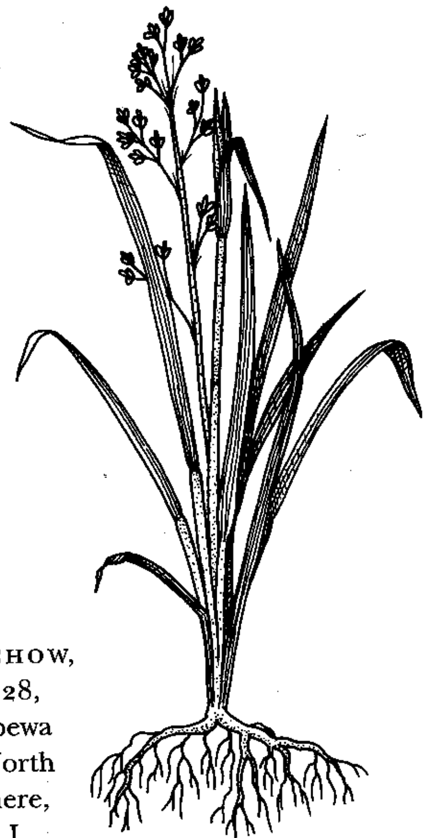
Rosewood Township



PAUL DEWAYNE GRUCHOW, Ed Will's Farm, Section 28, Rosewood Township, Chippewa County, Minnesota, USA, North America, Western Hemisphere, Earth, Milky Way, Universe. I wrote the words over and over in my best Palmer-method penmanship, arranging them like the lines of a poem. For me they held a terrible fascination. I felt about them as I did one Sunday morning when the preacher pronounced the words, "As far as the east is from the west," a phrase so magnificent and expansive,

so unfathomable, that it caused me to shudder.

Rosewood Township was too small and out of the way ever to be so parochial as some great capital. Its people never imagined that they were being watched or admired from afar. In a billion years it would not have occurred to anyone in Rosewood Township to refer to it as The Big Apple. There were people who were born in Rosewood Township and never intended to leave, who desired to live nowhere else and perhaps had no curiosity about doing so. But even the most optimistic inhabitant of Rosewood Township understood its significance to be obscure, limited mainly to the astonishing connections that might be drawn between it and every corner of the universe.

As a reminder, as a talisman, perhaps as an incantation, I wrote those words on the inside cover of every Big Chief tablet I carried to school: Paul DeWayne Gruchow, Ed Will's farm, Section 28, Rosewood Township, Chippewa County, Minnesota, USA, Western Hemisphere, Earth, Milky Way, Universe.

Ed Will owned our farm and operated it until his retirement. I have been told how infatuated we children were with him, how we would follow him everywhere when he came to visit, peppering him with questions that always began with his name. *Ed Will, how long are you going to stay? Ed Will, did you bring us any pennies?* (He always had.) *Ed Will, where do rabbits sleep? Ed Will, can snails sing?* But I remember almost nothing about him. I think of him as big and brisk, but I knew him when every adult seemed huge and was able to outstride my short legs. He wore a town man's straw hat, not a farmer's cap, and gray-striped overalls, not the more practical blue ones that my father and I wore. One time we visited him after

he had gone to a nursing home. Father and Mother went up to his room while we children waited on the porch, where half a dozen old men were slumped in wheelchairs. One of them suddenly let out a tremendous bellow, a nurse came running with a long-necked urinal, and he peed into it while my sister and I stared, more in awe of his grand indifference to us than of anything else.

When I was eight or nine, I stole a book of matches, which I had been strictly forbidden to have. As I was lighting them in the hayloft of Ed Will's barn, I dropped one, still burning, into the loose hay that filled the loft and could not retrieve it. The place exploded. By the time I reached the stairs, the interior of the loft raged with a searing light. The flames were already piercing the roof as I escaped through a main-floor door. I ran frantically to the pump, drew a single pail of water, and threw it at the barn, recognizing the futility of the gesture even as I carried it out. Then I ran hysterically toward the house, crying, "The barn is on fire! The barn is on fire!"

Neighbors and passersby, drawn by the smoke that mushroomed above us like a bomb cloud, formed a bucket brigade and kept the roof of the house wet, saving it, but every other building on the place was by nightfall either destroyed or damaged. The animals in the pasture, smelling the smoke, panicked and fled into the barn for safety. Not one of them, not even the cat, survived. Grain, tools, and machinery were destroyed. The embers smoldered for a week. The bitter smell of charred flesh lingered even longer.

I was out of my mind with grief and fear. I imagined being sent to prison. I had, young as I was, a faint sense of what my carelessness would mean to a family already dangling by an economic thread. The smell of smoke

and burned flesh nauseated me. I took to my loft and could not speak or eat for days. Ten years passed before I found the courage to talk about that afternoon.

The fire inspector came a few days later. I cowered in the house while my father went out, as he had said he must, to tell the official and Ed Will that his son had accidentally started the blaze. I could not hear the long, murmured conversation from the little window of my loft. When a story appeared in the local newspaper a couple of days later, it reported that the inspector had determined that the fire had been set off by spontaneous combustion. A few days later, Ed Will visited the farm again. He was not a wealthy man, and he was getting old; he would not rebuild, he said.

He had two nickels in his pocket, one for my sister and one for me, and he gave us both big hugs.

The community in which I grew up was pious to a fault—I came to believe that piety ought to be counted among the deadly sins—but even there, rectitude, out of consideration for a child, sometimes gave way to compassion.

