

LANDSCAPE  
and  
LONGING

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*for*  
PATRICIA EGAN  
*and in memory of*  
SUE AND JOHN HEGEMAN

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AND  
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photos and text  
by  
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# TOPOPHILIA

Dad always had a lot of books. These ranged from 95¢ paperbacks to mysterious old editions that had somehow come from a place his family had once owned on Lake Chautauqua. He would build new bookshelves as he acquired more books, so you could follow the shelves from room to room and get an idea of where his mind had roamed over the years.

I'd been drawn to these shelves since I was a child. Even before I could read, I'd stare at his rows and piles of books. There was always something new or something in plain sight that I hadn't noticed before.

Now I was scanning Dad's bookshelves for the last time, as I cleaned out the old house for the new owner. This was after my parents had both died. I'd worked my way through three other rooms and had gotten to the shelves he'd built out

of what had been the farm's previous owner's gun rack. *Mark's Manual of Mechanical Engineering*, 1941, well worn; *Grass*, the Department of Agriculture's 1948 yearbook, with penciled annotations; a couple James Bond novels; Camus' *The Rebel* and *The Plague* and *Myth of Sisyphus*; and for a man who only occasionally darkened a church door, and then only to please my mother, a surprising number of books about religion. Titles like *The Way of Zen* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, mixed in with books on quantum mechanics.

What I noticed now for the first time was Alan Watts' *In My Own Way*, which declared on the first page that "Topophilia is a word invented by the British poet John Betjeman for a special love for peculiar places." And I suddenly had the word for something I'd had once and now lost.



## *LANDSCAPE AND LOVE*

**W**e moved there in 1968, into a sprawling stone farmhouse that had two big porches and a slate roof and solid stone walls that had been smoothed over with a white oyster shell stucco. I was eleven years old. In the front lawn on the west side of the house was an enormous sugar maple with branches bigger than most regular trees and a crown that extended out a good forty feet. To the south was a huge Norway spruce that Dad would always talk about how we should put a big illuminated star on it for Christmas someday. Next to the front porch was a glorious star magnolia with branches that bent and forked with such fractal beauty that no matter how many times you saw them it was hard to suppress a gasp.

Further to the west, the big barn towered over the rest of the farm buildings. It was built almost entirely of American Chestnut, with weathered board and batten siding that had last seen a coat of paint many years before and a huge roof covered in thousands of slates each one not much bigger than a paperback book. Inside it was all post and beam, more than thirty feet up to the roof ridge, space like a cathedral.

There were ten more buildings clustered around a small barnyard maybe twenty-five yards to the northwest of the

house. Most of them had been built within the past few decades, but the big barn and the corn crib were as old as buildings got around here.

The house itself had been standing in some form or another since the Revolutionary War and had an appealing history to it involving a couple young officers in Lafayette's army and their tale of friendship and doom and of an ocean-spanning love of place.

About half the farm was in pasture. The rest was cropland, in contour strips of alternating ribbons of hay fields and row crops or small grains. Generations of moldboard plowing had created distinct hummocks along the downhill side of some of these contour strips. Over time, some of the hummocks had grown too big to farm over. Small bushes, then larger ashes and cherries had grown on them for generations, unplanned, the happenstance of a bird's perch. The plow lines were small margins along the edges of things, a refuge for the non-human world. They were the tithes that the tilled parts of the farm paid to its origins as precolonial forest, they were grace notes on the groomed landscape, they were heart-stoppingly gorgeous.

I loved the farm from the start, though even now I can't really say why. Most people who have an attachment to a place also seem to have a wide social connection to other people who are rooted to the same place. Not me, at least not so much. On the one hand there were the kids of what Dad would later call the real white-forehead farmers who quickly clocked us as interlopers and impostors or worse, and on the other hand the kids who went to private schools and who had already formed a clique that was polite but impenetrable to an awkward, dreamy outsider.

