Views From Bean Hill
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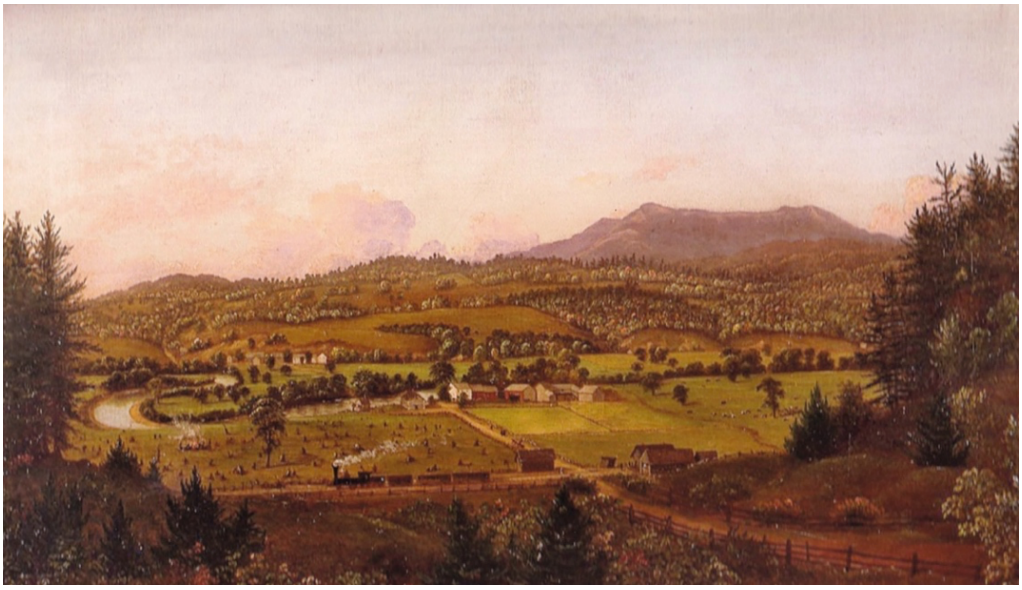

View From Bean Hill, Charles Louis Heyde, 1850

"Except for the milk trucks rumbling down Fay's Lane;
the whole house shakes from them,
little drifts of dust shake down
out of the plaster ceilings, and the bottles in the window
are set to rattling. I go out, cross the back yard, wade
the ditch and start up the hill. I do not love
the silences of mornings such as this one
which has begun with my looking at something dying
or not fully alive, in which the blood
has begun to make itself heard. I climb
through the sand of the old Champlain Sea, the Winooski
delta, watching as always for bones, stems
of sea lilies, brachiopods, finding nothing,
kicking into the clear strata of the ancient seabeds,
and come at last to the high clearing at the crown
of Bean Hill where it is cold" [2]
-Excerpt from "Interlachen" by John Engels

View from Bean Hill, by Charles Louis Heyde is a somewhat odd landscape painting—a collage of sorts, cartoonish in its inclusions—the stumps of cut trees, a smoldering burn pile, and the scraggly regrowth of white pines in the foreground from the once-denuded hillside. It isn't a

sublime landscape like that of his Hudson River contemporaries, but instead, an image of a landscape worked over. It was made during an early trip to the state in 1850 before Heyde moved to the state, married Walt Whitman's sister, and set up shop in Burlington painting landscapes full time. The painting features two of his favorite subjects, Vermont's tallest mountain—the sprawling Mount Mansfield, and the snaking path of the Winooski River, dividing his vantage point in North Williston from the cleared, or soon-to-be cleared hillsides in the towns of Essex and Jericho. His work has been described as inspired by the "broad forms of nature, demanding that his paintings be life-like; that nature appear beautiful and inspiring, and that the picture presents the moral elements of bucolic simplicity and virtue." In many ways, Heyde's vision of Vermont provides the underpinning for the agrarian sentimentality at the heart of the state's identity.

Heyde incorporates clues to the economy and ecology that dominated the region in the mid-nineteenth century. There are sheep off in a field, catching the shade of a lone pasture tree— a hangover of the feverish boom and bust of the woolen industry of the forty years prior. The majority of the countryside was cleared for pasture land, not sparing even the steepest hillsides and ridgelines. But most notable in the image is the steam engine trundling across North Williston Rd. on the Vermont Central Railway that also opened in 1850. North Williston, for a brief time in the second half of the century, became the economic hub of the entire town of Williston, including a creamery, cheese factory, grist mills, and New England's first cold storage facility (that at one point boasted a supply of 750,000 lbs. of butter).