Ed Will's land was at the southeast corner of Section 28 of Rosewood Township. There were two eighty-acre plots, one running east and west from the southeast section corner, and the other running north and south through the middle of the section. They made an L in the classic shape of a farmhouse. One hundred sixty acres, a quarter of a square mile, was standard size for a farm in the early 1950s. Our east-west eighty was generally level, running slightly uphill at the east end. The north-south eighty was flat for a quarter of a mile and then dipped into a large cattail marsh, which was low enough that the farmstead could not be seen from it. The topsoil was rich black prairie loam, fertile

and generally friable, but with a tendency to harden into something like concrete if worked when too wet.

My father rented this land on shares. He supplied the tools, the labor, and the seeds and kept two-thirds of the crop. Land in the early 1950s still passed mainly from generation to generation, but my grandfather, the son of Polish refugees, never owned land, and Ed Will's children, if he had any, were not farmers. So we were part of the underclass of tenant-farmers in the larger underclass of rural society, at a time when farmers still thought of themselves as the salt of the earth but after the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer had lost its savor.

Our farm was, if anything, less diverse than average. We raised corn, wheat, oats, soybeans, and flax and kept goats, sheep, and chickens, but many farms also had pigs and beef or dairy cows, and, consequently, alfalfa and more pasture than we did. My father was more interested in horticulture than in livestock—he was a gardener at heart—and sharecropping discouraged investments in pasture and hay, which were not as advantageous to the landowner.

A popular feature of our county weekly, the *Montevideo American,* in those days was the Mystery Farm. An aerial photograph of a farmstead was published, readers competed to identify its occupants, and the first reader with the correct answer won a small prize. A story about the farm followed in the next edition. The stories always included a paragraph about the farmer's conservation practices and described recent improvements to the buildings. Many farm people were installing bathrooms at that time.

Reading through these stories not long ago, I was struck by how diversified farming still was then, in what,

one realizes now, was the last stage of the industrialization of American farming. There does not appear to have been any farm that did not have four or five kinds of crops and two or three kinds of livestock. The average farm, too, was a quarter the size of one today, and the typical field was comparatively tiny—twenty-five acres of a crop was a big spread, and there were many fields of fewer than ten acres. I was struck as well by how much land was not under active cultivation. Often a quarter of the land on a farm is described as in pasture or is unaccounted for.

There were fencerows then. Corn hybrids were less sturdy than they are now, and genetic resistance to the corn borer was still to be developed, so there was more downed corn in the fields. Corn pickers were less efficient than today's combines, too. After the harvest, a lot of corn remained in the fields. The common practice was to turn the livestock loose in them to fatten on the gleanings, which required that fields be fenced. Fences hemmed in the plows. So every farm was ringed by a greenway, in which prairie grasses and flowers grew, mice nested, and ground squirrels, pocket gophers, and badgers burrowed, supporting populations of predators—foxes, skunks, weasels, feral cats, owls, hawks. The landscape was, in a modest way, still hospitable to wild as well as to domesticated life. My father had supplemented his income by trapping. Reading the old files of the *Montevideo American*, I understood how trapping was possible.

Such a contest as Mystery Farm had reader appeal in those days. There was a reliable chance that the occupants of the chosen farmstead could be identified, and that the people who lived in the buildings were, in fact, connected to the surrounding community. Farming and

farm people, quite aside from this particular contest, were once big news in Montevideo, the seat of Chippewa County. The progress of the rains, the arrival of the corn borers, the annual egg show, the annual meeting of the rural power cooperative (which drew more than 3,000 participants), the corn-picking contest, the yields at harvest time: all these were front-page news in 1952, the year my family moved to Rosewood Township from a seven-acre vegetable and berry farm in an adjoining township. Social news from Rosewood Township commanded a weekly column in the *Montevideo American.* I read in it that we had Christmas Eve dinner that year with my grandmother, aunt and uncle, and cousins, and that after dinner we attended services at St. John's Lutheran Church. When the program was over, each child received a bag of treats, including an apple, some peanuts in the shell, chocolate stars, pillow-shaped peppermints, and ribbons of hard candy.

Chippewa County is among the most rural counties in the nation, one of the few where agriculture still accounts for at least half of the gross production. Farming remains central to the economics of Chippewa County, and it is all there is in Rosewood Township. But there aren't many farmers anymore—there are producers and marketers. Farming once entailed something more than production and marketing, more than a livelihood. It was a culture, a vocation. Vocational agriculture was a subject taught in high schools, but in my experience of it, there was a good deal of talk about pig rations and weed-eradication methods and none about farming as work with a moral or social purpose. A profound change took place when people stopped talking about agriculture and started talking about agribusiness—the death of the culture in agriculture.

Our farmstead was sheltered on the west and north by a grove of maples. There was a farmhouse and, next to it, a little summer kitchen, a place where the cooking could be done in hot weather without turning the house itself into a blast furnace. There were also, until the fire, a hip-roofed barn, a chicken house, a hog house, a machine shed, and a granary. The granary had two bins, one with slatted sides for corn and the other, across a covered alley, with solid walls for small grains. The barn enclosed a big hay loft and was fitted for dairy cows, although we didn't keep any. Next to the barn rose a windmill, still in working order when we lived there. One of Father's annual chores was to climb the windmill and grease the gears at the top.