And yet the love I felt for the place was almost carnal in its intensity, a love of something outside yourself so vivid you could taste it. It was also a love that could seem inseparable from other loves, or somehow fused with them, and I remember lying in a hayfield with a new girlfriend, at one with this new love in her loose skirt and tousled blouse, and with the clover we lay on, with the bees and butterflies gathering nectar from the blossoms over our heads, the smell of her hair in my face, the smell of the damp ground beneath us.

I remember, too, the last summer before Dad got so sick. It was some time in August, and we'd sit in the shade hard by the pasture where Dad's cows placidly grazed, always Dad and Pat and I, very often Mom, often too a sibling or some friend who'd driven out from Baltimore. Three or four or half dozen of us would sit in the shade and sip our drinks and look out to the north where the light had already changed to something that hinted the long summer was over, fall was at hand. A breeze would stir, a funky animal smell would drift over from the cows, you could hear the sound of their pinkish blue tongues grasping mouthfuls of grass, and dozens of barn swallows would swoop and wheel overhead and feast on the cloud of insects the cattle stirred up. It was all mixed together: the funky smell of the cows, the hot summer smell of leaves and grass just before the season turned to fall, the banking dancing flash of the swallows, the murmur of friends and family, all one inarticulate love sprung somehow from this one small place.



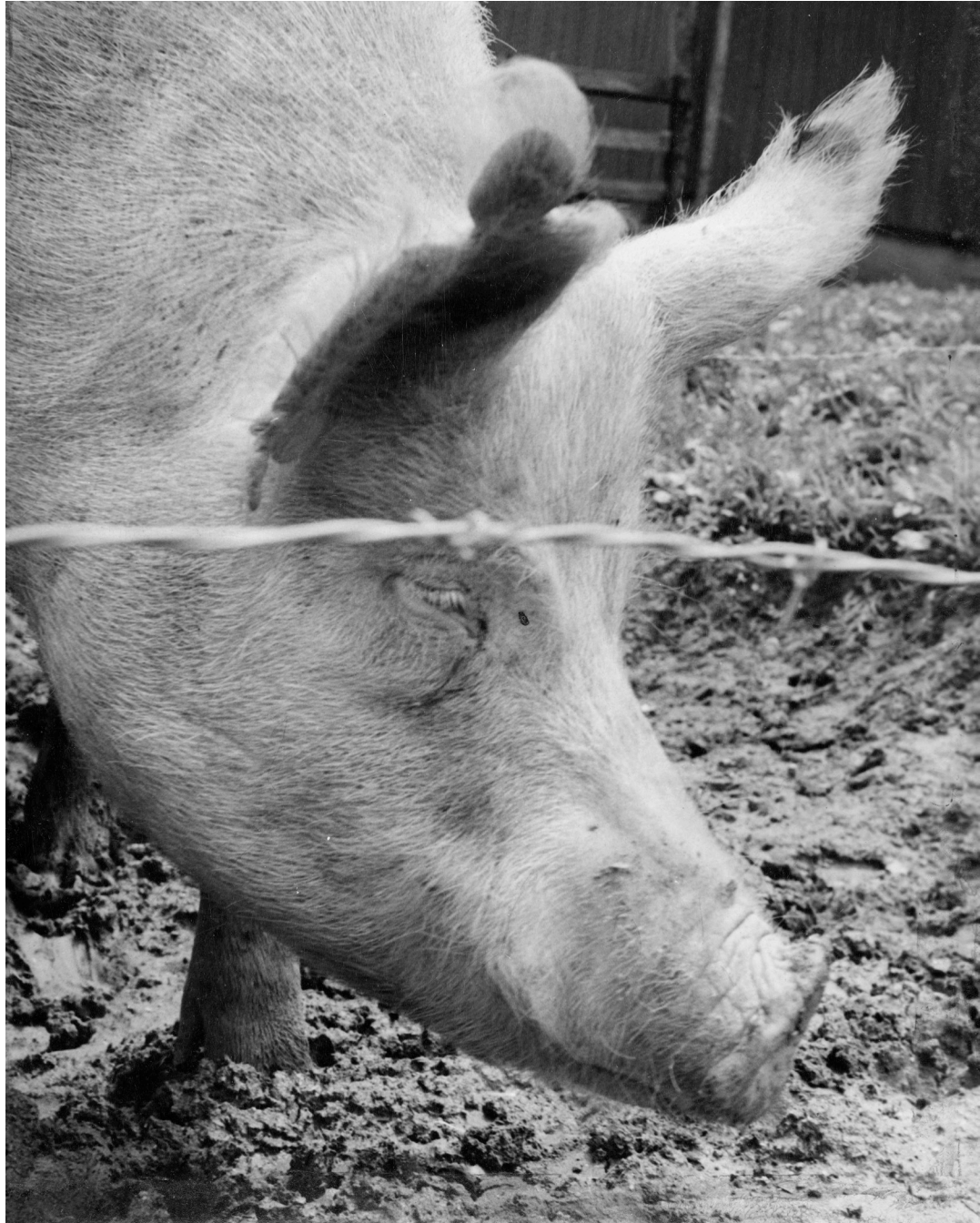








[Click here for panorama view of farm buildings](#)



## APPRENTICE

Dad's farming practices evolved over the years, but the place was always to be a working farm, not some gentleman's hobby or a back-to-the-earth fantasy. We would participate in the economic world we lived in. And so in the language modern farmers use to describe what they do, you might say that at various times we had a cow and calf operation, a dairy beef operation, a hog operation. We planted soybeans and corn as well, for a time using plow and disk and cultivator and watching the coffee-colored soil run off the fields, then as no-till, using some very nasty herbicides.

The pig operation lasted the longest. The cow and calf operation had not been going well, and Dad was looking for something else. We bought a few feeder pigs, sold them for a profit, bought a few more, then bought a few sows and a boar. The still nascent pig operation might lack the cachet of the cows, but it was a bit more realistic, and Dad would say how the old timers called their pigs mortgage lifters. It wouldn't be easy, we'd have to get better at it, and raise many more animals. But someday, maybe someday.... Meantime, the mortgage lifters were kind of fun, with their bright little pig eyes and their curious flat snouts.

