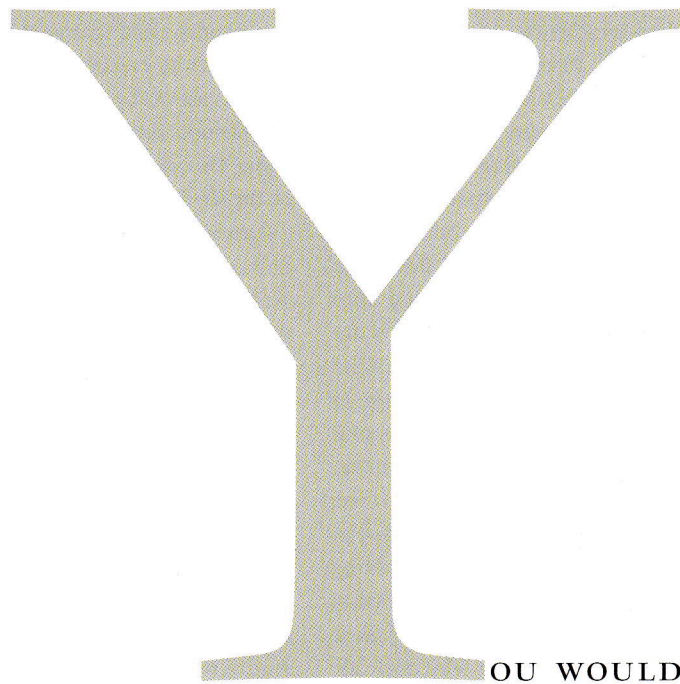




**A region's character emerges in the turn  
of generations on solid ground.**



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YOU WOULDN'T BE ALONE IN noticing it. Traveling west through Dakota along these straight-edged roads past Bismarck and its cut of Missouri River bottomland, riding the back of the earth as it breathes the long rise of the Great Plains, most people sense it. Pierre La Vérendrye felt it in 1738, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in 1804. In the 1830s, Karl Bodmer came as close to painting it as anyone before or since. Call it a quality of air. Or of light. Or the creeping awareness of space in a world where trees no longer hold back the sky. There are other places like it in the world—in Anatolia, Argentina, or Mongolia, wherever the landscape turns to grass and forces a person inward—but few so striking as America's own empty quarter, the grasslands running in a band down the center of the continent.

The Great Plains' difference comes from contrast, something not quite right to a person from further east. You try to contain the country by scaling it against what you already know. All those exits along the interstate with their no services signs. The gaps between towns. The gray boards of abandoned homesteads like so many tattered rags on a barbed-wire fence. At night you can drive for an hour and not see a light. In the morning you can search the whole horizon and not see a shack. The wind whips the grasses. The meadowlarks call. And you'll remember some article you read a long time ago about how the small towns are dying, the farmers moving on, and the prairie returning to its past.

If you're driving I-94 you'll come to Richardton, one of those towns strung along the aging necklace of the old Northern Pacific rail line; but some beads are chipped or missing altogether. You won't find the city of Antelope today. There's not much left of Sims, or Almont, or Judson. Worn smooth by wind and time, Richardton still signifies the more general prospects for those towns that remain. You might find yourself drawn to it because of the twin spires of the Benedictine abbey that hover like guardians at its northern edge. They cause your spirits to rise as you leave the interstate. The grain elevator, the church towers, and the high school all work to assure you that it's a town holding its own against the decline you've read about. But a closer look at the shuttered stores or the car dealership become a thrift store reveal a shallower grip, and you'll wonder again why anybody came to begin with, why anyone at all would stay.

I'm one of those people who left these plains, a last line in a story begun in my great-grandfather's time. Over the years, I had learned that as far as you might go, there's no escaping the gnaw of memory. Teaching at an eastern university, I knew how the country of your raising gets inside you. I had begun to wonder how it left its mark. Sifting for the required answers meant going beyond the boarded windows and the scaffold of numbers that mark the drift of people to bigger towns. It's not enough to say that Richardton holds fewer people today than in 1910. Caught up in the leaving, we lose sight of an earlier coming and the present continuing. I had come back to the west river country across the Missouri with time enough for a closer look.

