

S U N F L O W E R S



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The Godless Sky

Airborne, I view the flood.
Flattened wheat
blackens in the heat
or smothers under mud.

In the Piper's path I spot
the farmstead
on the home spread
my father's father bought.

An uncle stauncher than I
bears the cross
of another loss
under the godless sky.

It's hard to imagine a horizon as flat as a ruled line unless you've sailed far out to sea or driven Interstate 29 along the Red River of the North. Planed by an Ice Age lake, our Valley extends hundreds of miles along the border of Minnesota and the Dakotas, widening from thirty to ninety miles as it drops imperceptibly northward toward Winnipeg. To our east rise the maple- and pine-clad hills of northern Minnesota. Buffalo country lies to the west, the rolling rangeland that divides our Canadian watershed from the Missouri. The soil there is arid and alkaline. Eastward the soils vary from peat bogs to glacial till, sandy and stony. But the Valley is black loam. In a good year it's the most productive land in the world. In bad years it's a desert, or a lake.

I was three years out of college when I witnessed the flood of 1975. Our floods usually come in spring, when rains and snowmelt coincide. This one was different. It started on a muggy July afternoon as thunderheads blew up over my grandfather's farm northeast of Moorhead, Minnesota. The storm grew until it covered three counties, and it continued all evening, with hail big enough to kill cattle and tornadoes that tore down barns and silos. The benchland east of the Valley shed the deluge like a roof, and floodwaters guttered onto the farms below, gouging huge gullies in the fields.

I stayed high and dry in town, but the storm nearly wiped me out anyway. As crops rotted in the swamped countryside, my livelihood went with them. In a farm economy even the townspeople take their living from the land. You might think I would want nothing to do with farming after an experience like that. But the 1975 flood was only a bad memory in the drought year of 1976, when there were dust storms and locusts to worry about. Then came 1977, with a bumper crop and hungry Soviets bidding up our prices. I was in clover again. Bust and boom seem all too natural to a homesteader's grandson.

Razing the Woodlot

Here stands the grove our tenant plans to fell.
The homesteaders who planted this tree claim
fled North Dakota when the Dust Bowl came.
Their foursquare farmhouse is a roofless shell;
their tended shelterbelt, a den for fox
and dumpground for machinery and rocks.

The woodlot seeds its pigweed in our loam,
and windstorms topple poplars on the field;
but for a few wasted acres' yield
we'll spare the vixen and her cubs their home
and leave unburied these decaying beams
to teach us the temerity of dreams.

E. J. Murphy was born in upstate New York in 1856, son of a prosperous, second-generation Irish-American farmer. But home was hardscrabble country—rocky, steep, and almost as exhausted as Ireland. At age twenty E. J. went to Wisconsin to seek his fortune in the lumber camps. Later he joined the railroad and arrived with the locomotive at the opening of the Red River Valley. Smitten with this vast swale of loamy, rock-free prairie, he determined to homestead his own land. Back in the camps he accumulated a stake of capital and lumber sufficient for the venture. Heading west again, he purchased a wagon, oxen, seed, and a few rudimentary implements at the thriving rail town of Fargo. He then trekked twenty miles northeast, drove his stakes into a quarter section of prairie, and broke the virgin bluestem with a two-bottom plough. With his imported lumber he built the first frame house in treeless Felton Township.

E. J. had ten children by his first wife, who died (probably of exhaustion) in the fifteenth year of their marriage. When the widower was elected Felton's Superintendent of Schools, he hired a comely schoolmarm thirty-two years his junior, whom he soon married. In the post-war inflationary boom, Grandfather raised a new family on the homestead, which he had leveraged to three thousand acres, emulating the bonanza farmers he'd envied in his youth, and provoking in turn the envy of neighbors with eighty acres and a mule.

The first exuberant wave of settlement had crested long before, but high grain prices sustained large-scale farming despite falling yields and expensive transport. In E. J.'s heyday, disputes between farm cooperatives and the railroads engendered a political movement, the so-called "Non-Partisan League," enshrining a partnership between farmers and the state that now seems increasingly burdensome to all parties. The League disbanded when land values soared to \$250 an acre and wheat brought \$4 a bushel. Amid such prosperity the conflicts of the past seemed moot until over-production, Black Tuesday, the Smoot-Hawley tariffs, and the ensuing worldwide economic crash dethroned King Wheat. In 1932 the price of a bushel dropped to 14 cents. Felled by a stroke, E. J. left a bundle of debts to his young wife and sons.

