

Windy Acres

In the spring 2016 I moved into the home I hope I'll use until they carry me out feet first. Constructed on the homestead site that adjoins my defunct wheat farm, 50 miles north of Wyoming's capital, it's more modest in square footage than the house in Cheyenne where I used to live, but it's quality construction, custom built to last.

The collapsed wheat farm consists of my own 500 acres, the acreage to which, in its heyday, was added 700 acres of contiguous state land, which I had leased for farming by a sharecropper out of Wheatland. All has lain fallow these past three years, reverting to grasses and wildflowers. Will the state set aside its parcel as natural habitat? I took risks building here; well, I was betting Wyoming's legislators would legalize agrarian hemp.

"This has got to be the windiest place in Wyoming," visitors comment as they arrive for my open house.

"As you can see, I've made good on my plans." I shake hands, smiling and greeting. "Welcome to my new abode! Mi casa su casa."

Yes, it's windy out here where my home hunkers down on the high plains. On the plus side, twelve years of living in Cheyenne accustomed my body to the altitude. No more, that pesky night-time oxygen intake of my Wyoming beginnings. You *can* teach an old dog new tricks.

"So this is your former wheat field."

"Not all of it. The state of Wyoming owns the acreage at the south end. The previous

owner conveyed the state-land lease but continued to farm as share-cropper.”

“And you’ve had the income for some years, right?”

“Long enough to pay off what I owed on the land. Together, the acreage used to yield a thousand to 1500 bushels of winter wheat. Annually.”

To contain erosion, planting proceeded in strips on a rotational basis, leaving the previous year’s strips fallow. Seed was planted in August, sprouted (with good luck and rain) in September, fell dormant through the winter, and returned to life in the spring. The cereal was harvested in July.

“Three years ago, the wheat sprouted poorly and came up stunted, yielding less than 400 bushels. Hail had destroyed the previous year’s harvest. As you all know, ours is one of the driest states in the union—and today’s weather instability renders rainfall even less dependable. My sharecropping farmer up and quit.”

What I don’t mention: To cover land-lease obligations to the state, I had to borrow money from my youngest, a Silicon-Valley techie.

“How about planting irrigated crops? Sugar beets? Corn?”

“We don’t have the water for it. The wheat was raised in dry-land farming.”

To keep myself from fretting, I’d initiated container gardening, which I show off with pride. Raised-garden beds sprout spinach, lettuce, potatoes. Feed containers hold tomato plants, some already bearing small green fruit. Strawberries, geranium, and begonias round out my collection.

“The raised beds, I hope, keeps the wildlife from sampling my veggies.”

I also show my friends the “living snow fences” in back of my house, three rows of inaugural trees. “The Resource District planted them in weed barriers. They even added a

drip system. It's cost-shared, so it's affordable."

"My, but the trees are small," they tell me.

"Don't I know it. They won't make any kind of barrier against wind and snow until years from now. But it's all I could get."

All the while Abby, my canine companion, has been running around nuzzling guests, sniffing their crotches.

"You have an active dog," someone says.

"Well, she's a teenager in human years. I am her forth owner. What traumas she's lived through I'll never know, but I know this: she needs to touch base with me often. In and out all day, scratching at the door, tracking snow and mud."

"A good-looking dog."

"Yes." Abby is Australian shepherd mix, short-haired, with the shepherd's dark grays and browns and the beautiful white "apron" of another breed.

"Yesterday I found her barking at an outside corner of the garage. She had spotted a baby rattler pressing itself against the concrete. I worry she'll tangle with an adult rattler."

"I'd stay away from hiking in the grass if I were you."

"I do, but Abby runs where she pleases. Last week she came home with a muzzle full of quills. A veterinarian had to sedate her to extract them."

As a former city dog, Abby has found hog heaven. "She roams to the point of limping; she literally runs herself lame. Sometimes I give her ibuprofen in the evening so she won't hurt all night, but the next morning she is ready to run again."

"An absence of pain may be making things worse."

"My son says she'll have to figure out on her on how to pace herself."

