

# Walking the Fence Line

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One Christmas my father-in-law JP offered to take me out on his Kentucky farm to shoot my new shotgun. I had won the shotgun a few months before in a raffle, but I had never fired a shotgun in my life. So, the day after Christmas JP and I threw my new shotgun and a box of buckshot into his pickup and drove onto his farm.

It was warm for December, but we still dressed for cold. He wore brown, stained coveralls and old rubber boots. I wore a new pair of Carhart double-pleated pants, leather hiking boots, and an insulated flannel. We bumped along in the truck, not using any road or path, until we reached the edge of a woodlot. We set up old Coke cans as targets, hanging them from low-

hanging twigs. JP took the gun out of its case and showed me how to load three cartridges into the chamber, demonstrated holding the butt to his shoulder, and handed me some earplugs. Stuffing the earplugs in, I felt



the hickories and red oaks' height and grayness standing over me, the cold weight of the shotgun in my hands. I took the shotgun to my shoulder like he showed me, aimed at a can, hesitated for fear of the noise and recoil I knew would come, and squeezed the trigger. The shots filled everything with their cracks, breaking through even the earplugs. We reloaded, passed the gun between us, shot, reloaded, shot again.

When we ran out of shells, we packed the shotgun into its case and loaded it in the truck bed. I began kicking through the brown grass and brambles for the used shell casings. Leaning against the truck bed, JP told me not to worry too much about them. He said there were probably more shells scattered or buried out there than we could ever find. He and his dad used to hunt around there. But I tried anyway. I didn't want to litter his land. But I could not find them all.

I threw what shells I found in the truck bed and opened the cab door to ride back to the house. JP did not get in: instead he asked if I wanted to walk with him up into his woods and around the fence line. I agreed, smiling. I closed the truck door, and we headed into the woods.

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The raffle where I won the shotgun was at a conference for ranchers. They went to learn how to use prescribed fire on their pastures and rangelands, to talk about how to get gains for their cattle and the wildlife that used their land. They drew for prizes during the buffet dinner. When they called my name for the shotgun, I blinked, stood up, and leadenly began walking to the front. I passed about a hundred ranchers, older or middle-aged, wearing vests, flannels, and cowboy hats, sitting around large round tables, finishing up their buffet dinners. I wore a brown Levi canvas button-up and jeans that I bought at a thrift store that I hoped made me look rugged. But when the announcer lady handed me my gun and began snapping pictures of me holding it, I realized I was holding a shotgun for the first time in front of a group of men and women who had grown up hauling shotguns in their trucks and all over their lands to hunt pheasant and quail. They grew up knowing what it meant to own more than a quarter acre of land. Many of them grew up depending on the land for their livelihoods and life.

I grew up in the suburbs of Louisville, Kentucky. I climbed the old red maple in our backyard, weeded dandelions from the front lawn, and went on weekend daytrips to nearby parks

with names like Otter Creek, Jefferson Memorial Forest, and Iroquois Park. When we went on hikes, my parents made me wear duct tape inside out around my ankles to catch ticks, and before we headed home, we ate lunch from Ziploc baggies, sitting at picnic tables. And when we drove home, the air conditioning cooled off any lingering heat or humidity.

I began studying ecology and wildlife science in college; I took seasonal wildlife technician jobs, moving to places like the Whitefish Range of Montana and the Yuha Desert of southern California for the summers. Seeing and living on land I had never dreamt of as a kid, learning the names of plants and birds and lizards and how they coexisted and persisted in an unforgiving world, I started to feel like I understood nature and the land. And that understanding seemed to bridge a gap I had had for a long time. Identifying a plant species gave me something to love and search for in the woods, and knowing what kind of bird was calling from the thicket, even if I could not see it, brought familiarity to the unknown.

But I never fully felt a part of the land. There was me, and there was it. At the end of the field work day or the summer, I always returned to my suburban house or apartment, and the lines were drawn again. I suppose going out for a while and then coming back in is common, not unique to me. It is reinforced by the notion that I was raised with—that the land and nature are sacred. The very notion that the land is holy or set apart demarcates us and it. And even as I grew in understanding of nature through the lenses of science, the complexity of nature, its interwoven cycles (from Ice Age extinctions to the hourly generations of microbes) and layers of abiotic and biotic feedbacks (from pine beetle outbreaks to lightning-sparked wildfires) made me realize how little we know and how simplistic, like tinker-toys, our models of nature were. The familiarity, the holiness, and the unknowability melded: for me, nature became a beloved holy stranger.

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They weren't big woods, and they seemed smaller because JP had just logged them a few years before. Thin, twiggy oaks and elms stretched up beside jagged stumps as wide as wells, and bulldozer tracks churned the bare earth and mud around stumps and underbrush. We walked upslope along one of the tracks. They made clear, uneven paths. A few years before during the summer, I had seen the woods pre-logging. It had been a bit of a challenge to find a way into them through foliage and blackberry thorns. Once inside, two layers of canopy shut out the sky. The dead leaves and poison ivy thickets were so thick that they made stumps and fallen logs just look like mounds in the earth. So it made me sad to see the woods logged. I asked JP why he had done it. JP said he did it because Grandmamma was getting sicker, and she needed the money for hospital bills and the sitter that saw her every day. I felt ashamed that I had asked, but JP did not seem to mind.

