



FOUR SEASONS ON A KENTUCKY FARM

An excerpt from Landings: A Crooked Creek Farm Year

TEXT AND IMAGES BY ARWEN DONAHUE

MORE THAN TWO DECADES AGO, WHEN David and I became farmers, we wanted to work toward repairing the ever-growing rift between people and land, starting with ourselves and our home. We believed—and we still believe—that the world needs more small, diversified farms, and that it would be an honor to be counted among them.

Yet by the time I began work on *Landings*, I wondered how we survive in this place. It had been fourteen years since we moved to the farm—years of toil and exhilaration; of grappling with poverty and basking in plenitude; of raising a family in a community struggling with the loss of its own local economy. Our existence felt increasingly paradoxical. On one hand, even the notion of *a rift between people and land* belies the complexity of our lived experience here. It doesn't account for the joy, delight, and awe of our creaturely lives on Earth. On the other hand, the rift, on a planetary scale, keeps growing ever wider. To sustain my commitment to the farm, it was necessary to embrace my surroundings with more intention, to use art as a means of celebrating the struggle enmeshed in staying put.

Before I came to this point, art had largely been a refuge from the pressures of farm life, not a means of embracing it. After I decided to start drawing our daily lives, I began to carry a camera around with me, which I secretly called my *co-memorator*, as in *co-memorator*: collaborator in memory-making. Look at the incline of this hill; look at how many different colors I simply call *green*; look at how a small shift in perspective changes an entire composition. When I could find the time, I looked through the photographs I had captured and started to draw. Drawing was, in a sense, a flesh-and-blood extension of the work the camera had begun, as if the path between my eye and hand was a developing bath in which the images steeped. After they became part of my body, I drew them out in ink and watercolor on paper. I never composed in pencil, but jumped in with a wobbly broken pen dipped in ink. Revisions remain visible—reminiscent of how, looking at the lines of this land, we can see how it has been altered by generations of human presence.

Sunday, January 27

We walk in the woods in the late afternoon. Phoebe is down in the run, stomping on crunchy, wet ice. It's beginning to melt but is still strong enough

to hold her. David stands behind a pile of four offset chunks of wood, in the center of the circle he has made of the mess of fallen trees and branches that once lay around this spot, and looks up at the treetops.

I am happy that he felt compelled to make this impractical thing. The rigors of farming and the stark calculus of a farm's economy can wreak havoc on the practice of art. Since we moved to the farm fourteen years ago, I've attempted to protect that practice by segregating art and farming, by building a moat around my artmaking and retreating to it as a refuge from the farm's demands. Farming was David's dream, not mine. Art has been an act of resistance to the reality of my life on the ground.

But what is happening here? David's making art from fallen trees, and I am drawing the lines of our daily lives. I'm still defiant of the farm's relentless need (See a mess? Draw it!), but these drawings are also leading me deeper into my life in this place.



Thursday, April 18

When I lived in cities, grass was easy to ignore, the vegetable equivalent of pavement. A lawn in town must be mowed, but if I happened to have one, it was scaled to my capacity: an hour a week would do. Grass seemed gentle: even the word 'blade' loses its threat when followed by 'of grass.' A blade of grass yields to the blade you yield against it, and yields a sweet smell when cut. It also yields to contemplation, as Whitman knew: "I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass."

But spring on the farm allows no leaning and loafing. Beginning around mid-April, Kentucky grass becomes a relentless force. The earth is a green-pelted animal with rank fur, in which we

are embedded like ticks, hanging on for dear life.

Time is scarce. I mow and mow, cultivate and rake out beds in the herb garden, and plant parsley, cilantro, and dill. At day's end, I collapse on the couch. Phoebe is with her grandmother in Lexington, an hour away. We have stale popcorn and beer for dinner.



Tuesday, June 11

First pea harvest: fifty-five pounds, from the patch we sowed on Easter Sunday, the day we listened to the frogs' spring concert. We will distribute them to our customers tomorrow, along with an admonition that they should shell and eat them as soon as possible. The sugars will soon be converted to starch. Get a child to help you, we will tell them, and your child will eat them all up, and it will make you happy to see her eat all those peas. But our shareholders are busy people, whose lives are not built around shelling peas, as ours sometimes are. As a post-harvest treat, Phoebe shells us each a saucer of peas, and garnishes each dish with wood sorrel.

In the evening, I head to the hills to make bouquets of wildflowers. Bright orange butterfly weed spreads over the west-facing slopes, and oxeye daisies thrive wherever there's sun in the afternoon. I also see Philadelphia fleabane, yarrow, cinquefoil, St. John's Wort, Deptford pink, Carolina rose, and milkweed. I keep making a picture of myself in my mind's eye: Look at me! I'm doing something so pretty! But it takes a few hours to make sixty bouquets, and I never seem to work fast enough. There's still much to do to

be ready for tomorrow's harvest and delivery. It will be another late night.

Friday, October 4

Our last CSA delivery of the year was on Wednesday. David stands among the rinsed and drying coolers, crates, and baskets. On the porch bench and kitchen floor: baskets of pears, peppers, winter squash, potatoes, sweet potatoes. Our fifteenth year of growing produce for market was, in some ways, like our very first: we two (occasionally three) do the work of the farm alone together. That's given us the chance to visit every harvest day while we work, to reflect on the pattern of our lives.

That pattern is defined by the swinging wheel of seasons. Our own wills are swept off by the wind of the wheel's turning. Winter's dormancy nurtures hope and hunger. Optimism takes root in spring, flushing fresh and green. Summer's setting of seed and fruit lays bare our inadequacies: we are in the weeds. Much of what we wanted to thrive has withered; much of what foils us has thrived. Now, in autumn, we reckon with reality. How can we do better next year? We plan and scheme but know by now that failure is part of the pattern. We might as well greet it as we would a faithful friend.

I begin to avoid weeding, to protect crops from exposure to deer and insects. A freeze will soon kill everything anyway. What's the best possible method of failure, here? The one that requires least work. ♡



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