

DREAMING KANSAS

BACHELOR'S SONG

Journal entry : May 4, 2010 (E-mail fragment)

Dear J:

I am an artist who believes in the citizenship of art, which is to say in the case of this place, in the role of art in the reclamation, restoration, and sustainability of the prairie. However, such a comprehensive complex process entails a new American persona. Thus, I am seeking a new way of being on the land. In addition, being a man whose only western masculine archetypes are the cowboy and the pioneer patriarch, the Christian paterfamilias, I am engaged in an ongoing research about men who live alone on the land. The literature of the region, fictional and factual, used to call them bachelor farmers.

Does solitude on the land generate an evolved American masculinity that is more sensitive, that listens more, that creates more, that is more compassionate; wise? I am seeking to have conversations with such men. The only difference is that, while I am an art nomad, a pilgrim of culture (a cultural migrant worker), the men I talk to are planted, rooted, embedded.

Therefore, I would like to listen to how you live, and the journey that took you there and keeps you there.

Gratefully,
E



4 generations of men (unknown author)

Journal entry: May 6, 2010

...and everywhere the friendly indescribable solitude of that sea of grass.
Conrad Richter, *The Sea of Grass*

At first, bachelor farmers seemed a thing of the past, of Willa Cather's fiction (I first encountered them in *My Antonia*). However, when my partner in crime, octogenarian birder Marge Streckfus, like a veritable Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple*, began to poke around, they began to surface like grass after winter. Suddenly, almost everyone had known of one; many had them in their family tree. Uncle Harry, the neighbor down the road. But the living ones were much harder to access, because of their shyness (even antisocial stance), isolation, and constant labor. Running a farm on your own leaves you with no time for idle talk. Talking to a lazy artist is an unimaginable thing for busy men who farm alone. Therefore, my first offer was squarely turned down. And although I am crestfallen, it has made me even more determined. Because all I need is the voice of one. I still believe that one person can change the world. With much help I have gathered a list of nine, and I would be happy if the universe opened the mind of one, so that the world can hear him.

Journal entry: May 8, 2010

I suddenly realize that I have been projecting something onto this, namely, my own solitude on the land, as I travel far and wide to create site-specific art projects, painting community portraits. Because, although I am surrounded by people in these public gestures, I am alone, deeply alone. And even as I sometimes start the journey with someone waiting for me back home, that person is not always there when I return. Because the journey was too long, the feelings of abandonment grew to be overwhelming. Thus, a home, a family gets undone for the sake of portraying another one very far away. That is the secret price of this cultural journey. Therefore, these men are my peers, even as they think that I am an outsider. I understand them more than they will ever know.



Journal entry: May 10, 2010

(Driving through the rain with J, showing me the family fields)

His paternal great-grandfather was born in 1832 and came to Kansas in 1879. His maternal great-grandfather saw the train that carried Lincoln's body while making his way to Salina. Too poor to buy a ticket, he arrived in the train's cow catcher during spring 1869 and walked 8 miles west to his homestead. Eventually, both men had sons for whom they bought land, contributing the initial down payment; then the boys paid on. The girls got nothing. They were expected to marry money.

His father began to farm as a boy, almost 80 years ago. He's now 89 and cannot farm anymore because of age and health, but he still knows what's going on and makes suggestions. They don't have the newest nor the best farming equipment, but they don't owe anyone over 30 days cash. They do not receive government subsidies.

J has a boy's smile. He's a 57 year-old bachelor; neither he nor his sister married. He began to help his father farm in 1967, after his bachelor uncle died. The Boy Scouts found John dead in his kitchen by the kibble, sitting on the floor undisturbed. He suffered from Parkinson's tremors. Johnnie must have suddenly fallen ill as he went to feed his dogs, sat down humbly like a child and died. (J's voice cracks and he covers his mouth as he breaks down in tears.)

It was a difficult decision to farm the land. He has a degree in music education and plays in the Municipal and the German bands. He lived away from Salina for 2 years teaching in a school, was laid off and returned to farming. When asked about seeing the world, he replies, *If I haven't done it, it probably isn't worth doing for me.* He's a devout Roman Catholic: a lector, cantor, and Eucharistic minister. He has strong opinions about prayer and the need to participate weekly in a community of believers. *There is always an answer, it may not be what you want to hear, but it will nudge you along. Things go better with God.* All of his farming friends believe in God and attend some sort of church, but their children do not.

