

Where Paradise Lay

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by JOE WILKINS APRIL 8, 2020



Illustration: Margot Glass, *Grasses*, 2019. Graphite on paper, 12 x 16 inches. Summer 2019 issue.

To honor the passing of legendary singer John Prine, we are sharing this previously print-only essay “Where Paradise Lay” by Joe Wilkins (Coda, September/October 2014).

Bright, high-running clouds, the dry taste of grass and August blackberries — you’re on your way back from the park when you see a hand-lettered sign for a farmers’ market. It’s nearly the kids’ nap time, your wife’s not sure what in the world you’re doing, but you crank the wheel anyway and drive on down the old two-lane through bands of tree shadow, turn where the cardboard arrow tells you to turn, and pull to a dusty stop by the old whitewashed Grange Hall. Your son and daughter, at four and two, are just old enough to wonder, ceaselessly, why. You don’t have an answer. You just haul them out of the car, and while your wife shakes her head and wanders one way, you take in each of your hands your children’s hot, small hands and wander the other way through the ring of ramshackle stands.

The market’s not really that much, jars of chowchow, and stones painted to look like ladybugs, though your son and daughter find a spread of tomatoes red and gold and green as dreams and eat a couple right there as you wait to pay, the juice running and shining on their chins. There’s a band playing over by the stand of cedars at the edge of the lot, and you pull your children along that way. The chalked sign by the coffee-can tip jar says it’s Johnny’s Country Band, though you can’t tell which one is Johnny until this particular country waltz waltzes itself out, and the stringy old guy in the stonewashed jean jacket — dirty ball cap, droopy mustache, his voice like a box of rocks — apologizes for the empty drum kit in the back and jokes about the fecklessness of percussionists in general.

Tomatoes half-eaten in their small hands, your wide-eyed son and daughter are still as saplings — is this their first concert? You’re not sure — and now your wife is here too, squeezing your hand, as an older couple settles into the pair of plastic chairs next to your children, the woman with her tight curls and cream sweater, the man wearing a white felt cowboy hat and pressed snap shirt, his Wranglers that break-of-day blue, the man smiling now at your shy daughter, asking for a bite of her tomato, a palsy trembling his lips and chin. Oh, no matter that you are a thousand miles from your high-plains home, this man reminds you— suddenly, mightily, as if you have been hit by a good, hard wind — of all the cowboys and beet farmers you knew in your youth, all the stern, kind, uncouth ranchmen who fathered you after your own father went ahead and died.

And as the first dusty chords of John Prine’s “Paradise” drift and eddy, as the old cowboy winks at your daughter and rises and offers his hand to his wife — as with the practiced and stunning grace of years they turn one another through the cool breath of cedars and the devastating light of late summer — you begin to understand why you might be here at the Grange Hall this morning: “And daddy won’t you take me back to Muhlenberg County,” Johnny sings, that box of rocks really rattling now, “Down by the Green River where Paradise lay / Well, I’m sorry my son, but you’re too late in asking / Mister Peabody’s coal train has hauled it away . . .”

You stagger. Go just plain woozy in the knees.

Oh, it has something to do with how in Prine’s song the son asks the father to take him back home, and the father tells the son it’s too late, and the thing is your father died so young you never, ever remember asking a question he answered. It has something to do with watching, the last time you were back home, all those prehistoric coal trucks rumble out of the Bull Mountains and then reading in the newspaper of plans for another strip mine across the Yellowstone. It has something to do with your son and daughter rising now and taking each other’s tomato-streaked hands and dancing — Jesus, there they are, with that old couple, dancing in the gravel. O

Joe Wilkins grew up in eastern Montana, where he spent his summers working on a wheat and cattle ranch in the Bull Mountains. He is the author of a memoir, *The Mountain and the Fathers*, winner of a GLCA New Writers Award and a finalist for the Orion Book Award, and three collections of poetry, including, *When We Were Birds*, winner of the Oregon Book Award in Poetry. His debut novel, *Fall Back Down When I Die*, praised as “remarkable and unforgettable” in a starred review at *Booklist*, is now available from Little, Brown. This past academic year, he and his family lived deep in the North Country, where he served as the Viebranz Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at St. Lawrence University.

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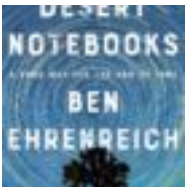
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