Armed only with a parka and a teaching certificate, seventeen-year-old Tessie Buckley had taken her first job in a hamlet near the Canadian border. Bypassed by the railroad, that village no longer exists; but my brother and I have often hunted geese in its vicinity. There Tessie drilled *McGuffey's Reader* into German-speaking youths whose farmer fathers, admiring her lustrous hair, called her "die kleine rote Fuchsen," the little red fox.

Later Tessie took degrees in English and history, unheard-of credentials for a farm girl in 1912. When she assumed a new post in Felton, Tessie saw E. J. sweep into the schoolyard with his fine quarterhorses and pedigreed hounds. How could she refuse an Irish suitor in this valley of Scandinavians?

Tessie had three children before her husband died, broken by the Depression and the specter of insolvency. My father Vince was the eldest. The second child, Vivian, was paralyzed by an incompetent surgeon two years after her father's death, and she was to be Tessie's burden and inseparable companion for nearly half a century. The youngest, Dan, went to war in 1943. Shot down and presumed lost over Germany, Dan survived to farm the sole section his brother and mother had salvaged from E. J.'s estate.

I was born in Hibbing, Minnesota, during the blizzard of January 10, 1951, one of the worst to hit the Midwest since the notorious blizzard of 1888, which struck on the day of Tessie's birth, exactly sixty-three years before. In our parts children are conceived at the first thaw and born in blizzards.

The cycle of generations runs long in the Murphy family. I was Tessie's first grandchild. We were extremely close, and I was steeped in her tales of struggle. Most children told of the bad old days squirm and close their ears; but I listened, and those stories haunt me still.

The Blighted Tree

"Spare that sucker at the root,"
she cautioned as I felled her tree.
Half-blind and eighty-three,
she planned to watch that sprout
blooming and bearing fruit.

Hardy enough to outlast me,
humming with bees and memories,
this offshoot of a blighted tree
spreads its flowery boughs
outside Tessie's shuttered house.

After World War II, my father left the farm and worked his way through college. Earning a master's degree in speech at the University of Minnesota, he joined the Minneapolis faculty as an assistant professor. There he met a beauty from Duluth, an aspiring actress who took the leads in university theatrical productions. His fate was sealed when he saw her play Lady Macbeth. To this day he looks at her and mutters: "Screw your courage to the sticking point."

Mother's prospective career was derailed when she bore five children in six years. In retrospect her sacrifice and devotion seem so daunting to us all that none of us has emulated her. Like so many of our fellow Boomers, we have small families or none; and we put our careers first. Yet we sometimes wonder what we're missing.

Rather than try to support a large family on an academic's salary, Dad decided to go into business. He quit his job at Hibbing Junior College and signed on with Connecticut General, then a thriving and respectable life insurance company, not the spendthrift colossus it has become as Cigna Corp. After a stint at the C. G. office in Duluth, Dad moved us to his home territory—Moorhead, Minnesota, a town of thirty thousand just across the winding Red River from its larger neighbor, Fargo. It was a pleasant place, modestly prosperous, its businesses based on the juncture of roads and rails at the center of the Valley. Over the decades since E. J.'s day, homesteaders' elms had grown into an urban forest, breaking the prairie winds and hiding the emptiness of the horizon.

Here Dad opened an office of his own, where he showed farmers and business owners how to protect their heirs from the claims of creditors and the IRS. Each summer at our lake cottage, forty miles to the east, Mother staged performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with her offspring, and in the winter she organized children's theater companies to tour tiny North Dakota towns. Though I inherit my passion for literature from both sides of the family, it was my mother who introduced me to Shakespeare at the age of seven.

The Sage Hen

To slake her fledglings' thirst
she dowsed her downy breast
and flew through blowing dust
from the river to her nest.

Now she is distressed,
always dreading the worst
for the flighty brood she nursed
because we do not nest.

After four years of college on the East Coast and several more as a trainee agent at C. G.'s Minneapolis office, I returned home and joined Dad's business. In 1978 we worked for Ivan Miller, who at age forty-eight was one of the wealthiest farmers in North Dakota. We persuaded him to gift his three sons large parcels of his rapidly appreciating land, and to discharge the incompetent bank trustee who would have managed his estate in the event of his death. He also assisted his sons in purchasing a substantial life insurance policy. Two years later he was struck by a loadout chute and smothered under tons of sunflowers.