You don't have to be an outsider to ask these questions, of course, though the reasons for asking might differ for a native. Once I walked a field north of town with a local farmer named Karl Bauer after a random hailstorm had turned his promising wheat crop to near total loss. Kicking through the broken stems and shattered heads, he spoke the slow cadences of resignation. Just a week before I had wondered why he was reluctant to speculate about his harvest, and here was the answer at our feet. It was a cloudless morning with a touch of coming fall weather, almost crisp. The grain would have been ready for harvest in just one more week. "Sometimes I ask myself," he said, when we stopped and looked around at the hills and sky and his broken wheat, "just why they stopped here. Why'd my grandpa think this was the place? Was it a broken axle on the wagon or what?"

WEST RIVER COUNTRY HAS ALWAYS BEEN A WORK OF imagination. From the hunting paradise of Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Indians, to the hoped-for outlet to the western seas, to today's neat grid of barbed fencing and right-angled roads, travelers and settlers spun their own meanings into its broken drainage and scattered buttes. The Mandan Indians told stories about its creation: that it came from a ball of earth dredged from a vast sea by a small black duck. First Creator took that earth and fashioned the rough country west of the Missouri to be rich in game. He called the river that flows east near Richardton "the heart of the world" and said that all good things must come from here.

Lewis and Clark spent the winter with the Mandan. Their journals reveal their wonder at the country. "Beaver is in every bend," wrote Clark of the brown current they worked against. One memorable day he sang of the "handsome high extensive rich Plains" on both sides and his sighting, all at once, of buffalo, elk, beaver, white wolves, swans, geese, ducks, and curlews. He wrote, too, of the hidden dangers of grizzly bear and wolves along the Heart River, and of the mysteries of burning seams of coal that fired the clay-rich earth into a red rock called scoria.

The railroad came in 1880. Its agents platted towns, named streets and neighborhoods, and waited for the tide of people to wash in. They dealt in dreams, planting stories in the press and creating visions of new Chicagos rising on the plains. "That the future seat of empire lies in the great Northwest is an acknowledged fact," an 1883 newspaper account declared, "and it is only a matter of time when the Capital of the United States, yea, the source and residence of the world's power and wisdom, will sit on top of Young Man's Butte, or some other elevated pinnacle on the landscape of North Dakota."

Richardton's first settlers, Yankees from the forested east heeding these booster visions, came to strike it rich in the shadow of that butte. They stayed long enough to scrape their dreams against harder truths: a depression in the 1890s; a land where rainfall pivoted wildly around an average that just supported farming; snowfalls that might arrive in September and keep their hold until the end of May. These earliest comers moved on. The countryside could afford to wait. It needed a temperament suited to the long haul.

Today's west river farmers count their connection to this place in generations. The largest part of the names in Richardton's phone book today belong to the German Catholics who skipped like stones from the Alsace to Russia in the early 1800s, and then onto the Great Plains in the 1890s. Their coming was slow at first. In 1891 the Catholic priest recorded one baptism in the parish records. The next year there were two. In 1896, just four. The gate swung wide in 1897 with seventy new names in the birth register. By 1899, enough Catholics had come that Abbot Vincent Wehrle bought land for his monastery at the edge of town. The Richardton Germans required a paper in their own language, and *Der Volksfreund* moved to town in 1903.

Word of mouth brought more. The neighbors from Landau

and Speier who had emigrated to Russia became neighbors again in the northern plains. Newspapers from 1905 were filled with notices of the five-year occupancy that would prove their homestead claims. A 1908 pamphlet with the breathless title *Beautiful Stark County: The Farmer's Paradise and the Businessman's Eldorado*, crowed about Richardton's stores, schools, three grain elevators, three lumberyards, and two banks. Christmas Eve mass that year was held for the first time in the new abbey church fashioned by the hands of monks and parishioners. That same church has seen more than four thousand baptisms in its time, and today's farmers claim ownership by right of that inheritance.

If you stand at the back of the church and look north, you take in what the 1908 pamphlet called "one of the finest views of farm country seen anywhere." On a cold day, when the dry air brings the world into focus, the Killdeer Mountains nick the northwest horizon. Shift to the right and look out another fifty miles to see giant industrial plants plume the sky with steam and burnt coal as they power electricity for the east. Down in the hollow, scattered lines of thin trees radiate from your feet along the seasonal trickles and creeks that gave Richardton its earlier name of Spring Valley. Natural contours get cut by the spare geometries of cedar post and strung wire that convert land into property. Not long ago, a four-wire fence meant the line between neighbors; a three-wire fence kept your own cattle from the crops. In the distance beyond the abbey barn are the nearest farmsteads; the first is two miles out, and another, two miles further. You're looking into Bauer country from here.