The house had two main rooms downstairs, a living room and a bedroom. An enclosed porch served as kitchen and dining room. Up a steep staircase, snuggled beneath the attic crawl space, were two tiny slant-roofed rooms tall enough for a child to stand in, but not everywhere, and just barely. My twin sister and I occupied these rooms when we were old enough to leave the main bedroom. After our younger sister came along, I moved to the summer kitchen, which had neither insulation nor interior walls. One night I shared it with a skunk, visible in the moonlight, that padded about, sniffing and poking into every cranny and upsetting the wastebasket while I lay frozen in my bed. Climbing out from under the mountain of handmade quilts on winter mornings and getting dressed in a room where the temperature was below freezing, and sometimes below zero, was a stiff test of character. But I loved that place for the privacy and independence it afforded me. It was my Walden cabin; like Thoreau, I spent my nights alone, but a hot meal, laundry service, and companionship

always waited in the house when I needed them.

The main house was sparsely furnished. It could hardly have been otherwise, given its minuscule size. The kitchen had a cupboard, a chrome dinette set of the kind fashionable in the 1950s, and a cookstove fueled with wood and corn cobs. A couch, two or three chairs, and an oil-burning stove that sat on a metal fire pad appointed the living room, as well as the only piece of art that I can remember, a rendering of the Last Supper in an oval metal frame painted gold. In the bedroom: a bed, a dresser, and a vanity table overhung with a big mirror, the only one in the house. You can estimate the economic status of a household by counting its mirrors. Upstairs: two beds, two dressers. The floors were covered in patterned linoleums, the walls in print wallpapers with ornamental borders; the whole place was a pastel panic of plaids, paisleys, and floral stripes.

Food was stored in a root cellar, a dugout with fieldstone walls and a floor that was muddy in the spring and dusty the rest of the year. It was reached through a trap door just to the right of the front door of the house. Dank and lit by a bare bulb, its walls were lined with shelves for the canned goods. Mother put up about 700 quarts of produce a year: fruits, vegetables, sauces, jams, jellies, pickles, fruit butters, krauts, meats. There were also a big bin in which the root vegetables were stored and tin canisters in which apples, wrapped individually in strips of newsprint, kept almost until spring.

In the springtime we children dreaded the trip to the root cellar. You might be told to run down there to fetch a pot of potatoes. This meant raising the trap door; descending into the dark through a curtain of spider webs that tangled in your hair and caught in your eyebrows; standing in the mud; and groping for the light

string, which, when pulled, made you feel better, although the bulb didn't, in fact, illuminate the potato bin. You plunged your hand in, knowing that you could find your fingers sinking into a rotten tuber, or that you could scare up one of the tiger salamanders that had wintered there in the warmth. It would scamper across your bare toes, giving you the bejeebees. The only thing worse was fetching eggs from under a temperamental and sharp-beaked hen in the mood to brood.

Ours was largely a subsistence farm. The chickens, when they were not molting, provided eggs. Occasionally one of them submitted its neck to the chopping block and, after a final headless romp around the yard, its wings beating desperately, it would be scalded in boiling water; its feathers would be plucked (the pin feathers stuck in your fingers as if still begging for mercy); and it would be boiled until tender, then panfried and served with gravy, made from the drippings, and mashed potatoes. The onions in the pan came from our garden; the flour to thicken the gravy was ground from wheat raised on the farm; the goats made the milk; the potatoes, because we ate so many of them, were raised in their own bed apart from the garden. To accompany the potatoes and the chicken, there might be string beans, or peas, or beets, grown also in the garden, or asparagus gleaned from the fencerows; and with the bread there would be strawberry jam, perhaps, or apple butter, or honey from one of our own hives of bees. For dessert there might be, in summer, a fresh-baked fruit pie, or, in winter, a sauce —plum, or apple, or groundcherry. The salt, the butter, and the sugar were bought in town. Breakfasts were also imported: the menu was the same every day—oatmeal with raisins and an orange or grapefruit. But what the farm, and our own labors, could provide, they did; and it is, I think, more than fancy that what we ate, because of this, had a special flavor and meaning.

The work went round and round: spring plowing, disking, planting, cultivating, the first hay harvest, canning, the small grain harvest, the second cutting of hay, soybeans out, corn out, cornstalks chopped, potato digging, fall plowing, wood cutting, butchering, boiling and dying traps, running the trap lines, skinning and stretching furs, corn shelling, lambing, until the rains quit, the puddles dried, and the trees bloomed—time again to start the spring plowing. It was classical work done mainly in the classical ways on a classical schedule. The weekly house schedule had the same regularity: Mondays, washing; Tuesdays, ironing; Wednesdays, baking; Thursdays, sewing, gardening, preserving; Fridays, town days; Saturdays, cleaning; Sundays, days of worship and rest.

To each day, and to each season, was dedicated a suitable labor, but no labor was ever exactly repeated. No year was ever the same as another, and each field had its own character. Farming the land was always new work, not repetitious but experimental, always unfolding, destined never to be completed. Sometimes the experiments worked; sometimes an idea that succeeded once, or ten times, failed on the next trial. Exactly why no one could say, since experiments on the farm are not like experiments in the laboratory, where the variables can be reduced to known elements. A subsistence farmer cannot afford the luxury of Cartesian thinking, but is obliged instead to work in the real world, the whole world, where one thing is indivisibly connected to another.

In the house the work was never quite the same work, either. Each batch of bread, for example, was the

product of a freshly ground canister of wheat that was not industrially milled and therefore varied from year to year, from grinding to grinding, and a cake of yeast that constituted a community of living organisms that multiplied, or didn't, according to its own state of vigor; and each kneading was a new and individual kneading, conducted with reference to my mother's memory of the exact texture that, from this lump of dough, under these conditions of heat and humidity, considering the fecundity of this yeast and the character of this batch of flour, would solicit a fine loaf of bread. The loaf would be baked to perfection according to its color and to the sound it made when it was tapped, each fire having been built to the occasion, its heat depending upon the condition of the materials that fueled it and upon the circumstances under which it was stoked or banked, according to the judgment of the baker.

