

**The Bleeding Fields:
Rural Exodus and Reinhabitation of the Southlands
(A Personal Narrative)**

By Janisse Ray

I am sitting at the dining table at Andalusia with a note-tablet in front of me, trying to stop crying. I keep thinking that Flannery O'Connor sat here, that she regularly ate here. I can feel her. To my left is the doorway to her room, where there's still a narrow bedstead and a shelf of books, whose titles I strained at the rope to read. The yellowed wallpaper is peeling, the aromas are dust and austere decline.

We arrived to Andalusia in two white vans, bumping and scratching up a long clay driveway, a group of scholars and writers out for an afternoon field trip, a diversion from a relentless weekend of canonizing the Southern soul. We have been given a tour of the grounds of Andalusia – dairy barn overgrown with vines, sharecropper cabin caving in to legendary rot, fields bitter with weeds. Everywhere at Andalusia there is ruin, an air of magisterial neglect. One barn-mule stands woeful in the brine of solitude.

The peacocks are gone. Flannery is gone. Her mother is gone. Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman are gone, along with all the good country people. The Bible salesman has come and gone.

My current sadness is my chronic sadness: a way of life is passing, I have watched its passage, it is one I loved, and I am not sure that in my lifetime we will get it back. In fact, I am almost convinced that we won't. What once rang with calls and bells is silent; what once bloomed has closed shut.

Our group has been invited by the Watson-Brown Foundation to Hickory Hill Plantation near Thomson, Georgia, home of Tom Watson, Populist candidate for president in 1904 and 1908. The theme of the gathering is “Cornbread and Sushi.” The South is at a crossroads. An old farmer on a tractor is driving along a Southern highway, down a long hill, and he is passed by a log truck, a queue of city bicyclists in skintight spandex, and a young woman with her belongings packed, headed north, or headed west. What do we have to say about it?

Mary Hood, author of *How Far She Went* and *Familiar Heat*, winner of the Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction, is among the group. “We are in transit and this is a scene from the rocket window,” she says.

Sitting at the dining table at Andalusia, one can hear the traffic of Milledgeville, close and constant. The road is highway now, paved and four-laned. A commercial enterprise operates next door, and we can hear its loudspeaker paging an employee to the phone. Because of Andalusia’s acreage and because its trees have not been cut, the farmstead is an anachronism. Even some of that, the curator tells us, may have to go, to help keep up the buildings. Nothing is sacred, I’ve savagely learned. Not history, not landscape, not family, not community, not childhood. It’s all on the market.

Moderator Bernie Dunlap, president of Wofford College, poses a question: If the rural tradition is dead, then are we glad and why?

“The rural South is largely a fiction to me,” someone says. Someone else mentions knowing the rural South only through recreational possibilities. Cuban-born Columbia College professor John Zubizarreta says of his first glimpse of the rural South,

“I was terrified. It was an impoverished, dangerous wasteland. I said to myself, ‘There’s no urbanity here.’” African-American novelist John Holman of Atlanta had a similar experience. “You see fields of something growing. You don’t even know what it is. You might never get out to something you recognize.”

It’s not a myth, it’s not a myth, I want to shout.

For what was I weeping at Andalusia? For the purple skies lost to me because of globalization. For a rural exodus wrought by industrial capitalism. For homogenizing forces, television and the Internet. “Assimilation, once the great fear,” wrote Hal Crowther in his essay “The Tao of Dixie,” “is now the great fact of most Southern lives.”

To first answer the subjunctive, *Is the rural tradition dead?*, let’s look at statistics.

According to the Bureau of the Census, anyone living in or outside a settlement with a population of less than 2,500 people is rural. Since 2000, the Census Bureau classifies 59 million, or 21 percent, of the total population as rural. Twenty-six percent of Southerners live in rural areas, and over half the populations of West Virginia, Mississippi, Kentucky, and Arkansas are rural. (Interestingly, the Office of Management and Budget avoids the word entirely. It defines “metro,” central cities and urbanized areas of 50,000 or more, along with contiguous counties, and classifies anyone who is not metro as “nonmetro.” For many statisticians, then, one is rural by default and to be urban is the norm.)

The South’s identity as a rural region has been longstanding and typifies the association of rural with agricultural. As historian Jack Temple Kirby writes in his essay,

“The Rural South,”

...Historical demographers perceive a sort of “tipping point” toward urbanism when the city-dwelling portion of a population surpasses ten per cent of the total. The Northeast achieved this level during the 1820s, the Midwest during the 1850s; and both were urban regions in another generation or so. By stunning contrast, the broad South, which included states settled by Europeans and Africans since the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, remained overwhelmingly rural for a very long time. As late as 1940, for instance, barely more than a third of southerners lived in cities, a proportion the Northeast had passed well before the Civil War.

For the past century, rural places have steadily bled people, mostly to big cities, where they migrate to find work. The falling apart of rural communities began in the late 1800s, Kirby suggests, with the advent of railroads that made travel easier and brought a keen dissatisfaction with rural isolation and lack of society.

“In 1910 there were 39,073 plantations in the eleven states once Confederate,” he wrote. “Thirty years later, in 1940...there were only 19,498, a disappearance of slightly more than half.”