Karl lives with his wife, Marie, and their son, Will, at that further farmstead, in the house Karl's known since birth. Their daughter, Crista, has gone east to Minneapolis for school and work. At an easy right angle from the older house, out of view behind the shelterbelt running along the red gravel drive, you'll find Karl's parents, Gene and Rose. They built their new house close enough for a coffee break and far enough to give the two families room to breathe.

The neat angles of the Bauer farmstead, with its house and outbuildings arranged around a square, make it easy to believe the family has been here from the start, and Karl's line runs from the last of three brothers to settle the northern plains. Lee Bauer, Karl's great-great uncle, homesteaded a piece of the hollow at the century's turn. Lee's father and two older brothers, John and Frank, had gone down to Henrietta, Texas, in 1892 to follow the promise of land. But land alone was never enough to hold a person wanting the comfort of friends. As Richardton became more German, it drew Frank north by 1914 and made John a frequent visitor. Their father's death, when John was fifty-six years old, loosened all ties to Texas, and his twenty-one-year-old son, Karl's grandfather, pushed for the move back north. In October 1918, the newspaper marked the sale by Lee's neighbor Peter Gauss of 1,038 acres to John Bauer as "one of the largest deals witnessed in this town." Those purchased acres form the core of the land that Karl still works four generations down the line.

**K**ARL SWAPS CHORES THESE DAYS WITH HIS NEIGHBOR to the south, Mike Bauer, a distant cousin also four generations from Frank. A mug of coffee in the early morning is likely to be met by the snap of gravel against Mike's truck when he pulls into the yard. Tough and wiry, Mike will come out of that truck like he's spring-loaded. His wife, Renae, told me in their twentieth year of being together, "I knew right away that Mike was the man I was going to marry. He had spirit. 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. Mike's not a pretty boy. When I caught him by surprise in Karl and Marie's kitchen with my camera one morning, he gave a glance at his shirt. "Oh good, I got a little grease here. Wouldn't want a fellah to think I wasn't working." Work is what you do if you want to make it farming. "When it's time to work, you work; and when it's time to play, you play," Mike told me. "Dinking around—I can't handle that."

You can't ignore the sense of something not getting done when you see a bunch of farmers asked to sit for a while. Put Richardton farmers into the abbey church for an hour and they're politely quiet, their eyes on the mass. But you'll notice, too, the way 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. Where the spin of a pneumatic drill turns the hours, sitting in place freezes time. You sense that the Catholic practice of standing, sitting, and kneeling at intervals must be a relief. Problems are solved by the body, by movement.

Karl, too, is in his element when he can influence an outcome by tooling a part or figuring a seed-to-acre ratio for planting crops. There's precision and smoothness to his action then, a focus and drive that tethers him.

It all comes clear in the morning when he lays out the day's work over coffee at the kitchen counter. He'll be in the corner by the window, leaning his chair back 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 as the pieces of the day lock together, ready to play out. He'll 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: "Will, 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 . . . Mike, you head over to . . . And Tom, you go with Mike to . . ."

Sometimes, he lays it out too fast for me to get it all. Everybody else will be moving, putting on boots and hats, and I'll lamely follow, swept up in their wake. If I'm lucky I'll know who I'm supposed to go with, and they'll fill me in on what I'm doing. Mostly I try to stay out of the way and lend a novice hand where I see an opening.

**W**ELL OBSERVED, ALL THIS MOTION FLOWS INTO PATTERN. Some things are basic and year round, like the insistent call of cattle, though even here there's a season. Rising on a March morning 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 to eat. Karl or Will make clucking noises as they fill the trough. Then you move to the next pen where the twenty-four new yearling heifers clot near the water tank—three buckets here. These heifers 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 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 line up like pets at the sound or sight of any one of them.

Hungry cattle begin their day with oats, which go quickly. Then you hop into the tractor with its bucket and lift. About eighty cattle and their calves in the south pasture need their feeding and rush the fence at the sound of machinery. You push into and past the herd 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 already have your bales before coming through the first gate.