The farm's previous owner had built and then given up on a milking parlor and the other facilities you needed for a modern dairy operation. Now we adapted the buildings for the new pig operation. The music had started.

We—and do I mean *we*, Dad and two of his teenage sons, not some contractor—*we* built it all with our own hands and labor. *We* took a jackhammer to the existing dairy stanchions, the abandoned pieces of milking infrastructure, *we* poured the new concrete floors. Out of the old dairy structures *we* built a sow house for the pregnant sows and next to it a farrowing house where per modern agricultural practice the birthing and then nursing sows were confined to narrow cages so they couldn't flop over and crush their tiny piglets. *We* dug ditches and installed concrete pipes for drainage and manure handling, *we* erected a grain bin for the corn and another smaller bin for the soybean supplement we mixed in for their feed, *we* installed augurs to move the corn from the grain bins to the hammer mill and more augurs to move the ground corn to the feeders on the concrete feeding floors.

And though it was never a conscious decision, never something we understood at the time or knowingly decided upon,

*we* who loved animals and we who thought of ourselves as humane people, *we* hardened our hearts to any sentimental thoughts about the poor sows in their torturous cages, the pigs crowded together on the concrete feeding floors some of them limping with sore feet, with the listless eyes of the living dead, the dominant pigs turning on the weaker ones with a fury that seemed almost human in its relentlessness. The mortgage lifters weren't so fun any more, but it's harder to end a spell than to invoke it.

Frank Purdue would come on TV and say that it takes a tough man to make a tender chicken. We were learning that it took a cruel one to raise a pig.

Dad's mood—always bright while he was dreaming and building and wrenching order out of neglected possibility—grew stone-faced and withdrawn, though still we struggled on. The price of pork rose and fell, but mostly fell. Despite all of the hard work, the hardened hearts, we were a small fraction of the size you'd need to succeed. Yet in pursuing this unreachable goal we found ourselves dancing to an ever crueler tune, mired in a daily grind of cruelty that would have been unthinkable if we'd seen it clearly, seen it all at once.















