University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters

University of Nebraska Press

10-1-2013

# Weeds

Evelyn I. Funda

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples

Funda, Evelyn I., "Weeds" (2013). *University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters.* Paper 216.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples/216

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Nebraska Press at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Buy the Book

AMERICAN LIVES | *Series editor:* Tobias Wolff

Buy the Book

# WEEDS

*A Farm Daughter's Lament*

Evelyn I. Funda

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
LINCOLN AND LONDON

Buy the Book

© 2013 by the Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska. Acknowledgments for the use of copyrighted material appear on pages 279–80, which constitute an extension of the copyright page. All rights reserved. Manufactured in the United States of America. ♾

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Funda, Evelyn I.
Weeds: a farm daughter's lament /
Evelyn I. Funda.
pages cm. — (American lives)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-0-8032-4496-2 (pbk.: alk. paper)
1. Family farms—Idaho—Gem County—
History. 2. Funda, Evelyn I. 3. Czech
Americans—Idaho—Gem County. I. Title.
S451.I2F86 2013
636.08'40979627—dc23 2013008782

Set in Fanwood Text by Laura Wellington.
Designed by A. Shahan.

Buy the Book

"What would the world be, once bereft
Of Wet and Wildness? . . .
Long live weeds and the wildness yet"

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS
"Inversnaid"

---

"What is a farm but a mute gospel? The chaff and the wheat, weeds and plants, blight, rain, insects, sun—it is a sacred emblem from the first furrow of spring to the last stack which the snow of winter overtakes in the fields."

RALPH WALDO EMERSON
"Nature"

---

"I believe that the only good weed is a dead weed, and that a clean farm is as important as a clean conscience."

FOURTH PRINCIPLE OF "THE PROGRESSIVE FARMERS' CREED,"
published by the *Illinois Educational Bulletin* (found reprinted in the June 6, 1912, issue of the *Buhl Herald*)

Buy the Book

Buy the Book

# CONTENTS


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | List of Illustrations | viii |
| | Preface: "In Dirt We Trust" | ix |
| 1 | Dodder | 1 |
| 2 | Loosestrife | 51 |
| 3 | Wild Oats | 97 |
| 4 | Sage | 147 |
| 5 | Cheatgrass | 197 |
| 6 | "The True Point of Beginning" | 243 |
| | Acknowledgments | 279 |
| | Notes | 283 |


Buy the Book

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

*Maps following page xvii*

1. Idaho
2. Emmett, Idaho, with inset of Funda properties

*Figures following page 146*

1. Lumir and Evelyn Funda, 1964
2. Funda family, ca. 1942
3. Toni Kratochvilová's International Refugee Organization card
4. Frances Pejskar and Toni
5. Toni on holiday with friends
6. "The Kiss": Toni on vacation
7. Toni and Lumir Funda on their wedding day
8. Lumir and Toni, 1969
9. Frank Funda, ca. 1910
10. Cover of promotional pamphlet for Gooding, Idaho, 1910
11. *Winter Sport* rabbit drive, Clarence Bisbee photo, 1913
12. Annie Martinek Funda, ca. 1915
13. Frank and Annie, ca. 1964
14. Frank's anachronistic flower painting, ca. 1963
15. Frank's Easter painting, ca. 1963
16. *Idaho Industry*, Clarence Bisbee photo, 1913
17. Kratochvil family, ca. 1931
18. Evelyn with the "two Sylvies" in front of grandparents' cellar, 2007
19. Gravestone detail from Toni's childhood church in Višňové

Buy the Book

# PREFACE: "In Dirt We Trust"

"To forget how to dig the earth and
tend the soil is to forget ourselves."

MAHATMA GANDHI
*Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*

In late 2001 my small family suffered what I think of as a triple tragedy. On October 1, 2001, my father, Lumir Funda, age seventy-nine, was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer that, by the time of the diagnosis, had metastasized to his brain, liver, spleen, spine, and bones. The prognosis was two to four months to live; he was briefly given radiation to relieve some of the pain and to shrink the tumor that had compromised his speech and mobility before he was sent home with my mother on October 23. On October 25, just two days later, my mother, Toni, age seventy-five, suffered a heart attack. After nine days in a cardiac unit, where she experienced additional complications of stroke, kidney failure, and internal bleeding, she died on November 3. My father's death came shortly thereafter, on November 29.

These events were preceded by the sale of the family's farmland. Just a month to the day before my father's diagnosis, my parents had signed the papers finalizing the sale of the last parcel of farmland they had worked together since my father and my Czech-immigrant mother had married in 1957. In fact, my father



Buy the Book

had farmed this land for most of his life. His father, also a Czech immigrant, had originally purchased it for a small sum in 1919 when the parcel was nothing but a sheep-grazed, sagebrush terrain. Although the land was never hugely profitable, my family was always proud of how they had transformed that unlikely spot.

When people talk about the autumn of 2001, these are the losses I think about, not the Twin Towers. The news of 9/11 seemed like a blurry background to my own razor-sharp losses that fall. Some would say that the timing of these events in family history was merely coincidental; bodies fail, land deeds change hands, and people endure losses. Cutting through the hardpan of my family history, I could make out the repeated strata of losing home, family, and a sustaining belief in agricultural values. As I considered individual family stories, I found a series of literal and psychic displacements, a history of transience, obsession, and dispossession, and a hunger for permanence. Farmland came to represent a landscape of loss, and I recognized how my family stories were emblematic of a cross-section of American agricultural history, as it moved from the optimism of the immigrant homesteader, to the industrial illusion of control that characterized the postwar farm, to the economic and political pressures of the 1970s and 1980s that nearly erased the Jeffersonian ideal of one man–one farm, to the exodus of younger generations, like mine, who left because they felt the farm held no place for them.

Influenced by personal narrative, biography, and cultural studies, this cultural memoir traces how different factors (ethnic prejudice, an increasingly industrialized agricultural model, and prescribed gender expectations) lead inevitably to similar endings. The loss at the center of this farm story, therefore, is replayed and recast in ever-widening circles, first through my farm daughter story, then through the generations of my familial and ancestral history. Even though my father and grandfather trusted whole-



Buy the Book

heartedly that the Idaho farmland would sustain the family both economically and spiritually, instead displacement is the ever-present theme in the lives of three generations for whom farming became a ritualized enactment of the desire to set down roots in a land we could claim as our own.