The bleeding intensified during World War II when, to rebuild our war-broken country, the U.S. government launched an advertising campaign to entice rural people away from the farms to the cities. Industrial capitalism needed a workforce, and what it promised in return was certain prosperity. Jobs were plentiful in the city, factory labor easier than hardscrabble farm-life. To leave the farm was as much an act of patriotism (albeit a misguided one) as a self-service.

The ad campaign worked. There ensued a mass exodus of rural people. Between 1915 and 1960 about nine million rural Southerners were displaced to cities, and another

9 million, approximately half white, half black, were gone from the South entirely (Kirby).

Later, young people would graduate from little towns like Ideal, Georgia and Liberty, Mississippi and Enterprise, West Virginia, and they would go away to university and never come back. They would have internalized what we told them, as the late Paul Gruchow realized, that if they wanted to amount to anything they'd better leave home. If they were any good they wouldn't be here. They'd be somewhere else. They would want chances to pursue learned professions. They wouldn't want to tackle rampant racism, homophobia, illiteracy, poverty, joblessness.

“We raise our most capable rural children from the beginning,” Gruchow wrote in his book *Grass Roots: The Universe of Home*, “to expect that as soon as possible they will leave and that if they are at all successful, they will never return. We impose upon them, in effect, a kind of homelessness.”

Four-fifths of people in the U.S. now live in urban areas.

Across the country you see evidence of this “hollowing out” of rural America – abandoned small farms, ghost towns, country stores with dark windows – and its attendant suffering. But nowhere is the hollowing-out of rural America more heart-breaking than in the South. Rural places have hemorrhaged their best and brightest children, their intellectuals, thinkers, organizers, leaders, and artists, those who would create change. The children of these thinkers are gone. People speak of having “escaped” the South. “I would die if I had to go back there,” I’ve heard said. “I couldn’t wait to leave. Nothing’s there.”

In the wake of this loss, rural locales have suffered a loss of imagination that has led to a cultural poverty to match the real poverty. When a jokester friend used to visit me from Savannah, he would quip that he had to set his watch back 100 years when he came to Baxley.

Southerners began to be regarded as a bunch of hoodlums and ignoramuses. “The South is, in some ways, a little slow,” said Edward Hoagland.

When I hear “dumb Southerner” jokes I think of a gentleman with whom I fell into conversation while boarding a flight from Washington Reagan to Greenville, South Carolina. The gentleman was in his fifties, portly and well-dressed. In his hand he carried a book. That the book was not paperback is important. Its dust jacket had been removed, and the book’s cloth cover was deep orange. To pass the time as we waited in a queue, I inquired as to what he was reading. He glanced at the book. “*Spice*,” he said in a lovely Greenvillian accent. “A history of the spice trade.”

Exquisitely erudite, even inexplicably so, the South enjoys an intellectual stereotype, found in black and white cultures, of the mild-mannered, reasonable, well-respected reader of books. The South has a literary legacy that no other section of the country has been able to approach. The region treats its writers like minor gods. The way to the heart of the South is to write a book (alternately, to drive a racecar). To write a book that people love is to become the South's darling, its idol, its pet – note Harper Lee, Caroline Miller, Charles Frazier.

I was raised on a junkyard on the outskirts of the town of Baxley, county seat of Appling,

southern Georgia, a county that was rural in 1962 when I was born and which remains rural today. The county seat of Baxley's population in 1970 was 3,500 and in 2000 it was little higher, 4,150. Both my mother and father had lived all their lives in Appling County. My mother was raised on the Branch Farm in Spring Branch community. She had been glad to leave it behind when she married my father, a town boy. I spent most Saturdays with my farming grandparents, Arthur and Beulah, who lived on land my great-grandparents had farmed.

Of my mother's birth family, all seven children except one (my mother) departed for larger cities upon adulthood. Another quickly returned, five stayed away. Of my father's birth family, six of eight departed for greener territory, and during midlife the seventh left. My father remained.

Of the four siblings in my own family, two live in Appling County and two (including, at this moment, me) left.

Remnant

A barn
longs for the trees it was, years circled in wood,
history
of forest, thrushes all summer singing.
A barn
never forgets. Rafters own the memory of sky.
What
once held leaves and wind, knew the
shifting
of horses and lowing of cows is
silent
in the evenings, after we have taken our
bowls
to be washed and turned off the lights. No
ewes

to lick trough-oats, no streams of milk. Gone the
cock's
crow, hens' gabbling. Gone the sire.
If
a barn has no animals,
what
gives it life? Except an audience, listening. A barn
desires
hay and the grassy fragrance of hay
mice
whispering corn. A barn wishes tools, nail for every
pitchfork.
Buggies and carts, wheelbarrows, bags of seed,
buckets,
moldboards, plows, mowing machines. Whatever
else
we've forgotten. But more than anything, a barn
longs
for barnsmen and barnswomen
working
wordlessly while wrens mistake beams and
night
comes on.

The South has been especially hard-hit environmentally. Basically colonized by the United States, it has been mined for resources. The most current abomination is the mountaintop removal of coal in Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee, a method of strip-mining that allows as much as 600 vertical feet of the Appalachians to be removed, often encompassing multiple peaks and thousands of acres of broadleaf deciduous forest in between.

