

BAKER ARTIST PORTFOLIO Nonfiction Sample

Broken Covenant of Salt: A Final Year on a Family Farm

And every offering of your grain offering you shall season with salt; you shall not allow the salt of the covenant of your God to be lacking from your grain offering. With all your offerings you shall offer salt.

Leviticus 2:13

New King James Version

There is salt between us.

Arabic expression about the bond of friendship

Thief River Scrap

Dark mound hides arched in wild blonde wheat
Like a slumbering bull dead still for two decades
Father-in-law abandoned the front of the combine
In this corner of the family farm during the '80s
Until the price of scrap hit fifty cents a pound

He guesses the hulk accounts for a third of the
8000-pound Massey-Ferguson that his grandfather
Brought down from Canada when staking the claim
His plan is to haul the carcass to Thief River Falls
Fifty flat miles north on the shoulders of a Ford F150

The cash would help with boreal months coming on
And little hay put up for 120 head roaming frozen hills
Where Ojibwe tilled long before mechanical buffalo
Arrived to labor endlessly for miserable homesteaders
With names like Jacobson Buringrud Paulsen Moen

Fifty miles on Route 59 where dust-swept land erases
Moose Dung's signature on the Treaty of Old Crossing
Boomtown home of Artic Cat Digi-Key Steiger Tractor
"Stolen-land river" where Dakotas secretly camped
Along the banks of Red Lake River's renegade current

Farmer-in-law walks cautiously toward the beast
Grade 80 chain draped around his neck like a serpent
He shimmies links under the threshing cylinder's belly
Lassoos its heavy ends to the excavator's gnarled claw
Hydraulics convulse as the behemoth mounts the pickup

Not wise to second-guess this ancient farmer's rhyme
When for some reason he ignores the simplest physics
That foreshadow effects of weight upon unequal weight
Gravity a force down versus horsepower to go forward
Old truck bed buckles like knees on a rust-addled Atlas

Shoulder to shoulder in the cab as the Ford moans
From dried pasture to gravel road huffing dirt clouds
Eight miles an everlasting hour toward town for gas
Treads shave from friction of wheel-well on wheel
I watch at the pump as the pickup folds itself into a V

INTRODUCTION

Go with your love to the fields.
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is nighest your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

Wendell Berry

"Manifesto: the Mad Farmer Liberation Front"

In 2002, I visited my future wife's family's farm in the far reaches of northwest Minnesota for the first time. Although a typical city boy, one more accustomed to rowhouses than hectares, my first job out of college was for my state's agricultural newspaper, and I always had an appreciation of (if not yearning for) rural life. I wanted to prove my mettle to the family who would become my in-laws. However, over the course of seventy-two hours on this thousand-acre cattle farm outside of Clearbrook (population 522), I was attacked by deer flies, trapped in a swap, almost drowned, almost crushed by a huge barn door, bucked from a horse, and electrocuted. Not to mention the grilling a prospective son-in-law gets around the dinner table.

For my perseverance, and salt-of-the-earth attitude, my bride-to-be rewarded me with a traditional Norwegian dessert: lefse. A thin pancake smothered in butter and sprinkled with sugar, rolled into a cigar-shaped tube of sweet deliciousness—what's not to like? Only for some reason, and completely innocently, she generously snow-covered the lefse with that other white

granule, rolled it up with a sense of Scandinavian pride, and urged me to take a much-deserved Bunyanesque bite.

My twisted expression confused her. There was literally salt between us. The curiosities continued.

I wasn't the only "fish out of water" in this pinpoint of rural northwestern Minnesota. This family shattered all my stereotypes from the hayseeds to the "you betchas." My prospective father-in-law spoke of comrades, revolutions, and gawr-darned Republicans; my future mother-in-law taught French and was once a buyer for a high-end department store in Montreal; their daughter had already helped broker a peace agreement in the Democratic Republic of Congo; their son attended graduate school at Middlebury. Books by Ibsen, Hamsun, Shakespeare, Erdrich, and LaDuke lined the shelves. They spoke of Mondale and Wellstone (don't mention Ventura) and listened to NPR and CBC. This family was a political drop of bright blue in a state quickly purpling toward red, certainly a blue dot floating in the red sea of their rural region.