Although the American farmer has been mocked as a "Reuben Hayseed" and an unsophisticated bumpkin, he remains iconic, an enduring symbol of strength, valor, and a distinctive connection with the land. The very word *human* derives from the same Latin root word as *humus*, meaning soil. No other work or occupation—with perhaps the exception of motherhood—is so profoundly invested with such symbolic weight or so fully spans the imaginative range of human experience in our culture. Read the agrarian novels of Willa Cather or the impassioned essays of Wendell Berry, consider the rhetoric of the Farm Aid organization (with its motto: "Family Farmers, Good Food, A Better America"), watch any number of films about farmers (from Jessica Lange's *Country* to the 2007 award-winning documentary *The Real Dirt on Farmer John*), study Victory Garden posters from World War II or farmers' market posters of today, and you will see agriculture cast in a wide array of starring roles. Farming is portrayed as a form of spiritual fulfillment, an act of artistry and divine creation, an expression of national commitment and patriotism, a means for proving heroism or manhood, a process of gaining personal empowerment, a foundation for community unity, a guarantee of personal independence and self-sufficiency, a chance to arrive at an authentic and wholesome life, a method for gaining dominion over and improving an imperfect landscape, a partnership with natural forces, and a battle against those same natural forces.

Farming is not just a job—it's a calling, and the farmer is ubiquitous in our lives. Take, for instance, the bumper sticker that



Buy the Book

reads, "If you've eaten today, give thanks to a farmer." Referenced in Senate hearings on the state of agriculture during the 1980s farm crisis, this sentiment's religious overtones are not, I think, by accident. Poised as he is between heaven and earth, the farmer is our mediator, a cultural idea emphasized by Michael Pollan, who writes in *The Botany of Desire*, "Wheat points [us] up, to the sun and civilization," because it is as "leavened with meaning as it [is] with air. . . . Wheat begins in nature, but it is then transformed by culture" through a "miracle of transubstantiation," in which wheat becomes "the doughy lump of formless matter [that] rises to become bread." This process, says Pollan, is one of "transcendence" that symbolizes "civilization's mastery of raw nature. A mere food thus became the substance of human and even spiritual communion, for there was also the old identification of bread with the body of Christ."

Pollan indicates the significant implications farming has for us as both spiritual and social beings; Thomas Jefferson, on the other hand, was most concerned with the farmer as the quintessential *national* figure. Identifying farming as the most important employment to our country, Jefferson called farmers "the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people," and said they were "the most valuable citizens" because they were "the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous," and "they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds." This was Jefferson's farmer-citizen: a better farmer because he was a citizen; a better citizen because he was a farmer. And Jefferson's idea is one that has proven to have legs. For instance, homegrown.org (a website affiliated with the Farm Aid organization) recently tapped into Jefferson's national and religious rhetoric when it took as its motto "In Dirt We Trust." Whether you believe that such a motto means the organization has supplanted God with the farmer (a potential heresy) or that



Buy the Book

it is indicating a belief that God and nature are one, the line suggests the valorization of the farmer's work.

The point is that what the farmer does and what he produces are more than the sum of their parts. Take, for instance, the significant growth in the number of farmers' markets held around the country. We have an increasing interest in what I recently heard termed "SOLE food" (that is, *s*ustainable, *o*rganic, *l*ocal, and *e*thically grown food). The pun, of course, indicates that crowds don't gather on weekends in parks and parking lots just for the sake of a buff-colored organic egg with a low carbon footprint. The farmers' market has become a ritual where we get to experience a renewed commitment to long-held cultural values. It feeds our souls as well as our bodies. When we exchange greenbacks for green beans, we are buying emblems of the farmer's independence and self-sufficiency. As we chat with him or her about whether the warm weather is going to hold out—"Don't we always get a hard freeze in September?" we ask—we express how we feel a personal investment in the farm itself. As we move from booths of produce to booths where photographers sell prints featuring close-ups of heirloom tomatoes or local jewelry makers sell chili pepper earrings, we begin to link farmers to the company of artisans. Moreover, by bringing the farmer into the city centers, markets serve to integrate the farmer into the community at large. He isn't just the lone figure out in the fields. At the market tables, burgeoning with colorful chards, bushel baskets of corn, frilly stocks of dill, we bump into friends: "Gee, the only place I seem to see you is right here at Bill's stand!" After gossip and an exchange of recipes we say to each other and the farmer, too, "See you next week." Farmers' markets are, write Jennifer Meta Robinson and J. A. Hartenfeld, a "living performance" where we build community and play out a "desire . . . for a sense of authenticity and locality."



Buy the Book

Such persistence of the farmer as a nationally significant icon is all the more remarkable, given the steady decline in our nation's farm population. In 1790, only a few years after the American Revolution, an estimated 90 percent of our citizens were involved in some aspect of farm-related economy. By the end of the twentieth century that number, according to the Agricultural Census, was down to just 1 percent, with each American farmer supplying food enough for an estimated one hundred people. In fact, in 1993 the Census Bureau stopped counting farmers as a separate occupational group (deciding to lump farmers together with fishermen and loggers) because their numbers were "statistically insignificant"—at least in terms of population figures.

Like people in hundreds of stories from western history and literature, my family was desperate to believe they could trust their connection to the land. My grandfather, for instance, was not that different from Per Hansa, in O. E. Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, who envisioned his homestead becoming a "kingdom" where he and his progeny would thrive forever, emboldened and nurtured by their connections to the land. I think, too, of one of the most defining stories of Utah, where I now live: when Mormon leader Brigham Young and his party emerged from Emigration Canyon in 1847, he gazed out over the Salt Lake valley and proclaimed, "This is the place." Four unassuming words were a declaration of dependence on a specific place, the moment in which the displaced had found their Zion.

My grandfather may have felt that same certainty initially, reinforced by an old Bohemian myth that credits the very founding of Bohemia and of Prague as the capital city to the prophetess Libuše and her farmer husband, Přemysl, the Ploughman. Before their marriage Libuše had governed the Czechs alone since her father's death, but when she ruled in favor of a young farmer in



Buy the Book

a boundary dispute, the loser in the clash cursed Libuše and said his people ought to be ashamed to be ruled by a woman "with long hair but short wits." Calmly, the prophetess queen assented. She instructed her councilmen to ride three days, led only by her riderless horse, and at the end of those days, she said, they would find a farmer named Přemysl plowing in an uncultivated field surrounded by tilled fields. Following Libuše's instructions, the noblemen found Přemysl and summoned him to "take up the sovereignty ordained to you and to your heirs." Although Přemysl did not seem surprised to see the men, he dismissed his oxen, which vanished into a rock, and then said to the men, "If I could have finished ploughing this field there would have been abundance of bread for all time. But since you made such haste, and have interrupted me in my work, know that there will often be hunger in the land." Turning his plowshare on its side, he drew bread and cheese from his satchel, laid them on the plowshare shining in the sun, and invited the men to join him for breakfast at his iron table. After their breakfast Přemysl changed into the princely robes the men had brought from Libuše, but he placed his peasant shoes into a bag that he brought to her castle with him, "so that my descendants may know from what stock they are sprung, that they may go in awe."

Přemysl honored his duties as leader of the Czech people, and he and Libuše were devoted to each other. He was there when she looked out over the Vltava River and foresaw the founding of Prague, a city whose fame would touch the stars. Their children founded the Přemyslid Dynasty, which ruled the Czech Lands well through years of feast and famine, peace and war, until the early fourteenth century.

