

Jane Brox
from *Clearing Land*

Our signals from the past are very weak, and our means for recovering their meaning still are most imperfect. The beginnings are much hazier than the endings, where at least the catastrophic action of external events can be determined. . . Now and in the past, most of the time the majority of people live by borrowed ideas and upon traditional accumulations. Yet at every moment the fabric is being undone and a new one is woven to replace the old, while from time to time the whole pattern shakes and quivers, settling into new shapes and figures. These processes of change are all mysterious uncharted regions where the traveler soon loses direction and stumbles in darkness. . . .

--George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*

Horseman, pass by I used to whisper as the sirens made their long way down the road from the center of town. Now: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven gone out of a generation--my father, both his sisters, four of his six brothers. They had possessed a collective strength that gave definition not only to the family but to the farm itself, to the hundred acres of woods and streambeds, fields and orchards we have called our that lie across the worn coastal hills north of Boston. I know time itself helped to establish a sense of security, time in place, time and a generation's fidelity to each other. Even as six of the brothers married and moved on and the care of the farm passed to my own father, there was a particular bond among all those siblings that lasted their entire lives. In their later, quieter years, though the farmhouse was no longer the gathering place for the extended family at holidays, all of my uncles were still in and out of it, often almost daily. In the years before his death my father lingered long at the table by the kitchen window, exchanging the news of the family, of the day. I can see him there still, bent over the local paper, talking with his sister Bertha.

That no one in the family lives in the old farmhouse anymore may be the strangest thing about all these passings. For almost a hundred years its nineteenth-century forthrightness had been at our center, and had so worked into our imaginations that, more frequently than I look at any of the pictures of my ancestors, I contemplate the 1901 photograph of the farmhouse with its linkage of buildings: summer kitchen, carriage house, barn. As I study the blades of the windmill above the roofline and imagine the silo just out of the frame, the world appears sturdy against a backdrop of sober daylight. A patient horse is swaddled in ropes and harnesses. Men and women look up from their work in the muddy yard. *However it is in some other world*, their uncomplaining gazes seem to say, *I know this is the way in ours*. Farming in New England was already in decline, with woods growing up on long-cleared lands as the mill cities and prospects to the west pulled people away from this countryside, but it was still the common life, wide open under a big sky, and one farm's holdings adjoined those of the next and the next all down the road- pasture and field and orchard extending as far as the eye could see.

Scrawled across the back of my copy of the photograph in my father's hand is--*Farm 1901*, so for a long time I'd imagined it to depict a moment just after my grandparents took possession of the place, after their immigration from Lebanon, after peddling wares in upstate New York, and briefly enduring tenement life in the city of Lawrence six miles to the east of the farm. Even when I learned that it actually captures the last days of ownership of the family

who'd lived there before my grandparents, it hardly seemed to matter. My family had simply taken over a way of life that had been accumulating for centuries, and there was little enough difference between last days and first.

In the years after my grandparents came into possession of the farm, the windmill blew down, the silo burned, but one after another child was born, the size of the milk herd increased, and their halting English became more certain. In time, teams of ordinary horses gave way to tractors as the farm steadied into the one I knew where irises and roses flourished at the fence, full-grown shade trees tossed high above the roof peak in the storms, and my entire extended family—thirty, forty of us—would gather at the farmhouse during the holidays. Aunts, uncles, cousins crowded the kitchen and dining room. We ate Lebanese *kibbeh* and stuffed grapeleaves, we tore off pieces of Syrian bread to scoop up *hummous bi tahini*. The heat chuffed, the warm air was filled with voices while beyond us, beyond the watery old glass of the farmhouse windows, the world was bright with the start New England winter.

That the farmhouse remained for so long at the center of our world surely had to do with the fact that my aunts, Bertha and Del, who never married, lived there all their lives, along with my bachelor Uncle Joe. My brothers and made cousins have little anecdotes even now about Joe. He taught them how to check a tire for leaks and how to change the oil in a truck. He stood over them as they planted the tulip bulbs in the farmhouse yard under his direction: “Is that hole four inches deep?” “Four inches,” any boy would affirm. “Bulb on its side?” “Bulb on its side.” But it’s Bertha and Del whom I recall most often. When I was very young the farmhouse had been—like the meadow, the brook, the woods—one of the stations of my childhood. I would go there almost daily with one or three or four of my girl cousins who lived near me. We tracked in mud, we tracked in snow. We spoke of them—Auntie Bertha and Auntie Del—in the same breath, as if one word. It seemed all the noise there ever was we brought with us into the kitchen as we settled in the rockers and easy chairs or around the table by the east windows where we found ourselves bent over Scrabble with Bertha or searching through the puzzle pieces laid out and partially interlocked. The unentered rooms, made more still by our games in the kitchen, were sometimes peopled by the recollection of evenings when there were so many for supper they had to eat in shifts at the oak table—a silver cup full of silver spoons at its center—or of the living room thick with cigar smoke when the brothers had brought friends home after a late night out.

The apples blossomed, the grass dried in the August heat, my aunts’ attention continued to turn to the sound of a car pulling into the drive, to the tenor of their brothers’ voices hailing them as they walked up the porch stairs. In time my own world became crowded with life beyond the farm, with friends from high school and dreams of going away—it’s hard to remember when I hadn’t been intent on going away. I bent to my books during those late teenage nights, my imagining and hopes running on faster than the frequencies on the radio dial I flipped through when I was restless: static, voices, snatches of song, everything in the world there if you could just tune in, if you could just settle on the right place . . . My visits to my aunts became less spontaneous then, more brief and formal, made dutifully, prodded by my parents. I sat stiffly by the window, feeling the stillness of the house now that the games had fallen away. The family pride—“you don’t act that way . . .” “Remember who you are. . .” —began to feel far too confining, and I tried not to stir it up as Del sat there rocking and Bertha knitted panels in patterns of cable and box stitches to make afghans for each departing niece to take away to college. I wondered about their single lives, their devotion to the family, the protection and regard of their brothers, the way you wonder about those flocks of swifts you see

in late August, readying themselves, making their glinting turns in the turbulent air—are they helped by the wind or made helpless by it?

“I’d sell pies and ice cream,” Bertha recalled, her needles clicking into the quiet as she told me about the tea room her father had built for her to run just across the road from the farmhouse. She elaborated on the story during later visits: “We called it The Red Wing—everyone along the road would stop in. . .” I can still hear her mild, soft chuckle, and a final comment: “Anything to keep me home.” Then she turned again to the work in her lap which by then may even have been my own afghan in shades of blue that I was to drape over myself as I read poetry and studies ecosystems, Shakespeare, and Russian history in my cinderblock dorm room almost two hundred miles away.