

REMAPPING THE HOMEPLACE

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USUALLY I ENJOYED watching the land change as I drove north from Iowa City to visit my folks in Iowa Falls. I shunned Interstate 80 and opted to zigzag northwestward on two-lane highways and county blacktops where, if I paid attention, I might catch sight of a deer at evening or see a soaring red-tailed hawk hunting over the open fields. I made the trip several times a year, but I made a special effort to go twice in the early spring. Once just as the leaves formed a blurry green halo around the crowns of the trees and again when the furrows, plowed to rich darkness, gleamed with the pale green of newly sprouted corn or beans. The rolling hills of pasture around Iowa City looked like freshly trimmed golf greens or the verdant landscapes of Grant Wood. Near Tama the hills become more pronounced with long steep rises and sharp, swooping descents reminiscent of old toboggan runs. Turn north out of Toledo, top that final rise, and the land drops away. The endless expanse of the glaciated plains extends to the horizon. In the spring when the weeds have not yet taken over the fence rows, the vista is broken only by lines of trees along the rivers and creekbeds and by the already thick growth of the waterways left uncultivated by farmers to promote drainage and check erosion. The brilliant blue sky competes with the greens for vividness. By late July the land is overgrown with a hundred shades of green all tangled into indistinguishable lushness. The corn and beans have bushed out over the tilled soil, covering the dark colors. Gradually the blues and pinks of spring wild flowers are mixed with shades of gold as the mustard and coneflowers bloom and autumn beiges and browns of dying grasses creep into the landscape.

Thanksgiving takes me home as the harvest ends and the land emerges again, its true shape once more visible as the heavy metal of the combines have chopped the crop rows into stubble. Naked, the land waits for snow. December takes the color out. Winter is gray

and cold. The birds desert the open country—only a few hardy crows or blackbirds fly against the monochromatic background.

The winter of 1980 was a particularly cold, although not very snowy, winter. I prepared to make the trip home for Christmas. Being in Iowa Falls for Christmas, surrounded by my sisters, my parents, and the seasonal smells and food, was an obsession with me. The morning I planned to leave, the weather bulletins reported limited visibility and wind-chill temperatures of ninety below zero. Travel was not recommended. Unwilling to give up my trip, I decided that I could not go anywhere unless the car started; I knew full well that my car disliked the cold and usually refused to start if the temperature dropped more than five degrees overnight. Depressed with the thought of being stranded by myself on the edge of Iowa City, I bundled up and went outside to start my car. But the Pontiac started and the thought of not traveling home on that Christmas Eve day did not cross my mind again. I threw my presents and a spare blanket into the back seat and started on my way.

I should never have left Iowa City. The wind whipped snow across the road in a continuous blur that limited visibility to a quarter mile. Each time I drove from behind a sheltering hill, the wind caught the car and pushed it over the center line. A thirty-mile-an-hour gale whistled in around the windows and blew the heat out. Every now and then I saw cars on the shoulders of the road—diesel Rabbits with their fuel jelled. Gradually the cold seeped inside my coat and drained away the last envelope of warmth. With it went my sense of well-being. I thought I was so familiar with the route home that I could drive it blind-folded, but the blowing snow obscured my landmarks and disoriented me. I gave up my usual cross-country tour, kept to the main highways, and strained to read the signs that would turn me toward Iowa Falls.

The southern part of the state had had very little snow and the flakes that filled the air were hard and dry. It was like driving in a sand storm. A handful of snow accumulated on the back seat where it blew in through a cracked door gasket. I worked my way west and north to Marshalltown and stopped for a cup of coffee and to warm my feet. The Country Kitchen was hushed and tense. As I drove west out of Marshalltown I realized I was meeting far fewer cars than before. It was a relief not to be continually blinded by the swirling snow kicked up by each passing vehicle but the deserted roads brought to mind isolation and its consequences. I did not want to think about it but I always returned to the question “how long would it take before help arrived if I slid off the road?” The tension did not lessen when I drove over a hill and nearly ran into the back of a semi-trailer truck

