

COUNTRY PLACES

by Lowry Pei

In the late 1960's or early 70's, my mother bought a country place in rural Missouri, the first of three she was to own. She had grown up in Columbus, Kansas, a town of 3500 souls in the southeastern corner of the state, and surely some dream of returning to the country from St. Louis, where she and my father had lived since 1949, and where she still lived after their divorce and her remarriage, lay behind her purchase of a remote property in the Ozarks, a mile from the nearest house on a road of mud and rocks – even though those back woods were nothing like the flat, exposed Kansas town in which she had been born.

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The larger towns just over the horizon from Columbus, Kansas were Miami, Oklahoma; Joplin, Missouri; and Pittsburg, Kansas. That part of the world was so regular that the county roads followed the borders of precise one-mile squares, “section lines” as they were called there – a precise man-made grid laid down over a landscape that offered no resistance to such mathematical division. There were no hills or valleys in the fields of wheat or corn or milo or soybeans. Streams in that landscape were events; they made gentle, sensuous indentations in its flatness, and meandered, marked by lines of trees, through the fields in curving contrast to the roads – the willows or poplars that indicated the presence of a stream made a boundary for the eye, a relief from the everlasting distance of the horizon. Bridges over these streams were as flat as the road and bordered by low concrete curbs barely noticeable as one passed; but there was, going over such a bridge, the tiniest sensation of space

underneath, of being over something for an instant, which I never failed to enjoy. I even took pleasure in the shallow, grassy ditch that ran down the edge of the street along the side of my grandparents' house, and the fact that it went through a miniature culvert as it passed under the walk that led from that side street to the front porch. Next to the walk, there was a hole in the bank of the ditch, in which, my mother led me to believe, a crayfish lived – or perhaps had lived when she was a child; I know I never saw it, but I never stopped hoping to, either. How it could possibly live there, in the heat of a Kansas summer or the cold of a Kansas winter, in a ditch where as I recall it water seldom ran at any season, I am now unable to understand.

The other relief in the landscape, besides streams, was grain elevators; they were the first sign that a road was coming to a town – visible, like cathedrals, long before any other human artifact. Whenever I passed by the elevator in Columbus I remembered my mother's story that once when she was a girl the wheat harvest had been so plentiful that the elevator had been filled to capacity, and farmers had dumped their grain in the streets – golden mountains of wheat waiting there for trains to come and take them away, while the farmers prayed that it would not rain and spoil their once-in-a-lifetime crop.

One of the local pleasures of Columbus was to go “down to the depot” in the early evening to watch the train come in – a passenger train operated by the Missouri-Kansas-Texas railroad, known as the Katy; the whole family would go. The platform was paved with bricks that were slightly rounded, like loaves of bread laid tightly side by side; pressed into them was the name of the nearby town where they had been made: “Coffeyville.” When the train pulled out I always stood and watched the red light on the end of the last car disappearing into the night, feeling a pull, a desire to be on board as if it were going somewhere I had once lived and longed to return to – as if I had a home somewhere else that I never remembered until the train came to remind me.

Another pleasure, for me, was the freight yard on the edge of town; I believe the Katy and the Missouri Pacific both used it, and it may be that other railroads, too, chose to leave freight cars on those obscure sidings, for reasons that I never had the slightest expectation of understanding. It seems to me that these tracks were along a stream of some sort, and that made them even more attractive. They were near the house where Aunt Ethie lived – my grandfather's sister and the first woman to graduate Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Missouri, an object of great devotion to my mother but a mumbling, vaguely bad-smelling shell of a human being to me, so old she scared me with her decrepitude. When we went there I

would escape out the back door at the first opportunity and explore the train yard.