Sure, Clearbrook possessed its cliches encountered in town after town along Route 2 out of Bemidji. Grain elevator. "Muni" liquor store. Family-ownen grocery. VFW. Diner operated by four generations of the same family. Six churches, four of which variations on Lutheran. The "old school" now a second-hand shop devoted to everything Nordic and gnomes. The "new school" that combines two jurisdictions and needed arbitration to decide which mascot to keep (Bee or Bear). Everything that *Prairie Home Companion* came to idealize, and I came to chastise before I counted the first of 10,000 lakes. The pace. The people. Their perspectives. But there was something else, too. Cool evenings versus concrete locked humidity. Call of loons instead of sirens. Blue skies until 10pm then not a ray of light pollution. Something in the water that stalked you around every bend: Peterson Lake shaped like a woman reclining on outstretched arms with

a knee bent upward, or Deep Lake, the depth of which no one knows but in which everyone swears a giant fish lives, all the way from the Mississippi headwaters at Lake Itasca to the “cross waters” of Lake Bemidji formed from part of Paul Bunyon’s footprint. How could folks not be lured to this place?

It reeled me in easier than a leech-starved walleye. I sensed an intense “salt of the covenant”—a phrase conjured up from a past life in seminary; the agreement between farmer and land, land and nature, weather and farmer—that my impending father-in-law and so many others like him felt for this place, the bitterness that often ensues, the cruelty it inflicts, the daily vicissitudes countered or exacerbated by jerry-rigged decisions, the confidence of experience, the satisfaction of plans going accordingly, the relief brought with every healthy newborn, the anticipation with each pound a calf gains, thankfulness for the sun, elation when an engine simply fucking turns over. And maybe it was just the trigger I needed, in Richard Hugo’s sense of the term, to better know my peculiar place called Baltimore.

Sixteen years after that first visit, I uprooted my family, moved 1400 miles west, and spent the next year helping my father-in-law shut down what had been the family’s lifeblood for four generations. From homesteaders to homelessness, putting down roots to uprootedness. The day when a farmer wakes up and there are no chores to be done. The decision was made partly out of necessity (he needed the physical help), partly due to heritage (my wife wanted our daughters to experience the way life was for her at their age), and definitely a result of timing (the window in which our girls would be resilient to a move was closing). To be honest, I also wanted to see if I could cut it, whether I had what it took to live a life in every term of the word “polar” opposite to the one I had led for 50 years. The closest I had ever come to a ploughman is

“lunch.” My wife had doubts. With uncaloused fingers, soft palms, and extreme allergies (hay fever), I had my own, too.

This adventure’s timing coincided with the rise of farm-based reality television. The Swedish production company Strix produced several shows and their counterparts in other countries, all based on the same premise of throwing together a half-dozen disparate celebrities to see if they could stand life on a farm. Viewers watch gleefully as “beautiful people” make frequent scatological references, struggle with the physicality of labor, ruin machinery with brute force and ignorance, and blush at the sight of coupling until they pass out exhausted and whining at day’s end. Only one rises to the title of “Top Farmer.” Then there was *Farm Kings*, which followed the lives of nine brothers named King from hardy Pennsylvania Dutch stock, the buffest of whom accomplished their chores shirtless while wearing tight jeans. *Farmer Wants A Wife* tantalized the familiar nursery rhyme by following a studly young farmer’s courtship process with ten city gals who seemed better suited for the penthouse than the henhouse. We owe a debt of gratitude to Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie who put the cringe-inducing spectacle of “lowering oneself” on the map with their turn-of-the-century effort, *The Simple Life*. Or perhaps that debt should go to Eddie Albert and Eva Gabor for the 1960’s *Green Acres*, which played up the juxtaposition of urbane against uncouth to maximum yucks. However, this book is not a “Survivor”-style story about me, despite the fish-out-of-water interloper perspective. It is certainly not an us-versus-theme exploitation of the prejudiced dichotomy often established between “city mice” and “country mice” (a prejudice that roosts in both camps). It is not about idolizing my father-in-law, although he is quite a character (think Wendell Berry if he were a communist) and the last link to this land. It is not about judging my closest relatives: a mother-in-law from that same part of Minnesota who grew weary of the lifestyle and who, soon after that