My father planted a field as my mother set out a batch of dough to rise, each paying attention to experience, employing techniques acquired through long practice, and varying the methods as present conditions or the impulse to experiment dictated, each relying upon the faith that these resources would meet the exigencies ahead but knowing that the fruit ultimately depended upon the season. The work was creative; it was like making a poem, or dancing, or saying a prayer.

For me, the most important place on the farm was the cattail marsh at its north end. To get there, you took the farm's interior road, a grass track that ran east to the edge of the maple grove and then north as far as the waterway that drained into the slough from the east. The physical distance was not quite half a mile, but so far as I was concerned it might have been halfway around the world.

Here was a piece of Rosewood Township as it had existed for thousands of years, a surviving testament to the tallgrass prairie, and the richest and most complex representative of it. As measured by its biomass, a cattail marsh is one of the earth's most productive features. Only in a tropical rainforest does life reproduce more extravagantly. Rosewood Township at settlement was a great ocean of grass lapping across a level plain. It had nothing that could properly be called a hill. The landscape rose and fell in swells and swales, like the sea. It had no trees, no river or stream, no lake. Because the moisture that fell had nowhere to go, it stayed on the land. The tall grasses caught and held the snow against the fierce winds in winter; in spring the thirsty sod soaked up the meltwaters, and they trickled down through the immeasurable miles of roots that constitute the hidden jungle of a prairie and into the groundwater basins and channels that are its unseen lakes and rivers. The water that the ground could not absorb drained as far as the nearest low place, creating marshes like the one on our farm.

Most of these were not permanent bodies of water. As summer wore on and the wet days of May gave way to dusty August, the ponds evaporated, exposing ovals of black mud, ringed by rank growths of cattails, rushes, and tall wetland flowers. These ovals baked and cracked, the rich alkaline deposits in them collecting as fine white powder. But the marshes persisted long enough, most years, to produce flocks of ducks and geese by the thousands, to shelter dozens of kinds of songbirds; and the marsh waters were as thick as a primordial soup with crustaceans, insect larvae, and with microorganisms by the billions per teaspoonful. This profusion of life attracted frogs, snakes, and insects numbering in

the thousands of species; and so came the skunks and weasels, the minks and foxes, the raccoons, the mice and shrews, and on the uplands the burrowing animals, the ground squirrels and badgers, and pocket gophers; and in pursuit of them came the wolves and coyotes, the raptors, the hawks and owls; and in the tall grasses around them grazed the great herbivores, the bison, elk, and antelope. At the edges of the large sloughs, such as ours, a few willows and cottonwoods took root, casting a rare shade upon the flowerful but severe landscape; and the water lasted from year to year, attracting muskrats and turtles, clams and crayfishes.

There were a million things to see in our marsh. I spent many days and whole nights there when I was a boy, trying to catch sight of them all. I could never succeed. It was a fabulous textbook to me, a storybook as fantastic as *Arabian Nights.* It was my university, my theater, my refuge and strength. When I rejoiced, I went there to celebrate; when I was sad, to be consoled. In every weather, I worshipped there.

I imagine that every child fantasizes an independent life, freed from the constraints and constrictions of youthfulness and of the household. My own dreams, when I was emerging from childhood into adolescence, centered on some version of living in the wild. I dreamed of being, sometimes in the company of one or another of my cousins, a kind of human coyote, a stealthy and wily opportunist, hiding out by day in groves or cornfields or in the drainage ditches that were such a prominent feature of the landscape I knew, emerging at twilight to hunt or fish or forage for food. I would be, I thought, a nomad, never lingering anywhere so long as to be found out, always living with undetectable lightness upon the land, a

hermit, existing at the edges of society but outside of it and unknown to it.

Or I would be a trapper living in a remote northern forest. Because the trapping I knew took place in the late fall and early winter, the world I inhabited in this dream was always wintery. There was a snug log cabin at the center of it. A pair of snowshoes and several pelts on wire stretchers hung on the cabin wall beside the door. Inside, a fire blazed in an open fireplace. A stew bubbled in a cast-iron pot above the flames. I would go out in the springtime, my furs loading down my canoe, to a settlement to trade my catch for another year's supplies, and without stopping even for a night, I would turn right around and head back to my snug house in the woods. I dreamed of living where it was wild, but also of living outside of a money economy. I never dreamed of wealth.

My mother, I think, would have preferred a more social life. She loved to talk; she struck up conversations easily with strangers. One day in the laundromat in town, when the news was of an escapee from the county jail, she discoursed at great length to a stranger on the utter incompetency of the local sheriff. "Why, that man couldn't find his head if it wasn't fastened on," she concluded. The stranger excused himself politely and left the premises. There was a long silence in the laundromat, punctuated by the slap of buttons against the insides of dryers.

Finally another woman in the place spoke. "Do you know who that was?" she asked my mother.

"Haven't the faintest idea," Mother said.

"That was the sheriff."

Mother laughed loudly. "Well, at least I didn't tell him any lies," she said.

After my father died, she took up ballroom dancing.

