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*from* One for the Wind, One for the Crow

THE BARN

When the barn was thick with animal warmth, snow melted as it fell on the roof. Now that nothing but tools and machinery are stored there, the barn is cold in winter. On a windless day it is almost as cold as the open air, and snow accumulates on the roof, in some years lingering into March.

One day voices echo in the frost. The next, they are lost in the sound of the thaw. This morning, water blistered along the edge of the barn roof and began to drip—in measured time at first—and then it quickened as the day grew warmer. By noon it seemed that all the snow of the lean months was streaming off the roof. The dripping incised channels in the accumulated snow around the barn, and then worked channels into the ground itself—lines more true than those of the building, which has long since sighed and settled.

Lines as true as the ones in the carpenter's dream. One man built every barn still standing along this road. No one remembers his name, but you can tell his work by certain details. Above the doors he always hung a row of six lights, which sometimes fogged with the pluming breath of the herds.

WINTER RYE

Most of the workers have been let go. Only a couple of men stay on to finish out the season, their day beginning in slant light and ending in shadow. There's no hurry now—if it rains or a bitter wind blows in, the work can be put off for a better day since they don't have to keep pace with ripening crops or a parching sun. Water jugs go untouched. It's coffee they drink with their lunch.

They are putting the farm away—cleaning the barn, draining pipes, grading out the last of the stored apples. Machinery is neatly rowed in a shed: tractor, planter, sprayer, harrow, plow. There's frost nearly every morning, and in the orchard all but the last leaves have fallen: you can see how pruned limbs work out of the squat trunks—the bare wires of a cared-for land. All the cornfields are in rye.

Winter rye is a cover crop only, planted in fields after the corn has been harrowed

down. Its dense roots work to keep the long-broken soil from eroding. In mid-September, the first planting of its shoots up a minty green while in other fields squash vines wither to expose tan butternuts, and pumpkins absorb the late sun. By the end of October, most of the cropland is mantled in rye, a deep and even green overlaying burnished husks, cobs, and broken stalks. It's a nearly perfect green, without row or furrow, a green that brings up the well-worn roll of the land as it slopes towards the river beyond our view. To those who've worked here all spring and summer and into the fall, the farm now looks surprisingly plain—a landscape only, surveyed and wide under too big a sky. And your eye is drawn to all the slight movements—a hawk, say, and its shadow, or a rabbit scabbling across matted grass. A deer at the edge of the woods raises its head—such a small stir, no more than an orphaned meteor—and I'm left wondering whether or not I saw it at all.

Wild grasses and orchard grasses turn sere, but winter rye does not. It remains green under accumulating snow, green as ever on south slopes in the January thaws, and everywhere green come the first March floods. Only on the late land—low and boggy, the last to be harvested and so the last to be put in a cover crop—is the rye grass sparse. There you could count each blade if you wished, and in a dry season unanchored topsoil will blow across the thin snow when gusts come up.

Dusk comes soon enough. The two men hunch in the front of their sedan and let the engine warm up a minute before they head home. Lights from their small city star the east hills. One evening planet in the sky before them, the crescent moon growing whiter and harder in the sky behind them. Straggling migrations of Canada geese settle in the rye to feed on what remains of the corn. Some evenings they are countless. Even so, they make scarcely a sound. It seems late for them to be this far north, but I suppose it's the plentiful grain that keeps them here, and frozen ground will drive them on.

## RUST

The worked out tractor stops an access road. The lame harrow has been pulled to the inside corner of a fence. And the old planter—at station among shattered grasses by the barn. It's likely they have been rusting for longer than they labored, having been hauled to marginal places after they broke a final disk, say, or were shadowed over by new machinery. After a good rain, the low ground around them puddles with copper-colored water. Rusted to fine things, they are, nearer to script or to vertebrae than to forged shafts, axles, and tines. Who, anymore, can imagine they were once bent to a human will—these, that thin and crumble to so much ferrous duff?

And who isn't inclined to think of them as being closer to draft horses at pasture than to the machinery we now use? A new Case tractor parades across the years we have, hauling beamy harrows, planters, and cultivators. A giant bucket attaches to the front of the tractor and is used to move loam or to clear a way for drainage. We tell our time by those outsized wheels that make their slow, peremptory turns and lay down chevron tracks on the soil.