Driving through the South, looking at pine plantations, the region appears to be a colony. In a colossal whittling-down, the area of natural forest across the South declined from 356 million acres in colonial times to 182 million acres today. Fifteen percent of this is pine plantations, which were virtually nonexistent in the 1950s and have been

displacing natural forests for the past half century. (No matter who cries the contrary, a tree plantation is not a forest.)

Fourteen ecosystems across the South have declined to occupy only 2 percent of their original range. Of them, longleaf pine historically covered the southeastern coastal plains of the left hip of the United States, 93 million acres. By 1930 virtually all of the virgin longleaf pine had been felled. By 1995, 99 percent of natural stands, meaning naturally regenerated thus of diverse age and placement, of longleaf pine forests were gone. The National Biological Service called it a “critically endangered” ecosystem. About two million acres remain, and less than 10,000 of them are virgin, not even 0.001 percent of what was. Most is first- and second-growth, mangled by logging, turpentine, grazing, and the suppression of fire.

There are more threatened forested ecosystems in the South than any other region of the country. Half of the forested wetlands, mostly meaning swamps, have been lost.

More than 80 percent of federally endangered species come from the southern U.S. and Hawaii.

As the Southern landscape changes, so too what it means to be Southern changes, because any culture – meaning art, especially a set of stories, that describes and explains life -- is inextricably tied to a landscape. “Tell me where you’re from,” Wallace Stegner said, “and I’ll tell you who you are.”

What kind of doom does it spell for our culture if we destroy 99 percent of a landscape that engenders it? What happens if we replace that landscape with buildings

and pavement? Does the culture become urban, street-wise, irreverent, disloyal? Does it turn its back on family, history and place?

Writers are significant to the vessel of culture. They “function as creators and sustainers of communities of memory,” wrote Jim Wayne Miller in his essay, “A Cosmopolitan Regionalism.” Hal Crowther, in *Cathedrals of Kudzu*, called memory “the primary raw material” of the writer’s trade.

Once I visited the writer William Gay at his home near Hohenwald, Tennessee. He drove me around the countryside, pointing out where scenes in his novels had taken place: “There’s the hill where the old man wildcrafted ginseng. There’s where the juke was.” Gay believes that the culture of the rural South has largely vanished. “The urban South has been different for years,” he told reporter Alden Mudge, “but the rural South sort of hung on to its ways....The people I’m writing about don’t exist anymore.”

Castigators of this sentiment abound. “The South has been notorious for mythologizing itself,” wrote North Carolina poet James Applewhite. “That part of the mind of the south which does not know itself persistently wishes to see the Old South, before the war, as a kind of Eden.”

“Nostalgia gets in the way of real work to be done in Southern letters,” said Vanderbilt professor Kate Daniels. “I can’t stand lying. And so much about the south has been about lying.” Pat Conroy said the South runs on denial.

Lying or not, myth or not, nostalgia or not, something is being lost. In her brilliant essay, “A Disappearing Subject Called the South,” novelist Josephine Humphreys writes of driving a northern writer through Charlotte, NC, which takes an

hour to cross. The visitor finally said, “Nothing prevents this from being New Jersey.”

“That is why,” she writes, “no matter how overworked the topic, we must continue to write about development. We must prevent it. Writers in particular have a duty to prevent it, because for us what’s at stake is lifeblood.” She continues:

A purely rural setting is hard ground for the novelist; more often than not, he’ll widen the rural scope by taking his people to town now and then, or by hauling in travelers. But a purely urban setting is hard, too, because community itself is not to be seen in most cities; the proportions of the place have gotten out of hand and are no longer of human scale. Town alone is that community in which community itself is discernible.

Will the urban literature, as Reynolds Price suggested, consist of “bad poems and novels full of neon light on wet asphalt, unshaven chins, scalding coffee at four a.m.”? As our old-growth writers die, what happens to our literature? Will the New South produce stories to tell, and the scribes to tell those stories?

“We’ve had the Solid South, the Old South and the New South,” wrote reporter Allen G. Breed. “But are we heading toward a ‘No South’?”

How will we reinvent ourselves?

Even as I was becoming a nature writer – a voice for wildness – and an environmental activist, I was battling a piece of myself that was happiest not in wilderness, but on a farm. But a farm is a destroyer too of native landscapes -- in fact, much of my beloved pine flatwoods fell to agricultural fields. Most farms are point-sources of pollution.

How could this be reconciled?

I came to think of a societal continuum that begins with wildness on one end

(hunting and foraging), moving through agrarianism (settling down and tending a piece of land), into industrialism (an urban life). So a tract of land can sustain a forest or a farm or a manufacturing plant. If wildness were on the left of the continuum, I would want all movement in terms of land-use to be from right to left, always toward wildness. I was happiest left of middle, but not too far left. My friend the writer Rick Bass, a fierce advocate of wilderness preservation, a man who has labored daily for twenty years to attain protection of roadless areas in his cherished Yaak Valley, Montana, once said to me, “What I would want, after working in the fields, would be to step away from the plow and enter an old forest, where I could walk, and rest at the end of a day of hard work.”

