

The Stage

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I live in the kitchen. It's a small room, (96 square feet to be precise) but dutifully equipped with everything I need. In one corner beneath an ink drawing of a live oak sits a small handmade table with a sturdy granite top. The laws of entropy have proven to be unbreakable as it has gradually become a frowzy heap. A relative of mine would quickly recognize the mountain of envelopes, newspaper, some drossy coins (mostly nickels and pennies- useless), clusters of usb cables, a futuristic external hard drive named Zbornak, an iPod, Betty which, as of today is filled with clumps of grainy detergent and minerals- just another careless victim of a washing machine drowning, a phone charger, a wounded laptop whose battery is completely dead and must now run on ac power thus rendering it a desktop, a glass bowl overflowing with navel oranges and Fuji apples, a spanking new pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses, a set of keys that I can't afford to lose, two pencils (one with no eraser and the other with a broken tip) and a virginal ream of staff paper, as objects that have all accompanied me from their mile-high particle board roost just east of the Rockies.

I sleep on the lower half of a child's bunk bed inside a thermal cocoon that I believe is cohabitated by a demon spider which gorges itself upon the bucolic blood of my calves while I feel nothing. The other farmhand had the top bunk for a week, but after winning the log sawing duel he moved upstairs and now I use the bare box spring illustrated with mauve stegosauruses and beryl pterodactyls as a hamper and guitar stand. The bed itself is too small for me, or I should say that I'm too tall for such a diminutive den of repose, thus I'm constantly banging my head against the wooden planks when I get up in the morning.

The room has a small north facing window and is not visited by direct sunlight. It's tiled and perpetually cold, though an electric radiator quickly toasts it in the morning. I forgot to bring an alarm clock, but the comparatively incessant cries of the local party of jays and a particularly punctilious rooster are a perfectly suitable substitute. There is another room upstairs which I could move into at any time, but having a kitchen in my bedroom is much too convenient to relinquish. I have all of the necessary amenities: a two-basin sink, cupboards stocked with dishes and utensils, an electric range that heats up almost as fast as a microwave while simultaneously contributing warmth and a small refrigerator just big enough to make my meager provisions look like a smorgasbord.

My cave is on the ground floor of the barn. The bathroom is next door and retains a perpetual humid characteristic. The toilet seat is made for a dwarf and poses something of a problem for a male determined to maintain a strict sanitary posture. I have since given up on that facet of hygiene. I was tentative to use the shower for the first week due a swarm of impudent crane flies that hangs around, crashing like winos against the mirror and blue plaster slung on the walls. I now disregard these innocuous skeeter eaters and let them fend for themselves against the steam and scorching hot spray.

Last week there were a dozen bales of hay next to the picnic table across from the horses' stalls. A few days later I espied a plump hen surreptitiously roosting in a pile of straw in a corner. I approached her and she clucked indignantly so I left her alone. Later, when I returned from work, tired and hungry I looked for the pullet, but she was gone. I

checked her den and there were two eggs nestled in the straw, one brown and one white. I bent over and inspected them. The umber spawn was naked upon its shell, but its albugineous neighbor was tattooed with green crayon. I picked it up and read the date: 3-23. Its delicious runny yolk was only three days old. I left its spadiceous sister alone and turned to enter my room. I happened to look down as I opened the door and just below my foot lay another niveous sterile progeny- a proteinaceous gift from the wife. Avoiding it, I nearly lost my balance and landed in a plastic chair- comfortable. I reached down and picked up the elliptical monster. It was heavy; at least two or three times the size of the chicken egg. I studied it and put it up to my ear as if to make sure there was no pigmy duck inside. I played with them for a bit, marveling over their contrasting sizes and debating which I would eat first. It was the beautiful cretaceous duck husk which I scrambled with just a hint of salt and pepper. I ate in silence trying to compare it to the commercial biddy eggs I had gobbled down in the past. It was quite similar, of course, but I wasn't immediately able to execute a definitive taste test as the purloined offering alone bedded my hunger down for the rest of the night.