But Přemysl considered leaving behind his beloved fields a great personal sacrifice, one dictated by fate and necessity rather than his heart's desire. I imagine him years later, in the rare private



Buy the Book

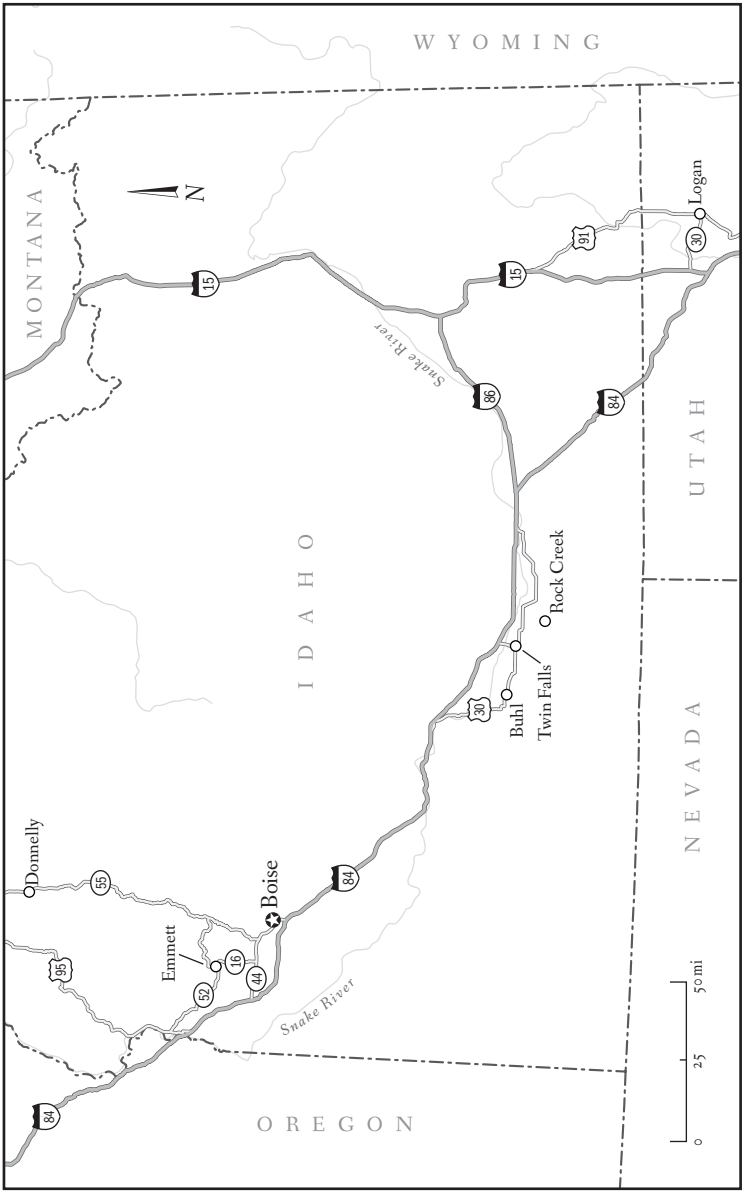
moments a king can steal from managing wars and settling disputes. He pulls a rough burlap sack out of a trunk and removes the old sandals from the folds of cloth. He fingers the soil that still clings to the soles, and he tries to remember the smell of newly plowed soil. He imagines the glint of the sun on the plow that he left in that field of unbroken sod. He remembers how his fingers lingered on the smooth plow handle in the instant before he greeted the queen's emissaries, the moment he became not a monarch but a farmer in exile.



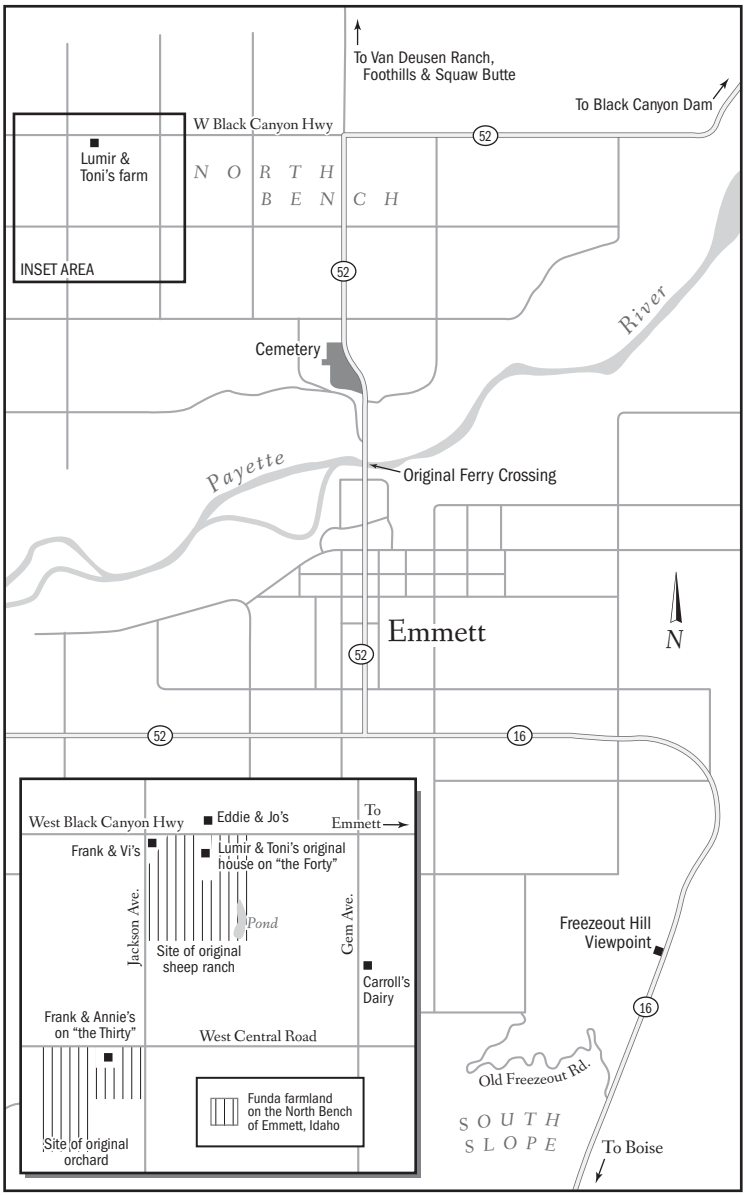
Buy the Book

# WEEDS

Buy the Book


WYOMING
MONTANA
N
15
Snake River
86
84
91
30
Logan
UTAH
IDAHO
Rock Creek
Twin Falls
Buhl
30
NEVADA
Boise
84
Donnelly
55
Emmett
95
16
44
52
Snake River
84
OREGON
0
25
50 mi