She had grown up in a household kept by Norwegian immigrants with a strong sense of propriety, first cousins bound in what may have been a marriage of convenience. Mother's parents had adopted her from an unwed Irish girl in St. Louis. At eighteen she married my father, a Polish farm boy, bright but uneducated, a convert as a teenager to a dour Christian fundamentalism of his own making, but worst of all, poor—entirely unacceptable to Norwegian in-laws with social ambitions. My parents had an affectionate marriage, but one in which most forms of public pleasure, especially dancing, were forbidden. By the time my mother was nineteen she had twin babies, her rich and beautiful hair had thinned and turned mousy from the strain of childbirth, and she was living, in the aftermath of World War II, in a twenty-four-foot square cinder block basement with a flat, ground-level tar paper roof and no windows, electricity, or plumbing. So when the opportunity came, in her forties, to dance, she seized upon it extravagantly. For all I know, she even had a drink now and then. One day I drove her home from the hospital. She had undergone a radical mastectomy and was still weak and woozy, but she insisted she'd be just fine. When I called the next day to see how she was doing, she was in high spirits. She had been out dancing until three that morning. "I guess your old mother isn't dead yet!" she said. She had some kind of economic longing, too, for richer fare; for the last year of her life, until her body rejected food, and although there was a day, a neighbor recently told me, when she was down to her last stick of wood for the furnace, she ate a steak for dinner every night.

She laughed a lot, especially at her own jokes, always a bit too boisterously. I do the same, and so did my grandmother on my father's side. My grandmother

laughed with pleasure, but she also laughed whenever anything went wrong. The more dire the news, the harder she laughed, not that she thought travesty funny, but because she had a heavy sense of fate. When things went wrong, what else could you do? You could never tell, when my grandmother laughed, whether she was amused or unbearably sad. I am the same way. When I laugh, I hear the loud, ambiguous laughter of my mother and grandmother.

My father would have liked, I think, a life of greater adventure. He was the youngest of the five children in his family who lived past infancy, and the only male. His ancestors were Polish farmers, early followers of the Reformation who fled oppression in their own country, first settling around Berlin and then emigrating to the United States. My grandparents grew up in the rich farming country of northwest Iowa, too late to homestead; later in his life, because of an inheritance of my mother's, my father became the first Gruchow in his direct line to own land. Grandfather, as was the peasant custom, dutifully served his own father until his twenty-first birthday; on that morning, he married a German girl who did laundry for the wealthy folks who summered in the Iowa Great Lakes. On the afternoon of their wedding day, grandfather put up a load of hay while grandmother went off to do a load of wash. Perhaps they were shivareed that evening by friends and neighbors, but a honeymoon was out of the question. Eventually they migrated from Iowa to much poorer land in Minnesota, where they lived out their days as farmers on shares. In retirement, grandfather kept a few chickens and watched television; grandmother rubbered on the party telephone line, kept track of the comings and goings of the neighbors, and

read children's books, the only kind she could read. They were, I would say, happy; at least they never wanted or expected any other kind of life.

Although my father was a gifted student, he left school after the eighth grade to work, and he, like his father, worked at home without pay until he was twenty-one, when he married my mother, whom he had met at a roller skating rink. The couple settled in the neighborhood where they had been raised. There they remained for the rest of their lives, venturing beyond it, so far as I can recall, except for an occasional Sunday afternoon picnic, only five or six times: a honeymoon trip to the Black Hills, a trip one winter to New Orleans, a blueberrying venture in northern Minnesota, one or two trips to the state fair in St. Paul, and one to Minneapolis to attend my own wedding. My father owned two suits in his lifetime, the dapper double-breasted navy one he was married in and the gray polyester one he was buried in, and four cars, a Model A Ford, a Chevrolet, and two Studebakers. The last of the Studebakers, a pink Lark, stout and gaudy, was, I believe, the single material indulgence of his life. He gave something close to half the family income, after farm expenses, to the church. He had a keen awareness of the many people in the world who were less fortunate than he. This was not a decision about which the rest of the family was consulted, or one in which they would likely have concurred.

My father's dreams were centered on lost worlds. He was a romantic, not in the perverted sense in which the word is now customarily used—fanciful, impractical, unrealistic—but in the older sense: he was an idealist, attracted to the idea—so far from his own life—of adventure, a celebrant of nature, of the ordinary person, of freedom of spirit. To use the label "romantic" to

dismiss any idea currently out of fashion also means to condemn it for its devotion to principle rather than expediency, to ordinary human beings rather than to those who would exploit them, and to freedom from intellectual tyranny. I, like my father, am, in the old sense, romantic; I do not believe that idealism is a delusion.

The lost world of Atlantis fascinated my father. In this I suppose he was under the influence of Ignatius Donnelly, Minnesota's great agrarian rabble-rouser and sometimes crackpot scholar. So did the story of the Arcadians; his was the romance of pastoral peacefulness and simplicity. One still meets people like him in the countryside, people who have been to the city only once and thought that was one time too many, who feel awkward even in the big rural county seat towns, who abhor crowds, bustle, and fanciness, who might enjoy racing stock cars at county speedways on the weekends but are discombobulated by the aggressive swirl of traffic on urban free-for-all-ways—people perfectly content to be who they are and where they are. One also meets the same kind of person in cities, sometimes in high places, the sort of person who went to the countryside once for a weekend and thought to die of boredom, who shudders to imagine the cloying, stultifying, shabby meanness of life in the kind of hamlet where the only restaurant serves beef commercials and there isn't a good show or nightclub or store that sells a shirt not made in Taiwan in a hundred miles. The only difference between the two, really, is that one kind of person is thought to be a bumpkin, a hayseed, a hick, and the other is regarded as a sophisticate. What divides them, mainly, is not so much who they are as what they have.