At the top of the hill, a little pond nestled in a circle of dead leaves. Little cedars and elms were pushing through a small berm holding the eastern side. Dead water-grass swayed in the black water. Seeing me looking at it, JP stopped too. He told me that his dad made this pond a long time ago. Sara and her cousins used to frog gig in it, he said, and they used to catch quite a few. He said a long time ago, one of his buddies drove into the woods before dawn to set up his deer stand to hunt, and he drove his truck into the pond. JP and his dad had to drive their own truck up and haul him out. I asked if that had upset his dad, and he said no, his dad didn't get upset over much.

We did not say anything for a moment. I was thinking about JP's dad—Granddaddy as Sara called him. I asked if Granddaddy made the pond for cattle. JP nodded. I asked why he didn't cut the woods down for more pasture then. Still looking at the pond, JP said he didn't

know. He paused, then said he guessed his dad just wanted to keep some woods. Sometimes the cattle used to come back in here, but Granddaddy fenced off the area a long time ago. It's just for the frogs now, JP said.

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Granddaddy has been dead a long time now. He is not mentioned much, but when he is, it always involves the farm. JP and Sara tell me Granddaddy and I would have had a lot in common, lots to talk about. But I think the differences between us—how we view the land, how we relate to the land—are what I most wish I could have learned about.

When he married Grandmamma, Granddaddy bought his first fifty acres, and soon after his son was born, he bought an adjacent fifty acres. He cleared most of the oak-hickory forest away for cattle pastures, hayfields, and a house for his family. In the middle of the largest pasture, he raised a barn where he cured tobacco, dried potatoes for winter, and castrated the male calves with rubber bands around their testicles before they went to auction. He kept a hog pen behind the house, and when the hog fattened up, he would slit its throat and hang it bottom up in the barn to drain the blood into the ground. He raised bees in the back pasture, and when he tended the hives and retrieved honey, he let the bees crawl over him, but they did not sting him. In the mornings, he would check on his cattle, finding mothers with new calves hiding in the trees, searching their eyes for the gumminess that indicated pinkeye, and putting out hay in winter or rotating them to another field in the summer. In the evenings, he would run trap lines along the creek and catch muskrat and beaver for pelts—and then check on the cattle again. When Sara was little, Granddaddy would sit on the porch with her in the summer mornings, looking over his hayfields and cattle pastures, and point to birds flying by and name them for her, whistling their songs back to them.

When he was diagnosed with terminal cancer and refused chemotherapy, my wife remembers sneaking down the basement stairs and seeing him sitting, stone-faced, stripped to his underwear, on a chair set in a metal washbasin while Grandmamma and my wife's aunt poured and scrubbed blood from the chickens he raised all over him, trying to cure what the doctors could not. And when he was lying in his back bedroom, waiting to die, he would let his grandchildren get up on the bed with him and roll Matchbox cars over his round belly.

I do not want to romanticize his way of life or make out that he had a deep, mystical communion with nature. Granddaddy lived a hard life. He was poor growing up, and his little farm never made him rich. Everything he gleaned from the land he bought with hard work.

Still, I wonder what he thought about the land. I will venture a guess that he never did anything he would call hiking, and he probably did not camp for recreation. He cut acres of forest, but he also left woods intact. He grew crops, and he shot squirrels and butchered cattle to feed his family. His land was his source, and I am certain he loved it.

But while he knew much more about the harshness and demands of the land, I doubt he would ever view it as something set apart or holy. From everything I can tell, he did not separate the land from his life or will. He was a farmer, and he knew and tended his land.

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We walked along a low fence. JP said the land on the other side is his neighbor Virgil's. Past the fence, through a stand of oaks, some cattle stood and some lay around a hay ring in a



small green field surrounded by woods. JP commented on how good the cattle looked, how good of a farmer Virgil was. Waving toward the northeast, JP said Virgil had a big hog house, although all I could see in that direction was trees. When Sara was little, JP said he used to visit Virgil at his hog house, and Virgil would give Sara a handful of piglets and ask her to mind them while he and JP talked. I remembered Sara telling me the same story: she said the piglets were pink roly-polys, always trying to get away and snuffle in the muddy floor, and play with each other. She also told me about how the hulking, grime-crusted sows lying in brown sludge in the surrounding pens scared her.

A little way ahead, a large white oak stood just on Virgil's side of the fence. Its branches twisted and crooked in all directions, forming almost a ball of limbs in the canopy. Many of them arced across the fence, the bigger ones' grey bark cracked and plated like jigsaw pieces. The trees surrounding it rose nearly as high as it, but had the perfectly straight, thin trunks of quick-growth. When I pointed it out to JP, he nodded, smiling. He said it was a good looking tree. Virgil told him that the last time he logged, that one had looked too nice to log, so he left it. He called it a witness tree.

