

## COTTAGE LIFE

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*Hilary Siebert*

PIECES ARE ALL there are to start from: the pieces of an apple orchard beside the cottage where my father lived the last two years of his life—and the fields with their wild strawberries beneath the blowing stalks of grass—and the woods filled with old things. Woods always have an old feel to them if their trees are of any substantial size; this woods, these groves of woods ranging between the fields, had a very tentative atmosphere about them. The trees were not quite old enough to look as though the land they grew on was truly theirs. Looking at them I always felt that only some unknown benevolence had allowed them to reclaim an area of plowed fields, and had spared them from the machinations of corporate developers who were seeking any and all land for soon-to-be-suburban housing developments—one image reduplicated on a massive scale so that anyone might purchase a life-style at the expense of the lives already there. But the trees: it was their types that made them old, and the range of their varieties—Cedars at the edges, Oaks, Maples, Beeches, and Shagbark Hickories within—although most seemed scarcely 25 or 30 years old, improbable children of economic changes after the Second World War. They were taking hold. And still, signs of battle lay around them: milk pails, now reduced to all but elemental iron skeletons, strewn fence wires lanced to abandoned trees, and miniature garbage dumps of old things that belonged to no one and to nothing—except the old glass bottles, buried in the earth, showing hulls of shifting hues to anyone wishing to salvage them, to show them in a new light as “antiques.” Trouble was, most of them were garbage.

I can't tell you about my father or his cottage without telling you about his orchard. It wasn't *his* orchard. It also wasn't the neighbor's orchard. Nor was it the landowner's orchard. It was no one's orchard, the kind you see along the highway, overladen with the fruit of unpruned branches, about to fall at any time, but perhaps never. The

tenants in the main house had gone. They had moved to Wisconsin. Like many Midwesterners they were family people, when it came to their own family. Before they left they sold the cider press, sold my father the air conditioner that had always sat anonymously in his rented bedroom window, and pitied the orchard aloud to him. He pitied it too: that's why he liked it—it was common ground. Yet, he was not one to go roaming wildly in an orchard. For him, it was a wistful image to live in. An image of blossoms on weathered boughs in the spring, and in the fall an image of expectant colors, yellow, red, green, and all the dappled mixtures that make apple trees fruitful—lasting for the eye until Christmas, and longer if he'd moved in on them, gathering and sorting the good ones from the wormy ones, the eating apples from the cider apples.

I think it is because my father cared for the little world around him that I began to care for it, as soon as I visited him there for the first time, freshly divorced and cast out from a life with my mother. He was the one divorced from my mother—that's what I meant to say; but in a way, I'd used the opportunity to get an emotional separation from her motherly clutches. That meant finding a place that would engage me with its silence. Living in a world always bordering on the noisy accusations of the urban, I welcomed the borders of the rural.

Moving into my father's little world, I noticed how he cared about it but still did not trust its permanence enough to care for it, to physically nurture it. That's what I wanted to do, and what I wanted him to do. Put the orchard back in order, put the downspout on the cottage back together. Yet that was not our place, these things were not ours to own. Not the cottage, and certainly not the land, which was then up for sale, one hundred or so acres for close to four hundred thousand dollars, not the ancient colonial house next door, included in the deal, living out its final years with ruinous renters paying ruinous rents, not the sights, not the smells, but maybe the memories of all these things. Memories are hard not to own, hard not to own up to. Experience, your own experience, is certainly something you own. It becomes the tacit kind of ownership created in the physical, empirical occupation of space, not a legal possession but the possession of sensation, and the memories of the senses. So, of course, the apple blossoms *were* ours, bemoan them as we would. Ours too were the problems of the downspout, and I wish I could see as my father did the spectacle of my standing atop a 15-foot ladder, enacting the industry I constantly advocated, trying to reattach the downspout, when a block of concrete fell off the roof, onto my head, and bounced off, sending my father into uncontrolled fits of laughter, perhaps because I hadn't screamed, perhaps because it was an image from a

slapstick movie, perhaps because the whole project was futile.