My father was also inspired by the Cajuns, by the story of their lonely wanderings in search of a place to

live in peace, until at last they came to the bayous of Louisiana, a swampy land, teeming with snakes and alligators and mosquitoes, that nobody else wanted, and of how they made there a vibrant culture suitable to the place. Our solitary family trip out of state, to Louisiana, was, I now understand, a kind of pilgrimage. It is fashionable at the moment to reread this continent's settlement history as a morality tale: the venal avarice of the conquering horde. One such account that I happen to have on my desk describes "the European predilection to kill first and ask questions later." I doubt that this characterizes the average settler, who was, I think, an Old World failure in search not of a new world to conquer but of a refuge, a place with a few cows, a garden, a house of one's own, as far away from trouble as possible. The worst kind of sentimentality supposes that bad results generally flow from bad intentions. Often, our best intentions are the ones that confound us.

The refuge my father dreamed of was in Alaska, where it was still possible to homestead. *Alaska* magazine was the only one he ever subscribed to. My father often, as if it were an icon, displayed a photograph, gleaned from the magazine, of some huge cabbages growing in the Sitka Valley. He held them in the kind of regard that an art connoisseur might have for a rare oil by an Old Master. The place was, to him, never merely Alaska, but The Land of the Midnight Sun, where a person could live free and unencumbered, simply, off the land. As a practical matter, living off the land required a natural system still more or less intact. My father did not want to conquer the land, to build an empire, or to leave any legacy other than his example. He mocked the back-to-the-land hippies of my own generation, but not because he had any fundamental disagreement with their

dreams; it was their ineptness that bothered him. He, too, was a dreamer, but a dreamer who could build a house, fashion a tool out of scrap metal, prune an apple tree, shear a sheep, and hive a swarm of honey bees.

I was, I think, ten the afternoon I decided to act out my own dream. Mother was at a Ladies Aid meeting; I had only recently been released from the humiliation of having to accompany her. Dad was in the field. I gathered the quilt and pillow from my bed, stole a quart of dill pickles from the cellar, cut a cabbage and pulled some carrots from the garden and piled these onto the quilt, added a box of matches, an empty tin can, a length of fishing line, and a hook and bobber, gathered the ends of the blanket up into a bundle, and set off down the field road toward the slough.

The road, about a third of a mile long, skirted the plum thicket on the edge of the farmstead grove and then turned north along the property line toward the cattail marsh. The plums were still green, but there were a few ripe wild grapes, tart, mostly seeds and skin, as refreshing as lemonade. I picked a bunch, tucked them into my bundle, and trudged on down the lane, two narrow dirt tracks with a growth of weeds—plaintain, foxtail, pigeon grass—between. On both sides of the track towered rows of corn tall enough to hide a man, their ears just at the milk stage. I plucked foxtail stems as I walked and chewed on their sweet, succulent ends.

The field was level, good black prairie loam soil, all the way to the slight ridge that, even in winter, hid the marsh from view. Over the ridge, the land made a shallow basin, longer than wide, running northeast to southwest and draining at its southwestern end, when the water was high, into a tile; the slightly lower basin on the neighbor's land had already been drained. Ours

hadn't, I think, because Ed Will was too old to be interested in new capital investments.

The slough was oval; its shape was accentuated by the concentric rings of vegetation that defined it: row crops on the uplands; then a gray-green ring dominated by the weedier prairie plants: common milkweeds, goldenrods, sunflowers, prairie dock; in the dampest soils and shallowest waters, a few swamp milkweeds, cup plants, Joe Pye weeds; then the thickets of cattails and hidden among them the houses and hidden waterways of muskrats; and then the gray-blue, irregular oval of open water at the center of the marsh, which lasted into August only in the wet years. In the dry ones, the water evaporated away, the water plants shriveled up, and a lacy network of deep cracks, like the surface of an old china plate, opened in the marsh bottom, which had an ashen glaze of alkaline precipitates. In the driest years, one could go walking on the marsh bottom, stepping over its dark cracks, the shells of pond snails and the brown tubers of cattails crunching underfoot, a sound as arid as the landscape itself.

At the upper end of the pond, there was a woodpile, the remains of a big old cottonwood tree that had once grown there, in which I had trapped both a weasel and a skunk. Perhaps now in the August heat it sheltered a snake. I would have to go there later to investigate. But for the moment I was content to spread my quilt beneath the other cottonwood tree, the one still standing at the lower end of the pond, just beyond a small thicket of willows. I loved it for its ragged heights. As I lay there gazing up into the sky, it sometimes looked as if the tree would snag one of the cottonball clouds of prairie summer, so that I might, at last, climb up and get the feel of a cloud. I loved the cottonwood for its thickly textured bark, as

brown and furrowed as my grandfather's hands. I loved it for its heart-shaped leaves, clattering in the breeze on their petioles, making a sound like gentle summer rain. I loved it for its shade, the thin, dappled shade of a solitary tree, which admitted the sun in yellow patches, as through the panes of a window into an empty room on a quiet afternoon. It was the light and shade of close summer afternoons, slightly moist, warm as a blanket, lazy, accompanied in the background by the okaleeing of blackbirds and the musty smell of marshwater and the feel of damp earth between bare toes.

