# Harv Is Plowing Now

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OUR LIVES submit to archaeology. For a period in my life which seems longer ago than it was, I lived in a farmhouse that lacked electricity and central heating. In the living room we had a fireplace and, as I remember, a kind of chocolate-colored rectangular stove whose top was a double row of slots and whose metal feet rested on a sheet of asbestos. I have not thought of this stove for years; its image seems to thrust one corner from the bottom of a trench. It was as high as a boy and heated a rectangular space of air around it; when I was sick, my parents would huddle me, in blankets, on a blue sofa next to the stove, and I would try to align myself with its margin of warmth while my fever rose and fell, transforming at its height my blanketed knees into weird, intimate mountains at whose base a bowl of broth seemed a circular lake seen from afar. The stove was fuelled with what we called coal oil. I wonder now, what must have been obvious then, if coal oil and kerosene are exactly the same thing. Yes, they must be, for I remember filling the stove and the kerosene lamps from the same can, a five-gallon can with a side spout and a central cap which had to be loosened when I poured—otherwise by some trick of air pressure the can would bob and buck in my hands like an awkwardly live thing, and the spurting liquid, transparent and pungent, would spill. What was kerosene in the lamps became coal oil in the stove: so there are essential distinctions as well as existential ones. What is bread in the oven becomes Christ in the mouth.

When spring came, our attention thawed and was free to run outdoors. From where we lived not a highway, not a tower, not even a telephone pole was visible. We lived on the side of a hill, surrounded by trees and grass and clouds. Across a shallow valley where a greening meadow lay idle, another farm faced ours from a mirroring rise of land. Though the disposition of the barns and sheds was different, the houses were virtually identical—sandstone farmhouses, set square to the compass and slightly tall for their breadth, as if the attic windows were straining to see over the trees. They must have been built at about the same time in the early nineteenth century, and had been similarly covered, at a later date, with sandy, warm-colored stucco now crumbling away in patches. On chill April and May mornings, thin blue smoke from the chimney of the far house would seem to answer the smoke from the chimney of ours and to translate into another dimension the hissing blaze of cherry logs I had watched my father build in our fireplace.

The neighboring farm was owned and run by a mother, Carrie, and a son, Harvey. Even in her prime Carrie could not have been much over five feet tall. Now she was so bent by sixty years of stooping labor that in conversation her face was roguishly uptwisted. She wore tight high-top shoes that put a kind of hop into all her motions, and an old-fashioned bonnet, so that in profile she frightened me with her resemblance to the first bogey of my childhood, the faceless woman on the Dutch Cleanser can, chasing herself around and around with a stick. Harvey—called, in the country way, Harv—was fat but silent-footed; his rap would rattle our door before we knew he was on the porch. There he would stand, surrounded by beagles, an uncocked shotgun drooping from his arm, while my parents vainly tried to invite him in. He preferred to talk outdoors, and his voice was faint and far, like wind caught in a bottle; when, at night, he hunted coons in our woods, which merged with his, the yapping of his beagles seemed to be escorting a silent spirit that travelled through the trees as resistlessly as the moon overhead travelled through the clouds.

In the spring, Harv hitched up their mule and in furrows parallel to the horizon plowed the gradual rise of land that mirrored the one where I stood in our front yard. The linked silhouettes of the man and the mule moved back and forth like a slow brush repainting the parched pallor of the winter-faded land with the wet dark color of loam. It seemed to be happening *in me*; and as I age with the twentieth century, I hold within myself this memory, this image unearthed from a pastoral epoch predating my birth, this deposit lower than which there is only the mineral void.

The English excavators of Ur, as they deepened their trench through the strata of rubbish deposited by successive epochs of the Sumerian civilization, suddenly encountered a bed of perfectly clean clay, which they at first took to be the primordial silt of the delta. But measurements were taken and the clay proved too high to be the original riverbed; digging deeper, they found that after eight feet the clay stopped, yielding to soil again pregnant with flints and potsherds. But whereas Sumerian pottery had been turned on a wheel and not painted, these fragments bore traces of color and had been entirely hand-formed. In fact, the remnants were of an entirely different civilization, called “al ’Ubaid,” and the eight feet of clay were the physical record of the legendary Flood survived by Noah.

My existence seems similarly stratified. At the top there is a skin of rubbish, of minutes, hours, and days, and the events and objects that occupy these days. At the bottom there is the hidden space where Harv—who since his mother died has sold the farm and married and moved to Florida—eternally plows. Between them, as thick as the distance from the grass to the clouds and no more like clay than fire is like air, interposes the dense vacancy where like an inundation the woman came and went. Let us be quite clear. She is not there. But she *was* there: proof of this may be discerned in the curious hollowness of virtually every piece of debris examined in the course of scavenging the days. While of course great caution should attend assertions about evidence so tenuous and disjunct, each fragment seems hollow *in the same way*; and a kind of shape, or at least a tendency of motion which if we could imagine it continuing uninterrupted would produce a shape, might be hypothesized. But we will be on firmer ground simply describing the surface layer of days.