Karl and Will have different tractor styles. Years of lifting these huge one-ton rounds of hay have given Karl a delicate touch with the machinery; for him, the bucket and pinchers move like hands. Will is younger, his motions more forceful. But the cattle get fed all the same. Whoever does the feeding that day 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 rounds 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 Karl 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 Karl was and, when he let it down, began its new habit of keeping a fair distance from the tractor.

**B**EYOND THESE DAILY PATTERNS, THERE ARE LONGER ones that play out in family time. I once sat over coffee, talking in the kitchen with Marie, listening to her put into words some of what I was just beginning to understand. Daughter of

Ray and Katherine Reiter and from one of the original German-Russian families, she had mostly grown up in town and wondered at the beginning if she'd be able to handle life on the farm. "But once you're here," she said, "there's just something about it. From the start to the finish, from when we plan our cropping to when we take it off together and then make our bread, we share it as a family. When you're living this life, it's a family thing."

Watching the work, I began to realize that Karl and Marie occupy that wide space in a stream that joins three living generations. A generation's life contributes to the larger flow, no different than the run of water on rainy days, each swale passing the current to a further channel. The currents run strongest for those in their middle years, as you see in the deft way Karl 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 Karl's grandmother when Rose and Gene were away for a month. It's Marie, too, who knew at any moment what needed doing when their daughter got married. 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. Their daughter's wedding was one of these, when Marie worked with Rose on matters of whom to invite and whom 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 Karl through years of playing them out. He goes to Gene less frequently since coming into his own, and the questions he now asks are on the order of thinking out loud.

Karl took over the farming in 1990, but such a statement stirs a misleading abruptness into things. One night, with the family sitting around the table, Marie working on a five-year report of family accounts and Karl filling out the seeding maps that he would take over to the USDA office the next day, Karl suddenly went to another room and brought back a scroll of window shade. He unrolled the light-brown fabric from the dowels, revealing hand drawn maps of several fields. Gene 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.

Karl pointed out how the lines of text in each field in Gene's small, neat handwriting gave the year and crop planted in each field over a twenty-year period. Another scroll ran the record back further. Karl 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 German pattern of rotation and fallow for a run of years. Looking at the pattern, it could almost be Gene making the decisions even after 1992. Karl's confidence needed some steadying before he began to stretch out for the real changes to come. Gene 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. Karl 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. Karl was ready to jump all channels by then. This was the year when Karl began his no-till, a style of farming that leaves the stubble in the fields, and threw all those earlier years into memory. Some seasons are like a big rain that cuts a new stream. Gene calls 1997 the year Karl decided to bet the farm. Nobody in the area was doing it, and the change required big outlays for new equipment for an uncertain gamble that the soil would slowly acquire a healthy root structure and better hold its moisture down the line. 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: this was his farm now.

Karl continued the process of coming into his own. The farm is a living record of that becoming. The fall before he had seeded the winter wheat that lodged in the fields west of the house, thick and green in the wind. Moving into winter wheat was another play into the current that Karl couldn't pass up. Winter wheat doesn't do well in this country, or hadn't with the old black dirt farming that turned the soil and dried it out before fragile roots took hold. Karl 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, Karl would be able to spread his seeding work across more months and dampen some of the hurly-burly, two-handed rush of regular planting season. He risked two hundred acres on the bet and the product was a deep green field dancing with wheat thick as winter fur. Karl's intuitions get written into the land. In time, the record will find its way onto the parchment map begun by his father.

**W**ILL WAITS IN THE WINGS FOR HIS TURN. HIS OWN sturdy economies of motion get enacted under the hood of a jeep or pickup. He's as at home behind the flanges of a baler as he is forking round bales with the tractor. When asked, Will 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. It's the same with farming. I asked him once when he first thought he might want to farm, to stay here in Richardton and do this work for his whole life. By the way he looked at me, I may as well have asked him when he decided to breathe. This is what he is meant to do. I liked the way his look echoed his father's words: "I know the Lord made me for this. I just want to do it right is all."

That God makes you for something confers confidence and grace on your approach to things, something I saw in the way Will worked with one of his calves. Born healthy, its rear legs refused to work right after being stepped on by another cow. That long cable of spinal nerve got pinched and made the calf rise painfully, walk with a wobble, and try to drop its hind parts to the straw after just a few steps. Its legs worked independently and out of control as though powered by a warped driveshaft.