## *LANDSCAPE AND LOSS*

Dad's farming operations never really made enough money to justify the investment, let alone the effort. Still less those other, intangible costs we understood only very slowly and even then had no language to articulate.

Looking back I see how there was a pattern to these several endeavors, a rhythm of initial high hopes and enthusiasm that would inevitably turn to dust. Dad did not give up easily—he would soldier on for years despite the depressing results—but there would come a point when you could tell that the joy was long gone. You couldn't not see this change in his mood, but as a kid I never much questioned it beyond wondering at times how he kept at it. It was only years after he died that I realized that this rhythm of hope and despair was more than a stubborn attempt to find a viable business model, that all this hard work for little reward was really a quest. And that it is in the nature of a quest that even in the middle of it you may not even have a name for what it is you are looking for, may feel lost and confused and not at all sure that what you're looking for even exists, at least in the world that you have been born in.

Until one blistering hot afternoon. Dad was on the old John Deere 4020, cultivating a field of soybeans. He was

wearing his usual worn khaki Dickey's trousers, tattered white undershirt, greasy baseball cap. Clean-shaven face as grim as stone. Half way through the job he got off the tractor, bent over and picked up a handful of dirt. He rubbed the dirt with his fingers, crumbled it, let it fall to the ground. And suddenly realized that all his hard work, all that he'd spent and invested and struggled with in the twenty-odd years since he and Mom bought the place, all that he'd accomplished had been to poison the soil, to rid it of life.

That evening he started searching for another way to farm.

In the last of Dad's farming practices, this last journey of his quest, he planted the fields entirely in grass, planted trees to shade the section of a small creek that ran through the farm. He made hay and raised grass-fed beef and slowly brought the soil back to life with a form of husbandry that was the polar opposite of the extractive industry that modern farming had become. In the season before he became so ill, he'd happily note how worms and other creeping things were coming back into the soil, how after a heavy rain the water that came off of his fields ran clear, that the hedgerows and plow lines provided shelter for so many small creatures. In this

last incarnation of his farming practices he'd found what he was searching for.

All this sounds easy now, thirty years later. Nowadays there's even a name for what my father was looking for: a Google search on "restorative agriculture" gets you some 52 million hits. In the early nineties, people doing this sort of thing were isolated hermits in a vast and inhospitable desert. There was no user friendly web, no Google, no broadband. You had a 1200-baud modem and a CompuServe account, listserv and usenet and a handful of unix commands. Finding what you were looking for took persistence and luck and in no small measure, faith.

**T**hat last incarnation of Dad's farming was gone before I took any of these pictures. It began to fade with his death, then disappeared a few years later when we leased the fields to a local farmer who had his own place and who also leased out many thousand more acres from people like us, we who owned land that we could not or at least did not till ourselves. He was a good guy, but there was no mistaking that his was an agriculture of chemicals and capital and ever-expanding industrial scale unlike anything I had ever known, a regime built of glyphosate and GMO crops.

I felt as if I had not only lost a loved one, but betrayed her as well.

I could justify the decision easily enough: the money that came helped slow down the decay of all those old buildings.

And perhaps I hadn't quite understood what I was getting into when I agreed to the deal. Even so, all love, love of place very much included, carries with it some obligation. I couldn't escape a sense of reproach as I looked out over fields surrendered to enormous machines and terrifying poisons.

I'd thought that having grown up on a farm I understood farming, which I took to be some fundamental and noble undertaking. As I looked out at the acres of roundup-ready soybeans or corn I began to wonder if I'd understood anything at all.

Only now that what Dad had achieved with his farm was gone with, well, one good spraying of glyphosate, only now did I realize that his search had been less about farming as a strictly economic endeavor than farming as an ongoing negotiation with the rest of the living world. And that as in many a quest, he had had to slog his way through hell before he could even hope to catch a glimpse of what it was he was looking for.

