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**STUDYING WEST RIVER:  
NORTH DAKOTA FIELD LETTERS, 2000**

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## By Way of Introduction

In West River, North Dakota, my interviews would get delayed for all kinds of reasons. Sometimes it was a cow's low moan and a calf about to be born. Other times it was a phone call from a neighboring farm and a red hot school board meeting that needed discussion. My favorite will always be waiting for a hide-tough farmer and his ten-year-old son to finish their dance with the moon.

I had been trying to pin Craig down for months but there was always a reason not to do it. Earlier, it was the rush of seeding. Then there was spraying. Then haying. Before long, the harvest and hauling grain took first place for this busy farmer. When it looked like it was never going to happen--about the time the monks at the Benedictine Abbey asked me to stay with them as I wrapped up the season--Craig gave me a call and told me to come by.

And so I found myself sharing coffee with Renae while her husband and son tried to get a picture of the boy holding the September moon. You do that by walking the thin edge of the east ridge near the house and lining up the camera just right. From down below we watched as Craig crouched low to snap the pictures that freeze all time. His son's thin arms arced against the pan-sized moon, a graceful dancer's curve over his head.

My work in West River is one project of many conducted through the University of Michigan's Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life. The town is my case study, a single instance of all those places in rural America, especially in the Great Plains, founded on scuttled dreams of robust growth. West River is one of many that advertised its "excellent farming and grazing lands all around, healthy climate, congenial people, fresh air and sunshine" in an effort to attract immigrants in the early 1900s. People came, mostly German Catholics, and settled the land in 160- and 320-acre chunks. The town grew, but never much.

West River's history is mostly a history of leaving. By 1970, it began its steady loss of young people and population decline after edging up to its census peak of 799. I looked at the graduating classes of 1973-1975, people in their mid-forties, and found that of the 100 (out of 116) people for whom I could find addresses only a quarter still lived in West River or on its neighboring farms. When the high school principal assigned an essay to the graduating seniors of the class of 2000, only 3 out of 25 thought they would be living in the area five years from now.

Since the summer of 1999 I have been doing the ethnography of this world of farms, ranches, and small towns. I am interested in how the culture of work and family gets shaped by a place and its history. And I am interested, too, in how changes in work and career choices might affect relations between those who stay and those who leave. Life course theories tell us that events and contexts will have much to do with how people see the world. My work concentrates on how enculturation in a rural world, with all its implications for how family and work are defined, will structure the responses of people to contemporary American work and family changes.

For this phase, the numbers are a scaffolding for the real focus of my data collection. Working as a cultural anthropologist, I am concerned more with the key cultural categories and symbols that local people used to structure their world. Out here, those symbols turn on the relations of work and character, family and place. My discipline has a long history of looking for these patterns of meaning in the everyday lives of the people we study.

My own efforts to understand West River had me collecting data of many kinds. I spent hours in the abbey archives ferreting through a hundred years of historical documents. I collected genealogies from selected families to discover the movements of people from home communities in Europe to the northern plains and the later spread of families out of the area. I pored over microfilmed newspapers from the early years of the town, looking for stories from the current residents' ancestors. I lived and worked with a farm family to open up the intimacies of their world in the most direct way possible.

Sharing lives may be the most classic of anthropology's methods. In my case, it meant sleeping in Joe and Marie Bauer's spare room and rising at 5:00 AM to start the day with their family. It meant driving tractor and combine, breaking machinery, and helping with repairs. It meant walking fence line and being bit by deer flies in a high hot wind. It meant pulling calves when cows needed help with a birth, learning who calls whom in an emergency, and how to tie chains around those delicate hooves, attach them to a pulley, and avoid the pour of afterbirth when the newborn calf yanks free. And it meant staying in the fields until the red sun crossed the western buttes at 10:00 and we could all go home to eat dinner.

I worked a double job helping where I could, but also talking and writing. Through all of this, I'd crouch down in a dusty field from time to time to jot down my notes. A lot of the work of anthropology is asking questions, looking for pattern.

Of course, there were interviews, too. I selected a sample of those high school graduates and visited them with my tape recorder to ask more formal questions. That's why I was waiting for Craig my last night in West River. He finally came down from the ridge with his son.

"Hey, Tom, sorry to keep you waiting. Bobby wanted that picture and what's a fellah gonna do? He's only gonna be ten once. I want him to remember what it was like."

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I lived in West River for 3 summer months in 1999, a longer period in 2000, and another shorter period in 2001. As a way of keeping in touch with center people working elsewhere, I began sending field letters to my office during that first chunk of time. The character of those letters described the landscape and the people from the newly sensitive eyes of a North Dakotan coming home after 20 years. In 2000, when I began living with a farm family north of West River, my letters began to describe everyday life with a new intimacy.

Ethnography places unusual demands on the researcher. Among those demands is an awareness of her changing relationship with place and people. The field letters from 2000 convey some of the texture of that work and, while far from the whole story I went to investigate, begin to sketch the contours of the everyday. I share those letters here as a first installment on the larger story.

The names in these letters are changed to protect my friends from prying eyes. In a later work, I'll better thank them for their extraordinary generosity. I'm humbled by my dilemma. How do you really thank people for welcoming you into their lives?

22. February 2000

Field Letter # 1  
West River, ND

Dear friends,

It's hard to begin with something other than the weather. It's the first thing to catch your attention on the drive out and it's the first thing that people greet you with after the obvious "Well, you're back!" So I won't try to buck the trend. In two weeks I've gone from somber winter to early spring and I suppose we'll go right back again before summer really kicks in sometime in May. The whole winter has been weird for the locals--just a week before I got here it was 60 degrees and not a spot of snow to be seen. Warm weather keeps the deer from bunching in the hollow places; they stay dispersed in the brush able to casually browse wherever they happen to be. That makes the hunting harder so the deer season got stretched out a couple more months to insure the culling. Rafe and Elisabeth did all right here at the motel with hunters still booking rooms into the first week of January, usually the deadest of months for business in small towns like West River. And farmers who usually bring their cattle in closer to home this time of year have been letting them range in the far forties. A weird year.

I'll enjoy this present spring, false as it may be--the road west to West River today in a warm 40 degree day. The streets in town are sloppy with running water, the cars covered with mud. Snow melting in great swatches off the east side of buttes and the upward sloping prairie. I noticed that the many ice houses that rose out of Sweetbriar Lake just a week ago have been mostly pulled off--one holdout risking a dunking in the cold waters. People are a little goofy with the unseasonable warmth, walking around in shirt sleeves and blinking like groundhogs in the sun.

Of course, driving into the state on the 8th was just another return to the North Dakota everybody imagines. The snow began blowing across the road in cloudy ground drifts by Alexandria, Minnesota a hundred miles from the border. One of those Canadian fronts was baring its teeth and keeping the high at about 10 degrees (sign on the Fargo gas station where I stopped: Car Wash Open only at Ten Degrees or Above). The wind blew cold through every seam. By the time I got to the Dakota border, I couldn't see further than a quarter mile at best; every now and then I'd enter a slipstream of blowing snow and the whole world turned blind. Now this is weather I could understand! Asked a trucker headed east what it was like for the next 200 miles west and heard it was about the same so I plowed on toward Bismarck. That night the temperature dipped to -17 and it barely got above 10 for the next week, about right for the time of year.

I haven't done a Dakota winter for years so I was happy to have the blast. I had forgotten about the ice fogs in the frozen marshlands hemmed in by eskers or the dead bluffs bordering ancient streambeds in this glacial landscape. The road cants upward along the back of the plains and there's no horizon to be seen--snow covered land and brilliant sky are all a strangely backlit kind of white. At 70 miles per hour, it feels like the car is spinning end over end in an infinite whirl. You feel weightless, untethered, and in space. And you hit the break wondering if the shadow ahead is a slow semi or a brick wall. People try to get inside, shy away from the wind and the muffled crunch of tires in dry snow. The car protests the morning ignition. There's nobody out and you see how an empty place can get more empty.

But that was only for a week. It began to warm up last Friday and it hasn't peaked yet. I got my cross-country skiing in while I still could; I trudged the 2 miles from my parents' house

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to the Missouri River when the temperature warmed to 10 degrees just to move around. My tracks weren't alone in snow--doesn't take long to go stir crazy out here. But that was all last week and most of it's bite is fading already.

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Of course, I'm really here to work with people no matter how much weather reports want to take the lead. So a few notes on conversations and coming back into the field. Three random encounters first; they don't fit anywhere in particular but they tell something about the ethos of the place.

I've already mentioned this one briefly in an e-mail. I went to the post office in McLaughlin to express mail my abstracts for the upcoming anthropology meetings to Jay Ruby in Philadelphia. Nine in the morning and two long lines were already snaking through the lobby; I fell in behind a stout grandmotherly woman whose head only reached up to my chest and waited my turn. My line always seems to move the slowest no matter which one I choose and I noticed that people behind me stayed in our slower line just as I did--not much toe-tapping or rush in evidence. We finally got to the woman in front of me. "What's in here," says the post office guy to the woman after she hands him large envelope, obviously full of paper. "This is a book," she says. ("Book" actually comes out as "buch" so it sounds more like "Dis iss a buch;" we're in German country out here...) The envelope bends in the post-office guy's hands as he hefts the package. "This isn't a book," he says. A book's gotta have covers and be bound. So I can't send this book rate. Do you want it to go parcel post or first class?" She thinks through every decision as though this is a first trip to the post office. The clock is ticking and nobody says anything although you can sense that let's get it over with feeling in the line.

It's a nickel cheaper for parcel post so she goes with that and she orders stamps to finish up her business. She keeps smoothing her six dollar bills, running them through her hands, putting them on the counter, and picking them up again while the clerk tallies up the bill. Six dollars and sixty-five cents.

I see it coming. The six dollar bills is all that she has and she pauses a bit to figure out what to do. "I'll take care of the 65 cents," I say. She turns to me and says, "Oh no, I couldn't have you do that." And I insist that it's no problem and plunk the coins onto the counter. "Oh thank you; well you have to give me your name, then, so I can pay you back." "No," I say, "You don't need my name and you can just give the money to somebody else. It's really no problem." "Well, then I'll give it to the church," she says, thanks me again and is out the door. Everybody is beaming; the clerk helps me with a flourish; the clerk in the next line laughs and smiles and a woman who looks like she's from a downtown business jokes with me about paying her postage, too. Morning in McLaughlin.

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Random encounter two happened the day before. Nothing much, just a stop at the rest stop on the interstate. I stood looking at the sky, the sun edging down in reds and pinks behind the cottonwoods along the Green River. My car is the only one at the stop until a car pulls up

and a woman and what looks like her daughter get out and head to the restrooms. I keep standing a bit longer and I hear a call, "Hey, how're ya doin'" and the man who was sitting in the backseat is strolling over. "Pretty good, how 'bout y'rself" (we Dakotans go for the laconic; I felt like I should have cowboy boots and a hat to tilt back from my forehead). And so we enter into a conversation.

They're an Indian family from up at Fort Berthold Reservation--mixed Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara. I tell him my cousins are enrolled members and he asks their names, but doesn't know them (they've lived off the reservation most of their lives), but he does know their uncle who lives across the reservation, and across the Missouri River, from him in Mandaree. One of those conversations that just happens up here--we establish some connection through family and move on from their to talk about work and whatever comes up. He works carpentry, says that's about all anybody does on the rez unless they work for the tribal government. He's just coming back from McLaughlin where he had to get some glasses--only an hour drive from the rez to McLaughlin. Bismarck's longer because no main roads go direct--you're always taking doglegs to get there.

His wife and daughter come back to the car and he begins to head back, but stops abruptly and turns again to me. "Lone Bear, A he says, "Darcy Lone Bear" and holds out his hand. I feel invited to stop by--you never know when it might pay to know another guy.

Small conversation. One of the little gems you encounter in the fading light of early evening on a springlike day of melting snow and soft air.

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And the third random encounter is the earliest, from back when the temperatures were still running well below zero at night. Just past the Hail Creek rest area on my way to West River, I notice a figure on the road ahead--tanned Carhartt Jacket, wool cap with the earflaps pulled around the ears, cowboy boots and jeans--he's walking west and turns to put out his thumb when he hears me approach. A hitch hiker at 15 degrees! With that big grey handlebar mustache and that outfit and no bags or backpacks, I guess he's a ranch hand either looking for work or heading home, so I pull over.

Ranch hand he is. On his way back to a ranch near Broadus over in Montana, south of Miles City. He's got a way to go and it's cold so I offer my thermos of coffee and some cookies while I take him as far as McLaughlin. Ask him where he's coming from.

"Winnipeg. Buddy of mine died little over a week ago so I figured I ought to pay respects. Haven't seen him for years, but we were good friends at one time, in Viet Nam. His wife called to tell me."

And how long did it take to get to Winnipeg from Broadus. "Four days. Not too bad. Of course, it's not like it used to be when every exit was lined with guys looking for rides. And one

car would pick up as many as it'd hold back then, too."

And this was the third day on his return trip. With luck he'd make it to Miles City and could call from there to the ranch to get a final ride. I warned him about the snowstorm that was supposed to come late that afternoon and asked him if he'd like to get dropped off at a warm spot like a truck stop. No, the road suited him fine, so I let him sip as much coffee as he wanted while he polished off the sugar cookies I'd brought from home in Bismarck and told me about himself. People seem to have stories and some of them want to tell them. Others don't, of course, but getting a lift from a stranger (and coffee & cookies, too!) must have the same tongue-loosening quality as long airplane rides.

I never got the guy's name but know he never married ("Being married to a ranch hand isn't the kind of thing that most women would want these days"), was in Viet Nam in 1967 & 68 (didn't go into the army until he was drafted along with his 3 brothers), got out in Georgia and bought a used car that'd get him back to Montana, a state which he has essentially never left for any thing more than forays like the present one and about 10 years of summers on the rodeo circuit in the plains and mountain states.

I don't really know anything about rodeoing but just happened to have read Annie Proulx's new book of short stories on Wyoming down and outers and one of those stories features the rodeo circuit. All I can say is that Annie Proulx did a pretty good job; I used what I picked up from her short story to make it sound like I knew enough to ask informed questions and my unnamed rider leaned back in the passenger seat, cradled the mug of coffee, and talked calf roping (his favorite) and riding. A Montana cowboy, he lacked the twang that you might hear in your mind right now--his was a slow, careful way of talking, unrushed like the line in the McLaughlin post office. Stories of all night driving with his partner, 600 miles or more from one rodeo to the next and starting times just a day apart. Stories of getting too banged up to stay in the game.

And that sense of something good ending that I hear from all over up here. Rodeo ruined by professionalism, big prizes, and corporate sponsors. No longer the sport of ranch hands taking a few months or years off to do some traveling and show what they can do. He took off from there and generalized, not a "whole country's going to hell" rant, but a more reflective pondering of things. I'd begin to write some of the things down, but they come off too easily misunderstood and made simple. It's true that my rider did comment on how you can't take people at their word like you used to, even in Montana. But I wouldn't want him to sound overly aw shucks in my account.

Took him to the western edge of town and dropped him off. We shook hands and he continued walking west. The snow came early that day. Quite a blow. Eight inches.

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Well, that's out of my system, but with all the throat clearing that I've been doing, I've already got a too long letter. I'll save more for the next one. The welcome back has been warm and friendly. I strolled into the abbey and got pulled into several embraces with the monks of Great Plains Abbey. Father Bernard immediately offered me an office and I as immediately accepted even though I wasn't planning to ask; I thought I'd be in the way, especially since it's hard to avoid the invitations to meals that come from just being around the abbey. This means joining in the chanting of the hours on occasion, something that has its own charms in this big German abbey church. I'm moving things into the office--just a door down from the one I occupied last summer--which will allow me to settle into some kind of pattern that includes writing along with the fieldwork. Solid oak desk in a room decorated by no more than an empty bulletin board and a crucifix on the back wall. The abbey printing shop is down the hall; the radiator adds character.

It's looking good. I'll be getting a list of names of those who graduated in 1972-73 & 74 and begin to work with a sample of these names to get more into family relations among those who've moved and those who've stayed. Not much of a secret that the years I'm interested in center on my own high school graduation year. Not only can I think of questions that hit home but it just happens to be the right age to get at people who are in mid-career and mid-life.

Hope all is going well with folks out there. I'm in pretty good contact via e-mail (I am now the proud owner of a McLaughlin Public Library card and that lets me use their internet connections). Only disadvantage there is that somebody might want to use the machine while I'm sitting at it so I'll have to keep most of my e-mail communications on the shorter side.

If anybody needs to reach me outside of the cell phone, it's possible to try me at the abbey phone number--but that would be catch as catch can (as my daily schedule gets more organized I might be able to come up with times that I'm likely to be here). The abbey phone is 701-974-3315 and my office extension is 142.

And, of course, I also have a post office box now:

Tom Fricke  
PO Box 312  
West River, North Dakota

Cheers!

24. February 2000

Dear friends,

Fog days on the plains. We're getting the same early warmth that you folks are having out in Michigan, only close on the heels of real cold and snow. The prairie is a wet quilt of sodden grasses, muddy fields, and patches of snow. A big raw wind from the southeast means a low pressure system is spinning through and dragging moisture into the air. Snow on the ground and warmer air means dense fog and gloom and here it is noon and you still can't see across the street. I drove into McLaughlin this morning to get to the computers at the public library and noticed all the fresh roadkill that results--skunks, a huge buck, and a doe--even some crows, which you almost never see killed that way out here. Weather report is for a big storm to move through tomorrow afternoon and people are running around getting things in order since they never know if it'll be rain or blizzard when the weather is like this.

Continuing stories from last summer in all the newspapers. The battles between the US Forest Service and the ranchers have escalated. First, the USFS wanted to change the balance of land use on the national grasslands, shifting things toward wilderness and recreation from the crazy dominance of ranching out here. That was bad enough from the rancher's point of view and it wasn't a good idea to appear overly conservationist in your walk or manner (putting me with the ponytail, jeans, and hiking boots at a real disadvantage in those places like Amidon, population 24). Now the USFS is canceling all ranching leases as of August 6 because two of the three ranching associations have refused to turn in their records for leased land. The sage brush rebellion lives. The association lawyers have asked for mediation sessions and the Forest Service has refused because they don't have to do it. Senator Dorgan, one of the two democrats in the US Senate from out here, has asked that they go ahead and do the mediation anyway since nothing is binding. Worst that could happen is that both sides get their backs up, which is more or less what's happened, and everything breaks down. Then the trucks will start getting trashed--western Dakota has a not too congenial mix of cowboy rhetoric and near socialism that may have trouble working things out when land use is at stake. Stay tuned!

I'm getting set to draw a sample of people in their early to mid-forties to begin some more systematic interviews. The idea will be to select people who were raised here in West River and who are now in their middle years, mostly established in their careers and their residence decisions, and well into raising their own kids. These are the ones whose relations with siblings and parents are most interesting to me. For starters, I went through the baptism lists for the local parish for kids baptized in 1953-56 (these are people who graduated from high school, if they went, in the early to mid-seventies)--I'll refine the list with the high school senior class names from a set of years, too. But here's something interesting in the way of movement. I checked the baptism names for boys against the phone book (doing boy names because most of the girls baptized from that time took their husbands' names at marriage) for West River. Out of 56 male names on that baptism list, I was able to find 12 in the phone book! Whew! Now some of those are names of people who have died by now (and some died when they were kids, too), but I was struck by the small number--even some of the family names from the fifties aren't present at all. I kept looking by searching through the names in McLaughlin and Bismarck-Mandan (since there's just one phone book for the whole region, but sub-divided by town)

and managed to come up with names that could represent about 20 of those originally baptized kids. It's hard to be sure unless you have middle initials since a name like "Bauer" has lots of people attached to it and you add that to a "John" or a "Robert" and you'll get more than one person. But let's say just for starters that between 50 and 75 percent of the (male) people born out here have moved on or died by their mid-forties and you get another view of decline (since not that many are moving in).

Well, that's just a start and it's rough. I'm looking forward to seeing what happens when I get some more refined records together (using the centennial family accounts and the high school yearbooks) and get to start talking to people in more structured ways. I plan to get as many addresses as I can of living people, draw a sample, and contact them (whether in town or in New Jersey) by mail first. Some of them will already know about me, but I want to give them a bit of advance warning via a letter (short--no more than a page) that includes some information on the project. And what better information to include than the 2 newspaper stories and the LSA Magazine article (I knew that was going to come in handy)--those that have seen those things have been all positive and had their curiosity piqued so I consider them tested enough to include with a letter that says: Uncle Tom Wants You!

Anyway, the detail there, such as it is, constitutes the methods section of this letter for those of you planning your own forays into the field right now.

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I still think that leaving the field is one of the single best things you can do for this kind of work. Of course, you have to actually come back, too, but it's in the return that people really begin to think you're serious (and maybe that you take them seriously). I have been swept into conversations since my return, made privy to stuff that makes you wonder who the imposter is here: is this person telling you about their father's alcoholism the real X, or is the real X the guy who said little more than a hello the first time and stared at you in sidelong glances.

Two days into town, I finally drove down to the Bauer place along the wide hollow space of the Flint River north of town. Wasn't sure if anybody would be home or not since I hadn't called ahead and with the steadiness of fresh snow falling for the past 4 days I had no idea what the ranch access road would be like either. Most of these roads, however far from the main highways, have street names these days (32 St SE runs off a state highway headed north and there's 4 miles separating it from the nearest farmstead going toward town). This is because they've centralized all the emergency services in the county--an ambulance or fire truck driver is unlikely to be a hometown man or woman who knows what the "Boehm place down by the old town spring" means so they've created street addresses. And the county clears named streets, but they'll do it in their own good time.

The road to the Bauers turned out not to have been cleared; the skid marks of the farm pick-up made their way a half mile from the house onto the pavement and I tracked myself along them to get in, occasionally spinning out toward the south ditch on my right. I pulled up to the side of the house, remembering that the family told me to just come into the kitchen through

The garage instead of using the front door; front doors are for formal receptions and for strangers out here--they might be locked where the kitchen door will be left open. (A few days later when I was feeding cattle with Joe, we went to the pen on a neighboring farm where he kept his 4 bulls--"Big and dumb," he said, "and worth keeping away from the cows"--we pulled in on the tractor, me riding a jerry-rigged seat he had fixed into the enclosed cab so that his wife could join him in the field, and I commented on how nice the house was on that farm. "Yeah, pretty nice, I guess," said Joe, "but the house faces the wrong way. I don't know why they didn't build it so that the main part of the house faces the yard so you can see what's happening." What he meant was that the way the house was built, the living room faced the entrance road and the kitchen and dining room were on the other side of the house--he couldn't imagine why they didn't do the opposite since any normal person would be spending most of his or her time in those places and not the living room.)