stopped—stalled—in the center of the road. The warning flags marking it on either side were nearly obscured by snow. As I turned north at Colo the car rolled over what sounded like the body of an animal. Looking behind in the rear-view mirror I saw nothing but snow. All winter this part of the state had had more snow. Even the ditches were filled in and now long tongues of snow lay across the pavement with the regularity of railroad ties. The farther from Colo I traveled the more drifted the road became until I was moving down the center of the road just to keep one set of wheels touching asphalt. The three hour trip had already taken four and a half. I convinced myself it wasn't much farther. Zearing 11 miles, Iowa Falls 38 miles the sign said. Hubbard was the only town in that middle 28 miles.

The town of Zearing was a mile off the road, but the Casey's sat right on Highway 65. Out front were two cars, their motors still running. I went in to talk to anyone coming from the north. Someone would know about the road conditions farther on. The two cars were traveling together. A couple from Hubbard who had gone to get their daughter from school in Ames were in one car, and a twenty-year-old, Todd Lindaman, was in the other going home to Hubbard after an overnight in Ames. The two vehicles had met up in Ellsworth as they tried to get into Hubbard on a county blacktop. It had been blocked by an accident and drifted snow, and this was the last leg of their alternate route.

I asked if there was a motel or any place to stay in Zearing. The clerk laughed. "I don't think there has ever been a motel in this town. Who would want to stay here except on a day like this?" The people from Hubbard chuckled. They apparently knew Zearing. Todd said that I was welcome to stay with his folks if we got to Hubbard. The other couple was encouraging, "Elaine and Ken will be glad to put you up."

My toes were still cold, but my nose and hands were comfortable again. We decided I would follow the other two cars caravan-style. A snowplow rumbled by going south and the electrical line crew that was following it pulled into the Casey's. "What are the roads like up ahead?" we asked.

"What roads?" answered one of the electricians.

"They can't be too bad if they were just plowed."

"Highway 65 is closed just north of Hubbard. Two semis jack-knifed and are drifted in."

The disappointment that I wouldn't be able to reach home today quickly faded. If I went on I had a place to sleep which was more than I had if I stayed here in Zearing. Suddenly I wanted warmth and safety more than I wanted to be home.

As we pulled further away from the Casey's oasis the Pontiac

wallowed in each drift. The plow had cut a single lane down the center of the road, but after ten minutes I could not tell that a plow had been through at all. I focused on the dim red glow from the tail lights of the Lindaman car and lined up my hood ornament with the cuts in the snow left by his tires.

The tail lights seemed to be getting further and further away and the fear of being left behind crept in. I stepped on the accelerator, pulled too close, and a swirl of blowing snow erased the faint glow of my beacon. The Pontiac slid sideways and stopped. I rocked the car back and forth between reverse and drive, but it was stuck in the drift. Todd jumped out of his car, came back part way, and yelled "Let's go. I don't want to get too far behind." As I ran toward the white car that was nearly hidden with blowing snow I realized how fragile I'd suddenly become. Fighting for each yard I gained against the wind, I thought how easy it would be to die. If I fell down and was unable to get up it would only be a matter of minutes before I was covered with snow. The wind came in around the hood of my coat and blew it off, baring my head, and forcing me to struggle awkwardly toward the car with my mittens over my ears. Even safely inside the plush interior of the Lindaman LTD I could hear the wind in my ears.

The remaining six miles to Hubbard passed quickly and we soon stood inside the Lindaman family grocery store. I sat in the back room rubbing warmth back into my feet and listening as Todd called the highway patrol about my abandoned car. Father and son swapped the weather and travel stories heard from the locals who had been into the store that day. They asked little about me and I was content to sit in warmth. I called my mother to let her know where I was and she told me another of my sisters was stranded just east of Iowa Falls in the small town of Ackley. We agreed there was nothing to be done until the wind stopped and the plows were out on the roads again. Recovered and restless I walked out into the store. My ears were beginning to burn. I'd frostbitten them in the two minutes I'd been outside the car.

