

One Man on a Tractor, Far Away

Walter Wangerin Jr.

April 28, 1995:

I've opened a small suitcase on the bed. The window shades are pulled. They usually are, night and day. Their white translucence, though, allows a fine spring light in the bedroom; and as I move from the closet to the dresser, gathering clothes for packing, I feel glad anticipations about the weekend.

It's Friday. Early afternoon. In forty-five minutes I will leave town for Wheaton College in Illinois where one of my stories is to receive its first public performance. As good as that--better than that, actually--I'm to meet one of my best friends there, whose full-length play will also be performed. His piece is the real feature of Wheaton's theater festival; mine's a private excitement.

My friend's name is David McFadzean. The director at Wheaton is Jim Young, soft-spoken, with talent as deep as tree roots.

I'm going to drive. I'll be back on Sunday.

So, then: two clean shirts, fresh underwear, a pair of dark slacks; my shaving kit is in the bathroom....

Just as I burst from the bathroom, Thanne appears at the top of the stairs. She lets me rush past her, then follows into the bedroom. She's moving slowly. Thanne will often suspend her work while I get ready for some extended trip. She'll say goodbye in the driveway.

"You think I'll need my raincoat?"

She doesn't answer.

"Thanne?"

I glance at her. No, her slowness now is not a preparation for "Goodbye." She hasn't sat. My wife is gazing at the window shades as if they were open and the world lay visible before her. Her head is drawn back. There are small bunches of flesh at the corners of her lips.

"Thanne?"

For a moment she stands unmoving. The shades are pulled; there is no world before her. There's nothing to see. Her face is illuminated by a diffusion of light. I stuff the shaving kit into my suitcase. I will say her name again, with greater emphasis--but then she speaks in a dreaming murmur: "Wally."

"Yes? What?"

Now Thanne turns and turns on me the same wondering gaze she gave the window shade.

"Dad's gone," she says.

"Ah."

There is no explanation for this, but I understand the sense of her words immediately, completely. I don't ask her to elaborate. There is no compulsion in me toward surprise or shock. Rather, I scrutinize the woman carefully, to see how she is herself responding to this ... this, what? Act of God?

Dad's gone.

But she stands as erect as first I ever saw her, and the cast of her neck and head make her seem a Grecian column to hold the roofs of temples. Except for the line between her eyebrows, her countenance is composed.

"Thanne?"

I'm asking after her state of being. I would add, How are you?--except she thinks I'm asking for details, and answers first.

Softly, as if all this were a wonder to her, Thanne draws me the picture in her mind. "Mom says it was just after lunch. They'd come back to their rooms. Dad had shifted himself from the wheelchair into his TV chair. Mom wasn't paying any attention. She was just about to sit, when Dad took three quick breaths ... and then he was gone."

I step toward her now. I gather the woman into my arms. I take her face against my throat, and we stand still. She is not crying. She is deeply quiet.

My wife's father, Martin Bohlmann, has just died. This is the first of our four parents to go.

Softly, still with that note of awe-ful wonder, Thanne adds one more detail.

"Mom's says it's a good thing Dad took those three breaths, and that they were loud. Otherwise she'd have talked to a dead man till suppertime."

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Spring, 1967:

The farmer was not a talky man. Not ever, I suppose--though when I first met him I assumed that the size and the noise of his family didn't permit him time to talk.

At the age of twenty-three I drove west from Ohio to the flat, black farmland of eastern Illinois, there to visit the Bohlmann farm, to seek approval of the Bohlmann parents, and to court the Bohlmann daughter named Ruthanne.

On a Friday evening we sat down to supper in the spacious kitchen. The day had been balmy. I remember that the kitchen door stood open to the porch, so that breezes stole in behind me. The air was warm and rich and loamy. Jonquils and daffodils were in bloom, the tulip beds about to pop, the ground as yet uncultivated. I'd been a city boy all my life. I wanted to weep for the perfect sense of sufficiency which this world provided me.

There were eight of us at the table, though it could accommodate fifteen at least. Martin and Gertrude had brought forth fourteen children. They buried one in infancy and now had watched nearly all the others depart for college. Ruthanne was the tenth child born to them, the fifth from the last.

The farmer bowed his head. "Come!" he said with surprising force, then lowered his voice for the rest of the prayer: "COME, Lord Jesus, be our guest...."

I soon learned that the first word was something like a gong, alerting the rest of his huge family to the sacred duty now begun.