Once I was enticed, or challenged, by another boy whose name and face I can't recall, more or less my age but seeming older with experiences I'd never had, to steal watermelons left randomly in a boxcar there – some of them rotting, all of them, as I think of it now, apparently forgotten. At the time it seemed to me that I was risking arrest, reform school, disgrace. Perhaps on that same day – egged on by that same bad influence, whoever he was – or perhaps on another day, at my own instigation (which was always enough), I hopped a moving freight train as it crept by me, barely beginning to move as it left the yard; I swung up on the step at the corner of a boxcar, holding onto the handhold above it. Did my companion (if I had one) tell me to jump off? And did I refuse? The acceleration was so gradual as to be almost imperceptible, but inexorable and therefore terrifying – I remembered the places I had seen from trains, at signal towers, for example, where a sign by the tracks said there was not enough clearance for a man on the side of a car, and I imagined being scraped off, ground between a train and a building, thrown under the wheels. The train was already – much sooner than I had anticipated – going fast enough that I was reluctant to jump off when I realized that if I waited longer it would be too late and I would not be able to jump at all, that if I did not jump I would have to ride, clinging on, if I could, with fingers made nerveless by terror, until it stopped. Where that would be I had no idea. In Oklahoma City, perhaps, or Wichita, or any other unimaginable place in the endless plains, where, if I managed to hang on that far, I would be lost beyond finding and would, in all likelihood, die far from home. I jumped, scraping my palms on the rocks of the roadbed, and crouched by the side of the tracks while the rest of the train – a long train, scores of cars – went by, building up speed, beating me down, where I lurked in the ditch, with the ringing and pounding of its passing by. By the time the caboose finally passed it was going much too fast for me to have thought of jumping, and I was thoroughly frightened at the stupidity with which I had tempted fate, my impudent self beaten as thin as gold leaf, as easily torn. It was like receiving a crushing lecture from a teacher or judge, but the teacher was not even human and that made it worse.

It seems almost too symmetrical now, but I seem to remember also that once, while we were down at the depot watching the train come in, around eight o'clock on a hot summer evening, and while someone in my family was trading pleasantries with the engineer, he offered to take me in the cab of his towering, roaring Diesel locomotive to the next town where

the train would stop. I think – but this is still less certain – that my parents offered to drive there and bring me back; if they did, I didn't have the courage to accept, despite the intensity of my desire for that very experience, which I had barely had the nerve to dream of. It was not the first time I had been unable to take what I deeply wanted when, to my amazement, it was offered; and it was certainly far from the last.

The water in my grandparents' house smelled powerfully of sulfur, and made orange stains where it had dripped for years into sinks; there were two smells characteristic of the house: that water, and the gas that leaked minutely from the gas heaters which were scattered throughout the house as if it were not already heated suffocatingly enough. I always felt a little short of breath there, as if I would not actually breathe all the way into my lungs until we got home again; the same feeling afflicted me in cars, especially when I was small and both of my parents smoked cigarettes, and so trips to Columbus always involved a certain queasiness connected to the air around me. On one particular visit I remember actually feeling more than once that I was about to throw up, and going to the bathroom to do so, without results; my half-brother, Landis, who lived with my grandparents, felt sick too, but no one could tell what was wrong with either of us. I felt I was in an unpleasant trance, a nasty, half-sick enchantment I couldn't shake off; I knew something real was wrong, but I was too young even to begin to convince anybody of that. Landis felt the same; he was older than me, but mentally retarded, and in no better position to make an adult do something out of the ordinary. What did finally happen to break the spell I am still not sure. All I can remember is that one night I was sleeping with my father; we were both uncomfortable, and had a hard time falling asleep; my head was hurting and I was full of the same sick feeling I'd had for days. Then somehow – I remember it as my own doing, but it probably was not – I was out of bed in the middle of the night, standing in the upstairs hallway in my pajamas, befuddled, sure of nothing but that I had to get outside. My father was up too, but nothing seemed to be happening; I stood in the hall, waiting for I didn't know what, interminably, and then (the memory is like a dream) I was outside in our car, dressed, with my coat on, it was shortly after dawn, and I was alone there breathing the freezing cold air gratefully, revelling in its purity, and wishing that my parents would hurry up and come out so we could go home, get away, leave whatever was wrong there behind. Inside, something else was going on: the furnace flue had broken, it had been leaking for days, my mother had discovered it in the middle of the night; we had all been on the verge of asphyxiation; Landis was calling the fire department and my parents were trying to carry my unconscious

grandparents down the stairs. The firemen came and got my grandparents out; my parents came out to the car and followed the ambulance to the hospital. I began to understand, as my head cleared, that we weren't going home that morning after all.

It only struck me later that it was remarkable that Landis could call the fire department and they would come. Telephones in Columbus did not have dials; you picked up the phone and asked the operator for a number (sometimes two digits was all it took). The operator would probably have recognized Landis's voice, but if she did not, she would surely have figured out who it was when he told her that they needed the fire department at Miz Lowry's house. Everyone in town knew Landis, knew that he was retarded; children and a few adolescents teased him, adults watched out for him and sometimes called my grandmother if they thought he was getting into trouble, or if they caught some boys trying to get him to take his pants down; but what strikes me is that they knew him so well that they also knew when to believe him. The fire department came right away.