All my life I’ve dreamed of being a farmer. I came to this by heritage and also by affinity. After my grandfather died, I watched his farm become less and less functional.

But deep in my memories are my grandfather’s mules, my grandmother’s chickens, fields of truck vegetables and sprawling watermelon vines, the full corn crib. Some of these, of course, may have been my mother’s memories before they were my own. Then there was the Farmall-A and the subsidized cotton and soybeans and the leased fields and the eight-row harrows and the monster combine and terrible erosion and the invasion of privet. The cane grinder was sold, the smokehouses fell, the last hen died uneaten. I remember my grandmother’s last pea-patch.

In many ways we are the poster family for the story of agriculture in the U.S. First, the working farms, the farm animals, the land-based, subsistence economy, farming children.

And, poof, all that was gone. It happened so quickly.

In the empty places, since the mid-1970s, fundamentalism, characterized by pervasive religiosity and conservative politics, has sunk deep roots. Religion scholar Sam Hill, author of *Religion in the Southern States*, proposes that fundamentalism has done more to destroy the cultural tribalism than anything in history, including the Civil Rights Movement. The pre-fundamentalism South was one of inclusion, and the Civil Rights Movement attempted and in large ways succeeded in expanding cultural boundaries. Fundamentalism's ethos is restriction, demanding personal piety and a literal interpretation of the Bible. The advent of fundamentalism has toppled the notion of Southerners as cultural adherents, since fundamentalists would consider correct belief paramount for inclusion.

“Fundamentalism in any form,” says Barry Lopez, “is the sign of a failed imagination.” When the imagination goes, the people become inflexible, rigid, dogmatic, closed.

In many ways the South seems uniquely responsible for the conservative government in Washington. John Egerton pursued this idea in his 1974 book, *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America*. Nine of the first twelve presidents of the United States were born below what is now the Mason and Dixon line. After the Civil War, wrote Egerton, “it seems fair to say that the single most revealing and defining feature of the South's political and cultural identity was its preoccupation with race and color.” He suggests that the politics of the United States is looking more and more like the politics of the Old South.

After the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 and 1864, Southern white males (women were not yet enfranchised) welded themselves to the Democrats, and until the election of 1948, the eleven states of the Old Confederacy remained true to the Democratic Party. Franklin D. Roosevelt, a liberal who won over even black voters, cleanly pocketed the Southern vote. In 1948 the racist governor of South Carolina, Strom Thurmond, formed the States' Rights Party, known as the Dixiecrats, which briefly attracted votes away from the Democratic stronghold. At that time all 11 governors, 22 senators, and 103 of the 105 Southern representatives were Democrat.

Then in May 1954 the Supreme Court (which had upheld segregation in 1896) ruled against segregated schools. That was followed by the Montgomery bus boycotts and the emergence of young Martin Luther King Jr. as leader of the Civil Rights movement. In a political backlash, in 1964 Strom Thurmond crossed over to the Republican Party and thereby began a flight from the Democratic order.

Ten years later, the Republicans would hold the seats of three governorships, seven senators, and 34 of 108 representatives. Nixon in 1972 easily took all eleven states. Since, the Republicans have kept the White House, with the exception of two Southern presidents, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, both of whom were scapegoated by the Republican establishment. In the last eleven national elections, the South has returned to the stage, some winners and some not. (George Bush the Father belongs on the list of Southerners if a Houston hotel address and voter registration is valid.) By 2004, 7 of 11 Southern governors were from the grand old bourgeois, 13 of 22 senators, 76 of 131 house members.

One of the most satisfying experiences of my writing life came in the year 2003, in advance of the 2004 presidential election (if indeed it can rightfully be called that), in which I worked on a book that would attempt to pry loose the vise-grip of the Republican Party on the South. Because the South is arguable to blame for right-wing theology to be the order of the day, it makes sense that Southerners who can, to dissent. Tony Dunbar, an attorney and mystery writer from New Orleans and the son of white civil-rights leader Les Dunbar, who had directed the Southern Regional Council during the 1960s, sent a letter inviting me to contribute an essay to a volume that would be modeled on the 1930 book of agrarian essays, *I'll Take My Stand*. Our collection would be called *Where We Stand: Voices of Southern Dissent*. It would be a book by Southerners who were defenders of the poor, believers in racial equality and the rights of nature, and opponents of militarized American society and untethered capitalism.

Southern dissent. Those two words seemed an oxymoron. What I was finding is that the conservatism of the South is not as deeply rooted as one might think. As Mary Hood once told me, "After Reagan won, I sat on the floor and cried. And in many ways I haven't got up."

Early in the process, contributors were invited to the farm of Will Campbell, a man of the cloth who was hired as Director of Religious Life at the University of Mississippi in 1954. Two years later he was fired for siding with civil rights activists. He went on to work closely with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and to dedicate his life to liberal progressive ideals. During Vietnam he ordained many men who would otherwise be drafted.

Among us was civil rights historian Paul Gaston, the wonderful arch-liberal Dan Carter, and the classicist Susan Ford Wiltshire, who thought that we should hire a bus and take our group on the road. Somehow Jimmy Carter was conscripted to write the foreward.

Who knows if our book made a whit of difference. We all know what happened in the general election of 2004.