I have seen a pair of gray foxes streak across the field and wondered whether Abby has tried to chase them; if so, she would have come up short. Foxes are way too savvy to tangle with dogs. When he yet lived in Wyoming, Walter once pointed out the foxes' den in a hollow between field and road, kits playing at its entrance. I myself would not have noticed them, but as wildlife veterinarian Walter had developed an eye. The den is still there, for I see Abby sniff around the telltale spot. The foxes, I know, will have disappeared long before she gets anywhere near. Ditto the grassland birds she tries to chase.

“Look, she is going after a rabbit!”

“One time she actually caught and killed one. Ate half of it, without my knowing. Next morning I had to clean up a mess of vomit and diarrhea.”

I explain how terrified she is of loud noise, especially thunder. Even a distant rolling will send her to the only room in the house without a window, a bathroom with sky light. She presses against the tub, shaking and panting.

Lately, though, she sometimes ventures from the bathroom to seek my presence. If I happen to practice guitar, she'll wedge her muzzle into my armpit until I relinquish the instrument and stroke her. When I first got her, she refused to be touched.

“I've seen you around Cheyenne in the car with your dog.”

“Abby loves to travel. Of course, this means hours of confinement, but we've worked out a system. She runs beside the car to the mailbox, a stretch of about a mile, then jumps into the backseat. I clip her to a doggie belt.”

“A doggie belt?”

“It permits her to sit or lie down. The previous owner allowed Abby up front unencumbered. That's a no-no with me.”

In the house my guests sample the snacks and drinks I put out. Someone points to my guitar. “You play this?”

“Off and on. I’m a member of Cheyenne Guitar Society.”

“I’ve heard of them. You must be good at it.”

“I started in Germany. Later, in California, I took a college course in classical guitar.”

An image arises in my mind’s eye: Andy, our youngest, then in his teens, popping into the room where I sat practicing a Carcassi rondo. “That you?” he said. “I thought it was a CD.” I was playing for his dad in the pre-trembling, as the poet says, of a house that falls. That was on the central coast, the San Andreas Fault a locale and a relationship.

My guests chat with one another about owls and kestrels. Then comes what I knew would pop up: “Don’t you get lonely out here? With no company other than Abby?”

“I had someone.” I hesitate. “He supported my hemp project.”

“Yes?”

“He prefers to live in the city.”

My reply is facile. Well, it’ll have to do.

“I get by. I sing in the choir of the Unitarian Universalists.”

* * *

Call him Garth. He is of Scottish extraction. Sometimes charming, always interesting, he is a conversationalist who is politically astute, social conscious, and world-wise.

“I love your columns,” he initiated our email conversation. “You are the voice of sanity in this town.”

“Flattery will get you anywhere,” I want to reply but don’t.

“Ever since President Nixon’s War on Drugs, hemp has been misclassified as a Schedule I substance, even though industrial hemp contains less than 0.3% THC, the delta-9-TetraHydro Cannabinol that constitutes the psychoactive substance in marijuana,” my column comments. “A bloated Drug Enforcement Administration secures its prosperity at the expense of states’ rights—and common sense. Worse, in its zeal to root out the ‘evil weed,’ the agency enlists the cooperation of state and local law enforcement by offering training with benefits. Wyoming now boasts a warrior-cop force determined to be more catholic than the pope.”

My interest in hemp lies, of course, in pecuniary considerations. Unlike winter-wheat’s early growing season, hemp’s begins later, thus remaining unaffected by late-spring hailstorms. Its rapid growth crowds out weeds, eliminating the chemicals to kill them. Plus, it needs neither irrigation nor fertilizer.

“The DEA’s Domestic Cannabis Eradication and Suppression Program (DCE/SP) is the drug war unleashed on ditchweed. Eradication chemicals are harmful to the health and safety of residents, inflict untold damage on the environment, and burden taxpayers with unreasonable costs. Ditchweed does not contribute to the black-market marijuana trade—a market that would not exist if weed were regulated like tobacco or alcohol. Ditchweed, a wild-growing hemp, is no threat to public safety. But tell that to the agency! In 1996 alone, the DEA spent over \$9 million on eradication efforts in all 50 states. This figure does not include the cost of state and local participation.”

