

## small gods

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That contemporary agriculture is dissolving is evident enough. It is being eroded, rapidly, and replaced by agriBusiness and bioTech. This will be my life, I among millions, reversing this profanity.

At prayer on Friday nights, as the candles are lit, young Jewish girls are told “May you be as Sarah and Rebecca, Rachel and Leah,” heroines they know from countless stories; but all these stories are about women in relation to their husbands, their sons.

I came to learn landscape architecture because I love landscapes: the thick forest, the open glen, the rushings and floodings of rivers. I came to become visually literate, to learn to read the signals: the trees’ wildly abundant flowering before death, their broad buttressing when hollowing within, the eroding gully downstream from a new parking lot. For two and one half years now I have been encouraged to know landscape in the context of the built world, landscape as yin to architecture’s yang. But what of landscape in its own right? Where are the stories of landscape for its own sake, where buildings are not necessarily absent, but incidental and perhaps even only extant in support of the land?

And so my heart opened to agriculture.

This is not a depopulated landscape, not a “virginal” Denali or Yellowstone, this is simply a place that is finally out of doors. If I am held up internally by my pre-fossilized bones (waiting here in my little storage locker body until they can return as calcium to their friends, the rocks in the earth) and I am supported externally by the walls of the houses and buildings I seem to require as a 21st century urbanized hominid, then my body, my self, my home, my space of occupation and dwelling, is perhaps best defined as the zone between my bones and the walls of my home (or wherever I am at the moment). Landscape in service of architecture is a lovely gesture, but it is perhaps homologous to the skin and hair of my more traditionally defined body, outside without being way “out there”.

To walk across a cornfield, though, is another matter. This is not landscape in relationship with buildings, it is landscape in relationship with people. Where gardens habitually have walls (or at least edges to their intentions), fields have hedgerows. This is nature bounded by nature, abutting more nature and more open sky. This is where we finally run out of doors, have no more doors to run out of, finally shed our protective multiple shelled bodies and talk to the Landscape on its own terms.

It has been said that prayer is simply unmixed attention. During my first year of grad school, Tuesdays were disproportionately rainy. In fine Murphy’s Law tradition, this was the day of our Plants and Ecology class, spent outside knowing plants in their settings. Unable to be elsewhere or otherwise occupied, we prayed. These trees became small gods, and the forests small heavens. The rest of the week was hectic and stressful, but Tuesdays were golden even when wet. Second year, that class was gone, and with it the outside world retreated. Though for ten days I was able to wake up and do my yoga exercises on a porch facing Mt. Vesuvius, I was largely asked to develop my understanding of the land from inside my body, buried deep in the library or the studio, my bones far from rocks. Even pressed up against the plate glass windows, out of doors was very far away. I fell apart.

I rebelled that spring by dropping my studio course and digging a garden instead. Now it is the winter of my third year. Still eating from my garden, I let myself be swallowed by school again this fall, learning about the land from books and lectures. I chased my ability to represent the land, still falling short on the temporal scale, but making great strides in many aspects. I need to continue my pursuit of landscapes in relation to people and other landscapes, not in relation to (even if in proximity of) buildings. I need to pray, regularly. I need to find the time and the peace to be with the land. Life is bigger than studio, Landscape is bigger than life. If I can draw and paint and quilt with the land in mind, the body in the land, then perhaps I can re-find my small gods and ask them for clarity.

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