Apart from that commanding "Come," Martin's praying and his manner both were mild. His hair, on the other hand--aimed at me from the bowed head at the other end of the table--constituted a fierce aggression. It never would comb down, but stood up and stabbed like bayonets in defiance.

As soon as the prayer was done, a hard, clattering silence overtook the table, while every Bohlmann concentrated on filling up their plates.

Potatoes and vegetables had been raised in the kitchen garden. Popcorn, too. Milk came from Bohlmann cows. There'd been a time when the hog was hung up on a chilly autumn morning and butchered in the barn door, giving cracklings to the family, hams and chops and sausages and lard. Gertrude used the lard for the wedding cakes she baked to earn spending money. The Bohlmanns owned neither the land they worked nor the house they slept in. They rented. They never paid income tax, since their annual income never approached a taxable figure. For them it was a short distance from the earth to their stomachs--and back to earth again. Thanne recalls the cold two-holer on snowy winter mornings.

Martin ate that meal mostly in silence. But so did he eat all his meals, and so did he live most of his life: in silence.

When he was done, he slipped a toothpick into the corner of his mouth, read aloud a brief devotion for our general benefit, pushed back his chair, stood up, and walked outside.

I followed him. I think I thought I'd talk with him, persuade him of the honor of my intentions. But Martin moved in the sort of solitude which, it seemed to my young self, admitted no foolish intrusions. And once outside, he kept on walking. So I lingered in the yard and watched, following no farther than that.

In twilight the farmer, clad in clean coveralls, strolled westward into the field immediately beyond the yard. He paused. He stood silhouette, the deep green sky framing his body with such precision that I could see the toothpick twiddling between his lips. His hair was as stiff and wild as a thicket, the great blade of his nose majestic.

Soon Martin knelt on one knee. He reached down and gathered a handful of dirt. He lifted it, then sifted the lumpish dust through his fingers onto the palm of his other hand. Suddenly he brought both hands to his face and inhaled. The toothpick got switched to the side; Martin touched the tip of his tongue to the earth. Then he rose again. He softly clapped his two hands clean, then slipped them behind the bib of his coveralls, and there he stood, straight up, gazing across the field, his form as black as iron in the gloaming, his elbows forming the joints of folded wings--and I thought: How peaceful! How completely peaceful is this man.

It caused in me a sort of sadness, a nameless elemental yearning.

April 29, 1995:

I am in Wheaton with David McFadzean, sitting at a small table in the college snack bar. I drove my little pickup here, while Thanne drove the mini-van south into the Illinois farm country of her childhood. She's with her mother and her siblings in Watseka, arranging for her father's funeral, which has been scheduled for Monday. Thanne has already contacted our own children, to see which will be able to attend the funeral. They will all be there--at least for the wake on Sunday.

Since there's little I can do for Martin now, and since Thanne herself is surrounded by a small city of Bohlmann's, we decided I should keep my appointments after all. And I have. But I move as something of an alien here. I'm morbidly conscious of my body, the thing I live in, as if it were a bunting concealing my truer self. No, that's not quite accurate: rather, my body is the heavy thing I bear wherever I go, as if it were a prison of severe limitations. And here's the irony: to lose it or to leave it is to die.

Last night the Wheaton College Theater Department performed my story, "One In A Velvet Gown." It's a melancholy piece, based on personal boyhood experience. Watching it, I became a watcher of my past, departed self.

We're going to watch David's play tonight. He tells me it's still is a work in progress. He grins, suddenly conscious of what he's doing. He's preparing the both of us to forgive the flaws he fears we'll see.

"How's Thanne," he says. This is a running joke: "I'd rather be talking to her, not you!" His eyes blink flat with a false sincerity.

I swallow coffee and surprise myself by saying, "He can't be gone."

What?" David tucks his chin into his neck and curls a lip of wry query: "Whaaat?" He thinks I'm giving him joke for joke.

I say, "Thanne's Dad died yesterday," and then I feel terrible. It's a crude, stupid way to announce such a thing. But this is how separate I feel: when David snaps to a confused sobriety, I don't apologize. I don't say anything. I don't even acknowledge his gestures of sympathy--or if I do, I don't know that I do.

For as soon as I uttered that sentence of death out loud, I realized I meant much more than Martin's physical departure. I meant the man's entire way of life, his perfect peace in the universe. And now my spirit is breathless at so tremendous a loss. For if these are gone, than the world has become a dangerous place altogether.