There was nothing better to do on such an afternoon in the shade of such a tree than nothing: the illicit sweetness of idleness when there was, as always, work that needed doing, work that would have to wait. Nothing to do instead but to wait and watch, to listen, to doze, to dream, to pluck apart the petals of a flower, to spy on leafhoppers and spittle bugs, to host a tree frog in the palm of a hand, to imitate the droning of a bumblebee, to anticipate the fall of a green leaf. Donald Hall reports, in *Life Work,* the meaning of happiness, as it was reported to him by an Indian acquaintance: *absorbedness.* I know, as much from boyhood afternoons at the marsh as from anything, what he meant: those brief moments in life when one is so occupied as to forget time, when time has become a translucent pair of wings.

I prided myself on my ability to tell the time by the sun. When I saw that it was after five o'clock, I made a meal: a wedge of the cabbage, a couple of the carrots, several dill pickles. I intended to forage for food and to try my hand at cookery, but these were efforts that might be made later, when I had settled in. The garden food, in any case, ought to be eaten while it was still fresh. I would have liked a glass of Kool Aid, I had to admit. The

meal was good and satisfying; if only I had thought to bring a tomato, too. Our garden flourished in an old pasture rich with the residue of animals. We gardened organically, and many of the seeds we planted were, we would say now, heirlooms, saved from the best plants of previous seasons, the ones prized for their vigor and for the intense flavor of their fruits. They were the end product of generations of discriminating selection. The sort of gardener I knew when I was growing up was a small-time plant breeder and, although the cooking was generally plain, an epicure: someone who judged a vegetable more by its taste than by its appearance. Our everyday kitchens were supplied, as I was for my purloined repast, with ingredients so fine that money could not buy them. Possessing such richness was one of the ways in which we were, although impecunious, rich.

After the meal, I climbed into the cottonwood tree, took a lofty seat with a view of the marsh, and settled in for the evening show. It was a show without much of a plot, although I never tired of it. The shadows lengthened; the light assumed a late, golden radiance; mama ducks took a turn around the pond with their cheeping chicks in tow; muskrats swam here and there, submerged except for the upper third of their heads, making brown arrows in the water from which their wakes spread like feathery tails; the evening showed its colors; twilight rose, as if out of the water, and spread like fog; the birds fell silent; the first stars came out; the crickets began to fiddle; and then there was the moon, its soft blue light floating upon the darkness of the submerged earth or held aloft upon the shimmering ostinato of the crickets, a sound that accentuated the silence.

I began to feel sorry for myself as the night and the silence deepened. Nobody had come looking for me.

Did this mean that I was not missed? Had no effort been made to find me? Perhaps days would pass before anybody noticed that I was not present. There would be some chore and nobody to do it, I supposed, and then somebody would finally look around and say, "You know, I haven't seen Paul lately, have you?"

"Now that you mention it, I don't think so."

"He always was one to disappear when there was work to do."

I, in the meantime, would be dead, drowned in the muck of the pond or struck by lightning in a passing thunderstorm, already bloated and starting to smell. There would be flies crawling in the sockets where my eyes had been. When they found me in that condition, they'd be sorry. Then there'd be a few tears for poor old unmissed Paul.

I was a little teary myself as I climbed down from the tree and wrapped myself in the quilt. My mother had made it of old flannel shirts and pajamas and worn-out overalls. There were twenty years of family history in that patchwork blanket, which had been mine for as long as I could remember. It felt good to be embraced in it now and to lay my head on a familiar pillow. I removed my eyeglasses and put them in the tin can for safekeeping. The bright drawbridge of the Milky Way dissolved into a vague glow. In a distant farmyard a dog barked.

I awoke in the dark hour just before dawn when the rabbits have come out to feed in the dewy grass, the owls are settling into their daytime roosts, and the songbirds have stirred and one at a time begun to sing, the hour of the day, in one strand of Native-American mythology, when all creatures sing to encourage the plants to drink the dew.

Nothing compelled me to rise from my bed beneath the cottonwood tree, and for a long time I didn't.

That was the first of hundreds of mornings that I have spent in out-of-the-way places, listening and watching as the dawn opens the day. When I arise in my house, brew a pot of coffee, read the morning newspapers, and go to my study to begin the day's work, I have submitted myself, usually pleasantly and productively, to the discipline of the clock. But there are other ways to follow time. One alternative is not to live hour by hour but moment by moment, understanding that a moment might last indeterminately, to live, that is, from experience to experience, as I do, perhaps instinctively, when I travel into nature. Dawn is one of the moments of this kind of time.

I had more practical considerations on my mind when I finally did get up. I needed to think about shelter. What would I do when it rained? When winter came? I walked around to the other end of the marsh to inspect the woodpile. Perhaps its pieces might be rearranged into some kind of hut. But that, I soon saw, was unlikely. I thought of a dugout such as the first white settlers in this country made, but the slopes in the vicinity of the marsh were gentle, the digging that would be required formidable, there was no prairie turf left with which to sod it, and I had neither a shovel nor the materials for making one. I could raise a teepee, but where would I find the skins, and how would I tan and sew them? The most logical solution, I thought, was to make a wigwam. The willows might be cut and bent to shape, and there were plenty of cattails from which mats for thatching might be fashioned. I cut an armful of cattail leaves, hauled them to my shelter beneath the cottonwood, and set to work. But the leaves were not as pliable as one would have thought—they had a tendency to crease when they were

bent too far—and when I had assembled a whole mat it was not clear to me how to bind it. In any case, it hardly looked waterproof; either there was a better way to do the weaving or one would need to make a daunting number of mats and layer them. I wasn't prepared for these technical difficulties. Fortunately, rain did not seem imminent, and winter was months away.

