bruise and slide.

pebble creek. I sit in it,
gooseberry skin, counting
pennies as the dog rushes

to shake water in my hair.

town walking

the back of the right knee
tightens in protest but
outside, outside we walk

dog and person, our daily
routine. she pants. I swing
my arms in the warmth of a

softshell, the deep burgundy
of berries. winter is not here
yet. down the blocks, hazy

lights of old town. we glance
past houses old enough
to stand as matriarchs

well-dressed, hints of
gingerbread, brick posts,
windows with the candle-

glow of fall and
broad polished beams.
they are stories to walk by.

I am not the listener. I am
the one hiding from words
outside. paws to pavement.

right knee telling me
to slow it down.

Iowa

Barns red and independent
alike as sisters, scattered
across the prairie like children
in a schoolyard. Hiding secrets
of rope swings in the haymow,
favorite calves poured
just a little extra milk,
holes in the posts where
kittens climb and look out
eyes glinting opal from the dark.

Inside the chores, the same
across the acres: grain and hay
to the cows, oats and hay
to the horses, slop to the pigs,
water to everyone, and hours
and hours of scraping out
manure, especially in the winter.

The barns know these as well
as the children and know too
the thoughts of cleaner times,
of harvest festivals and dances,
with the girls in swirling bright
skirts and the boys standing
chewing their wheat against
the wall, until they come together

and anyone can see the cycle
of life starting itself over again.
Barns collapsing into steel.
Outside fields run away into
the horizon, soybeans and alfalfa
but mostly corn pushing up soft
and unknowing from the soil
into a botanical army, clothed
in bright green, equipped at
the right age with potent formulas
to combat bugs and disease
and unaware they're turning
their best ally against them

by stripping the soil of its own strength. Still ears of corn grow thick and well-wrapped, jewels of grain concealed and carried close to the body of the plant, until the stalk ages in the sun; then profit taken and means knocked over, plowed under, discarded into nothing but tired, chemical-laden fodder for the cattle and the soil to try breaking down into something worth using.

Onion Creek Farm

Joe wears white.
It blocks the sun.
But it's also like
him, opposing despair,
darkness. Analytical,
critical, still optimistic.

Lonna wears a straw
hat and, it seems, red.
A smile. Something
about the way she talks
tells you she's an artist.

Their home, barn-shaped,
holds a greenhouse, peers
glass-faced, over a wood,
down to the creek. The
main floor holds you

in its coziness, the conciseness
of space, a woodstove, office,
and kitchen in one room,
carefully designated,
seamlessly integrated.
We chat and cook. Wine,

bread, greens of so many kinds,
talk of politics, family history,
Ireland, what in the world
needs to happen. We work out
our ways of knowing.

I am a dreamer, a talker;
I think plan and yet
doing is sometimes hard.
Here I watch and see
this next step lived
out, what I say we ought
to do, is done; and more.

Little rural America, what you
need is this, Joe and Lonna
and their tubs full of lettuce,

bouquets of garden hoes,
ponds pouring water clean
into each other. What you need
is this, an art of living well
through careful thought
and practice.

soil and water

in the shower
I scrape at the
dirt beneath
my fingernails

even if I like the
farm, the country,
the boys just a little
rough around the

edges, that doesn't
mean the princess
in satin ribbon
is gone and

she likes pearly
fingernails, flowers
tucked in a curl and
now and then, something

soft, like eyelet.
a rough-hewn fence
wants that touch
of white cotton, the

sharp beauty in a
pair of matched
opposites. I step out
of the shower, linoleum

puddles, citrus scent
shaking with the towel
from my hair. Rub,
scrub. Country girl,

put on your ruby slippers.

Reward

Some things you ought
to have to earn.
Like wild black
raspberries, the sweet
lushness beyond
plastic packages.
Ripe, out in the
mosquito-thicket.
I wear shorts and now
the suckers find me,
branches scratch,
but I reach through the
green for that dark,
deep flavor.
Nothing, nothing, will
taste the way this
berry does in
a bowl of vanilla
Jersey ice cream. Even
while, sitting with
the juice and milk
lining my lip,
I will scratch
at my ankle
with a bare toe.

Sugar and Cloves

The Place of Tenderness

The kitten fights against the dropper. I nudge again. Gently use a fingernail to ease its mouth open. “You’ve got to eat, little guy.” This one sits most of the day in the corner of the box, its head low. The occasional quiver.

The other kittens are making a rebound already, getting fat little bellies and mewing loudly in demand when they see me peering over the edge of the box with the dropper and milk replacer.

I sometimes wonder if this one misses its mother more than the others do. If the sense of abandonment rests most deeply with the littlest one. The kitten gives a weak whimper as I squeeze the liquid into its mouth. I watch to see if the throat moves in a swallow. Wait. There. Yes, acceptance.

I stroke its head, the little black patch at the top against all that whiteness, though not so white now, with no mother to lick the fur clean. I set the kitten down and hope that somehow my will for it to live will radiate into the tiny body. It shakes itself and totters over to the side of the box, crouches, is still.

My mother has watched us at this, my younger brother and I, and once she paused to say, “Such tender children I’ve raised.” Indeed, we learned it first from her, this extra gentleness for the animals, especially those lost, afraid, sick, motherless.

When I was in high school my father and brother kept sheep, a hobby of sorts. I sometimes helped, mostly studied. Deep into algebra, a late winter’s night, I heard the wheels of my father’s truck on the gravel, the rolling of his diesel engine. I came upstairs to greet him and found him handing my mother a lamb.

A lamb, woolen, legs stretched, eyes wide.

The lamb wouldn't drink, Dad said. The ewe had rejected him, wouldn't let him suck from her. The cold rubber of a bottle wasn't as nice. The lamb bleated and fought.

Usually Dad could get a lamb to drink. But when he couldn't he came to Mom. He claimed she had a magic touch. That was the best he could explain.

Mom sat down on the floor of the kitchen and cradled the lamb in her lap. The lamb's hooves clattered and scraped against the floor at first, when he struggled. Mom stroked him, let him settle in. Spoke in soft voices.

I sat down across from my mother so that our knees were almost touching. The lamb in the middle smelled like straw and warmth and a little manure.

Mom slid her hand under the lamb's chin, along his neck. She held the bottle and worked until the nipple found its way into his mouth. He turned his head away, but she kept trying until milk splashed out and the lamb got a taste. Milk on the white mouth.

Patience.

He couldn't figure it out at first, bit at the bottle, his little bleats so like cries that I ached. But then he got it, held his mouth around the opening, sucking warm milk to fill his newborn belly.

Mom looked up at me and there was the smile of mothers between us.

Sometimes, back at the farm in Minnesota, Dad had to slide a tube down a calf's throat to get food into its stomach. A necessary kind of force, when the effort of sucking or the pain of digestion overwhelmed the animal's will to eat. But these smaller animals, these lambs and kittens, make such tubes difficult if not impossible. So we must resort to patience.

A gentle insistence. A kind of care and compassion for the living thing, so chosen and so certain that it seems almost to be love.

**

The pastoral ideal is nothing new to laugh at, or to covet. By definition the pastoral most anciently involves sheep and a shepherd, though its meaning has come to include all aspects of rural life in a kind of quaint, wholesome sense. In the pastoral, the farmer wears bib overalls, or suspenders, maybe even a straw hat. A young girl has a braid down her back, freckles on her cheeks, and bare feet. A little boy sits in jeans, shirtless, on a rustic brown fence, sun-brownned and strong-limbed. A dog runs around the yard, a big red barn rises in the background, Mother hangs white linens out on the line. In the morning, milk comes fresh from the cows. In the afternoon, bales are stacked high and golden in the barn. In the evening, crickets chirp against a star-lit sky while children chase fireflies into Mason jars.