During that campaign, and then afterwards, there was much to-do about red states and blue states. The South went solidly Republican, as did the Intermountain West and the Great Plains. Blue states, fewer in number, were located in the Northeast, the Upper Midwest, and the West Coast. But when one examined the map county by county, it was obvious that the red/blue divide in this country is between urban and rural. In red states, most of the urban areas (with some exceptions, such as Jacksonville, Birmingham, Salt Lake City, and Tulsa) voted blue. In blue states, most counties outside the major urban areas voted for Bush.

If the brightest children leave, what's left is a dismal public education. Funding is often tight for local school systems. Poor children increasingly can't afford university. In my home county, 32.7 percent of the population didn't graduate high school. (The national average is 19.6; the figure for Windham County, Vermont, where I currently live, is even lower, 12.7 percent. Incidentally, 8.4 percent of Appling Countians have a degree higher than a B.A.; that figure for Windham County is 30.5.)

I believe that nobody chooses ignorance. I would ask, is the South a culture of

abandonment?

When I was a young woman, at the exact time I was learning to write, I began a study of oppression. I was lucky enough to fall under the influence of people who worked for world change – these were words they used, world change -- people who were members of peace coalitions, banked at credit unions, marched for civil rights, came out of closets, quit shaving their legs, drummed with other men in circles on full moons, sent their children to alternative schools, didn't pay war taxes, read Ellison and Castenada and Steinem -- people who would end racism, classism, ageism, both sexism, homophobia.

So in a time when I was struggling to find my voice as a writer, I was struggling to find my voice as a human living in the 20th Century in the United States of America, a country founded philosophically on the ideals of freedom and democratic rights, but built ironically and tragically on extermination and subjugation of entire groups of living beings, and I was struggling to find my voice as a defeated Southern American.

I had been raised by early fundamentalists to be godly and quiet, to be good and good-looking within a subset of uneducated, dirty-fingernailed, whip-you-if-you-don't-sit-there-and-act-right, working class people.

That I fell in with radicals made sense. Perhaps because I was born an underdog I have looked out for them, spoken on their behalf, especially those that have no voice -- the wild species -- or those whose cries are barely audible – children, people of color, single parents, migrant workers, Native Americans, draftees, innocent civilians in wartime, the unsuspecting and unarmed and unable. I have been a shock to my people,

who subsequently have forced me into a cumbersome position, of being an outlier in the only place in which I can be insider.

Seventeen years after I left, I returned to rural southern Georgia, to our family farm. I no longer felt at home on much of the earth, riven as I was from our predominant culture – cities with hordes of strangers, a gluttony for material things, loss of nature and family farms, general disconnection to land. I hungered to be part of a rural community defined by land and history and blood. I wanted my young son to run barefoot and pick blackberries and climb magnolias and play with his cousins.

Instead, what I found in Appling County, Georgia was an erosion of bonds – to each other, to the land. The community and sense of place that I remembered and sought had been compromised severely. I saw a way of life that once made sense, more sense than any other lifestyle, pitched into failure.

Nowhere in recent human history are our tribal, interdependent natures more realized than in farming communities. The agrarian life seems to me a particularly artful and imaginative one. While industrial society and the academy are beset with deconstruction, the agrarian seems inexorably possessed with a drive toward creation. The farmer constructs the field, which constructs the corn, which constructs the chickens, which construct the eggs and also the manure which constructs the soil.

Agrarian society, of course, is not without dysfunction, ostracism, and strife, and those in the apparent minority – gays and lesbians, people of color, worshippers of certain religions such as Jews in the South, artists, and the mentally ill – often find rural

communities more stultifying and dangerously close-minded than urban ones.

But gardens, fields, pastures, domestic animals. Morningglories, a mailbox on a pole. Birds, fruit trees, corn cribs, barns. One-lane bridges.

I wanted to inhabit that life.

The morning I urged the U-Haul out of Montana, I dashed into a sidewalk café to grab a bagel, and there was my friend Davy, drinking coffee and waiting, newspaper scattered about.

“Sweetmeats,” he greeted me. Davy is easy in his body, slim, his neck-length hair plowed by finger line. Although he is openly gay, we are very flirtatious.

“Babydoll,” I answered, jovial. “I’m on my way out.”

“Know how women in the South wear blue jeans cut off short, and they sew lace to the hem?” Davy asked with false innocence. As a Charleston native he knows only too well the poignant stereotypes and untruths about the rural South.

“They got big hair and when they walk their pantyhose go swish, swish, swish,” he drawled. “And the men, they drive around with Confederate flags stuck all over their trucks and there’s a dead deer lying in the back they’ve poached. And they live in house trailers with a pile of beer cans in the yard that they’ve thrown out the window as they emptied them.”

He paused, looked directly at me.

“Girl, you gone come out the house and there’s a big ole rattlesnake coiled up on your front porch showing its teeth at you.” Davy opened his mouth wide, somehow managing a vulgar, lustful expression. He has the most expressive lips ever put on a man.

“Wild pigs come out in the morning from the swamp – watch out when you go rambling or they’ll get you, get your boy, and get your little dog, too. Don’t go swimming in no river, ole alligator’ll drag you under.” He drew in a quick breath.

