



Twenty Rural

CHILA WOYCHIK

"It can draw a person right down to the skin of the world."

—Ellen Meloy, *The Anthropology of Turquoise*

1. WHEN SMOKE RISES over these hills, across a splash of ranging cattle and corn rows miles long; when cities disintegrate under the weight of bombs and terrorism and waste; when the coasts heave and the South boils off in a hazy steam, we'll still rise at 5 AM, gas the tractors, drag the implements, harvest the fields, grind the corn, call it good.

2. The Doomsday Vault and so many seeds. Melting polar ice invades a tunnel. We could talk peripherals: how the weedless fields come with a price, chemicals that kill the biome beneath the stalks. Farmers who wear masks so they won't inhale what they're spraying. The dwindling bee population in the Midwest—60% in the past few years—and how it's too often blamed on parasites when research shows that herbicides, pesticides, and fungicides are to blame. A 97% drop in the total monarch population in the past 15 years. But what good are facts in the presence of rousing sales numbers?

3. We raise soybeans and stout provincialism. Empty roads string along forever. Too long here and we forget how to drive, how to run our hands across the sweaty brow of a city. The pulse slows to a cow's pace, and here I squander my moments in a row of corn listening for the pop it makes when it grows.

4. Nothing marks the passage of time like a cellphone chiming every hour between 9 AM and 9 PM to prompt a medical ritual. My farmer discovered this recently and, when within earshot, so did I. “It was just 6 o’clock a minute ago, and now it’s 7?”

5. The farmer grows weaker. Something about genetics. I knew it years ago, could tell by his tells. Roses grow gnarly when the roots are bad. So let him talk about the color of his “paint”: International red, John Deere green, New Holland blue. All this land for growing things, and somebody’s gotta do it.

6. In the Midwest, corn is king and children grow like weeds. In the Midwest, “Garrison Keillor” and “Jesus” are used interchangeably. In the Midwest, clichés are a dime a dozen and every new thing stalls.

7. We know modernity hereabouts. I think even Jesus would have a Facebook account and check his iPhone for updates in Iowa—the problem would come with the lack of a pocket on his robe. Postmodernity is what smacks us upside the head. We have family to stare into the face of each day. And these rolling acres on and on and on.

8. Life keeps soiling its skirt with death. If it’s not neighborly neighbors, it’s the animals scurrying out of reach of large and fast machines. Roadkill check-erboards these back country lanes; we guess species by the color and size from twenty yards away. Nothing should die without breath being spoken over it, so we sigh a sadness while passing by.

9. My farmer lets me have my space. Our questions are few but to hash out daily bread and butter cost. He’s a mental man, preferring the life of the mind to body work, and I carry buckets of water and grain exquisitely.

10. Each birthday it’s something more. Today I wonder what the ancients did about bad hips. The Egyptians or Chaldeans. The Israelites. A single touch from a good angel? One Greek physician in the first century recommended ivy to ease symptoms of arthritis in the hips, hips too often spread to mount a horse, to mount a man.

11. If only I could explain how aching it is to gulp soft air and eat orange sky. Like a felled tree trunk stuck in an eye socket, poignant. Like a cow mooing her way to Timbuktu or a calf hobbling along the stark rim of heaven, if you can imagine.

12. Cattle call across adjoining fields. Above these ever-living greens grows a boisterous sky. But no, my farmer said, says, is saying, the fields are dying due to haphazard chemical use. A soil devoid of insects is not a healthy soil: earthworms aerate and fertilize. No reason to be subtle about it.

13. Sporadically, sheep bleat a mile away and their cries carry through the woods while spring peepers *click-click-click* in the valley below, a noisy yet not unpleasant sound. Here we learn so many things, such as how to keep darkness at bay by looking into the light. Here's how: we rip open shades and flip switches, a fly drawn to a lit bulb at night. But please stop smiling, they say, you're minimizing our pain. We can't stop, we reply, because all this squinting draws up the corners of our mouth, like so.

14. Even rural family dynamics can challenge us, leave us wondering if we should stay. It's not easier here. Before uncontested divorce and marital counseling, what did they do? Put up with it? As long as Mama stood in the kitchen and Daddy brought home the bacon, all was well. It came down to duty, God, and country, and those broken fences, clothes on the line. Billy, fix the mower; slop the hogs, son, slop the hogs.

15. My gentleman farmer worked in Connecticut three months this year, told of relentless traffic, drove like a banshee when he returned. You're not in Connecticut anymore, I told him. I know, he said, but Connecticut is still in *me*. But it's finally out now; he's a farmer again, not a high falutin' engineer type with gravy on his tie. Welcome home, I said, and those outlets still need put in the shop.

16. Farm jive proliferates and fake news isn't confined to politics. For instance, several online articles claim that all cattle (presumably everywhere) will be pointing in the same northerly direction at any given time based on the earth's magnetic field. But what I can tell you is that *most* cattle will *often* be lying

down when the barometer is at a certain place and a front is moving in, and *most* cattle will *often* be standing up when the barometer is somewhere else and the weather is fine. I've not yet seen a farm field in my vast travels around the Podunkvilles of the Midwest where the cattle line up in one direction for a substantial period of time while grazing or relaxing. Safe to say that we shouldn't believe all the bull we read or hear when discussing the intricacies of rural.

17. Fifty cows will be let into the fifty acres next door any day now. In a few months, this four-foot high grass will be eaten down and a farmer will truck in grain to supplement it. See, we take our adventures where we can get them.

18. Patience is a rural virtue. That transport inches along, a farmer in a slow truck. In Iowa, the horn is a vehicle's vestigial organ; we don't use it often but to get the attention of a chicken pecking at the road or an escaped cow chomping a ditch.

19. So much of the Midwest ties us down, the corn rows and cabbages, family firmly planted, deeper roots than any oak left standing when it's over. So much ties us down, heavy-laden, cranked on cloister, hot on wonder, waiting, and a body worn and weary from all that stooping over. So much ties us down when all we really want is some flashy thing to make us feel alive.

20. These are days, but not without significance. Roadblocks, every journey has them. Religion in that high corner, politics in the low. When the price of gas for our tractors outstrips the demand for grain, we'll be digging holes in the ground too, stashing goods, hoarding dreams. The only difference between here and there is the amount of land under our feet.