

Breaking Ground

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At indeterminate hours, our target roared through on the Illinois Central & Midland line at about forty miles per hour, a freight coming out of Jacksonville. We would stand in a lane no closer than thirty feet from the tracks and size up the likelihood of the engineer or conductor seeing us. If the risk was deemed low, the fun would ensue. Green tomatoes worked best—solid and thick-skinned enough to hold some momentum while still exploding on impact. Ripe tomatoes might come apart, and half-rotten tomatoes were the worst. We called each other “Ace Three, Ace Four, Ace Five,” depending on how many tomatoes we could fling through the open doors of boxcars. My brother taught me how to throw tomatoes when we weren’t working the rows.

The railroad track ran past my father’s half-acre of rented land, across town from where we lived. On that lot we grew a garden.

In my father’s mind, although there was a backward look of longing in the garden, it wasn’t a place for leisure. He was a farmer’s son. His parents plowed the sandy Oklahoma soil of the 1930s Dust Bowl and survived the Depression through diversified farming—a method whose praises he often sang. The crops would mature at intervals throughout the summer, providing a steady income. My father’s accounts of his years of youth were, it seemed to us, peculiarly absent of fear, frustration, or anger coming from his parents. All he would say about the Depression was, “Farming is farming. We resigned ourselves to the situation.” Then the tales would take a turn toward farming innovations, experiments, and “getting by.”


Each spring, we germinated less hardy plants in fiber egg cartons filled with peat moss and sandy sterilized soil. When the seeds sprouted, we set them by a south-facing window to increase exposure to the sun. We kept the roots watered, drained, and fertilized and at a steady temperature of not more than seventy degrees. Then we hardened off the seedlings by giving them their first exposure to outdoor air and sun before we transplanted them.

Similarly, the idea of the garden hardened off each winter’s end in my father’s mind with a thorough examination of the Burpee catalog, graph-paper diagrams, and seed-per-row reckoning. We weren’t included in the cerebral cultivation; it wasn’t until the development that took place on hands and knees that we were called upon.

One day, while we worked the tomato plants, my father took care of weeding the sweet corn. A futile task, I thought, and my brother and I took pains to convince him of such. We’d use the reasoning of meteorologists, botanists, and soil scientists—pleading that “we’d do anything else but weed.”



“Let’s just keep weeding, boys.”



“Think about it, Virgil. By the time the corn is so high,” my brother said to my father while sizing an imaginary plant, “its shade will block weeds from growing.”

My brother and I grew up calling my father Virgil. Although my father shared the same name and birthday as the Roman poet, he probably wasn’t named after the Virgil. His parents had always called him, the firstborn, Son.

“And these sprouting weeds,” I added, “by the time they’re full grown, the ears will be mature.”

“Listen to him, Virgil. The size of the corn roots by then should overcome the weeds growing around them.”

My father silently took stock of our remarks as he deftly scraped at the smaller weeds and loosened the soil around the corn roots. He yanked the larger ones by the stems. “You see this weed?” he asked. “It’s the same kind that grows about as tall as you if you let it go. Sweet clover.” He knew the names of the weeds and their habitats, medicinal uses, and folklore. We’d tell him he must be part medicine man and he agreed. Against this, how could we protest? If we pushed him, he would say, “Let’s just keep weeding, boys.”

At last, well into fall, we pulled the plants from the ground—the withered stems and brown stalks—and heaped them onto a tangled, sprawling pile. Since some of the plants still held moisture, we poured gasoline onto the heap—probably more than we needed. When we ignited the gas-soaked mound, a more-than-modest explosion rumbled under our feet. As it burned, a spectacular black and orange trail of smoke poured into the autumn air—with it went the season’s trials and successes.

Whenever a train went through, we stopped working and waved at the engineer and then headed for the tracks to see how long the train was. Long enough? Good. We’d hurl tomatoes at the boxcars, listen for the thud and watch it splatter. I don’t know why my dad didn’t stop us. Or maybe he did, but not before a few of the unripe fruits connected. When the caboose passed, we dropped our ammo and waved at the conductor.