Contemporary technology keeps you in touch. But in the old days you were out there all by yourself. He admits that the solitude would drive some people nuts. But, he asks, are you really ever alone? *There may not be a human being for miles, but there is an abundance of creatures, if you open yourself to it. The land has a voice: the wind through the grass, deer jumping, birds calling, insects, skunks, coyotes, badgers, possums. You may not see them but you hear them. Sometimes it's very soft and sometimes very forceful.*

To see a hawk 100-200 feet up in the air above you making a dive for a field mouse. There'll be a cloud of dust and suddenly he rises with the mouse in his talons. He seldom misses. What eyesight and perception! That's nature: life and death. You feel sorrow for the mouse, but some other will replace it, and the hawk will live for another day. Everything is provided for. People in towns don't see this, the sunrise and the sunset.

The breadth of God... What this Higher Power has provided: rats, mice, ground squirrels. But we have damaged nature. The more we use chemical fertilizers, those things disappear: grub worms, centipedes, millipedes. Even the earthworms. You can't find them anymore around the fields that have been farmed when you're trying to fish. If you stop farming, they come back after a while, but never in the same quantities. But he considers chemical fertilizers a necessary evil, if we are going to live off wheat, even as they are seeping into the tap water. We are ruining ourselves. Wheat is our livelihood. We do not have enough cattle and horses to make manure. The soil has been so depleted over the years that it does not produce without chemical fertilizers. And most farmers do not let their land lie fallow. In the old days, farmers rotated their crops. But the demand for wheat makes it impossible. So, they farm from road ditch to road ditch. And yet, after all this, a storm can flatten your wheat. So you cry a bit and keep going.

At the turn of the century, Salina had 5 operating grain mills, but now it only has 1. The railroad abandoned us, he says. *First, they gradually stopped sending crews to do track maintenance. Then, fewer trains came. And, eventually, they stopped altogether.* Old train tracks still run through his property, and he's trying to maintain them on his own, because of his love of history and genealogy.



He remembers the harvest when he was young. They would come together at lunchtime and during afternoon break. His mother would bring lunch, and a special dessert that she only made during harvest time. They would stop for their evening meal. His grandfather bought 320 acres of land with the help of his father, a half section, but left 12 acres unplowed. J's dad did not farm them either. When asked why his grandfather and father did not farm them, J responds that these men were not the sort of people that did much asking or telling. They simply understood how things should be.

What is the future of this land, I ask? Perhaps more people will move out here from the city, he says. But it would be a shame. Prices do keep climbing, in spite of the recession. *There will always be pastures.*

Journal entry: May 12, 2010

(Two bachelors named J in a row. Visiting a second J's homestead)

I'm a big fan of cows, he says. *The prairie needs a grazer. The bison is beautiful, but without the ranching force, preservation is harder.*

His 28 year-old, self-sustainable, homestead off-the-grid is thickly fenced like a compound envisioned by Hollywood for a post-apocalyptic thriller, complete with a heavy timber 50 foot high lookout he built with a friend. He explains that the tall fences are to keep white tailed deer, raccoons, and other predators out of his garden and poultry coops. He lives outside Hartford, bordering the Flint Hills National Wildlife Refuge. The wooded trail beyond his gate is sided with the tallest poison ivy I have ever brushed up against; not a path for curious mountain bikers. Solar panels adorn the entrance, while 15 years supply of firewood is scattered by his shed.

J sports a long pony tail and a peace tattoo on his right hand. He got it back in 1969 at a party. He looks much younger than his 60 years of age. In fact, he recently had surgery to remove a giant benign tumor wrapped around major organs. He should have died but survived, he believes, because he was physically fit and grows all his food organically. He was expected to be on morphine for 60 days following the procedure, but never took an aspirin. He hunts

deer and turkey with bow and arrow, processes his own catch, and has not bought meat in 40 years. He crafts the bows himself and was making a remarkable one as a gift for an old friend. He hosts bow jams in his tool shop.



He has one of the most beautiful little fruit and vegetable no-till gardens I have visited in years. I break and eat a sprig of tasty fresh asparagus off a raised bed. He has no time to can, so he freezes his produce, and maintains an unheated greenhouse over winter. He does not spray anything. *If you got a bug problem, you got a soil problem. Real good soil is the best antidote against bugs.* Prairie hay is his favorite mulch, because of its diversity.

J grew up as an army brat, but spent 7 formative years in Alaska, where many of his friends lived off the grid. It wasn't an unusual choice. I enter a house built with salvage materials, and his living-room is magical, filled with books, bones, feathers, paintings, and other memorabilia. He has a stone desk with an amazing fossilized sand top from an old ocean floor. His bed on the second floor is covered by a beautiful quilt his mother made. She made them for every one of her five kids. A small piano sits by his bedroom window. He took lessons 15 years ago and hopes to pick them up again after his retirement, to keep his mind alert. For now, all his hobbies are very physical. He hopes to retire in two years. He needs to save a little bit more money to be comfortable in his old age.