For me, Bean Hill was the unnamed woods behind my childhood home— a brick building constructed one year after Heyde's painting from its vantage point. I grew up in a quiet (other than rush hour traffic and the dump trucks) pocket of river land between I-89 to the south and the railroad and the Winooski River (from the Abenaki word, *Winoskik,* meaning "at wild onion land") to the north. It is buffered from the historic Williston downtown by mixed agricultural land and 1990's-built suburbs, and five miles northeast of the Taft Corners shopping area (home to Walmart, Dunkin' Donuts, Texas Roadhouse, and Home Depot to name a few).

Bean Hill sits left of center. The Winooski in the foreground. Lake Champlain seen in the top right corner. View from a hot air balloon taken by Stephen Mease.

Like many New England homes, it's an amalgam of multiple buildings added together and built at different times in its history, and by various owners—the most recent is a two-car garage with solar panels built in the early 2000's by my parents (*The Barn* as my mom calls it though it only hosts the odd sick chicken) to match the Greek Revival style of the original house. A few steps from the garage, through the mud room with the door handle that sticks and a string of bells that announces your arrival, you enter a rustic but admittedly cozy home, smelling gently of mildew and woodsmoke. On rainy days, in a particular part of the house, you might catch the faint hint of litter box from our cat 20-years-deceased. Nothing is straight or level in the house— the creaking floorboards are up to 14 inches wide, the multiple layers of paint chipping to reveal the white pine boards and smattering of square forged nails that work their way up to snag holes in

socks. The horse hair plaster and lath walls in the house are covered in up to a dozen layers of wallpaper, some of which we peeled back to the substrate one summer while redoing a room (*redoing* to my family meant decluttering and applying a fresh coat of paint). Down in the dirt floor basement, two diligent sump pumps click on and off melodically, moving water that seeps up from the high water table out through pipes to the ditch that runs alongside North Williston Road, and eventually the Winooski River.

André Corboz writes that land can be thought of as a palimpsest— as if places can have their past uses washed or scraped clean from the valuable surface that lies beneath, but through that process, leave residues from past lives. Sometimes this effacement is so effective that all traces of the past are lost, but in other cases, there is someone who intentionally records the state of things—a young man settling into a river valley to paint the newly incorporated railroad, a curmudgeonly poet planting trees and plodding through his backwoods, or my father diligently taking photos of everything around him. Timothy Morton writes that "art sends us information from another place. Snow falls in a poem, but it is not really falling...Painters of paintings live in a society: perhaps the paintings are distorted records of the way that society organized its enjoyment—otherwise known as economics." I would like to present a view from Bean Hill that pulls at the threads of connection, the sedimentation, the unearthing, and the effacement of various *worlds* in this place—as history reaches forward and the present digs its heels into the past.

One of the most significant transformations to Bean Hill came with the importation of sheep to the landscape in the 19th Century, and traces of this period can still be read on the landscape in

the meandering stone fences crisscrossing properties, rusted barbed wire snarled in the middle of the woods, and the trees and shrubs of the once cleared pasture. With the defeat of the Portuguese by Napoleon in 1810, the embargo on the export merino sheep ended, and William Jarvis, Consul to Portugal brought 4,000 of them to his farm in Weathersfield, VT. By 1824 those 4,000 became 475,000, and the number grew to its peak in 1840 at 1.7 million in the state. During the thirty-year "sheep fever" that gripped the region, three-quarters of all land was cleared for pastures including even the steepest hillsides. As fast as it developed, the sheep fever ended, as overstocking on fragile soils caused erosion and some of the worst floods in recorded history, as silt clogged rivers.

With the thick forests cut, and the soils exhausted, half of the population of Vermont moved west with their eyes on new frontiers, leaving their fields abandoned to regrow with beech, maple, hemlock, and pine. In the fertile fields of the river valleys, farmers held on, transitioning to the small market and dairy farms that we now identify with the bucolic vision of the New England countryside.

This is the landscape I was born into, surrounded by the Whitcomb farm up the hill and the Fontaine farm towards the river. Today, as small dairies have been financially squeezed by the megafarms of the West, the former got big and the latter got out—a common narrative in this area. Once again, the land is going through a cycle of agricultural abandonment, as the pastures fill in with scrubby trees.