This is an old version of the American dream, one that has faded from the plans of most Gen X and Y youth. Yet the dream lingers, more present to our modern psyches than we might realize. Wooden children's puzzles depict a farmer in overalls and his red barn and a menagerie of animals, not a farmer in sanitized coveralls and a long steel warehouse full of hogs or turkeys. And almost every child in America has this puzzle, whether or not they have seen a farm in real life.

On our supermarket shelves, we see item after item exhibiting some manifestation of this pastoral ideal—whether or not the product so packaged is organic, natural or conventionally produced. Organic Valley's cartons of milk feature different pastoral

countrysides to reflect the different regions across the country, from New England hills and woods to Midwestern plains to the blue-green verdant pastures of the Pacific Northwest. Maple sugar and maple syrup, among the few products still frequently produced on a small scale, often wear labels that feature scenes of wooden snow-covered cabins, thick trees, a family riding in a sleigh. Children chase alongside with the dog, and a team with bells pulls upfront. Country Hearth Bread begins with warmth and home in the title, moves to the simple image of a fireside, ends with the dark crusts of their bread peeking through the bag. Hodgson Mill, a flour company, depicts a quaint old-fashioned water mill amidst trees. Heartland Granola features a farmer in a straw hat, using a scythe to harvest wheat, with blue skies and green fields in the background. Archer Farms features a perky rooster as its logo, though you'd be hard-pressed to find a rooster on most farms these days. Clabber Girl Baking Powder shows a family of yesteryear preparing for dinner in a decidedly rustic, rural atmosphere: Mother and one of the children pluck a bird, two other children play beside them, a kitten rubs up against a wooden box, and the oldest girl carries a plate of fresh rolls in the foreground, her big eyes and gentle smile inviting the viewer to try one.

SuperTargets across the country milk the pastoral myth, plastering their walls with images of cows in green pastures, fresh eggs in baskets, glass bottles of milk in wire holders set atop a hay bale. As shoppers browse under fluorescent lights, pushing red plastic shopping carts through metal aisles full of glossy packaging, they can glance up for a few moments of escape. I discovered this marketing maneuver after my first move to the Twin Cities, and despite my tendency to resist the ploys of advertising, I fell into these scenes with something akin to desperation. For just a few moments I could see—what I'd had, what I

wanted, even as it seemed so very distant and impossible. Sometimes I wondered how many were like me, how many knew it.

**

In the Christian church, the pastoral came to mean the caring of a leader for followers, the pastor and the flock. This leadership has historically been distorted at times, as all positions of power can be, but in its ideal state the pastor/shepherd acts in loving service to the people within the congregation. He or she knows the people in the community, fosters their relationships and spiritual growth, and helps them discover the truths that will bring them joy, contentment, and rest.

Yet this human pastor is merely an imitator, of the ultimate Christian leader, the One who calls himself The Good Shepherd. I don't mean to minimize the role of the pastor in the church, but merely to acknowledge that no human holds a role higher or more holy than others. As leadership is necessary, that leader models in a more public role what all Christians, as they claim to be, ought to be modeling to one another. For the call of Christianity is to become more like Christ. And the Good Shepherd is a relentless giver, a persistent nurturer.

**

On the cover of *Country Living* magazine, you will usually see a table and chairs set outside, some lovely fabrics, greenery, and a cool pitcher of lemonade. Or a rustic building bearing a

snow-dusted Christmas wreath. Or a child swinging joyously across the page on a tire, in a blue-and-white dress. Maybe a field of lavender, or a hammock and an old copy of *The Portrait of a Lady*.

American readers of *Country Living*, myself included, have noted a significant difference between the American edition and the British edition. The American edition seems to be for the suburbanite who wants to incorporate country traditions, tips, and decor into his or her way of life. The emphasis is on activities, foods, and styles that most anyone might adopt. Surely there is nothing wrong with this approach, yet I never find myself buying this copy at Barnes and Noble. Instead, I opt for the larger and glossier British *Country Living*, which has been voted the country's best environmental magazine and conducts such campaigns as Fairtrade for British Farmers and Bringing Back the Nature Table. This magazine, claim others readers and I, truly focuses on the small village and how to build and maintain a rural society. It emphasizes such things as supporting local farmers and regularly features artisans such as men who make sculptures from driftwood, women who sew and embroider aprons, and families who hand-carve walking sticks from the woodland areas they purchase and restore.

The U.S. publication simply pales in comparison, seems more about good housekeeping than country living, in the end. Though at the risk of sounding scornful, I must ask: Is America satisfied with a mock pastoral, the pretend-farm things we can incorporate into suburban lives? The American *Country Living* doesn't force us to let go of the farm, entirely; nor does it let us have it, entirely. Are we content to live in this meridian? Or are we simply stuck here, in this pattern of progress, in the understanding that small towns *are* failing, good jobs *are* in the cities, and even as we resign ourselves to beige vinyl in a cul-de-

sac, we would rather see what we *can* craft of country life here, rather than page enviously through the charmed pastoral of another, far away land?

**

Let it be known: the pastoral ideal has haunted many a farm child, many a back-to-the-lander, many a well-meaning CSA volunteer. This pretty image of integrated communities and holistic farms does not come without its share of blood and sweat, failed dreams, pinched pennies, and sacrifice. Sometimes, the tractor breaks. Sometimes, people don't keep their word. Sometimes, sickness sweeps through the healthiest of barns. Sometimes, a farm goes under. Every day someone has got to trudge through the mud or snow or manure to gather the eggs or milk the cows or ration out the feed. *Every* day, and if you want a vacation, you've got to pay someone to do your job for you. This is work and commitment of a kind many of us dream of never coming close to. It's not all lying atop hay bales a-watchin' a sunset. Too easily we see such images and forget the accompanying realities.

The toss-up that results forces us to measure our values. What, exactly, is your time worth to you? What are certain experiences or habits or even people worth to you? What do you risk losing, or gaining?

**

Brennan Manning, a former Franciscan priest and active author and speaker, is best known for his insistence on the human experience of the fullness of God's love and the vastness of God's grace. He rages against the legalism that drowns out compassion as well as the complacency that cheapens forgiveness. One who truly knows love will not be driven by fear, but by gratitude and joy. And from there life becomes different.

With all his ideals and intensity, Manning does not forget that Christians are human and prone to error. In fact, he insists upon acceptance of this reality. It is for this reason that the sacrifice of Jesus becomes so great and so necessary. So love is offered again and again.

He writes, in his book *The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus*:

The parables of Jesus reveal a God who is consistently overgenerous with His forgiveness and grace. He portrays God as the lender magnanimously canceling a debt, as the shepherd seeking a strayed sheep, as the judge hearing the prayer of the tax collector. In Jesus' stories, divine forgiveness does not depend on our repentance or on our ability to love our enemies or on our doing heroic, virtuous deeds. God's forgiveness depends only on the love out of which He fashioned the human race.

This offering, however, must be accepted, and once accepted, can be experienced. Manning pushes beyond mere intellectual knowledge: "To believe means to realize not just with the head but also with the heart that God loves *me* in a creative, intimate, unique, reliable, and *tender way*."

