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Ode to my Father, Who Worked

Memories of growing up in a land caretaker's family

Beaumont Sugar



MY FAMILY LIVED IN A COTTAGE HOUSE THAT WAS OUT OF THE WAY BUT still in sight of the stone-walled, many chimneyed manor where the family who employed my mother and father lived. As far as the physical goes, between our houses was a small apple orchard, a large barn for the horses to sleep in at night, a field of thick grasses, and a field of all different squashes. Some of those squashes would dry out into rattles in the fall, and we lit candles. My family would shake those rattles and dance.

We were roomed and boarded, and my family received a little stipend, too. It provided paper and pencils for completing schoolwork. It clothed my brother and my sisters and me. My family wore jeans and sweatpants with sneakers and boots—or, more commonly, no shoes at all. My neighbor's family wore khakis or pastel shorts with boat shoes.

Whenever one of my siblings or I encountered a member of the neighboring family, they seemed surprised to see us. My parents' work ethic and understanding of the importance of being punctual imbued them with a kind of bootstrap nobility. To a degree, my parents were the kind of people who "knew their place."

We children were savages. Our pants had holes, so it was our knees that were grass-stained, and we had red welts from spider bites and bee stings, and we didn't bother to brush the leaves from our tangled hair, or the golden pollen from our noses. I think it spooked people like our neighbors to have to admit that we had knees and skin and hair and noses and that we, heathen as we lived, were people all the same.

My mother breakfasted their children and mopped, dusted, and swept their house. After a couple years, she wouldn't go over anymore because she was tired of getting screamed at. My mother was replaced, and out of loneliness or compassion, my mother invited this new maid over for lunches to help her perfect her English via gossip and daytime talk shows.

My father quit and was fired many times, too, but I think that's just how some people play because he never stopped cutting the grass and replacing the salt lick and raking up the leaves, and my family was never thrown out onto the street, despite the screaming promising we could be. Could be any time at all. Is that what we want?

The author climbing a fence on the farm where the family worked as caretakers in the 1990s. COURTESY OF BEAUMONT SUGAR

My mother was their maid, but my father's role was less defined. If you visited the property, which I've heard described as a "gentleman's farm" more than a few times, you might think you'd caught a glimpse of him watering the hydrangeas under the east-facing windows of their giant house, but so fundamentally did he belong to the dirt and the apple trees and the chickens that you might turn to your strolling partner to point him out, only for him to then appear in that view, leading the sheep through the gate to the front pasture, or pruning the ornamental plum tree shading it with its deep purple leaves. You couldn't really be sure he was in any one place at a given time, even if you were speaking with him. He was only ever a little more likely to be in whichever place you were observing him.

After he bathed, my father still smelled like sweat and pinesap, lanolin, and moss. Even if you didn't hear him turning the knob, you would know he had entered an inside space because then it smelled like you were outside.

He was prone to errors of communication with our teachers at school, or when communicating with people like bankers, but he could talk to animals, and they talked to him, too. My father's skin didn't believe in nonsense like "you vee rays," and his skin gave itself to the sun. He was tan and handsome.

He was strong, too. My neighbors invited their hunter friends to shoot deer on the grounds. Once someone shot a buck who must have been king of the deer, judging by his size, but an arrow in the chest is an arrow in the chest, so while this buck fought mightily against death and ran quite a distance from the site of his assassination, his struggle eventually ended, the way they always do. Somewhat uniquely, his struggle ended in the middle of the human-made lake about a half-mile from the stone manor.

My father let me come with him and watch while he dragged it out of there. The water made the buck and my father both shine like glass in the sun, and I could only tell which tan, bulging, muscular frame belonged to my father by squinting, trying to determine which of the two still had the spark of life. Once the water was shallow enough for him to stand again, my father put his face close to the buck's face, and he said something to it, but I couldn't hear over the whirring locusts.

My father understood the geometry of beauty, and he understood that, for some people, things are most beautiful when they look like they've been left alone. Some people have a kind of a preoccupation with imagining they're first. A preoccupation with "unspoiled" things.

My father's first assignment after being hired by our benefactor was to plant spring bulbs. Bundles of daffodils, clutches of crocuses, a basket of tulips. "We want it to look *natural*," they said.

He gathered all those bulbs and mixed them together in a canvas sack. He walked, tossing handfuls behind him. He planted those flowers where they lay.

They never bought my father a riding mower, so he walked acres and acres, singing to that land. He walked the horses from their grazing pasture and into their stalls at night. He walked with a leaf blower on his back until everywhere was tidy. My father knew his employers wanted the land to look “natural” but needed it to be tidy.