“And it’s so hot down there you’ll have to shave your legs.” Davy took a sip of coffee and banged his mug down, coolly picking up a section of paper. I sat in the sweet sunshine, feeling behind me the beautiful people drinking their organic, hazelnut-flavored, songbird-friendly coffee, and beyond them the lovely enlightened town, and even beyond, majestic mountains washed in green, rising past the café window.

“What do you want to go back down there for?” Davy asked.

At present, the region's population is exploding. By 2030 it is expected to comprise 40 percent of the country's population. A third of the people who live in the South weren't born there, and of those born in the South, only 77 percent identify themselves as "Southerners." Total, 63 percent of the population think of themselves as Southern.

James Cobb, author of *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, said that the South has become "sort of like a lifestyle, rather than an identity anymore." As scholar Suzanne Jones, in her paper, "Who's Writing about the South and What Does It Mean?," wrote, "in the twenty-first century the South through immigrant eyes looks a lot like America."

In what has become a second carpetbagging, the South has readily moved to embrace the trappings of our industrial capitalistic economic system. The South is disappearing, buried beneath Wal-Marts and Burger Kings and Home Depots. Native landscapes shrink and the towns that produced authors like Alice Walker and William Faulkner and Willie Morris become a sham of chain restaurants and box stores, which is to say unrecognizable. The old railroad depots and two-story hotels are bulldozed, the hardware stores close down.

Our embrace of efficiency, lust to belong, and fear of uniqueness means that our towns increasingly look like replicas of each other, or in the "new urbanism" of Seaside, Florida or Celebration, Florida, they look like replicas of Disney, which is a replica of what never was.

Much of what seems rural, too, is in actuality industrial. What is a pine plantation if not an industrial landscape? What is mountaintop removal if not an industrial landscape in the most rural of places? Agricultural fields are being developed, suburbs edging into farmland.

In an egregious insult, St. Joe Paper Company, with enormous holdings of north Florida land, became St. Joe Development Company. One of its projects, WhiteFence Farms southeast of Tallahassee, markets three- to ten-acre hobby farms to people “who have always wanted to live on a farm but don’t see themselves as farmers.” The tracts cost from \$250,000 to \$750,000.

St. Joe calls its design “new ruralism,” touted as “reestablishing connections with land that once was at the heart of America’s farms, ranches and rural communities.” The development has hired a fulltime agriculturalist, whose business card says “farmer” and whose main concern is growing crops with “emotional value and physical beauty” – buckwheat in flower, for example. A tractor trail runs through the development, and a cultivated field will be in view from every homesite. Homeowners may keep cows and horses, and are encouraged to erect outbuildings such as barns. No pigs will be allowed.

Farming itself, of course, has become an industrial activity, with chicken houses and corporate hog farms polluting the countryside. Big ag, or agricultural monopolies, makes a parody of family farms and our government’s agricultural, trade and economic policies favor the agribusiness conglomerates. Their profits rise. Government subsidies create an economy of welfare farmers. (Addressing the plight of the family farmer is a major part of progressive presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich’s platform.)

Kirby suggests that the “appropriate mode of observation concerning the contemporary rural South is the *memorial*...Rural studies, indeed, seem in boom phase throughout the western world – a sure sign, I must also think, that rural-agricultural life is gone or nearly so!”

After a few years my son, unhappy in the countryside of Georgia, came north to live with his father and after a few more years I followed. I couldn't live without my son. Again I left again the hot flatlands, native to me, whose tragedies and pleasures are intimate, where for seven years I had lived on my great-grandparent's farm. I came to live in Brattleboro, Vermont, an urban town of 12,000 in the rural county of Windham.

When I arrived to Vermont, I was in utter awe at the landscape. Down beautiful narrow New England roads my family drove, slowly, up and down hills, through the northern deciduous forest, alongside fields of corn and hillsides of goldenrod, gazing around at this new country. We passed through small villages with their white-steepled churches, general stores, historical post offices and grassy commons. We passed old cemeteries, hillsides of trees, farmstands with rows of pumpkins.

From what I see, rural Vermont for the most part has kept its history, its unique character, its local businesses, its culture. Centuries-old stone fences wind through the woods.

The charm and imagination of New England makes me ache with a strange mixture of gratitude and sadness -- gratefulness for an emphasis on quality of life; and grief that so much of my homeland looks very different. Coming to live in rural New

England is like reversing myself thirty years, to a time when towns across America weren't all trying to look the same and to a time when people mattered.

Whatever singular essence the South once had, as this one does -- with the smell of haying and speckled jewels hanging thick on the jewelweed -- is vanishing. When I was in the South, immersed in it, I could not see it as clearly as I do from the brutal, cold New England landscape and, let truth be told, I would not trade one drink raised to the ghost of Faulkner for all the maple syrup in Vermont.

The most hope I see for the rural South lies in new agrarianism, as defined by Eric T. Freyfogle in his anthology, *The New Agrarianism: Land, Culture, and the community of Life*, as a reinvigoration of ties to the land, or “humans living and working on land in ways that can last.” Evidence of this agrarian renaissance is found not only in the trickling resettlement of rural farmlands, and in the transformation to organic and sustainable farming methods, but also in home gardeners, watershed restoration groups, sustainable timber harvesting, local land trusts, native plant societies, and community-supported agriculture.