Money or no money, my father could not invest himself in the land. He could not get out into it and make it his, with plants, with cultivation, with tillage—so he said. But it was his for a short time, at least to idealize, to gaze upon when he returned each day from big business, until the lease ran out, two years, or until the place was sold. Too bad he didn't quite last that long himself, I thought, when I returned home one March from college life in Iowa to this cottage life in New Jersey. Not that I thought of it in that exact way, I didn't think of metaphysical leases—but rather, it seemed to me that everything in my world was ending even before the brief time appointed for it. And not just because my father had died, but because he had lived a struggling two years on land that was about to die, about to be boxed up and buried along with him—with him at least in spirit—for some inconceivable eternity. The lives, the hundreds or millions of lives of nature that filled this little world of his were the only forces that could stand up for me and cry out with my voice for a world I could stand to see, and stand to live in. And it was as though with each voice, each wild strawberry blossom, each wild field covered with wild strawberries, each field with its borders lined by blowing flowers, each border outlining a small wood with nuts and ivy and curious recesses, all the voices should have been loud enough—or subtle and seductive enough—even without the birdcalls, to coax nature's own human creatures into conversation with them. Was there really a time when people looked at a flower as a "forget-me-not," and wrote poems to a violet that had been crushed underfoot? These trysts with nature were long gone. And if they seemed too sentimental, as the charms of love can inspire distant and sentimental manners, why were there no new manners to allow an exchange of voices? People still seemed to long for a meeting with someone or something out there, but now they were looking much farther—they'd lost even the notion of a horizon they could meet—something had gone wrong, they just kept on truckin', as though they'd missed the rest stop, as though seeking had become a habit in itself, and the waysides that could bring peace or a pause along the way had been forgotten beneath the droning roar of the tire. As in these woods, as in this cottage, shaken by the ubiquitous echo of the distant highway that emerged every night out of the evening's still sounds, a demonic presence that penetrated the night-time spaces, proclaiming itself against anyone's efforts to forget that everything existed only elsewhere. So that when I returned to what had been home for my father, and was more a home to me than anywhere else, faced with the task of putting his life away, in a place I myself hated to abandon, knowing what its fate would be, my

apocalyptic paranoia—if that is a fair term to use for it—began to accelerate and to fill me.

Instead of cultivating nature, my father had fashioned the interior world of his rented cottage. The external pieces of life outside yielded to the haphazard order of slate flagstones that led within to more intimate parts, to the carefully chosen furnishings of a country gentleman. The kitchen, with its polished pans, and European provincial dishes, old in their very nature more than in time, often just two or four of a kind, remnants, with designs of folk art; the slanted roof that allowed you to hit your head on one side of it reminded you that the kitchen had not been a kitchen, and that the cottage had formerly been a mere “carriage house,” the caretaker’s residence. In the small, adjoining living room, if you took careful notice of the ceiling, the large, rough-cut but smoothly finished beams were apparent; below that room, if you chanced to go to the cellar, not for roots but to fix the hot water, you saw the raw cedar cross-beams that held up the livingroom floor. The livingroom itself was a harmony of mahogany and walnut furniture, blended with lamps, candlesticks, and china, each piece selected by my father for itself, and for the companionship it lent its surroundings. A man and a woman gazed gravely at one another from their frames at opposite ends of the room.

When I first entered the cottage and examined the last, most recent signs of the life that had been, I felt a power coming from the objects, the pieces that felt their way together into a representation of my father’s life. I tried for an hour or so to willfully put things out of order. I tried in a forceful and almost destructive way to tell myself and to tell the damned things to “get lost”; I wanted to put them out of their misery as soon as possible by making it clear I was arranging them for the pragmatic fate of boxes and storage containers, where only size is important, and looks don’t count. I sent them packing, helter-skelter. The air of the cottage was electrified with the charge of constituent parts, cast into disarray, looking to reorient themselves. Old tables that were no longer “his” began to take on more qualities of their own, and I began to wonder what those qualities were, and what they might mean to me. Yet, there was a countervailing force in me that refused to recognize “my father’s” things for my own, for to do so was to completely destroy his presence. What I could feel of him in these things was finally something I could not let myself destroy. I wanted to somehow appropriate the objects along with the spirit of their old attachments, and so keep them bound together in a way that would preserve my father’s life within them. At some point in this confusion, a poem began murmuring its way through my mind. When

I had recalled a line or two, and remembered its author as Emily Dickinson, I had only to locate the book of her poems on the shelves in the room, and sift through a few pages to find it:

The bustle in a house  
The morning after death  
Is solemnest of industries  
Enacted upon earth,—

The sweeping up the heart,  
And putting love away  
We shall not want to use again  
Until eternity.

Some poems really hit the spot in the right context. Having naturally sentimental inclinations, the poem overwhelmed me and I must have read and reread it and recited it to myself hundreds of times in the month it took me to pack up my father's life for some indefinite future. The way she gave you a future suddenly at the end of the poem for those feelings that seemed stripped of all earthly weight, as though you had to either kill them or die with them—she didn't really *give* you a context for them, but let one hover in front of your eyes, approaching and receding with hope and despair, an offer you could neither quite trust nor quite doubt. "Until" gives it to you, and "eternity" almost takes it back. I don't understand how the poem reads so quickly and matter-of-factly now before my eyes, when at the time each sound pounded into my ears, measuring out for me a voice in answer to the swirling silence of my life there among those things.