From the first day, Will worked to save his calf. The daily checking to see if it could feed. The coaxing onto its legs and close observation of the wobbly walk. Will took it to the vet early on and found there wasn't much to be done except to hope it mended itself. He helped it along as much as possible with a daily injection that after a while required two people to accomplish. I'd get called to help at those times when he found me standing around the shop empty-handed while his uncle helped Karl assemble a double twiner for the baler. "Come with me," he'd say, using that same economy of language that outsiders find so abrupt but that harbors nothing rude at its source. Language is meant to be used out here, no prettier than another tool or the spare parts that find new uses on another machine. Will would direct me to put my foot onto the calf's head, helping to still it while he put the syringe to its neck.

Three or four weeks after the accident, the process had become routine. But hard not to notice the soothing gentleness of Will's voice when he came to the calf, or the careful way he pushed the hind quarters to get it to rise. "Hey, buddy, hey. How's it going today, buddy?" The calf would work its body away from us after the injection. We'd watch it go with that weird canted walk in its hind legs, knowing that it'd take a while for the animal to mend, if at all.

**T**HE SECTION-LINE ROAD WHERE I DID MY MORNING thinking runs north into a low slough, slow to dry when it rains. To the south, it fades into high grass and rut, never quite disappearing as it skips over the heave of prairie. Homestead law required every settler to give up thirty-three feet of right-of-way along these lines so that every township would hang from a grid of roads.

In most places now you'll find every mile marked by sixty-six 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 geogra-

phy 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. Before he died, James Forster lived maybe three miles to the east of Karl, but the best way to his place swept north along a ten-mile arc of gravel and dust. Getting there took me another remove from town just when I began to think I wasn't all that close to the earth's far edge. You couldn't see the town from out there and the farmsteads were a light sprinkle on the countryside. Karl and Mike made a point of dropping over to see James from time to time, a way to break up a friend's loneliness.

James was somewhere in his seventies and had never married. You'd hear occasional stories of him being serious about a woman who died before she and James could fan their spark into a new family. That was long ago and James had been a bachelor for so long that he carried it like a skin. It went well with his whipcord build and the ready smile made no less frequent by a stunning lack of teeth. He lived with his fat old dog in the same house he'd called home his whole life. From the look of it, this was the house his father must have built when he settled this place. Ramshackle additions couldn't obscure the rammed-earth walls, three feet thick and supplying their own insulation, whatever the season.

Karl and I drove there just before the baling to get some pipe for welding the new haywagon Karl needed to haul his bales. We pulled our train of dust along the long road until we got to James's place and found him in the shop. He had quit his farming a while back and made a living of connected odds and ends by working metal into feeders and racks for the area farmers. A person could nearly always find James in his shop except for his ritual trip to town for breakfast and dinner every day. James 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 Mike's got just what you want over there. Maybe you ought to take some of that."

Karl's first question was whether Mike was working on any project requiring the pipe. "Don't think so," said James. "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 James loaded it on the trailer with Karl, laughing.

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 Karl's kitchen looking out toward the yard. Mike pulled in and went directly into the shop across the scoria drive. We just continued with our coffee.

Most people have a good idea of the equipment people have, and nearly anything might be called on by a neighbor. Property slides from thing to relationship in that act of calling; it doesn't take long to know who you can rely on. Karl told the story about Duane Schmidt, who farms just to the west. He recently had to borrow a rake, even though his own—lent without hesitation to his brother-in-law—was the newest and most efficient in the area. So with his own haying commencing, Duane 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 Duane comes out ahead doing it this way.

It wasn't long before Karl 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 Mike had put together from old engine parts. But Mike'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 James's place again. He had a bender powered by his tractor, and Karl figured the extra horsepower could do the trick. James 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 James's tools. When we finished, we put everything back where it had been.

Just before leaving, Karl walked over to the sliding metal door of the shop and 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 James's accounting system. He writes the orders on this beam and crosses them out when he gets paid."

**L**IVING IN THIS KIND OF WORLD ALLOWS FOR GENERAL understandings that seldom get put into words. But Renae Bauer rang like the abbey bells on the subject when I talked with her. "There's a bunch of us, all married around the same time, that couldn't make it without each other. People like Duane and Kathy and Karl and Marie. We take care of each other. It's the thing that makes this life work."