Author Phillip Keller portrays the shepherd in a similar light. Keller grew up in a culture of shepherding in East Africa, and for eight years worked as a sheep rancher in North America. In his book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, he focuses on each line of the passage

anyone marginally familiar with the church will have been exposed to: “The Lord is my shepherd,” it begins; “I shall not want.” In his first chapter, Keller identifies and explains certain roles—what it is to be the shepherd and what it is to be shepherded. A good shepherd regards the flock as something valuable and even joy-giving, and so he makes sacrifices for those in his care. It is his role to make sure they have all they need. And the response of the flock is to trust that they will be provided for. The phrase “I shall not want” is less a command to humans to avoid desiring things, and more of an encouragement for us to trust that we will not be left without.

Keller says of the Shepherd:

He is the owner who delights in His flock. For Him there is no greater reward, no deeper satisfaction, than that of seeing His sheep contented, well fed, safe and flourishing under His care. This is indeed His very “life.” He gives all He has to it. He literally lays Himself out for those who are His . . . From early dawn until late at night this utterly selfless Shepherd is alert to the welfare of His flock.

The Bible authors, such as this Psalm’s King David (an experienced shepherd himself), used analogies from the culture they knew to describe the God who had revealed Himself to them. Is it possible that generations of the historically dominantly Christian Western culture used this model of shepherding to guide their own agricultural endeavors? The persistence even today of the pastoral ideal suggests as much. Episodes of James Herriott’s *All Creatures Great and Small* and countless Hallmark movies show time and again the noble farmer, veterinarian, or child spending all night in the barn with a colicky horse or abandoned lamb. Personal responsibility is felt deeply by the shepherd, and the life within his or her care

becomes of such importance that sacrifice is not extreme but expected. The animals, while they live, should be safe and content in their pastures, nurtured by owners who know each one. Where did we depart from such thinking? With massive feedlots and hog confinements extending themselves across the country, I have to wonder, when did the necessity of profit overcome the devotion of the shepherd?

**

When we put on the billowy plastic boots and head to the barns, I bit my lips in the rain, hoping I wouldn't get too worked up about what I was going to see. I had heard about these Confined Animal Feeding Operations, the CAFOs of many an angry environmental article. Hundreds to thousands of animals—turkeys, chickens, cows, pigs, whatever product you please—concisely packed into long metal buildings. The only way such high numbers can live in such close quarters is through what seems like an almost panicky biosecurity system and umpteen vaccines. In some operations, workers have to shower before entering and shower before leaving. The rationale is simple: if one animal comes into contact with a disease, the entire herd could be decimated in one fell swoop.

A recent post to *Grist* explained further why such intense biosecurity is necessary for CAFOs. In a small-scale, less-contained operation, the writer said, the animals have better resistance to disease for several reasons. First, they have fresh air, often times fresher food and/or access pasture, and regular exercise, which altogether contribute to better health. Second, they *are* exposed to diseases now and then, but there's less likelihood with fewer pigs overall, as well as fewer pigs being carted in and out on a regular basis. If one pig does

get sick, the others, with already better overall health and therefore stronger immune systems, might be exposed without actually catching a full-fledged version of the disease. Their immune systems thus become stronger still. Third, these animals are generally happier, or more content if you prefer, because they are allowed to engage in instinctive behaviors, such as pigs wanting to root in the dirt or cows needing to chew on grass. An animal that is not constantly frustrated is far less likely to succumb to illness.

Many of these kinds of comments lingered in my head, and at the same time I, along with my fellow classmates, had been reminded not to go into each situation with a set of judgments or preconceptions at the forefront. The twenty-five or so of us in the class were exploring the different components of the food system in Iowa, from farms to grocery stores to packing plants. I had seen many new things—hogs hanging upside down from chains on a conveyor in the process of slaughter, huge vats of corn being turned into syrup, a pile of compost full of worms to speed the turn back to dirt, boughs of bittersweet to be sold at craft fairs, a home-based milk bottling machine for a herd of gentle Jersey cows. But I had yet to see a CAFO beyond the glimpses from highways and gravel roads.

The farmer who greeted us was cheerful and spoke with pride about his family farm. He seemed like a nice guy and his boys traipsed around ready to follow in his footsteps. My father has said that the new family farm is not a farm owned by the family, but a farm run by the family. I know what he means, but I don't like the fact. Still, as the farmer explained the logistical side of his operation, I could see how contract work had its benefits. With far less risk to the farmer, why not? Is ownership really that important?

We stepped into the long white building and there they were, pens full of cute pink piglets. They ran about on metal floors and didn't seem terribly crowded. The place was

clean and had a system to wash the floors periodically. So, it was a little dark and industrial. Oh, well. The piglets romped and squealed and we laughed at their flat wiggly noses. But one of my classmates whispered in my ear, “How long have they been here?”

The farmer told us, about a week. I wondered how much bigger they would get, and how many to a pen, then? Would they grow despondent, less active, after a certain amount of time? I asked if the males and females were separated, but one of the hired men told me it didn’t really matter. They’re all basically the same. I wanted to know if he paid attention to each animal as it grew. And if so, how? What qualities matter most in a pig in an animal factory?

A study hanging simple strips of colored fabric above the pigpens showed significant increase in the animals’ growth and health. All the fabric did was give them something to look at. These intelligent animals thrive on studying, on exploring.

I looked at the tails. Docked. In his essay, “An Animal’s Place,” Michael Pollan explains how piglets, desperate for something to chew since they’re deprived of an environment that allows this instinctive action, begin to chew on one another’s tails. To prevent problems, farmers dock the tail to make it especially sensitive. The chewing will then be so painful that the pigs dart away from each other to prevent being chewed on. Without such pain, they have become so bored and programmed into “learned helplessness” that they won’t move and the tails will become infected.

I shook my head to try to get the thought out of my mind. Too late. Already there.

The calf was blind.

I remember the day that my father brought him home. He led him out of the old white trailer, a green halter rope draped around the calf's head and nose. The calf barely stepping forward. Dad pulling, gently. "Come on, Radar."

I stood by the house. I knew the calf was blind because Dad had said so before he went to pick him up from one of his farmer-clients. Dad brought home a lot of calves with strange things, like a lame leg or weak lungs. Things the farmers often didn't have time to care for. Dad would find the time.

I had never seen a blind one before and I was afraid of his eyes.

Dad must have seen me watching, but he didn't say anything. He kept leading Radar slowly toward the shed, the small shed with the peeling red paint where they kept the new calves. Radar stumbled over the doorjamb. I winced as he knocked down on one of his knees, but he scrambled up without bawling.

I followed them inside the shed. There Dad was putting Radar into his own pen, fresh with straw.

I stood in the doorway. The calf was far enough away that I could glance at him without having to see the head too closely.

"You want to feed him?" Dad looked at me as he worked the rope off the calf's nose.

I shrank back and shook my head.

"The eyes aren't so bad, Erica." He stepped out of the pen and hung the rope on a nail jutting from the wall. "Just small."

I shook my head again.

“All right.” Dad left the shed, carrying an empty bottle he would fill with milk replacer and warm water.

The calf nosed around his pen, bumping into the wooden fencing as he learned his boundaries. He would pause a little, and turn away, until he found the space to move.

His head was fuzzy. I could see from the doorway, the softness of the lines that were slick and clean on calves with finer coats. I came closer.

He lifted his head toward me. I made myself look. His eyes. They were small, like Dad had said. Small, shiny, black. Almost twinkly. Different from the big blue-brown eyes most calves had, with their thick fringes of lash. These had hardly any lash at all.

Different, but not bad. Not ugly.

Not scary.

“Radar.” I leaned against the fence.

He leaned in toward me, toward my voice. He was just close enough. I reached out a hand and stroked his forehead. His nose was wet against my wrist.

