Universal Landscape in Will Weaver's *Red Earth, White Earth*

by

Jill B. Gidmark

In the compellingly beautiful and ultimately tragic film *The Field*, based on the 1965 play of the same name by Irishman John B. Keane, Bull McCabe is obsessed with the land, specifically the smallish plot that he and his son Tadgh rent near the sea. He and his father's father's fathers have fertilized it with rich seaweed and coddled and cultivated it with industry and love. Bull McCabe believes that there is a law stronger than common law, the law of the land, and that no cleric's collar, civil uniform, or weapon can protect his ancestors. In fact, though , it is the nightly terrorizing of the land's owner, a defenseless widow in her tenth year of mourning, by McCabe's on that drives her to leave the region and put the field up for public auction. Tadgh is not his honorable father's son—he lusts after Katey, the tinker's daughter by day, harasses the widow by night, and has no love for "the field" or any other land. Though no local farmer would dare bid against the Bull at the auction, a young Yankee, played with appropriate Fitzgeraldean swagger by Tom Berenger and ostensibly on the prowl for his Irish roots, can top any bid the Bull could possibly scrape together. The pretense of "roots" masks the Yankee's real motivation—to cement over the field and produce a superhighway system that would make him a fortune. The Bull's obsessive lust for the land and his rage at obstacles that come between consume, finally, the lives of the Yankee, Bull's two sons, and Bull himself.

At a remove of an ocean, half a continent, and half a century, Minnesota novelist Will Weaver likewise produced in his fortieth year a call of the rural land no less compelling than John Keane's. It is a call borne of Weaver's own history with the farmland of northern Minnesota—a saga of working the land, leaving the land, returning, and sorting out its place in the lives of himself and his protagonist.

Growing up on his grandfather's farm near Park Rapids, Minnesota equipped Weaver with the skills and experiences that drive protagonist Guy Pehrsson on his grandfather's farm. The farm Guy lives in and works is on the White Earth Indian Reservation which, along with both subtle and violent clashes between white farmers and red Indians for control of the land, lends the novel its title. The earth is the central concept in the novel, and what drives the concept forward is racial conflict for its possession.

Guy himself is a microcosm of such conflict, descended from an alcoholic father and Bible-toting grandfather who farm in Indian land (except on Sunday) but who can't stand the sight of an Indian, and descended as well from a sympathetic and courageous woman who leaves her husband to live

with those Indians, specifically to move in with Tom Little Wolf, Guy's best boyhood friend.

The novel's exposition is rife with a personalized racial conflict that plays itself out against a backdrop of the ongoing real-life struggle on the White Earth Reservation for land, the whites seeking to retain reservation land they had purchased in good faith and are now farming, the Indians asserting that those titles are clouded and they have been defrauded of land rightfully theirs, In 1889, the Nelson Act divided reservation land into allotments of between 40-160 acres for each Indian and also, unfortunately, allowed for the sale of that land to non-Indians. Within 40 years, 80 percent of the allottees had lost their land, receiving only 10 percent of what the land was worth, until today only 1/3 of 1 percent of the originally allotted lands are in Indian hands. Weaver's book was published the year of the 1986 government proposal to solve the dispute, but in fact the white farmers didn't get their titles cleared, and Indian heirs, when they can be identified, have been having a difficult time claiming their settlement.

When he was 18 and his father was incapacitated by an alcohol dependency, Guy bargained with his grandfather to farm the land. "Two thirds, one third. And no Sundays" (110). It is flax that Guy chooses to sow on the farmstead's hundred acres, much to his grandfather's disapproval; that was not a crop anyone in Becker county ever grew. But Guy remembered open fields of flax near Winnipeg he had seen while visiting his mother's relatives. He had dug up a sheaf of the grain still in its Canadian soil and kept it in his trunk to remind him of what he saw:

> . . .at sundown. . .a great field of grain in brilliant blue bloom. The field was so long its far end flowed into the sky. The blue grain matched the color of the air. He could not tell where the grain ended and where the sky began (90).

When Guy's thriving crop is ruined by heavy rain at just the wrong time and when a hired combine crew arrive at the right time but aren't permitted to harvest because of Guy's no-Sunday promise to Helmer, Guy strikes out in disgust for California. His failure and despair drive him to sever himself from the land, and, though Guy doesn't recall it, we remember his mother's earlier prophetic admonition,

> [D]on't buy land. . .The land hooks people, especially farm boys like yourself. . .You take a tractor and plow to it, turn a green field back and then make it green again, you start to feel powerful. I can see it in the way men talk. They talk like they control it, like it's their slave. . .But that's not true at all. The land controls you. It controls everything (118).

Guy dodges the land for 12 years. As an entrepreneur in the Silicon Valley,

he makes it big with electronic circuit boards, drinks fine Chablis, dates a Stanford English department graduate student, and subscribes to *Rose Grower's Monthly*, a lifestyle that rural Minnesota could hardly have prepared him for. Neither is he prepared for the wobbly pencilled message from his grandfather that opens the book, "Trouble here. Come home when you can" (11). After fifty hours of driving, a quarter gram of cocaine, three speeding tickets and tapes of Leo Kottke and Joseph Haydn, Guy is two miles away from his grandfather's farm. He senses. . .the great weight of the land all around him.