In the old days, I would have been the member of the tribe who did the walkabout, exploring. I'm a rather independent person. I prefer not to be dependent on society. Nevertheless, I don't do this to be ready for the collapse of American society. It's about my quality of life. This lifestyle forces you to be healthy. I built this house with my own hands. I believe that when we get very far from using things we haven't made, we cheat nature. It's morally wrong to consume too much out of life that you cannot generate. I'm not a religious person, but life is a gift to be used sparingly.

J was married twice but has no children. I'm not a hermit. We think we're in control of our lives, but we're not. However, I do monitor who comes into my life. I need time to live like this. It takes time to live like this. It takes discipline. I don't have superfluous friends. But I do like solitude. It takes a fair amount of solitude to think things through. Loneliness is the price of freedom. A lot of people move out of school, get a job, a wife, kids. They die and did not have much time to think and make right decisions. That lack of time leads to many wrong decisions.

J spent 320 days with a friend on a canoe exploring the Mississippi river, living out of a tent. The most shocking aspect of being back in society was the noise, how noisy we are. Recently, the doctor told him that he has bionic hearing; the best hearing of any man his age the doctor has ever witnessed. You are a better listener if you're totally immersed in nature. It's a truly auditory experience.

When asked about counseling young people, he responds: We don't have an energy crisis, we have a brain crisis. Learn a little bit about nature. There's a lot of nature deficit disorder. The average American is 5 or 6 generations away from the land. So they don't recognize its value, the loss when it's gone. It's important to have a connection with dirt, with a living plant. A lot of things have intrinsic value beyond purchasing or selling them. And we need to be aware of the moment. We're always bitching. But the moment is generally beautiful. Thank your blessings. We need to stop being so greedy.

J smiles and gives me a tuft of grisly bear hair as I'm about to leave. It's long and red, surprisingly soft. He found the bear already dead and took some. For the road, he says. You can come back any time.

Journal entry: May 14, 2010

(The youngest of them all)

Hector, Homer, and Willa come out to greet me. 3 happy dogs down a green path. But only Willa is his, the two boys belong to the neighbors. He adopted her from the pound three weeks ago and she has not left his side ever since. She's dark, so she hardly ever gets ticks. They favor lighter colors.



He is 48 years old and originally grew up in northern Texas, but had no sense of that landscape. *I was in the suburbs, and the suburbs look pretty much the same everywhere.* He lived in the San Francisco Bay Area from the early to mid-1990s, but he doesn't remember having an inclination to live this way back then. It was certainly not conscious or developed, he says, though he rode his bike to school. He was drawn to a "back to the land" notion and read *Walden* in college, but was actually put off by its idealism. However, by the mid-90s he became attracted to living in the Midwest partly because of living expenses. He could not afford the Bay Area anymore on a young journalist's salary.

He drove up here in 1999 for the Smoky Hill River Festival, and visited The Land Institute. But he hesitated moving here. So, he worked for a while with the US Park Service at the Homestead National Monument in Southeast Nebraska, as a way of testing the area. Eventually, he wrote to his current employers about coming here for a farming internship. They answered affirmatively, and that was 14 years ago. He now works for them as an editor.

I want to live as light as I can in this society. That is why I have decided to live in the country, to raise a fair amount of my food, and do without a lot of things that people today think about as needs, but which are really conveniences, not truly necessary. Of course, I do recognize that I am single, that I have no dependents, so I can indulge in the luxury of this poverty. Although I spend less time gathering

firewood than people do watching TV. The same with getting water. Of course, if I were using 150 gallons of water daily, like the average American, then it would take longer, but I don't.

He owns 40 acres, 26 of which he keeps for cool-season pasture grasses, 14 of which he dedicates to prairie, which may be used as pasture too. His house has a toilet because the health department required him to put in a septic tank. But he admits that it will help when his parents visit. He has no electricity, no solar power. It doesn't seem to fit here, he says. He uses candles at night.