**

The Organic Valley Farmer’s Pledge

Whereas how we eat determines how the Earth is used, and

Whereas agriculture is the largest polluter on Earth, and

Whereas the act of growing food should not contaminate water, deplete soil, kill wildlife, destroy the ozone layer, contribute to antibiotic resistance, leave poisonous residues on the food so grown, compromise human health nor risk the genetic disruption of the entire natural world,

We, the Farmers of Organic Valley, in order to form a more perfect union between our agricultural practices and the natural world, sustain life for countless future generations, establish economic justice for rural communities, insure the tranquility of our domesticated animals, and promote general welfare, hereby declare our intention to work as organic producers in building a partnership society with those who buy and consume our food.

We, the Farmers ...

1. Respect the laws of nature.
2. Know we can feed the world with organic and sustainable agriculture.
3. Build strong rural farm communities that help sustain healthy urban communities.
4. Must have farmer determined stable pay pricing.
5. Honor animals through humane practices.
6. Require protection from other chemical and genetic contamination of our crops.
7. Claim the right to say what is and is not in our product.
8. Reserve the right to save our seeds.
9. Deserve to receive our fair share of the research dollar.
10. Expect tax laws to reward excellent care of our water, air, soil, and wildlife habitat, hence protecting bio-diversity.

11. Are advocates for organic education.

12. Pledge our support of farmers everywhere.

-“We the Farmers,” Organic Valley Family of Farms

**

Martin and Loretta Jaus have a dairy farm. The yellow-brick barn has the Jaus name patterned in above the entrance to the haymow. This place has been in Jaus family hands for over a century.

In my early years of interest in alternative agriculture systems, I contacted Organic Valley to see if, by chance, they might be able to set up a short, week-long internship for me with one of their farmers. I had been impressed with the company, what I knew of it: first by the handsome brown eggs my parents purchased through a buying co-op, second through the farmer stories I read on the milk cartons I bought in my suburban coop, and third by the elaborate mission and beautiful images portrayed on their website. While the co-op does not typically perform such services, something in my letter must have made them want to help me out. They proposed an exchange: if they set me up with an internship, would I write an article for their company publication? *Let me think.*

So I ended up at the Jaus farm for a week of exploration. Loretta and Martin were milking around fifty Holstein cows at the time. I walked with Martin through the pastures as he explained the rotational grazing system: he left the cows on certain section of pasture for a few days, then moved them to another section, and so on, in order to prevent overgrazing. He kept careful tabs on what kinds of plants and grasses grew in here, considering the nutrients

and the threats of invasive species. Along many a fencepost I spotted a bluebird box, little wooden homes attempting to woo this dwindling species to the farm. Essential habitat.

I learned a myriad of things: how to milk, how to incorporate elements of wilderness into a working farm, how to drive a tractor and cut hay, how the dairy functions as a component of the larger coop. This farm is a place carefully tended, from the sickly calves recovering with garlic and insistent feeding and special spots in the shade, to the aging black dog who comes wagging for pats on the head.

There are moments of discovery where all that has been learned seems wonderfully right. Since I love calves, I was eager to help Loretta feed them. It was August and hot that evening, though, hot in the barn even with the fans blowing. I prepared to mix up buckets of a special organic milk replacer, but once in the milkhouse, Loretta pulled the spout away from the silver bulk tank and let the milk empty in long, sweet-smelling swooshes into a white bucket. “Now when this one’s full move it over and put the next under,” she said, and she walked away to help Martin finish up the milking.

Four ten gallon buckets full of milk, when that organic milk could earn \$5-\$6 a gallon? It seemed like a lot when milk replacer is only \$30 for eight pounds of dried powder. I was jealous of the calves, actually, watching that warm creamy stuff spill into the buckets; if the buckets didn’t have pieces of mud and straw in places I might have dipped my finger in to taste it. You wouldn’t find milk fresher than this. We’d always used milk replacer on our farm, for the calves that came without their mothers. As a small hobby beef operation the calves from our cows got to stay and suck from their mothers, but the new ones from the sale barn or the weak or injured ones that farmers gave Dad, they needed something to drink. The milk replacer smelled good, kind of chalky-sweet, but it was clumpy and sticky and when we

tasted it, it wasn't much like real milk. The calves sometimes had to be coaxed to swallow. We'd hold their bottom jaw closed against the nipple until they realized that the warm liquid made its way to their hungry stomachs, and then they learned to suck hard, and butt for the milk to come faster. I don't think it's a great evil to feed with milk replacer—it is perhaps similar to feeding human babies formula—but it's not mama's milk, and that's all there is to it.

Loretta came back to help me bring the buckets out to the calves, who had little open-air hutches a short way down the lane. The calves were lying in a mix of green grass and straw in their own pens, licking their noses, twitching their ears. But they unfolded those long knobby legs when they saw us, to scramble up against the wire, lift their heads, stick their noses under the milk as we poured it. And when their buckets were full they snorted and sloshed that milk like they hadn't eaten in days, there was more going on in my mind than regulations. It felt natural. It was natural. This wasn't about following the rules; it was about living in harmony with nature.

"We love our life," Loretta would later say to me, as we sat out on the front steps in the falling dusk. "We've never regretted coming back to the farm." Because Martin and Loretta are trained as wildlife biologists, living in a way that works with nature's systems is important to them. They choose to run their farm in a manner that reflects their own values, values they have also pledged to adhere to as members of Organic Valley. Many other cooperatives, companies, and farms operate on similar statements, and the longer I remain in this field the more I am encouraged. I merely focus here on this one because I have personal experience in watching what it preaches play out in practice. As Martin walked the cows

back out to the pasture, I saw the shepherd in him. That same reflective gentleness extended to how he spoke to his wife, and to me.

**

My grandfather—my mother’s father—has devoted his life to Christian preaching and service. He was a minister overseas, delivering services in Arabic and English several times a day, after years of study that provided him with the knowledge and ability. He has served as a college chaplain, professor of religion and Middle East issues, and in his eighties continues to preach as needed at churches in rural Iowa. I can’t count the times I have met some his former students, who have told me how brilliant he is, how much they enjoyed his classes, how much he has helped them to understand this faith they claim. My grandmother, an educator and librarian and faithful wife, has gone with her husband in these endeavors, raising four children amidst the flurry. Her own father was a minister, a mentor to my grandfather, and at first my grandmother and grandfather were merely friends. He is seven years older than her, after all, and at the time she was a kid and he was a scholar. But then she went off to college across the street from Western Seminary, where my grandfather was studying. Upon seeing him she announced merrily, “Well, you know, I’m here to marry a minister.” A year and many picnics on the seminary lawn later, she did.

The Reformed church brought my parents to the same Christian college in Northwest Iowa, but despite this shared religious heritage, their families are vastly different. I wonder what my maternal grandfather and paternal grandfather thought upon their initial meeting. The one a minister and highly educated man, raised in L.A., a world-traveler and eloquent

speaker. The other a quiet and deeply-rooted Dutchman, who finished eighth grade and left school to farm, worked numbers like magic, grew up handling draft horses, and read animals more than books.

One kind of shepherd to another. If they sifted through all the differences, would they be able to share notes?

**

Easter Sunday morning I found her first litter under the stairs in the old part of the barn, Elsie tired and looking to me for approval, acknowledgment that it was okay and that she'd done something right. I held that moment to myself for a while: nine satin bodies pressed up against that red-gold fur, in various shades from white-gold to black. Outside was cold and dark, but in here with the soft old-fashioned light bulbs it was warm, smelling of straw, with calves scuffling in the background for their morning milk. "Good girl, good girl," I kept saying, stroking Elsie's face and staring at those little new creatures, and then, suddenly, needing to share this time. I ran to the house and shouted; in moments the stillness became chaos, people throwing on jackets and boots, "What? Where?", eager faces with sleepy eyes, and then all of us crowded around, but quiet, patient. In wonder.