Buy the Book


To Van Deusen Ranch,
Foothills & Squaw Butte
To Black Canyon Dam
W Black Canyon Hwy
52
Lumir &
Toni's farm
N O R T H
B E N C H
INSET AREA
52
Cemetery
River
Payette
Original Ferry Crossing
Emmett
N
52
52
16
West Black Canyon Hwy
Eddie & Jo's
To
Emmett
Frank & Vi's
Lumir & Toni's original
house on "the Forty"
Jackson Ave.
Pond
Site of original
sheep ranch
Gem Ave.
Carroll's
Dairy
Frank & Annie's
on "the Thirty"
West Central Road
Site of original
orchard
Funda farmland
on the North Bench
of Emmett, Idaho
Freezeout Hill
Viewpoint
16
Old Freezeout Rd.
S O U T H
S L O P E
To Boise

Buy the Book

Buy the Book

# 1

# Dodder

"O thou weed! . . .
Would thou hadst ne'er been born"

Shakespeare's Othello

Highway 16, the main route into my rural hometown of Emmett, Idaho, winds through a high desert country of sand and sagebrush before the road narrows and suddenly descends into the valley through a steep grade known as Freezeout Hill. Gouging straight through the terrain, the road drops more than five hundred feet in elevation within the span of a mile. Imposing, sheer banks on both sides of the road cast perpetual shadows over that portion of the highway, but only half a mile later and halfway down the hill, it emerges back into sunlight where I can pull off at the monument and viewpoint that overlooks verdant farmland alongside stretches of subdivisions.

Whenever I pull over at the Freezeout Hill viewpoint, I try to locate the acreage that my grandparents purchased in 1919. The land my family farmed for more than eighty years lies nearly ten miles across the valley from Freezeout, so I look for distinctive landmarks. I can make out the road that crosses the river, climbs the North Bench, and then skirts by the cemetery, but from there it's a visual guessing game where the distances seem to erase certainty. Squinting, I look for the blue dairy silo of "the Carrolls'



Buy the Book

Place," which is what everyone used to call the dairy, even though the Carroll family moved away in the 1970s. When I can't tell if the silo I see is the Carrolls', I try to identify the bank of greenhouses south of our farmland, and I search for the house to the east of our place that was built right into the side of the foothills so that the windows seem to offer a glimpse into the depths of the earth. Like a dozen times before I'm never able to feel certain I've located the place where I grew up. Uncertainty is not a new feeling for me whenever I return to Emmett. Even when my parents were living, I felt tenuous about my connection to the farm. I used to think this out-of-place feeling was just me because I was a farmer's daughter instead of a farmer's son. And that made all the difference, I thought. It meant that from the moment of my birth I was destined to have to leave the farm.

I now live in northern Utah where I teach at a university, and I return to Emmett only as a visitor. Despite promises that originally brought my grandparents to this "Valley of Plenty," farming didn't make my family rich, or even solvent, and gradually, over the years, the farm has been sold off, acre by acre. The last twenty acres were sold in 2001, just months before both of my parents died—one of cancer, the other of a heart attack. Only two and a half acres and the house my parents built in 1972 on that original sheep ranch remain in my name. Strangers now irrigate the fields my father farmed, and I return to Emmett as an absentee landlord rather than a resident. I don't know what the locals call "the Carrolls' Place" anymore, and no one recognizes me in the grocery store where I stop to buy flowers for family graves.

Standing at the Freezeout Hill lookout, then, is like standing at the threshold between the ages, at some kind of boundary between past and present. The history of the road itself demonstrates the transition from a wild pioneer time to an age of modern, western agriculture that is now giving way to what some geographers call



Buy the Book

a "rurban" landscape. The paved highway I've just driven down is actually the cutoff route of Freezeout Road that was built in 1929, a decade after my grandparents Frank and Annie settled on seventy acres ten miles northwest of here. The narrow switchbacks of *Old* Freezeout—as the original road is known locally—still wind down the foothills just to the south of where I stand. The pass was so named in the late nineteenth century by a group of settlers who nearly froze to death just three miles from town while they waited out bad weather one winter's night at their camp near the windswept top. The original road was so treacherous that even on good days drivers had to lock their wagon wheels—or "freeze" them—and slide down the steep road, praying that they wouldn't plunge over the sandy cliffsides. Getting out of the valley proved no easier, and reports say that it sometimes took an entire day for a dozen team of horses to pull heavily loaded freight wagons up the hill.

Once the Payette River Valley was a place to travel through rather than a place to settle. Shoshone Indians often wintered there, but they maintained camps elsewhere during the rest of the year. Among the first white men in the valley was trapper François Payette, whose fur-trapping expedition came through in 1818, and although Payette's sons ran traps for years along the river named for their father, there was no permanent settlement in the valley until 1863, when a much-needed ferry was built at the present site of Emmett. Roadhouses and general stores catered both to the transient miners going northeast into the mountains and to those pioneers headed west to Oregon, but Martinsville, as it was originally known, didn't inspire as much permanence as it did hostility. A natural rock ravine at the base of Freezeout Hill named Pickett's Corral was refuge to an infamous gang of horse thieves, bandits, and swindlers who targeted those passing through, and hostilities between the outlaws and the men of the "Payette



Buy the Book

Vigilantes" were a routine occurrence. According to a local history, confrontations with local Indians were common and violent, with one particular battle leaving Indian bodies "floating down the stream all summer" where they would "get lodged on a sandbar" until somebody "would take a cottonwood pole and drive them on down the river."

The monument references some of these harrowing stories of the valley and indicates points off to the left where you can still glimpse the sheer cliffs and hairpin turns of the original pioneer road as it winds down South Slope. But if you turn your back on that road, you can follow the route of the Payette River as it heads from east to west toward its confluence with the Snake River at the Idaho-Oregon border thirty miles away. Placid canals that thread through the valley have put the waters of the Payette to good use, creating a tidy vista of grain fields, orchards, barns, and houses that fans out below.

Originally, farming anywhere beyond the margins of the river seemed entirely improbable in this arid landscape, and agricultural settlement didn't really begin until the 1890s, when settlers united to form the "Last Chance" canal company, the first of several companies that tried to channel the waters of the Payette. For the next three decades these companies were plagued by lack of money and the difficulties of engineering canals in the sandy soil of the Black Canyon. The wooden flumes leaked, and the ditches often washed out, usually in the hottest days of summer when the farmers most needed the water. One year, desperate to fix a massive break in the canal, they shored up the banks with what was at hand—hundreds of loads of sagebrush that they had grubbed off adjacent lands.

But over time irrigation ditches reached from north to south. As a point of considerable state pride Idaho is one of the top five irrigated states in the country, and the state holds the record of



Buy the Book

most acres "reclaimed" by the projects of the Desert Land Act of 1894 (also known as the Carey Act). Saying that the Carey Act offered Idaho the promise of an "Industrial Eden," historian Mark Feige points to Emmett in particular as a "systemized and controlled landscape" evidencing "a progressive technological order" in which the engineer and the farmer triumphed over an unruly and flawed environment.

