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Martin and Jennie Bouwman House

“ALMOST 900 ACRES OF UNDEVELOPED FARM LAND”: A REMINISCENCE

David Huisman

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.

Or a stadium and a fairway.

In August, 1937, T.S. Eliot made his only visit to East Coker, the Somerset village from which his ancestor, Andrew Eliot, left England in 1669 to journey to the New World, and where, in St. Michael's Church, his own ashes would be laid to rest. In "East Coker," the second of his *Four Quartets*, Eliot meditates on the changes which time and history work upon both the land and its human inhabitants. In the opening lines quoted above, households and the ancestors who raised them are Eliot's subject as well as the habitations those households built: "Houses live and die: there is a time for building / And a time for living and for generation / And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane. . . ." For Eliot, the rhythms of agrarian life and the soil itself connect us with our ancestors, with time and history:

In that open field,
If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,
On a summer midnight, you can hear the music
Of the weak pipe and the little drum
And see them dancing around the bonfire. . . .
Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth
Mirth of those long since under earth
Nourishing the corn. Keeping time,
Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
As in their living in the living seasons
The time of the seasons and the constellations
The time of milking and the time of harvest. . . .

For James H. Zumberge, explorer of frozen antarctic wastes and president of Michigan's newest institution of higher learning, there were, at the outset, two "times" of real interest, the geologic and the present:

The planners started with two basic elements that figured strongly in their deliberations. The first was a rural tract of almost 900 acres of undeveloped farm land ten miles west of Grand Rapids. The second was the requirement for a decentralized campus. . . . The eastern boundary of the acreage is defined by a north flowing stretch of the Grand River. During late glacial times, . . . short tributaries flowing into it from the west incised themselves into the upland of glacial drift comprising the eastern one-half of the campus, thereby leaving a system of rolling plateaus dissected by deep ravines. The college land farther west of the Grand River remains as glacial morainic topography. The planners decided to build the first elements of the campus on the dissected plateaus, thereby leaving the undissected morainic part for future expansion. (79-80)

That georgic poets from Virgil to Wendell Berry might view “undeveloped farm land” as an oxymoron apparently did not occur to President Zumberg. Accustomed, no doubt, to his role as pioneer of desert places, he seems unaware of the implication of his casual assessment: that no one prior to the planners of Grand Valley State College had invested thought and toil in the tendance of the “raw land” (79) which they were rapidly encumbering with concrete and steel, and paving with asphalt.

To be sure, the prehistoric Woodland peoples had left little visible trace of “development” here, and a vanished nineteenth-century lumber town in the vicinity is the focus of an archaeological dig. But much of the 900-acre tract had been cleared and put to the plough by homesteaders like my grandparents, Martin and Jennie Bouwman. Indeed, the new college’s first campus address was the remodelled farmhouse which they had built and occupied from 1907 to 1945, and where my mother and two of her four sisters were born. During the closing half-decade of that era, I, along with a brother and cousins, began to store up childhood memories which, if I do not come too close, connect me to this land.

Although family visits to Grandpa’s farm in Allendale were usually summertime affairs, often timed to coincide with haying or threshing, the controlling image of the farm for me is a wintry one, drawn not from experience but from rustic art. When, like Dylan Thomas in *A Child’s Christmas in Wales*, “I plunge my hands in the snow and bring out whatever I can find,” I recall a picture on the wall of the second-floor sitting room, that of a solitary wolf on a snowy hill at dusk overlooking a snug farm in the valley below. I imagine that copies of that picture hung in farmhouses all across America at that time (Garrison Keillor’s oral *tableau vivant* of the scene in one of his best Lake Wobegone monologues has given it new currency). The patent symbolism of the picture—reinforced by its position on the west wall near the woodstove—was complicated for me by a suppressed sympathy with the wolf. Excluded like Grendel from the camaraderie and warmth of the meadhall, where the gleeman sings, the wolf yearns for what the farmers enjoy, but, unlike Grendel, it accepts the distance as natural and unbridgeable: there is no envy in its yearning. The ambivalence of a city boy, no doubt, but the lonely beauty of the wolf haunts me still, though I never

heard of actual wolves in the area. (An undated anecdote recounts how a pack of wolves chased a woman and her two small children home from a neighbor's pig butchering [Sheridan 65].)

The Standard Atlas plat of Allendale Township for 1912 shows the "Mart Bowman" (sic) farm as the fourth parcel west of the Grand River fronting on M-50 (as it was then designated). Consisting of two 40s laid north to south and extending to the present Campus Drive West, the 80 acres seemed boundaryless to me, except for the highway, where the occasional car headed for Pearline or more distant Allendale ran the gauntlet of dandelion guns aimed by idle boys on summer afternoons. The driveway cut, looking much the same today as it did then, though now paved with asphalt, led into the barnyard, where the drive jogged left around the barn, past the chicken coop, and thence into the fields to the south—more or less down the western sideline of the football stadium. Wheat, oats, and field corn were the main crops, along with hay and alfalfa for the small dairy herd and Dick and Molly, the team that did the heavy lifting at seedtime and harvest.

If you had come this way during my grandparents' tenure, you would have found little to distinguish the farmstead from a thousand others, unless it were an ancient tractor which stood between the garage and the marl pile, an inert testament to bad planning and the efficiency of the horse. I never saw it move under its own power. Its huge cleated iron wheels rusted to a near-Calder red, it might have been a landgoing derelict from some Titanic tank battle, at last out of gas after a crewless meander over the fields. Was it parental admonition or childish dread that kept us from clambering on it in our barnyard games?