And yet, in the wake of that tractor, not much is changed from other years. Disks and tines disturb the earth at standard intervals. Hybrid seed funnels through the planter and drops out in traditional increments—so many inches between hills of squash, so many inches between stalks of corn, so many between beans, between cabbage plants. . . . East, west, and east again, measured lines follow the well-worn roll of the land.

Scours on stone made by glaciers, scours made by harrows. Where is the trained eye to distinguish one from the other? The distance between the past and ourselves is as thin as the saturated red enamel on the new tractor, though we can't bring ourselves to believe its durable surface will rust. And besides, the new machines are too big to be simply left to one side. Imagine this tractor in disuse, and how it would block the easy line of the horizon. Sharp edges in a hazy season. Orchard grasses would never clear the hubs of the wheels, and the raised bucket stalled above the cab would remind us of a saurian jaw and that entire epoch that for no apparent reason just vanished.

## BLUE HUBBARD

People say they look like seals resting on the curve of their stomachs. Round-shouldered, full-bellied seals. Blue Hubbards *are* a lumbering kind of winter squash—all middle tapering towards a blunt stem end, and the blossom end can perch like a small, inquiring head. Like seals in shape, yes, but a Hubbard is warty and frosty blue. Its heft is too great and the rind too thick for even a chef's knife to be of much use. You have to drop it on a resistant floor to split it open, or use a cleaver the way my father does when he cuts one up for seed. His aim is as deliberate as a stonecutter's, and the two halves cradle away to reveal a thick wall of orange flesh, its surface mottled with white seeds. He milks the seeds from the flesh and scatters them on newspapers to dry. "Milk" is his word for it, and it does look as if he's working a cow's udder, which he did as a child and long into adulthood.

There are hybrid vegetables, improved varieties, disease-resistant strains. The kinds of corn my father will grow, or tomatoes, or peppers, change from year to year, and he buys seeds from Harris or Burpee. Hubbards are one of the last vegetables he still cultivates from its own seed.

Elderly customers are always remembering the nutty, sweet taste of Blue Hubbard and what a smooth pie it makes. But the best Hubbards are upwards of thirty pounds—far too big, they say, now that they live alone. Far too big, too, for the everyday meals of small families. So, we split the Hubbards and sell them in quarters or sixths.

Some people will still buy whole ones to eat at Thanksgiving or Christmas, kept until then in a dry corner of the cellar—two or three snuggled on a shelf as in other years, while outside a shutter whinges and the blown leaves are covered with frost, then snow.

## PEACHES

The handful of varieties that grow in this part of the country have hardiness bred into them. Reliance . . . Elberta. . . . Not names to dream on, though to grow peaches here, near the northern limit of their range, is something of a dream. My father was well over sixty when he planted the peach orchard in a long-time meadow. That was the last piece of land to be hayed—cut and cured and stored. I barely remember it, the rectangular bales spaced like footsteps across the land.

The peach trees—fifty or so of them—were no more than whips to start with, and it hardly seemed they'd survive a January. In truth, the trees don't always winter well—some years there is barely a crop, and once in a while, no crop at all. The peach orchard blooms early and pink. It will never look as crabbed and thickened with the years as an apple orchard; the trees aren't long-lived, and they are pruned in their own way—without a central leader—so the limbs curve out and up to embrace an open center. Each crown, a ballroom of its own.

I have never seen relic peach trees crowding a cellar-hole the way apple trees often do. Apples are nearly as old as agriculture in these parts, a cash crop talked about endlessly. How many times have I heard about the Ben Davis, too bitter to eat, that would cling to the branches until spring. Or about Cortlands, developed by accident during the search for a McIntosh that would redden on the tree. Or the original Red Delicious tree fenced and locked at Stark Nurseries. About cider years. Snow apples. Astrakhans.