"She's stranded. The curve on 65 is drifted shut and the snow is blowing so bad the snowplows have been pulled off the roads." I heard at least twenty variations on this conversation. As the storm worsened, people came into Lindaman's grocery in four-wheel drive vehicles or on snowmobiles to stock up on bread and milk just in case they got snowed in for a couple of days. If they commented on the ninety below wind chill or the impassable blacktops (the topic for the day), the cashier nodded her head in my direction and said, "She's stranded."

It seemed like the wind and the snow had conspired all day to isolate

me from places I found familiar, even the familiar sweep of the land that I found comforting. I wanted to join the small talk, but a hundred and fifty miles of cold and worry left me mentally and physically numb. I searched my memory for anything or anyone I knew from Hubbard. I had once tended bar with the son of the local implement dealer and the plumber's daughter had been the student secretary of the small college where my father taught. But neither of those people now lived in town, and I was caught up on all the news about them in five minutes. The name that kept coming up was that of my sister's father-in-law, yet I barely knew him.

"You know Arnold Broer. This woman's sister is married to Arnold's boy." The cashier turned a little in my direction as if to invite me into the conversation with the man in the insulated coveralls. "Arnold Broer. He farms the ground on highway 65 just south of the Owasa corner." From the tone of his voice I could tell that the man in the coveralls did not have a strong image of Arnold, but he knew the Broer farm, even though it was some twelve miles from here and probably many more miles from his own land. It should not have surprised me. While people in my Iowa City neighborhood are unusual if they know more than their immediate neighbors, rural people, with miles between them, seem to map whole counties in their heads and connect local faces and events to those maps. The land is the important thing. The families that work the ground come and go, but the land remains. When Jack Simm sold out, Arnold bought up the fields that abutted his own place and bulldozed and buried the house and buildings. Yet that long narrow strip (a trick to plant and with low places that fill with water in a wet spring) is still called the Simm's place. When farmers refer to the Simm's place it brings to mind the problems of the ground as well as its owner and location.

"Yes it's the green ranch-style house and white out buildings on the west side of the road there." I betrayed my more urban bias by identifying the buildings rather than referring to the number of acres and naming the farmers on the surrounding land. As I thought about Mike and Faye's place I realized I was imagining it with the spring freshness when the hyacinths, crocuses and tulips—all of the bulb flowers—were in bloom. I'd stopped by there just a month ago when they were harvesting, yet when I called the farm from memory it was as if I hadn't been there since May. In weather like this the white buildings would disappear against the backdrop of white drifts and gray-white sky. This time of year the landmark on their farm was the windbreak of tall spruce that filled with snow and sheltered the north and west sides of the house.

"That's the homeplace, but his boy, Mike, farms it now. Arnold just

built a new house in Iowa Falls.” The homeplace. This is where it all started. Arnold had purchased several other fields, like Simm’s, since he began farming, but the original farmstead with the well-kept buildings—that was the homeplace. Arnold had retired. That meant he served as farmhand for planting and harvest, and consultant for the buying of land or livestock, the selling of grain and hogs, and the planning for the future. Gradually Mike will buy the ground, but the farm will be called Arnold Broer’s until that label no longer brings this land to mind for a new generation of farmers. The older people born, schooled, married, and growing old in the same township recite family names like biblical genealogies. Few of them still apply.

“Is that right.” The man in the green insulated coveralls looked at me critically with eyes that were used to sizing up livestock in the sale barn. “So your sister is married to Arnold’s boy. That’s a pretty good piece of land he’s got there.” He turned back to talk about the weather with the cashier. He had pegged me in the way that was most meaningful to him. I was connected to the Broer homeplace. The respect he had for Broer’s farm was passed on to me—within the social conventions of family, I was mapped with the land.

Later that evening as I helped Elaine clean up the supper dishes, I struggled to think of a topic of conversation that would keep away the uncomfortable silences. We had exhausted talk of the cold, the wind, the storm and how the town was handling it. All of the forty-six people stranded by the storm had been fed in the Methodist church hall and had been taken in by families around town. My car, with the Christmas packages still sitting on the back seat, had been pulled out of the drifted highway by local farmers who had come into the grocery store looking for a little news or company and had helped me out. Now I could only wait until the plows had cleared the road. I would be home for Christmas dinner. “Do you travel much?” I finally asked Elaine.