Brannon Brown knew nothing about throwing tomatoes at boxcars. But he watched us and learned. When we first saw him, Brannon held a salt shaker in one hand and a half-eaten hard-boiled egg in the other. Red cheeks and puffy, drawn-back lips perpetually gave him the look of a kid coming straight from a lost fight. Even though we hadn’t invited him to join in our assault, Brannon dropped his hard-boiled egg and tore after us. After the train passed, unfinished work called us back from the tracks.

“Is this your garden?” Brannon asked. We told him yes.

“I seen you working here before. My dad said you don’t live around here.”

My brother told him we lived in Peninsula West.

“Yeah? You go to Sacred Heart, then,” he said. “You know Tony Ferengi?”

“No.”

“Pat Gaduch?”

“No.”

“Dave Dupre?”

“Yeah.”

And so on.

Peninsula West was on the *good* side of town. Our garden was on the east side. By fifth grade every West-sider had learned the rivalrous mantra “West side, best side” and believed it. The east side launched a rejoinder. I’m not sure what prompted it. But hundreds of bumper stickers printed in Old West typeface over



an alarming orange background, appeared on the backs of east-sider's cars: *PROUD TO BE AN EAST SIDER!*

One morning we went to water our crops, which were becoming vulnerable to a spring that had changed steadily into a cloudless, hot summer. Brannon Brown was roping garbage bags with a laundry-line lasso when we pulled into the alley. I could hear a TV blasting a Cardinals baseball game from the house. My father shut the car door and let out a groan when he looked over the garden. "What the—!" my brother and I yelled.

Someone had trampled a few rows, leaving some of the plants uprooted, tossed away, and wilted after they were found to be immature. The intrusion showed not so much malicious destruction but mere simple-mindedness. Why would anyone uproot winter onions and carrots this early in the year? Before they're ready? And of course we knew who did it.

"Look at this!" I spat. "Looks like they came here last night with a machete. Dirty east-siders!"

"We ought to come here tonight and wait for them on the other side of the tracks," my brother said.

"Get cops to come and wait with us. No sirens, a silent approach."

"No, no. You don't know it was the Browns," Virgil said. "Let's get some work done."

The rest of the summer was dry, the heat searing. We went to the garden almost every day to weed or water vegetables. Left alone, they would have scorched and wilted. During the latter part of summer, Brannon began to spend more time with us while we gardened.

Once we took turns seeing how far off the ground we could get any part of the rototiller but stopped when none of us could get any part off the ground. He mostly spent idle time with us—standing over us throwing dirt clods at telephone poles and talking about how tough he and his dad were. "My dad fought in the Marines,

two tours in Vietnam," Brannon said. "He could rip your dad's head off and"...he paused, remembering the rest, "eat it for breakfast."

"Yeah, so? My dad flew in a B-29 bomber in World War II. He flew sixteen missions over Germany, got shot at from Messerschmitt fighter planes, and got hit in the leg with flak," my brother countered.

In fact, our father never saw action. His crew was slotted to fly to Japan in August 1945. But another crew got there first, so he returned to civilian life, moved away from his parents' farm, and got a degree in journalism through the G.I. Bill.

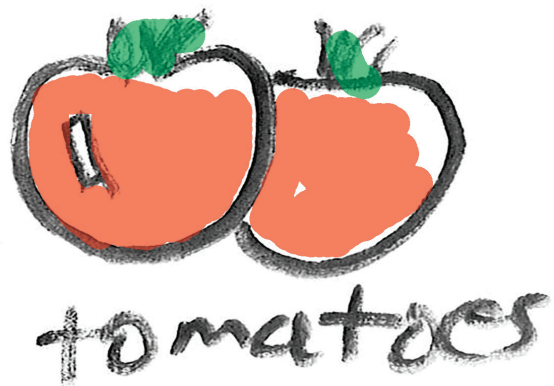
"Now look at him," I said. "War wounds and all, doesn't even limp."