There is a toughness and single-mindedness in farmers unlike any I've seen. It's not easy to persuade them of anything. During the winter before Ivan's death, I tried to get him to buy more insurance, arguing that the continued inflation of land values could raise the death taxes imposed on his heirs. At first he waved me off, saying: "If they tried to sell my land, they'd break the market and there wouldn't be any taxes." Later, when he'd looked over my calculations, he agreed to buy when the wheat was green. He didn't have that much time.

But the sons inherited the father's toughness along with his land. Once Ivan had purchased a new farm and sent his youngest son, Jon, who was only nine at the time, to watch the crew sent out to work it. The men, who were mostly Ivan's age, went to the wrong farm. An argument ensued between Jon and the crew. Ivan came by and was horrified to see four tractors sitting idle. He roundly chastised Jon for failing to manage the men.

Such an upbringing girded the young Millers for confronting the IRS. After a protracted wrangle, they emerged victorious with their farms intact. The eldest, Kelly, told us on a pheasant hunt: "When Dad died, the rumor was that we would have to sell half our land, but thanks to you two, we have a lot of disappointed neighbors."

The following spring Kelly invited me to join him in a partnership and purchase a farm on the higher ground west of the Valley, where land prices were lower. Thus began my friendship with a man whose crimes against the language conceal one of the shrewdest minds I've ever encountered. When wheat prices crashed in 1985, Kelly said: "The farmers are totally diswilderred." Kelly cash-rented his first farm at age twelve, bought his first section at sixteen, and has experienced enough diswilderment to be a consummate pessimist.

Kelly's Lament

I fear for my spring wheat.
Will it grow red and tall
 or head out small?
Will it succumb to heat,
 drought and dust
 or rot and rust?
Will it be flooded out
or flattened by the hail?
 I am beset
 with doubt and debt.
Surely the wheat will fail.

In the dry and windy May of 1982, the soil blew away as tractors worked it. Tillage practices had changed little since the Dust Bowl. Too many farmers ploughed their fields to powder between crops. On the day Dad and I were to negotiate the purchase of my partnership's first farm, a wall of dust rolled over town. The cloud was electrically charged, and lightning flashed through the brown dusk at noon.

We had sought spring possession and the newly seeded crop. But the farmer demanded such a ridiculous premium for his fall tillage and spring seeding that we decided to wait out the drought and seek possession the next fall. I told the man I didn't want the crop at his price, and he angrily accused me of renegeing on a verbal agreement. Dad said: "Mister, if you're going to impugn my son's integrity, we'll adjourn this meeting to the parking lot and watch your land blow by until you choke on your own grit." The farmer was so taken aback he lowered the price by \$50,000, and the deal was done.

Our newly purchased land lay near Gwinner, North Dakota, gently rolling country some twenty miles west of the Valley's edge, at the primordial boundary between tall and shortgrass prairies. It was a chancier place to farm than the prime bottomland Kelly owned near Wahpeton. Some years the summer storms form over the rangelands beyond the Missouri and water our whole region. Other years the rains fall only to our east, over Minnesota lake country. The heavy soils of the Valley can hold enough moisture to sustain a crop through a dry spell; our western coteau with its lighter soil would not. Land prices reflected the difference. Our venture was a calculated risk.

By the time of our first harvest, I was a wreck, with a crick in my neck from scanning the sky. Kelly's burly foreman was unloading a combine as I drove into the yard. He strolled over and said with a stricken look: "Kelly's sendin' out the ploughs 'cause it don't pay to combine this junk." I nearly had a stroke, but our wheat made forty bushels while farms five miles away ran twenty.

Farming All Night

I dreamed of a lush stand of hard spring wheat
and bumper barley yields
ripening in my fields,
sunflowers blooming in the summer heat—

then came the black squalls with swaths of hail,
lodged and battered grain,
ruinous harvest rain
and flooded barley rotting in the swale.

Our second summer it scarcely stopped raining. There was a constant threat of severe weather. One swath of hail passed a mile south of our home half, smashing beans, trashing grain, and stripping corn to the stalks. Two weeks later another hailstorm totaled a fine stand of wheat right across the road from the luckiest section in the township. We didn't lose a spear.