There was a real war somewhere, of course, but boys not yet ten might be forgiven if their contribution to the war effort amounted only to harassment of the cock of the barnyard flock, "Shicklbruber" (as, all innocent of the finer points of Teutonic onomastics, we cleped him). Never in his most choleric dreams did Chaucer's Chauntecleer foresuffer such torments as we visited upon that hapless chicken. Or would have, had we been able to catch up with him; actually, our lapidation went wide of the mark most of the time. Still, it is embarrassing at this remove to invoke puerile chauvinism as a cover for what I suspect was really *Lord of the Flies*-like savagery. Moreover, the battle-hardened bird had his revenge, when, as the centerpiece of a holiday feast, he proved indomitable to the last.

The feasts I remember best were those that both celebrated and sustained the harvest. The men would come in from the fields at noon and wash up with much splutter at a trough in the back yard, then climb to the second floor of the farmhouse. There they were greeted at the head of the stairs by a round table heaped with steaming food the women had toiled over all morning: meat, gravy, boiled potatoes, a variety of fresh vegetables, including sweet corn and sliced tomatoes, fresh baked rolls, and pies. The sight of stubble-flecked men in sweat-stained shirts packing away mounds of hot food on a scorching summer day was a thing of wonder to a child, only weeks from his peanut butter sandwiches at school. The memory for me is an emblem of hard work and its most tangible reward—the abundance of life lived close to the soil.

Food is the business of a farm, of course, but my eternal summer is ripe with secret gastronomic delights. The small orchard next to the house had an early variety of apples whose scent and color still gladden my reverie. Not for me the troubled winter sleep of Robert Frost's apple picker, "hearing from the celler bin / The rumbling sound / Of load on load of apples coming in." I plucked and ate and knew perfection. There were forbidden trees, to be sure, late varieties whose fruit, green and hard as painted rocks, tempted the innocent long before the fall, and exacted a baleful price. The kitchen garden offered less risky delicacies, though the carrot grit I couldn't wipe off on my overalls is still lodged in memory, if not between my molars. No carrots since have tasted as good.

In the barn, we boys explored hidden recesses for clutches of eggs secluded by hens bored with chicken coop routine, and at milking time watched Grandpa, deliberately within range of a well-aimed udderful of warm, unprocessed milk straight from the source. Somehow, the city boy in me was never reconciled to the sights and smells of the separation process or Grandma's churn, least of all to the lumpy buttermilk Grandpa slurped with such relish; yet now I drink it in along with all the bounty of the place.

One building in the farmyard, the tool shed, was special. It was dark in there, almost dark enough to obscure the clutter of parts and implements large and small that loomed from the walls or stood on the earth floor, seemingly or in fact abandoned. I could identify only a few of them then, and none now, except, perhaps, a corn planter or a rusty plough blade. Yet the place is as fresh in memory as the apothecary shop in Mantua, which Romeo recalls with desperate clarity upon learning of Juliet's death:

... in his needy shop a tortise hung,
An alligator stuff'd, and other skins
Of ill-shaped fishes, and about his shelves
A beggarly account of empty boxes,
Green earthen pots, bladders, and musty seeds. . . .

Over all hung the rarest incense, a blend of old metal, dried grease, worn leather, and wood—the wood of tools smoothed by calloused hands—and, from bins at the farthest end of the shed, the scent of new-threshed grains. This was the inner sanctum, drawing us like postulants to the holy of holies. Heedless of warnings, we climbed into the bins and burrowed into the cool, fragrant oats and wheat. Here was the essence of the farm, indeed of the growing world, gathered to one sacred spot, Ceres' blessing:

Earth's increase, foison plenty,
Barns and garners never empty;
Vines with clust'ring branches growing,
Plants with goodly burthen bowing. (*The Tempest* IV i)

Not a trace of the farm survives, in its place only a part of a vast sports complex where, as a man, I can play again where I played as a boy, and engage in artificial work where I began to learn the meaning of work. The farmhouse, rudely forc'd from its foundations and embroiled in a zoning dispute, was removed a quarter mile west on M-45 to where it stands today, refurbished out of all recognition. The shed, last of the outbuildings to succumb, fell not to the wrecker but to the wind in the spring of 1965. I felt, as I passed by on my way to campus, a pang of Gloucester's fatal ambivalence, a tug of war "Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief." Better that way. Better too that Mart and Jennie did not see the sand trap.

Walking there this fall, I find a badly hooked Titleist on the spot where the house stood, a spot destined to disappear altogether when the road is widened at the end of the same century in which the house was erected there. (Other lines of Eliot echo thus in my mind: "And the wind shall say: 'Here were decent godless people: / Their only monument the asphalt road / And a thousand lost golf balls.'") It is the familiar American pattern: dream, build, pull down, and build again. The site of Eliot's boyhood home in St. Louis, once only blocks from where the West began, is today a parking lot; the church founded by his grandfather, long since abandoned, recently burned, only one of its stained glass windows salvaged from the rubble. We can't go home again. And that, Eliot insists in the concluding lines of "East Coker," is the way it must be:

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. . . .
Old men ought to be explorers
Here or there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation. . . .
In my end is my beginning.

Works Cited

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