first visit nearly two decades ago, took a job teaching high school French outside of San Francisco; a brother-in-law who, after travelling internationally and earning graduate degrees, settled near Baltimore himself and teaches French in Baltimore County Public Schools while raising a lovely family with his wife; a wife who left the farm to study abroad at age 17, attended Carleton College a comfortable six hours away from home, then hit the Peace Corps trail and hasn't lived in Minnesota since. They are all intelligent, compassionate educators who are politically conscientious citizens of the world. It is not about pervading the mythos or reclaiming the glory of this country's agricultural past (make America *grain* again?). It's about the drama (both extraordinary and quotidian) involving a family, a place, and a way of life all in stages of winding down that resonates with many Americans, even if that family largely runs counter to images of middle America and mid-Westerners, a family that earns its livelihood in a way most of us have lost touch with.

The lefse incident aside, "salt" serves as an appropriate metaphor for this book's topic: sweat, preservation, and endings. And, if I may push the metaphor into a pun, it's about a type of "curing": between people and the land, between family members across generations, between sustaining tradition and charting one's own course.

The name Moen originates from the Old Norse word "mór" meaning moor, heath, or meadow in reference to any numerous farmsteads all over Norway. A common 18th-century Norwegian practice involved the military taking in estranged women and their children, and the family would be renamed "Moen" literally after the field in the center of base. Such was the case with Ylva Moen, my wife's great-great-grandmother. The new matranyim carried on through patronymic lineage and immigration to America, where Moens joined homesteaders across the prairie.

EXCERPT Broken Covenant of Salt: The Final Year on a Family Farm

On the Moen family farmstead in a remote part of northwestern Minnesota, the endless sight lines with distant vanishing points shrunk the small house to almost miniscule proportions. I imagined something grander, a mix of what I had seen on *The Waltons*, *Green Acres*, and *Dallas*. But it made sense, especially given the brutal winters. Livestock need lots of land, but humans...no need to waste square footage and furnace power on humans. The house on the Sheep Ranch Road, however, was much smaller than I pictured, and that from the mind's eye of a Baltimorean who has lived in thirteen-foot-wide rowhouses since he was born.

The quarters, as seamen said, were tight.

Even though we were full grown adults, it felt awkward sleeping with my future-wife in her childhood bed just on the other side of a wall separating us from her parents. Even more awkward when her father Dick roused me from a deep sleep into the pitch dark of a cold spring morning. "Spring" being relative, given that March in Minnesota was a liminal world pushing between frozen and muck, more "in like a lion, out like a really pissed off lion."

"The lamb," he said, making no effort to whisper. "Ewe is struggling."

It took a moment to process the homophone and to not agree that, indeed, I was struggling. I switched on the bedside lamp. Half naked, I worried about evidence of an attempt to make silent love just a few hours earlier, or whether I still cupped a breast of his daughter with my hand when suddenly awakened. For me, propriety rushed in quicker than priority.

"Hurry up, this is a job for at least four hands." He lunged out of the room fully dressed except for boots waiting unlaced by the kitchen door. The cold contrail he left behind informed me that he had already been outside, perhaps for hours, coaxing the ewe to cooperate before

considering alternatives and calling in reinforcements. His confidence in my ability to serve in said role of “the cavalry” was not high, but when the closest help lives four miles and maybe an half-an-hour away given unsalted icy roads, he played the hand dealt to him. Me.

