

1-1-2002

Celery Fields

Bonnie Jo Campbell
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr>

Recommended Citation

Campbell, Bonnie Jo (2002) "Celery Fields," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1, Article 12.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol24/iss1/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Celery Fields

Bonnie Jo Campbell has been a visiting professor in the Department of Writing and is now living in Kalamazoo, Michigan. "Celery Fields" appeared in *Women & Other Animals*, published by University of Massachusetts Press in 1999.

The police called as Georgina was swallowing her last bite of plain Cheerios with skim milk. "Ma'am, do you own a white Ford pick-up?" Georgina didn't think of herself as a ma'am. "That's my husband's truck," she said. That's the truck that cost half as much as this house, she thought, the truck he'd bought without consulting her. Georgina stared into her empty bowl and clicked the clear-polished nails of her free hand on the polyurethane tabletop. As a kid she'd eaten at a varnished pine table that softened when anything wet spilled on it. "My husband's not here."

Andy was supposed to be out with his brother cutting firewood for their dad. On Saturdays, if he wasn't pouring cement, Andy usually did something with his brother. In late November they'd clip on their licenses and go deer hunting, which meant they hunkered in a dark field with a hundred other orange-clad men until the sun rose, and then they went to a chain restaurant near the game preserve and ate a lot of fried meat. At other times they'd go fishing or attend outdoors shows or gun shows at Wings Stadium. Georgina spread her fingers out on the table; for a moment she was surprised that her nails were clean.

"The truck's bogged down on some private property," said the cop, "and the owner called to complain. Your husband might want to tow it himself right away, save everybody else the trouble."

Andy had left some kind of caramel pastry here. Georgina pulled the box toward herself across the table until she could see through the plastic window. She didn't care what Andy ate during the day. Let him eat his deep-fried doughnuts and vending machine cashews. Let him pour maple-flavored corn syrup over his fucking Greek restaurant breakfast sausages. But he didn't have to bring this shit into the house to tempt her.

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate it," she said. According to the cop's directions, Andy's truck probably wasn't more than a half-mile from the house where Georgina had lived until she was fifteen. The old neighborhood had been run down, and the road along the river had

always been littered with trash despite “No Dumping” signs. Kids there, including Georgina, had earned nickels from the bait shop by digging nightcrawlers out of the soft muck.

Georgina hung up the phone and resisted an urge to take out her file and further clean and smooth her nails. She had been planning to get her hair trimmed today, to buy a red blazer, and to visit her sister-in-law who wanted her to host a party to sell candles or lingerie or some shit. She thought about pretending she'd never gotten that call about the truck, but she'd become curious about the old neighborhood, and besides she'd like to see just how stuck Andy had gotten himself. Andy had eaten a corner piece out of the pastry, a rectangle no bigger than a folded-up paycheck. Why would a person who was going to eat only that much buy a whole goddamn box?

Georgina hadn't eaten pastry in years. Dieting had changed her body into an efficient machine, one which needed surprisingly few calories to sustain itself. When she had originally cut her rations, her stomach radioed her primitive brain—the oldest, grayest part, at the base of her skull—and sent the message that she was a woman lost from her tribe, banished from her native lands, scavenging on hillsides in years of drought, scratching for the sustenance of wildflower seeds, berries, and weed roots.

With the handle of her cereal spoon, she cut a piece of pastry about the same size as the missing piece. She held it between two fingers and moved it toward her mouth and almost bit down, but instead she returned it to the box and wiped her hands on her jeans. Stop it, she told herself. But she wondered if biting into that sweet stuff would open up an alternative universe, one she'd entirely forgotten. Maybe it would be a universe of surrender. Vegetables and rice cakes never surrendered. Cheerios always stood up to her in the white china bowl, which sat before her now looking very empty, as though it had never contained cereal or anything. She rinsed the bowl and the spoon and put them both in the drainer. Eat me, the pastry cried from the table, bite me, as boys used to say in the neighborhood.

She could probably eat more if she exercised, but she couldn't imagine herself bouncing around the way women did. Maybe martial arts. Gardening would

have worked, but Andy didn't want her tearing up any part of the lawn. He claimed it would interfere with his underground sprinkler system. She went into the attached garage and started up her Volkswagen Golf. Georgina had thought she, not Andy, would be the first to get a new vehicle, since hers was ten years old with some rust on the rear body panels, and yet, something stopped her from giving up a car that still ran well. In another year or two, her car would look at home in the old neighborhood, parked in a dirt driveway, next to a sagging front porch on which an unshaven man in a sleeveless undershirt lounged on a torn and disheveled couch.