By the time Frank and Annie first drove down Old Freezeout, the area had been transformed by irrigation and the lumber industry into "the Garden of Idaho." Local boosters were keen on quantifying achievements. They bragged about twenty-five thousand acres that raised grain and potatoes and fruit, one hundred thousand sheep that were raised and shipped from Emmett yearly, and half a million board feet a day produced by the lumber mill. Boxcars of apples, Italian prunes, peaches, apricots, and sweet cherries from Emmett's famous orchards were shipped as far away as London, Australia, and the Orient. Eager to bill the community as simultaneously pastoral and cosmopolitan, a 1910 promotional pamphlet promised that the valley was "full of sunshine" and "genial the whole year through," calling Emmett a "radiant spot on the world's map."

The valley I grew up knowing, however, felt like neither a "wild west" nor a technological wonder intimately connected to the world's metropolitan centers. With one stoplight, a bowling alley, a farmer's co-op, two drugstores, and several bars, the town seemed like a cartoon version of provincial, small-town America. And during my teens the Old Freezeout Hill Road was less known for horse-and-wagons than it was for pot parties and the graffiti carved into the sandy cliffsides that proclaimed "77 Rules" or "Mike Loves Kristi." I'd heard the story that once it took a dozen team of horses to defy the gravity of that place, but—at a time when my friends and I "cruised" only as far as Roe-Ann's Drive-In, turned



Buy the Book

right at the stoplight, snaked around the city park block, and then circled back to start all over again—that story held more symbolic weight than historical relevance. It was a warning, emphasizing that ground under your wheels can crumble at any moment, that all ways, in or out, are treacherous.

Although I'm convinced I could still drive the backroads of this valley in my sleep, knowing a place and having a claim to it are two different things, and I realize that if Emmett has any message to offer me, it is that today's claimant is tomorrow's body, lodged precariously on a sandbar.

Thirty-five miles from the capital city of Boise, Emmett is considered a bedroom community, especially since the sawmill that once employed generations of residents closed in 2001. Only a seventh of the valley's thirty-five hundred acres that were once in fruit production still have trees. Just below the viewpoint asphalt streets named Plum Street, Cherry Lane, and Apple Drive meander through housing developments where orchard trees used to bloom. Although corn, wheat, and hay are still grown here, the patchwork of fields gets smaller every year.

Captivated by the idealistic cultural views of the farmer, my grandfather Frank Funda was undaunted by the fact that he knew nothing about farming when he first moved to Idaho. A plucky but poor Bohemian immigrant, he had no experience, tools, friends, or family when he arrived in 1910, but still he was certain, as the popular claims told him, that he could "Plant Dimes, Harvest Dollars." He bought his first acres of land in Buhl, Idaho—150 miles from Emmett—on a place he called Rock Creek Ranch because, as the family joked, all he could grow there were rocks. After he and fellow Czech immigrant Annie Martinek married in 1915, they sold the ranch and moved to the North Bench in Gem County, where they bought two parcels of land, one a young or-



Buy the Book

chard where Frank raised Italian prunes and kept bees and another half a mile a way that had been a poor sheep ranch near the base of the foothills. Over the years Frank and then his sons—my father, Lumir, and Uncle James Frank—transformed the undulating land from sagebrush to flat crop land. It was on this second parcel that I was raised in a drafty, converted sheepherder's shack that had been remodeled into a four-and-a-half-room house. With regularity the winter wind moved the curtains in my parents' bedroom. You had to be careful not to trip over the buckles and cracks in the gray linoleum. The toilet only worked some of the time, and we had an outhouse for the rest of the time. I bathed in an aluminum tub in the kitchen, and my mother washed our clothes with an old-time wringer washer out on the "porch," which was actually just a couple of plywood sheets laid over two-by-fours on the bare ground.

I imagine my father would want me to make clear: we were farmers, not ranchers. On such definitions he was unyielding. Even though we lived barely above the poverty line, he utterly believed farming was superior to ranching. While western mythology romanticizes ranching, for my father it was untamed chaos. Ranches were either remote, wild places like the Van Deusen Ranch, where he was hired to custom-farm on hilly land that was miles from the nearest phone and electricity, or they were like the Nevada ranch that he and his brother owned for a dozen years that had been nothing but sagebrush and didn't even have a well until two years after they'd bought the place. Those were "ranches" that aspired to be farms. At the bottom of Dad's agricultural hierarchy were ranches that had stock. These ranchers worked by brute force and were slaves to their animals—5 AM milking, for instance, or nights spent calving, the neighbor's phone call in the middle of the night to say your stock had breeched the fence and were wandering down the middle of the road. Farming, by



Buy the Book

contrast, was orderly and intellectual; the rows of crops or trees ran straight and true, and the farmer ruled with his machines.

I was a grown woman before I discovered that the word for *dodder*, the brightly colored, Medusa-headed weed my father righteously battled on our farm, was not spelled, as I had always assumed, d-a-u-g-h-t-e-r. Make no mistake, I knew the weed well enough. I had seen my father keep vigil for its burnished patches and heard him cuss "that goddamn dodder!" when it appeared in the clover and alfalfa fields of our small farm. I recognized how deeply he despised the choking tendrils of that plant vampire. But for some reason I had never actually *seen* the word as a child, had only heard a lax, Idaho pronunciation that did not differentiate the embedded consonants *t* and *d*.

I first saw the word months after my father's death as I cleaned out a drawer where he had kept years of farm-related publications, and an old illustrated pamphlet slipped from the pile and into the black trash bag at my feet. Even in the extension agency's fuzzy black-and-white picture on the cover, the weed's twining tendrils were unmistakable, but the title—where it spelled out in big capital letters D-O-D-D-E-R—was a revelation.

I now know, thanks to that pamphlet and the fine print of an *Oxford English Dictionary*, that the word for the weed and that for my relationship to my parents are only coincidentally related by sound and not sense, and they have, as far as I can tell, no common etymological history whatsoever. My concept of the word had been shaped by a non sequitur, a profound fallacy of homonyms: like hearing that the Book of *Acts* is about the ministry of Paul, the Apostle, and mistakenly picturing Paul Bunyan's *ax* carving out the Grand Canyon as his beloved blue ox Babe looks on from the rim. It wasn't even remotely the same thing.

Yet that essential misconception of equating dodder and daugh-



Buy the Book

ter, however unfounded it was, had long ago engrained in me an analogy I found hard to shake, one where the boundaries between two things, weed and woman, are permeable and fluid.