I pulled on the spandex running pants that I brought to actually run in (what was I thinking?) as extra insulation, then a pair of cotton socks and a pair of wool socks. Next I fit my legs into my day jeans, a decent pair intended for casual wear to not-so-fancy restaurants during this “vacation” that globs of frozen mud and shit rendered less than fashionable in less than a day. On the farm, they call them “day” jeans because once ruined, there was no redemption and they became your work clothes. Then I wrestled one of my future father-in-law’s ill-fitting sweatshirts tight over my shoulders. It depicted a screaming maroon Indian head logo with the words “Red Lake” crowning it and the word “Warriors” decapitating it. (The farm lay thirty minutes southwest of the rez, where Dick taught for fifteen years to supplement his income from cattle.) Over the sweatshirt I buttoned a cardigan up to my neck. I waddled just ten steps through the small living room (under a little lamp a copy of Knut Hamsun’s *Growth of the Soil* splayed open pages down on the arm of the couch) to the kitchen where last night I left a jacket, scarf, gloves, and a red-and-black striped knit hat stitched with the name “Tim Hortons.” (The twin cities were a five-plus-hour drive away; Winnipeg, just a little over three.) I assembled these outer garments and fit my hands into the crusted leather molds that served as gloves, before realizing I was bootless. Off with the gloves, down on a kitchen chair, and it took all the abdominal strength I could muster to scrunch over in the layers of clothing to pull on the boots. Rigor mortis had set into the laces, so I did not tie them so much as criss-cross them like arms across the chest of a corpse.

I worried that in the time it took me to prepare, disaster had struck.

Cold hit my face as soon as I stepped into the glassed-in entryway between the warm house and cruel world, a type of *pre*-compression chamber only I remained clueless to how deep I was about to dive. I grabbed a flashlight from the half-dozen assorted torches kept on a ledge and made my way across the unfamiliar lawn with the trepidation Jesus must have had when he stepped from the beach at Galilee. Air clung to my face like a plastic Halloween mask and squirmed its way beneath my unfamiliar costume. Darkness stretched in every direction, not a trace of city light pollution that kept Baltimore in a constant state of urban glow. Once my eyes adjusted, the cartography above came into focus: Great Bear, Milky Way, L'Étoile du Nord herself. I foolishly shot the flashlight skyward as if it would expose more stars, but it reached no higher than an empty birdfeeder strung to a branch above me. Like me, the birdfeeder waited for warm weather, and it reminded me that my role here was not as tourist or even guest, but as laborer in a place where the enemy of everything was delay.

I explore farther out into the yard, slowly, like a tethered astronaut out for a spacewalk. The beam of the flashlight finally caught posts of a wooden fence that bordered the barnyard. With one leg, my torso, then the other leg, I wedged between the top and second rails, barely squeezing through for all the layers of clothing, and stumbled like Minimus pig into frozen Manor Farm, feeling stuck between the poetry and the propaganda of rural life. I mapped out the yard with landmarks seen in daylight: old sheep barn hard to starboard, garden beside it, shed dead ahead, huge pile of god-knows-what topped with scrap metal in the back corner, pole barn—my destination—to far portside, but not too far left or I would run into the trough and chute. My ankles and knees wobbled across the terrain, softened by the previous day's mash of hooves and just enough thaw before freezing solid again over night into sharp craters. The

yellow beam of light ahead of me was useless, and at a hidden deep divot I fell to one knee onto a jagged piece of earth that penetrated both denim and spandex.

“Fuck,” I yelled and the sharp word crystallized into silence as soon as I said.

I headed for a sliver of dim light that marked an open gap between the barn wall and barn door. Dick would have normally closed the door tight, but he deliberately left it ajar as a signal for me, a boat on choppy water guided by a lighthouse in the distance; instead of a warning to steer clear, it was a beacon drawing me in.

Once inside the barn, I realized what exertion it took to get there. White streams of breath pumped from me in rapid bursts like steam from pistons. Only three bare bulbs dangling from orange extension cords illuminated the barn, creating unsettling pockets of light and dark like a sepia tone of some bygone place. The earthy smell of hay and mud rose up although icy surfaces wanted to lock everything down. Old wooden pens were sutured with twine and reinforced with 2x4s at strategic angles. Every broken pitchfork handle, rusted post, toothless rake, rotten pallet had been repurposed to secure something or prop something up. Cans and buckets once used for this were now used for that. Ties were made from anything that bent: tape, pipe cleaners, snippets of barbed wire, frayed electrical cord, a man’s belt, boot laces, socks knotted one after another into a rope.