As she backed into the street, away from her vinyl-sided, white-trimmed white house, the perfect blackness of tarred and curbed driveway poured out in front of her. Covering the land between house and driveway was Andy's sacred green, uninterrupted by bush, flower, or weed. The garage door rolled toward the ground. From somewhere out of sight Georgina heard the buzz of chain saws and diesel motors; she smelled the burning oil of two-stroke engines, of men clearing the way for another house like hers, of bulldozers shoving felled trees to the back of one hundred-by-two hundred foot building lots. There was so much development around here; everybody wanted to live in these gently curving rows of tidy and respectable prefabricated homes.

In a field near the river, Mexicans with machetes trudged north along the rows, the muck closing around their feet with each step so their rubber boots became as weighted as balls and chains. The men hacked with

knives as long as their forearms and tossed heads of celery, half as thick as they were high, into the wagon that rolled beside them. The sweet peppery fragrance of celery leaves and seeds poured into Georgina's car through open windows and became so strong that she had to stop and park. Her granny used to grow a patch of celery behind the barn and she'd told Georgina about the old days, when the farmers grew acres and acres of the best celery in the world right here. Georgina wished Granny could see this. Along with the other old neighbor ladies, her granny had worked most of her springs planting seeds, and her summers placing bleach-boards against each plant to block the sun and make the celery grow anemic pale, the way people liked it in New York and Chicago. The black-haired men in boots, jeans, and straw cowboy hats moved steadily away, abreast one another, shouting in Spanish, slashing and tossing, synchronized in a harvest line dance.

When Georgina no longer could hear the men's voices or make out their hands and necks, she shifted into first. For half a mile, celery heads grew on either side of the road, green columns which, after all these years, had somehow thrust upward from their roots with enough force to displace the heavy soil. After her granny died, Georgina, who was ten, had asked her mother why nobody grew celery anymore. Georgina's mother told her that the soil was finally used up, once and for all, and that was why the fields lay weedy and uncultivated, including the little garden plot behind their barn.

The houses beyond the fields were exactly as Georgina remembered—simple, small, peeling—paint houses built on concrete block foundations or on slabs poured atop mounds of slag landfill, above yards low enough to flood after a big rain. Georgina slowed to pass a driveway where four children with dirt-smudged legs played a game of running and hand-slapping. Even with Andy's sprinkler system and fertilizer, her new west side lawn didn't stay lush like these yards, fed by a watertable not more than a foot below the surface. That watertable explained everything about this place, why the celery grew, why the earth used to heave behind her old house, where one month there might be a valley a foot deep and the next month there'd be a little hill, and why Andy's truck, when she reached it, was mired nearly

to its axles. If he couldn't live without the new truck as he'd insisted, then why had he risked the thing by coming to the river, of all places, to get firewood? Andy's truck was as white as a wedding cake, a pure color that seemed wrong here. She'd expect green-whites like the celery her granny once protected from the sun, and she'd expect red-whites like the crazy eyes of that pony that had been trapped in the mud a decade ago.

God, she hadn't thought of that pony in ages. As a kid, Georgina had seen cars stuck when older kids unfamiliar with the area would park and make out, and then they'd have to call their parents or a tow truck to winch them. The girl who lived up on the ridge must have known she was pushing her luck riding her pony into that part of the woods after spring rains. When Georgina and other kids on the street heard the commotion, they came tearing through their patched screen doors and out of their weedy backyards. The pony, purply-brown and sweating, had sunk past its knees. It screamed and tossed its neck in the air as if trying to throw off its head. Its eyes rolled back in its sockets and grass-colored foam poured out of its mouth and coated the leather bridle and reins which whipped around like swamp snakes.

Though visions of the pony used to keep her awake nights, she had managed not to think of the animal since she'd moved with her mom out of the neighborhood. If they'd given Georgina a chance, she might have been able to free that pony, but back then she hadn't done anything but watch it thrash and listen to its screams, half-animal, half-machine. The girl had run up the ridge in her cowboy boots and leather fringe and returned with her father who dangled a shotgun. He made the girl stand back as he raised the gun to his shoulder. "No, Daddy! No!" screamed the girl. Georgina woke into the nightmare that the man wasn't even trying to save the creature, and that people up the ridge were cruel and stupid. The girl in fringe covered her eyes, and Georgina watched the ash-faced hill farmer buck at the force with which the shot left the gun. Later he and some other men shoveled a mound of dirt over the pony. A year later the ground was level again.