Historically known by a number of other names such as lovevine, hellbind, strangle weed, tangle weed, devil's guts, devil's ringlets, maiden's hair, witches' shoelaces, and witch's hair, dodder is a pernicious and highly specialized plant with a malevolent character that has earned it a place on the Department of Agriculture's list of the ten most noxious weeds. Loathed by farmers, this many-tentacled, yellowish orange plant, which is found throughout the continent except in the most frozen reaches of northern Canada, has lost the capacity to synthesize chlorophyll and therefore has adapted to be one of the few truly parasitic plants. A botanical distant cousin to the ubiquitous morning glory and other members of the bindweed family that choke plants and compete for water and essential light, dodder—*cuscuta cephalanti*—is, writes naturalist David Attenborough in his book *The Private Lives of Plants*, "more sinister." It is a true parasite, a freeloader, "incapable," says another writer, "of any independent existence except as a seed." It has only tiny flowers and the barest hint of leaves, having bartered those flora essentials for specialized structures called "haustoria" that hold close a host plant while it anchors into the living stems and begins to suck off vital food stores that the host has manufactured for itself. Unchecked, the twining tentacles work their way under, over, and around crop plants like clover and alfalfa, creating bright orange cobwebs, masses of intertwined tresses that "envelope plants like an insidious veil." Crediting dodder with a calculating, cunning nature, Attenborough writes that the weed "not only actively hunts" its "prey" "but selects its victims with care." The plant has a "very sophisticated" capacity, say researchers at Penn State University, "almost animal-like," to differentiate a potentially good host from



Buy the Book

less succulent ones by detecting odors that help it "make a decision" about which host to embrace. Scientist Colin Purrington has identified dodder as "one of the creepiest plants" he knows and added, "It's a horrible existence for the host plant. If plants could scream, they'd have the loudest screams when they had dodder attached."

I have a 1914 manual on weeds that advises that any dodder-infested patch must be burned, not once but twice, with kerosene and straw. But farm folklore warns that if the smoke from such fire swirls back down and touches the ground, however fleetingly, new patches of dodder will sprout and grow at that spot. If burning is unfeasible, the manual advocates spraying with an arsenic-based treatment, and although this treatment will kill the alfalfa too, the manual insists that once "relieved from the strangler's grip," the crop will recover and come up from the roots. You can't pull dodder up by the roots either because even a small broken bit of stalk can seize onto a host and then start a new center, so farmers sought other methods of eradication. In the early twentieth century they tried sprinkling dodder patches with one of a variety of acids, such as the antiseptic crude carbolic acid (which was the same chemical injected into the veins of Nazi victims in the late days of World War II as a quick, effective means of extermination), or the extremely corrosive sulphuric acid (which at lower concentrations was used as battery acid but is now known as a main component of acid rain), or, finally, sodium nitrate (which had been used as a gunpowder in the late nineteenth century and was later used as rocket propellant). Dodder, it seems, is so dangerous it must be controlled by the most radical means.

With its brilliant curling tendrils of gold and auburn and strawberry blond, dodder does have about it a fiendish, feminine beauty. But however bizarre or aberrant it is within the plant world, to my mind its most monstrous characteristic is that once fastened



Buy the Book

onto the host plant, dodder allows its own connection with the earth to simply wither away. Roots can entirely break off contact with the soil, and the parasite morphs in a weird, disconnected existence, well above the terra firma of its inception.

Because I was my parents' only child and, on my father's side, the only grandchild, people who met my parents for the first time would often drawl, "Bet *she's* spoiled rotten." The pronouncement required no retort; in fact, any reply to the contrary would only serve to verify the original conclusion. By acclamation I was considered lazy and useless, just by virtue of being an "only." Being a girl on a farm, however, removed any doubt.

The genre of "farmer's daughter" jokes demonstrates the pervasive cultural beliefs about those of my tribe. Portrayed as a wild, sex-crazed temptress—a pigtailed Barbie with ominous pitchfork—the farmer's daughter is simultaneously innocent and menacing. Happy for a romp in the hayloft with any passing stranger, she uses the farm (her *father's* farm, for she lacks a direct claim to it) as her sticky-sweet flypaper. But the trick does not leave her untouched. She is fenced in there on the farm, where she lacks the power of self-determination, and the isolation deepens her sexual hunger to a maniacal degree, erases all social niceties of courtship, robs her of the promises of unconditional love, and leaves her vulnerable to violence and rape.

They say that determining the gender of a fetus is work that falls to the sperm. I was a girl because of Lumir's seed, then, even though I'm pretty sure, if he'd had any real choice in the matter, he would have selected a boy as his only offspring. I take no offense at that. For my mother's part having only one child wasn't her choice either, but rather a cruel fact of her physiology. Before my birth she had suffered two miscarriages, and she would have another two after—results of her being Rh-negative in the years



Buy the Book

before widespread use of the drug Rhogam, which prevents a mother's body from spontaneously aborting the fetus whose blood is incompatible with her own. Unlike my unborn siblings I defied the insistence of my father's blood type and sided with my mother instead.

In late 1959 my mother was in the last weeks of her pregnancy, and everyone assumed my father would finally get the boy he wanted. The owner of the John Deere implement store where Dad sometimes worked as a mechanic in the winters gave him a little green metal-cast tractor. Likewise the local Ford dealer offered toy-sized samples of the latest models: a little sporty baby blue convertible and a dark red sedan. Later when I discovered these vehicles were too small for my Barbie doll to sit in and drive, I abandoned the Barbie—not the tractor or cars. Barbie, I thought, was useless, all frizzed hair and pointy breasts. She didn't go anywhere, didn't *do* anything, create anything, or inspire anything other than my contempt. The other toys, however, represented choices: to either set off for a place of your own choosing or change the character of the place you'd chosen to stay.

Whenever my father spoke of my birth, he never failed to begin the story with the words of his own father. With something strangely akin to pride, he used to say his father Frank had admonished my mother when she was pregnant with me, "If it's a girl, you send it back!" My father would then laugh and add, "But once you were here, he wouldn't have traded you for the world." The photos kept in old Brach's candy boxes and reels of 8mm film attest to the truth of my father's claim. One scene of the home movies shows my bespectacled grandfather settled on a stool next to a baby carriage placed out in dappled shade. As he coos over the carriage, cherubic hands reach up and try to clench at his gray moustache. He turns to the camera and laughs. I suspect he knew by then that I would be the only grandchild he would ever have.



Buy the Book

The family women of that generation were all in their midthirties or early forties by then. His other daughter-in-law was "barren," as the family whispered; his own daughter had never seemed inclined to children, preferring to stay "Daddy's little girl" long into her adulthood. So maybe his delight was a matter of resignation. He was loyal, nonetheless. Even when the film shows my grandmother lose interest in the baby and wander over to the flowers or into the house, there my grandfather keeps his post by the baby carriage. And while this scene, composed by my father behind the camera, is supposed to convince me of my grandfather's devotion, it does make me wonder what magic I possessed to turn my grandfather's heart and why I had to redeem myself from my gender at all.