To get to know me, Garth joined my “Climate Parents” group, a body of parents and educators outraged at Wyoming legislators’ opposition to the teaching of climate science.

Eventually he helped me lobby the lawmakers of Wyoming's Agriculture Committee. Inasmuch as we both lived in Cheyenne, attending legislative sessions was a matter of planning.

“Growing hemp was legal in the U.S. until 1957. Today, half of the 50 states have laws that allow for some form of hemp production. Why not Wyoming? George Washington grew hemp at Mount Vernon. So did Thomas Jefferson at Monticello. Benjamin Franklin used it to start one of America's first paper mills.”

While I speak, Garth hands out a National Hemp Association leaflet with graphs of states that are charting their own course. It explains outdated, cumbersome federal regulations—and the inability or unwillingness of Congress to change them.

“The American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Farmers Union, and the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture all support industrial hemp agriculture. It'll create thousands of jobs. Kentucky, once the nation's top hemp-producing state, has started growing hemp again.”

I refrain from mentioning that Kentucky's state police vowed to resume its fly-over “eradication” campaign, with Police Commissioner Rodney Brewer boasting that the year previous “we eradicated \$44,000 worth of illegal plants and arrested 524 people.”

Instead, I end on a positive note: “Congress enacted, and President Obama signed into law, the 2014 Agriculture Act, which allows states to regulate hemp production without DEA interference. A follow-up Omnibus Appropriations directive cuts off funding for DEA hemp- and marijuana pursuits. We may proceed unmolested. Wyoming's economy will benefit.”

Our legislators seem unconvinced by our pitch; still, Garth and I leave the capitol in

high spirits.

In time I met Garth's significant other, a woman considerably younger than he who, as chance would have it, was severing their arrangement and moving into an apartment of her own.

"It was our agreement all along," he said. "I'd help her through college and then she'd find a man her own age."

Yeah, sure.

Over eighteen months a relationship evolved from activism to engaged dialogue. He made sure I understood, his status as retired professor made him an attractive partner. A good-looking oldster, very tall with dark, dark eyes, he sports a small mustache and still owns most of his hair. On the other hand, there was an oft-repeated story about a dysfunctional son that, I began to suspect, served to screen something else.

When Garth mentioned "Rowan," his alcoholic benders and suicidal funks, he hastened to add that the man is "brilliant, absolutely brilliant. He left to study in Australia, saying he'd never return. In the U.S., he thinks, he'd shoot himself." He added an exposition of the son's academic accomplishments.

"My son, too, left to go elsewhere. Did I mention, his Wyoming career began with large-animal wildlife? He was working toward a PhD in epidemiology, an asset the job required. Later, as Wyoming's state veterinarian, Walter was offered a job he couldn't refuse, teaching veterinary science at Texas A & M."

"Good school, A & M. I did my undergraduate work there."

"Maybe their daughter will too, someday. I used to look after Amanda when they lived in Wyoming. Her mother is a lawyer, now with A & M's legal department."

In later conversation Garth confided a setback in another country that entailed serious financial losses. “When I got back I sat in my house and cried and cried,” he said. It made me think maybe my impression was wrong that he preferred surface relationships. Hence I was delighted—more than that, surprised and elated—a few months later, when Garth said, “I love you.” The occasion, however, and the manner in which the comment was offered, gave a moment’s pause.

The occasion was this. From spending two winter months in Texas I returned with several bags of pecans. One was for Garth, for which I anticipated a “Gee, thanks.” Instead he said, “Let me count the ways I love you.”

Let me count the ways I love you. What a way to convey emotion! I imagine he figured I’d recognize the phrase as a takeoff on a Barrett-Browning poem; he knew that my last (and fourth) career was teaching College English. The utterance is a delightful riff; nevertheless, it seemed a bit contrived. Had he used the line before? I determined to ask what exactly he meant with his Barrett-Browning paraphrase. Sadly, I never got the chance.

It’s not often that someone we’ve come to value utters an “I love you.” When it does happen, it serves as a powerful motivator. But then, inexplicably he said he needed to visit his son.

“When things get bad, Rowan’s wife emails me. I pack up to go see him.”