No cars by the house, just the farm equipment across the gravel lot near the outbuildings. I got out of the car to scratch one of the few farm dogs in the county that didn't seem to want to bite me when Marie Bauer pulled up from a trip into McLaughlin for groceries, welcomed me back, and invited me in for a fresh pot of coffee. We got started right away on the things that were most on her mind. Her daughter's getting married in June and the planning is well along--19 years old and in her second year at the University of Minnesota; she had wanted to get as far away from the country as she could think of and Minneapolis seemed just right to her. Now she's planning on marrying a boy from out toward Glendive. Met him at a youth gathering up at St. Mary's a couple of years before. He's working in Minneapolis at a computer company that does trouble shooting on hard drives for clients across the country--a good job and one that he quit school to take up (and quitting school is a worry to Marie and her husband).

"I don't know, Tom, maybe it's just that we don't want to let our daughter go, but we're worried about her rushing into marriage," she says when the coffee's brewed and we both have our cups on the counter in front of us. She doesn't want that to be the reason she's worried. She and her husband had gotten married when she herself was 19 and seven months pregnant; and her parents didn't care much for him since he was working as a roustabout on the oil rigs at the time. But she's worried anyway.

"It's just that the more we get to know him, the more we see some of the things that trouble us about him," she went on. "He's the kind of guy that doesn't seem to just get along--sees the worst things instead of just making it work."

Marie talked about her last trip to the Twin Cities (she's wearing a Gopher's sweatshirt with her jeans and hobnailed boots while we're talking). It had snowed wet and thick the whole day and the roads were a mess. She and her daughter were sitting around the apartment waiting for her daughter's fiancé to drop by after work and it took him a while--no big deal since Marie enjoyed the extra time to talk with her daughter. "When he got in after making his way through the snow and traffic, you would have thought that the only person it snowed on that day was him. Took him a long time to calm down and quit complaining." Things like that worry her. "I just wish he were more like most of us out here are, the kind of person who just takes what comes and works with it."

But he's from Glendive, I say, and that's as much like being from here as you can get. "Yeah, but he takes things too hard. I don't know. He's really a good guy and maybe I'm just seeing this because I'd rather my daughter not get married yet. Joe feels the same way and you know how he says whatever's on his mind."

It's a long and good conversation that requires a lot of coffee. We sat around the counter for an hour and a half, mostly talking about marriage and her daughter's plans. Marie and her husband are hoping that things will slow down and that their daughter will at least postpone the wedding even though they say it's up to her in the end. They'd like her to get a little more experience before jumping in. They've had about 10 years of experience directing the encounter classes for couples planning to get married at the local parish and they have a strong sense of what couples need to know before getting married. And leading the classes have made it easier for them to talk through these things with their daughter. It's an unusual mix of expressing their opinions and still letting their daughter choose.

"I knew it was coming, but didn't want to bring it up myself. Then one day my daughter mentioned that it would sure make things easier if she and her fiancé moved into a single apartment. I was on the phone with her when she did that. She said it would save money that they need and it would make sense since they're getting married so soon anyway. I let her know right away that I didn't like the idea. You know how Joe has that strong morality. So I told her that she should talk about this with her Dad before she does anything.

"So she called again about a week later and wanted to talk with her Dad about this. Joe took the phone and she brought up all the same things with him. And he said that he couldn't make her do anything she'd set her mind to but that he was against this. He told her that money was not a good enough reason for doing something that you know is wrong, that if money was the problem, then we could take care of that. He said that she should remember that we didn't raise her like that and he hoped that she wouldn't do it."

It was quite a conversation--the one I was having with Marie. I couldn't help being impressed with how easily she and her husband talk with their kids (their son is 17 and gets into the conversations, too--although Marie mentioned that she and her husband decided not to discuss their concerns about the upcoming marriage in front of their son anymore because they don't want to set him against his possible son-in-law. Lots going on here and I wanted to pull out my tape recorder right away, at least scribble some notes right there at the counter instead of later. An example of the kind of opening up that seems to follow a return to the field.

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Lots more happening in town, too, since I left in August. You already know that Fr. Louis had heart by-pass surgery in January--he's had to give up on teaching for the semester and will be back at the Abbey next month when his physical therapy sessions are finished in Bismarck. I think I mentioned that Ben Engler has finally decided to retire from being high school principal. He's been toying with the idea of retirement for a couple of years and things reached his limit

this year with the first bomb scare ever at the school (the two kids responsible were found out right away--a prank that got one of them expelled and the other in lesser trouble) and the case of a boy coming to school with a t-shirt that read something like "Fucking is the only way to go". In that last case, Ben had the kid take the t-shirt off and put on another. The thing that got to him wasn't so much the shirt but the call from the boy's mother in which she argued that there was nothing wrong with it. This comes from Margaret who said, "Can you believe that? What can you do with parents like that? And she's a local woman, too; went to school right here!" A transgression, understandable if not forgivable in an outsider, has made it's way to West River.

Ben's retirement is the big news all over the town. The first thing that Fred Muehl wanted to talk with me about over at the post office when I rented my box. And Rafe Flick over at the motel, too. Nobody's quite sure how they'll be able to replace Ben and nobody's quite sure what the future will bring with the school anyway--just last summer they lost 4 teachers at the last minute because the salaries are so low and the four nearly doubled what they were making by moving out of state--two of them taking up teaching in Minnesota and the other two leaving it altogether. This all adds to the feeling of unsettlement.

(One of Margaret's great tics, by the way, is her habit of referring to her husband as "Engler" rather than his first name. Of course, you can keep your eyes closed and still tell what generation people are from by whether or not they call Margaret by the single name or by "Margaret Jean"--all the people 65 and over say Margaret Jean.)

There's more. I should tell you about what a lousy ranch hand I make--adventures of cattle feeding when a slicing wind cuts the fence lines around the pasture. I'll save that one or forget it altogether. Too much going on!

I hope that similar adventures and stories are your daily lot out there. Take care!

Cheers!

14. March 2000

Dear folks,

Woke up this morning to the watery wash of a Karl Bodmer painting. Beautiful and indistinct shadings of grays and browns, sky cloudy but in that way of boundaryless grays moving one into the other. It's what gives the look of water color: a few sharp boundaries like the ragged edge of fencing or the stark, clutching outline of the winter cottonwood at the edge of a bluff, but an overall scarcity of detail. At the same time, it's not gloomy at all. The whole thing appears either backlit or weirdly luminous with its own internal glow. Expectant landscape. Anything can happen.

Karl Bodmer was able to catch some of that effect in spite of his European artistic heritage and training; most artists, and even Bodmer can't always resist the temptation, were at a loss in the Great Plains and tried to anchor their paintings to something grand and authentically (that is, authentically inspiring in that European way) massive in the landscape. They just didn't know how to deal with a place like this, where space and nuance is the key, where light shifts in an entirely new way. Well, Bodmer seems to have gotten it, at least occasionally, during his long residence with the Missouri River Indians north of Bismarck in 1833. Take a look at that picture in my office and you'll know exactly what the landscape was like this morning. Maybe Bodmer had the same sense of "anything can happen"--a few years later, the final smallpox epidemic hit the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara and nearly wiped them out.

No small pox epidemic on the horizon today, only a world transformed. Buttes in the shadowed distance looking bigger than usual--paradoxically magnified by the softening of lines. Even the line of hills along the Green River loomed like genuine mountains. Heavy frost. I drove into McLaughlin and turned off the suddenly distracting radio news.

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And I returned to my abbey office to get caught up on some note-taking; saw Fr Bernard as I dropped down the stairs and he invited me to noon prayers so I joined the monks for Lenten chants and then lunch. Fr Benet is there and I give him a hard time about the Bismarck Tribune spelling his name wrong in an article about local cleric responses to the Pope's Sunday acknowledgment and apology of uglier moments in Catholic history. He goes off on a tear: "What the hell am I supposed to say when some AP reporter calls out of the blue and asks me what I think about the pope's apology? That I don't think he should have done it? Reminds me of when I had a conversation with another reporter a few years back--nice guy, intelligent guy--I thought we were having a nuanced, subtle conversation and he went and wrote something like 'Father Benet Weiss doesn't believe in the resurrection'! Two days later I'm in a drugstore in Bismarck and see the Bishop coming down one of the aisles so I duck behind the aspirin. 'Oh, come out, Benet I know you're there,' the Bishop says, 'I know you didn't say that.' Whew! It's worth your life to talk to these reporters--I thought the Bishop might ask me to join him over by the rat poison aisle or something!"

Brother John is sitting to my right and smiling. Fr Benet, says to nobody in particular and just to start a conversation, that Brother John must be nuts.

“He looked out the window this morning and went on about how beautiful it is! This is beautiful? This is a bleak, pain-filled landscape! This is a northern desert!”

Fr Benet is kidding, I know, because he’s written about this place and I asked him to give me copies of his articles. Even though I haven’t read them before his busy ragging on Brother John, I’m used to Benet saying just about anything to see what happens next--an agent provocateur. Still, I laugh and say I have to agree with Brother John--it’s beautiful! And I bring up Bodmer.

“Bodmer?! Yeah, yeah, Bodmer...hmmm...yeah, yeah.”

Drift of conversation like the slow drift of night sky, constellations, stars, turning wheel. Aldebran, Orion, Betelgeuse, Cassiopeia. We go from there to stinging nettles to cassava. To lifting boxes. This Friday, I’m going to Bismarck with Bernard to help load the pick-up with Louis’s boxes, furniture, and bed frame. He’s moving back to the abbey after his by-pass surgery, giving up the apartment he’s lived in for 10 years. “Cheapest rent in town,” he says. Must be--it’s a basement muskrat hole of a place; not too bad except the water pours into the windows at every rain; the kitchen ceiling’s been ripped out to get at pipes and no sign of quick repair.

Benet on the monks and the Great Plains (from something he wrote about 20 years ago):

“It seems to me that this kind of eccentric environment must have some effect on a person.... There is nothing anyone can do about a blizzard or a prairie drought. No one plans on them happening but they can and they do...”

“We [monks] may be crazy, but we are not necessarily stupid. Some of us cannot imagine leaving this place. We built these buildings ourselves. We cultivated these fields since the turn of the century. We watched from our dining room window the mirage of the Killdeer Mountains rise and fall on the northwest horizon.... We have become as indigenous as the cottonwood trees and the bo-berry bushes and the box elder bugs.... Besides, who could imagine this place without monks?”

A...We see jackrabbits jump out of a bush and bound away. Then freeze. We see crocuses come right after the snow.... We see a Chinook wind in January make rivulets run. We see dust-devils and lots of little things. We are grateful.”

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So I go back downstairs and do some more note taking before calling Ben Engler to tell him I had some copies of the LSA Magazine for him. Margaret answers and we get into a conversation about me taking them out to dinner sometime soon. It’s been impossible to get a

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day that works--Class B basketball tournaments and West River doing surprisingly well at the last moments; school board meetings and Ben's retirement announcement, me in San Francisco, Monday choir in Bismarck for Ben. They can't do it tonight--Ben has parent-teacher meetings until 9 PM and then tomorrow until the afternoon. So I call Ben and we work out that tomorrow night it is.

I go and do some photo-copying and Brother Stephen comes by to say Mary's on the phone again.

"Hey, Tom! I forgot to say that just because Engler's working tonight doesn't mean you gotta go hungry. I'm making some soup and some bread and there's plenty! Ben's working so you can't eat here but I'll put the bread in a box and pack up the soup for you. Come by between 4:30 and 5:00 and get it, okay?"

All in one breath as is Margaret's way. I say okay. Go by later and bang on the door to "Come on in!" heard through the closed door and windows and over the dog's barking all the way from the kitchen where Margaret is laying neat twists of bread and cinnamon into a tupperware box and ladling homemade ham & pea soup into a container for me. I lay the LSA Magazine on the counter and collect the stuff. Margaret's chores are all around--the cooking all afternoon, the knitting on the chair in the front room looking out the window past the horse corral to the far ridges, magazines, the air of several phone conversations and probably at least one "coffee group" getting together earlier in the day (coffee groups: you are a member in some ill-defined way and most likely of more than one--cross-cutting membership means news travels across them and this is how Margaret knew that Elisabeth wasn't doing too well even though they weren't "in a coffee group together or anything like that")....

Margaret's all-in-one-breath talking again, piling the stuff into my hands, and asking if I can handle it and saying (I swear she said it like this): "It's hot so du bist careful!"

Du bist?

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And before any of that I had called Joe & Marie yesterday. A message was taped to the door of my abbey office when I got back--long out of date--last Tuesday. Marie answered the phone and I explained that I got back from San Francisco sick so hung around Bismarck for a few days.

"Oh," she's laughing. "Yeah, well it was Fat Tuesday and I figured that since the next day was Ash Wednesday we better have you over to drink some beers with Joe's folks and us. No big deal, but too bad you couldn't be here--now I've got til the end of Lent before I get to drink!"

This seems to be a Catholic thing--or a Catholic & German thing. My grandfather--a heavy drinker by any gauge--would quit drinking for Lent, too.

So I head down the six miles of road to their house to drop off copies of the LSA Magazine this afternoon. Snow has begun to fall; the road into the house has just enough cover to have turned slick and I skid to my halt in the farmyard and head toward the back door. The workshop door opens from across the yard and Joe shouts for me to come over there.

Joe's there in insulated coveralls just beginning to turn grimy, oil on the knees and thighs. His cousin Wayne (farms about a mile and a half south of town) is there, too, and they're at their separate projects. Joe works at ripping out some of the equipment and replacing stripping in the old West River-Emmon Ambulance that he got at auction for just \$800 with only 70,000 miles on it. It's about to become a farm service vehicle once it gets its welder bolted to the floor and a few other changes (the distinctive emergency vehicle paint strips and red lights have got to go, too, and Joe's trying to figure out how to cover all that up without making the new truck too ugly). Wayne's working on repairs to a field pump casing that he got a deal on--needs some painting and he's got to put some insulation in it so that the water doesn't freeze in it and blow the pump. He won't tell how much he paid for the iron casing--just says he got a good deal.

(Joe's real comfortable telling how much he paid for the ambulance although he keeps joking about me asking to begin with. You don't ask things like that out here--I do, so I'm a little weird. And, although weirdness isn't directly called out here, it gets joked about and, thus, pointed out. As I talk with Wayne, Joe interrupts, "Hey, I still haven't heard how much he paid for it." Eventually, I ask and he laughs. Wayne evades the answer--he's just been on a tear about the census form he got in the mail--on which he answered all but one question, whether he owned or rented, because it was nobody's business.)

Joe introduced me to Wayne and we begin to try to figure each other out. I'm both easier and harder to figure out because I just handed Joe the magazines with that story in it. So Wayne knows I teach. But then he's got to find out if I'm a North Dakotan and exactly what I'm doing. I tell him that he's one of the guys I might like to talk with--he'd 44, graduated from the high school in 1974, and he hasn't left town. Yeah, well that might be okay--he kind of looks at Joe to see what he's getting himself into.

So Wayne spends a lot of time establishing that he couldn't stand school. "I suppose that if I read, I might have done better." Things like that. Is this because I teach? Or because I have a PhD? I caused part of the problem by not giving a straight answer when he asked me what I teach--I froze a little trying to figure out how to make what I do sound like it makes any sense at all to him: Teach classes on social theory? Teach about kinship? I would have been better off just saying what I do and letting him take it or leave it--my hesitancy got translated into condescension and maybe that's just the right word for it.

But I putter around, help Joe bolt some flashing to the side of a cabinet in the ambulance, keep up the chatter, let Joe joke. And Wayne says when I'm leaning up against the workbench, "Hey, maybe you can give a hand over here, too!" No idle hands in this place.

"So how did you end up doing what you do?"

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“Well, it’s kind of a long story--one thing led to another in a way. I really started out thinking that I’d be teaching high school in North Dakota.” We measure off some insulation and work it into the casing and I go on with something about working construction. And that does it!

“Oh, you worked construction?”

“Yeah, well I had to work to get through college so I did things like that in summers. I drove a garbage truck one year while going to college...”

Joe jumps in with a friendly snort, “You mean you got to sit in the front!”

I get his point. “Yeah! And stand on the back, too, especially in the winter!”

And Wayne. “Well, if you worked construction... Well, then...”

And so it’s good again. We drift into easy banter. I’m helping with the stuff--nothing fancy--and Wayne wants to know what I do for fun. (God, the questions! I mean, I don’t really think about these things and for some reason I’m not at top form today--I don’t seem to be able to just say “read” which is what I do.) I recover on that one--he approves of backpacking because it sounds more like hunting to him. Does not approve of mountain biking, because it makes me sound like one of “them”--I regain stature when I answer that I like snowmobiling; this is the real shibboleth. (And I’m not lying when I say I do like snowmobiling although the last time I did it was about 30 years ago--great fun!)

And then, “Hey, you’re not a vegetarian, are you?”

Joe jumps in, “No, Tom’s no vegetarian!”

“No, I’m not a vegetarian. Well actually I was for 2 months, I say, but that was pretty clearly to piss off my Dad.”

Wayne thinks that’s funny. Looks good, we’ve gone as far as we can on the casing and he has to get off to check on his calves--calving season, 5 so far and no late nights up to now. He’s out the door right about when Duane gets home with the drawer to the tool chest (really an old dresser doing retirement service in the garage) that he’s repaired at the high school wood shop. “Hey, Dad, check out how I fixed that drawer...”

And Joe’s checking it out and joking with his son who wants to take over the farm. You can tell they’re comfortable working around each other. Same kind of joking that I just heard between Wayne & Joe (Joe gets on him because his feet were cold, “You should have heard him whine!” and Wayne says when I tell them I have to go get my soup over at Margaret’s, “Good thing you’re not eating here! They fed me a baloney sandwich for dinner! I was lucky that I ate before coming!”) and that I got to briefly be a part of, too. This joking is a thing that needs more looking at, but not here and now!

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So official letter's end. So much to include but I better move on. I was going to write something more on how people respond to this place but won't get it together here--but notes follow for the Dakota junkies in the crowd! Hope all goes well!

Cheers!

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Postscript: Stray Notes

I got back from California last week with this season's inescapable cold and flu so I've been occupying myself until yesterday with old explorer journals from 1738 and after. Some great stuff in there and the expected fixation on the miseries of being in this place. For some reason, a fair number of these expeditions would commence in October or November and leave these guys over-wintering among the Mandan, or at least beating a hasty and miserable retreat east in January.

Poor Pierre La Vérendrye was first, in 1738 & 39, starting out from his trading post at the edge of the eastern Canadian forests in October. Nobody ever seemed to visit these plains for themselves. La Vérendrye was hoping to find the river rumored to flow into the Mer de l'Ouest and to be settled on either side by a white race who lived in earthen lodges (and also by a group of 3 foot high dwarfs, although he doesn't seem to have been as interested in these guys). His first disappointment after the initial shock of realizing that this wasn't the Canadian Shield with its navigable (he was going to have to walk!) was to actually meet the Mandan Indians--they were no different from the Assiniboine (except more clever)! And what a shock it was.

His whole report is one long complaint and excuse. There's kind of a whining tone in the background--you begin to feel sorry for him, which seems to be the point since he saw himself as having failed (and so did his promoters in the French government). His final comment nearing the end of his ordeal:

After three days' rest, I resumed my journey. I reached the first mountain on January 9 [1739], and there we camped for a long time.... Never in my life have I endured so much misery, sickness, and fatigue as I did on this journey.

Or take David Thompson, who came through from east in 1797-98--again in December! The temptation is to take all of his journal, but a few selections are enough to get the point. It takes him barely a month to experience the two worst days of his entire life; an extraordinary run of bad luck, especially if you read the reports intervening between December 19 & January 22!

December 10th Sunday. A fine sharp clear Morning. Ther -20.... At 8AM a heavy South Gale arose, which soon increased to a dreadful terrible Drift that the Earth & Skies seemed confounded together, it was almost as dark as Night, we could actually not see more than 100 yards around us.... the men began to despair of surviving the Night, as we were without Shelter, and almost exhausted....

December 19th Tuesday. A most terrible Storm with exceeding high Drifts and bold all day from NNW. At 8 AM Ther -17. The very Heavens obscured I never saw a worse Day in all my life.

December 26th Tuesday. At 7 AM Ther -16. At 7 2 AM a most terrible Storm arose from the SSW and continued the whole day and evening--excessive bad weather. The wind roared among the Hills like distant Thunder.

January 22nd Monday. A most terrible Storm at West all Night & this Day with thick Snow and excessive high Drifts. The poor Fellows who are living in the Ht could not light their fire & were obliged to crowd in with us 16 in all. This is beyond all Doubt the worst Day I ever saw in all my Life it is absolutely impossible to see 10 yards before you.

Well, okay, these guys came in winter, they deserved it. But the summer reports don't always fair much better. François-Antoine Larocque was just west of here in July 1805:

Saturday 13th. We sat of at 9 through a very hilly and barren country in crossing two small Creeks and arrived at 12 on the banks of the lesser Missouri we crossed it and encamped on its border about 2 miles higher. The river is here about 3/4 of an acre in breadth from bank to bank but there is very little water running, the bed appearing dry in many places and is of sand and gravel.... No grass at all. The whole forms a prospect far from pleasing.

Or my favorite so far (and I won't bug you with any more after this), Alexander Henry the Younger, who actually makes the blizzards sound more bearable than what he went through. The full journal entries are too long to include again, but these brief excerpts do well enough (his spellings are fun, too):

Monday July 7th [1806]... The weather was fine, sultry and overcast. The wind aft. We were much plagued with the Musquitoes that surrounded us in clouds.

Tuesday 8th.... The misquetoos continued very troublesome. It was only with difficulty we could keep our horses from throwing themselves down and rowling in the water to clean their bodies of these cursed insects.