What? And shall all my fears return again, making me an alien wherever I go?

1900-1950:

Martin Bohlmann was born with the century. His relationship to the earth, therefore, was established long before society developed its ever more complex technologies for separating human creatures from the rest of creation.

Throughout his young manhood, farming was largely the labor of muscle and bone, hoof and hand. The very first successful gasoline tractor was not manufactured until 1892. In 1907 there were a mere 600 tractors in the entire United States.

Thanne can remember the years before her father purchased his first John Deere in the late forties. She watched him plowing behind draft horses, steady beasts with hooves the size the little girl's head.

"Prince," the farmer called them, and "Silver."

Often it was Ruthanne's task to lead them to water. And this is why she remembers the time and the chore so well: it frightened the child to walk between two such massive motors of rolling hide, her head below their necks. The quicker she went, the quicker they took their mighty paces, until she thought she could never stop them, and they would fly headlong into the pond, all three!

Her father, however, commanded them mutely with a gesture, with a cluck and a tap of the bridle. Silent farmer. Silent, stolid horses. They were for him a living, companionable power. And when Martin and his horses spent days plowing fields--moving with huffs and clomps and the ringing of chains, but with no explosions of liquid fuel--their wordless communication became community. The farmer never worked alone. He was never isolated. And if the dog named Rex ran beside them, then there were four who could read and obey the rhythms of creation, four creatures, therefore, who dwelt in communion with their Creator.

Ah, what a woven whole that world was! How the picture stirs my yearning--and my sadness too, if I could not enter the peace the farmer knows!

Horses plowed. ("Walk on, Silver. Walk on!") Horses mowed. Horses pulled the rake that laid the alfalfa in windrows to dry--giving Martin's fields the long, strong lines of a darker green that looked, from the road, like emotion wreathed in an ancient face.

And when the hay was dry, horses pulled a flat wagon slowly by the windrows while one man forked the hay up to another who stood on the wagon. This second man caught the bundles neatly on his own fork, then flicked them into an intricate cross-arrangements on the wagon, building the hay higher and tighter, climbing his work as he did, climbing so high that when the horses pulled the wagon to the barn, the man on his haystack could stare dead-level into the second-story windows of the farmhouse. Then horses pulled the rope that, over a metal wheel, hoisted the hay to the loft in the barn.

Martin and his neighbors made hayricks of the overflow. They thatched the tops against rain and the snow to come. The work caused a gritty dust, and the dust caused a fearful itch on a summer's day. But the work and the hay--fodder

for the fall and the winter ahead--were a faithful obedience to the seasons and the beasts, Adam and Eve responsible for Eden. Martin Bohlmann knew that!

He milked the cows before sunrise. There was a time when he sat on a stool with his cheek against their warm flanks in winter. Cows would swing their heads around to gaze at him. He pinched the teats in the joint of his thumb and squeezed with the rest of his hand, shooting a needle spritz into the pail between his ankles. He rose. He lifted the full pail and sloshed its blue milk into the can; then he carried the cans, two by two, outside.

The winter air had a bite. His boots squeaked on the crusted snow as he lugged the cans to the milk house. The dawn was gray at the eastern horizon, the white earth ghostly, the cold air making clouds at the farmer's nostrils--and someone might say that he, alone in his barnyard, was lonely. He wasn't, of course; he was neither lonely nor alone. His boots still steamed with the scent of manure; his cheek kept the oil of the cattle's flanks; the milk and the morning were holy. They were--the very harmony of them was--manifestation of the Creator. And the work was nothing more or less than Martin's obedience. Of which is peace.

1991-1995:

When Thanne and I moved from Evansville in the southeast corner of Indiana to Valparaiso in the northeast, I was granted the chance to fulfill a personal yearning--a life-long yearning, to tell the truth, but one made ever more intense by the farms of eastern Illinois. I wanted in some modest way to live the farmer's life. We sought more than a lot and a house, therefore. Thanne and I went looking for land. Today we own twenty-four acres, fields and woods, a tool shed, a barn.

Martin himself had retired before we moved to this place; but we were closer to him now, could visit and talk with greater frequency. And I could focus my questions upon practical problems and solutions of my own small farm.

I have learned! In these latter years, I've come to understand the thing I once could only admire.