Undoubtedly the animal had gone a little mad—but what greater madness drove that man to bring his gun down the hill? Was it the same thing that made Andy

drive his thirty-five thousand dollar truck into the mud? Nights after the hill farmer shot the pony, Georgina had devised plans for pulling it out alive, using ropes and winches, block-and-tackles, devices which could lift that pony straight into the air, maybe in a hammock made of her bed sheets. The muck would have released the pony if they'd worked it. Why had the man been so anxious to sacrifice the creature that he didn't even ask the river people for help?

Georgina pulled off the road alongside a drainage ditch and the car tilted sideways. She wished she had brought Andy's pastry and given it to the dirty children back there—if they were like her, they'd have torn it apart with their hands and chewed it with their mouths open as they shouted to one another. When she got out of the car, she saw that if she'd pulled a few inches farther off the road, the car might have fallen into the ditch. She crossed the road toward the woods and the truck. If this were March instead of September, the rigid, spiked cradles of skunk cabbage flowers would be poking up from the mud. Were this May, the leaves of the skunk cabbage would have unfurled as fresh and green as that celery. Georgina used to bend down and smell the skunk cabbage each spring, and now she remembered it like the stink of her own sweat before she'd ever used deodorant. In the summer she had roamed the cool woods, gnawing wild onion and the roots of wild ginger. Andy's double rear tires had crushed a stand of jewel weed blossoming at the edge of the road. If this were late September instead of late August, she would touch the orange pods of the

jewel weed, and they would explode against her fingers. In addition to celery, Georgina's granny used to grow tomatoes, cucumbers, and muskmelons in the black dirt behind their old house.

Four-wheel drive had apparently done Andy no good with all four wheels buried. Maybe that's why the cops called the house—if the truck had been easy to tow, somebody would have towed it already. Andy deserved to be stuck if he was here trying to steal from somebody else's land; he deserved to be stuck for thinking these people wouldn't stop him from taking their wood. And yet Georgina couldn't help but think she should at least try to free the truck, to make up for not rescuing the pony. On the other side of the truck, three men stood in the driveway of an asbestos-shingled house painted the color of lime sherbet. One was old and bald and small-headed and two were about Georgina's age and wore baseball caps. Their property was built up unevenly, several feet higher at one side of the concrete block foundation. A full-length crack in the front picture window was held steady with duct tape. Beside the driveway sat a trailer made out of the back end of a pickup, rusted and filled with split wood, one of its tires flat. Andy's truck with its clean white panels and black wheels looked like a spaceship in contrast. It had sunk low enough that Georgina hardly had to step up to get inside.

Everybody Georgina remembered from this neighborhood had been a mutant of some kind, malformed or marked, as if nature loved each so much she couldn't let him look like anybody else. Look at that old man standing in the driveway with the tiny head, hardly enough room in that head for a regular brain. Georgina's mother, a pale-haired mammoth of a woman, used to have a mole on the side of her neck, a great protuberance that looked as though it might grow into a second illegitimate child, a sister for Georgina. When they'd moved away, the first thing Georgina's mother had done was get that mole removed. Delbert, a boy with whom Georgina waited for the school bus, had a raspberry-colored birthmark covering half his face. The woman next door was confined to a wheelchair; a long, unpainted ramp led to the front door, its boards coming loose, regularly stranding the woman partway so she had to holler for help from her six children. After her granny

died, Georgina's whole body had become a mutation, round and soft as a tumor from eating any food she could get hold of. Without Granny's yellow cakes and date cakes cooked with coffee, Georgina spent all her nightcrawler money on cream-filled cookies and honey buns and ate them right outside the store, standing next to the electric meters. In the morning she filled her cereal bowl again and again, with sugar-flavored cereal, then milk, then more cereal.

Out of habit, Georgina pulled the seat belt around her. Andy's truck, which cost more than the houses in this neighborhood, started easily with a turn of her own key, vrooming at first, then slowing and idling into a low growl. Maybe Georgina could drive to her old house by cutting a new trail through the woods, swerving through trees along the river, then turning back south. She felt an inclination toward the old place, a pull verging on homesickness for the solid feel of its carpeted concrete floors, the lumpy and changing landscape of its backyard, her granny's garden, sodden and weedy after a night of rains—some weeds grew a foot a day in this soil, Granny had complained, mud smeared to her elbows. Some previous owner had cut away a curved doorway between their kitchen and the living room but had never smoothed it out or plastered its edges. Spiders had built webs there in the spaces between the pieces of sheetrock. Granny said spiders helped control the flies, but after her granny became too sick to argue, her mother used to spray insecticide into the cracks.