Abundantly present are small items of wearing apparel, particularly belts and shoelaces; china plates, patterned and plain; stainless-steel eating implements; small tables with one loose leg; glasses containing, like irregular jewels hurriedly stashed at the cataclysmic end of an antique queen’s reign, ice cubes; children’s faces, voices, and toys; newspapers; and isolated glimpses of weather, sky, towers, and vegetation. The order of occurrence is not random; generally, in the probing of each fresh stratum, a toothbrush is the first object encountered, often followed by an automobile gearshift and a ballpoint pen, or a fountain pen which is invariably dry. Contra-ceptive devices and vials apparently of medicine are not uncommon. Sometimes the page of a book is found involved with a bar of soap, and confusing snowstorms of cigarette filters and golf balls must be painstakingly worked through. Care is crucial; days, though in sum their supply of rubbish seems endless, are each an integument of ghostly thinness. At Ur, in the delicate excavations of the tomb of Queen Shubad, a clumsy foot might crush a hidden skull, or a pick driven an inch too deep might prematurely bring to light a bit of gold ribbon, or a diadem, or a golden beech leaf more fragile than a wafer.

So, too, the days of my life threaten, even where the crust appears to be most solid, to crumble and plunge my vision into a dreadful forsaken gold. At the touch of a memory, the wallpaper parts and reveals the lack of a wall. A lilac bush, and the woman’s hair engulfs me. Guitar music drifts from a window, and I turn to see if she notices, and newly discover that she is not there: grief fills the cavern of my mouth with a taste like ancient metal, and loss like some sweeping hypothesis floods the transparent volume between the grass and the clouds. Broad streets open up, stream outward, under the revelation, and the entire world, cities and trees, seems a negative imprint of her absence, a kind of tinted hollowness from which her presence might be rebuilt, as wooden artifacts, long rotted to nothing, can be re-created from the impress they have left in clay, a shadow of paint and grain more easily erased by a finger than the dusty pattern on a butterfly’s wing.

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Imagine a beach. At night. The usual immutable web of stars overhead. Boats anchored off the sand, lightly swapping slaps with the water. Many people, a picnic; there is a large bonfire, lighting up faces. She is there. She, herself, is there, here. Cold with fear, under the mantle of darkness, I go up to her; restored beside my shoulder, her human smallness amazes and delights me. “How *are* you?” I ask.

“Fine, just fine.”

“No. Really.”

“Don’t ask me. I’m all right. You’re looking very well.”

“Thank you.”

The nervous glitter of her eyes, looking past my shoulder into the fire, translates into yet another dimension the fire my father had set to burning aeons ago. She looks at last at me. The fire goes out in her eyes. She asks, “Would you like some coffee?”

“I don’t have a cup.”

“I have a cup.”

“Thank you. You’re very kind.” I add, touching the cup that she is touching (our fingertips don’t touch), “Don’t hate me.”

“I don’t hate you. I don’t think I do.”

The taste of metal follows the taste of coffee in my mouth. “I’m glad,” I say. “For me, it’s still bad.”

“You like to think that. You enjoy suffering because you don’t know what suffering is.” And from the trapped quickness with which she moves her head from one side to the other, toward the fire and away, I realize that she is struggling not to cry; a towering exultation seizes me and for a moment I am again her master, riding the flood.

I protest, “I do know.”

“No.”

“I’m sorry you hate me,” I say, to wrench a contradiction from her.

The contradiction does not come. “I don’t think that’s what it is,” she says thoughtfully, and takes our cup from my hand, and sips as if to give her words precision. “I think it’s just that I’m dead. I’m dead to you”—and with sweet firmness she pronounces my name. “Please try to understand. I expect nothing from you; it’s a great relief. I’m very tired. All I want from you is to be left alone.”

And I find myself saying, “Yes,” as she walks away, her long hair bouncing on her back with the quick light step she has preserved, “yes,” as if I am giving assent, aloof and scholarly, to the invincible facts around me: the rigid spatter of stars above, the sand that in passing accepts the print of my feet, the sea absent-mindedly tipping pale surf over the edge of darkness—ribbons of phosphorescent white that unravel again and again, always in the same direction, like a typewriter carriage.

Where am I? It has ceased to matter. I am infinitesimal, lost, invisible, nothing. I leave the fire, the company of the others, and wander beyond the farthest ring, the circumference where guitar music can still be heard. Something distant is attracting me. I look up, and the stars in their near clarity press upon my face, bear in upon my guilt and shame with the strange, liquidly strong certainty that, humanly considered, the universe is perfectly transparent: we exist as flaws in ancient glass. And in apprehending this transparence my mind enters a sudden freedom, like insanity; the stars seem to me a roof, the roof of days from which we fall each night and survive, a miracle. I await resurrection. Archaeology is the science of the incredible. Troy and Harappa were fables until the shovel struck home.

On the beach at night, it is never totally dark or totally silent. The sea soliloquizes, the moon broods, its glitter pattering in hyphens on the water. And something else is happening, something like the aftermath of a plucked string. What? Having fallen through the void where the woman was, I still live; I move, and pause, and listen, and know. Standing on the slope of sand, I know what is happening across the meadow, on the far side of the line where water and air maintain their elemental truce. Harv is plowing now.