“In Australia?”

“Or Japan. Or Belgium. Wherever he happens to be. This will be my twenty-third time.”

“I see.” Actually, I did not see at all. I did, however, think of “Recover Wyoming” and its originator.

“Would you agree to talk with a friend of mine? Laura Griffith spent decades abusing alcohol—and I mean abusing. At a fundraiser she confessed, what—a gallon of bourbon a week? She was past fifty before her life turned around.”

“Where does she live?”

“In Cheyenne. Five years ago she founded a non-profit that helps addicts who have completed rehab. Release from rehab is a vulnerable time because people are often without resources. Laura says her own family disowned her during her down time.”

“Rowan has been through rehab. Several times.”

“Will you talk with her?”

“If you can set up something between now and Wednesday. I fly out Wednesday.”

Laura agreed to see us on short notice. After a thumbnail sketch of her own experience, she said: “Edith tells me your son has been in rehab before.”

“Repeatedly. Two weeks here, three weeks there.”

“I did the same thing, but two weeks doesn’t cut it. Four weeks doesn’t. It took me ten weeks for rehab to take hold.” Then she said, “Tell us what you do when you travel to see your son.”

“He trusts me. I hold him and hug him close. Throw out his booze. Take away his credit cards.”

“You may want to rethink the booze and the credit cards. Your son must be willing—and able—to call it quits on his own.”

Garth remained controlled and suave. He continued to address my friend as “Counselor,” jotted down notes, promised an update on his return.

“Any children?” she asked.

He hesitated. “Knowing he had these problems, my son had an agreement with his spouse: No children. She decided to get pregnant anyway. That was the first time she called on me, when they had the row over her pregnancy. Their daughter is sixteen now.”

It was a disturbing revelation. “An unwanted child,” I commented. “How awful she must feel.”

“Rowan has had a change of heart. These days he loves her to death.”

Not enough to change his ways, I thought.

“She would still know she was unwanted,” commented Ms. Griffith.

“She's fine. Incredibly smart. Has an offer for a scholarship at Oxford.”

The next day I urged Garth to take a stance. “Promise to hold your granddaughter in your arms and tell her, ‘It’s not your fault. It’s not your fault.’ You’ll need to do this many times. It’ll take months to sink in, maybe years.”

He nodded, checking his itinerary.

When he returned, his ex picked him up at the airport, then stayed over. A week later came another frantic note from his daughter-in-law.

I emailed, suggesting he consider the term “complicated grief disorder” as applicable to his son’s—perhaps his own—existence, urging he reflect upon Laura Griffith's comments on his costly yet counter-productive approach to Rowan’s problems.

“You may be unable to grasp what troubles your son until you take a close look at whatever went on in the first year(s) of your own life. A variant may have happened to him.”

From my own painful past I have learned the pervasiveness of grief. I also know something about the repetition compulsions that can emerge in family dynamics.

“My brother Helmut killed himself in Idaho at 32,” I confided one time. “Repeating our youngest brother’s suicide in Germany at age 18, to which Helmut was witness.”

Garth seemed to have lost interest; hence, I kept quiet about Karl. Karl who had wandered with me through childhood as through a garden laid waste; Karl, closest to me in age and psychological make-up, closest also in physical locale—Karl and family settled in California, near the town where Darold and I raised our three children. Karl who managed to hang on until 45, when his demise struck me as ritualistic reenactment of Mother’s death. Just as she did, Karl left behind children who find life very difficult indeed.

Years would pass, decades, before I was to free myself of the self-absorption of grieving. Similar fixations informed my parents as they lived out their lives in Germany, I now understand. Largely unacknowledged by the other spouse, each mourned bereavements that, though we children had learned of the losses, proved all but disabling. Grief not validated can be devastating, to the mourning individual as to the group she or he deems family.

“I’ll never get old,” Mother used to say. “I’ll die of cancer like my mother did.” Was her fatalistic outlook a form of grieving? Grieving for the mother lost too soon, grieving for her own anticipated too-early demise?

Apparently Garth is unwilling to tolerate any doubt that pertains to his actions, decisions, or relationships. I was to find, his “I love you” screened a punitiveness that put an end to our conversations.