The memories I have of Granddad, who died when I was seven, include how willing he was to indulge me, how he used to be my main audience for frivolous dress-up dramas, enacted in front of a blanket thrown over the clothesline for a stage curtain. Photos show me in front of this curtain bedecked in my aunt's string of fake pearls that almost hang to my knees, one of the brightly flowered dresses she favored, her high heels, and a grotesquely large, white fur hat. In this peculiar exhibition of exaggerated femininity I would prance before him and bow to his applause and afterward slip a rose from his own garden into the buttonhole of his shirt pocket—confident in the fact that he doted on me and always had.

But my role on the farm was limited by clear albeit unspoken orders of the men of my family. As I grew up, I was expected to help my mother weed the garden, butcher the chickens, and feed any livestock we might have at the time. But I'd rather play with the pigs than feed them. With other farm chores I could delay and feign weariness or forgetfulness, or I could thin the radish sprouts right along with the weeds, doing the job so incompetent-



Buy the Book

ly that my mother would ultimately think me unforgivably lazy or stupid and go out to gather eggs or weed the garden herself. The suspicion was that I didn't have much sense when it came to the farm. For years my family laughed about one of the many times I got shocked by the electric fence. Too lazy to take a big pan of wet and stinky chicken slop out to the backyard where the hens were scratching in the dirt, I just went out to the side yard next to the ditch and flung the contents of the pan out across an electric fenceline and into the ditch where it would, I thought, just float away, and no one would be the wiser. In one of those slow-motion, cartoon moments the stream of slop arced out toward the ditch and then settled across the hot fence wire, sending the electric shock down toward the ditch and right back up to the pan I was still holding. The jolt clenched every muscle into a blue hot spasm, and after a second, when the alternating current let me go, I screamed. My mother stuck her head out the back door and laughed. "That'll teach ya," she said, and by dinner that night the whole family knew about my foolishness.

I never seemed to learn some of the simplest farm lessons. Oblivious to where I was walking, I often stepped barefoot into green chicken shit that oozed up warm—or worse still, cold!—between my bare toes. I would whine and turn on the hose to wash the smell away. "Go put shoes on!" my mother would scold with impatience. She had little empathy for my dislike of confining shoes or for my need to directly feel the grass and dirt under my feet. By every summer's end my feet were so leathered that I could walk without pain into the stubble of a grain field—the Idaho version of walking on a bed of nails. I took some pride in that.

I dreaded the early mornings when my mother roused me to help with butchering the chickens. Incompetent or not, as soon as I was big enough to hold a flapping chicken by the legs, I was expected to help—and without "back talking," my mother would



Buy the Book

warn. My job was to grab the penned chickens by the legs, swing them upside down so they wouldn't fight, and bring them to my mother at the chopping block. I hated every minute of the dusty fury in the pen and the way they squawked and pecked at my fingers. I once saw my mother, while she was helping my grandmother butcher, hold eight fully grown chickens in her hands, but with me it was one at a time, and I was expected to be standing there with the next one when the headless chicken ran blindly from the stump, spurting blood from its mangled neck. Once they were beheaded, we put the chickens into huge tubs and poured boiling water over the feathers to loosen them up so we could pluck the birds clean. My mother would examine my efforts and often as not hand the bird back to me, saying: "You missed the pinfeathers around the tail and inside of the legs." By the time we were finished plucking, my fingers were scorched, and wet feathers stuck to my arms, face, and hair, but we were only half done. Inside the house now we inserted the tip of the sharpest paring knife near the anus, slit up to the bottom of the breastbone, reached into the bird and pulled out the innards, separated out the heart and liver, slit the gizzard and peeled away the inner sack filled with grain and sand, rinsed out the cavity, and then cut up the meat and dropped it in ice water to cool before we packed the meat into old bread bags and stacked packages in the used chest freezer we kept out in a shed. For days after we finished butchering, I could smell that lingering odor of scalded feathers and chicken guts on my hands and in my hair, no matter how my times I washed.

Barnyard animals and produce—destined for our own kitchen table rather than the open market—were women's domain on our farm. My identity as farm daughter, however, was shaped more by what I *didn't* do on the farm than what I did. When in my teens I aimed to get out of garden work by offering to learn to drive



Buy the Book

the tractor, my father told me that field work wasn't for a girl. Absolutely methodical and particular about setting his siphon tubes, he consistently shunned my efforts to help him irrigate. I was allowed to keep him company in his machine shop, where he would call me his "little grease monkey," because I knew which tools to get when he asked and I knew how to attach the grease gun to the nipples of the combine and then pump the handle until amber grease oozed from the crevices between the machine's joints. But if I admitted too much pleasure, Dad would frown, take the grease gun from my hands, and shoo me away to the garden where I was supposed to be picking tomatoes. Although I may have helped construct corn bins during harvest or shovel wheat toward the bottom of a thundering auger, these were duties that took place off the fields. On occasion, if I was bringing a Mason jar of cool water out to my father, I was allowed to ride on the combine and peer over the rim of the filling hopper behind his seat, but I was never allowed to touch the steering wheel or the levered controls, and after one trip, down the field and back, he expected me to hop off and leave him to concentrate on the straight lines of his work. My father did finally teach me to drive the John Deere 4020, but lessons took place in the farmyard, and I was forbidden out on the field unless we were picking up hay bales or gated pipe at the end of the season, in which case the harvest was done and I could do no harm.

For the most part, as a farm daughter, I felt peripheral, relegated to the edges of the fields, where the weeds had a grip on the soil, where to some extent their existence was watched with suspicion but was otherwise tolerated with benign contempt.

Sometimes I wonder what things would have been like if I had indeed been a boy. My parents used to tell me they had a name picked out if I was a boy: Ralph, after a cousin of my father's. I



Buy the Book

hated that name more than my old-fashioned, little-old-lady name, so on that count, at least, I was always glad I was a girl.

*Call me Ralph*. For the moment at least.

*Even though I am my parents' only child, I was never once called spoiled. I was on a tractor before I could walk, and I spent my summers at my father's side, whether he was irrigating the fields or combining. I learned how to figure the yield on a field of grain before I went to school, and by the time I was a teenager, my father was asking me for advice on whether we should sell the grain or put it in the silo and hold out for a better price. We would consider whether next year we should plant wheat or corn in the fields around the house. And we used to laugh together when my mother complained that being surrounded by fields of corn made her feel claustrophobic. To us nothing could be finer than the weeks before harvest when every breeze brought the music of rustling corn stalks. It sounded like money. Last year I bought the farm next to Dad's, and now we call the place "the Funda and Son Farms."*

I hate Ralph. That smarmy asshole. Golden boy of the family. I want to point out to him that "Funda and Son" is a twisted syllabic name about as poetic as a dirty mop—not that he'd probably listen to me, or any woman, anyway. Ralph would probably even marry a nice local girl named Ann or Jean, meek and obedient and as fertile as his crops. Though I do suppose, since he's a product of my own fantasy, I could make him anything I want.