It was that glimpse of an idea where the fields were safe meeting grounds where you might negotiate a give and take between people and the rest of creation, which first Dad's death and then my handshake and nod had foreclosed and erased. Now the farm was again a conquered land, where like any good colonist, the farmer strove to exterminate whatever it was he couldn't own. Dominion over the Earth.







## *THROUGH A GLASS*

When they first arrived we called them the Empire Walkers, though unlike the machines in the Star Wars film they moved on tall skinny wheels, and really they looked more like huge weaponized insects with a big abdomen full of Roundup and a closed-in cab that looked like a couple big compound eyes jammed up next to each other and a big long spraying boom that unfolded in several sections out the back

as if they had just come out of a chrysalis still fragile and wet. We'd watch them from a distance or from inside the house.

Once the booms were deployed the machine ranged across the field and lay down a curtain of poison mist. Then for a while after they sprayed you'd get a chemical scent everywhere you went, not overpowering, but distinct, unmistakable. Even after the Empire Walkers were gone, the apocalyptic smell of glyphosate still hung on the morning air.



## WINTER

For a long time that winter, Hector would wander down to the now empty house and lie on the stone threshold to the front door in a sort of watchful repose, age-clouded eyes focused who could tell where, nostrils constantly twitching as he processed who knows how many thousands of scents. He had seen my mother grow suddenly weak, had seen her doubled over in pain. Had seen the paramedics take her out strapped to a gurney and had tried to force his head through the door to follow her as they wheeled her to the ambulance.

I'd walk down there, too, late in the afternoon. I told myself that I was just checking things out—people always said how empty houses quickly deteriorated. I'd let myself in the back door and walk through the kitchen, then peer into the living room with its lovely but generally uncomfortable furniture, it's now silent grandfather clock that had come from Mom's parents' house when they'd died. I'd open the front door for Hector, who would pad in and plop down next to the reclining chair where Mom used to sit reading or watching TV. I'd plop down on a chair next to him and remember how I'd

so often stop by about this same time while Mom was alive. We'd have a glass of red wine. Sometimes we'd talk about the farm. Sometimes we'd rail about Bush and the war. I would ask her about her early life with Dad or as a young girl, and maybe she would come up with a story or two, but mostly she'd tell me to stop asking so many questions.

Now as I sat there with Hector and his twitching nose, I would feel as if there was some sort of knowledge there in the old house, something that might come to me if I sat still and listened hard enough. Sometimes I would sit for only a moment, sometimes until well after dark. No matter. All I ever heard was the occasional creak of the old house, the slight ringing in my own ears.

Eventually I'd roust Hector, and we'd go back out into the cold. Hector would move stiffly, his hind quarters a little wobbly. Together we'd walk up the lane to our tiny tenant house, where a wisp of gray wood smoke rose from the chimney, barely visible against the darkening sky.



[Click here for a panorama view of the farm in winter.](#)





## MODEL FARM

Right after the final settlement on the farm, the new owner hired a big, tracked excavator to knock down a couple of the old buildings and then to uproot trees that had grown along the fence rows and along the old plow lines. Just a few days earlier, his realtor had assured me I'd be impressed, he'd bring the place back to life, turn it into a real model farm.

Gone were the grace notes, gone the goldenrod and poke-weed, the food source and cover for many dozens of birds. In short order, he hired a trapper, too, who set out leg hold traps for the groundhogs and foxes.

I used to quip about our neighbors that if it was green and they didn't plant it, it was a weed. Now I saw that what I first said as a joke fell well short of the mark. There was something beyond financial return that was driving all this, some fury to eradicate any living thing the farmer didn't own or control. I remembered some of our neighbors of long ago, the fervor of their efforts to kill every last crow, their anger and disgust when the birds were protected by federal law. I thought of hunters in the West, shooting wolves from helicopters. Dominion over the Earth.

About then an old song drifted into my head. It wasn't really all that good a song, it had played on AM radio for a while about the time we moved to the farm back in the sixties. The song came to me out of nowhere, when over the sound of the birds and of the gentle morning breeze I heard the clanking sound of a tracked machine, faintly at first, then growing louder as the big yellow excavator came into view.