This was a happy story, mostly: we saw the puppies grow and thrive, into yapping, fury, tail-wagging little terrors until passers-by saw our sign by the road for Puppies: \$20. They stopped and, smitten, took them home. Elsie had three more litters after that, and with all those puppies we had only a few sad endings: Sandy, the plucky boy our friends Megan

and Matt took home, and who got hit by a car while we all happened to be at the vet clinic, and then a mad rush in the emergency room, and several sobbing children. Anastasia and Bess, who didn't get bought quickly and who, Elsie decided, were harassing her too much, and so she turned teeth on them so that we felt compelled to bring them to the vet clinic for safe re-homing. Carly, the brown-and-white puppy we planned to keep, and who followed Elsie down to the creek, that ran, eventually, to the road, and who didn't follow her back up. Elena and I were gone away to college and furious that Mom and Dad had allowed this to happen. They, equally distraught, searched for several days, even in the dark and with a flashlight, but never found sign of Carly. We hope someone found her on the side of the road, lost and afraid, and fell in love, and now she sits winters by a fireside. We hope. And we remember the better stories: the husky-like pup adopted by a girl whose dog had recently been hit and killed, the white-gold pup who went home with a lonely man, the furry brown female who became a tenth birthday present, the sweet black male held close by a family who had lost a child. Not long ago my father did some work for a client who has one of Elsie's puppies. This man told Dad how his son and the dog went on to win Grand Champion for Obedience in the Plymouth County Fair. "Bernard's the best dog we ever had," he said, and we know, of course he is.

This box of kittens is not one of the happy stories: one through six, they slowly die, despite weeks of careful feeding and what had seemed like a comeback. A little bit of my optimism dies with them. I am saddened at the fading spark in the charcoal blue eyes, time and again. I hate that my will isn't enough for them to grab onto and live, despite the odds. I can't help but be frustrated at those hours spent for nothing. But was it nothing? What was

the other option—to leave them in the box to starve? I couldn't. These lives deserved a chance, even if their saving meant missed sleep, soiled clothing, and a sorely craned neck.

Caring for animals on a farm can take on immense importance for children in the process of growing up and for adults in the daily facing of an imperfect world. The kind of tenderness offered each animal, as an intimate way of knowing and caring, even to the point of selflessness, is a trait we as a culture would do well to revive and affirm. We live in a time of cutthroat business deals, the necessity of shameless self-promotion for career advancement, and societal acceptance of the pouty, selfish teenager. Yet beyond the brittle, self-sufficient exterior of the American go-getter, there is an underlying desperation for the ability to be truly known, and to be handled gently. Don't we all desire to have someone care for us in a deep and sensitive way? How diligent are we in extending this care to others, from mate to classmate, partner to stranger, elder to child? This attitude-turned-action requires a patience that grows more perfect with practice. In learning to act with pastoral tenderness towards our fellow creatures, we might better extend this same gift to our fellow humans.

Underlying all is a sense that the tenderness implicit in the pastoral leads, somehow, to wholeness. Whether in search of spiritual fulfillment or ecological harmony, humans adopt habits of listening, adapting, and revising along the way. Elements of forgiveness hover here: over straying or mean animals, over wasted soils, over harsh words or cruel acts. There must be shepherding of land and of hearts, and the changes that take place will lead to healing. Some folks might, and will, criticize those of us who continue in the pursuit of what seems to them too lofty to attain. Our success will be sometimes hard to measure. But the ideals are too important to abandon.

The Ag-Art of Living Well

I stand in the strawberry patch, the soil muddy-soft against my feet. The plants are just dry enough for me to pick the berries, after days of overcast skies and yesterday's long rain. I carry a white bucket, roll up the cuffs of my pants. The dogs come snuffling around the edges of the patch. Emma sticks her manatee-nose in to investigate. "Emma," I warn her, so she doesn't discover the sweetness here. She dodges back but looks at me with something between hope and apology, her tail wagging. I laugh, step into another section of the bed, peek under the leaves to find that bright red, such happy fruit, like cheerful hearts hanging safe in the shade.

This month has been a rough spring-into-summer, with a job that fell through, an abundance of cloudy days, no real home, and an economy failing to offer much in the way of careers. The last few weeks have sucked me into that vortex of computer land, searching for employment, writing cover letters and resumes, staring at craigslist until my eyes start to blur. The outside becomes irrelevant, a distraction.

But now. Strawberries fall into the bucket with that soft, familiar thud. The phrase, "Strawberry girl, strawberry girl," something from a children's book I read years ago, repeats in my head until it becomes a song. I sing it under my breath, to the berries, to myself. I am the strawberry girl now, my feet in the mud, the poplars waving in the breeze, the sun warm as approval.

These moments of being. And therein, learning. Sometimes, I seek them out. Other times, they find me. I gather them like beads, string them onto a strand of hope. Idealism, maybe. I'd rather call it the pursuit of love: for land, others, self.

**

In West Branch, Iowa, the Religious Society of Friends has established a quiet, emphatic, living legacy. Scattergood Friends School demonstrates how the priority of peace so attributed to the Quakers applies not merely to how one lives among people, but also how one lives upon the land.

The school began in 1890 in this small town outside of Iowa City for the purpose of protecting students from the evils of the world, yet as time passed the school's mission moved away from isolationism and towards outreach, analysis, and example; not shutting out the world but rather considering it critically, engaging with it, and making conscientious, visible, and influential choices.

The school first functioned from 1890 until 1931, when the Depression forced it to close its doors. Yet the buildings and the spirit of the place remained; and during World War II the campus became a hostel for refugees from Europe. From 1940 to 1943, refugees were provided a safe environment in which they learned English and tended gardens. The revived activity on the site led the Friends in the area to consider reopening the school, and in 1944, with the leadership of Leanore Goodenow, they did so.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the school began to reassess its policies and its role in the community. Students were subsequently given more freedom in their choices of music, dancing, and clothing. Further, the school became more involved in service projects and activities in the "outside world." The private school, which might easily have been dubbed elitist or holier-than-thou in prior years, now carries more of a sense of deep thought and

humble service. This place is a haven, yet not a hideaway, for serious thinkers and doers. It aims to equip its students for work in an often turbulent, often marvelous world. While serving both non-Quaker and Quaker students—perhaps a quarter of students claim Quaker heritage—the school remains founded in Quaker principles such as equality, simplicity, harmony, community, spiritual awareness, and life-long learning.

Of particular interest to me is the fact that this school has a fully-functioning CSA farm. The sixty or so students enrolled each year are expected to work on the farm just as they work around the rest of the campus. The school employs little janitorial and maintenance staff; students serve on shifts to clean and maintain the facilities themselves. Thus, tending the land in a way that is rooted in history as well as a land ethic becomes a part of the curriculum.

By a stroke of luck or pure generosity, Practical Farmers of Iowa, the nonprofit organization I've been interning with, sends me to West Branch to learn more about this school/farm. My route is trimmed with orange cones and detours; the floods of 2008 have left plenty of damage around Iowa City. Yet out into the country towards West Branch the roads become better, and when I reach the farm I have virtually escaped signs of damage.

