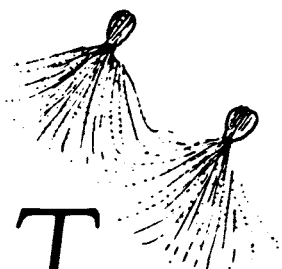


A Patch of Earth



The farm, a wide plateau of rocky, loam-dark fields, lies above Swago Crick, along the Greenbrier River of West Virginia and some twenty-five to thirty miles north of the Virginia line. This patch of earth is held within a half stadium of limestone cliffs and mountain pastures. On the surface, the Swago Farm is quiet and solid, green in summer and in winter deep with snow. It has its level fields, its fence rows and hilly pastures. There are some two hundred acres of trees and bluegrass, running water, and the winding, dusty paths that cattle and humans have kept open through the years. There are three small woodlands, two of them still virgin and mostly of oak.

On one of the knolls is the weedy myrtle-grown graveyard where we have buried our people for 150 years. Before then, we buried them where we now forget. We call the knoll the Graveyard Hill, and the cattle graze there outside its wire fence and crooked

gate. Higher up on the ridge-top and canting over toward Captain Jim's orchard is a rusty pole set like a crucifix – a television antenna that stands as though it were put there to mark our soldiers' graves. One grave is for Captain Jim, my father's father, who went with the Virginia Rebels; another is for the boy, Elbert Messer, who was fatally wounded in World War I.

Some of the gravestones are too old to read, their names eaten away by time and water; the faint rock-etchings are filled now with gray moss. It is one of these stones that marks the grave of our great, great, great cousin Jacob, who died back in the 1800s when he was just nineteen. Cousin Jacob was sick of the "bloody flux" a long time before he died and used to come up here on the hill to sit under an oak tree and read his Bible. So they buried him under the oak, and for a hundred years it stood there, heavy with age and old funeral keenings, and was called the Jacob Tree. But that tree is gone now, and Little Manfred's tree too, and the willow tree Granny Fanny planted over the grave of her dead baby back in 1875.

But even older than the old graves were the primordial oceans that once covered our fields and cast their seashells into our rock. When the ancient waters receded,



strands of pink and broken coral were left scattered—as they are still scattered—across the meadows. This is not coal country. No rotting swamps lay over these slopes and upland valleys, only the oceans weaving and receiving as they laid the pink coral down: coral rock and white limestone rock, and the underground streams sucking in the dark. Through all our generations, we have picked and hauled corals and piled them in roseate heaps along the fence rows and in the swamp.

So it was with us, and is with us still, over two hundred years and nine generations of the farm keeping us, and we believing that we keep the farm. But that is not the way it is in the real truth of it, for the earth holds us and not the other way. The whole great rolling earth holds us, or a rocky old farm down on Swago Crick.

Until I was sixteen years old, until the roads came, the farm was about all I knew: our green meadows and hilly pastures, our storied old men, the great rolling seasons of moon and sunlight, our limestone cliffs and trickling springs. It was about all I knew, and, except for my father and before him, the old Rebel Captain, all that any of us had even known: just the farm and our little village down at the crossroads, and the worn

cowpaths winding the slopes; or we kids driving the cows home in the summer evenings; or the winter whiteness and stillness, Aunt Malindy's "old woman in the sky" picking her geese, the "old blue misties" sweeping out of the north.

Some of our tales were old and old, going back into time itself, American time. Living so long there in the same field under the same gap in the mountain, we had seen, from our own ragged little edge of history, the tall shadows passing by. "Old Hickory" in his coach passed along our dug road one morning; General Lee one evening on his way to the Gauley rebel camps. Then, in 1863, as we watched from our cliff walls and scrub oak bushes, the great Yankee army passed on its way to the Battle of Droop: all day long the clank and spur and roll of their passage, 2,000 3,000, 4,000, hard, blue Yankees, their bayonet tips made bloody in the sunset.

Grandpa Tom, our "old one," had gone with George Rogers Clark to Kaskaskia and had run the Falls of the Ohio under an eclipse of the sun. Uncle Bill went to Point Pleasant against old Cornstalk and his Ohio Shawnee; then Little Uncle John to the War of 1812; Captain Jim to the Virginia Rebels, his brother Al to the Yankees. My father, in 1906, sailed with Teddy Roose-

velt's Great White Fleet; then Cousin Paul and Cousin Coe "to make the world safe for Democracy."

But before I grew up and went out into the world—and a bloody thing I found it—we were all at home there in our faded cottage in the meadow, all of us safe and warm. Sometimes now, a quiet sense comes to me, the cool mist blowing in my face as though I am walking through islands of fog and drifting downhill slowly southward until I feel the mountains behind my shoulder. Walking on, I can see the light in the "big room" window as I come to our cottage standing in the meadow under "Bridger's" Mountain, as it always stands on the fore-edges of my memory, and the old farm where I ran the April fields and pastures to my great rock up in the woodland where the lavender hepaticas grew. Then I knew just the earth itself: the quiet measure of the seasons; the stars in the sky; the wheat field in August, golden: darkness and day; rain and sunlight; the primal certainty of spring. Then we were all there together, the years not yet come on us, these seventy-five years of war and money and roaring turnpikes and torrents of blood.

I know, deep down, that our one old farm is only a ragged symbol, a signet mark for all the others, the old and far older hard-



scrabble mountain farms of Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia, all the briery fields scattered across the mountains south. And how the earth holds us is still a dark question. It is not the sucking deepness that draws us, for the earth is mother, protector, the home; but the oppressor too. It requires, sometimes, the very lifeblood of its own, and imprisons the fly-away dreams and bends the backs of men and women. Yet to love a familiar patch of earth is to know something beyond death, "westward from death," as my father used to speak it.

We could sense, just beyond our broken-down line fences, the great reach of the American continent flowing outward. Because we stood so long in one place, our rocky old farm and the abundant earth of the continent were linked together in the long tides of the past. Because the land kept us, never budging from its rock-hold, we held to our pioneer ways the longest, the strongest; and we saw the passing of time from a place called solid, from our own slow, archaic, and peculiar stance.