When I ask about what he does with his mind during his free time, he replies that there are moments when he empties his mind of all thought. Those are the best moments in his experience, he admits. *But I'm a ruminator, he states. I have a higher than average level of rumination than most people. I consider meditation to be a chosen state. So when I say that I'm ruminating, I mean that I wake up in the middle of the night with a thought in my head and I consider it for hours.*

I do read in my spare time. But there is not much opportunity for that during this time of year. For example, I have been building a fence around my vegetable garden and it took several trials to finally get it right. I poked myself to succeed. There are so many chores to do, like maintaining the chicken coops I keep in two different locations. I have more time to read in winter. Initially, I was an art major. And I still enjoy the process of making an image more than of setting down words. I love an intuitive visual engagement. The writing that is best for me is a kind of journal writing that takes you places. Again, a kind of rumination.

What do you ruminate about, I ask. *Being alone occupies much of my rumination. It's not natural for a human being to live alone, although solitude is good. This is one of the reasons why I enjoy going to work in an office, to be with people. Otherwise, I'm not very good at meeting people.*

He once announced the lifestyle choices that he was planning to make in the midst of a family gathering. His otherwise calm conventional father, an engineer by trade who early on in this process knew where his son was headed, suddenly lost his temper and remarked that no woman would want to join him. *Indeed, the greatest challenge has been to find a partner who wants to live this way.* I ask what he does to meet this great challenge. His face suddenly lights up, his blue eyes widen and he produces a big smile. *Well, I'm always looking!*

I live alone as the byproduct of decisions I have made. I also live this way because I have an artistic temperament. Solitude is the physical description of where you are. Loneliness is a feeling. Being lonesome means that you are in solitude. Being lonely means feeling hurt about being alone. I feel less lonely than I used to. I suspect that I feel less lonely here than in other places because this is the first place that feels like my own, as opposed to renting. But it also has to do with the quality of rural solitude.

I intentionally put my house here as opposed to the road because I wanted this much solitude. I do like to know that there are people around me, but I like a certain amount of space to myself. I like it when people visit me but I want a certain amount of space my way. Living in solitude allows you to do things the way you want to. This home is fairly uncompromising, considering how most Americans live.

Nevertheless, during the process of building my dream house, I have compromised. I would have built a smaller house where it just for myself. But I built it this big hoping to share it with a partner and visitors one day. Of course, I built it once, and I could do it again. However, I've not made the compromise of getting electricity. His new house's beautiful, textured whitewashed walls are very thick, built with straw bails sealed with a mixture of clay, sand, and horse manure.

The foundation consists of limestone salvaged from an old torn down grocery store. The structural timber was salvaged from the military.

The house still has a loose dirt floor, so dust covers much, including his kitchen shelves. An assortment of second hand dishes fill them. He cooks out of a wood burning black stove. During summer, he cooks on a camp fire. He hopes to lay down a floor of bricks on sand, but it's hard to do all this alone. He sometimes procrastinates, but once he gets going, it's not so bad.



When I ask him about the best of all possible futures, he returns to the notion of partnership and working his land much more. *My pasture would be healthy and have animals on it. The trees that I planted would grow and become magnificent before I die. You cannot make a living as a farmer with only 40 acres. So I would still want to keep my job for the social contact, and its editorial environmental goals. I would also like to see the world either forced to get off its fossil fuel addiction, or give it up on its own, soon.*

I'd like to see the beginning of the end of what we used to call progress in my lifetime. I'd like to get to see that things are going to be better. But I don't want to see blood running on the streets. It sounds horrendous, unbelievable. But what would happen if our resources suddenly plummeted? My father thinks that they'll figure something out by then. I understand his response, partly because no one alive today in the West has known it any different.



Journal entry: May 16, 2010

(Surrendering to the humbling aspects of time)

I have not finished reading *Sod-House Days, Letters from a Kansas Homesteader, 1877-78*, the epistles of Howard Ruede, edited by John Ise. I am a very slow reader. Like my third bachelor, I ruminate every phrase, sentence, and paragraph. I stop over individual words like potholes of wisdom, to ponder them for days. Sometimes it takes me years (yes, plural) to read a truly good book. Maybe it comes from my earlier formative training as a cloistered monk.

Time is running out. I ended up with a short list of 9 men who live alone on the land, by choice or by destiny, from confirmed and unwilling bachelors, to widowers. The youngest was in his late 40s, the oldest in his early 80s. Nevertheless, I was only able to interview 3 during the past few weeks, only a third, because of other project responsibilities. Talking with them meant traveling next door or 140 miles, a few hours or a full day. A pilgrimage to a different American heartland; to a different expression of masculinity. I would like to come back and pick it up again one day soon, before some die, before threads vanish. These solo voices have something to teach us, something both gentle and fierce.



Anonymous photographer, 1918. Pencil handwriting reads: Arthur holding the colt, King, and the other is King's mother, Lady.