...passed a very uncomfortable night, the weather hot and sultry, with clouds of Misquetoos. They annoyed us to such a degree as to prevent us from taking any supper. It was impossible to sit up otherwise than by placing ourselves in the midst of the smoke, and even there we were not intirely free from them although nearly sufficated... .

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Wednesday 9th. Fine clear weather, but excessive warm.... The Misquetoos always tormenting us as usual...

So, temperatures of unbelievable depth, white-outs and freezing pens no matter how close to the fire, unpleasant landscapes and sulfurous water, and to top it all off: mosquitoes. I've got some more positive reports, too, but this begins to resemble my notes more than a letter so I'll let them pass.

Still, Meriwether Lewis should get the last word since we're so close to the Lewis and Clark bicentennial. Here he is in April of 1805, maybe giddy after the long winter at Fort Mandan:

I ascended the hills from whence I had a most pleasing view of the country, particularly of the wide and fertile vallies formed by the missouri and the yellowstone rivers, which occasionally unmasked by the wood on their borders disclose their meanderings for many miles in their passage through these delightfull tracts of country

But then, that brings up Sakakawea...

Dear friends,

I had been planning something else, but Fr Benet just dropped down here when I came to store my computer and grab a few books. Launched into a conversation on Benedictine stability, the northern plains, German-Russians, and charlatan priests.

Add to that my not being able to shake the image of beaver carcasses and it's clear I need to get a quick note out.

Beaver carcasses?

Well, I mentioned this in a postcard already and even wrote a quick letter featuring them to my friend Keith Taylor, but the subject doesn't want to leave just yet. Must be the reading of old fur trade & explorer journals. But it also gets me to the subject of lists and the apparent fascination with them up here (who knows, I have no control or comparison group--maybe people are into them everywhere else, too--but on a 20 minute drive through slate skies backing the yellow-brown prairie, there's no telling what will pop into your head--this popped in right about Gladstone coming out of the Green River valley and its rim of naked grey cottonwoods).

The beavers. Nothing much really but I happened to finish a salad at the Applebee's in McLaughlin yesterday (Applebee's, whatever else it might be in the restaurant chain world, is the place to go for a good salad; best hope of getting away from the stacks of chopped iceberg lettuce that count as salads in a lot of other places), paid the bill and stepped out into the 15 degree weather made to feel peculiarly warm by the brilliant near-equinox sun--in spite of the temperature, water was running in the streets. A pick-up had parked next to me and I assume its occupants were sitting in the Applebee's, too, although it's an open question whether they were there for a salad. And in the bed of that pick-up were about 100 beaver carcasses, freshly trapped I suppose, the sun bringing out the rich dark brown shimmer of beaver fur. There may have been slightly fewer than 100; I saw that a few muskrats must have gotten into the traps, too. I couldn't keep my self from counting them--about 25 beavers in the top layer and I figure a pick-up bed is about 4 beavers deep so that's close to a 100 (this is one of the things I mean by lists--you just can't resist the urge).

As William Clark wrote in his journal after a "verry cold" night on April 26, 1805, "beaver is in every bend." (Meriwether Lewis was more explicit about what you do with them, "beaver are very abundant, the party kill several of them every day.") Lewis & Clark talk about killing just 91 beavers the whole time they were in North Dakota--they probably killed more since sometimes they say "several" and don't give numbers--and that's from Oct 13, 1804-April 27, 1805 and August 3-20, 1806, over six months! I have to wonder if this pick-up truck load is a whole season's worth of beavers or if it's just a few days' worth, or what. How long is beaver trapping season anyway? (It's sure over for those poor guys.) One of the teachers at West River High School used to supplement his salary by running trap lines for beaver. So did my friend, Steve Jamsa, in high school and college.

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Forgetting the procreative wonders of rodents, I had thought that beaver must be pretty thinned out in places like North Dakota. My Mom wears a beaver coat from time to time (I have told her to avoid bringing it to Ann Arbor where the beaver coat story won't have the luxury of narration before the spray paint cans come out). It's beautiful to the touch. The soft cool of fur on the hand, blackened and lighter browns, the iridescence and shimmer of a magician's coat!

Seeing the beavers in that truck, it's hard not to think of the beaver coming to the Hidatsa and promising them long lives if they would drink lots of water and expel the bitter things in their stomachs each morning (beavers were considered healers & doctors by the Hidatsa--the beavers also gave people a system of flint-knapping different from the one passed on by eagles, but nobody knows it anymore). Had these beavers forgotten this?

My Mom's iridescent coat came from some of the last beavers trapped by my great-uncle, Fred Petrie, on (what else?) Beaver Creek, which flowed through his property on its way west to the Missouri River south of Bismarck. (Lewis & Clark passed the creek on October 16th and noted it in their journals; it's almost embarrassing to translate the name they got from the Indians--**Kee tooch Sar kar nar** in Clark's always delightful spelling of things--it means "place of Beaver." Just so. Or not quite--actually, this creek is called "Little Beaver Creek" these days; the Beaver Creek where my great uncle got those pelts was called by a name translated as "Elk Shed their horns" by Clark. You can't have everything.... Not too far above Beaver Creek, Clark wrote: "Great Deel of Beaver Sign. Several Cought every night.")

Fred Petrie liked lists. Or at least his Dad did. We have books filled with his Germanic handwriting, books of lists. And so did Fred's wife Lillian like lists. Lillian was my grandmother's sister which is how he is my great-uncle. We have the books she filled, too. Fred and Lillian are dead now and they didn't have kids so these books are scattered among kin who regard the lists as curiosities to be pulled out and mulled over in connection with Fred & Lillian stories that would be called "the Fred & Lillian Cycle" if recorded by my colleagues. These often involve hunting stories since Fred & Lillian were great hunters--every year they towed a little trailer behind them through the back country of the northern plains, through the western Dakotas and Montana and Wyoming. They went hunting for their honeymoon. Their house along Beaver Creek was filled with the mounted heads of antelope, deer, elk & moose. Fred made moccasins from some of the hides of various animals and the moccasins made their way to kin through mysterious networks that told you how close or distant you were to Fred & Lillian's emotional core. When Fred died (in his sleep unlike his brother-in-law Connie Kalberer, who married another of my grandmother's sisters and whose last words were "Did I get him?" in reference to the goose he had just brought down) people came from all around the continent to send him off. I wished I were there when I found out about it; all my brothers were, but I was standing on a rock in the Cascade Mountains, three days walk from a road, when Fred died; I recall having some of his moccasins with me and that's probably enough. I never asked but like to imagine that everybody at the funeral in Linton, North Dakota, wore the transformed hides and furs that Fred distributed among them when he was alive. And that the obituary was in the form of lists. Beaver lists. Stone lists (He worked agates, too.). Daily lists--telegraphic entries of what he did every day & whether he made or lost money doing it.

Fred & Lillian's lists might seem merely quaint or even odd if they were the only ones keeping them. We excuse Lewis & Clark their penchant for lists because, after all, Jefferson put them up to it. But then, it wasn't Jefferson or Lewis & Clark who counted how many beaver they report killing within the boundaries of North Dakota. No, it was Russell Reid who, although coming very close to being a Canadian, was a North Dakotan born about 1 mile from the northern border in 1900. This was not too much before Fred Petrie was born. Fred liked lists; Reid liked lists; they're both North Dakotans. I rest my case.

Or I'd like to, but I'm not allowed to do that, am I? So here are a few more stories. Reid was one of those autodidacts from an era when you could be self-educated and, although uncredentialed, still do great things. He graduated from high school, I suppose in Hannah where he was born, and became the superintendent of the state historical society in 1931. Thanks to Reid, North Dakota is the only place in the country where you better say Sakakawea rather than Sacajewea or a Sagagawea. We in North Dakota are very proud of the fact that we are right and the rest of the world is wrong. It has long been that way. We don't care.

He did lots more than that (although I will go to my grave saying Sakakawea, even if wrong, because any other way sounds funny), but listing it all would make a longer digression. Still, in thinking about Russell Reid, I just realized that he is something of a model for a North Dakota type, the local hero triumphant against huge odds. I just discovered that the anthropologist Alfred W. Bowers was another one of those types. He wrote **Mandan Social and Ceremonial Organization**, the first full length ethnography I ever read (not counting Kon Tiki, which isn't an ethnography anyway, but which I read 12 times by the time I finished 6th grade). Although I read that ethnography in North Dakota when I was 18, I had no idea until just this week that Bowers was a North Dakotan. But he was, born in 1901, and raised on his parents' homestead near Killdeer, which is nearly straight north and a jog west of here in the next county. I think I've already said that you can see the Killdeer Mountains from the Abbey windows.

Bowers' story is one of persistence. Here's a short version:

He went to a normal school to qualify to teach in rural schools and after some years of that he managed to get himself certified for city schools and moved to Mandan to teach. He kicked around at that for a while and then decided to go to a college to get his BA; got a degree in geology at Beloit at age 28 or so and went to Chicago to do graduate work in anthropology. He worked with the Mandan in 1929 and 1930 and later with the Hidatsa in 1932 and 1933--all of this part of his dissertation work. Funding was tough--this was the depression--and things got worse when, in the winter of 1933, his family's farm was lost for failure to pay taxes. He had to interrupt his research to run a trapline for beaver, hoping that selling the pelts would help him to get back the farm. And he had hoped to be named the director of the State Historical Society, too, but lost out to Reid. Bowers did manage to get his farm back but he needed to supplement his work by becoming a county extension agent. No time to work on the dissertation! Finally in 1948, he got his doctorate in anthropology and went off to Idaho in 1949 to begin his university career! Whew!

Well, there are a few others but what about the lists? (I've gone on so long I may never get back.) Reid liked them; Bowers liked them. One of my favorite Reid articles is "Birds and Mammals Observed by Lewis & Clark in North Dakota, appearing in 1927. And it's not much more than a series of expanded lists in which we find out about the 91 deceased beavers but also 2 big horn sheep, 13 antelope, 111 elk, 243 white-tailed deer, 4 mule deer, 2 muskrats, 7 porcupines, 9 wolves, 1 red fox, 2 otters, 1 badger, and 4 grizzly bears killed and generally consumed within the state boundaries. No count on buffalo.

Still, again, these lists are actually kind of interesting and useful; or we try to make them so after the fact (as in Reid's counting the numbers in Lewis & Clark). We do that a lot--make the listing a rational enterprise even though the list-maker is driven by forces that make us nervous. There was a monk here at the Abbey who began keeping lists. Temperature and precipitation. Every day, every day. My grandfather did the same thing and it was regarded as an odd but more or less harmless tic, generally not addressed directly in hopes that nobody would notice, a source of vague discomfort of the kind observers are subject to when somebody's zipper is down. I wonder if the other monks thought the same about their brother monk, finally succumbing to the pressure of respectability by getting the guy training with the Weather Bureau and getting the Abbey registered as one of the official national meteorological stations. A mild embarrassment, an empty habit, made suddenly useful. Everybody in the Abbey, of course, knows that the waking up at precisely the same time every morning, the shuffling out to the thermometer and rain gauge before morning chant, the checking of instruments and recording of numbers--the creation and extension of his list no matter how blinding the blizzard and how ill the recorder--all this was driven by far more than the need to be useful. Generally, monks are probably more accustomed than others to this sort of thing.

There is a frenzy of bird-counting around here. Several monks, several ranchers, townspeople keep bird counts. Ben just saw a rare albino finch and got a picture. Father David is sure the bluebirds are back two weeks earlier than usual. Last summer, a guy stopped his pick-up alongside me up by the Killdeer Mountains. I had stopped to take some pictures. He was an older rancher and not at all polished for polite company--permanent stubble of whiskers and tufts of hair coming out of his ears, a few teeth randomly screwed into in his gums, dribble of snooze down his chin, and nearly impossible to understand because of both accent (Norwegian) and loss of teeth. I got the impression he wasn't used to talking. I was a little nervous that I was on somebody's private access road and eyed the gunrack at the back of his cab when he stopped. The thing he brought up with me? The bluebird count. He pulled his list out of his glove compartment to prove his point and the shared moment of the two of us looking over this pad in the westering sun and expanding shadow of the Killdeers was about as gentle, timeless a moment as I've ever experienced.

Well, I suppose it seems obvious what these guys are doing, or part of what they're up to, anyway. They're creating order out of something barely organized for sure. But they're doing something else, too. They're standing up and saying, "Here!" to that same universe of space and wind and cloud. This requires some digging into to make more clear but I'm not going to do it right here (one of my own annoying tics). The letter really is too long--besides, I want to finish with a final list (and still not go beyond 5 pages of letter!).

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Francis A. Chardon of Philadelphia PA got himself assigned to head Fort Clark, a post of the American Fur Company (beaver!), in 1834. He stayed up there until 1839 before getting reassigned. It's hard to make him out as a sympathetic character--he traded profligately in alcohol, was responsible for the death of people who crossed him, and died embittered enough.

But from time to time you end up feeling for him. The plains occasionally oppressed him; he has some lonely times:

Thursday 25 [December, 1834]--Christmas comes but once a year , and when it comes it brings good cheer. But not here! As everything seems the same, No New faces, No News, and worst of all No Cattle... [why no cattle?]

Sunday 14th [February 1836]--Extremely lonesome and low Spirited--I hardly know how to account for it, but I have always found Sunday to be the dulllest and longest day in the week--that is--the Sundays spent in Indian Country--I suppose it is because we are apt to contrast the scene with that of civilized life...

But these are few in his journal. What stands out more than anything was his list making! On August 12 1835, he opens the 2nd volume of his journal with this summary:

I arrived at this place on the 18th of June--from that date up to the present--I have traded 340 packs Buffaloe Robes--1100 Beaver--Killed 39 Buffaloe--1056 House Rats...

House rats????

It seems to have started out from the beginning although he doesn't bother to make it public in his journal until August 31st:

As I keep a dayly a/c of Rats Killed at the Fort, since my I arrival I must announce the death of ninety seven.

And then the occasional monthly tallies:

Friday 31 October:                   Number of Rats this Month 97  
Wednesday 31 December:    Number of Rats Killed this Month 34  
Saturday 31 January:       Number of Rats Killed this Month 91

And so on until the last entry on April 30, 1839: Killed 90 Rats this Month--total 3729

What can I add to that? Hope all goes well in Ann Arbor!

Cheers!

Dear friends,

Blustery winds since last Friday gusting up to 50 mph and making everybody just a little edgy--everybody including the animals. The cattle turn toward you in the field when you walk by and give you the eye. They're quick to lope away. Cows are calving and the farmers are up and checking on them through the night, into the morning, and throughout the day. They know what cows are about to give birth, keeping an eye on their swollen udders, the wide beam of their pregnancies, and the expectant swelling of their vulvas. The cows giving birth tend to stand just a little off from the herd and if the farmer has done his figuring right, he'll get those closest to calving into a lot near the barn.

The calves come out like they're kneeling in prayer, their front hooves poking out from under the tail followed by their noses. If their hooves are upside down, if there's just one hoof, if there's any sign of irregularity at all, then that cow gets separated out and hustled into the barn--one pen into another narrower pen and then into another. Coax the moaning beast into a gate that closes around its head, pull the tail to the side and inspect the birth canal.

I stood with Brother Ambrose at the Abbey farm this afternoon after getting a cow into its headlock, two delicate hooves protruding from its rear. The hooves are simultaneously delicate and rangy like the big feet of a young retriever. I held the tail out of the way, a bucket of hot soapy water set by my feet in the hay. Ambrose put his hand inside her to see if everything was okay. He could feel the calf's head right behind the two hoofs, right where it was supposed to be, but the cow seemed to be having some problems so we wrapped chains around those hooves, attached the chain to the winch anchored on the post about 10 feet behind the cow, and began to crank that calf out. Prayerful hooves and the head covered by the cowl of placenta. Reach down and lift the placenta from around the snout, keep tugging on the winch. Long, black and sleek the calf comes into the world with a wet thump, falling the distance from standing mother to floor. We clear the placenta--its mother can't really move with the grate around its neck--the calf gurgles for breath, panting and nearly emphysemic in its struggle to get the wind into its lungs. Brother Jacob comes into the barn just as its breathing gets more regular, stares down at the new calf, looks at me laughing, and says, "Ah, the miracle of life!" before unceremoniously grabbing the calf's right hind leg and dragging it into a pen I spent two hours clearing of manure just yesterday afternoon. Louie is laughing again, "Well, Tom, I guess you'll be clearing this again in a few days!"

Calving season. The Abbey has a big operation--190 pregnant cows; some nights produce 10 new calves, some 5. So far only one was born dead and Ambrose contemplated skinning it and draping the new hide over another calf whose mother's milk was less than he liked. Put that wet skin over another calf and the mother of the dead calf might take it as it's own and begin nursing it. Only takes a couple of days and before you know it, the mother doesn't know her child is adopted. The idea of a newborn animal wearing the skin of another is faintly eerie and yet so right.

Duane Bauer pulled up into the Slope Motel lot just as I did. Both of us spent our days with cattle although his day included high school--a shorter day to work with his Dad. He and his

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parents are in the field doing the same stuff I'm doing with Ambrose. Yesterday, Duane pulled a calf out of its mother with chain and winch, stuffing his hand into the birth canal to make sure everything was in the right place before tightening the winch. Seventeen years old. His first time doing it by himself. He'll spell his Dad for a while. Then his Mom. Then somebody will spell Duane so he can make it to choir practice as West River's choir prepares for its state competition.

I ache. My back is sore. Two torn blisters on my right hand make it harder than usual to type. One cut on my thumb from stringing barbed wire. My neck and shoulders throb from hoisting forkfuls of cow shit up from the pen and through a small chest high opening in the barn wall. I had told Ambrose last Friday that he could put me to whatever work he wanted from Monday through Wednesday of this week. So far today (and it is the end of the day after all), I have shoveled shit, retrieved a cow having trouble, helped with a birth, herded cattle through the breaks and into a lot near the barn (I got to run with a cutting stick, trying to outflank 37 irritable cows in a high wind--Ambrose followed in the pick-up; this is because I followed him in the pick-up when we cut the cow having birthing trouble from the herd and got her into the barn), shoveled more shit, joined the monks for noon chant, shoveled again, helped Brother Louie string an electric fence line, pounded posts into the ground, chased two bulls with Louie from a field they had gotten into and back toward where they were supposed to be, shoveled again, worked with Ambrose trying to figure out why the electric fence wasn't working, and gone to Vespers with the monks. My blisters opened just before lunch--lots of jokes from the monks about me getting the stigmata for Lent, but then a surprisingly gentle application of medicine and bandages from Ambrose. A full day!

Other than the noon prayers and Vespers, there's not much different going on here than at the other farms around West River. Cows can conceive on a monthly cycle and the farmers keep the bulls away from them until June through September. A little over nine months later--mid-March or so through April is calving season. "Nine months and ten days," says Ambrose, "Of course, some come early and some come late just like with people."

The new calves are closely watched by their mothers and Ambrose has to make his way into the shifting bodies of new mothers and 2 day old calves to punch a plastic numbered tag into the ear of each new calf. The number matches that branded through flash freezing onto the haunch of the mother. Ambrose walks into the crowd, hyper-alert and ready to run; the new mothers scuff their forehooves like bulls in the ring. They lower their heads and occasionally charge and Ambrose dances away from them with the grace of a twenty year old. He's sixty-five. He walks in with his coveralls and gloves and a wool cap jammed down over his ears to keep the bite of the wind at bay. One hand holds the tag and stapler; the other a syringe of antibiotics. In surprisingly quick motions, a shorthand of gesture, Ambrose grabs the calf by a foot and drags it away from the mother, tags the ear, and pulls out a pinch of calf skin to punch through and inject the medicine. Then he dances back and away; the dust and straw kicked into the air swirls in the vacuum. And nobody gets hurt. Usually.

Last Friday--that's how this whole week got started for me--I went along with him hoping to see a cow give birth. Ambrose needed to tag a calf with an unusually aggressive mother.

He snatched up the calf by a hind leg and dragged it along the ground to the pick-up, calling to me to give him a hand with the cow. I jumped out and came around to the side and that mother was on us before we could do much. She got to the side of us and began butting her big head into me. One slam, two, three, into the side of the pick-up. I was sure my leg was broken and didn't see much point in hanging around. Dust and straw and a pissed off mother--the mother of all cows! I grabbed the side of the truck and pitched myself into the box just to escape the battering. Ambrose had gotten out the other way and tossed the calf into the box along with me.

"Are you okay?" A worried look on Ambrose's face.

"Yeah," I say after making sure I can move my leg.

And then we start laughing. Ambrose in his German accent saying, "Ja, well, I thought you might chust know what you were doing. I mean, you dress like a cowboy..."

I may never wear blue jeans and denim shirts again. Later that day my knee swelled up to double size and I felt an odd friction in my pantleg. Took a look to find the knee abraded and bloody and the whole thing bruised. Brother Louie asked who dented the pick-up--my knee and a cow.

Ambrose and I went to lunch right after that and he said he figured I needed to get a degree in "cowology." So I said sure and that he was going to have to start the coursework this week. That's why I'm working with him for a few days. Can't bear to go through the rest of my life afraid of cows, after all. Ambrose's response to the battering was to have me give the injections, pulling the calf skin between thumb and forefinger, punching the thick needle in, and pressing down on the syringe. And to get me back out in the lot waving my arms and yelling at cattle.

And so I have aches and blisters and first hand experience of the scrape of my pitchfork on the barn's cement floor after I've cleared down and past the overburden of wet manure. Cowology 101.

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To tell you the truth, I think Ambrose was a little shocked when I showed up on Monday asking to be put to work. He's a German Russian farmer from east river (means east of the Missouri River) in the German Russian pocket that mirrors this side. I think I introduced you to him in last summer's correspondence. Thick German accent and undisguised bemusement at the thought of having a pony-tailed PhD as his hand. He tends toward the laconic--as in, "Come" or "Get in" or "Here" when offering instructions or the pitchfork. He calls me a hippie and mutters German curses to himself while watching me at work. I've grown fond of him, naturally.