A tom turkey puffs up his feathers and struts around outside the coop as I climb out of my car. The Scattergood School sign stands just a few yards behind me, swooping letters of white against blue. The classroom building is located beyond another hill, but now I stand at the school's farm, around 100 acres of pasture, prairie, hay, and vegetable gardens. I wait for Mark Quee, the farm manager, among rows of round bales and a handful of red, brown, and white buildings, where chickens chase each other through loose straw and gravel.

The lights in the gym hummed, their fluorescence reflecting off the floor. A record player, scratching. The teacher, counting. *One, two, three, four. Now swing. That's right.* We stood in squares, pairs, groups of eight. Mostly girls with girls, guys with guys, except for the popular crowd who by fifth grade were all ready to hold hands across the sexes. Not me. I turned to my best friend and wrinkled my nose. Why were we learning this?

In our tiny rural town, the only organized dancing I knew about happened a few nights a month, in the school cafeteria, old ladies with curly purple hair and big poofy skirts. The elementary school was a block from our house and some nights I'd watch them gather in the twilight. The lights shone out of the cafeteria and I could see inside. The men in trousers and suspenders. The women dolled up, like I imagined they might have in the '50s. My mother talked my dad into going with her once. I didn't hear her, but I can imagine his reluctance, her laugh, "Come on, it'll be fun." Maybe it was, but they didn't go again.

Squares and polkas and whatever else happened there was for senior citizens and not for us. A fading thing of the past. So why have lessons now, in fifth grade? I wanted ballet, please, something real and not silly. Especially not something that could potentially, eventually, make me have to dance with a boy. We looked awkwardly at each other, even amongst the girls, and giggled, groaned. Stumbled through the steps, taught too fast. Only a few weeks, I told myself, and then we'd be back to kickball, where I could hide in the outfield and think about horses.

Sue DeBieck is one of those people who makes herself known almost by instinct. Her enthusiasm and open posture allow her to network and organize and accomplish a good deal of fun and work. Before I became her roommate, I had classes with her in the sustainable agriculture program, and as a result I got invited to one of her personal projects that year: the Urban Agrarian series.

These events would take place one evening every few weeks, and their goal would be twofold. First, they would be potluck evenings. Once I got to know Sue better, I discovered that she will host a potluck at any opportunity. Second, they would be learning evenings, and participants were encouraged not simply to attend, but to take turns teaching.

This first year at Iowa State I wasn't fully integrated into the sustainable ag program, and I felt shy and burdened with the demands of school, so I didn't attend many of these events. I missed cider-making and vegetable canning, but I did make it to the night of bicycle repair.

Sue's series moved beyond growing food and reached towards living sustainability. Agrarianism is not only about how one eats but also about how one lives. Though predominantly associated with food production, it is rooted in concepts and ethics that extend to a whole lifestyle. Bicycles are better than cars, as all environmentalists know, but even better is the ability to mend the bike you own. So Matthew Hoffman, the bicycle racer and California viticulturist, stepped up to teach us how to fix a tire and be prepared for roadside mishaps.

Full with meats and an abundance of vegetables, and lingering over a peach crisp, I, laughed in the right places when Matthew read a humorous article about the efficiency of biking, and I paid periodic attention as he stripped and patched and re-attached the tire of his

own bike. Sue, who had unintentionally blown a tire earlier that week, copied him. I just enjoyed being here, taking another sampling of those honeyed sweet potatoes, considering the coral-colored walls of this house I would later call home, smiling wryly at wise-cracks, and most of all studying the faces around me, Turkish and Ecuadorian and Ugandan and Austrian and Indian in addition to the Midwest's typical German and Scandinavian. I bit my lower lip and felt glad for this moment, this place, all this talk of food and farming and society and justice. Still, I knew so little. Me, the Iowa stereotype. I rested my chin on the back of my chair and wondered if I belonged here.

**

Sometimes, I buy in colors. One week, oranges and carrots. Another, yellow: lemons, bosc pears, butternut squash. I don't notice until I get to the register, sometimes not until I get home and pile up my gatherings on the counter. Then the colors find each other, a spectrum of shades. Not long ago a friend came to visit, and I gathered red: red onions, red potatoes, red D'Anjou pears. We had pears and cheese and crackers as we cooked the red meat and red onions and red potatoes into a spicy-sweet Pakistani Kima. The sky fell into twilight but we kept the kitchen warm.

We eat in this house, a yellow hundred-year-old Victorian in the Ames Historic District. Five women, all exploring the stages of our lives, young still, searching still—more, or less than before? Tomoko can spend eight hours a day in the garden, despite summer heat. Her study involves community and urban gardens as a solution to social and environmental problems. Sue brings the Farm to ISU—literally—by working with local farmers and the

Iowa State University dining staff to get food from Iowa (for goodness' sake) onto the plates of Iowa students. Rachael, our undergraduate, comes back from Ecuador with tea and startlingly smooth, rich chocolate. She wakes early to bake scones, stays up late eating pepper and avocado slices with a friend. Emily spends days whipping lattes, nights swimming, weekends playing music—and in the midst tries new recipes: pesto, bruschetta, baked apples. She practices violin, the notes moving from urgent to soothing, as we stir soup in the kitchen. And me—I read my way through the MFA program, with pear crisp baking in the oven. I add a minor in sustainable agriculture so I can get into it all, the food and land and people, this bright and welcoming mud-on-our-hands network.

Agriculture leaves fingerprints on every facet of our existence. And at the end of a day we come home to how we eat. We eat in all the richness of a pesticide-free squash, butter sliding into the dips and crevices, fair-trade brown sugar glinting against that yellow-orange of flesh so bright it's like Frederic Lord Leighton's *Flaming June*. We eat the tartness of kale in summer, bite four kinds of lettuce as we forget the names in the mix. We eat the depth of bread, Tomoko working the starter into yet another flavor. Honeycomb from that place north of town. Butter from Picket Fence Creamery, to our west. Cherries from a tree in the back yard; we didn't plant it, but we know its bounty, some blessing from a former resident, we the happy receivers. Red in a lattice pie.

In summer, I stand in a skirt on a ladder, and reach among the branches. Is this how Mary Oliver felt, her bear-self gathering the richness of blackberries in August, the poem of a body strong and wild in pursuit of sweetness? I imagine the someday of children running around my feet, shouting as I toss down cherries. Maybe they will catch them in little silver

pails. My children will bite the fruit and the red juice will stain lips, pits spit onto the ground, laughing squinting eyes.

**

Coming in from the fields at Scattergood, Mark is Chaco-clad and dusty from working out in the dirt, where after recent torrents of rain the farm has had ten days of almost too-dry weather. Still, he greets me with a laugh and we head out to look at the grounds, where black guinea hogs snuffle in tall grasses, where the vegetable plots spread out on a nine-year-rotation, where black Angus steers graze a hillside pasture, and a ladder leans against a cherry tree. Mark reaches up and grabs a handful of cherries. He offers me one; it is dark and sweet.

Mark has worked at the school for ten years and has served as the head farm manager for the past five. “The school always had a farm alongside it,” he explains. Which used to be pretty normal; students boarded there and needed to eat, so it made sense to have a farm, just as other families had farms or large gardens. But when local eating began to slide out of fashion the school held onto its practices. “The farm just fits in with the Quaker mindset,” says Mark. “The Quakers believe that work is good. They see value in the work involved in growing your own food.”

**

The German Minnesota town of my childhood found it important for my elementary school friends and I to learn country squares and lines. At the same time, in northwest Iowa,

my future high school friends were practicing Dutch dance. In their gymnasium, rows of elementary school children moved in a step-brush-hop, slide, slide, forward-two-three, back-two-three. Blonde, fair, and squeaking the floor with their sneakers. Later they would go outside and put on the shoes that made all the difference.