So, then: in the spring of 1992, I became the owner of a John Deere 5000 series farm tractor. It pulls at the power of forty horses, more than enough to handle the work I do, light plowing, disking. I drag timber from the woods to cut and split for firewood; I mow the broader fields, stretch fence, chip tree limbs, grade the ground and haul earth and stone and sand--all with my little Deere. The machine is perfectly suited to the cultivation of our modest crops, berry bushes, hickory and walnut trees, strawberry hills, scattered stands of apple trees, a sizable vegetable garden.

For decades before our relocation north, my family and I had lived in the inner city. We were hedged in on every side. True safety (or so it seemed to me) existed only within the walls of our house. I lived in suspicion of strangers. My children's new friends--the boy-type friends especially--might--could bring the

threat that I could not protect against. After nightfall folks regularly gathered across the street from our house to drink, gamble, smoke dope. I slept tense.

I drove my car with such distracted anxiety that Evansville Police Officers knew me by sight: the pastor with a rap sheet. Well, I was not felonious; but I'd gathered my share of driving tickets and accident reports.

Once we came to the land, however, and once I'd learned to listen to its rhythms, I've felt a dear sense of expansion--yes, and the beginning of peace: I plant and pick, harrow and harvest generous crops in their due seasons.

My tractor is nothing like the modern behemoths that cut swaths as wide as avenues through dustier fields, machines wearing double tires on every wheel, pulling several gangs of plows and disks and harrows at once, while the operator sits bunkered in an air-conditioned cab, watching the tracks of his tires in a television monitor.

Me, I take the weather on my head. I mow at the width of six feet. And mine is but a two-bottom plow.

But Martin's wisdom makes of small things true sufficiency.

Summer, the late 40's:

My father-in-law purchased his first tractor--a John Deere exactly as green as mine, but smaller and less powerful--at the only price he could afford, something less than two hundred dollars.

"Billig," he judged the sale, which could be translated from the German as "Cheap," but which in his mouth meant, "Such a deal!" He bought the tractor used from one of his neighbors. The machine wasn't even two years old, but it kept stalling, driving the neighbor crazy. In the barnyard, in the field, pulling a wagon or plowing, the tractor would quit and refuse to produce the spark for starting again, however hard the poor man cranked.

That farmer figured he was selling aggravation.

Martin, on the other hand, sought to buy a sturdy servant, not only with his cash but also with his spirit. The dollars bought the cold equipment; but patience and peace bought time to examine it with complete attention, his mind untroubled; and mother-wit brought the tool to life again.

In those days tractors used a magneto generator. My father-in-law opened it and discovered a loose washer inside. The washer had shifted whenever the tractor bumped over rough ground, shorting the coils and killing the engine. Martin simply removed that washer. Thereafter he had a dependable tool for as long as ever he farmed. It was there when I came courting his daughter. It was there when he finally retired at the age of seventy and was forced to auction off his farming equipment.

Autumn, 1993:

Near the western boundary of my acreage, the land descends to a low draw through which my neighbor's fields drain their runoff waters. For several years, the only way I could get back to the woods--and to the writing studio I'd built there--was through that draw. But every spring the thaw and the thunderstorms turned it into a wide stretch of sucking mud.

In order to correct my problem (to me it was a "problem") I laid a culvert west-and-west over the lowest section of the draw, then hired a man with a diesel earth shovel to dig a pond on the east side, then to pile that dirt over my culvert. I built a high bank, a dry pathway wide enough to take the weight of my tractor. I seeded it with grass, and the grass grew rich and green. Had God given us dominion over the earth? Well, I congratulated myself for having dominated this little bit of earth.

Congratulated myself and used this elevated path, that is, until the following spring, when severe storms caused such floods that the earth broke and my metal culvert was washed backward and submerged in the pond.

I tried again. I paid several college students to help me re-set the culvert, re-dig and re-pile the earth upon it. I walled the mouth of the culvert with rock and stone in order to teach the water where to go. I re-seeded the whole, yes. Yes, and during the summer months I watched miserably as little runnels of water found their ways beneath the culvert. By spring these runnels had scoured out caves, and the caves caused the culvert to slump, so that my draw returned to its first state as if it had never been anything else: primal mud.

When Martin came to visit, I showed him my new John Deere. He described for me the pattern for efficient plowing, then told me the story I've recounted above, about his own first tractor. We walked slowly across my back field. I took him to my failed culvert. That's what I called it while we stood by soupy pond: "Failed."