My father knew how to bring something up. He’d delivered lambs and watched clusters of jelly become a pondful of croaking frogs. He had a vision. With spring bulbs and babies, and winter’s somber readying for renewal, he was creating paradise.

He gave his body to that land. My father knew growing things requires a sacrifice.

THE ANCIENT GREEKS CONCEIVED THE ARCADIAN PARADISE, AND THE IDEA persisted through the Renaissance and into modern Western culture. People had strayed too far from the “golden age,” an imaginary time of forest frolicking and raw milk drinking and hours spent lazily communing with bees in a meadow. A time before the land and people were spoiled. A lifestyle sometimes referred to as “soft primitivism,” the addition of “soft” basically translating to “a primitive lifestyle, but because we can, not because we have to.”

The cure for this perceived straying from some golden age was intuitive, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the height of the deliberate creation of horticultural utopias for those who had the means. They were made to appear as natural as possible. Sprawling fields, contoured with thickets of pine and spruce. Human-made lakes so skillfully manicured with cattails and crabapple trees even the geese and cranes thought they were real lakes and laid their eggs there. Basketball court-sized vegetable gardens growing every edible plant possible in a temperate climate. Trees! Tall trees with flat leaves and bushy trees with prickles. All kinds of trees all tangled up with each other underneath. Old trees and young trees.

These properties were created as escapes for comfortable families when they weren’t in Nantucket or Paris or Palm Beach. The world-class collection of arboretums, fountains, gardens, and conservatories at Longwood Gardens were once a private residence owned by Pierre du Pont.

If it isn’t the business of those who work the land to question what these people were trying to escape from, and it isn’t a worker’s business to wonder why these escapes had to be so completely immersive, then it isn’t anyone’s



The author's mother in front of the pond the "king of the deer" was pulled from.

COURTESY OF BEAUMONT SUGAR

business to consider that the worlds these people needed a soft, idyllic respite from was largely the world they themselves had created, as typically those with means are lawmakers and influencers and thus have the most say about what exactly "the world" is.

To enhance the illusion of life nestled in some kind of is-it-or-isn't-it-magical garden-and-forest paradise, some comfortable families went so far as to invest in what was referred to as an "ornamental hermit." The hermit's cottage home would be out of the way of the main home, and he would be roomed and boarded and receive a little stipend. This was a real live person who was supposed to give a mystical effect to the land and serve as a medium between it and its owners, who described the land using words like *property*. He would

be encouraged to dress like a druid, as if he belonged deep in the land, and walk and walk and walk. Members of comfortable families might look out their windows and catch a glimpse through the mists. Did he really exist?

THE FACT OF THE FARM ITSELF PROVES MY FATHER EXISTED AND WAS MORE than a wanderer or a simple farmhand. He was more than a groundskeeper, more than a landscaper. He painted the inside and outside of the huge house, the cottage house where we stayed, the barn, the fences, the garage, and the “playhouse,” which was, truthfully, fully livable for a human being.

He trimmed privacy hedges around the swimming pool and ornamental hedges dotting the property with little focal points. He maintained the rose gardens. He mulched and weeded on his knees, he relocated wasps, beetles, and bees, he mucked the barn, and he talked the pony out of her heartbreak over the horses excluding her in the pasture. The animals followed him when he came around, and they all had different names for him. He pruned the fruit trees: pear, cherry, and peach. He dug swales protecting swaths of land from heavy rain. The year I was born, he planted trees along the long, long driveway, maybe twenty of them. He cared for those trees and brought them up right.

He gave his voice singing his praises and incantations to the land, he gave his own breath breathing life into the land. He walked on the land, and where he walked, shoots sprung up and everything is greener, and the deer won't run when they smell him because he's got a name in their language, too.

The existence of the farm proves the existence of my father. He was not part of a team caring for the land. He was the only lover it ever took. The whole expanse of it was perfectly represented and exalted in my father, alternately lonesome for and raging at the world encroaching on their borders, pulsing at the thought of shrugging off that world's expectations and limits.

My father could affect the shape of a landscape in a few hours. As the years stretched, the influence the land had on my father became more and more apparent. They were creating each other.

ANNUALLY, MY NEIGHBORS HELD COURT ON THEIR ARCADIAN FARM GROUNDS and threw what can only be described as a horticultural gala. Anybody they saw as somebody was invited. A grand garden party held in the height of summer, but nothing like any solstice fire I knew.