On Monday, he had me help with a little herding, decided I wasn't much good, and put me to work in the barn. "Your pretty shoes are gonna get all dirty," he said. My pretty shoes are a battered pair of hiking boots that I almost threw away a few months ago. Ambrose wasn't

really commenting on them so much as expressing his feelings about the academics and artists who hang out in the monastery itself. He's angry because few people attracted to the life of the monk have much to do with the only work he knows. Ambrose's a farmer. He didn't come to the monastery to be a farmer, but that's what he ended up doing. And there was a time, back in the fifties when he became a monk, that everybody understood this to be a rural Abbey dependent on farming. Nowadays, he gets complaints from his fellow monks when he shows up for communal prayers in monk's cowl and manured boots. They don't like the smell.

"This place is getting feminized. All we have are artists now. They don't like the smell of cowshit. And one of them complained because we had to trap skunks and they smelled up the place a little. Oy yoy yoy!"

But I worked hard on Monday and got some grudging acknowledgment of that this morning when I went straight to the pens and began cleaning. "Boy, you really are an eager beaver! Here, Tom, I brought you some gloves."

I worked more and he came back, staying a little longer to talk now. Ambrose wanted me to know how German Russians did things when he was a kid. He talked about burning cow pies for fuel in the winter because "over there, east river, we had no coal." They'd pile the cow manure into a mound and walk horses over it to pack it down, then cut the compressed manure into blocks that'd dry and fit into the stove. He showed me how his mother would use straw to bind shocks of wheat when there was no twine. He talked about plowing with a single share plow and asked me how they do things in Nepal. He told me that his sister got cows for her dowry and that all the German Russian daughters back then got cows when they married.

There's a book of photographs and prose called **Searching the Great Plains**, a collection put together by a photographer from Vermont named Peter Baker. Baker went up and down the Great Plains and took black and white pictures of the people he met from Texas to North Dakota. One of the people he included in the book is Brother Ambrose Vetter. He included some of the words of his subjects and here's what he includes from Ambrose:

Why do you take so many pictures? It makes stress. Just take one and you do not have to choose. Make life easier.

Miller sent an inscribed copy of the final book to the Abbey and Ambrose has carefully glued a tab to the page where his picture appears--it's on page 19, a black and white picture of Ambrose in his Benedictine habit, sitting on a bleached cottonwood log, a barbed wire fence and the Flint River drainage in the background. It's an old world kind of picture. The thin, chiseled monk and the fissured land. You look at Ambrose's hands resting on his lap and you think "This man is a farmer."

The second day I worked with Ambrose, I walked down to the barn and saw his truck out front. There was a large white envelope on the dash. I went to Ambrose's workroom in the barn and banged on the door to let him know I was there. We talked about what I might do. He broke in, "Oh, I brought something I thought that you might be interested in. It's on the dash." In the envelope was Peter Baker's book. Without comment, Ambrose let me find the tab

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marking his picture. He was sorting tags for the new calves but I knew he was watching me, waiting to see how I would react. I said I had heard of the book and, after looking through it, said I'd probably want to buy it. Later, when I went into his workroom at the end of the day, he left the book and envelope on the table there. There was a note taped to it:

Tom, Maybe you can borrow this instead of buying a copy.

Talking, Ambrose gets skittish after a while, just like the animals he works with. Conversations are short, telegraphic. They arrive fully formed and without small talk as Ambrose launches into something that he has been thinking through for a while. Maybe the germ of the conversation comes from a few days before. Maybe from the morning. Ambrose suddenly erupts with what he wants to say and I need to make my responses quickly before he flees. He's most comfortable talking about German Russians. He collects folk cures, proverbs, and has written the complete genealogy of several family branches--these last he had printed and bound and I have copies of some of them. I encouraged him to organize the proverbs and print them, too. "Maybe," he says while looking at me sideways. But he's smiling, pleased that I am interested.

Ambrose spent the morning ducking in and out sowing his conversations into precisely calculated moments. Each visit was a new one. The German Russians. The sisters over at Annunciation Monastery one mile to the west. The novices who stay. The novices turned away. Of the ones who leave, I say, "Maybe they can't take your German abruptness--you scare 'em with your style: Here. Come. Take this. Go there." And I have him laughing.

"Well, whaddya mean? It's not like I'm mad or nuttin'. I just say what I mean, ya know."

"Yeah, sure you do, Ambrose, and scare the hell out of whoever you're talking to; you bet!"

And so the day goes. There's no romance out here. Neither on the farm nor in the monastery. Just life. Stamp boots free of cow shit. Talk. Hoist forkfuls of manure to the slotted window. Wave your arms. Shout at cattle in the wind.

What's the line from the Snyder poem?

Why do truck drivers get up earlier than Zen monks?  
Because there is no other life.

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I hope all goes well out there! See you all very soon!

Dear friends,

Home again. Back in Dakota, the 10 day interruption of talking head academics in Santa Fe and the trip to Ann Arbor behind me. The temperature last night got down to 15 degrees--a foot of snow up north but Bismarck was only lightly nicked by the same front. Gray scud of clouds this morning when I wake up to Eastern Time at 5:00 AM. Reading a new book on Gary Snyder's writing on the plane back from Ann Arbor (Patrick Murphy's **A Place for Wayfaring: The Poetry and Prose of Gary Snyder**) makes me want to get back to some of his work so I take his selected poems with me to the Missouri River early this morning and read alone in the naked cottonwoods where the Nuptadi Mandan lived in winter villages before the smallpox epidemic of 1780. These east-river clans kept the sacred bundles for the corn ceremonies that needed performing every year if there was to be a harvest. I sit reading poems on bottomlands where corn and squash grew every summer, where the hoop games mentioned by Lewis and Clark were played every winter. Thick frost in April.

Time for some notes and getting caught up. I mailed thick packages from here to friends in Kathmandu and photo-copy articles for people in West River. Tomorrow I'll head out to Joe's farm and begin working with his family at the tail end of calving.

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The Santa Fe trip was useful. If for no other reason than allowing me to see the continuity of the Great Plains country and the arid plateau to the west. The scene from the Albuquerque airport suggests a further edge of the aridity that begins out here. New Mexico is only an extension of that upward shift into the distance that begins where the tallgrass prairies begin to fade. The psychology of landscape in Dakota has already taken its break from the east. In the airport I find myself feeling more like these people than like the midwesterners in Minneapolis--dress Dakotan and you fit right in. Even the weather feels the same. Morning sky, 5:30 AM, and a glow behind the eastern ridge that has no name. Stars still bright and air holding its own at the margins of cold and dry. Snow one day. High sun and meltwater the next.

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The big winds that passed through here just a week ago are gone but the broken branches and up-ended trees are all over the ground. When my flight to Detroit was canceled I went out to see what 70 mph winds would do along the Missouri. The river rocked. The wind gouged hollows into its surface and smashed the fill into the bridge pilings where the interstate crosses. River spray leaped up 30 feet and the mist drove ahead, no different than a hard rain. There was no standing against the bite of driven sand and mist; I noticed a small group of Canadian geese hunkered in the marsh and facing into the wind with their necks outstretched and their bills tilted down. Along the bottoms, angry cottonwoods whipped the air trying and failing to regain their poise. I dodged among them in a hurry to get to the river's edge, trying to calculate how long it take for a snapped timber to hit the ground and wondering if you hear the warning crack before it strikes.

I sat for a while on the lee side of thick choke cherry bramble along the shore and watched the geese, the river, and the blowing sand for a while. Then drove the eight miles up to the place called Double Ditch now, but known as Yellow Bank Village (aware:ta ciiri atiš) when people lived there a couple hundred years ago. Double Ditch is on top of a high bluff jutting into a bend in the river.

Not much to see these days except for shallow circles marking the lodges that used to house several family groups. The Mandan would loll in the sun on their lodges, shout across the way to one another, laugh, and gossip. Kids ran between these hollows. Women worked their bullboats across the river below the village. All this given over to wind and grass. The highest points in the village are middens at the northern edge--mounds of garbage accumulated over the years now ten feet high. The two ditches are clear even in the grass. Their palisades of ash and the towers at their corners are gone. When you look at the outer ditch, you're looking at the village boundary before the first small pox epidemic; the inner ditch was dug after terrible death and the need to draw in for protection against the Dakota.

People don't live here anymore but there's lots happening. Coyote scat and the torn carcasses of slow birds. Broken bottles (something called "Amber Mist Zinfandel") and beer cans (Olympia & Budweiser) from the cheap drunks of high school kids. Spent shotgun shells. Burrowing animals dig into the midden piles and bring up fragments of bone, shell, and old Mandan pottery. The wind has laid the buffalo grass as flat as scythed wheat. It keeps blowing even with that work done. I feel it straining make the car airborne on the blufftop.

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Just a week before I was at the abbey in West River. Wednesday morning is high wind and lowering sky. I pull my cap down tight to keep it on and jam my hands deep into pockets to fight the chill. Arrive at the barn to see Ambrose's pick-up already there, but can't see the man himself and walk around to the pens out back. Met by Ambrose's shout.

"Tom! Over here! We gotta get a cow and calf into the barn and do some work!"

I walk into the barn and nearly into the dead calf slid to a halt by the workroom door. Sprawled in the straw, white hair of hide barely dry, the calf looks no different than the others. Not yet stiff, newly born, sleep shades into death.

"Come on. Let's get that other calf." Ambrose's in a hurry to cut another calf from its thin-milked mother. This white skin has some use.

We go out to the pen and scare off the older cow, bring the live calf born just yesterday into the barn with the mother of this dead one. The living calf is black. It's mother holds to it as long as it can but takes a fright at our waving hands and we pull and push it away. Ambrose goes into the workroom to fill a bucket with hot water and hands two long knives to me. We drag the dead calf into the pen and go to work.

“You push the knife in like this. Be sure to get under the skin and cut from there; the hair dulls the knife.”

Brother Ambrose works at the bottom of the dead calf and I begin at the front, pushing the knife into the skin just above the knee. It takes some work to get the point in, but then I'm there and work a ring around the leg. Ambrose is making neat work at the other end and with a slit up the belly, the hide folds off easily until we're left with a white coat for draping over the live calf. The dead calf has gone in a few minutes from a fellow creature to two un compelling objects: hide and carcass. Punch holes in the hide and tie it to the black calf and it is transformed into something altogether new and yet familiar to the cow that sniffs at it and lets it work away at its udders. By afternoon, this cow has a new calf, from white to black, and the live calf has a mother who can feed it into strength.

The original mother is out in the yard, baying in low concern at the loss of its calf. Ambrose says, “I always feel guilty when I take a calf away. The mothers take a while to get over it. It hurts to hear them mooing like that.”

Later that morning, Ambrose finds a newborn calf with its head turned under and in danger of suffocation. His crusty farmer's hands are gentle, lifting the head out from under its own body. The calf struggles to breathe and then the air fills the lungs in regular breathes. “Ja. I saved that calf,” says Ambrose. He is pleased. The same man working the body out of its skin on the one calf saves another from dying. All one work.

Later I ask several others if they've ever heard of skinning out a dead calf like that. All of them have heard of it--a German peasant trick--but only a few of the older ones have actually done it.

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Another Wednesday morning, just yesterday, I drove back to West River after the few days in Ann Arbor. Met with sudden snow flurries along the river at 9:00. Grey cottonwoods. The dead rushes are brown in the marshland along the river and the wind off the Missouri is cold. I head west on the interstate boxed in by semis and blowing snow until New Salem where the sky begins to clear but the wind stays cold.

I drive down to Joe & Marie's to find Craig Bauer in the yard getting the sprayer ready to kill weeds in the fields. Joe is surrounded by Bauers and their all related, often in ways that Joe himself is unsure of. He thinks Craig might be his Dad's second cousin but he's not sure. At another time, I drove into the yard and found that Mike Bauer had just dropped off some pick-up parts--related again but who knows how. You drive up Highway 8 from West River and every mailbox says Bauer. They all know they're connected somehow, common ancestry, but don't seem to act in terms of the connection. Kinship needs to be enacted to become significant. Bauer is not so different from a Tamang clan name--the shared ancestry is understood but the exact connections are lost. Brother Ambrose made the distinction last summer--people cooperate because they're friends, not because they're relatives, even when they are relatives.

Joe's in the field seeding lentils. Craig tells me how to get to the field. Just head down the highway until you see the big Hereford Bull sign and turn to the right--Joe's in there a section or so down the road.

I go out to find Joe and it's just as Craig says. The sign cut into the shape of a Hereford Bull is at the top of a hill heading north, just a few miles from Joe's farm. Like a lot of signs out here, it's riddled with the holes of target practice. The large testicles of this anatomically correct sign have proven irresistible and bear a higher than usual density of bullet holes and dents.

Joe is seeding on small fields of about 25 acres each. They're separated from each other by ancient looking shelterbelts of Chinese Elm, brittle and broken in last week's wind. Joe says they're a total waste; Elm doesn't work out here--too little rain, too cold in the winter--so there's lots of dead trees that will need to be bulldozed, heaped into piles and burned. Joe rents this land from his widowed aunt, married to his Uncle Alois Bauer who died just a couple years ago. Alois and his wife have 5 daughters and none of them farm out here. Joe was especially close to his uncle. He was a kind of tinkerer. He drank a lot when he got into a funk, sometimes coming home with a bottle of whiskey and drinking it down in a sitting.

"He would get depressed sometimes; I always heard it had something to do with being a POW during the Korean War."

Joe remembered when he and his uncle dropped a well into the land near here with a backhoe. The water's close to the surface and they dug just 9 feet before hitting water. "It wasn't great water but it was enough for the cattle. But there's a lot of sand out here and pump wore out quicker than we thought it would."

I climb up into the tractor and sit on an upturned plastic pail with Joe's red sweatshirt for padding. It's not very comfortable but I figure I can last an hour or so and end up sitting with Joe from about 3:00 until 9:00. We move through the field dropping lentils into the earth at 5 mph. Most of the time, Joe is alone in the tractor doing this, an hour and a half or so for every 25 acres until he's seeded 3200 acres. "Lots of time to think."

There are breaks. He needs to call Marie on the cell phone when he needs more seed. Dust devils spin to on the alkaline flats to the north. Hawks swirl in his wake eyeing the mice that scatter from crushed tunnels. Plumes of dust rise from the no-till seeder and hover in the air as if incense at a Lenten mass.

On the last field, last Wednesday's storm has toppled broken Chinese Elm. They haven't so much snapped as been lifted whole from the shelterbelt and strewn into the path of the seeder. We begin the field by pulling a tree out of the way--brittle and dead; light and prickly. I look ahead to see that the whole row has trees and branches littering it from the edge of the broom grass along the shelterbelt and decide to run on ahead, pulling branches and whole trees out of the way, feeling slightly useful for the first time in the ride. It gets dark as we do this last field--the western sky is painted red and Joe has to finish by headlights. He calls Marie on the cell phone to tell her we're finishing up. The machinery will be left, ready for tomorrow.

Each head of cattle needs ten acres of pasture out here. Cropland goes for between 300 and 400 dollars an acre. Pasture for about 150. The 400 acres that the abbey rents is for sale and the asking price is 250, too high. Father David, who handles abbey accounts, will give 120 and this probably won't be accepted so Ambrose is pissed off because he thinks they should go for 150 even though its not the best. Joe knows this land, everybody knows what's for sale and what's being asked in the area--says it's a shame that the abbey won't buy it since if they don't get it they'll probably have to cut their herds by 40 to 50 cattle. (I found out this morning that somebody bought the land at 230 an acre--this from Craig who is angry and blames the looniness of paying that kind of money on an outsider. "What do they care? That kind of price sounds cheap to them and we can't stay in the game.")

Marie has to wait as we finish up the field and we find that the pick-up won't start after we stop the tractor. She calls Duane. Joe monkeys with the engine ("That's how we do it--call for help and then work like hell to try to get the thing fixed before the person you called shows up."). But we can't get it started and rely on the jump. Joe and Marie are laughing and joking, not at all concerned with the delay at day's end. The sky is clouded but the half moon is bright and casting a huge circle of light in the night sky. In the growing cold we take in the loveliness of the night, getting back to the house at 9:30. Marie warms up a stew and some rhubarb cobbler--she and Duane have already eaten so Joe and I eat while Marie makes a pot of coffee.

Earlier, I had asked Joe why he stays in farming. He said because he doesn't have a boss, he can pretty much do what he wants. He said because he gets to work with his family. He said, "Because I get to be out in this," gesturing to the land in front of us. To the north the land rose up beyond the alkaline and canted toward the sky, white clouds just over us and darker moisture bearing stuff on the far horizon; to the south the long hollow and then the abrupt rise to West River. Joe said he couldn't think of any other job that would let him wake up and stand in this. He can't imagine having to get into a car and drive to a place with four walls.

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Here's that poem from Gary Snyder I mentioned in my last letter:

WHY LOG TRUCK DRIVERS RISE  
EARLIER THAN STUDENTS OF ZEN

In the high seat, before-dawn dark,  
Polished hubs gleam  
And the shiny diesel stack  
Warms and flutters  
Up the Tyler Road grade  
to the logging on Poorman creek.  
Thirty miles of dust.

There is no other life.

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Field letter #6  
11. April 2000  
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I left Joe, Marie & Duane a little after 10:00 that night. Walked out into the yard and into the car--getting cool. They sat in the kitchen; Joe had his chair turned at an angle to the counter, legs crossed; Duane was at the end of the counter; and Marie was standing, pouring more coffee, then crossing her arms and leaning against the kitchen drawers. A Triptych! The light cast its glow into the yard. Warm inside. Laughter and animated talk at the end of the day.

Before leaving I asked what time I should come by--they'll be out with the cattle by 6:00--I mention coming in around 7:30 or so--that'd be a good time they say--they'll be in having their coffee.

There is no other life...

Cheers!

Dear friends,

Horarium means schedule--or at least I think that's what it means, no dictionary close at hand. Of course, I did ask Father Bernard in passing what it meant and that's the first thing he said: schedule. It comes from the same root word as the English "hour" and the monks call their daily schedule for prayer the Monastic Horarium--the hours they keep at Great Plains Abbey are part of the 1500 year Benedictine tradition. Changes from the old ways, for sure, but recognizably a part of something much bigger and longer lived than the local community. Here's the schedule at Great Plains Abbey for weekdays:

6:20 AM	Morning Prayer
11:40 AM	Noon Prayer
5:00 PM	Conventual Mass
7:00 PM	Vespers

This is just the schedule for communal prayers by the whole community of monks. The rest of the day is built from this scaffold--private prayer, meals, and work. Ora et Labora--Prayer and Work, the Benedictine motto.

It figures that a 1500 year old order of monks (1520 years--St. Benedict wrote his rule in 480) would have come on the time diary or its rudiments long before we social scientists, even though the Great Plains Abbey Horarium accounts for maybe 2 hours of the day at most. Add on the time it takes to get in from the various jobs the monks are at--Brother Ambrose putting down whatever tool or animal that happens to be in his hands; Father Benet marking his place in a book or logging off his computer; Father Louis the same; Brother Patrick and Fathers Bernard & William shutting down the press; Brother Stephen in the guestroom letting a conversation with a visitor come to an end; and all the others, too, stopping at the sound of a high, clear bell--and it's more like 3 or 3 2 hours covered. There are probably about 3 hours of Labora in the morning and another 3 in the afternoon.

And some monks continue their work after Vespers, too. Ambrose needs to go down to check the cattle, especially calving season. Others might get back to writing or reading. Others go off to meditate. Nowadays, some settle in to watch TV or play cards. Still, the day punctuated by its quiet moments of ingathering and chanted prayers is remarkably free of the rush and tightness of our own office horarium. I suppose a lot of things make this so. Chant soothes in the cool church and singing does the same--I have tried to scowl and do either and find it pretty impossible. The look and feel of grained wood in the choir stalls; the play of light though stained glass; the simple act of presence four times daily in a place saturated with a hundred years of such acts. It's hard to remember that our universities grew from precisely these kinds of places.

The twin spires of the abbey church aren't quite visible from the Bauer farmyard because they're blocked by a hill just to the south of the buildings. You have to move a little to the side, to one of the nearby pastures, before you can see them. Instead, from directly outside of Joe and Marie's house, a look straight south will get you the West River water tower, blue and shiny on the same ridge as the abbey. And being 4 miles north of the abbey, it takes an especially

still day or, if not still, a wind coming just the right angle to hear the bells toll out the hours and the community calls to prayer.

But there's a Bauer Horarium, too, that balances the communal and the personal. Last Thursday's was something like this:

- 6:00 Wake and work with cattle
- 7:45 Go in for coffee, caramel rolls, and fruit (strawberries & apples)
- 8:15 Off to the field to be seeded; 3 people in two trucks; stop and look at yesterday's work; check how deep the lentils were planted, the moisture of the soil; figure how those settings would work on this new field with it's different slant and moisture
- 8:30 Begin seeding a couple of test rows; stop and repeat the checking
- 9:45 One person continues seeding, the other 2 head back to the house; met by a cousin dropping off parts
- 10:15 talk about whether there's time to blow out the beds of seed trucks and load them with peas for seeding before going to auction; decide there is and get to it
- 10:40 drive trucks to the seed place
- 11:00 Met by Marie at seed place south of town; leave trucks for filling and head off to McLaughlin & Livestock auction
- 11:30 take a look at the heifers Joe is looking to buy--talk with ranchers who raised them;
- 12:15 sit in the auction hall with cans of Coke and watch the regular auction where big buyers for feedlots are most of the action; special consignment auction isn't scheduled to begin until 1:00; enjoy the crowd; talk with friends from other farms
- 1:40 Nelson auction finally begins--30 bulls for sale and 24 heifers--the bulls don't do well--only 11 get sold
- 2:00 Joe bids on the heifers; gets them at 670 a head--buys all 24, four more than he planned--Marie writes the check; talks with Jordan Nelson about delivering the cattle
- 2:15 go over to Schwoebel's trailers and seed and pick up some milk substitute for calves; look for parts for Duane's pick-up; talk with in-laws

- 3:15 stop at bank in Emmon to check on accounts; on the way to bank, a cell phone call to check on how the seeding is doing; met in Emmon while waiting in the car by the crop insurance guy; he has liver cancer and is dying, but still works away; reminds Joe to get in the alfalfa claim for last year by the end of the month
- 3:30 go to pick up the trucks filled with 12,000 lbs of peas--drive trucks back to the house
- 4:00 Joe lays out chores for Duane what he's got to do--says he wants him to take the salt and sacks of minerals to the different pens for cattle, fix the fence that's getting knocked down by the water, get the cow that's in the high pasture and bring it back with the rest of the herd; the wind is coming up and the temperature is dropping fast--freezing rain and snow in the forecast; Duane says he'll get to it right away--he's got to get to choir practice and practice his lines for a play by 6:30
- 4:10 Duane and I get moving--tow the disabled pick-up out of the way with the old tractor and bring the other one out of the shed--pile tools and fence line into the box and head down to the water hole to fix the fence--wind is rising and cold on the way; we do all the work; this means fixing the fence, moving feeders with the tractor, going over to the bulls and feeding them, moving hay, loading salt into the licks, putting minerals in buckets--we do this in 6 different places, two of them a mile up the road; by 5:30 we have the stuff around the house done--we head over to Gerald's where the bulls are, back by 5:45 and it's started to rain--we go out to the high pasture and get that cow into it's pen--done by just after 6:00
- 5:00 Greg brings the heifers bought earlier at the auction--Marie runs over from cleaning cattle trough to show him the pen
- 6:10 I drive off and say I'll see you tomorrow; Joe just coming back from the far field with the whole no-till seeder and tractor--it's beginning to storm and he knows he'll be kept from the fields for at least a few days; better to leave the rig in the yard
- 7:00 School board meeting for Joe--this goes until 11:30
- 11:45 Joe drives back to the house in a snowstorm on an icy road

On the surface, the Bauer Horarium appear less constant than that of the monks. That night's snowstorm meant a more relaxed morning on Friday, attending to a different kind of business as other farmers, similarly snowed in, used the time to make phone calls and get caught up on their accounts. I went out that morning along the four miles of ice and snow, down the half mile gravel track to the house, to sit with Joe and Marie, the perpetual flow of coffee, and the ringing phone. It's considered fair to begin the calling at 6:00 AM out here since

that may be the only time you'll be able to catch somebody. Those who want to be really certain will time their calls for closer to 5:00.