> . .He suddenly understood that farmers spoke in short sentences or none at all because the land weighed down their voices. The land took away speech because it was always bigger than words to describe it (144).

The weight of the land presses Guy now at his return as it had when he had left. He was freed of its pull then by leaving, and when the land surrounds him once again, a second time he is able to release himself, and though the wrestling is difficult, it enables him to exorcise childhood ghosts, overcome adult hangups, and set much to rights.

For one thing, his return reestablishes a close bond with his mother. In leaving her husband, her house, and the farm, and assuming Indian allegiances, Madeline models the freedom of place and of spirit that Guy only mimes. His father and grandfather are closely identified with the land—like Bull McCabe, they possess it, cultivate it, and cannot see beyond its productivity and its demands. Madeline prefers the forest to the rolling prairie and sheds the land like a restrictive skin. The polarity is clearly drawn.

Reaching toward his mother during their first sight if each other in a dozen years, Guy simultaneously feels "old blood" restraining his arms. The old blood is his father and grandfather and ancestors even farther back, he intuits, "people who worked the land. If right now he spaded up a hole and put in his hand, in the cool earth he could feel them shifting, turning; hear them whispering to him" (165). But Guy does embrace his mother and defy the land's hold:

> Right now the old blood was not so strong.
> It was not strong because. . .he had been away from the land for a long time. He had broken its hold. Now he controlled the river of his own heart. (165)

Guy's persistent stance is at a distance from the land. Like the Yankee in Keane's Ireland, Guy makes a trip back to his roots but has no intention of becoming rooted. And detachment from land also implies detachment from people. The postcard he buys to send his Stanford girlfriend is an aerial view

of his town of Flatwater: "From the great height you could make out occasional tiny tractors and cars. But no people" (175). Guy becomes attracted to a senator's attorney sent to the reservation to placate angry white constituents threatened by Indian land claims, but Guy evades psychological intimacy with her.

Guy resists close human relationships because "people were always crazier and more dangerous than the land. . .[H]e stayed apart from people so their craziness would not touch him. . .Farmers chose land but the land wore you down" (225-226). But Guy determines that his return to Minnesota won't imply that he is choosing the land. There was just something he needed to do here, a conflict to resolve. "He came to understand that if he left [Flatwater] now, he would be no better than the silent fields around him" (227).

Even when the land issue accelerates legalistically and violently, Guy tries to be objective. On one hand, he doesn't want to see his grandfather lose title to the farm, and moreover he is beginning to turn his father's destructive behavior around. More compelling on the other hand are his mother and Tom Little Wolf, law school graduate and now president of the White Earth Chippewa/Anishinabe Tribal Council. When Guy admits to his grandfather that he owns only a house and a small yard in California, Helmer is confused, "A man should have land. . .What would a man do without land?" (245) That the answer of the white farmer differs drastically from that of the Indian symbolizes a conflict deeper than the physical features of the land.

In *Clouded Land*, Randy Croce's excellent documentary of the White Earth dispute that has aired several times on public television, an Anishinabe youth asks, "If you live on the land and belong on the land, who owns the land is a spiritual matter. Indian people don't think of the land belonging to them, they think of them belonging to the land." Rather than actively farm the land as the whites do, Weaver's Indians would plant the fields back to pine and the lakes to wild rice—the land is a spiritual identity and solace for them. The government's public offer of $12 million to the Indians to give up their claims is unceremoniously rejected: "You can't eat money! You can't walk on money! You can't hunt money!" (261) The verbal rejection gives rise to physical combat and loss of life in the novel: "The blood was a dark red throw rug on the pale blond stubble of the field. Red earth, white earth" (287).

Plowing his grandfather's fields the weeks he is back in Minnesota, Guy's "heart starts to beat faster" (294). The "old blood" is strong. Helmer accidentally dies, and intentionally wills the farm to Guy. By transferring the title to Martin, Guy invests in his father self-respect and a livelihood, motivation, we are to assume, for a drug-free future. By the time Guy returns to California he had made a choice that does not include the land, but his meddling with the land and the people of his past has liberated him emotionally. For the first time, he is able to establish honest human

relationships. He can admit that the graduate student has less allure for him than the senator's attorney. Weathering personal and ethnic crises has been cathartic, and Guy reenters his California present with control and freedom.

Gregory Morris, in examining *Red Earth, White Earth* for his article "The Agrarian Impulse in Contemporary American Fiction," asserts that, for Guy, "Reclamation of past and land fails, as if politics were too strong a medicine for matters of spirit and desire" (194). For me, the ending of the novel is much more sanguine. What Guy has reclaimed is more important to him personally than land, though land has been the catalyst for the renewed spirit and the desire that he comes away with, to say nothing of his mother, who accompanies him to California after Tom's death. In the renewed bond between son and mother, the circle of the past has successfully closed for Guy as it has for Martin with the ownership of the farm.

This novel of getting in touch with on's roots is for Guy as much a salvation and a rebirth as it was for Keane's Yankee a damnation and a death. The land itself is, finally, inconsequential to both Guy and the Yankee, but it proved appropriately instrumental in ways they could never have imagined.

WORKS CITED

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