But now that the celery was growing here again, folks didn't have to leave this neighborhood the way she and her mother had. People could plant and tend huge gardens that watered themselves from below, and if they canned and froze, the vegetables could feed them half the winter. People's houses could be cleaned and painted, and windows could be thrown open to let in the sweet peppery smell. Plaster and drywall could be patched so that spiders were relegated to attics, and people's lives could be made lush the way they once were, as fertile as when her granny worked the celery.

Georgina adjusted the rearview mirror and in it saw Andy walking toward her from the road. Andy had grown up far from the river, in the neighborhood Georgina and her mother moved to when Georgina

was fifteen, a neighborhood like the one she lived in now, where the ranch houses had decorative shutters, aluminum or vinyl siding, and attached garages. Georgina first had made out with Andy in his father's car, and then they'd had furious sex at every opportunity in his parents' paneled basement. Once he had torn her shirt in his hurry to undress her. She'd told herself he was passionate, but she knew now that he was devouring her the way she used to eat those cheap pastries she bought with her nightcrawler money, without even tasting them.

She turned to watch Andy lumber toward her, his boots sinking with each step. Georgina's white tennis shoes were still clean as they stretched for the pedals. She hadn't bogged down as she walked, partly because she was lighter than Andy, but also because she knew how to place her feet on this kind of mud. Andy saw nothing in this neighborhood but wood to steal and, in November, deer to shoot at. Outside Georgina's bedroom window, the deer used to travel through the morning fog like the starved ghosts of ponies, alone or in families, on their way to drink at the river. The deer were the food of last resort. In or out of season, a person shot one if he needed the meat and dressed it out on his own kitchen table. For Andy's ignorant selfishness, the mud would swallow him.

The truck windows were rolled up, and Georgina locked the doors with the automatic button as Andy reached her. He pulled on the door handle, but Georgina looked away and fiddled with the radio, turning channels until she found a female voice

wailing on a country station. Georgina turned up the volume loud enough that she couldn't hear Andy, and she put her finger on top of the door lock button each time he inserted his key and tried to turn it. Georgina watched the mouth she had not been able to stop kissing in that basement rec room and on a honeymoon hotel bed in Mexico. The mouth shouted, barely audible above the radio, "Let me in the goddamn truck. You're gonna get it stuck worse."

At their wedding reception, she and Andy had fed each other mouthfuls of a three-tiered wedding cake that Georgina had chosen from among a hundred nearly identical designs. Then they'd returned to their table, each with a single tower of pure white cake. Georgina ate her own piece, scraped the plate and licked the fork, while Andy ate about half of his and ignored the rest. When he later clunked the plate with a beer glass, his remaining cake toppled and lay collapsed.

Georgina looked straight ahead toward the river as she shifted into first, what Andy called "crawl," what the men from this neighborhood called "swamp gear." The wheels all began to spin beneath her.

Andy's face grew red outside the window. Georgina jammed the big knob into second gear. The wheels spun faster, and Georgina felt the truck sink. As she shifted into third, Andy began pounding on the glass with both fists. In his crybaby desperation he looked like an even bigger man than he was. Just over a year ago, in his rented tuxedo, he had picked up Georgina in her dolly lace and, to the cheers of his brother and friends, carried her squealing out to the parking lot, slung over his shoulder like something he'd shot up north. Now mud from the front tires flew all over him, up his big left arm, onto his cheek, like cake raining on him, a crazy chocolate cake tossed handful after handful by some dirty, bad-ass bride.

Georgina looked over her shoulder and saw a policeman at the edge of the road, slim-hipped with his arms crossed over his chest, probably the guy who'd called her "ma'am." Andy's little brother appeared beside the cop, his mouth hanging open as usual, his monkey arms dangling. No doubt Andy's brother intended to pull this truck out with his own truck. They'd had it all figured out, except they hadn't counted on Georgina showing up. She shifted into fourth at four thousand

revolutions per minute. She thought of the apple cake her granny used to make every fall, “plain apple cake” she used to call it, and Georgina’s salivary glands shot spit through her mouth.

Andy fell away from the side of the truck and leaned against a tree, an immense swamp oak thrusting upward like the world’s biggest celery stalk, a tree that had somehow defeated the chain saws of a thousand men like Andy who couldn’t grow anything but grass. On the other side of the truck, the small-headed man watched patiently with no expression, as if he saw this sort of thing all the time, as if just yesterday he’d seen the farmer march down from the hill and shoot his daughter’s pony, as if Georgina, the cop, Andy, and his brother were just another collection of fools. Georgina closed her eyes and floored the accelerator pedal. As the wheels beneath her tore at the ground, she felt herself easing that pony free. She saw herself smashing layer after layer of her wedding cake with both fists. With the big wheels of the truck, she imagined she was cultivating, at last, the heavy black river earth that a generation had neglected.