As we walked the sodden fields in July, Kelly and I marveled at the heaviness of the heads, the thickness of the stand. In August it turned hot and dry, and the wheat was finally fit. Thirty-foot headers slashed through the straw, and the choppers screamed as they sheared and scattered the chaff. Kelly's brothers threw four of their combines into the fray, and seven green behemoths lumbered over the land—Deere 8820s, the pride of the Millers' fleet, unloading their hoppers on the run as semis roared in and out of the fields. I phoned Dad to tell him the wheat was going great but the trucks couldn't keep up. He laughed and said: "Every farmer should have your problem."

As my father knew, farming is an unpredictable and competitive business, despite all efforts to portray it as a bucolic "lifestyle." Nostalgia has its place, but a farmer who thinks he can live on it will not be farming long. The necessary concomitant of the right to succeed is the room to fail. An overpriced loan or an ill-timed delivery contract can be as devastating as a hailstorm. The marketplace prices everything, even loyalty.

Eight years after our first harvest at Gwinner, Ron Offut, owner of a dozen John Deere dealerships, visited Dave Miller's office, trying to sell fifteen combines to replace the family's aging fleet. For an account like that, Offut was ready to give a client plenty of personal attention. But over the conference line Deere's competitor, Case, made an offer Offut couldn't match. The next fall Big Red replaced Big Green on fifty-five thousand acres.

The Failure

Tractor and combine axle-deep in muck,
seedcorn and soybeans frozen in the field,
the home farm pledged against a bumper yield,
he has run out of money, time and luck.

What would his frugal Swedish forebears think
to see their hard-won holdings on the block?
There is no solace for a laughingstock
in woman's arms, religion or strong drink.

Any day now the banker will foreclose,
summon the sheriff and the auctioneers.
What will he tell his sons in twenty years?
He cannot wholly blame the early snows.

When crop prices and land values fell in the mid-1980s, we had to expand or get out of farming, so we enlisted capital contributions from three friends and our little venture grew.

Our boldest acquisition was the Femco Farm #1, once the crown jewel of an agricultural empire, with one of the largest contiguous chunks of land in the Valley. Publisher of the *Minneapolis Tribune*, Frank E. Murphy had owned a slew of farms. No relation to me, he was a lace curtain Irishman, whereas by the Thirties my kin had reverted to the potato bag variety.

Years before he was elected Governor of North Dakota, Bud Sinner (whose brother, Father Sinner, married my sister Mary to a man named Marion) told me an anecdote about Femco. There was a famous herd sire on that farm. He was a Grand Champion with a passel of blue ribbons, and the newspapers wrote about him so often that Bud's kids had nagged him all summer to show them the greatest bull in the Valley. One Sunday Bud loaded the nine of them and two dogs into a station wagon and wheeled into the Femco yard. As the children and dogs piled out of the car, Bud walked up to a gray-haired farmhand and announced: "I'd like to take my kids into the barn to see the bull." Incredulous, the old man asked: "Are all dese your kids, Mister?" Bud acknowledged it was so, and the old man said: "I bring the bull out to meet you."

Nowadays newspapers are more apt to tout the new corn plant (government-mandated ethanol for fuel) or the sugar beet mills (quota-protected domestic market) or the french-fry factory in Jamestown (site chosen after blackmail of town council for tax rebates). To stay on the land, farmers are compelled to cultivate big government and big business as carefully as we tend our fields. Ever more aware of our customers and competitors in the global market, we pray for lower interest rates, for peace in China, for drought in Ukraine.

One thing never changes. We hazard all each spring, maybe for the last time. Yet risk has its rewards, and for me there is no greater satisfaction than seeing fat partridge flush in front of the combines as the sun sinks into our wheat.

Harvest of Sorrows

When swift brown swallows
return to their burrows
and diamond willows
leaf in the hollows,
when barrows wallow
and brood sows farrow,
we sow the black furrows
behind our green harrows.

When willows yellow
in the windy hollows,
we butcher the barrows
and fallow the prairie.
The silo swallows
a harvest of sorrows;
the ploughshare buries
a farmer's worries.

Now harried sparrows
forage in furrows.
Lashing the willows,
the north wind bellows
while farmers borrow
on unborn barrows.
Tomorrow, tomorrow
the sows will farrow.