Martin turned bodily and looked at the fields west of mine. Even in old age his cheeks still bunched beneath his eyes. He seemed ever to maintain a private smiling. And his nose! That wondrous blade looked Navaho, though the man was German, through and through.

He turned back again and looked down at the flood-torn earth at our feet.

"Take your time," he said to me as if the last two years had been no time at all. "You've got the time," he said. Martin was himself ninety-three years old, and I but forty-nine. Yes, from his vantage I had whole quantities of time.

Finally he raised his eyes to mine and said, "Ask the water what she wants, then give her a new way to do it."

My John Deere 5000 makes a low muttering sound. At full throttle it emits a commanding growl. But its voice is muffled, modern.

Martin's first tractor uttered that steady pop-pop-pop-pop which, when it called across the fields to the farmhouse, revealed the essential vastness of the earth and all skies.

Pop-pop-pop-pop! Thanne recalls how she would step outside the farmhouse with her father's lunch, cock her eye and listen for that pop-pop, then follow the sound to find the farmer. She ran between cornstalks as high as her waist, the flat leaves nodding, whispering, slapping her legs as she passed them by. In the lunchbox were thick beef sandwiches, some cookies, coffee and two toothpicks. Always the toothpicks for her father at the end of his meals.

Pop-pop-pop-pop, and suddenly the child would come out on high ground and catch sight of her father in the distance, mowing between the solitary cottonwoods, creeping the low and golden land beneath the white cumulus giants striding the blue sky above. How tiny, little Ruthanne would think to herself, unable to distinguish her father's features. How little he is: one man on a tractor, far away.

But How peaceful, think I to myself, in spite of Martin's littleness in the universe. And: How completely peaceful is this man!

For during these last years, I've learned to know the nature of his peace, that it is not in spite of his smallness. Verily, it is in the smallness, as long as his is smallness under God.

For Martin Bohlmann, the sweet admission of his personal limitations was ever the beginning of wisdom. Only in knowing oneself as created can one know God as Creator. Otherwise, striving to be in control of our lives, the true Controller must feel like an adversary of massive and terrible force.

I have despised the limits on my own existence, and in that despite have suffered perpetual tensions, seen enemies everywhere. Why, the common act of driving a car can become a contest of mortal consequence. For the streets are battlegrounds, aren't they?

But Martin dwelt in patience and in peace.

Faith and trust and farming were all the same to him. He read the weather as humbly as he read the Bible, seeking what to obey. My father-in-law was an obedient man. This is the crux of the matter: his obedience was the source of his peace, because the one whom he obeyed was God of all, and by obedience Martin became one with all that God had made, as powerful himself and as infinite as the Deity with whom he was joined.

Daily the farmer did more than just read and interpret the rhythms of creation (though these he did do, these he had to do, for his vocation depended upon such readings, or the farm would fail). As Prince and Silver heeded their master's mute commands, so the farmer also obeyed the natural signs of the Creator, entering into communion with God Almighty.

So here was Martin's peace: not in striving for greatness but in recognizing who is truly great. And this was his peace: by a glad humility to do the will of the Creator.

And so this was Martin's peace as well: to bear the image of God into creation.

Have you know known? Has it not been told you from the beginning? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretched out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them like a tent to dwell in....

Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power, not one is missing.

April 30, 1995:

No, but one is missing! Martin is missing. My father-in-law himself. He is gone. This man is dead.

I'm driving south on Interstate 57 with a clenched jaw and stark knuckles. Angry. Anxious, really. It's nearly nighttime. South of Kankakee the Illinois farmland stretches east and west of me. More than I seeing it, I feel the cultivated earth as a swelling tide, a heaving of massy weight as of an ocean. It will fall on me soon, and I will drown.

I am about forty five minutes from the funeral home in Watseka where Thanne is, and my children. And Martin in a box.

I'm driving at sixty-five miles per hour precisely. The speed limit. Cars rip past me, fire-eyed enemies, each one triumphing over me in my pickup. This particular obedience is not my habit. But I'm torn between desires to be with Thanne and never to be near the casket of my father. So I'm going at a grim, calculated slowness.

Death and the empty skies consume me now.

I hate this pickup truck! A beaten '84 Chevy S-10, the seat's too low and too hard. It wasn't made for distance driving. My back is killing me. Oh, God, I want to howl! To howl at you!

Because all our human limitations may be made easy in obedience--all, Sir, but this last one: death!