Our move to Orange City meant that we got to live in a place where everyone else was Dutch and Protestant, too! So, belonging, I jumped into the cultural enclave with both feet. The coming spring of my sweet sixteenth year, encouraged by success in choir and band, I auditioned for The Dutch Dozen, a song-and-dance show to be performed several times a day during the Tulip Festival. We'd sing some songs in English and some in Dutch, wear bright orange wooden shoes and use quaint props such as watering cans and windmill blades. Also, Dutch Dozen participants got to dance through the streets with the rest of our community's Dutch Dancers before each afternoon's parade.

I had given up ballet with the move, and now suddenly this seemed like a fun alternative. Wooden shoes, yes, please.

May found us, after weeks of practice, in calf-length skirts, pointed white hats, and many pairs of socks. We ran clop-clopping down the street, made windmills and turned turns, clapped our hands and skipped around our partners, to the sound of an organ piped over the loudspeakers. *Sipping cider by the Zuider Zee, the Zuider Zee, the Zuider Zee . . . wouldn't it be more than heavenly, with you so close to me?* Later, sitting on the curbside, sweaty and sucking on popsicles, we listened to the street organ puff and bang, and laughed about ourselves. Oh, we knew, how small-town charm this was, not exactly tacky but neither typical high school cool. The first warm days of spring and you couldn't find us in the bare skin of short-shorts, dark shades and messy ponytails, walking the streets for slushies and gossip. No,

instead, heavy black skirts, white aprons, red posies printed in a Friesian style. Up on a stage harmonizing in words we barely understood—*Dar bie, de molen*—with probably terribly heavy American accents.

Still, we loved it, for something. I doubt we could say, at the time. Of course there was the component of each other, good company. A shared enjoyment of music, of step, the wanting to make art together. But most of us, I think, sensed something else, buried beneath all the stuttering and stumbling into polished performance, all the sunshine and playing pretend, all the photos snapped by proud relatives and delighted festival guests. Still, no one spoke it, or tried. Instead, we celebrated our reward of free ride tickets and Hush puppies—waffle sticks dipped in chocolate and smothered with whipped cream. And spent half the time darting glances at the boys, our partners, in balloon-y black pants and blue buttoned jackets—boys good-natured enough to find this fun, black caps tugged down over flushed faces. Smile. Sing: *And if suddenly, our two lips touched, then would I be in Dutch?*

**

The agrarian is not only about science, the prosaic and often reductionist approach to producing food. Gene Logsdon, in his book, *The Mother of All Arts*, explores the influence of agriculture on the arts, and the emerging agrarianism that, he claims, is a response to the art of the old. He explains, “Farming has always been driven, in part, by the instinctual human love of natural beauty. Likewise, art has often been influenced by farming and can be understood fully, or as fully as any art can be understood, by an intimate knowledge of farming.” Might it be, then, that the farmer and the artist can inspire one another to the point of becoming one

and the same? Logsdon's book is part of a series focused on new agrarianism, exploring it as an alternative to a destructive consumer culture. The series editor and advisory board (Norman Wirzba and others who have demonstrated acute analysis and strong voices) define agrarianism as "a comprehensive worldview that appreciates the intimate and practical connections that exist between humans and the earth." Such a statement carries much yet asks to be unpacked outside of a summary situation. Logsdon ventures in that direction, noting how politics and philosophies can produce agendas, which can shade or even distort the term. Referencing Wirzba's introduction to *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, he draws out two important characteristics of agrarianism. First, agrarianism has become a lifestyle—a way of thinking and acting that translates into a way of being. Second, agrarianism seeks a holistic kind of health in a place. True health involves not just the physical entities of humans, animals, and soils, but also the local culture. A culture that includes art.

Logsdon is not the only one to see this intrinsic relationship, the art-and-science of growing things. Professor and author Mary Swander collaborated with Fred Kirschenmann to start a group focusing on the relationship between the two. As my professor, Mary knows of my interest in such things, and so I am invited when they gather together people from many walks of life: students, professors, writers, filmmakers, dairymen, ranchers, vegetable farmers, teachers, organizers, actors, graphic designers. Barn dancers. Grocery checkers. Fiddlers. If you like food, rural life, and/or art, you belong.

We first meet at Fred's house, a sprawling home held in the shade of large oaks and trimmed with lush gardens. The potluck is bound to be good, featuring renowned cooks like Donna Pritzngas and a host of unprofessional gourmets, and incorporating the meat and produce of many local farmers and businesses. I sip a glass of wine, hiding a little behind the

glass as I answer Fred's questions. He doesn't know that I've read his essays and heard him lecture, and I certainly never expected to talk to him in person, much less be invited to his home. Others filter in with steaming dishes of new potatoes and dill, zucchini bread, cheesecake, chocolate brownies, sautéed greens. The countertops and tables fill amidst the clatter of silverware and dishes being moved to make more room. We greet the people we know, introduce friends one to another, and I am amazed at who knows who, and how now I know them, and they me, and all across town and into the fields here we are, this web of people with so much in common, and yet so much uniqueness to bring forth.

Fred's wife begins the dinner by having us go around and announce what we've brought, and where it's from: "Galen Bontrager's beef, from Kalona, Iowa." "Green onions from Joe and Lonna at Onion Creek Farm." "Carrots from Garry Guthrie's CSA." "Potatoes from Mustard Seed Farm." I press my lips together and smile in the knowing, these people and places, pride woven with thankfulness. This sharing is the blessing of sorts, before we take our plates and fill them until they can't possibly hold more, though we've only gotten a small portion of what's here to be had. Then we settle in to eat and chat. Mary has us introduce ourselves—who we are, what skills and interests we claim. As the knowledge and personalities come to the forefront I am at once intimidated and encouraged: so much skill here, and passion, and how much might we be able to do together?

Here we have come to discuss these things we love, and, in particular, discover how art might address the dire needs of agriculture. That is, how could we employ art to bring to light the crumbling countryside and, concurrently, rejuvenate it? As small towns disappear, small farms disappear, and diversity disappears, we believe that artists have a social call to respond. Art can hold onto these things we are losing, celebrate them, and sometimes even

bring society to return to them. Lofty ambitions. But ambitious goals can begin with small steps. So we toss out ideas. Art exhibits. More potlucks and small group discussions. Plays. Youth programs. Book clubs. What can we do to encourage one another's work? What can we do to reach the larger community?

Autographs grace one of the walls in the Kirschenmann's house. Wendell Berry. Bill McKibben. Michael Pollan. The company of the greats. I study the intent, eager faces around the room. Each one of us, right now, we are among them.

**

Scattergood Farm has eight certified organic acres of vegetables. The pasture and animals are treated in accordance with most organic principles, but for a few practical reasons, as well as the fact that the meat goes primarily to the school, they've currently chosen not to obtain certification in that area. Still, the animals are not vaccinated and receive almost no antibiotics. The farm has plenty of livestock: heritage hogs, cattle, chickens, turkeys, and sheep. As we walk along the gardens and look out at the pasture, Mark marvels at the simplicity involved in raising grass-finished cattle: "You just stick them out there and let them graze, let the sun do its work, the cattle turn the grass into protein. It's a lot easier than trying to get protein out of plants!"

Wren, a former student and current worker on the farm, looks up from where she's weeding the peas. "I'd rather work for it," she says, pushing back a strand of nutmeg brown hair and wrinkling her freckled nose. The students at Scattergood come to the school with a variety of dietary needs: some are vegetarian or vegan, others are Muslim or Jewish, others

demand meat. The farm and the school's cooks have to work to meet those needs, largely on a seasonal basis—a challenge most school kitchens don't find themselves facing.