*Ah, you may leave here for four days in space*

*But when you return, it's the same old place*

The excavator lumbered off to whatever tree or small grace note had been slated for uprooting—

*But you tell me over and over and over again my friend*

*Ah, you don't believe we're on the eve of destruction*

—and I shivered despite the summer warmth and wished I'd never heard the not very good song, which now I could not get out of my head, background music to this one very local skirmish in a centuries old war.











## *SENTIENT CREATURE*

The big maple in front of the house had always seemed immortal. Then not long after Dad died, Hurricane Floyd came through, and the first of the branches as big as most normal trees came crashing down. After that, it seemed every couple years some kind of storm would take out another big branch, until the once majestic tree was grievously wounded and more than a little strange looking.

Practical people said to take the thing down before it falls on the house, and looking up at it I'd wonder if they were right. But Mom would say that when the tree goes she was going. Maimed though it was the old tree survived her and was still standing a few years after her death, still shielding the unairconditioned house from the harsh western sun. And though practical people continued to say we should take the thing down, and though I'd continue to worry a little as I looked up at the remaining huge branch supported by that half rotten trunk, I still couldn't bring myself to touch it any more than you'd hasten the end of a crippled old man.

Trees were sentient creatures, I'd realized, probably conscious ones, too.

It still stood—scarred, rotting, and doomed—in the months between selling the place and finally moving out. Stood shielding us from that merciless summer sun while we parceled out or gave away or carted to the dump the last of the family furniture, the knick-knacks, the photos jumbled in a desk drawer, the old income tax returns and farm records, the rugs, the antiques, the who knows what it was or why Mom kept it, until at last we were finished unwinding my family's long life in the house and walked out the front door for the last time, leaving the house and the old tree behind us.

That evening a heavy summer rain passed through. Afterwards the night was quiet except for the dripping leaves and the calls of the night creatures. I heard the sharp crack of splitting wood and the surprisingly slow crash of a falling trunk. In the stillness that followed I heard the ancient creature say it had hung in there for us as long as it could.





## LANDSCAPE AND LONGING

The little cinder block tenant house was on its own two-acre parcel. Pat and I stayed on. Along our side of what is now the property line dividing our place from the farm that I once loved so unquestioningly, there's a motley assortment of osage oranges and walnuts, white pine and spruce. The trunks branch awkwardly, the limbs droop at odd angles. I like to look at them and try to imagine what they might be saying, these sentient creatures with their unfathomable consciousness, forever rooted in place. Their branches wave in the air, they yearn for the sun as the saints yearn for God. Roots spread outward through dark soil, entangle each other in a silent caress. I hold my bare skin against my lover's soft flesh.

Looking at the trees it's hard not to wonder how it is that I've lived fifty years in one place only to find that the place no longer exists, perhaps never did. That I am a stranger here, that the endeavor of farming that I once celebrated as an imperfect but evolving compact with the non-human world was in fact like so much else an endlessly escalating war against it.

I'd understood nothing, nothing at all.

Less than nothing perhaps. One afternoon Dad and I were talking about the land trust he'd started, about a waterfront

farm the land trust was trying to preserve from development. This was after he'd gotten sick, but early enough that it was still reasonable to hope he would beat it. It seemed pretty clear, I said, that agriculture was the highest and best use of a very finite resource, one we didn't really own but were merely entrusted with to preserve for future generations. I was pleased with how well I'd phrased all this, I knew Dad would agree. What he said was:

*Don't forget that these fields were once somebody's forest.*

The murmuring swallows are now almost all gone. They disappeared about the time the empire walkers arrived. I try to remind myself that at least we have planted a few trees. A few from the nursery, a few others from seeds or from volunteer seedlings that we dug up before they got mowed over or sprayed. Osage oranges with their wildly curved branches to mark the property lines, red cedars with their deep purple heartwood to stand over the dogs' graves. Slow growing weed trees that speak of knowledge and mystery and loss. Of quests born out of landscape and longing.