The woods opened, and JP's hay fields, iridescent green even in winter, rolled up a hill toward a gray sky. We paused, looking at them. I asked JP what he seeded them with. Scuffing the grass with his boot, he said a mix of fescue, timothy, and orchardgrass. Sometimes he puts in redtop and white clover for protein for the cattle and deer.

I knew none of these were native species and that pastures like these were one of the largest cause of declines in species like cottontails, bobwhite quail, Henslow's Sparrow, and Dickcissels that need taller, bunch grasses to nest and forage between the bunches. I know many conservationists and ecologists who would immediately suggest killing that pasture and

reseeding with native, warm-season grasses. But I was wary of saying it so blatantly, and not just because JP is my father-in-law. Standing out there, in the field his father had cleared and planted, where he harvests hay for his cattle's winter food, it seemed arrogant and ridiculous to suggest it. But I suppose my training got the best of me, because I asked him if he had ever thought of putting out native grasses. He had thought of it, he said, but it was expensive, and his fields seemed to do fine; and his cattle liked it.

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Not coming from land, I often think of what I would do if I had some. Because I have been trained in ecology and wildlife management, I would probably "manage" it. I think of sowing native warm season grasses back on the pastures or letting some of the land grow back up in forest. I imagine the pastures full of Common Yellow-throats and Grasshopper Sparrows, singing and nesting, unseen, in shoulder-high grass. And I see the woodlots, not quite old-growth, but still a thick, solid block of green rising far above the grasses with Summer Tanagers' blood-red bodies appearing and disappearing along the edges. I would still keep some hayfields and pastures because I would like to learn how to farm and my wife wants some cattle. But mostly I see a small refuge, almost a garden that I would tend.

Sara told me that when her mother Teddi began planting trees around her new home on the land, Granddaddy couldn't believe it. He told her he had spent all that effort clearing the trees out, and there she was, planting them back. The trees are huge now, lining the driveway and circling the house, and Teddi is glad for the privacy from the road they lend. For me, thinking of Granddaddy's reaction makes me feel a bit childish for wanting to make a Garden of Eden out of the farm. But still, I want to try.

Sara and I tell each other we will move back to the farm one day, and we tell JP and Teddi so too. They nod and tell us they are more than happy for us to come back, but I don't think they believe us.

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A sudden crashing and crunching to our left brought our heads around: two does bounded out of a gully crisscrossed with felled logs and brambles. After watching them leaping through the pasture and disappearing over a hill, I told JP how strange it seemed that they didn't flush while we were shooting. But he was not surprised. He said they were everywhere back there.

He said he and Granddaddy used to hunt back in here all the time. After Granddaddy died and JP quit hunting, JP would let his neighbors and friends hunt out here. The hunters would always drive their pickup to JP's house and show him their kill and thank him. JP said Sara used to play with the carcass, lolling its head around by the rack and tracing the outline of the smooth, muddy hooves with her fingers.

We kept walking along the fence line, toward the horizon. Sumac and mulberry and sassafras grew thick and tall along the fence line, dovetailing to sprouts closer to us. I said that it is probably really great rabbit habitat. JP told me that was what he liked, to see foxes and rabbits and deer playing in the fields. He pointed over to a hill in the distance. He said that in the evenings, he can see deer silhouetted against the twilight horizon, browsing his fields and warily vigilant. But he said Granddaddy would have hated the untidiness at the fence line. Granddaddy always liked to keep it cut and nice right up to the wood posts.

We turned away from the fence line, heading through the hayfields to the truck. The hayfield centered on a hill, and when we crested it, we could see much of the hundred acre farm surrounding us. Another hayfield, also JP's, sloped down to the road to the west. The woodlot we

just left sat in a bowl to the east. On the top of the hill to the southwest, we could just see Grandmamma's house—the one Granddaddy built—peering through the line of trees separating the first fifty acres Granddaddy bought from the second fifty. Beyond that, I knew were the cattle fields, the old tobacco barn, more fields, woods, and then Crabbe Creek forming the eastern border of the farm. And far ahead, we saw the house JP built and the tree-lined gravel drive that Teddi planted that connected the house to the paved road that bounded the southern half of the farm. It did not take long to reach the truck. We only walked a small part of a small farm.

As we drove back through the bumpy, road-less field to the house, JP asked me if Sara and I would ever let any children we might have walk out on the land with him. He said he would show them where we shot today, take them to find arrowheads by the creek, and let them feed the cattle apples. I told him that I hoped he took our children out every time we came to visit.

We pulled onto the gravel drive and up to the garage. I got out and took my gun to the workbench in the garage to disassemble and clean it (JP had just shown me how yesterday), and JP went into the house to see Teddi and Sara. As I was beginning to swab the barrel, JP came back out, called to me that he was going to check on the cattle and Grandmamma and got in the truck. I waved as he drove off. Watching the truck head up the paved road and disappear over the hill, I wished I had asked him if I could go with him.