On the east side of the barn the fog is thickest in the morning. After a perfunctory shakedown of the sleeping bag for the ghost arachnid, (which always yields no answers and more fresh welts on my legs) I step out to watch the fog, suspended over the craggy tip of the raw silhouette of Hollister Peak like a vaporous beard. The Frame family lives in a beige mobile home with turquoise shutters sixty yards away from the barn; I'm close enough to see (as I rip through the gamboge skin and sweet flesh of a Fuji) a shirtless young man burst through the front door. He is carrying a frying pan in his hand and he shovels its contents into the front lawn with a spatula screaming:

"Come and get your breakfast, assholes!"

Through a line of young evergreens, I see the fowl scatter, but quickly reconvene around breakfast as he disappears slamming the door behind him. Somewhere behind the house two black potbellied pigs are snorting and moving low to the ground waiting for their morning slop. Everything feels wet and heavy. I finish my breakfast and chuck it across the road into the cover crop. I enter the kitchen again (now nice and warm) and turn off the space heater. I put on a pair of muddy stonewashed jeans, a short sleeve and long sleeve shirt and a hooded sweatshirt (the same clothes I have worn every work day). Layers are important. The weather will be warm in a few hours, then after lunch the wind starts. I grab my kevlar gloves, now shiny around the fingers from much shoveling and stuff them in my back left pocket. Into the right posterior I insert a small dusty digital Canon Elph. I switch from flip flops to a pair of trail shoes and put on a fine mesh ball cap with a roadrunner emblem sewn upon the front.

Exiting through west end of the barn, the aluminum door groans against my shoulder and this attracts the attention of the horses. They all look silently in my direction except for one chestnut colt, which whinnies and nods vigorously, more excited to see me than I am to see him. Still, I graciously return the courtesy and tap my finger lightly against the bill of my hat.

"Mornin' Handy."

He neighs again and stomps his feet raising a little cloud of dust. One of his stable mates, a wispy old fuliginous mare with long coarse bristles jutting out from her stippled chin pokes her head through the gate as she chews on a wad of roadside oats, unaware of my presence. I pass by and merge onto the gravel road. To my left lies an

acre of freshly mowed hairy vetch, bell beans, field peas and mustard. A large silver tractor with a spring tooth attachment is idling in the middle of the field, its job only halfway done; if it's out of gas we'll have to bleed the fuel injector. Adjacent to that is next week's work- its verdant doppelganger- presently teeming with territorial red-winged blackbirds perched upon the yellow mustard flowers like sentinels. A flight of swallows sprays out of the barn like a dark sneeze and dissolves into the fog. The air is still and behind me I hear geese honk as the old border collies chase them around for a little early morning exercise. The melanic green tufts of grass on either side of the road are speckled with dew and glint like emerald shavings. It's still spring. There is still plenty of moisture. A thick juicy moss spreads up the sides of the valley. It's hard to imagine the landscape as it will be in a few months; metamorphosized into a lustrous and golden mountainside, mercilessly drained of its chlorophyll as the sun greedily slurps its fluids. In November, although I won't be here to see it, it will have become a hoary cinereous matrix- a different world.

Most mornings a pickup truck passes me as I make my way to the greenhouse. Inside, a man in a hat leers over his shoulder venomously as I'm forced to inhale a cloud of his dust and diesel exhaust. He is the owner of the land and although I've only met him once during a brief silent handshake, I've somehow managed to quickly make a formidable enemy.