I gnash my teeth. I roll down my window and weep with the frustration of it all. Martin is not here! I can do nothing about that! This single, final limit makes every other limitation insupportable! And God's infinitude becomes my hell, for it makes my smallness burn like a flesh afire.

I have already left the Interstate. I'm driving east on highway 24, approaching state highway 49. The night his hugely black, endlessly empty above my little

vehicle, though once I took the farmer's daughter for rides on county roads nearby, and then the nights were filled with delicious mystery.

I had a VW convertible in those days. When the night wind grew chilly, Ruthanne would draw her knees up to her breast and pull the sweatshirt down over all to her ankles. That tender gesture stole my heart; her easy intimacy made me a citizen of the night and all that countryside. But there was no death in those days.

The parking lot is full. So I pull out again. I park on a side street and walk back. The funeral home spills light from various windows. I can hear a hubbub within.

I enter at the side of the building, artificial light, heat, a human humidity.

In the hallway I hang up my jacket. With slow steps I move to the viewing room. Martin's name and the dates that round his life are on a framed placard: 1900 to 1995. There is a birthday and a deathday.

I shift my sight to the room and look through the doorway. Many people are sitting. I recognize Thanne's sisters, her brothers.

And then, astonishingly, here is Thanne standing directly before me, looking up into my face.

My wife, my wife: are we okay together?

Her countenance wears a pleasant expression. She has not been crying. She touches my cheek. This is how Thanne will remove dried patches of shaving cream. It's also how she indicates to me by feel what she sees by sight: my face does not wear a pleasant expression. Yes. I know how gaunt and anxious I am, my face and my spirit, both.

Thanne takes my hand.

"Come," she says gently. She leads me into the wide viewing room. People glance my way, acknowledge my arrival. They sit on folding chairs all around the walls. Others stand in knots of conversation.

There is the casket, at the far end surrounded by a jungle of flowers. It has the appearance of an altar in church. No one is near it now. We approach, still hand in hand. The room seems (can this be?) to hush a little. I feel a general expectancy. But my role among the Bohlmann's is of no greater stature than anyone else's. In fact, this hush tightens my stomach even more than it was. I don't like to be on display. No emotion could possibly be natural and easy under scrutiny.

But Thanne continues forward to the casket, drawing me with her.

Behind the casket's linen, I see that great sail of a nose now rise up. Yes, it is Martin whom I'm coming to see. Yes: and there is his cantankerous hair. Even in death those spikes will not lie down. His eyebrows, too, are great sprouts of hair. His eyes are closed. His bunched cheeks are slightly rouged.

Suddenly Thanne lets a little giggle escape her lips. The sound of it tingles inside of me. She's laughing? But then I see the farmer's mouth, and I understand

her immediately and completely. Sticking straight up from the corner of his lips, causing a little grin to pool there, is a toothpick, straight, bold, erect.

Thanne tries to whisper in my ear, "The mortician..."

But the whisper becomes a squeal: "Oh, Wally," she squeals with perfect clarity, "the mortician is mortified!" And then she can't help it. She breaks out in laughter.

That laughter kills me. I mean, it kills my silly anger; I and glance at Thanne's bright, wet eyes and burst into laughter, too.

Martin doesn't move; but his face is not offended by the hilarity, and besides, he was never a talky man. And here are my children, gathering, grinning, all four of them. And now I know what the whole room was anticipating: my taking the last step, my joining them, too.

And so I know exactly what happened after lunch on Friday, April 18, 1995.

Martin Bohlmann, having finished his meal, popped a toothpick into his mouth. He wasn't about to read his devotions. Rather, he was about to do them, devoutly and well.

And though he'd mostly been bound to a wheelchair, the farmer got up nevertheless, and pushed that chair aside and strolled out the door and into the fields west of his dwellings. Twilight. Farther and farther west the old man walked, until he came to a place of pausing. He tucked his hands under the bib of coveralls and gazed extremest west and listened to the deepest rhythms of the universe.

Yes, and I know what happened then. In his own good time, Martin Bohlmann knelt on one knee and scooped up a handful of the black earth and brought it to his face and smelled in it its readiness for plowing and for planting.

A springtime breeze got up and blew. And when at last my father-in-law allowed the soil sift from his hands into the wind, why, it was himself that blew forth, ascending. Here was the dust of his human frame and the lightsome stuff of his spirit.

This, then, I know as well as I know any other thing: even his death was an obedience.

Martin died, therefore, in a perfect peace.

Walt Wangerin
April 28, 1995

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