“Only on weekends. It’s hard to get Ken away from the store. He always says that he works a sixty-hour week to empty his ‘in’ box for a week’s vacation and when he gets back six weeks worth of work is piled up and waiting for him. Not that I blame him. I just wish that sometimes he would leave it. Last summer my sister and her husband invited us to go to Germany with them. Ken told me to go ahead, but I knew I wouldn’t enjoy touring Germany while he was here working.” She paused to examine where this conversation might go next. “My sister is working on the family tree.”

As Elaine understood it, about a hundred years ago the area around Wellsburg, Ken and Elaine’s hometown northeast of Hubbard, was settled by German homesteaders from Friedberg, Bavaria. In her

search for genealogical ties, Elaine's sister had written a letter to Friedberg in care of a cousin she thought might still be living there. She got a wonderful letter in reply filled with new information about her great-grandfather, inquires from the townspeople about lost brothers and sisters who may or may not have settled in the area, and invitations to stay with people in Friedburg if she wanted to visit. She needed no other encouragement. When she came back she brought letters from German families looking for still more lost cousins, pictures of the family, the church, and the homeplace. Elaine had them framed on the wall. Fenced with stone walls, the garden-sized patches would never be mistaken for wide-open Iowa fields, but by imagining the land without the walls, in unbroken square miles, the land had a familiar look to it. "It looks so neat and orderly doesn't it? I would still like to go there someday." Elaine connected herself to a homeplace thousands of miles from where she had lived her whole life. I thought of the immigrants, leaving most of their friends and family behind, heading out for a new place they had only heard about and building new homes where the land looked familiar. How long did they live here until they called these new farms homeplaces?

All day I had watched other people connect me to their maps with their own associations—too tired to build a different image of myself for them, too dependent on their goodwill to challenge one of the things that made me welcome. But I have my own connections, my own interiors, my own landscapes. I have been a transient so long that I really have no homeplace, no small piece of land where I know every dip and curve, every marshy or rocky foothold. Perhaps that is what we give up when we no longer work the land. I was stranded between places that were important to me, two homes, but neither was the place where my grandparents lived and worked, neither was the backdrop for the family stories that are woven across generations, neither held decades of my own memories—time had not melded events with the land to create a homeplace.

As I crawled into the bed that Elaine had turned down for me, I oriented myself to the strange bedroom. My left hand touched the lamp. When I turned off the light the dresser became a tall shadow at the foot of the bed. In my mind I walked though the house. The bathroom was out the door to the right. I could tell this bedroom was over the dining room where Ken and Elaine sat talking over a cup of Christmas eggnog, their muffled voices coming up through the floor.

Too wound up to sleep, I turned on the light and reached for the novel I had brought along. Each time I prepared for a trip home I packed a book and each time I barely touched it. Late night talks with the family left very few hours for reading. But travelling, like moving,

disorients me. So many times after my family had moved, I would sit in my new room surrounded by a few boxes of my books, trying to hold on to that euphoric anticipation of the new place that had buoyed my spirits as the lonely reality of having been stripped of everything familiar kept creeping in to my thoughts. By simply opening the covers of my books I discovered that not everything had changed. The countryside of Grimm's fairy tales was still peopled with dragons and enchanted princesses, the Cat in the Hat still worked his pranks in the imaginary landscape of Dr. Seuss, and the large brown and orange moth on a page of Zim's Guide to Insects was still labelled cecropia moth.

Tonight as I opened my novel and began reading, a landscape came to mind—an old stage cluttered with familiar sets and props. As the author set the scene I spun together bits and pieces of the scenery from the early spring trip northward, the Panora neighborhood where I did some growing up, and the sunny kitchen from a house I lived in at What Cheer. Their realities were softened, simplified by time and embellished with imaginary touches. I read quite late that night to finish my novel. It seemed important to weave a whole imaginary world complete with breathing characters as if that newly constructed homeplace would shut out the blowing wind and soothe the burning of my frostbitten ears.