In the books I particularly admired at this stage of my life—*Robinson Crusoe, The Swiss Family Robinson, Huckleberry Finn*—such difficulties never seemed to emerge. The people who got shipwrecked on islands or floated away down rivers, apparently, were naturally handy; the right tool always just happened to be in the chest that had washed ashore and the places where they landed were amazingly rich in just the resources one needed to survive. My own thoughts, over a lunch of the remaining garden vegetables and the last of the pickles, turned not upon resourcefulness but thievery. I would have to sneak back to the farmyard in the night and help myself to a few supplies. If Crusoe could ransack ships, why couldn't I have a go at the toolshed? I'd return the stuff, of course, when I had finished with it.

After lunch I took a nap. I was a free boy now, and such luxuries were available to me. Then I needed to think about supper. My life as a hunter and gatherer had begun. My first thought was to catch a fish. I didn't much like fish, but it was the only game I was prepared to catch. I whittled a digging stick and poked around in the soft furrows of the cornfield until I exposed a couple of earthworms, baited my hook, and tossed it out into a muskrat channel. Later, I could see, I was going to have to make a raft. It was a quiet, warm afternoon and nothing much was stirring, but it was pleasant to sit there imagining the huge bullhead that was about to strike.

There weren't any bullheads in the marsh, as I might have known if I had thought about it. I would have done better to have gone after a mess of crayfish, which abounded there, but I didn't yet know how delicious they are, and I had a profound fear of things that snapped. Once when I was much younger I found a flashlight bulb in a dresser drawer I had been told to stay out of and managed to swallow it. The next time I rummaged in that drawer, despite being sharply forbidden to do so by my mother, I got my fingers caught in the mousetrap that had been set there to teach me a lesson. Not only didn't I forget it, but it was years before I dared to get close again to anything that snapped. My grandmother had a case with a spring-loaded lid in which she kept her eyeglasses. I was terrified of it.

Eventually I despaired of catching a fish for my evening meal. What else might I find? Some corn. I went up into the field and picked a couple of ears. And frog legs! Why hadn't I thought of them before? They were, I had heard, a delicacy. If there is one thing a country boy knows, it is how to catch frogs. In short order, I had pounced upon two big leopard frogs and slaughtered them. After that, I was at a loss. Should one cook the whole carcass? Just the legs? Should they be skinned? How should they be cooked? The possibilities were mercifully limited. I severed the legs, found it difficult to get a grip on anything so small and slick, and so concluded that they must be cooked unskinned, boiled, obviously, since the only utensil I had was the tin can. I would have to think later how to pilfer a skillet. I made a fire, brought a bit of water to boil in the can, and dropped in the legs. While they cooked, I ate the raw corn. It was surprisingly good, I thought, even without salt and butter. Then I considered the legs, which had shriveled to

almost nothing and turned an awful shade of gray. I poked at one of them with my knife, extracted a bit of flesh, swallowed it without tasting, and gagged anyway. Perhaps I didn't want to eat dead frog legs after all.

This knowledge depressed me deeply. I could not have said what I was depressed about, but it was the realization that my escape into the wilderness of the slough was not practical, that the place was, rich as it seemed, too narrow in its resources to sustain me, and that I was unequipped to take advantage of even the resources it did offer. I had dreamed of a retreat into a world long past, but it was the present world, I saw, in which I would have to make my way.

I sat beneath the cottonwood tree as the dusk rose again from the earth and spread like smoke. I cut a length of green willow branch, as my grandfather had shown me, worked its bark loose and slipped it off, carved an airway and a series of sound chambers in the naked stem, made finger holes in the bark, and slipped it back onto the stem. With my crude flute I joined the blackbirds in a song to welcome the night.

Later, in the light of the moon, I gathered my things into the folds of the quilt, slung the bundle over my shoulder, and made my melancholy way back to the house. I felt sheepish when I arrived at the breakfast table the next morning and was relieved to be welcomed as if I had never been away. My parents, I realized, knew where I had been all along. I had been out hunting for the way home.

Ed Will's farm survives, of course—in the midlands, land does not appear or vanish in a human lifetime. But it is now a kind of desert. The fencerows are gone. The house is gone. The marsh is gone. It was underlain with

plastic drain tiles that now siphon its waters into a nearby drainage ditch, which carries them to the Minnesota River, which is connected to the Mississippi River, taking the fertile waters I once knew directly to the sea. The tile intakes in the bottom of the old marsh are marked by steel fence posts on which white plastic petroleum and chemical bottles hang, making them visible to the operators of the big machines that turn its soil. On the rises above the marsh the soils are now thin enough that the moldboards of the plows bring yellow patches of clay to the surface. The waterfowl are gone, the raptors are gone, the burrowing animals are gone, the predators and herbivores are gone. The insects that remain are learning to become specialists in the two or three domestic crops that now grow there. Some of them, like the grasshoppers, come and go in plagues. All across the township, the domestic animals are gone and the few barns that still stand are slowly imploding from their own weight. Last season, the whole 160 acres of what used to be our farm was planted with a single crop—corn.

There is hardly a desert so barren. I went walking once on a ranch in the Sonoran Desert, where it takes four or five farms the size of the one we had to raise a single cow. It was, in comparison, an oasis, supporting even a few mosquitoes; how, I cannot imagine. It ought to go without saying, but doesn't, that the people are gone from our farms, too. Do we think that we can plow a piece of land to its last square inch without also uprooting ourselves? Do we think that we are machines too?

If there is no one left to witness the way from Section 28, Rosewood Township, into the wide universe—and there scarcely is—does the connection still exist?