When I finally had packed—and was forced by others to pack—my father's things away, I still could not conceive of them for myself at all, except as points that mapped the landscape of a world I shared with him—that was vanishing. A landscape of old china, old books, old engravings, old fields, and old woods in an old cottage in New Jersey. The territory indoors was finally taken care of, and finished off with a few Polaroid snapshots in color for insurance purposes, for the goods. But the space outdoors, because it was less limited and less intimate, was more mine to deal with, it had always been more mine than my father's, more a place of my own traces and conversations. The woods and fields and even the orchard were part of a larger, continuing dialogue, begun in New York City with hedges, and expanded with the trees and mountains of a woodland hollow in Vermont. I'd started quite young with plants, talking to the Forsythia

and promising it that I'd rip the last Morning Glory vine off its twigs as a personal favor, because the vines stunk and we both knew it. At summer camp, I was taught how to carve trees into totem-poles with faces you could talk to and noses you could rub for wishes. By the time my father died, I think I must have already given up talking to plants with my voice, I was over twenty years old, but they had not given up talking back, in whatever way it was they had of talking.

This was what had created the dialogue, and sometimes now it was the self-dialogue of mute wanderings and gazings, but other times I knew it was more than that, as when you glance at another creature and your gaze is returned in a moment's recognition, a moment's provocation. It takes the patience of something like a photograph to isolate such glances, and usually there is too much that gets lost in transferring the world before the lens of the camera to the paper beneath the lens of the darkroom enlarger.

I had no more Polaroid film for the outside of the cottage in any case. And even if I'd had a more reasonable camera, with black and white film, I was in no mood for outdoor photo essays. The two bee hives, the only domestic goods my father had left outside, squatting beside one another like little huts, were now gone too. That close to the workings of nature he had finally come, though timidly, and in his gentlemanly way. I think his idea must have been that the bees would go out and explore the flowers and the fields for him, since they like the outdoors too, and were much more inclined to go out for a ramble. I had tried talking to the bees when I first returned to the cottage. It was instinct and need that made me go out to them, need because there was no one else around, and instinct because as I later read in his books of bee lore, I was performing what amounted to my filial duty to inform the bees that their keeper had died. That way they know what's going on and they know not to swarm off; all you've got to do is tell them there's been a change in management, and—especially if it stays in the family—they don't really mind. Maybe its one of those odd situations where they already know, but if you don't tell them you know they know, they get worried and think of leaving. But before I got to them that first day I was home, I got to the sight of a groundhog, lying dead, about two feet in front of the hives. He must have seen quite a shadow that winter. And when I pleaded my case to the bees I found only the consolation of knowing they were kindred spirits: they too were dead. Field mice were feeding on their remains. I wondered for a moment whether it was my father or the bees who had died first; the groundhog I couldn't figure out—all I could see was that it was stiff in the warm air. I buried it and went back inside. The hives themselves I cleaned and packed later.

After packing and moving the goods for so many weeks, it felt odd to be about done with it. I had no more claims on the place, not on the cottage, and not on the land. It felt odd to turn my back, but my own plans led me elsewhere, back across the mountains to Iowa, or rather, over the mountains in an airplane, I wouldn't even see them. The best photographs I had taken by the cottage in the past called to mind details of the spaces and places I now saw around me out there, and it was nice to feel Spring come to the land in New Jersey, to the layers of the Hickory's shagbark as it climbed shag by shag to the sky, the birds above, the wildflowers below, the leaves still matted on slivers of ice in the little brook that tinkled down through the woods and then between the fields. Iowa would not be like that, its spaces lacked detail, except along the railroad tracks leading out of every town, nice enough places to walk and maybe scare up a pheasant. But beyond the distance of a few yards looking out from those tracks, the details diminished rapidly, leaving gaping space, especially at this time of year: a general, rough texture of earth in clods, maybe the lines of furrows, but beyond that, nothing, unless a house enclosed by evergreens and a limping windmill came finally into view, or the call and red wing of a blackbird. Out on the tracks, the "middle of nowhere" in Iowa had no woods, no valleys, no pathways—no paths for the *eye* in any case, the tracks were only a mechanical path, meant for the machine that moved steadfastly over its surface. The bare, black earth heaving toward the horizon in a curve, almost above the horizon, as you search the distance.