Meanwhile, vegetables in our garden kept disappearing. Brannon's dad was present only in the footprints he left every few days. From the garden, we could hear the clattering, TV-blaring everyday life of the Browns. Some Saturdays his dad would have friends over and they would party from early afternoon until late in the evening. It was during one of those parties that we first saw Brannon's dad.

His friends were leaning against his pickup truck, shirtless and sunburnt, reaching now and then into a cooler full of beer that sat in the bed. The songs of The Who came blasting out of the screen door. I pointed out Brannon's dad as he swaggered out of the house. He didn't look at all as big as Brannon made him out to be (or as I imagined). He carried a basketful of fresh corn to a smoking charcoal grill. He dunked the ears into water, threw them on the grill, and went back inside.

It was the season for our first planting of sweet corn to ripen. We had watched the ears develop with anticipation and tested the milkiness of the kernels with our thumbnail. The first of the season! A few days before, we checked the rows and found ears yanked from the stalks. And now we had witnessed the most infuriating evidence.

I turned to Virgil, and with confidence said the very words I believed he would say, "They ripped





would have to be chopped clear with a hatchet if the tiller couldn't hack through them—a few hours of work either way.

"Go ahead and start it," Virgil said, leaning back against the Browns' pickup.

I set the choke on the tiller and stepped back. Brannon Brown's

dad stepped toward it and jerked back the starting cable. The engine coughed, blew out a puff of blue smoke from the exhaust port but nothing happened. He tried again while I toggled the carburetor control. This time the engine kicked in and with a sputtering start billowed clouds of exhaust. When it ran smoothly, I moved out of the way for Brannon's dad to do the job. But Virgil nodded at me and motioned toward the tiller. Over the noise of the engine, I thought he said, "You do it...try breaking it up."

In front of me was the potential violence of newly broken ground, resisting intrusion. When I started into the spaded patch, the tiller began "buckin' like a bronco." My hands vibrated from keeping too tight a grip on the handles. The engine fought the ground with its tines. The ground fought back with its debris, parched hardness, and the mangled milky roots of the mulberry tree. And I fought them all, white-knuckled and sure that the tiller would tip and spill its gas and oil. I thought I must have looked as scrawny and rubbery as a kid. To the adults watching, and to Brannon Brown.

But I'd always thought, *I was the one who could hack anything*. So I held onto the tiller, struggling just to keep it upright.

The engine sang. Like threaded remnants, the songs came together—rambling, drifting pieces that left my ears ringing even when I set the engine in neutral and stepped away from the tiller. I figured I'd done enough. When the tines stopped turning, I backed away to let my brother take a turn.

I watched Brannon's dad point out to his son some stuffed garbage bags lying at the corner of the house. It was yesterday's waste from the party. My father nodded for me—since I was still *doing time*—to help Brannon carry them. So I grudgingly hauled to the barrel their bags full of our corn husks and overripe tomatoes.

We lit the bags on fire and watched the corn husks flare and turn to ash and listened to the pulp of the tomatoes begin to sizzle. Brannon stirred the fire with a mulberry branch. I glanced across the alley at the uneven height of our rows of corn, noting that some of the stalks hadn't yet tasseled. I spotted a cicada shell clinging to the trunk of a hawthorn tree.

"You know what that means, don't you?" I asked. "First sign of fall."

I pulled it off the trunk and inspected its fibrous cavity: a miniature extraterrestrial shot to hell; a dorsal hole half the size of its body. Brown, the color of dung. Death, as stiff and brittle as I knew death was. From the west I could hear a train coming.

Where the cicada's eyes had been were two translucent bulbs, a black dot in the center of each. Somewhere nearby was the buzzing, red-eyed, derelict flyer who had emerged from its shell (possibly with better vision) to find at the end of its bumpy flight the branch of, God only knows, another haw.