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It seems strange to me now that my mother, with her powerful ties to Columbus, should have picked a place like Piquet to fulfill her dream of a place in the country. The landscape of the Ozarks is closed-in and almost sinister; it is a region without views, an extraordinarily lonely place whose isolation is more than geographical. Farming is impossible there; the land is poor and full of rocks and almost none of it is flat. Bumper crops will never be piled in the streets of its suspicious towns. Or perhaps I think all this because by the time I saw it I was several years out of college, no longer a child. My mother's property was on a dirt road, two miles from where the paved road stopped, outside Dixon, Missouri. The road was winding, studded with rocks that could be treacherous to a car's suspension -- but when it rained those rocks were all that kept a visitor from being cut off there, separated by two miles of mud from the rest of the world. Trees closed in the view in any direction, not first growth, but scrubby forest that seemed as worn down as the Ozarks themselves -- true mountains in some geologically distant past, now no more than hills. Whenever I remember that road I think of cloudy, raw days, leaves everywhere dripping with rain, the sound of trickling water and an almost underwater light; I remember the feeling of mud sucking at my shoes.

The house was nothing special -- a Quonset hut with a screened-in porch built onto it -- but she hadn't bought the property for the house.

There were two ponds on the property, separated by a narrow isthmus; one was fed by a spring, marked by a bent tree someone had trained as a sapling long ago, and the other by a stream coming out of Piquet Cave, directly behind the house. It was the cave that made my mother buy the place; she expressed her proprietary feeling about it once by writing me scornfully that the natives pronounced its name “P.K.,” but I was never able to draw the distinction between that and her own correct way of saying it. The cave’s entrance was an arch a good thirty feet high, as grand as a storybook illustration, with a dirt floor leading steeply uphill, quickly narrowing into a passage that had been explored and mapped two miles back into the earth, where the spelunkers had finally chosen to stop; there was more cave after that, no one knew how much. A team from the University of Missouri had come and collected artifacts there and said that the site had been a human habitation for twenty thousand years. It made sense – there was shelter and water, and all the rocks in the world for making stone tools. The place had been a Stone Age workshop; failed tools that had broken while being made were scattered in and around the mouth of the cave, easy to find even when I came there, after my mother and her new husband had already collected pounds of artifacts – arrowheads, ax heads, scrapers, some of them perfect enough to put in a museum.

Wild strawberries grew in the grass between the cave mouth and the spring, where the sun was hot; there were fish in the ponds – sometimes a great blue heron would fish there in the early mornings, while mist rose like smoke from the water. Bats lived in the cave, and came out when dusk was almost night, so that I could barely see them even if I was waiting for them to come. Sometimes for a moment I caught the outline of one against stars. My mother told me – after I had gone swimming – that a snapping turtle lived in one of the ponds; I never saw the turtle, but I did see a king snake once, moving along the bank intent on some project of its own. When I was at Piquet alone, as I usually was, the silence followed me everywhere. It watched me – a presence I was always obscurely relieved to get away from by returning to the lights of town. I could tell at Piquet how far from human origins I was, how much a product of a later civilization. At night the darkness there was absolute – nothing like the half-light of streetlamps called night where I lived the rest of my life. I had felt the same way about the darkness in Columbus as a child – it had been scary to me at first, and then enfolding; this was still deeper, and though I didn’t like to admit it, it scared me a little even as a supposed adult. Yet the challenge of that presence always drew me back.

The nearest house, a mile up the road in the direction of the blacktop, belonged to Freddy Newman and his wife; the next house after that, at the

point where the pavement began, belonged to Freddy's son-in-law, Lyman Kennedy. Both of these people had befriended my mother, and so they were, perforce, friendly to me. But I knew as soon as I came there that I was there on sufferance, that there were rules in effect about which I knew nothing. Freddy and his wife looked about seventy, but I could have been entirely mistaken; they seemed both decrepit and strong. They lived in a ramshackle wooden house that was unpainted and black with age, and sat on the porch looking at the scarcely-travelled road in the evenings without a light on in their place. I once spoke to Freddy there on their porch, in the daytime, and saw through the screen door that they had a washing machine; up until then I hadn't been sure that they had electricity. Freddy's wife, who as far as I can remember never spoke to me, kept a cow and some chickens, and my mother told me that her finances were entirely separate from her husband's; he did odd jobs in town sometimes, but essentially Freddy knew how to live off the land – how to fish and hunt and even gather: in his travels through the woods he found ginseng plants, remembered their locations, waited the years it took for them to grow big enough to be worth money, then dug up their roots and sold them. He was a friendly man, kind enough not to laugh at my ignorance of the world around me there; when he came to my mother's place he would stand on the doorstep and talk for half an hour, but no amount of urging would make him set foot inside the house. He seemed not to hear such invitations, and I felt like a fool repeating them, as if I were inviting a tree or a turtle to come in where it didn't belong. I think he would have had to ask me into his house first, and I don't know what would have needed to happen to make such a thing possible.