“I’m not interested. No hugging, no kissing, you hear? I’m a one-woman man.”

He must have known I recognized his one-woman claim for what it is. When it suits his purpose, Garth readily avails himself of poetic license, acting the man about town.

I saw I must surrender our bond, let go of a friendship I'd hoped would deepen with time. "We are all damaged goods," I said in my final email note. "All of us. This is so sad."

Still I had to ask: whatever possessed me to imagine a life together? It was a fantasy, sweet while it lasted but a fantasy nonetheless. Nevertheless our losses, though part of life, do take their toll; we must accord them respect even as we remind ourselves: It is time to let go.

"Everything passes," comments Erich Maria Remarque at conclusion of his final novel, a thinly-disguised autobiography of a German expat who lives out his last days in California. "Everything passes and man is the only animal who knows it."

There'll come a moment when we relinquish everything we cling to: our loved ones, our possessions and acquisitions, our deeply-felt emotions. At the point of death, willingly or not, we let go of all that is dear. There is but one thing in life, and it is to let go.

* * *

My middle son, a technical writer with family in California, has helped me create a website. In it I explain hemp: It is cheap to tend, doesn't need pesticides, and is actually good for the soil. It is heartier than other mono-crops and produces the strongest natural fiber in the world. In Europe, auto makers and clothiers use it to good effect.

Problem is, until the laws change in Wyoming, hemp can't be grown here. Because the plant is in the cannabis family, for decades it has been misclassified as a drug. To this day it is banned under the federal Controlled Substances Act. Individual states have formulated their own prohibitions.

Oddly, ours is the only industrialized country that bans hemp while consuming the world's largest volume of hemp products. Industry figures show total U.S. sales of products

containing hemp to be around \$500 million. Australians and Canadians use hemp domestically and export it as food and biofuel. A few years ago a “Hemp Car” toured the U.S., logging thousands of miles on hemp biofuel at 27 mpg; “Hemp4Fuel” shows the car on YouTube. At Whole Foods, consumers purchase hemp’s numerous—and pricey—products: cooking oil, milk, protein powder, granola, and a variety of beauty products. Their labels indicate their origin in Canada, including the base product for the hemp milk made in Oregon.

I alert readers to “Hemp Traders,” a California company that has flourished these twenty-five years. Founder Lawrence Serbin, then a newly-minted college graduate, desired to undertake something that would make the world a better place. “Hemp Traders” offers anything from raw hemp to textiles fashioned from hemp.

Its website statement, “We grow our own hemp,” prompted me to telephone the company. In no time I found myself speaking to Mr. Serbin himself, who disclosed that the company’s hemp grows in China.

“Most of what we sell comes from China. For twenty-three years I’ve traveled to that country, at least once a year, sometimes participating in hemp harvests.” Indeed, his website shows him with his Chinese partner, hemp fields in background.

I asked if he envisioned purchasing U.S. hemp. He’d love to, he said, but the lack of infrastructure makes it difficult to process and ship the material domestically. On the other hand, securing it from abroad presents its own challenges.

“In China at the moment, hemp fiber is in short supply,” he said, “because China has curtailed its cotton-production on account of its water- and fertilizer needs. If you had large quantities of good-quality stuff, the Chinese would buy it from you. Yes, if our farmers were

able to grow hemp, I'd see about getting some of my products from them."

In February 2015, Wyoming legislators approved Leland Christensen's "Hemp Extract" bill. In this they followed Utah's lead, which followed Colorado's lead in approving CBD oil, a hemp-leaf extract more effective than pharmaceuticals in alleviating seizures, particularly in children. Utah patterned its "Charlee's Law" after Colorado's "Charlotte's Web." Both laws were named after seizure-prone little girls. However, where Colorado and Utah simultaneously enacted laws authorizing the growing of hemp, Wyoming held back. The reason? Attorney General Peter Michael, in his capacity as Commissioner of Drugs and Substance Control, advised Governor Mead not to sign the bill. Fortunately, because the governor refrained from vetoing it, the legislative effort still became law.

Mr. Michael's hobby, by the way, is gardening for organic produce.