Dick’s rear-end poked out from one of the pens that straddled a light and dark patch. I heard bleating and grunting, unsure which animal or human uttered which sound. His left leg cocked and trembled the way a linebacker’s calves struggled against defensive tacklers. I came up from behind farmer and ewe tussling, not sure how to enter the scrum.

Without looking, he sensed my presence.

“Dystocia,” he said.

I knew enough about etymology and Margaret Atwood novels—"dystopia" equals "bad place"—to know "dys-" anything was not good.

Then I noticed that Dick was elbow-deep inside the ewe, cheek pressed against her woolly ass, eyes rolled upward, searching around like he lost keys under a sofa.

He withdrew from the ewe, her eyes bulged as big as hardboiled eggs. He stood, flung mucus off his hand but hit the overhead bulb, too, sending a halo of light swirling around the barn. I felt...queasy.

"Gawr-damn," he said, inflicting a tone somewhere between curse and comment. He wiped his greasy hand on a rag. "Waterbag burst thirty minutes ago."

"Oh," I offered neutrally without indicating whether I realized that was a good thing or bad thing to have happened.

"Gotta go now or risk losing them both," he said, as the struggling ewe lost energy and collapsed into the hay she had nosed into the corner of the pen.

For some reason I had my hands with the molded gloves raised before me like a just-prepped surgeon. *Scalpel?* I thought in vain. "What can I do?" I said, vainer.

"It's a gawr-damn mess," he said, steamy breath puffed on every syllable, five syllables at the start of a haiku that went nowhere. Clouds of commentary turned to coldly barked orders.

"Restrain her."

I shuffled between them and the side of the pen, placed one hand on her back and another on her side, more of a hug.

"No, no, no. Like a linebacker. Put your shoulder into her's up there."

He pointed toward her head. Yes, I knew what a shoulder was, maybe not a shank, but a shoulder. The more his daughter and I dated, the clearer it became that this man would likely

become my father-in-law. I wanted to do more than merely help; I wanted to prove that a 35-year-old, soft-palmed book publisher could hang with a weathered cowboy twice his age. I wished for silent gestures and the dart of an eye to be the only direction needed, the type of nonverbal communication that settles in between people who have encountered the same dilemma time after time. I wanted an understanding between us that I already knew might never develop.

Dick inserted his arm again, fishing for the lamb's hooves, which startled the ewe back into action. I rolled back on my heels like a rookie fifth round pick and she got the better of me, bashed me into the side of the barn.

He said: "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

"Bible?"

"Hamsun. Now again!"

I did my best Ray Lewis imitation and laid into her hard so that her attempts at bucking away did not disturb the task at hand. She was stronger than me and her retaliation slid my legs into the barn's wall, which I in turn used as leverage back against her.

Again, Dick withdrew, wisps of steam curling from his arm and sleeve. "At least I got her straight, but the contractions are done, she'll die in there."

He stood up and backed away, staggering into the pen like a pummeled boxer up against the ropes.

"Find whatever twine," he ordered while looking around himself.

Even with his arthritic fingers in the cold of night, he deftly strung together some yellow nylon, beige twine, white rope, and blue bungee cord into a makeshift lasso. Another round of orders, but steadier (he had studied the limitations of his assistant) and Dick said with a calming

and-2-3-4 cadence of a middle school chorus teacher, “And again, your shoulder, like linebacker...”

In once more he dived with the rope trailing behind, hand guided by memory and anatomy. A prayerful scene: Dick on his knees, eyes shut, head reared back. I thought I even heard him say “Jesus.” Then legs presented, and he lassoed the hooves, slipped the twine to the mid-shaft of its metacarpal, and pulled.

And pulled.

Goddamn it he pulled hard, and I lost all sense of linebackers and tempo and prayers.

“Son of a...,” he said and pulled again, even harder.

I wanted him to stop.

He reeled the rope around the back of his hand three, four times, tightened his grip, and bore down.

Stop! Pull! I scream-thought-eeked.

“Come on!” Dick fell back on his rear-end and hit his head on a plank. Sweat beaded his brow.

Like a stubborn cork from a bottle, Jesus Christ he did it.