When reading the forested landscape of Bean Hill, the thickest strata that imprints on the current sense of the place is the cycle of deforestation, pasturage, and abandonment that occurred in the early 19th century. The majority of Vermont's forests are composed of stands of trees of similar ages, simultaneously springing from the abandoned fields at the turn of the twentieth century. Here there is a link between the aesthetic and its causality—the objects of the land are simultaneously its signs *and* its sensations. As Naturalist Tom Wessels notes, "Like the old stone fences that run through the forests of central New England, the fraying warp and weft of a worn landscape tapestry, abandoned pastures leave apparitions of their forgotten pasts." And while some *are* apparitions, others are very real objects, such as the painstakingly stacked stones that delineated property boundaries across the countryside or the giant "wolf trees" that punctuate the young forests. Like Bean Hill, these trees remained unnamed to me—they were just the biggest trees I had ever seen. In the rationale of childhood, I didn't categorize them by their provenance, but rather by how suitable they were for climbing—and wolf trees, with their low splitting trunk and wide splaying branches, were perfect.

On a recent trip to Vermont to visit my parents, I toured a nearby forest that has become a testing ground for "adaptive silviculture," spearheaded by Chittenden County Forester Ethan Tapper. As we walked through the young forests, he pointed to a gnarled, low-branching white pine with a trunk diameter of nearly four feet and asked the group how it got there. "It must be an old growth," I said, thinking of the towering Redwoods and Douglas Firs of the Pacific Coast. But the settler history of the East Coast reaches much further back, and the true old-growth white pines, with their unbranching trunks stretching eighty feet, and canopies reaching to a total height of 250 were long ago cut down to form the masts of British sailing vessels. Instead, these

squat wide-spreading trees are the very trees pictured in Heyde's 1850 painting shading the flocks of sheep. They are called wolf trees because, as Wessels writes, "like a wolf, these open-grown trees often stand alone." Eastern White Pines, as all conifers when grown in normal conditions, have a single straight trunk. Wolf trees, on the other hand, split, twist, and arch reacting to the conditions of cleared pasture land. This growth form is caused by the lack of competition with nearby trees, and by shoot damage at a young age by white pine weevils, who selectively lay eggs in the terminal buds of sun-exposed pines.

My mother standing next to a Eastern White Pine Wolf Tree in August of 2023.

Here the aesthetics of the objects of the landscape is linked to its ecological and economic causation. But that linkage is not always explicit or fully realized, especially if your eyes are set on good climbing trees. What wolf trees evoke as they pull us back to the sunny day when a weevil laid her eggs in its terminal bud, is how unintelligible the workings of the places we inhabit truly are from within. It reveals our proximity to our own world viewed as a future set of eerie phenomena when the lived contexts of these things have been sloughed off by the workings of time.

The poet John Engels, who sold my parents this house at the corner of North Williston Road and Fay Lane in the late eighties, had a propensity for planting trees across our yard during his tenure. A weeping willow in the front that finally split under the weight of its own soft pulpy

wood when I was in middle school, or the blue spruce that blew down in a winter storm. But it's clear his proudest planting was the grove of pines he located directly behind the oldest section of the house. He writes in his poem, *Damp Rot,* which laments the entropy of the old house from the high water table that ran (and runs) through the dirt floor basement,

> I dream also of the pine grove of my planting,
> which I know I love and which is the green truth
> of this place: in one day ten years ago
> I dug fourteen small trees, wrapped the roots
> in burlap, dragged them down from the top ridge
> of the hill, spaced them carefully, watered
> them each day for one whole season

One of Engels' Eastern White Pines toppled after a storm.

By the time I experienced the grove, the trees had the same tell-tale sign of New England White Pines affected by the pine weevil, split low with no central growth pattern, the four remaining trees blanketing the grass, dandelions, and Creeping Charlie below with their delicate needles. The "green truth" of these trees is fleetingly short. One of the four fell to Hurricane Irene in 2011, narrowly missing both the powerlines and the Riordan's house next door, and the others ring hollow and are in desperate need of removal as I write this.

Engels writes about decay and hope in adjacent stanzas, about losing his son, Philip to SIDS in what I believe to be my childhood bedroom in 1965, and the rituals of climbing Bean Hill or wading through the Winooski on the first killing frost. It might surprise him that the damp rot of the house he laments has outlived the green truth of his pine grove. Timothy Morton writes that lifeforms both include and exclude death, as "a poem is always talking about the paper it is written on and never talking about it." Bean Hill also embodies this same interstitial space that reveals the fragile worlds we construct as it simultaneously includes and excludes its own histories.

This green truth of Engels' grove does not carry far back into the past either, as we see in Heyde's painting of a bare landscape on its second or third deforestation by 1850, and looking further back, it is only within the last five thousand year that a white pine would be found in this landscape at all. Rebecca Solnit, in her book *Orwell's Roses*, contemplates her connection to the trees of her childhood, "I think we both loved the sense of steadfast continuity a tree can represent…Many individual trees that I knew as a child are still recognizable when I return, so little changed when I have changed so much." Here my connection with Solnit's writing fractures— I don't feel this same continuity that she expresses about the Muir Redwoods of the Bay Area.