Of the 81 acres, only eight are being farmed. A chunk of the remaining parcel is home to the horses, fowl and pigs. I realize there's a lot of potential lying dormant in this land, but there's simply not enough manpower to dig it out of the soil. The cover crop looks healthy and beneath it the earth is waiting for seed. The best looking field has stood up to the weeds so far. The delicate pac choy and tat soy are shrouded under a row cover of cheese cloth hiding from the flea beetles and aphids, but their leaves still look like gossamer lingerie. They are much too tasty to go unnoticed. Heads of red and green romaine lettuce poke out in clumps next to their crinkled leafy cousins. The bulbous little radishes live in cramped quarters, crowding together underground, fighting for room and water. A row of spinach with floppy elephant ears is invaded by stinging nettles, but seems to be thriving anyway. Some potatoes are flowering. In a few weeks the other farmhand and I will pry them out of the ground and rob them of their precious tubers. The drip tape buried beneath an acre of strawberries swells like blue veins as the emitters leak solubilized lime and phosphorus. They are fed by a two-inch line, which in turn is attached to a main at the north corner of the field. I walk in between the rows now laden with ripened berries. It's like finding precious stones growing out of the ground. The candied rubies ooze their sugary blood as I slice through their flesh with my front teeth. The rows haven't been treated with slug poison in some time however, and a rout of slimy gastropods is gorging itself as well. There is still plenty of fruit to go around and after I get my fill I ford a patch of waist length barley that undulates like a nest of charmed cobras. I hear the sibilant spurt of a leak as I pass by the carrots. I examine the damage and see that overnight, a gopher or rabbit has chewed through the tape. Water shoots upward in an arc and one row over, next to the newly transplanted cauliflower and broccoli a large mud puddle has formed in the furrow.

Another tractor sits silently beside a backhoe among a few industrial dumpsters. Nearby, a pile of gravel mixed with horse manure has started to sprout thistles. As I reach the greenhouse, I notice that the sink we installed just last week has started to rust

again. Little rubiginous patches are starting to appear like fungi on the low-grade stainless steel. I set my water bottle and a banana on a table under a green mesh awning and walk into the nursery to check on the seedlings. It's dank and a few degrees warmer inside. The ground has been tread upon heavily and a slick slime coats the grassless earth. The walls of polyethylene sheets swell against the wind and the mud squishes underfoot. Everything is busily growing, sucking up all the moisture and heat it can. As I pass by the trays of cucumbers and tomatoes a cloud of fruit flies spurts out of the soil. The squash doesn't look healthy; something (perhaps a lack of nitrogen) is sapping the life out the leaves. They are yellow and flaccid and I worry if they will make it. Further down, the broccoli, cauliflower and lettuce are growing vigorously. Four hundred tiny celery plants are growing slowly but surely after a meticulous pruning session with a pair of forceps and much squinting left my hand in a cramp. I run my hand through a tray of magenta colored leaf lettuce that is ready to be transplanted and a small beige toad hops out of one of the cells. His skin is thin and elastic as I stroke it with my forefinger. It sits on the table like a nice little subject as I focus the camera for a good shot. It's approaching eight, not quite time to wave the water wand of life. Stuart, the farm manager is gone with his van, probably to get diesel for the tractor so I make a beeline for the field of newly buried artichokes and asparagus to check the gopher traps.

The first pair of rusty subterranean jaws is untouched. The second beast is empty as well, but triggered. The cabbage leaf bits are gone. There is a third trap on the other side of the field, near the fava beans and withering cabbage heads and I'm ambivalent as I yank the yellow chain out of the earth. It feels slightly heavier than the others and it pops out of the ground with a small explosion of dirt and cabbage and fur. The fat little corpse dangling around my knees is what I came for. The trap worked perfectly, chomping completely through the gopher's neck just as it was on the verge of meal that should have seemed too easy. He never saw it coming and as I inspect his devoured eyes and matted fur I hope that he never felt a thing, although I know that's never the case. As the song goes:

"There's always some killing you got to do around the farm."

But there's no time for a eulogy or prayer, Stuart has pulled up with the fuel and he's motioning for me to get rid of the carcass and meet him by the gold chard. I walk between the empty rows that won't be picked for two years with the gopher trap wrapped around a wooden stake pointing away from me. Just west of the greenhouse there is another empty field and I unclasp the spring and shake the body loose. It falls limply on the dirt, but it won't be there for long. The fog has lifted and a yellow light bathes the valley. The vultures are already circling and a lucky one will come across this free meal soon. I shove the stake into the ground and walk over to the sink to wash my hands before I start picking for the farmer's market.