Three stimuli are moving us in this direction.

1. Our economic system.
2. The decline of fossil fuel.
3. Global climate change.

I used to think that the loss of so many things that make sense, such as family, community, history, and landscape, could be blamed on human ignorance and apathy. As

an environmentalist and a rural activist I would think, if we could just do three things, a kind of three-point plan for saving the earth, we could stop the hemorrhaging of farms and farmland (not to mention wild places): 1) educate enough people, 2) pass enough policy (such as making genetically modified organisms illegal until proven safe or preventing the blame for wind-borne passage of GMOs to be placed on the farmer on whose land they appear), and 3) protect enough farmland and open spaces. I no longer believe this to be true.

I believe the culprit of destruction of the rural life is our economic system, industrial capitalism, which we have now managed to spread globally. We have been sacrificing into the global free market the things that matter most to us, including but not limited to farms and farmers, rural communities, clean air, good drinking water, rivers and prairies, our forests, free time, childhood, liberties, justice to other nations and cultures.

As Wendell Berry explains in his small book, "In the Presence of Fear," we've been told that we're living in a "new" economy that would "grow" endlessly. Industrial capitalism's motto has been *more, more, more*; its model an uphill line. We gave corporations the rights of people, of personhood.

Capitalism promised prosperity to every citizen of the world, but we know now that that prosperity is limited to a small percentage of the world's population, more so if one is a citizen of the United States; we in this room are among that percentage; and industrial capitalism has accepted pollution as the normal cost of doing business. Global industrial capitalism is going to fail because it requires more and more of itself to solve

its own problems, meaning more resources to produce ever-greater profit margins for companies and their stockholders, and the earth cannot support *more more more*.

We are not taking into account, in our economics, the damage we're doing to the earth, said Robert Kennedy Jr. said in his speech on September 10, 2005 to the Sierra Club National Convention. We “treat the planet as if were a business in liquidation“ and “convert our natural resource to cash as quickly as possible, to have a few years of pollution-based prosperity.” We are loading the cost of our generation's joyride on the backs of our children and our nation's long party on the backs of other peoples.

We inhabit a world in search of transformation. We will solve our problems, I am wont to believe. For now, here are four possibilities to think about:

First, we can keep on doing business the way we're doing and we will have to police natural resources worldwide and we will live with terrorism. Secondly, we can imbue ethics back into the system we have now. Regulate more. Pass saner policies. Punish polluters and insider traders and those who murder labor organizers. Stop giving corporations more rights than people.

Third, we can come up with another economic system. Communism hasn't worked because it doesn't produce enough for its people. Capitalism produces too much, makes us violently wasteful. Herman Daly at the University of Maryland suggests a steady-state economy. Maybe a new system, sustainablism?

The fourth solution seems most easily accomplished: we can extract ourselves from the global economy as much as possible and participate more and more in local, decentralized economies. This will mean that we produce as much for ourselves as

possible. Beyond that, we buy local. We don't shop at chain stores.

Buy local. Produce as much for yourself as possible. Try not to shop at chain stores – give our money to our friends and not our enemies. Move toward renewable, local energy. Not long ago I saw a new take on the old slogan: Think Locally, Act Locally.

As people understand the connection between our society's ills and capitalism, more of them will begin to focus on local products. They will be encouraged to do so by another phenomenon of our modern world, the decline of fossil fuels. Much of industrial agriculture – our entire industrial civilization – is based on cheap fuel. We are still many decades away from the end of petroleum. The prediction of peak oil, however, brings us to question our use of petroleum and wonder how long it will last. According to James Howard Kunstler in *The Long Emergency*, U.S. oil production peaked in 1970, and instead of learning frugality, we hyped up oil imports, until now 75% of our energy comes from overseas. Global oil markets are hard to read, but scientists predicted that global production of oil would peak between 2005 and 2010, and many believe it has already peaked. (Orion last issue) Oil will not suddenly run out; it will get harder to get and more expensive -- it will be of poorer quality -- it will have to come from countries with whom relations are poor.

What peak oil means for us, a nation helpless without petroleum, is more war, as industrial civilization (which has many governments in its grasp) demands that the party go on. It will mean much higher gas prices at the pump, smaller vehicles, and huge changes in the way we live -- less movement, more frugality. It will mean a return from

globalization to the very local: local growing of food, local economies, local entertainment, local community. Shoulders are already being put to the long and arduous task of reconstruction.

Last August, over 160 people from southern Vermont signed up for a Localvore Challenge, one week during which people promised to eat only food grown and produced within 100 miles of Brattleboro, or in the state of Vermont. Fifty people purchased “starter kits” that included hard-to-find items like cornmeal, beans and vinegar. Hundreds more participated region-wide.

The commitment had many levels: eat local for a day or week or month, or eat one local food at each meal. Nightly potlucks were scheduled.

The average calorie travels 1,500 miles to arrive to our plates and eating local initiatives have become an important way for communities to decrease dependence on fossil fuels and to help build a more dependable, decentralized food system. Local food is fresher, thus more nutritious, and uncompromised by technology that make growing and shipping more profitable.