Still, these occasions of storm and adjustment only lightly mask an underlying structure as regular as the hours at the abbey and no less communal than the call to prayer. No bells on the farm but the insistent call of cattle. Morning rising means a trip to the granary and the scoop of shovels filling five gallon pails with oats. First, you feed the new mothers in the pen just behind the bin--two pails will do it. The new mothers and their calves know the opening door signals food and rush from their corners of the pen to eat without a call. Joe or Duane make clucking noises as they fill the trough. Then you move to the next pen where the 24 new yearling heifers clot near the water tank--three buckets here. The heifers at the other side need settling into new habits and you walk out to set the buckets by the trough calling, "Hey boss, hey boss, hey boss..." until they begin to climb the slow rise. The susurrus of oats sliding from bucket to trough, the puff of oat dust rising from grey wood in morning bite, the humming chant of the continued call--all of these things come to signify feeding for the new cattle until they come like pets at the sound or sight of any one of them. Communities of prayer and communities of food loose all distinction here.

You fill five more buckets after that and set them aside. These will go in the pick-up truck for the bulls and cows kept behind the old wing barn at Harold's. When Duane or Joe say, "Harold's," they're speaking of the farmstead just north of them owned by Harold Geist, a maternal cousin who has gotten out of farming and who rents his land and pens to the Bauers for planting fields and keeping bulls. Joe figures that the place will come up for sale in a year or so and would like to buy it to help set his son up to farm. The Geist place--480 bottomland acres, a house and hundred year old wing barn in such good shape it looks to have been built no more than a decade ago, outbuildings and stands of cottonwood along the meandering creek that begins just south of Joe's house--would go for anywhere between 150,000 and 200,000 dollars. Joe wants a shot at that although he thinks that Harold's brother, the one who left North Dakota to be a doctor out in New Jersey, might decide to buy it just to keep his connection to the land from fading too quickly.

Hungry cattle begin their day with oats and they go quickly. Then you hop into the tractor with its bucket and lift. Depending on the temperature you spray ether into the carburetor and start the engine and spin out toward the lines of round bales to complete the feeding. About eighty cattle and their calves in the south pasture, rough ground cut by a crick, need their feeding and rush the fence at the sound of machinery. You let it down and push into and past the herd and toward the bales. If today's feeding is alfalfa, you go to the bales fenced off at the southeast corner; if wheat stubble, you go through yet another fence and into the higher pasture with its view of the abbey spires; if grass, you've gotten your bales before coming through the first gate.

Joe and Duane have different tractor styles. Years of lifting these huge spun rounds of hay have given Joe a delicate touch with the machinery; for him, the bucket and pinchers move like hands. Duane is younger, his motions more forceful. But the cattle get fed all the same.

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17. April 2000  
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Whoever does the feeding maneuvers the tractor to the bales, bites into two at once, carries them into the pasture, and sets them down toward the middle. Cattle crowd the tractor and throw themselves at the bales, ripping at the hay and pushing the round bales along the ground. The operator moves through them, uses the bucket to cut the twine and spins the bales out like an unraveling carpet of grass. The cattle move in a kind of frenzy and the machine bucks and swerves among them. It's a wonder that cattle don't get run over although Joe admits that he once had to pick up a bale to move it and in the process picked up a cow along with it. He didn't notice it in the chaos until four hooves appeared below the bucket as he lifted. The cow was as surprised as he was and, when he let it down, began its new habit of keeping a fair distance from the tractor. Four bales for these cattle. Two for the yearling heifers. Two for the cattle in the north pen and two more for the bulls at Harold's.

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24. April 2000

Well, better get this letter off! I'll try to get one more out before my return. I've begun the next phase of my work out here--living and working with the Bauers. Rising at 6:00 and working until late in the evening doesn't leave much room for fancy letter writing! But lots to report on!

Hope all is well out there--I'll see you soon!

Dear friends,

Not so long ago, driving an empty grain truck down a scoria graveled road, hauling my trail of red dust west into the blue sky, following the other grain truck driven by Joe, listening to the recently returned meadowlarks, and taking in the sweep of all this purity of space I woke up to myself and started laughing. I am enjoying this work too much to call it that! It feels so good to try getting these gears to shift up or down in the ancient truck, grinding away and finally slipping in with that sweet click of accomplishment. Feels good, too, to smell dust and oil and the near ferment of old grain in the bins. And to have grease and dirt worked into the cracks on your knuckles so that you can't quite get it all out by washing your hands. Grass-stained, oil stained, grain-stained jeans. Cow shit on the boots. With these occasional epiphanies, I break from thinking about all this as data, just long enough to savor the clear stream of my joy at what I do.

And to wake up at 5:30 before getting out to the far fields north in Doig County where we left the tractor and equipment overnight so we could get started right away in the morning. The sun does the waking and it's 2 pots of quickly drunk coffee with Joe and Marie to sketch out the day ahead while accommodating the unexpected. These last two days we've begun at that time and gotten back to the house at precisely 10:30 at night, quitting the seeding in the 10:00 darkness with the huge vault of sky and stars overhead. If we're lucky, like a couple nights ago, the northern lights will be hanging way above the horizon. We'll stand and take it in and try to remember where we left the dark truck in this square mile of seeded earth within a larger bowl of land that lacks a single electric light. Joe seems to know exactly where to go and I stumble along. The trail is like a part of his body even when his goal is invisible.

There's a new moon coming up and that's no moon for the moment. The kind of weather you get for the new moon lets you know the general shape of things for the next month; the Germans out here say that anyway. And maybe they're onto something since the last new moon was a little cloudy with a splash of showery rain, pretty much what we've had for this last month. Craig Bauer, Joe's fourth cousin, drops by in the mornings about 6:00 and tell us the portents that he and his wife have seen. Earthworms active cleaning their dens, an itch in scars from long healed wounds, red skies at dusk or morning, the striking smell of moisture on the wind or its lack, things that you get to recognize in a dry country. Every clue is considered and rolled over the tongue, a thinking out loud since nobody quite commits themselves. Joe runs into his front room to check the satellite feed from a special agricultural station--radar maps of current weather showing heavy rains in Havre in red and the shading toward green signifying lighter moisture. This doesn't carry any more weight than the other portents--two or more are necessary to commit yourself to a prediction. Science & confirmation by faith.

Joe says a prayer before starting every field. Marie asked me if Joe had been praying when we were doing our seeding together and I told her I hadn't seen anything obvious. "Oh," she looked a little puzzled, "but he always starts a new field with a prayer." I told her that he might feel uncomfortable doing that around me and say he's probably praying quietly, but that I'll ask him. So, later that day when we're together in the tractor, I ask.

“Joe, do you begin your seeding with a prayer?”

A quick laugh and a sideways glance my way.

“I was just wondering because I had heard that some folks do it that way. I thought you might be doing it but not so openly because I’m around.”

“Well, yeah. I’m a farmer. I pray all the time. And yeah, I say one for the field and the weather and the seed before I start.”

Maybe it works. Joe seeded canola for his cousin Michael a few weeks back. The day started cool and turned colder as it went along, getting to that bite where Joe would usually have stopped his seeding. But being so close to completion was a spur that kept him in the field. He hopped out to check his pipes on the air seeder as he usually does periodically and discovered that one of the main pipes had come undone. Bad news or worse than bad news! That pipe fed into the smaller coils of tubing that fed seed to an eight foot section of the seeder and how long it had been spewing its seed into the wind was anybody’s guess. Joe got that worrying tightness in the pit of his stomach. An eight foot section out of a 33 foot seeder for the length of time since he had last checked the pipes meant he could have missed a quarter of the field. Even worse, it wasn’t his own field that he may have screwed up, which would have been bad enough, but it was his cousin’s. Joe worried over this for the time between seeding and the first punch of green leaves from the ground--in this case, since it has only begun to warm up this week, three weeks. The two of us walked the field yesterday and didn’t find the regular pass of an eight foot gap with every round of the tractor. Right living seems to pay off.

There’s a growing sense of working under the gun out here in western Dakota. And the gun is a date, May 10, which marks for an average year the divide between the best yield possible and the steady decline of potential. Get the seed in before that day and you’ve done your part. Wait til after and you’ve thrown away some of your wild cards in the annual gamble. Joe’s cousin Craig turns to me in the pick-up that I’m doing a bad job of maneuvering through a tough section line road. The bare minimum of shocks and a tight suspension and we’re getting thrown into the air every time we hit a badger hole. It’s comical to watch Craig fly into the air because his body remains in whatever pose he had a few seconds before--makes him look like he’s levitating--and his conversation goes on without interruption.

“As far as I’m concerned, every day now means a cut in bushels. I’m only happy when I see that seeder moving. Then a fellow knows he’s done all he can.”

Doing all you can puts the prairie in motion these days. Huge, slow moving, sauropod-like machinery chugs up and down the roads and along section lines before getting set to gouge the earth. Trucks filled with seed or fertilizer shuttle from farmyard bin to field and back again. Men and women hover near the chutes behind upraised truckbeds as the grain or peas or canola pours into a basket and is augered into the air tank. Each seed makes its own sound. The steady, smoothing sound of wheat has the timbre of pouring sand. The hard roar of the peas and lentils runs like a cataract and requires shouting if you want to be heard.

Three nights ago, Joe and I were seeding wheat into the land he rents about ten miles from his farmstead. Up north in Doig County where the constant wind has blown centuries of loess into smooth hills. The field is far enough off the main road that Joe decides it's perfect for me to learn how to seed. I usually sit with Joe, when I join him in the fields, on an upended five gallon pail. The cab floor is about 6 feet above the ground and the two of us sitting there get a view from 12 feet up or so. Until Doig County, I'd sit beside Joe asking questions and noting his smooth sure motions as they propel and turn the tractor and its trailing rigs back and forth across fields of eighty to two hundred acres.

Joe's tractor is a Versatile with eight wheels steered by a pivot joint in its center. A finger touch on the wheel is enough to move the rear wheels to either side and turn. It pulls the air tank that holds the seed, the air seeder with its shanks, and knives, and coils of pipe that place the seed into the ground, and the tank of anhydrous ammonia that serves as fertilizer for the grains--altogether 97 feet of linked machinery, a third of a football field coiling along the earth. The effect is of mass and motion. Joe's fully loaded assemblage is 37 tons of machine, grain, and liquid making its way across the ground at the speed where a fast walk elides into a jog, between 4.6 and 5 miles per hour. A 160 acre field amounts to something like a 40 mile drive on a tractor.

Suddenly, as I sit on my bucket, Joe is instructing me. "Okay, Tom, this lever is for the anhydrous and this one raises and lowers the seeder knives into the ground, and this one over here controls the engine speed. Now when you get to the end of the row, just before the grass, you pull on this brown lever to stop the anhydrous, and then pull on the blue one to raise the seeder, while you're going into your turn up here with the tractor. You want to do this turn right about here like I'm doing so you don't end up in the fence."

Avoiding that fence appears to be the crux of things. This lumbering dragonload of tonnage bears down hard on the field's edging and Joe's miraculous sudden turn seems all that averts disaster as we loop through every round. The abrupt change from easy conversation to instructions is all the cue I need to get my heart bumping in my chest and I focus on that. Forget the levers, I just can't bear the thought of dragging a quarter section worth of barbwire and weathered cedar into the next quarter section. I swallow hard and watch Joe more closely through the next round. How does he do this? The quick snap of levers, sure hand feathering the throttle, and fingertip turning is too simultaneous to take in.

Too late to beg off. My anthropologist's willingness to try anything is on the line and I secretly desire this test in any case. Joe pulls to a halt and we trade seats; he's on the bucket now and I jerk this monster into motion.

"Too far over. Better come on to the right a little. Remember to keep that wheel about 9 inches from the old line."

What appeared easy in the watching is excruciating to enact. I don't know the first thing about where to set my sights and before long I'm waving and weaving across the prairie like a grounded skywriter. I hew as close to the old line as I can but the many corrections and

over-corrections are already enough to convert Joe's meticulous rule into a curious zigzag edge.

"Don't worry about that. Better to overlap than to miss. Those missed spots will turn right into weeds. Nature just loves to fill in the vacuum." Joe's voice resides in its usual laid back groove although the set of his mouth begins to suggest something like second thoughts to me. What farmer in his right mind would turn this complicated set of maneuvers over to a professor in the first place? And my own thoughts aren't much comfort here. Getting beat up by Ambrose's cow is one thing, but this guy's got a family and the single most important part of getting from one year to the next is this very machinery and, now, this very anthropologist.

We come on into the grass at the field's edge. I shut off the anhydrous and raise the seeder in frenzied yanks and go into my turn in a jerky whirl of hands.

"Okay, come out of it." I'm so focused on the turn that Joe's voice sounds like I'm listening from under water. I hang onto that turn like it's a life preserver and refuse to come out until it's too late. There's a crack that I don't hear and Joe says to shut it off so I stop the whole thing. Just my luck to have Marie and Duane show up at my most incompetent moment.

"Don't worry about it, Tom; it's just iron. You can always fix iron." That's Duane's voice trying to cheer me up. In my too tight turn I had taken off the right rear packing wheel and a packing wheel scraper from somewhere inside the last row, too.

Joe seems impressed by this last thing. He's holding the foot and a half length of red iron in his hand and shaking his head. "We've all hit the wheel on the edge at one time or another," he says, "but to tell you the truth, I didn't even think knocking off this scraper was possible."

It takes a bit to get this all repaired. I've sheered off the bolt holding the scraper in place and we need to find a replacement. The wheel on the anhydrous tank is notched and gouged where it hit the scraper on my tight pivot. And I'm thinking that I blew it. So much for farming; better pack my bags and get out of the spare room while we're still on speaking terms.

And Joe says, "Well, better get back up on the seat, Tom. Can't quit when you're down. Let's get going."

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I'd like to report that I turned it all around after the wreck and that I finished the day drawing those smooth, straight lines that Joe so neatly inscribed into the stubble fields of night. I'd like to say that my turns were smooth and elegant, that my lifting and lowering of the seeder knives were inspired by grace, and that my opening and closing of the anhydrous pipes were a snap of my fingers. But I'd be lying if I said that and making that claim would lose the larger point of all this. I got a little better and a little more confident as I went on. I could go into and come out of a turn. My control of the levers remained jerky, but my timing improved. But the

thing I mainly got was a whole new appreciation of the mastery and skill of these farmers riding the backs of these many tonned serpents across the earth.

I kept it up for about 20 acres before turning it over to Joe. "Okay, Joe, you've got a lot of work to do. Thanks for letting me do this."

And I never did get my lines any straighter.

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The view from one of these tractor cabs while seeding is a searching look into the limits of possibility and hope. Fields aren't straight. They bend with the earth and wrap around hills. Farmer's put the seed down as a gesture to the future. Get it down in time and pray for the balanced allotment of rain and sun, a pox on hoppers and weeds, and a market that makes it all pan out. And the past rides along in memories. One night of late seeding, Joe looked around us into the blackness and shook his head. "These fields we're doing right now," he said, "used to be farmed by six separate families." Nothing but stars to share the work now. Joe figures that there are less than half as many farms in the area as there were when he was a kid.

When Joe was young, seeding at night was like a big party. Everybody was out. The fields glowed in the eerie motion of tractor lights. People brought beers to break the monotony. Lots of laughter and joking across the night fields, the sense of something held in common, hard and worthwhile. Joe's descriptions remind me exactly of Thomas McGrath's **Letter to an Imaginary Friend**, his description of the winter work teams and "the last commune."

But the farms need to be bigger now. The price of grain and the expected yields have changed the scale and the pace. Marie's Dad, Jake Schwoebel, talked to us over coffee one morning and spoke of the changes. "Used to be," he said, "that people took time off for things, like fishing or just talking and being sociable. Things weren't so driven like they are now."

Brother Ambrose said pretty much the same thing when I pulled off the road where he was seeding oats for feed. "I don't farm the same way they do now. I guess I'm just old-fashioned. Or, I don't know, maybe I'm just not smart enough." But he was taking his time on a Saturday afternoon, getting late into the field at 3:00 in the afternoon after a long, sociable dinner with friends. "I knew they would be home and I just decided to make a visit."

And yet, those who remain perform exquisite, self-assured acts of independence and control to a degree most of us only dream of. A bent piece of metal gets put back into shape in the field. A come-along hitch serves to pull a truck out of the mud or repair a broken jack. A box of stray brass, of bolts and metal and oily parts, gets turned into a treasure chest of potential solutions to the next mechanical problem. Rummage through with a calloused hand and find just the part you need.

Joe and Craig once repaired a broken sprayer boom, it's 80 feet so mangled that it twisted in and out of itself like Ouroboros, with the hammers and wrenches they happened to

have with them in the field. It took them an hour and a half, a lot of chains anchoring parts to tractors and pick-ups so they could have leverage to pull against, and an absurd sense that they may as well give it a shot. "We thought for sure we were going to have to buy the darn thing and an hour and a half later you couldn't tell that anything had happened except for where we scraped some paint with the chains."

Marie and I drove back to the bins to load a truck with more seed while Joe continued in the fields. Joe's instructions to Marie, on how to turn on the auger, were as spare and quickly delivered as those he gave me and we found ourselves in the yard in 40 mile per hour wind trying to figure the damn thing out. I had never done this before and neither had she. Marie looked at the engine and moved parts until she got it running. We augured that load into the truck's empty box, fought the tarp over it, and cinched it down. "That felt good," said Marie as we drove away, "figuring out something new by yourself."

The mastery is the thing. The risk and the trying in spite of all that surrounds you that is out of control.

The sociability remains, too. That night of my initiation into the mysteries of seeding we could see the lights of another tractor a mile away. Jan Engle was out late, too. I asked Joe if seeing those lights made him stay out later and he laughed.

"Just til right after he shuts his off!"

Later, toward 9:30 and in the dark, the cell phone rang in Joe's cab and he hit the button to the speaker.

"Yeah, Joe here."

"Ain't it the shits when you have to reach for your phone in the dark? You gonna be finishing up over there, I want to go home!"

Jay and Joe laughed and talked the easy banter of before. On the qualities of that particular earth with its strange blend of sand and clay, on getting the seeding done and working late, on getting set to head home. But for the phone and there just being the two of them separated by a mile of ground, the conversation sounded like they must have before.

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I see what these people are doing as a kind of heroic gesture. Not a lost cause; not yet anyway. And it wouldn't matter if it were because it's just the act of doing what they do that matters. The real work, sliding by. Joe gets the last word again:

"I know what we're doing is right. And I know the Lord made me for this. I just want to do it right is all."

Cheers!

Dear friends,

Back in Dakota again and back, too, to the peculiar sense of being at home even as I am in the field. The oscillations of rain and sun and summer heat are firmly in place. Crops are in. Farmers nervously watch the sky and calculate the wisdom of getting hail insurance while the jet stream waves across the state. At any moment its position is the key to what can be expected. When I arrive, it's north of West River and hot winds blow from the south and east. Later it floats south with its cool air; thunderheads grow from unseen vapors into black towers and hail bursts from unstable skies.

Today is the steady rain of a new front pushing through. I'm sitting in the library in Bismarck getting caught up on writing and e-mails and deciding not to head back to West River as I had planned. Let the moisture soak into the ground and let the cool salve ten days' heat and grit. Grey skies are for recollection. I search for a pivot that spins the days into meaning. Cara's wedding is the center of it all for now. Though it was on Saturday, it reaches back to grab the earlier week and give it shape.

I got into town last Tuesday to find Joe working in the shop at the constant maintenance of machinery. With seeding done, it was already time to get set for spraying, haying, and the earlier harvest of winter wheat. Time to check tires and chains on the baler, grease the friction points, and hope that you've done enough to keep a machine from breaking down in a distant field. Parts need ordering and picking up. They're purchased on account with a nod across the counter. You wait for packing and gossip with the dealer in talk that runs from Rush Limbaugh to Dr. Laura and a quick word about another farmer. The dealer likes the call to Limbaugh from a person who complains about women wanting 6 weeks paid maternity leave at their jobs. "Problem is that they want it all," the dealer says. "You gotta makes choices and live with them." Information flows through the minor conduits of hellos and purchases. You make note of the ones you've seen and pass the news on. Berger is already cutting hay just north of Joe's place. "Look at him! What's he trying to do, make the rest of us nervous?"