Cars belonging to people with names written in the social register lined the long, long driveway, shaded by trees. These people wore very nice hats,

and smart skirt-suits and khaki pants. They wore pale greens and yellows, maybe pale pink, and white. Lots and lots of white. They were mostly tall, and their voices carried and were melodic, hypnotizing us children.

These people would come to bask in the otherworldly perfumes of the place. To pass through a veil and be dazzled and contented and mystified. They would come to escape and enjoy themselves.

It was never said outright, but we understood we were to stay inside during this horticultural gala. We were not children, after all, but imps sired by that devil who pulled back the curtain and destroyed the illusion for these esteemed guests. We didn't own the land, we certainly weren't ornamental, and we weren't there to work ourselves, but to acknowledge our existence was to acknowledge our father.

We imps and the land only knew each other through pain, prayer, and play, and so much of the land was in us that if those guests looked at us, they would immediately see the land and realize with shocking surety how far from it they were, even if they took their shoes off and stood right in the grass.

The second reason they'd come, more important even than enjoying themselves, was to celebrate their hosts, and tell them what a good job they'd done on the place. They toured the property in parades and fell all over themselves. *How fragrant!* a woman must've gasped at the roses, and *What incredible attention to detail!* they fawned and swooned, and my father sat in the cottage house.

Their fawning and their hats were exotic to us, so we imps would hide behind bushes and in the hayloft, peering, and listening. *Your own little slice of heaven! And, I almost want to say "Shakespearean!"* And, *"Great work! You've done such great work!"* they said to their hosts. Their tongues wagged, lusting after this land, and they frightened the sheep and chickens, and their tires put ruts in the grass, and my father sat in the cottage house.

Once they had left, delighted at what they had seen and pleased with themselves for being delighted, my father would trim away dying lilies which had been accidentally stepped on, and spread grass seed where the cars had parked, and feed the animals, who had been waiting all night. He would let them all know everything was all right.

THIS IS HOW IT WAS FOR DECADES, BUT LITTLE THINGS CHANGED. FIRST, MY mother left all of us. Then one by one, we impish children left my father. Eventually, my neighbors must've bored of their paradise, because in preparation for sale, my father was extracted from the land and put up somewhere else. His new home was close enough to witness the defamation and

destruction of his creator, but he didn't own the land, so as far as the rest of the world was concerned, it no longer had anything to do with him. He mourned the land alone.

The trees got bigger, but the sheep were culled, then castrated, and those acres of meadow, forest, and field were all sliced up and sold, and houses with quiet plumbing and good insulation were built on them instead. It means more people can enjoy it, I guess.

My father's hips were replaced first, and then his knees. His eyes and his skin were overtaken by the sunlight, and his hands remain as scarred, gouged, and calloused as they ever were. Lyme disease and lung irritation.

Land doesn't lay itself down gently and serenely out of any naturally occurring inclination to do so. It can't be pleaded with, and it won't be tricked or tamed. My father's imposing frame, his booming growl of a voice, and his strong bones amounted to one single pound of flesh.

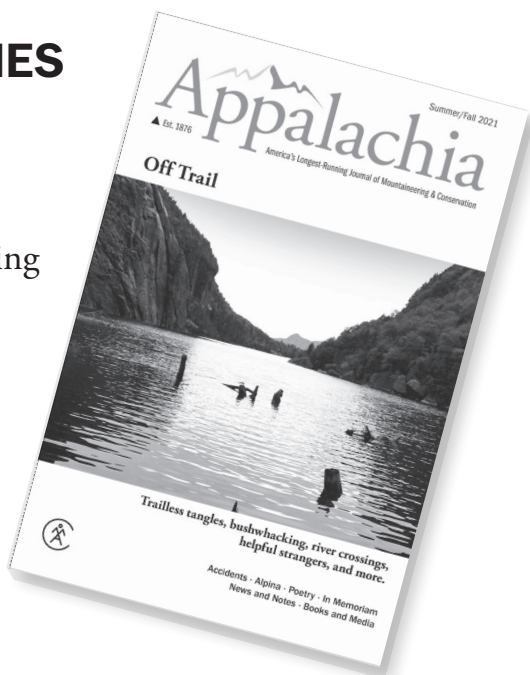
BEAUMONT SUGAR is an essayist, poet, and painter who has written for *Hash Journal*, *The Whorticulturalist*, *Ruminant Magazine*, *Gasher Journal*, *Anchorage Press*, and *decomp journal*. Their visual art is on Instagram @beaumontsugar, in *Tint Journal*, and at Tidal Artist Haven. Sugar lives in Anchorage, Alaska, with their wife, Penelope, and cat, Waffle.

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