The lamb fell wet on the cold hay. Mother survived. Baby needed more coaxing. Dick positioned it near the head of the ewe. She would not take her. Time appeared again as the enemy. Dick cradled it, picked at its nostrils, wedged a finger inside its mouth. It would not suck. He nuzzled its head against the nose of the ewe. Nothing. He had a bottle of colostrum prepared inside. He went to fetch it and left me alone to monitor the situation.

A strange calm descended on the barn after such an ordeal. I crouched down low beside the newborn thing. I saw life begin when my first nephew was born and I watched life end when

my grandmother died. I had never been so invested in the outcome of another sentient being than with this almost motionless lamb in dirty hay. This little black and gray matted mass sure as hell better live, but all I could do was wish and not act. I was so far out of my league. People turned to me for all sorts of advice on esoteric matters, but ask me how to breathe life into a dying baby and I have no answers. This shit, according to both urban and rural dictionaries, got real. I removed the stiff glove from one hand and touched the lamb's damp fleece. How did Dick deal with the balance of life and death that occurred daily on the farm? I knew a question of economics lingered in the mind as well, a healthy lamb would have consumed \$350 in feed and maintenance then paid out nearly \$400 per hundred pounds at the sales barn. A dead lamb netted zero. But in the short time that I had gotten to know Dick, I knew that concern pressed less against his conscience than the fact that the ewe endured pain and the lamb's chances were slim.

Dick returned with a dirt smudged bottle with a rubber nipple as tough as hide that I would not have given to Beelzebub's baby. I wanted to protest, but assumed farmer knew best. He granted me permission to leave.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said.

"I'll be here for hours," he said. "Rest up. There's more to do in the morning."

I looked at the ewe. She rolled an eye toward me, an eye that had settled into relief if not understanding. I looked at her lamb. Dick rubbed it hard, anything but the gentle caress I had just administered, and made clicking noises with his tongue to stimulate it. There was truly nothing I could do. I backed out of the barn the way a bandito given clemency backs out of a saloon, toe to heel with arms slightly raised in surrender.

Outside a slice of red hot light on the horizon did not make a dent in this frozen world. I made my way back the fence, shimmied through the rails, and crossed to the house without using

the flashlight. My eyes had adjusted. I started to see. Inside the decompression chamber, I automatically kicked off my boots and added them to the heap of mucked-up footwear piled against the wall of the entryway. I stripped down to t-shirt and spandex running pants, propping up the stiffened layers of cloths in a corner near the door to thaw out for another use. My future mother-in-law and the woman who would become my wife remained undisturbed, warm and peaceful in a parallel universe. I entered the room where my girlfriend slept as a child and she reached out to me—tired, dirty, and shivering—and embraced me without question or complaint.

A little while later, her mother busy orchestrating breakfast, we checked in together with her father in the barn. We assembled our gear—day jeans, layers, coats, caps, gloves—then passed through the entryway into the brightening day. The sun rose higher, craters of frozen mud began to turn to pudding.

The lamb died. Dick added her to the pile of god-knows-what with some other casualties that he had already shoveled into the bed of a rusting blue-and-white Ford F-150. He was busy fixing a piece of equipment that refused to start when sunlight spilled across the docile yard that staged such violence just a few hours earlier. How did he cope with the balance? He moved on. Maybe, in a moment of intellectual weakness, the old atheist muttered a prayer or bowed his head. *The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...* then he moves on.

“Oh, well,” Dick said. “Let’s eat. I want to get the mixer wagon loaded and out to feed by 9 or 10.” He and my girlfriend made toward the house, but I turned in the opposite direction and walked to the truck. It was loaded with hard mud, straw, and stumps. From the pile extended six small hooves. I identified my lamb by comparison to the other more decomposed bodies. Larger animals were sent to the rendering plant, or Dick knew a Red Laker who took carcasses up on

the rez, but for smaller ones Dick had reserved a swampy corner far away in the pasture that would be thawed out enough by mid-afternoon.

“Come on,” my girlfriend called back. “Can’t linger on the gone ones.” Somehow this nursing student transformed into a wizened bit player from *All Creatures Great and Small*. She had learned well the lesson on moving on.

Then the four of us ate silently at a round wooden table in the home’s small dining room.