Joe's feeling pretty good about the start of the summer, but knows enough not to crow. It's way too early and anything can happen. Still, he allows himself the small pleasure of acknowledging the greening fields. It rained just right only a few days before my coming. And that rain, true to experience, touched the fields with its own logic. Joe got about an inch on most of his land north of town. Others got as much as an inch and a quarter. At the abbey gauge they claimed 1.33 inches. The moisture tailed off in a northerly direction and Joe's hole in the landscape got its customary less than others but nevertheless enough. Winter wheat grows thick and healthy south of the access road. Canola looks strong on the north side. The lentils and peas of early seeding look good enough to get a smile from Joe. Even Craig, who tends to notice the hollow side of a good deal, allows himself a favorable comment on those fields.

Marie comes into the shop where Joe is working and I'm just saying hi on the first Tuesday back. I'm drawn into helping to replace parts on a tractor hitch before heading back to the Slope Motel to meet Karen Riley. She's coming out from New Hampshire to tail me in the

field and find some material for a piece that will appear in Natures magazine. We arranged to meet at 6:00 and I'm trying to figure out with Joe if that meant Central or Mountain time. Karen is the third writer Joe and Marie have met now and the one they liked the most. "She had a real personality," is how Marie put it later, "You felt like you were getting to know somebody." And Joe noticed it, too. "She was fun. Not like the others. It was like you two were right at the same level. Lots of joking and laughing."

Marie's arrival puts him onto a different tack. "Your call, Lukie [Joe calls Marie by that name--usually it means he's feeling good]. Do we get hail insurance or not?" Deciding whether and when to buy hail insurance is the main game of nerves for this time of year. With the crops in there's not much you can do to influence outcomes in west river dry farming other than spraying for weeds and insects. The sense of most things now being out of his control is simultaneously a relief and a grinding anxiety for Joe. His competence is hands on and kinetic, the kind that translates a problem into something solved by the body, by movement. If Joe can influence an outcome by tooling a part or figuring a seed to acre ratio, he's in his element. There's a surety and smoothness to his action then. His response is tactile, the workings of his mind converted into energy and motion.

Watching Joe work, I think of William Blake. If energy is eternal delight, then Joe's delight is eternal action. I've seen it in the morning when we lay out the day over coffee at the kitchen counter. Joe's back in the corner by the window leaning his chair and running through imagined hours as though the day can't happen without his nudge. Look closely and you'll see the energy building inside him when the pieces of the day lock together, ready to play out. Joe will start drumming his fingers on the counter. He'll nod his head as decision brings his chair to the floor. For him, the day begins like the sudden bolt of a big cat.

"Duane, you go out and feed the cattle. When you go into town, see if they have that part over at the store and give me a call. When you get back, we'll be out at.... Marie, you need to... Craig, you head over to... And Tom, you go with Craig to..." Sometimes, he lays out the day too fast for me to get it all. Everybody else is moving, putting on boots and hats and I'm lamely following. If I'm lucky I've at least gotten who I'm supposed to go with and they can fill me in on what I'm doing. Mostly, I try to stay out of the way and be helpful where I see an opening.

Joe's approach to the world is at its best when there's a call for action. The complementary need for waiting turns that motion inward into nights of bad sleep and restlessness. It's hard to say how general this is. At any large enough gathering of people, you figure there's a whole range of styles. But you can't ignore the sense of something not getting done when you see a bunch of farmers at a place where they're asked to sit for a while. Put them into the abbey church for an hour and they're politely quiet and even have their eyes on the mass. Still, most men hold their open hands in their laps or uneasily clenched together. Empty hands want the comfort of drop-forged iron or steel. A wrench or a wire cutter or a come-along signifies creation. The spin of a pneumatic drill turns the hours; sitting in place freezes time. In this case, the Catholic practice of standing, sitting, and kneeling at punctuated moments must be a relief.

Crops require their own moments of rest and forbearance; relationships require another. This last week is marked by one of those rare confluences when farming and family have synchronized their rhythms and left Joe empty-handed all the way around. With crops on their own and a daughter getting married, he's faced with twin movements toward autonomy. Both of these open a space for anxiety. There's always something to do, of course, and the machinery fills a lot of the hole.

On Wednesday, with Karen watching and asking questions from the pick-up, we spend the morning driving and walking along the fence line to the southeast pasture looking for slack wire. Fencing is work done in spare time, not scheduled unless there's an emergency. You just fit it in. Joe's Dad used to do the fencing, but he's doing that less now and drifting more toward real retirement every day.

We go out to drive the fence line--Duane is spraying just over the hill in the field to the west; Marie is preparing things for the wedding on Saturday; Cara is asleep up in her room. The truck jars along the line in rising heat and high wind. Deer flies patrol the grass along the line and we're gearing up for hot, sweaty work. Even though the three of us are bantering back and forth across the cab, Joe scans the line as we drive and seems to pluck posts and loose spots out of thin air--an exquisite sense of order. He says, "There's one," hops out with a new clip, comes quickly back, and gives us a glance. "I don't know about you but I've been fencing since we got in the gate."

So it goes. We hop in and out of the pickup, staple line to cedar post, wire it to the metal ones. Our tools are a hammer, a pliers, and a fence stretcher. We occasionally pound a loose post back into the ground or replace it altogether. Walk the line. Sweat pours. Eyes sting. Deerflies bite. We push along talking.

The stretch of muscles in the forearms and legs frees Joe to talk and we turn our words toward the wedding. It's clear that's where Joe's mind is and we ease into the topic with a comment on the small number of people coming to West River from Nathan's family over in Beach. Just 70 or so out of a total of about 320. This seems a source of concern although you don't condemn directly out here--you look for reasons that excuse an action although the hurt might still be there. The circumstances for them is that their family has several weddings this summer and the next one in the family will be a double wedding with two sisters getting married.

But the real thing bearing down on Joe is that he wants to talk with Cara to clear things up. It's tough to have her away in Minneapolis for so long and then need to wedge all the unsaid things into the short space of her visit. The rhythms are wrong, not like it would be if she lived in West River where you can build to the conversation, where the minor irritations of family get diffused every day and solve themselves.

"It's her attitude since she's been back," says Joe between the twists and clipping of barbed wire. "I need to talk with her." But he doesn't quite find the time and the wedding's only two days away. Cara sleeps when Joe needs to move. She's off when he'd like her around. It hurts when she and Nathan crunch those pickup tires down the road without

stopping in the shop to say where they're headed. Cara's leaving is bad enough, but why does it have to happen this fast and this abruptly? It's the quick change from shaper to bystander, like having to suddenly watch the new wheat green on its own. All you can do is search the sky for hail.

We move along the wire, stoop to the lowest line and slap at deerflies. Here to the west there are 3 lines strung between a quarter section's worth of posts. Up ahead to the south, at the boundary with Chuck Bauer's land, there are 4 lines. Karen asks why some rows have 3 lines and some 4. Joe looks and says, "Well, maybe it's when the next field is our own and when it's somebody else's. But then that doesn't quite work, does it? I don't know, we just follow what was there before." Later, he decides that it is that inside/outside boundary that explains it. It's a lot more trouble if the cows get into a neighbor's field. Boundaries are magic. They put breaks into what's otherwise continuous and create new forms of order. It does no good to be at it with people across the line. Joe's daughter is crossing a kind of line by marrying and he's trying to figure out if this is a 3 wire or a 4 wire boundary.

Some of the older wire at the south fence is brittle with rust. I work at the stretcher to tighten a loose section. It's hard stretching with the fear that it'll snap and accordion toward us in a tangle of slicing metal. "What happens when it snaps," I ask. "You're gonna bleed a little," he says. As I'm working the lever and tightening, Joe stops me. "That's enough."

How do you know when it's ready? "When I start to get scared," he says.

Sudden change is hard going. There's a subtle but real tension in the air, a counterclockwise swirl in the weather. I'm not sure I know the sources--whether disapproval of the groom, or of the living together (very recent), or of something more intangible. When it seems that Joe doesn't want this transition to happen, you wonder if it has anything to do with drumming fingers on a countertop and a hot southeast wind.

Joe's uncertainties contrast with Marie's calm. Turned outward, his pitch is perfect; facing inward, Marie's hums steady. I know it sounds tired and stereotyped to say it, but Marie's emotional mastery makes her more sure of her own feelings here. There's motion in her approach, too, and she's already talked things over with her daughter. No need to sit back and wait. She gets the time with Cara over the moments of making mints for the wedding or being in the house when Cara wakes up. Where Joe's moments with their daughter are crowded with the presence of other people, Marie can more easily be alone with her. She tells me that everything is resolved for her and they will be with Joe, too. It'll just take a little more time for it to happen between them. Marie brings her pre-marriage counseling at the parish to bear on things. She makes sure that Cara has considered the issues and worked them out, at least insofar as it's possible now. She knows that sense of entering something new; she knows she's launching somebody.

Like the parts dealer says, "You gotta makes choices and live with them."

Marie is convinced she's prepared her daughter for making those choices. So's Joe, I think. The grappling with things that he worked through in the cadences of fencing, preparing the baler, and fixing the tractor hitch all last week had much to do with another familiar anxiety. Linked to his daughter's marriage was his own inevitable transition from active participant to silent observer. And almost every irritation he expressed, every thing needing to be said, had something to do with that change and the toughness of letting it happen.

Stretching fence and walking that line is one of the last chores you do before turning the farm completely over. Joe asked me as he drove the pickup into the southeast pasture if I thought he could turn it down one of the hills. It looked pretty steep to me and I said I had no idea. Neither did he, he explained, he hadn't done much of the fencing work up to now because his Dad had been doing it. But at 68, his Dad was letting that work go. One of the last chores.

Letting go is a kind of retirement. You let go of the wheat and it greens and ripens on its own. You retire from the immediacy of control. You let go of daughters, too, and retire from the interventions you once made in their lives. When I got to the house last week one of the topics of conversation was the big bill Joe and Marie just paid on their 800 number. Even though this daughter had already prepared the way by moving to Minneapolis, there've been a lot of phone calls over the past two years to help keep the inevitable from consciousness. Joe said they'd be closing that one off now--no more collect calls. Yet another signifier of new status. Cara moving to the cities for school was more like a 3 line fence. Marriage makes for a 4 line fence.

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The wedding was grand. I sat in the last pew of the church trying to be unobtrusive. But that worked even better than planned because I got to see everybody set up for the procession to the front of the church. Joe and Marie brought Cara down to the altar together, one on each arm. Cara requested the break from tradition--she wanted both her parents to give her away. Joe was beaming. Marie was, too. Cara held firm to both of them. I lost myself, forgot I was an anthropologist, and was just happy for my friends.

At the dance, Marie came up to me and said that Joe still hadn't talked with Cara. He still wanted to, still had things he needed to say, and it was getting late. The DJ announced the last song. Long evening. Much laughter. Lots of good drinking all the way around. This was a fine German wedding in Dakota. The music for that last song began to play and Joe came over to stand by Marie and me and talk through it. He got interrupted though. Cara came over, took his hand, and led him out to the dance floor. They got their chance to talk.

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"Your call, Lukie. Do we get hail insurance or not?" Marie answered, "No, not yet."

Cheers!

Field Letter #10

PO Box 312  
West River, ND  
21. June 2000

Dear friends,

In a dry country so much depends on rain. It's all the difference in the world for a farmer. He rises or he falls on the pinpoint splash of water on furrowed ground. Diamond hard truths of this order encourage most of us to more tightly link our futures to the present. We know what the payoff is for an hour's employment; we know how the money comes. For the farmer though, all the weeks of planning and all the work of putting seed into the ground are more obviously acts of faith, gestures toward an incalculable future. I can't think of another kind of life where so much is unknowable. And this kind of uncertainty makes for a general reluctance to speak in definites. You don't want to jinx things. Nor do you want the gaudy reputation earned by reckless hubris. No one here would taunt the skies by demanding their due; better to assume the postures of reverence. A good season invites gratitude for unearned grace.

West river rains make for a dicey scaffolding on which to construct a future. Most people figure 16 inches is a minimum for safe dry farming. Averages out here tend closer to 14 and the wavering line between a good year and bad might hang on the skittish flight of a thunderhead that drops its wet into one field while skipping another. There's just no knowing. So when those big fronts spread clouds across the sky and stall over the open land, you feel tight muscles go easy.

Here in West River, last week's long slow rains brought a welcome caesura to the casual rhythms of the farm. Grey skies and more grey skies. Cool weather and even a frost warning one night--rumors of snow to the northeast in the Turtle Mountains. Though the two inches in Bismarck last Tuesday was a less insistent one inch further west, both places were marked by the same in-gathering of thought. A chance to pause and breathe and enjoy muddy creation. Joe's rain gauge occupies its own post next to the one bearing a cross and a prayer for favorable harvest. The water rose along its grooved lines, one inch on Tuesday, Thursday another half inch, and a quarter inch more by noon Friday. And the rain kept on coming through that day's afternoon and throughout the morning on Saturday.

I called Joe from Bismarck on Tuesday and asked him if it was raining out there. "Oh yeah," he said, "and it's a good one, too." The light winter and the spotty rains since seeding were beginning to show up in the landscape. Stock ponds dependent on runoff were more cracked mud than real water. Alfalfa was showing signs of strain. This rain behind a stalled front promised a good soaking. Of course, good timing is all a matter of what went before. For those who had gotten to their haying just ahead of the others, there was new cause for worrying. You don't want to have your grass laid out in neat rows and unbaled when the rain begins. Muddy fields will grab at tractor wheels, forcing you to stay out to suffer the heartbreak of watching your mown grass soak in the water and begin the quick rot that ruins it for hay. Joe's cousin Mike may have gotten himself into that bind with his early start to haying. He'd cut all his grass by Saturday night and was planning to follow that up with all the baling in one sweep.

Inconvenient or not, rain forces a change of pace for everybody. It's a good chance to work on machinery, head into town for things that have been put on hold, and even sit on a lawn chair in the garage to read a book and sip whiskey to the timeless sound of steady rain.

The rain couldn't have been better timed for Joe and Marie. They had planned a two day break after their daughter's wedding long before they knew what the weather would bring. Wednesday afternoon, they loaded up Duane's newly shined pick-up with a Weber grill and coals, chests of food and beer, and a few plastic garbage bags of clothes and drove up to the Little Missouri River to be alone together in a rented cabin in the breaks north of Killdeer. Joe put two books into the pile--collections of letters that Phil Maier wrote to his mother when he was in Vietnam. Phil farms with horses over in Haymarsh and is a friend of Marie's Dad. I reflected just a little on the dense ties linking people in this place: Phil's brother Jim, the Doig County Sheriff, just gave Joe a speeding ticket exactly one week before this packing for holiday.

With everything in the pick-up, Joe turned to Duane and ran the litany of things to do while he's away: help Marie's Dad move cattle; get the jeep Duane's gotten running out of the workshop, replace the corner posts on the pasture, work with Grandpa Frank to move cattle from the north pasture to the south pasture near the yard, clean up the shop, move the balers into the shop and the two combines (one of them is Craig's) into the quonset.... There were a few other odds and ends, but the list was made moot by the rain that began drumming that night.

Listening to Joe's instructions and watching the work, I began to realize that at any given moment there are three generations in motion here. Joe and Marie occupy that wide space in a stream that joins their parents Jake & Eva Schwoebel and Frank & Kay Bauer to their grandchildren, Cara and Duane. The currents of authority run strongest here and you see it in the deft way Joe sets up the order of things that need doing in his absence or the steady attention Marie gives to family matters. It's Marie who made the regular visits to the nursing home to check in on Joe's grandmother when Kay and Frank were away for a month. It's Marie, too, who knew at any moment what needed doing and when their daughter got married a week ago. But the line between emotion and economy isn't so neatly drawn, since it's also Marie who carries the checkbook and figures accounts for the complex enterprise of making farming work in this country.

The know-how that goes with living accretes in its own time. There are the long cycles of lives being played out where the pattern requires consulting. The wedding of a daughter is one of these and Marie consulted with Kay on matters of who to invite and who might be hurt by getting skipped. And there are the shorter cycles of the annual round with their own sure patterns. Some of these are well known to Joe through years of playing them out. He goes to Frank less frequently since coming into his own and the questions he now asks are on the order of thinking out loud.

And so the stream flows. Generation follows generation, small variations in the channel cut by what happened before. Gary Snyder has a poem about this, called *Axe Handles*. He remembers the line from a Chinese poet as he and his son make a handle for a hatchet, "When making an axe, the pattern is near at hand." In Snyder's poem, the tool for cutting a new handle is the father shaping his son from the only pattern he needs. That pattern is his own life.

I wonder if it's any different out here. Just a couple of weeks ago I was sitting in the kitchen talking with Joe and Marie over morning coffee. Karen Wright was there when I asked how Frank reacted to Joe's switch to no-till seeding. "He didn't really understand it, but figured it seemed to work." Frank came in right after that to say hi around the counter. "We were just talking about you," I said, "and I asked how you felt about Joe's turn to no till." He looked my way and smiled without answering directly. Instead, not even hearing what went before, he launched into the time when he and his brother Alois took over from their own father. Soon after taking up the farm, the two of them took out a mortgage to buy a new section of land to the north. Taking on a mortgage in those days was the last thing a German farmer wanted to do and Frank reflected on his Dad's reaction. "He said, 'I don't really know what you're doing, but it seems to work out for you.'"

Joe took over the farming in 1990 but to say it like that is to stir a misleading abruptness into things. Monday night with the family sitting around the table, Marie working on a five year report of family accounts and Joe filling out the seeding maps that he'll take over to the USDA office the next day, Joe suddenly went to another room and brought back a scroll of window shade. Unrolling the light brown fabric revealed hand drawn maps of several fields. Frank Bauer had made these to help him decide what crops he would seed in the coming year. The meticulous work of pencil on the rough fabric gave the shade the look of old parchment.

Joe unrolled it from the dowels. I took it as a sacred text, the Pentateuch, a record of a people. We sat around it and Joe pointed out how the lines of text in each field were Frank's small, neat handwriting giving the year and crop planted in each field. This map ran for twenty years and other scrolls ran the record back further. Joe pointed to the lines and said, "See here where I took the farm over in 1990, but my handwriting doesn't start until 1992? Those first two years, we'd sit down together to work out our seeding plan, but Dad always did the writing. After that, it was mine to do. It was like he just lost interest." Lost interest or knew that the work had been put into good hands.

The cropping plans follow the old west river pattern of rotation and fallow for a run of years. Looking at the year to year pattern, it could almost be Frank making the decisions even after 1992. Joe's confidence needed some steadying before he began to stretch out for the real changes to come. Frank had made the occasional experiment, too, but his tended toward variations within the channel of tradition set by his own Dad. The fine inscriptions on the scroll revealed the year he planted peas instead of putting the field to summer fallow. Moving down the years, you then see how wheat got seeded the next year and how this was followed by an abrupt out-of-cycle fallow year. Joe deciphered that for me. "We thought peas might give as much back to the soil as fallow. So you see this wheat coming the next year and then this fallow. I guess it didn't work. Wheat yield must have been off."

Read the scroll further and come to 1997. Joe was ready to jump all channels by then. This was the year when Joe began his no-till and threw all those earlier years into memory. Some seasons are like a big rain that cuts a new stream. Frank calls 1997 the year Joe decided to bet the farm. On the scroll you see it faintly in the new crops that show up--chick peas, lentils, crambe. These are whispers of the bigger truth, that this was his farm now.

Joe continues the process of coming into his own. The farm is a living record of that becoming. Last fall he seeded the winter wheat that lodges in the fields west of the house, thick and green in the wind. Moving into winter wheat was another playing with the current that Joe couldn't pass up. Winter wheat doesn't do well in this country, or hasn't with the old black dirt farming of before, but Joe noticed his crambe left a thick green stubble on that field at harvest and thought this might be just the thing for winter wheat. The stubble would hold down soil, allow the snow to drift and get caught, and protect the seed from the bitterest cold. If it worked, Joe would be able to spread seeding across more months and dampen some of the hurly-burly two handed rush of regular planting season. He risked 200 hundred acres on the bet and the product is a field of deep green dancing with wheat thick as winter fur. Joe's intuitions get written into the land. In time, the record will find its way onto the parchment map begun by his father.

Even when the work gets shared, it's Joe's farm. This morning, five of us drove up to the northernmost pasture up in Doig County to bring the cattle into a pen. From there, we needed to cull three cows and their calves from the herd to bring them back to the yard. They were suffering from pinkeye and needed injections into their eyelids and quick squirts of medicine. Joe was up at 5:30 and over to Craig Bauer's to get the steel panels that we'd use to construct a temporary chute into the pen. From there, we'd need to get the cows we wanted into the trailer for hauling. Frank drove in with his grandson. Joe, Marie, and I were in the other pickup with the trailer and we set up the panels in a high plains wind. Frank figured it was time to get to the other end of the pasture to bring the cattle the half mile east to our pen and eased his pickup toward them. Joe glanced up to see him leaving and shouted a charged, "Whoa, whoa!" into the wind. "Where's he going? Duane, get your Grandpa and bring him back!" And Duane was on the four-wheeler to catch up with Frank.

Joe walked up to the pickup and, gentle this time, said to his Dad, "I thought we might have a plan before we get started on this." Watching Frank listening to Joe from behind the wheel, his clear eyes straight ahead and a hint of pleasure in his look, I saw the shift again. It's written in action as much as on maps. Frank listened and even smiled an acknowledgment of who was in charge. Joe ordered the next half hour in quick instructions to all of us and we broke off to the places he had chosen. The cattle handled easy. We got them into the pen and began the culling on one man's plan.

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Frank said something else about their farm as we sat around the counter that day. When the kids were young, he and his brother used to hire a hand. But there were always problems. He recounted the story they tell around here of a hand who seeded a whole field with one side of the seeder plugged. He went around that field knowing all the while that half a row was getting skipped, thinking he'd be paid and gone before anyone knew. Rains fell and slowed his leaving; the moisture and heat revealed his zebra field and the farmer saw it. "What the hell happened there?" "Is that up already!" answered the hand.

Frank laughed and finished by saying, "The good ones already have work and the poor ones we don't want. As soon as they were old enough, we got rid of the hand and put the kids to work." They learn this life in the doing, the pattern near at hand.

Now it's another generation of continuing and of the occasional break. Autonomy grown in place means that one generation stands aside. And it means they know when the timing is right to do that. The autonomy that grows out of leaving is another thing, but there's still a time to know even then.