Yet even these differences can feed into learning. Mark says his “eating curriculum” addresses the questions, “How do we eat well? What does it mean to eat well?” Students have the opportunity not only to think about and respond to such questions but also to participate in activities that contribute to their knowledge of food and farming. They may not become farmers or work in agriculture, yet they will have seen what sustainable agriculture looks like in practice and, perhaps, use it to influence their opinions and decisions.

**

Nikki, Phil, and Tomoko talk about cooking *all* the time. Even among foodies and aggies, they form a kind of nucleus of their own, of those who love to find just the right flavor, just the right tool to bring it out. Their talk eventually leads them to form a cheese-making club. I smile when I overhear them talking about their plans, in part because I want to know how to make cheese, too. But now, in the middle of school, it simply isn't my top priority, can't be, not anything I could commit to. I have to read about Crevecoeur's dodgy Early American Farmer and grade fifty lackluster composition papers. When will I have time to study up about rennet, and various milks, and the processes of aging?

Tomoko invites me to join them in making ricotta and pizza one night, though, when I have nothing else to do, and so I tag along. I've had a head cold and hibernated most of the day, and now I am glad to be out. Mostly, I watch, while they measure and stir. Phil offers me a taste of the ascorbic acid, and it is sour-sweet, the same stuff used to coat certain candies. I

cough and have some water. Watch the clock, the thermometer. Strain, drain. A little longer.

Does that look right? Aha. Cheese.

Then, flatbread pizza on the stone, with pesto and the ricotta and many other happy flavors. Phil's apartment is warm and clean and smells like dairy and herbs. Nikki is challenging us to think differently about something, as she often does, and we alternately ponder, wrinkle our brows, and joke our way out of the seriousness of life. In all that it is, in the end, we can still make what we make, fill our spaces with good things, like each other.

**

Evenings at the yellow house, Tomoko and I share cups of tea. We are the night owls, lingering in the sleepy hours of quiet that come when the others have tucked in. Our conversation encouraged by the chamomile or bergamot. These are times to look forward to, our hours of good listening.

Before I lived here, I came to this house for a potluck that followed with homemade chai. Now I tell her how I have craved that chai for the past few weeks. She laughs and says, "Erica, why didn't you tell me?" We get out the ingredients: black tea, milk, cardamom, cinnamon, brown sugar, and cloves.

The water, boiling, then milk, steeping tea. Stirring together the liquids, the spices. The scents swirling upward and I am in India, what I can imagine of it. This very comfort.

I take an index card and write down the steps so I can have Tomoko's Chai whenever I want to. I won't always live here. But I want to remember it, these people, these flavors.

**

Each February Scattergood School marks out a block of time to allow students to explore other skills and disciplines, those not necessarily included in most school curricula. Some involve excursions and projects that may not fit into a regular course schedule, such as “museum hopping,” outdoor adventure, or service projects. A good many others—things like candlemaking and quilting—fall into the realm of folk crafts, arts, and trades.

The desire to practice and preserve these folk skills has sprung up in little places around the Midwest, reaching well beyond the sometimes kitschyness of traditional craft fairs. In Grand Marais, Minnesota, the North House Folk School offers courses such as building cedar or birch bark canoes, handcrafting a wooden paddle, blacksmithing and bladesmithing, knitting, dogsledding, and driving a team of Fjord ponies. The school is, essentially, an American version of the Scandinavian *folkehøjskole*—schools of adult education that do not grant degrees but rather exist for the sake and love of learning in its own right. In southwestern Wisconsin, the Driftless Folk School teaches sacred harp singing, Irish clogging, coffee roasting, food fermenting, flyfishing, and willow wattle fencing. The Clearing Folk School near Green Bay offers quilting, poetry, watercolor painting, and glass bead making. The schools seek out skilled instructors and offer day, week, or even several-week-long workshops. Adults gather together and learn. While some courses delve into newer areas—one school offers a course in Photoshop, another on how to install and utilize solar panels—most common is the study of old and near-forgotten skills. How many in the Midwest, especially among my generation, can say they know how to build a wooden dory, or rosemale a table, or garden with the moon?

These folk schools serve as sort of living museums, much like Seed Savers Exchange growing its heirloom varieties of fruits and vegetables. Just as a seed is not simply tucked away in a bank, but rather planted and grown, so a skill is not archived and remembered, but rather practiced and passed on. Folk schools would do well to attract not only the retired with some memory of their grandfather's woodshop or grandmother's loom, but also to market to the younger generation, the generation that does not well understand the process of creating and refining, of painting or carving oneself into something, and having that thing be unique, lasting, and valuable. Where the mass market and corporate business undermine the work of local hands and minds, the folk schools reclaim and celebrate.

The agrarian becomes deeply personal, an affirming process of self-within-space. The impact of each person begins to matter immensely, what his hands touch, how her body moves. Folk schools contribute to this shaping of self, making craft a part of a person, letting art find its way out. Move then, into community: a sharing of knowledge and ability. What might we offer in this connectedness we choose, to the land and to one another? So the building of a sled becomes a gift rich with the maker's sweat and design. So a dance celebrates the heritage of forefathers and mothers. So a painting pays tribute to shoreline shared by painter and purchaser. So my vegetable farmer offers me a ripe tomato, with tips on how to serve it, and I offer him a poem.

At Scattergood, event weekends include masquerade balls featuring homemade costumes or barn dances drawing upon well-worn steps and songs. In Ames, a few hours to the west, the Iowa Barn Dance Association and the Barn Owl Band fill the Methodist church annex with strings and swinging. All kinds of characters find their way here, clinging to walls at first, moving together with the rise of voices and bows: older, lean gentlemen in trousers

and suspenders; barrel-bellied men in tight t-shirts; motherly women with long braids and long skirts; undergraduate students with gangly limbs and a tendency to giggle; and of course, sustainable agriculture types, often in cowboy boots and ribbon-tied braids, or scarves and newsboy caps.

My skirt swishes as we do-si-do into contras, wheels, and squares, weaving patterns all through the room, our steps carrying the stories of cultures. I wish all the women would wear long skirts, for the flip and swirl of fabric brings such lushness. Lonna Nachtigal's voice rings out, merry and clear. She once told me that it only seemed natural for her to become a caller—this woman who met her husband here, and whose wedding included a dance in the neighbor's barn. Designing the steps of a room full of people draws upon the same artistic sense she needs for her visual artwork, the cards she sells at the local coop and the signs that greet visitors to her farm. I sometimes long to hop up on the stage where the band plays and the caller chants, so I might see what she sees, this kaleidoscope of people moving across the floor.

This day, I glance across the room and see Joe, standing along the side, chatting with a neighbor; Sue, kissing a chum on the cheeks; a couple of friends from my undergraduate days hovering at the edge of this new group; Tomoko and Phil both slim and dark and dancing with a kind of hesitant grace; my sister and her husband laughing wildly at themselves, and each other, as they always do; but wait—here—focus! A hand, and a promenade. My partner is a stranger to me, an older gentleman with confidence in his steps. I try not to worry if he'll be impatient, and as some of us grow confused, he guides where the caller leaves off: "right hand star, left hand star." Dizzy. Spinning room, spinning people. A golden glow against the hardwood. I change hands for new faces, new steps. This elaborate, stumbling, working

structure; this logic-into-art; this brightness of learning. I clap my hands, twirl through an arm, find myself facing outward, into a room full of color and light.

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