Freddy's son-in-law, Lyman Kennedy, lived a mile further along, just at the point where the dirt road met the blacktop, in a mobile home up on bricks with a TV antenna on the roof; he was building a new concrete-block house when I first came to Piquet. He had four or five dogs who would rush any car that came onto his property, barking and snarling in a frantic display of viciousness; then Lyman would step out the door and shout and they would slink off to hide under the house with their chins on the ground, transformed. He was rumored to have been a minor gangster in Kansas City; now he worked at demolishing buildings, and his front yard was piled with the evidence of his trade – mountains of radiators, window frames, iron fences, balustrades; the obligatory old cars and trucks; engines, car parts, what looked like a well-drilling rig – he lived half-surrounded by a fairly sizable and well-organized junkyard, and it was said there was nothing he couldn't fix. It was also said that some men – city people – had once been foolish enough to go hunting on his land without asking his permission. Lyman drove up in his pickup and

told them, with his shotgun much in evidence, to get off his land; then he pushed their car, with them inside, off his property and a ways up the road, ruthlessly accelerating, until he was sure he had made his point. His wife, Freddy's daughter, did speak to me; she was an attractive woman and like Lyman, she came of tough stock, but unlike him she did not seem hard. Once Lyman stopped by at my mother's place while I was there alone, to look at something that needed fixing there – a frozen water pump, perhaps; the weather was bitterly cold and he had more or less appointed himself her caretaker. Unlike Freddy, Lyman would come inside; I even persuaded him to sit and have a cup of coffee with me. After an hour or so he got up and thanked me for the hospitality and left; only when I glanced out the window at him getting into his truck did I realize that his wife had been sitting in the truck the entire time. I had not seen her, he had not mentioned her, she had not come in out of the cold.

Sometimes all one had to do at Piquet was turn one's back and people would break in; someone once smashed a window and stole some insignificant things while I was in town buying a paper. Freddy once helped me clean up after someone broke into the shed and stole the lawnmower; I was going to screw on the hasp for the new lock, but he said no, I should hammer in ten-penny nails and bend them over on the inside – that would be harder to pull out than screws. I took his advice, but in the long run it did no good; thieves cleaned out the place, took everything, even the refrigerator and stove, and my mother sold it. The silence, the cave, stone tools, twenty thousand years, and all. Probably for a song.

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By that time my mother had already bought her second country place, the one that she eventually lived out her life in – a tiny house in a place called Holstein, a farming town – a village, really, where about two hundred people lived. To get there I would drive west from St. Louis on Interstate 70 for an hour or so, to Warrenton, the county seat of Warren County, then south on state road 47 to the small town of Hopewell, then turn southwest on a road which as far as I can remember had no number. It was three or four miles at most from Hopewell to Holstein, a curving road over and between rolling hills, passing mailboxes at the ends of dirt lanes. In summer, on some stretches of that road, the corn that was planted right up to the fence on each side would be so tall that there was nothing to be seen but road, corn, and sky. The Missouri River was only a few miles away, and though the area around Holstein was not the

true bottom land, it seemed to be all that a farmer could ask for. One look at the fields said that the round-topped silos dotting that landscape should be full. Every mile or so there would be an old cemetery with a spindly wrought-iron fence gradually rusting away, and granite angels on the more elaborate gravestones, worn down a little over the past hundred and fifty years, sometimes slightly tilted. Most of the names were German. The dead in that region far outnumbered the living, but I only realized that on second thought; as I passed by them, they seemed to fit in, to be modestly at home there. There was plenty of room for them, plenty of light and air.

The last stretch of the drive there was an experience of constantly coming over the top of a hill or around a bend, and the road that actually led into Holstein always seemed to appear suddenly, just when I had begun to wonder if I had missed it. The first evidence of the town was its only new building – an elementary school that looked big enough for two or three classrooms; past it was the new cemetery, less than half-occupied, and then, at a fork in the road, my mother's house.