Renae is a woman constructed of angles and energy. The plane of her high cheekbones leads directly to her green eyes. Renae's way of talking lays her thoughts in front of you as though they were physical things. She 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. She likes to wake up at four-thirty 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 six-thirty to see if she'd have time for talk.

I got there when Mike was in the shop with his seventeen-year-old daughter, Mary, and ten-year-old son, Steve. You're as likely to find Mary on a tractor or a combine or greased up inside the guts of an engine as Will usually is over at Karl 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 Richardton, on a farm that her dad, Alfred Dienst, turned into a ranch because he liked working cattle. There's a picture on the wall of the living room of her in a cowboy hat, a red dress, and a sash proclaiming her Dickinson Rodeo Queen. Next to it is one of Mike on the back of a bull whipping so high into the air that you're 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.

**O**UT HERE EACH DAY'S MOOD 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 strain nerves and put a tight kink into the corner of the eye. By July, west river days shift toward the impromptu and unexpected. For farmers, the waiting game until harvest continues with the shallow breathing of an upped ante. 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 long before. There's no turning back. In July, fields of canola begin to lose their carnival yellow and take 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.

In a dry country so much depends on rain. It's all the difference in the world for a farmer. He rises or 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. 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 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 sixteen inches is a minimum for safe dry farming. Averages out here tend closer to fourteen, 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.

In Richardton, long, slow rains bring a welcome pause to the casual rhythms of the farm. Grey skies and cool weather allow an in-gathering of thought. A chance to pause and breathe and enjoy muddy creation. Karl's rain gauge rightfully occupies its own post next to the one bearing a cross and a prayer for favorable harvest. For a week that summer, 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.

But the light amount of snow that 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 to worry. 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.

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 a steady downpour.

**A**UGUST IS A TIME OF ANSWERS, A TIME THAT WITHOUT nudging turns the world plain and clear. Before dusk, when the sun begins to tip behind the high hill west of Gene Bauer's place, is usually best. These are days when 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, through the small crack between window and sill back at the house. Chaff, 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.

One Monday night, under the pan-sized harvest moon over Karl's Dunn 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. Karl



and Marie had hauled their last load of the day after letting Gordon Hofstad know he could head home to his wife. Will 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. Mike and Karl's brother, Neil, 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. For west river farmers, times like this are 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 an earlier week's hot days when the temperature cracked one hundred degrees and no amount of water could temper the thirsts of harvest. Summer and autumn swing hard together like hurled stones from a common sling.

This is the time for payoff. All the waiting and worrying, the searching the sky for hail, and the annual roll of the dice for just enough rain are in the past now. For all the work and motion, you feel the general loosening of muscles kept taut by hope. Farming is an act of faith, no less resistant to reason than the regular liturgies at the abbey high on the ridge to the south of Karl Bauer's fields. In the semiarid country of western North Dakota, well past the one hundredth meridian where John Wesley Powell drew his line of warning, a good harvest means you're in it for another year.

THE VIEW FROM ONE OF THESE TRACTOR CABS WHILE seeding is a yearning look into the limits of possibility and hope. Farmers 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, Karl 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. Karl figures that there are less than half as many farms in the area as there were when he was a kid.

When Karl 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. 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, Ray Reiter, 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."

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.

Karl and Mike once repaired a broken sprayer boom, its eighty feet so mangled that it twisted impossibly in and out of itself, 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 bury 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 Karl continued in the fields. Karl's instructions to Marie on how to turn on the auger were as spare and quickly delivered as those he gave me over morning coffee, and we found ourselves in the yard in a forty-mile-per-hour wind trying to figure it 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 beyond control. The sociability remains, too. Another night of seeding we could see the lights of another tractor a mile away. Jim Elkin was out late, too. I asked Karl if seeing those lights made him stay out later and he laughed and said, "Just 'til right after he shuts his off!"

Later, toward nine-thirty and in the dark, the cell phone rang in Karl's cab and he hit the button to the speaker. "Yeah, Karl 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!"

Jim and Karl laughed and talked in easy banter about the qualities of that particular earth with its strange blend of sand and clay, about getting the seeding done and working late, about 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 a piece of the talking you might have heard just four generations before. ■