Somewhere to the south there must be like stories about peaches. People traveling up from Georgia and the Carolinas will say our peaches just don't have the flavor of theirs. They'll name varieties I've never heard of that ripen right down the summer. Here the peach season doesn't last long—a few weeks in August and maybe the first of September when we have a fruit that isn't meant for storage, that doesn't smell sharp as the cold side of the mountain, and whose flavor isn't deepened by the frost. Reliance and Elberta are hardy names, but like all peaches, their fragrance blooms at the back of your throat as it passes.

## MONADNOCK

The exact meaning of the Algonquin word is lost. Some people believe “manitou”—a guardian spirit—is stowed in the name. Others safely say that it means “mountain that stands alone.” Monadnock rises only a few thousand feet above the surrounding countryside, but it *is* solitary, with long gradual slopes, and so seems imposing. And it is all the more imposing because its summit is bare rock, so that when the lower land is running with the thaw, bringing out new scents and bringing up the color of lichens, the snowed-in peak of Monadnock keeps its cold look.

Between the ice age and the present day there was a time when the summit of that mountain was covered in red spruce—a pure stand, dark green and resinous. Those trees must have played down the elements, or they took on the brunt of them. Any-

way, they protected the soil, and the summit's amber duff—color of steeped tea—just kept getting deeper and softer.

Most stories say the fires began soon after the region was settled. Fires to clear pasture. Fires that spread too far up the mountain and burned until they burned themselves out. The one fire that was so hot it killed the red spruce trees and the soil they grew on. The charred trunks fell where they stood—a black tangle that became a haunt for wolves. It was early in the 19th century when the dead timber was deliberately set ablaze to drive the wolves from that place. What remained—ash and barren soil—easily blew away on the constant wind. So, the summit will always be bare, they say, since the weather is just too persistent for new soil to establish itself, and the old berry pickers' paths, just too well traveled.

At the summit, cold-chiseled into the rock, are initials and dates that range back into the last century. As the surrounding land has become more widely settled, the climb has become more popular, since it isn't difficult, and from the top you can see far in every direction. To the northwest rises Mt. Mansfield in Vermont; east of north, Mt. Washington; north of east, in Maine, Mt. Agamenticus. To the south is a quieter breath, the low-lying hills of eastern Massachusetts. Those hills have no focus—except for the higher towers of Boston—since they're nearly even in height, the remnant of an old plain, furrowed by water into valleys and rises.

The farm is off there to the east and south, but I can't pick out where it must be. All contour is gone—the hills we plow and build into, the low place in the orchard where the frost lingers, the rise where, early on, the lights of a small city might climb towards Orion. Looking south from Monadnock it appears as if all the land has healed back into a plain, the working of all that water seeming to have disappeared, and along with it the barns and fields have disappeared, the back stoops, the millstacks, the stone church. Detail lost to the color of a cold flame, as lost as the towns beneath the Quabbin Reservoir, which supplies much of that south stretch of land with water.

The old residents of those drowned towns hold reunions now and then to recall the lead smell of the tannery or the sweet taste of a sheepsnosed apple—the last details—the way my Aunt will recall, not the herd, but her cheek resting against the pied flank of the cow as she finished the milking.

## IN THE WOODS

In the woods where one of the larger trees has fallen, the surrounding ground is flecked with white pine seedlings thriving in that keyhole of light. They are nothing but long, soft needles, those young trees, whorls of needles hiding trunks no larger than sticks. Elsewhere the woods are too dark for the new pines to survive. Instead, hardwoods grow. It seems those other trees will take over later on, but for now white pines are prominent, and after the yellow and red leaves have fallen, those pines stand over the land.

It is then, in winter, that you see how their high-topped crowns are broad and irregular. Some branches shoot away from the rest—out and up—as they follow the

lead of the sun. Lower limbs, long blocked from the light, have pruned themselves back to skeletal remains—broken, without bark, stained a moss green. The trees don't thicken and crook the way a solitary pine might. They are slender and straight, sistering the masts they were once felled for.

I have never seen the owl, but I have heard its call, rounded and hollow. When the winter wind drowns out that call it's the white pines that sound in the woods. With all their length those trunks creak as they sway to the limits of their axis, and the creaking builds and decays, builds and decays just as if it were the old, uneasy sea pitching beneath them. That creaking dwells in the woods, never clearing the boughs, which have their own sound—a persevering, swept note—distant, with nothing to stop it.