Holstein was so small it did not have a single store or a commercial establishment of any sort; it consisted of white houses, cemeteries, and a church. Nothing about it, not even the church steeple, interrupted the continuity of the rolling hills. My mother's house, white like the rest, stood between the two forks of the road, its front porch facing west, toward the left fork and the valley beyond. It was four rooms when she first bought it, a tiny old house with two rooms downstairs and a cramped bedroom in its attic, and a kitchen added on at the back -- visibly a separate building, though only inches from the original house. In the back yard was the round cement lid of a cistern fed by a drainpipe from the roof, and a pump for drawing water – a chain pump, cranked by hand; the outhouse was farther away and slightly downhill, closer to the road.

The house seemed to be stationed so that anyone in it would be sure to see or hear whatever went by; but hardly anything did. Once when I was visiting my mother after she had developed cancer, we were sitting on the screened-in front porch in the middle of the afternoon and she asked me to step across the road to the mailbox (it was only a few yards away) and see if anything was in it; I did, but I wondered to myself how the mail could have been delivered – how anyone could have driven by and stopped in front of the house, at any point in the day – without our knowing it.

The quiet at Holstein was different from the silence at Piquet, which had seemed to emanate from a presence lying in wait; at Holstein, in the long stretches of time between one passing car or pickup and the next,

the quiet was the sound of the whole surrounding world itself, almost as if human beings had not yet come on the scene. In my memory of it I am there alone on a hot afternoon, the sun coming down hot without a breath of wind, and there is not one figure visible anywhere in the valley I am watching from the front porch, though I know that between the clumps of woodland I can see, and the tops of hills, there are fields being worked as I sit there. Some of the fields are visible, but no human figure makes its way down the rows, no sound of a distant tractor drifts up to my ears. All I can hear is an occasional bird cry, coming and going so quickly that I wonder if I actually heard it, and the legs of crickets making a sound which swells up and dies down and only accentuates the stillness. My mother once told me that when she was a child in Kansas, on certain hot days after a good rain she could actually hear the corn grow, and maybe, if I am hearing anything, that is what I am hearing now – a world of plants, at one with itself. I begin to imagine that there is no one in the other houses up the road, no other person within range of my hearing but me, and so I might lose the sense of being a person myself, if not for the reminder of the house.

As she started to look like my grandmother, my mother built onto the house and began to surround herself with my grandmother's possessions. Treasured things from the house in Columbus ended up there: portraits in heavy frames – one of the legendary Great-Aunt Iowa Wright, who went to Russia in 1900 or so and whose letters home from that trip my mother once showed me; uncomfortable antique chairs and loveseats with legs and backs of carved mahogany; lamps with hand-painted milk glass shades, samplers, a mantel clock that chimed the hours, a fashion illustration from 1879 showing thirteen impossibly shaped young women in impossible dresses, and two children who appeared to be about to play badminton in their very best clothes. The house acquired running water, a rebuilt kitchen, and eventually three more rooms and an outbuilding for storage, so that it could hold all the family items she had inherited. Whenever I looked in a cupboard or a drawer, there was always a possibility of finding a candy dish or serving platter or piece of silverware that would for a moment yield up a glimpse of some scene from a childhood visit – something taken for granted then, and after that let go of, to sink into the countless layers of the past. Now here it would be in my hand, as if that past still lived, but that world had been my mother's world – never entirely mine.

My mother and her husband retired to the house in Holstein, and after some years he was buried across the road in a cemetery plot she could see from the house. By the time he died, my mother had developed

cancer; a local woman, Shirley Hase, took care of her at home, spending more and more time at my mother's house until she hardly saw her own family – doing for my mother what her relatives, almost all of them far away, almost all of them living in cities, could not.

When she and her husband moved to Holstein for good, my mother joined the United Church of Christ – as she said, you had to belong to the church to live in a town like that. She had been an atheist since a Methodist minister in Columbus had made a pass at her when she was sixteen; she had conveyed to me all my life that religion and believing in God were for superstitious, backward minds. But in Holstein the church was next door to her house, and the minister, a man about my age – pushing forty – knew her well enough to deliver a eulogy that I could recognize as being about her after she died.

My mother wanted to die at home, but in the end she did not; the logistics of it proved impossible. She did, however, “move across the road,” as she had put it more than once, to the last piece of property she bought, part of which her husband already occupied, and part of which is still reserved for two of her children. She was buried on a windy day in February. One of my uncles for some reason insisted on driving his car the couple of hundred yards from the church to the cemetery, and after the burial he found it wouldn't start. The rest of the family and the people of Holstein ate and drank and said what one says after funerals, in the house in which she no longer lived; through the kitchen window I watched my uncle trying to start his car with the help of some other men, and the crew from the funeral home finishing up the filling-in of the grave – making it neat, or as neat as it could be, until the dirt should settle and grass should begin to grow.

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