Two hundred years ago, eating local was a way of life. Vermonters, Georgians, and everybody else grew gardens and kept livestock, then stocked root cellars, smoked meat, made sauerkraut and pickles, and canned fruits and vegetable for winter.

Jonathan Crowell, the southern Vermont organizer, said “Local food keeps money in local communities. It supports a food supply that is disconnected from the politics of oil.” But the project, co-founded by Californian Jessica Prentice, professional chef and

author of *Full Moon Feast: Food and the Hunger for Connection*, is really about supply-and-demand economics. “We’re acting as a local community to transform the economic and political topography of the region to make it more sustainable. We are now a force.”

“This is a community exercise to find out what foods we’re missing,” said Crowell, “and to encourage farmers to diversify in order to create a more-rounded local food supply.”

Earlier this month a smaller group participated in a Winter Challenge.

Southern Vermont is designing the infrastructure it will need for a local economy, not a global one. As is Asheville, North Carolina, which bills itself as the Tuscany of America, adopting as its slogan, “Thousands of Miles Fresher.” This kind of direction doesn’t make corporations happy.

The number of farmers markets in the country, according to the Department of Agriculture’s Agricultural Marketing Service, increased from 340 in 1970 to 3,700 in 2006. Producer-only farmers markets are having a startling result -- with the advent of markets in Oregon, the number of small farmers rose 40 percent. Georgia, which although a leading agricultural state has the fewest farmers markets per capita than all other states, has 36 markets, quadruple the figure in 2002. In the two years prior to 2006, the number of certified organic farm doubled, from 17 to 36. The 2006 Georgia Organics guide lists 64 farms.

Essayist Robert W. Watson, a latter-day Agrarian, writes, “a man who cultivates five acres of land that belong to him is a truly free man, unlike the corporate employee who is subject to losing his paycheck at any moment at the whim of his master.”

With global climate change increasingly more obvious, people have another reason to reconsider agrarian lives. One new farmstead in Vermont is attempting to prepare for climate change by installing a reservoir for water to be used during drought, slope farming that will adjust to fluctuating temperatures (reminiscent of the Inca system of graduated circles into the earth that allowed for crops grown simultaneously at different zones.)

So what we're witnessing in agriculture is a revolution. Turning full circle. But we are coming back different. We are coming back better prepared, knowing what struggles are ours. We're coming back educated. We're coming back knowing that failure is not possible.

The job, nonetheless, will not be easy: Southern resettlers are farming in a region of depletion, in terms of natural processes and in terms of people, and in a place of rigid beliefs. They walk an edge between:

balancing the needs of the wild with the need to nourish people

balancing concerns about human health with the need for productivity

weighing input against output

making farm decisions based on ecology *and* economy

balancing tradition with innovation.

This is not to forget the financial edge new agrarians walk, nor the edgy place where they exist on the fringes of contemporary agriculture. To be comfortable on an edge requires a good deal of courage and self-respect.

Meantime, attitudes toward rural places have to change. As Gruchow wrote, “The work of reviving rural communities will begin when we can imagine a rural future that makes a place for at least some of our best and brightest children, when they are welcome to be at home among us.” Vermont’s governor Jim Douglas has initiated a plan he calls “Vermont Promise Scholarship Program.” He has earmarked \$175 million in scholarships over the next fifteen years. Students must attend a Vermont institution and agree to live in Vermont for three consecutive years after finishing college. If they don’t meet the residency requirement, 50 percent of the scholarship will be treated as a loan and must be repaid.

Disillusionment with capitalism and industrial society, growing awareness of the end of fossil fuels, and fear about climatic disruption, accompanied by the realization that urban centers are utterly dependent on the surrounding countryside, are the factors that have inaugurated the resettlement of rural lands. (Interestingly enough, many of these new agrarians are women.)

Rural reinhabitation is not to be confused with urban sprawl. Being in a country place while remaining connected to a city for work and entertainment, and demanding urban amenities in the country, is not a rural life, but an increase of urban area. We must rebuild rural landscapes and communities not by destroying more wild places to build homes but by moving into the abandoned places.

Agrarian communities are diminished, but they are not dead. The rural tradition is yet alive, starting to flourish anew, and I for one am glad.

This time maybe there won’t be cannons
guns and flags waving

nobody in the streets, fists raised,
shouting:

No more

except tired lines of worried people
waiting at gas tanks, soup kitchens,
Red Cross supply vans, stores:

with their worthless bills
with the fresh memory of the way things
should be

without a map for getting anywhere else.
What a terrible day.
How excited I will be.

Meanwhile,

those who saw the future
who listened to science and reason
and the poor workers of the world
who turned off their televisions just in time
and shut the lying newspapers,
used them to start the

first fires –
those people will already be entering
their small fields, in their hands
some kind of tool

without
a trace of unhappiness

on their faces

The sun will have leapt over the pines,
the far ridge,
the windmill

barn's cupola.

In that moment before the mist
begins to evaporate, every leaf-blade
bathed and fresh, silver-cast

sun
poised
at the edges of fields

they will turn

to look back at their own tender footsteps
in the dew.