The engine passed by the garden, inviting us again to sprint to the tracks and launch an attack against the broad sides of the boxcars. Brannon stopped stirring the fire and let the branch drop.

"Should we?" he questioned.

I glanced at the train. "Wait, you gotta see this." I held the cicada out toward Brannon in the open palm of my hand and then ground its shell to dust with my thumb. "Let's go," I said grabbing Brannon's arm and heading toward the train. "It's a long one!" ●



us off. No doubt about it. Time to have a talk with them.” But he was gone, headed toward the car.

Brannon came out of his house and walked toward us. He hesitated but then came ahead anyway, carrying a sack of garbage to the trash barrel.

“Looks like you’re on your own, huh?” Brannon said.

“Yeah.”

And that might have been the end of our exchange. Brannon swished away the bees that hovered over the trash, threw in the sack, and lit it on fire. “I know what you’re thinking,” he said and began to head back to the house.

“How about lunch on us, Brannon?” I asked, goading him. And he took me up on it by spinning on his heels and glaring at me. Just then I noticed that our car pulled into the Browns’ driveway. My father got out of the car, ignored the party and headed straight for the front door. Good! It looked like the start of a two-front skirmish.

“That’s my dad’s friends,” Brannon Brown said, “his party. I ain’t invited. It’s his food, his girlfriends, his corn on the grill,” he said, turning away. “So you can—”

“His corn?” I broke in. Before my brother could stop me, I picked up a solid clod of dirt that shot out of my hand and exploded into a cloud of dust on Brannon’s back. “Filthy east-sider!”

Brannon bolted toward me—about fifty feet away—gaining slow momentum because of his slight bulk. His cheeks were red and puffed, billowing out a string of saliva along his lips. Outrage seemed to throw him off balance. I noted this with mean-spirited satisfaction and amusement and decided to deepen his humiliation by outrunning him.

By the time I reached the end of the garden I had matched his speed. Then I jumped up on the track and ran between the rails—landing squarely on the railroad ties and solidly springing ahead, an act of agility I was sure Brannon Brown couldn’t muster. He had fallen behind by losing energy to curses and wildly thrown gravel. Finally, he stopped running and so did I—about one hundred yards ahead of him. I walked along the tracks and looked back at him. Bent over, hands on his knees, Brannon watched me walk ahead and followed for a while. Then we both returned to the garden.

That night, we drove home in silence. We ate dinner in silence. Somehow my father found out about it. My brother? Or maybe he knew from the way Brannon and I came back from the tracks winded. I didn’t gloat on that victory as far as I could tell, but whether I liked the feeling or not I felt it hot and copery on my tongue, pounding through my arteries. It was a glorious little triumph.

The next morning, my father woke us at seven o’clock and by eight we had loaded the tiller and tools into the trunk, along with the confirmation of an afternoon’s work ahead—the scuffed and worn thermos and mealy white-bread sandwiches. But we didn’t go to the garden, directly. Instead, we pulled into the Browns’ gravel driveway. My father started to get out of the car. I asked him what we were doing here.

“We’re going to plow their soil,” he said, “for next spring’s garden.”

Brannon Brown’s dad came to the door looking ready for the job. A surprise. My brother and I expected to see him standing hung-over behind his screen door and furious at having been roused out of bed this early. “What do we need to do here?” he asked him.

Brannon appeared in time to help unload the tiller. This time, though, he watched close-at-hand while Brannon’s dad and our father lifted it out. Brannon’s dad showed us the area we would till by roughly marking a twenty-by-fifty-foot patch with four stakes and told Brannon to clear the area of branches and rubble. It took both Mr. Brown and my father to break the ground with spades while the three of us watched without talking.

The grass in their yard was tough and dry from the summer’s drought. It had left the grass brown almost to the roots, exposing a network of small cracks in the baked, acidic soil. Their yard was strewn not only with rubble but also with the spreading, shallow roots of nearby mulberry trees. Some of them