Maybe, instead, he was a disappointment as a son: too selfish to care much about Dad's farm, more interested in smoking weed than killing weeds.

*When I was sent out to irrigate, I'd go loaf at the edge of our pond, trying to imagine myself anyplace but on that damn farm. I left Idaho just as soon as I could and never looked back. I went east for a degree in astronomy, not accounting, like Dad wanted me to do. I liked how I could make endless sky—the great beyond—*



Buy the Book

*comprehensible with mathematical certainty. Who gives a shit about the land? My father is proud of me, even if I'm not a farmer. Mother tells me she's lonely without me. Dad is too, I think. I ought to visit more, I suppose. But I send a check every couple of months. Lord knows, they need the money, poor things.*

Condescending creep.

Maybe Ralph could be the farmer, after all, but one who fails because he's overextends himself, ambition being his downfall. Or he argues with Dad endlessly about using the organic methods he learned at the commune where he lived for a while (a scenario I've stolen straight from Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres*).

Is that what I wanted? A straw man, so easily knocked down, to make me, the daughter, look like their last, best hope?

Yes. Maybe.

Don't get me wrong: my kind and decent father never in any way voiced resentment of me. And like my grandfather, I think, he would not have "traded me for the world." When I was little, I ate breakfast with him every morning, stealing yolk-dripped toast straight from his plate. I flatly refused to eat fried eggs when my mother made me a plate of my own. "This tastes better," I'd say, and Dad would grin and indulge me. Whenever he was welding some broken piece of machinery, I was right there, wearing my own welding mask and watching the sparks fly like fireworks.

One year he designed a hammock out of rods and chains attached to the corners of an old iron bed frame and hung it between two poplar trees. We threw an old, thin mattress on it, and when the house was too hot in the evenings, he came out after dinner to push me for wild rides on the hammock. I clutched the mattress and screamed as I flew up and then back, but the ride was thrilling. After I lay there beside my father who, with one foot on the ground, rocked the hammock gently as we watched the stars



Buy the Book

came out. We didn't talk much. He was tired, and I was content. Sometimes one or both of us would fall asleep, to be awakened by my mother's whisper to come to bed.

As I grew up, he was proud of my accomplishments, and he made personal sacrifices so that I could achieve them. But his stories of the family's past, which demonstrated a real pride in the way he and his father and brother had shaped this land, always trailed off a bit at the end, as if his awareness of me as audience called into question his purpose for telling these tales in the first place. These weren't, after all, stories invoking a son to follow the row he'd chosen to hoe.

My family's expectation was that I would someday leave the farm, find a nice husband, sever my roots to that land entirely, and work, if I chose to work at all, outside of agriculture. I would let my father—sonless—be the last generation of my family to cultivate that land, as if I had chosen in the womb to forever cast the fate of family and farm. As a girl I did not possess the capacity to make a way for myself on the land, and there were few examples to suggest that a woman could have an independent existence on the farm. My family only knew one woman rancher, who bred horses and was tough and tanned, but when people mentioned her, it was always with certain veiled suggestions that were only silenced when she married a rodeo star and had a child of her own. So my models were few.

A high school English teacher once urged me not to limit myself according to the perspective of that valley. Miss Nutile was disdainful about the girls who went up the Old Freezeout Road to smoke pot and make out with their boyfriends. When one of my classmates, a bright but unmotivated girl named Sissy, got pregnant in our sophomore year and married her boyfriend weeks before her son's birth, Miss Nutile hardly disguised her censure. A feminist in a time when that was a dirty word in Idaho, she



Buy the Book

seemed decidedly exotic for Emmett. Unlike most of the teachers in the school Miss Nutile wasn't from our valley. She was young, wore miniskirts, had long, black, wavy hair that she wore in a loose ponytail, and she was the first person I knew who wore contact lenses. She rented a house that I could see from my family's living room window, and although the neighbors gossiped about her—noting especially the mornings when a man's car parked in her drive had frost on the windows—none of us ever dared visit her at her house. A teacher—especially a single female teacher—was of a completely different social order. At school, however, she was friendly to me, and I spent my lunch hours in her room, listening to the Simon and Garfunkel records that she would play on a small turntable. While the popular girls were out in the school parking lot, their arms wrapped around the warm torsos of their boyfriends and their hands anchored in the back pockets of jeans, I hovered at Miss Nutile's desk as she graded papers and ate spears of peppered cucumbers. She said she liked my poems and stories, and one day she suggested I major in English when I went to college. She said "*when*," not "if"—as if a college education were a given. When I stuttered and mumbled a word of doubt, she lifted her eyebrows and said coolly, "Don't ever forget, there is a world out there beyond Freezeout Hill." It was a challenge. As far as she was concerned, to stay within the boundaries of that valley where I had been born and where my father had lived his entire life was to be paralyzed by small-town thinking. She made me feel it was my absolute duty to escape.

Her words evoked memories of a fantasy I had had as a child when we would take occasional drives out of the valley. As we would pick up speed on the highway that made a gradual curve at the bottom of Freezeout Hill before straightening out for the ascent, I used to pretend we were taking off in a plane. "Wing flaps?"



Buy the Book

I'd say to an imaginary copilot. "Check." "Engines?" "Check." "Ready for takeoff?" "Check." We climbed the hill, and off to the right now the valley fell away like the view from a cockpit, and for a brief instant all we could see ahead of us were the carved hillside banks and nothing but open sky. For that brief moment our destination could have been Chicago or Hawaii or Paris.

The reality was that everyone I knew thought that a girl's relationship to that farmland had to be mediated by a wedding ring. When I was fifteen, one local farmer, who was much older than I was and smelled of dairy cows and silage, came for coffee one summer morning. This wasn't unusual, as neighbors often stopped by for a visit or on their way in or out of town. They knew the coffeepot was always on, and my mother often had baked goods that she could offer. My father was out in the field irrigating, so the neighbor and my mother sat drinking coffee at the table. I had been sent for the coffeepot, and when my back was turned to them, I heard him say, "Toni, don't you think it's about time you let me take Evelyn out on a date?" I was lifting the carafe off the burner when he spoke, and I remember I just stood there, paralyzed for a moment, dreading my mother's response.

"Hmpf!" she grunted indignantly. "Evelyn knows she isn't allowed to date until she's sixteen." I turned and went back to the table, giving him a weak smile as I refilled his cup. I hoped the expression struck the right balance between politeness and resignation—and that it revealed none of the horror I felt at the prospect of sitting next to him in the cab of his pickup on a Saturday night.

"And what is she now? Fifteen, isn't she? Isn't that close enough?" He drummed his finger on the table to make his point.

"Sixteen," my mother said. "She has to be sixteen." And before he could protest, she leveled her chilliest glare at him and added, "And *you're* too old for her anyway."



Buy the Book