Cara's marriage was of the second kind. Joe and Marie still tease around the edges of what they can insist on and what they need to ask for. Father's Day came hard on the heels of the wedding and Cara sent a card to Joe with a message and note that brings me close enough to weeping. It softens Joe and turns his mind to her next visit. His mother's family reunion is in just a couple weeks and he thinks she might come for that, but her latest phone call to Marie isn't promising. Joe and Marie think she ought to come--this may be the last time she'll see her great-grandmother and, with her great-grandmother's possible passing in coming years, the last time so many family come to West River. "Yeah, I'd like her to come and be with everybody. But I gotta remember when I was her age and that kind of thing wasn't so important to me, either." Still, he searches out ways to get her and her husband to come. They mentioned the expense of gas so he thinks of telling her that he'll fill her tank out of the yard when she gets here and when she leaves, half the cost. It's tough finding new ways to act.

Duane's more of the first kind of growing. He carries the rangy look and the certain manner of an 18 year old testing the limits of his territory. For him, it's something personal, the measured way a new calf gets its balance in jerky steps that rapidly smooth out. But it's also a part of the larger flow, no different than the run of water on these rainy days, each swale passing the current to a further channel.

In the yard, Duane's sturdy economies of motion get enacted under the hood of a jeep or pick-up. He's at home behind the flanges of a baler, in place forking round bales with the tractor. When asked, Duane won't be able to tell you exactly when he learned a particular maneuver inside the guts of an engine. He grew up around these things and his hands have had the touch of grease and oil for as long as he can remember. Duane's the same with farming. I asked him when he thought that he'd want to be a farmer, to stay here in West River and do this work for his life. But I may as well have asked him when he decided to breathe. He's sure that this is what he is meant to do.

That same Wednesday before the steady rains, Duane and I went over to his Grandpa Jake's to move cattle from farmyard to pasture. Jake handled the branding but Duane set up the syringe for injecting the calves and directed me in getting the animals from the pen into the clanging metal of the tub and alleyway leading to the confined headgate. His feel for cattle comes as a condition of being out here. Live with them long enough and you're inside their heads. You know when they'll bolt and when they'll follow you like a favorite hound. Even Jake gives credit to Duane's skill. I watched the partnership across that jump of generations that connect Duane with his Grandpa, how Jake would ask him what he thought, how he let him work the cattle into the alleyway without comment. We finished the work in a never plowed prairie that stretched the horizon. On the way out, Jake pointed out the dam and the nearly dry stockpond behind it. Eva made supper for us before we headed back home to the coming rains.

Cheers!

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By 7:00 the next morning, Frank calls over to say it's too wet to run the cattle up the section road. There's a 100 yard piece of that road well known for its ability to suck pick-ups into the ground. High school kids make a sport out of trying to get through it after a good rain and the odds are always in favor of the mud. Frank and Kay Bauer take advantage of the lack of any real work to take their RV down to Bowman for a weekend of wedding plans and birthday celebrations for Joe's brother John; Duane turns to the chores that can be done in the yard, and I head up to the abbey to do some writing.

Dear friends,

This is one of those mornings when I wake up and wonder what the hell I'm doing out here. It's frustrating to always be the one who stands to the side of things with a notebook or a camera. Last Friday I swung over to the Abbey in the afternoon and found Father Martin and Brother Darren hard at work downing dead trees near the south gardens. One tree got hung up on its neighbor and everybody rushed to join in the common task of finishing that work. On Saturday, Joe and his brother worked in between family reunion events at the baler, drilling and polishing a new twining hole in its side, working out the best way to make this machine do what they want it to. Not long ago Craig, his 14 year old daughter, and ten year old son were deep in the guts of his combine, the metal shields lifted, getting the new water pump in before harvest. At other times, there's the simple lifting and moving of pipe and stray parts, the sweeping of the shop, the daily labor. It makes no difference, my first urge is to drop the notebook and lend a hand, get a little grease on my fingers, feel the burn of the welder's torch.

Being an observer is doubly passive in a world of such concrete action. The real work is there, always right in front of me, but instead of bending my back to it I mainly hope I'm not in the way. My contribution to the proceedings here is to twist my head around front to back, gazing at things with an owl's squint.

Watching Joe and Duane, Marie and Renae, Craig and all the others, I can't help but feel a need to define myself. What's an anthropologist anyway? We pretend to a power to make permanent what happens irrespective of our acknowledging presence. I guess there's merit in that. Of course, that forces the wearing questions: does it make any difference for the work itself and how do we choose those things that merit our scribbled record anyway? What exactly do we owe these folks we watch with all this intent? If there's any obligation here, it could just be that we hope for the good luck to be a fair kind of storyteller.

The people we study make choices, too. Like us, they actively preserve their worlds in story. All that happens is potential record for them, too, and the stories that get told are unconscious selections from a continuous stream. John Berger saw that well enough in his book, **Pig Earth**, a series of gestures that take off from life in a French peasant village. I don't have the book with me although my first reading of it when I returned from early fieldwork in Nepal was a revelation. I remember Berger writing that the life of any small enough town is revealed in the stories that people tell. And I remember how the simple stories in **Pig Earth** opened into the otherwise unexpressed complexity of a farmer's way of thinking the world into being.

The stories people tell are icons, flat statements of deeply textured truths. If that's so, then the loss of those stories or of the possibility of those stories is a kind of stripping of the altars. Anything that thins the textures and knowledge that goes into making those stories is at best a nuisance. At worst, we're hovering at the near side of committing a criminal act. So, maybe the Benedictines have something to offer when they tell us how to listen. "Listen carefully," writes Benedict in the first words of his rule, A...and attend ...with the ear of your heart." Understanding requires a contemplative turn. In contemplation the story selects itself.

Out here each day's mood, both for me and for the people who truly live here, cleaves hard to the course of the weather. Broad spring fronts and stable rains confer their special peace on the landscape. There's a surety that goes with them. High winds, another regular feature, strain nerves and put a tight kink into the corner of the eye. The west river July begins a new phase for everybody, the days of the impromptu and the unexpected. For farmers, the waiting game until harvest continues with the shallow breathing of an upped ante at each new stage in the living herbarium outside your window. The closer you get to harvest, the more brittle your fate. It's way too late to replant now and the line between success and failure left the grey areas behind a long time ago. There's no turning back. Joe's fields of canola began to lose their carnival yellow a week or two ago; by now most have taken on their more sedate camouflage of green. Winter wheat shifts toward the paler colors of harvest from a lustrous shimmer that seemed to liquefy in high wind.

My own fieldwork runs its paces alongside that canola and wheat. My fields were long ago seeded and it's too late to turn back. Stormy weather gives me a case of nerves. These letters are a way to hear things with the ear of my heart. I never know what's going to go into them when I begin. And trying to guide the uncontrollable is a sure recipe for a wreck.

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The stories I tell come when they will. They're arrival is unearned. "Listen!"

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It may be Duane's calf. Born healthy, its rear legs don't work like they should after being stepped on by another cow. That long cable of nerve in the spine was pinched. The calf rises painfully, walks with a wobble, and tries to drop its hind parts to the straw after just a few steps. Its legs work independently and out of control as though powered by a warped driveshaft.

The first question with a damaged animal is whether it can be saved. Can it live the life and serve its intended ends? If not it will need to be destroyed. Duane puts this in the category of "having a situation." "We've got a situation over in the pen," Duane says to his Dad one morning to announce the problem with the calf. On another day he said, "Grandpa Jake's got a situation, A when we were on our way over to work cattle. One of Jake Schwoebel's bulls, brand new and muscled to a weight trainer's specs, had broken its penis. This happens from time to time and if you don't see it happen you can only guess at the cause. It could have been knocked off the cow it was serving by the other bull in the pen. Maybe it just slipped. Maybe it got caught on something. But the bulls have just one end in this place and broken penises aren't reparable. Jake just shook his head at the bad luck.

"A goddamned shame, but what can you do? That's just the way it goes, I guess, just the way things can get to be. It's a sonuvabitch, but there it is. Jesus."

Jake has the trick of stringing his reflections along like he's saying a rosary. Behind the necessary profanity lies the entirely Catholic earthiness that invokes God's name at all moment

of crisis. For a ruined bull there's no way out, but any person still needs to come to terms with it and Jake's litany is his way of doing it. The bull was sold for bologna a day or two later, a return of just a few cents on each of the dollars paid for it.

From the first day, Duane works to save his calf. The daily checking to see if it can feed. The coaxing onto its legs and close observation of the wobbly walk. Duane took it to the vet early on. There's not much to be done except to hope that it mends itself. He helps it along as much as possible with a daily injection and by now the calf has grown big enough to require two people for this. I get called to help when I'm standing around the shop. It's another example of the anthropologist hard at work and mostly looking like he has time on his hands in these parts. When Duane sees me empty handed while his uncle helps Joe assemble a double twiner for the baler, he says, "Come with me." Duane uses that same economy of language that outsiders find so abrupt. As with Brother Ambrose, he bears no rude intent. Language, tools, spare parts finding new uses on an old machine. He directs me to put my foot onto the calf's head, helping to still it while he puts the syringe to its neck.

Not many words go into this. Three or four weeks since the accident, it's become routine. But hard not to notice the soothing gentleness of Duane's voice when he comes to the calf or the careful way he pushes the hind quarters to get it to rise. "Hey, buddy, hey. How's it going today, buddy?" A different order of invocation than Grandpa Jake's, but one that serves. The calf works its body away from us and we watch it go with the weird canted walk of its hind legs. It'll take a while for the animal to mend, if at all.

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"No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else."

Rule of Benedict, Chapter 72, The Good Zeal of Monks

Thunderheads tugboat through on hot afternoons and leave a wake of rain according to their own hidden inclinations. These are the true managers of the daily schedule since every cloudburst carries its own potential to shift a day's plans. Whether you'll work in the fields or in the shop isn't finally known until the morning itself. A drenching will keep you from the field for certain. It might also turn the evening into a chorus line of stories waiting to emerge from the wings when another farmer drops by. We got one of those nights just a few days ago when Mike Bauer dropped over to the house.

Mike is a retailer of stories, a natural master of ceremonies for the unanticipated party. I found him cradling a beer in the garage last Thursday afternoon after the last downpour. He creates his own center of attention through the simple act of leaning against a meat freezer. There's a grin on his face and a tilt to his head. His clothes are slopped up enough to put you at ease and give you the easy comfort of knowing there's no hurry here. Mike is sizing up the moment for one of his interventions. His greeting was a "What took you so long, young man?" and I wasn't sure if he was referring to the package of beer I'd brought in from town or to my late afternoon return to the house. Mike took charge of the beers and made sure nobody suffered an empty. The cans strung themselves out through the rest of the afternoon and into the

evening and the party grew from the small seed of his unplanned visit. We called his wife, Connie, to have her join us for supper. And soon enough we called Brother Julian from the abbey, too. Mike looked at me laughing, "I just love it when it rains!"

Brother Julian is the abbey monk that Joe, Marie and others in West River put their hope for the future in. He's studying for ordination at St. John's in Minnesota now and is back in West River for the summer. Julian arrives at Joe's after the party has swollen its banks. We've just begun talking about West River Catholics and St. Mary's parish. There are things that bother the people around the table.

For Joe and Marie, it's a sense that the parish is less a part of community life than it should be. "Go to St. Stephen's if you want to see a parish that works," says Joe. "People stay and visit after mass. They work hard for the parish. You just get a feeling that they're a community down there."

For Connie, it's the bothering message that the pastor has read before masses of late. It's from the bishop and is about communion being available only to Catholics in good standing. Connie wants a more welcoming message in the parish. She worries that these hard legalisms keep young people from church. And it hurts, too, because the message is more likely to be read at a wedding or a funeral mass because non-Catholics are likely to be present. She converted from the United Church of Christ after marrying Mike and it's still hard for her family after all these years.

Julian enters the room, trim and neat, and articulate. He's a monk that has friends in the community and he's more likely than others to join a party like this. Julian's arrival is a delight to Mike.

"Aha, monk! Now we've got you! You've got to answer our questions!"

I am taken by how much they all challenge Julian. Slurred words offer no bar to questions serious as cut glass. For all Mike's delight in skirting the edge, it becomes clear that he requires hard ground to put spring into his leaps. He relies on Connie to give him a good part of that. And he wants other constants, too.

"Okay, young man, just tell me this. Why is it that after all these years, the church says that we don't have to worry about everything that we were taught when we were young? I mean, if things were true before, why aren't they true now? I know an old guy who says that he's lived long enough now to find that every last thing he believed in when he was young is just plain wrong. What's going on?"

On into the night. Julian is warm. Mike leaps. Julian laughs at Mike's bravado but touches him on his shoulder or arm when he answers. He leans into the questions. Joe at the other end of the table holds a pen in his hand to make a point. Marie around the side by Duane speaks with elegant devotion, nods at Julian's answers. Connie challenges. Beers keep coming. Theology at midnight around a farmer's table in West River.

“And really,” from Mike who is seen in church a couple of times a year, “what I want to know is do we get more points for converting a Lutheran? I mean, you know, do I get more credit for marrying a non-Catholic? I could use a little of that!”

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“When they live by the labor of their hands, as our fathers and the apostles did, then they are really monks.”

Rule of Benedict, Chapter 48, The Daily Manual Labor

Joe decides in that small gap between thunderclouds after mowing over at Uncle Alois's place--that land still breathes Alois's name even after his death--that it's time to get the cut grass raked into windrows and baled into thousand pound rounds of hay. He sends Duane ahead with the rake and follows with the new baler. I drive out in my own car so I can head back into town. The day grows hot and Duane pulls the spinning wheels of the rake around the rows. The rake is a machine with two long booms that trail behind the tractor in a shallow V. Spiked flanges turn and catch the grass, sweeping two rows into a single knee high snaking line.

Joe's on another tractor pulling the yellow baler with it's belts and ribbed teeth. It's a boxy little machine on wheels, jolting along behind the tractor like a giant yellow beetle, dropping its bales behind it. One bale every three minutes.

I hop off the tractor and watch the two of them in their slow twirl, in and out along the curving tracks of cut grass. A father and son--both of them tell me they don't like to dance. But there they are, their two machines under the cloudless morning sky riding the slow lift of land. They look tethered to each other, like they're holding hands in Texas Swing. In and out, spinning toward the field's end and around the bend. Passing. Handing off. Dancing.

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Saturday morning, Joe bolted awake to a 5:30 storm exploding with electricity and sudden rain. The balers had been left out the night before and he needed to get them inside. The farm yard ignited into balls of screaming light and Joe worked the tractors between them into the shed. He got back into the house with the sore neck that comes of dodging annihilation.

Cheers!

Dear friends,

These days I wake early from the heat of my upper room and the first break of sun in the eastern sky, walk the rough section road at dawn, and watch the far hills ripple from shadow. I'm partial to morning solitude at the section line just east of Joe and Marie's house, beyond the outbuildings and pens, the downslope of marshy drainage, and the abrupt climb to never-plowed pasture. Each day begins with its fresh reading of the landscape. There are times when the temperature threatens 95 and sluggish morning warmth needs to count for a whole day's cool. Days like that, the ridges roll away in a humid bath, running to purples and blues. These deeper shadows can cast spare wind-formed hills into piling mountains. I'll crouch low in the ruts then, listen to the killdeer and meadowlarks, and watch how the sun etches cedar posts along hundred year grain. I'll meditate on the day's opening, the insistent blue sky straight over my head, and the 6:15 bells calling the monks to morning prayer four miles south of the farm.

Over a cup of coffee in the westside shade of the house, Joe is looking out toward the cattle in the near pasture and listening to their urgent bellowing. They'd been moved a few days ago to clean up the growth and they resent this weedy fare when tasty grass is just a fence line away. He traces the southern ridge with his eyes, lays out the day. Frank and Kay will be joining us in their pick-up. We'll move these closer cattle first and then head up to the north pastures across the county line and move cattle from there, too.

For all that needs doing, you sense a general tightening in the pit of the stomach around here. Harvest thoughts pluck the cords of anxiety. The winter wheat turns a honeyed gold in hot sun, ready for the swather in just a week. It's hard not to think of the yield: "Forty or forty-five bushels when I'm reasonable; fifty-five or sixty, maybe even seventy when I'm dreaming," says Joe. Some farmers have already begun swathing their canola, laying it to the ground for the two or three weeks it'll need to cure. It's a waiting game now, a nervous consideration of the odds when hail can bust a whole season.

On these long hot days, time itself seems to twang. There's a wide-eyed alertness, a readiness to move. This wet year, the haying continues later than most would like. It presses its fat belly hard up against the earliest rounds of combining that will soon begin and threatens the order of things. Thousand pound bales, 6 feet across, expand into the empty places near the yard and Joe wonders where he'll put it all. He figures he'll have twelve to fifteen hundred of them when he's done and there's no room for it.

But even these thoughts get crowded out by what's to come. It's been over a week since he said he would try to make it, but Omer, the mechanic who lives up by Grassy Butte and who knows combines best, still hasn't come to tune up the big red machines that'll soon be in the fields. Joe's given up calling now. No sense in irritating the man who keeps those machines humming.

You fit the baling in where you can. Heavy dew sets a schedule on edge with the same finality as a soaking rain. So you take the pick-up into the shop or head into town for other business all the while keeping your eye on the sky and hoping that long slant of sun will dry

things just enough. The horarium these days gets cut and shuffled about as much as the pinochle decks at the American Legion in town. No way to know exactly what you'll be doing and it's best not to ask. It's in the nature of things to throw in your hands from time to time and settle into an evening with beers over at Frank and Kay's.

This is a time for distraction. Anything at all that deflects the thinking is welcome. Joe's family stacked two reunions into as many weekends. Marie arranged for a night in a badlands cabin to celebrate Joe's birthday. Joe and I joined another farmer to retrieve some cattle kept on range up north of Ft. Berthold.

But the distractions are never permanent. Joe packs the tension of waiting inside himself, neat bundles of containment that still find their out. Two weeks ago, his leg flamed into a rash brought on by the effort to hold it all in. And now he rises early, paces the house, checks grain prices and the weather radar on the satellite feed. He walks an anxious path from the kitchen to the living room and into the office making phone calls at 5:30 and 6:00. To Omer for the combine--still no answer. To Tom Beyer to borrow a rake. To Doug Zahl for the school board and for word on his sister, sick and dying before her time in the hospital in Bismarck. To Neil Schwartz who farms up near Halliday--ask him about the streak of blackening cloud and the tear of lightening to the north. To Craig Bauer to find out what he plans to do with the contagion of weeds in his chick peas. Every conversation slides sideways toward harvest talk, the state of fields. Whatever the reason for the call, Joe eases his queries to farming. Knowing what you want to do, you crave the assurance that others are in the same boat.

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A failed field is called a wreck and everybody gets a pass for one. Neil, nodding to our left from the pick-up toward a field overrun with kocia, says "This is my wreck for the year." Craig's wreck displays itself to the world in the field by the highway and every neighbor sees it on the trip back from town. The joshing comments of earlier weeks are in the past now. Reading fields after seeding, Joe would joke about a missed row or a plugged line in the air seeder in those holes where black earth pooled like oil in an otherwise green field. There's no stealth to farming, no covering your tracks, where every crooked line and every gap with a sprayer gets inscribed for later reflection and casual commentary. You joke at the minor gaffs. A sloppy line or a hole in a quarter section of land bears little weight in the construction of a future. Each of these is a few bushels at most, a small and good naturedly contributed tithe to the communal good will, the airy banter of competition between friends.

But jokes are out of place now when failure can cut like a scythe. No farmer wishes ruin on a neighbor in this country where the delicate balance of survival at the edge careens so wildly and where so much depends on the neighbor over the hill. One wreck and you tighten the belt for another year. A pile up loosens the hold on the land for everybody. One family's succumbing to the heartless calculus of livelihood spirals and loops through the whole community. One less family is one more argument for closing a school, a few miles more to drive for borrowing a rake or baler, one less person to call when a calf curls the wrong way in a cow's belly.

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The section line road where I do my morning thinking runs north into a low, slow to dry, slough when it rains. To the south, it fades into high grass and rut, never quite disappearing as it skips like a stone over the heave of prairie. Homestead law required every settler to give up 33 feet of right of way along these lines so that every township would hang from a grid of roads. Most places now you'll find every mile marked by 66 feet of open land suspended between fencelines. West river farmers read this landscape with second sight, as though a great wind blew through them. They read for sign, translating geography into meaning with the roll of a body's gait across a maturing field. They read with mind upended, receiving the world's pure gift as the reward for an undivided heart. For them, the landscape opens from the disciplined grid of the section roads into immense geographies of kinship, emotion, and the tense draw of unstated need.

Section line roads and the grids they define, laid down in abstraction, were filled in and made concrete in the settlement of this country. They circumscribe real lives, families, and stories today. They exist as both the framework and the conduit along which communal sentiment softens the harder geometries of life. Martin Wetsch lives maybe three miles to the east but the best way to get to his place sweeps along a ten mile northern arc of gravel and dust. Getting to the Wetsch place takes me another remove from town just when I was getting the hang of thinking I wasn't all that close to the edge of the earth as when I first got here. You can't see the town from out there and the farmsteads are a light sprinkle on the countryside. Joe and Craig make a point of dropping over to see Martin from time to time, a way to break up the loneliness of a friend.

Martin is somewhere in his seventies and never got married. There are stories of him being serious about a woman who died before she and Martin could fan their spark into a new family. That was long ago and Martin has been a bachelor for so long that he carries it as a condition of being. It goes well with his whipcord build and the ready smile made no less frequent by a stunning lack of teeth. He lives with his fat old dog in the same house he's called home his whole life. From the looks of it, this is the house his father must have built when he settled this place. Ramshackle additions can't obscure the rammed earth walls, three feet thick and supplying their own insulation whatever the season.

Joe and I drove there just before the baling to get some pipe for welding the new haywagon Joe needed to haul his bales. We pulled our train of dust along the long road until we got to Martin's place and found him in the shop. Martin quit his farming a while back and makes a living of connected odds and ends by working metal into feeders and racks for the area farmers. He's nearly always in his shop except for the ritual trip to town where he has breakfast and dinner every day. Martin came out covered in black grease and we explained the need for piping of a certain diameter. "I don't have any of that," he said at first, but brightened when he looked to the edge of his yard and the long rods stacked there. "But Craig's got just what you want over there. Maybe you ought to take some of that."