Unlike the preservationist models imposed by the redwood forest's namesake, this land is a working land that has, for the past two centuries, been viewed as an amalgam of resources to extract—the sandy hill across the road removed one dump truck at a time, the nutrient-rich

alluvial soils converted to corn and then to milk—trundling away in window-shaking chromed milk trucks in the early morning, and the forests "high-graded" to remove the trees of value. Fay Lane sags like an ox yoke under the weight of ever larger tractors, manure spreaders, and trucks—the soft sand beneath the asphalt yielding in the wet summers and frost heaving the road to pieces in the winter. When I go home to see my parents and the red brick house they live in, I don't feel such a continuity while checking my body for ticks in the bathroom after a walk up Bean Hill, rather, I feel as though so much has changed *for both of us*.

At the end of the poem Engels writes, "But it is clear that if I do not freely leave this place, it will leave me." And my eyes well up every time, only to empty into the ditch on their way to the Winooski. It's not because I think Engels is a particularly moving poet, but that what he writes about is so specifically *ours*, threaded across a half-century. I think of my aging parents, in their seventies now, unable to freely leave this place either. I think about the day when their clutter becomes my clutter, and the lived contexts of their things slough off too.

In reading the poems in Engels book *Weather-Fear*, I was struck by his seeming inability to write about anything else but the house, gardens, hill, and surrounding river valley. It is almost like a creative and contemplative gateway through which he processed grander subjects that the dust jacket of the book calls "the human themes of all fine poetry—death, love, loss, joy, sadness." It is not lost on me, perhaps my own inability to synthesize an understanding of place, or ecological awareness without stewing in this original place—my childhood home. Rebecca Solnit writes in her earlier book, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* that, "There is no distance in childhood… Their mental landscape is like that of medieval paintings: a foreground full of vivid

things and then a wall." Even thinking of it now, Bean Hill's steep sandy slope folds up vertically behind my parent's house, and the thought of climbing that hill feels like quicksand.

I'll end with the final view—out the kitchen window, across North Williston road, overlooking the Fontaine's field, at the far end of which the Amtrak still runs on the original Vermont Central Railway tracks laid in the 1800s. Further yet the rolling forested foothills that lead to the Green Mountains—Clark, Mayo, and Bolton smoothed over millennia by erosion and glaciation.

My father is retired now, but worked as a journalist and editor for the Burlington Free Press, at the Champlain Valley Exposition (the fairgrounds), and in communications at Champlain College. All the while he freelanced as an event photographer, cataloging marathons, community plays, concerts, and parades, sunsets, geese, snowstorms, and high waters. I think of his photography as a compulsive and loving practice to synthesize the world around him—a way to hold at arms-length and also to enfold and understand. He will go to the county fair ten days in a row to shoot pictures of the same fair rides, hypnotist, giant pumpkins, and manicured dairy cows that assemble there every year. The photos appear to be the same, and yet they are always slowly morphing and becoming. His Flickr account contains over 90,000 posted photos spanning 15 years, not to mention the countless SD cards and hard drives floating around the old brick house.

I asked if he could collect together all the photos he has taken of our front view over the years—the hope was to reveal an ongoing, incremental change in the landscape—the loss of that *View From Bean Hill* as the recently abandoned field across the road infills with towering willows that

was suddenly so surprising upon my last visit. Tom Wessels notes that while 90% (in 1997) of the pastures in Vermont are maintained by small family dairy farms, the farms and the pastures are "disappearing almost as rapidly as their sheep-grazing predecessors did in the mid-19th century. The field across the road used to be populated with the Fontaine's heifers, who would quietly graze the pasture. You could always tell if it was going to rain because the cows would all lie down in the tall grass before its arrival. The cows are long gone, the rains more severe, and the field gets hayed once or twice a year, which isn't enough to discourage the slow creep of white pines, willows, and honeysuckle from making a home there.

I have included a selection of images that span a period bookended by catastrophic floods, the first being 2011's Hurricane Irene that took down Engel's pine, up until the floods of 2023 that caused the Winooski to swell and swallow up the Whitcomb's low-lying corn and pumpkin fields, and just as Engels wrote in *Damp Rot* fifty years prior, the *"*Water [to] sheet on the old stone of the cellar walls, [and] trickle out over the floor into little deltas of mud, worse every year."

View of the 2023 flood covering North Williston Rd. and the Whitcomb's corn fields from Essex.

18 views from my parent’s house, taken between 2011 and 2023. Photos by Stephen Mease.