

Capella Maggiore, Italy  
Via Della Caseriné

22 January 2009  
Dolomiti chill

Lately, of these past few weeks at least, I find myself unmotivated, floating lifelessly in some amniotic gray of indifference. I entertain that perhaps an illness yet addressed lingers within, sapping all resolve. But of this dawn, I find myself at the bedroom window, as often I begin the day, greeting the robin that sings on my windowsill each morning.

But on this cold morning, as on many mornings prior, my intention is pulled from the center by the low squeak of a wheelbarrow moving ever so slowly between the vineyard rows in the property next to mine.

It is my neighbor, Guido, early to chore. Though I am enchanted by the throaty robin balanced upon the sill my eyes are pulled by the lumbering resolve of my neighbor. The seventy-two-year-old man begins the day early; carrying, digging, cutting, churning, weeding, snipping, shoveling and pausing, but he is most always in motion. His upper body bent forward, and his mud-spattered boots opened at the top, flap in rhythm with each step.

He is both protecting from winter and preparing for spring these rows of sleeping vines. In watching his endless movement, I am moved by a will personified in him; his body is shaped by decades of such rough work, and I wonder how many seasons he has trod these vineyards.

He works every day except Sunday. His grown children visit him on that day, arriving in shiny new BMWs. They are lawyers and professors and live in distant cities. I can see them playing soccer with their children on a patch of green on the far edge of Guido's property. Sons and grandsons playing and laughing while nearby the wives quietly talk beneath a white veranda; a baby held close in the arms of a silver-haired woman.

Guido walks alone through the vineyard in dark pants and a white sweater, pausing in places to look closely at the vines and the soil. He walks down every row, his hands tucked into his pants pockets as he examines all the work he has done that week, his white hair glistening beneath the winter sun. He glances back to the men and boys playing soccer; they have never entered the vineyards in the time I have lived here. Finally, he reaches the end of the vineyard and pauses at the back fence. He leans his thin arms atop and looks out at the distant fields. Each field worked by a fellow farmer or tender of the vines.

I can only guess at how differently he sees the same fields I see every day. I notice the work, the churning of the soil, a lone figure walking amongst the dark furrows followed by a dog. But I understand not this ancient exchange between man and land occurring before me.

I think the secret lies somewhere between the tended field and the man, or perhaps within their intentions. In a strange way, I can see and feel that what is occurring outside my window is a timeless accord between man and earth thousands of years in the passing.

Perhaps the modern means of endeavor are new, where the diesel tractor replaces the beast of burden, and the wheelbarrow replaces the mule. These changes matter not, the work is all. Yet, these rough and seemingly silent men depend so much upon things that lay outside their skills: the temperance of the seasons, the language of the earth, the droughts, and the floods. All these uncertainties play their part. These lone men play theirs. Somewhere in between, timelessness meets the moment and things grow anew.

In the late evenings when I am certain I will not be seen from the distant farmhouses, I walk those tended fields. I am amazed at the size of the dark clods that those machines leave in their paths and alongside these swaths of soil the gentle impress of a solitary farmer and his dog's tracks. I kneel to touch the soil. It is cool to the touch, the odor is rich, even pleasant. It is like holding some magical powder from which things come into being.

I feel that something more is present right in front of me, lingering just on the edge of my knowing, but I cannot grasp it. It is there in that silent awareness before large tracks of churned up soil beneath the darkening sky that I come close to facing the limits of my human experience; that I must call upon something, a subtler language which lies just out of reach of my command. Something sweet and wispy that can be touched but not held.

Something I can get the scent of but cannot remember moments later. Something that calls to me in the lone hour to walk in the night where men have worked during the day, to trace meaning in the simple intricacies of earth. Barren but lingering earth and step away somehow fulfilled, knowing that what I cannot grasp – grasps me. That as I kneel and gently sift this soil – I am sifted so in return.

The following morning as I watch the sun rise, Guido begins his work anew.

I feed the lone robin and watch the fields slowly tended, slowly transformed. Bundled against the chill, Guido wheels a barrow of smoldering manure to the far end of the vineyard. He begins to shovel it into the furrows he dug yesterday. I feel tired but continue to watch a man who never seems to fatigue.

I wonder at what works my hands toiled; what fields, what have I grown, what stands as testament to what my hands have tended? Can a pencil be a man's shovel? Can a pen be a rake and ink his crop? Are these lines not akin to furrows planted in similar faith and susceptible to similar fates?

Is there not also a hidden language within these lines as mysterious as the robin's song or the freshly churned field? Does not a well-tended line taste as sweet as the late summer grape? But can I at season's end take in what has been sown and reaped in some measure and have it leave upon me or anyone else a sense of fulfillment? What have these furrows of letters surrendered after so many seasons? Does the lofty testament of this harvest lie outside my life's passage?

For I have only harvested in the distant fields of abstraction. I have been as susceptible to the fate of seasons as these farmers and tenders of the vine. But in the drought, those terrible droughts, I embraced the thirst and sought not a drop elsewhere. From neither heaven nor stream. Those seasons have been lost and the bitterness of those lines like an acrid grape upon the palate, prove it so.

I am unfulfilled by the fields I have tended on my own through all the pages of the seasons; through the dots, lines, and senseless scribbles I tilled. In the end, nothing ever matched the grace of bent Guido, or the sweetness of the robin that sings outside my window every morning that I have lived here.

Do I hold a rake or a pen? Do I tend lines or furrows? Am I a farmer or far less? I cannot say, but I think when I kneel beneath the darkening sky over distant fields to sift the soil, none of this really matters.