Joe's first question was whether Craig was working on any project requiring the pipe. "Don't think so," said Martin. "You can ask him if he needs it, but if I were doing it, I'd just take it and ask him later. It makes it harder to say no."

We picked out the pipe and Martin loaded it on the trailer with Joe laughing about Craig's own habit of borrowing. Martin had made some panels, metal fences for cattle pens, for Joe a year or so ago and Craig had gone to Martin needing exactly what he had. Martin let him take the panels and Craig let Joe know later on. He kept them so long that he offered to buy them, suggesting that he pay the price for used panels since they were no longer new. Joe let them go. You can't put a price on keeping connected.

The borrowing and easy use of other people's tools happens spontaneously and with a logic of its own. Who you borrow from and how you treat people tells everything about community membership. The failure of generosity threatens everybody, tatters the grid that joins them. One day we were sitting in Joe's kitchen looking out toward the yard. A piece of land to the east had just been bought by a Milius from McLaughlin and we were talking about him. Joe was just saying, "I guess we have a real good idea of what kind of neighbor we've got with this guy. No sooner did he buy that land than he went and put a chain and padlock on the gate! Now I hear he wants to move the fence toward the section line. That's where I'm going to have to make an issue--I'll tell the county commissioner that I use that road."

Mark pulled into the yard at about that moment and went directly into the shop across the scoria drive. We continued with our coffee. "When somebody pulls in and goes into the shop, I figure he needs to use something. I don't think he's out to steal anything."

Most people have a good idea of the equipment people have and nearly anything might be called on by a neighbor. Property quickly signifies character in that act of calling--it doesn't take long to know who you can rely on. Joe laughed about Tom Beyer who farms just to the west. He had to borrow a rake even though he has the newest and most efficient one in the area. But his brother-in-law had asked for it a couple days before and he lent it to him without question. With his own haying commencing and his brother-in-law not finished, he needed to borrow an inferior rake from somebody else. A purely economic calculus can't make sense of this, but everybody knows without comment that Tom comes out ahead doing it this way.

It wasn't long before Joe began working on his rack. We cut pipe and experimented with different angles to mold the frame into a cradle using a pipe bender that Craig had put together from old engine parts. But Craig's bender didn't have the power to force the angle we needed so we loaded the pipe back onto the trailer and drove out to Martin's place again. He has a bender powered by his tractor and Joe figured the extra horsepower could do the trick. Martin had gone into town and we missed him, but no sense in letting that stop the work. We opened the shop, powered up the tractor, and bent and crimped the pipe with Martin's tools. When we finished, we made sure to put everything back where it was when we got there.

Just before leaving, Joe walked over to the sliding metal door of the shop said, "Come here, Tom, I want to show you something." There on the support beam was a penciled list of names and figures, some crossed out and some not. "This is Martin's accounting system. He writes the orders on this beam and crossed them out when he gets paid."

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Living in this kind of world allows for general understandings that seldom get put into words. But Renae Bauer, Craig's wife, rang like the abbey bells on the subject when I interviewed her. Renae is a woman constructed of angles and energy. The plane of her high cheekbones leads directly to her green eyes. She's pleasant to look at and even more to talk with. Renae's way of talking lays her thoughts in front of you as though they were physical things. There's not a lot of time for bullshit here. She likes to wake up at 4:30 every morning so she can have the first couple hours of the day to get work done and she wanted me to call her at 6:30 to see if she'd have time to be interviewed.

I got there with Craig in the shop with his seventeen year old daughter Mollie and ten year old son Stuart. You're as likely to find Mollie on a tractor or a combine or greased up inside the guts of an engine as Duane over at Joe and Marie's. "We raised her to do anything," is how Renae puts it, "and that's how my Dad raised me." Renae grew up just east and south of West River on a farm that her Dad, Alfred Dies, turned into a ranch because he liked working cattle best. She still thinks of farming as a lesser kind of calling. There's a picture on the wall of the living room with her in a cowboy hat, a red dress, and a sash proclaiming her as McLaughlin Rodeo Queen. Next to it is a picture of Craig on the back of a bull whipping so high into the air that your sure the picture is staged. It's not. Looking at the two, you figure this must be about as close to being made for each other as it gets.

Renae says, "I knew right away that Craig was the man I was going to marry. He had spirit. I need a man to fight back. He wasn't one of those pretty boys." Pretty boys are the kinds of guys that won't wear a cap because it flattens their hair, guys that step gingerly through a barn. Craig's not a pretty boy. When I caught him by surprise in Joe & Marie's kitchen with my camera one morning, he gave a glance and looked down at his shirt. "Oh good, I gotta a little grease here. Wouldn't want a fella to think I wasn't working." Craig let Renae know on their fourth date that he was going to marry her. She was in high school and planning on college, but ended up quitting in her first quarter to marry him at 19. They've been married 19 years and it's hard to imagine them not staying married for another 19.

There are many ways to get on Renae's bad side. One is to call her Judith Ann, which is what Tom Beyer does to needle her. "I'm not a Judith. I'm a Renae." Tom gets forgiven, but Renae tells me that someday she might reach over and pluck an eyebrow from him when he does it and see if he bursts into flame. Some people think Renae's a witch because she can predict rain, sex cattle before they're born, and find water. She once found all the pipes in the floor of West River high school on a challenge from a person who didn't believe she had the power.

Renae drives the school bus. She raises and sells eggs. She doesn't like to reach the boundary between what she can and can't do.

The first time I met Renae was during the tail end of calving season Joe and I had just sat down to a late dinner after a full day of seeding. Marie made a special dinner of steak because the last four nights before we had worked into the late hours. We'd just said grace and cut into the first bite of that steak when the phone rang. Marie gave a worried glance around the table, picked up the phone, and said we were just sitting to dinner. She was about to say

call back, then stopped and nodded. "Uh huh, oh, uh huh..." and looked to Joe. "It's Renae; she's got trouble with a cow."

"Tell her we'll be right over." We were out that door without a second look at the dinner and over to Renae's in minutes. "This must be serious," Joe said as we drove, "Renae doesn't like to ask for help." Craig was working over at the abbey and Renae couldn't reach him so she called Joe. She met us outside the barn in the cool dark and led us to the cow in the barn.

Renae kept up a patter, apologetic and frustrated for needing to call. "I know this cow is ready but I can't get into her for the calf. I like to do these things myself, but I'm beat by this one."

Joe took a look and put on the rubber gloves that slid right up to his shoulder. He reached inside and felt around for the calf while I pulled the simple job of holding the tail out of the way and pressing the cow up to the wall with the gate. Renae was all motion, getting water, coming back, going for the pulley. Joe reached in and worked at getting hold of the calf that was at a bad angle inside. He was in up to his shoulder and still couldn't get a grip but it felt like the calf was wrong side up. He worked and pushed, at one point pressing his leg against a stud to push in further. I didn't think it was possible to be that far inside an animal. The contractions worked Joe's arm and still he pushed and worked his hand around. He grew exhausted and switched arms, working in until his face was up against the cow. Still no grip. The cow's water broke and waves poured out soaking Joe from waist down. I was selfishly thinking that Joe might realize I had the longest arms in the room when Joe caught hold of the bottom jaw and pulled. He got the calf turned and pulled up to the canal, working the forelegs out of the vulva so we could attach the chains.

It wasn't long after that and the new calf was out. With the work of reaching and pulling finished, Renae was quick to step back in, clearing the placenta from the calf's wet snout and getting it to breathe. The cow was already licking it. It was going to live.

"That's worth a shot." Renae called Joe over to the house for whiskey and the quiet talk that follows hard work. In a few more minutes we were back at the house with our steaks.

In my interview with her, Renae said, "There's a bunch of us, all married around the same time, that couldn't make it without each other. People like Tom and Sue and Joe and Marie. We take care of each other. It's the thing that makes this life work."

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It's knowing that you're not alone that allows you to press back against the anxious times. West river farmers rest in a section lined lattice of kin and neighbors made real in action. There's not a lot of room for theory out here. Better to look toward the heart.

In these weeks of ripening toward harvest, Joe scans his fields. A Saturday morning thunderhead passes to the north. Neil might be getting that one. Joe and Marie drive the fields, testing the wheat for readiness, the health of the canola, peas, and lentils. Along the way, they stop by Craig's crops and walk his fields. There's an understanding here. Craig will be pleased to hear their report.

Dear friends,

Sometimes, without my slightest nudging, things come together to make the world plain to anybody who cares to see. It might be the time of day. Before dusk, when the sun begins to tip behind the high hill west of Frank Bauer's place, is usually best. These days the light is textured by harvest dust and fuzzed by the smoke of western fires stretching their trace as far east as Dakota. The sun sets red as blood. When it's like this, you've been at it since morning, from the opening chores of greasing the combines and tuning the trucks, to the harvest work itself with its steady jig between field and bin. The fine dust sifts into the warp of your clothes, the small crack between window and sill. Chaff, blown airborne in the combine's tailwind, catches the light like feathering snow. Your throat itches. Your mouth tastes of metal and duff. It's at that moment, when you're high in the cab and facing south, taking up the last windrow of canola, your right hand working the speed, your thumb poised to raise and lower the header, that the abbey spires will pierce the far horizon and you'll know how these edgy liturgies of sweat and dust convert fields into altars.

Monday night, under the pan-sized harvest moon over Joe's Doig County wheat fields, two tired men eased their huge red machines into the shadows of an abandoned farmstead marked by a shelterbelt and a single weather-beaten shed. Joe and Marie had hauled their last load of the day after letting Lucas Rolvaag know he could head home to his wife. Duane had just taken his full load of grain back to the yard after working his magic under the old Ford's hood. I'd hung back with the service van and the gas tank trailer to feel the cooling air and watch the play of combine lights against the sharp edge where stubble meets standing grain. Craig and Bill gentled their combines into position, swung their augers out, and pumped the sweet fullness of new wheat into the last truck's groaning box. They'd been out here all day running those three trucks through their paces. Two combines bring surrender to a field more quickly than seems reasonable. Nobody gets much chance to rest.

August fills these west river bins as surely as the days shallow their sunlit hours. There is something beyond coincidence to this. Days shorten as the slanting light of summer pours into grain; they grow full again after the grain is returned in seed. August is another spin of the wheel, a cusp joining the anxious waiting of before to the present jubilant release. Times like this are, for west river farmers, the necessary breath that inspires meaning into the long rhythm of earth's body. Nothing is forever except the promise of the cycle. Tonight's cool bite shares its arc with last week's hot days when the temperature cracked one hundred and no amount of water could temper the thirsts of harvest. Summer and autumn swing hard together like hurled stones from a common sling.

If there is any meaning to this for these farmers, it resides in the unsubtle union of flesh and spirit that they live every day and that one way or another gets proclaimed from their altars every week. Life on this prairie is as intensely and unreflectively Aquinan as any I've seen. Nobody around here is likely to cite the **Summa** as an explanation for their actions, but its spirit pervades their world. I think something like this lived in Joe's comment to me back in April, "I know what we're doing is right. And I know the Lord made me for this. I just want to do it right is all." This idea of the good resides in the body's actions, in habits built up over a lifetime. There is no other way to be good than to do good. There is no other way to be a farmer than to farm. There is no other way to be than to do.

Spoken aloud or not, a core sentiment like that carries its own risks. Times of inactivity settle into the spirit like a damp fog. The anxiety that billowed before the harvest was nurtured as much by the discomfort of inaction as the worries contained in a hailstorm. Joe's tapping fingers on a counter top are the hallmarks of a life lived in motion.

Some of the anxiety gets salved by ritual. Church goer or not, a west river farmer lives a life of sacrament. Sacraments are ways to bring God's grace home to the body. The call and response of chanted prayers, the motion of calloused fingers, the hard wood of the kneeler are all ways to smooth peace into a person's roiled fabric. If you walk into St. Stephen's Church just before mass in the farming country south of West River, you'll hear an old woman leading a rosary. "Hail Mary full of grace..." she'll chant. "Holy Mary, Mother of God..." everybody replies. Bead after hard bead through tired hands. The cadences and the repetition stop time long enough for rest.

Stay longer and you'll hear the Litany of the Saints and the special prayers you won't likely hear in city churches:

Holy Mary, Pray for us  
Holy Mother of God, Pray for us...

St. Isidore, pray for us.  
St. Maria, pray for us.  
All you holy Farmers and Ranchers, pray for us...

From all evil, O Lord, deliver us.  
From all sin, O Lord deliver us.  
From drought....  
From famine....  
From destructive storms...  
From destructive insects and pests...  
From greed,  
From discouragement...  
From false self-sufficiency...  
From everlasting death...

Thus is death personalized and joined in the imagination to worldly caprice and the unanchored heart's casual temptations. Deliver us, they say, not only from this threatening world, but also from the sins of selfishness, hubris, and the throwing up of hands.

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Late Monday afternoon, I met Joe and Marie when they were bearing south on Highway 8. Joe's crew of son, brother, cousin, and friend were moving the combines and trucks north to Doig and Joe was bringing Marie back to the house so she could get a lead on supper during a lull. They saw me coming and pulled to the side of the road. I turned to catch them.

Joe was exhausted. Tired eyes and some of that goofy jerkiness that comes of overwork from nearly three weeks of harvest. The only thing that gets you out of the fields now is rain and the whole harvest season has been uncommonly dry. There have been only two or three early evening or night showers and each of these has allowed the fields to dry by late the next morning. So Joe was running on over 20 straight days of constant motion until late every evening. And yet he was laughing, happy to see me back after a week away, happy for the yields so far, and more generally happy to be alive.

“Why don’t you come with us to the house and I’ll drop Marie off. We can go up to Doig together.”

When we got to the Doig County wheatfields, Bill and Craig were already nearing full hoppers in the two Massey-Ferguson 860s. Each combine holds about 200 bushels of wheat. Some people like to drive their trucks in the field alongside the combines and fill them as they go. Joe thinks this is a messy way of doing it. You lose grain and the heavy machines conspire together to harden the soil. Joe lines his trucks along the side of the field near a spot where the combines are likely to be full. When there’s only one combine running, this gives a nice space for rest to the truck drivers in between loads. Lucas Rolvaag likes to use that space for playing the violin that he made with his own hands. With two combines running, there’s not much lull to call on though. Everything is in motion.

Craig augered his grain into the truck with the neat back and forth maneuvers that come from years of experience. He joined us after Joe climbed up the ladder to the deck and motioned Craig out of his seat to give him a break. Lucas, a Lutheran married to a Catholic, went up to Craig, a Catholic married to a Baptist, and talked. We got onto the subject of the next day, Feast of the Assumption, a holy day of obligation for Catholics, a celebration of Mary’s bodily assumption into heaven declared infallibly by Pope Pius XII as a central dogma.

“You gonna make it to mass tomorrow, Craig?”

Mark looked over, red eyes rimmed with wheat dust, ripped jeans blackened by dirt and grease, face unshaven from too many days of working straight through and getting up early to work again. He set his mouth for determined delivery and said “I’m gonna make it to my combine right here in this field. What a fellah’s gotta do is to get a can of whoop-up on this wheat and get it done.”

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We woke up Tuesday morning to heavy dew, sat around the counter with the first coffee, and munched a coffee cake that my Mom sent out for the Bauers. Craig pulled into the yard at 7:00 wearing his ragged canvas coat against the almost cold morning, went straight to the shop, and began worrying over his truck. Motion animates on its own when you’ve been going this long.

Joe and Duane went out to set up the day with Craig and began working on the blue Ford 900 truck. This one is twenty-six years old. "For a long time, it was the only vehicle on the place that didn't have 100,000 miles on it," says Duane. It's got the miles now and is beginning to complain. The three men huddle under the hood trying to figure out what the most recent problems with it might be. This truck holds about 600 bushels of wheat, the other two trucks about half that. Breakdowns are expected parts of the harvest. Serious ones get repaired as they happen. Less serious ones wait for the rain day or the times of heavy dew to get attention.

The wear of constant work seems to thin those walls that we use to obscure who we are. Subject anybody to three weeks of little sleep and watch their essential character float to the surface. You might expect a blow-up with some, but Joe, Duane, and Craig are giddy. They're moving again, doing what they were meant to do in the easy partnership they share. And the promise is almost realized this year. The wheat flows into the bins until they can't hold any more. Joe talks with Danny Wetsch and rents his bins. But after their filling there's still more wheat in the field. No place for it but the quonset used to store the combines. Wheat pours into a golden pyramid on its concrete floors. Small wonder that these three loosen the cap on their feelings a turn or two.

They scheme about taking Bill down into the dirt later in the day and pounding on him a little. In addition to the Assumption, it's Bill's 41st birthday, a landmark requiring the razz of the physical.

They break into guffaws at small provocation. Craig laughs at the fan about to spin off its pivot and despoil the radiator. "I can't wait til this happens. This'll put the day out of whack!"

Joe and Craig get into a mock debate about whether a plug will spark until Craig finally shouts, "If that goddamn plug sparks, Joe, I will eat it right here."

"Oho, and I'm about to be happy to serve you lunch," says Joe as he hoists himself into the cab to turn the ignition.

Mark winks because he knows the coil isn't attached and nothing's going to happen. Joe figures it out before he cranks the engine.

Working on another truck, Joe yells to Craig, "Does every goddamn thing have to run that way?"

"You're just lucky that it runs at all."

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For whatever reason, the general run of joy at a good harvest or a simple need to increase understanding, Craig finished augering his hopper load of canola into the truck at the gathering Tuesday dusk and called over to me behind the truck. I was busy maneuvering myself away from the blowing dust and chaff.

"Tom, get over here!"

I ran over to the combine and up the steel steps to the cab. Craig was halfway out of his chair and grinning.

"It looks to me like time you learned how to combine, Tom. Hop on into the seat here and let's get going."

Brisk instructions on what to do and I had the thing in a jerky motion, too slow for Craig.

"C'mon, Tom, drive this thing like you own it! Put some speed on!"

Hard to see. Darkness coming on strong and the clouds of dust and chaff, but following the track of the windrows, centering them on the header and letting the turn of the picker lift them like a conveyor wasn't too hard. Memories of the tractor and me seeding in this very field kept me tight.

"Don't over-steer, Tom. Look on ahead like you're driving a car. Drive it like you own it! Drive it like you mean to!"

We rounded that field a lap that night and I became a farmer, or just enough of one to begin to understand the feeling of bringing home the promise of spring seeding. The next day, Craig gave it to me for the morning. And Joe gave me his for the final rounds on the last canola field. Duane had the other one then. We swirled and danced across that field in the setting sun and watched Joe, Marie, and Craig head to the house for the evening.

And the same thing yesterday straight cutting Craig's 85 acres of wheat. This time I had Joe's machine for the whole afternoon in the hilly country just east of West River and in sight of Young Man's Butte. Straight cutting requires a little more attention than picking up a windrow. You need to keep adjusting the header level so that the stubble is about eight or nine inches tall. On hilly ground cut by washouts, you need to be careful to avoid planting the thirty foot header into the ground. You need to watch the edge of the header to make sure you're not missing a line of grain. And you need to adjust the speed to keep from clogging the machine. You've got to know when you've filled your hopper and when to slide the huge combine alongside the waiting truck with a foot to spare so that the auger boom will line the spout up over the truck's center. You've got to have the delicate touch of swiveling the boom back and forth and moving the truck to balance the load.

Joe and Craig do all these things without thinking, but it's gratifying to know that even the most accomplished will occasionally clog a machine or bore into the earth. Craig likes to run along the fast edge and watching him disengage the combine so that he could jump out onto the header and dance a pile of straw into the teeth of the pick-up made me feel better, knowing that I had to do it more than once. The second time I did it, I jumped on that header and let out a yell. When I got back to the truck, Craig was giving me his sideways grin.

“Didn’t that yell feel good, Tom? We heard you all the way over here. You’re a real farmer now, boy. It’s when you yell like that you know you’ve made it!”

In the same way, when I took that machine into the deep washout in the middle of the field, stabbed pure earth from keeping the header too low, picked up a cantaloupe-sized rock, and broke out two steel fingers in the header’s feeder, it was good to hear Craig say he did the same thing just two year’s ago. And that Joe had done it, too.

I got the rock out myself and Craig pulled around to have a look. We didn’t have the tools to fix it right there so I pulled out of the row and back to the van for field repair. Duane and Lucas walked over when I stopped by the van; it’s pretty obvious when something’s broken.

“Picked up a rock and broke a finger,” I said.

“You suck, Tom,” Duane said right back. But he was laughing and I was maybe smiling, too, except my face was red.

I know they didn’t do it quite like me. And I know they wouldn’t have done it where I did it. But it felt good anyway that they do it from time to time. Breaking a machine, doing field repairs, is part of the game. Like Duane said when I broke the seeder, “It’s only iron, Tom. Iron you can fix.” And like Craig said when I broke the finger, “It’s just metal, Tom. No big deal. We can fix this one.”

We finished the field and I had to get to Bismarck. Joe and Marie had used the free time from me taking over the combine to have a look at other crops. They were unexpectedly doing crambe right away that night. But standing around by my car between Craig’s wheat and Joe’s crambe, Joe thought there might be time for a farewell beer. And so we sat a while sipping a beer and enjoying the friendly rebukes sent my way for the mishap. It’s the razzing that let’s you know you’re home.

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In the peculiar and looney world of the Catholic imagination, no feast is more worrisome than the Feast of the Assumption. The idea of this woman, Mary, being lifted body and soul into heaven is about as sore a test of faith as you can have. Bad enough for non-Catholics, even a lot of Catholics will cast a nervous glance over their shoulder to see whose watching when they head for mass that day. There’s not much that can beat it for convincing people that we’re nuts.

You might think that Joe and Craig, all those other farmers and their families who didn’t go to mass that day, were driving a nail into another church dogma. But the real story is that all of them were celebrating the feast. Its looniness is no different than that of the farmer’s. Like the harvest season that the feast arrives with, it proclaims the body’s sacredness, the union of flesh and spirit. It says God is right here and now. Craig didn’t say he was missing mass. He said he was going to be in that field. You can’t get any crazier than that for pure joy.

Cheers!