

Natural Monuments.

by Conrad Vispo

Along a backroad that I walk, there is a sprawling farm. A proud house, austere but substantial, stands on a low knoll, full face to the road. Behind it, a pair of additions stretch confidently back towards an impressive three-story barn with a drawbridge-like ramp. Perpendicular to this axis, an arm of lower buildings, including what looks like a store front, reaches north capped by perhaps the original barn, a stalwart, heavy-timbered structure set in its ways. A Catalpa, Lilacs, Rhododendrons, a swimming pool and picket fence grace the courtyard formed by this configuration. Surely, this is rural opulence of a sort.

Only, those times are past. When I started walking this road several years ago, an old woman lived in a mobile home that had been inserted between house and barns; later, an old man; now, nobody. The decay of the house face can no longer be hidden by its makeup of aluminum siding and occasional lawn mowing. The front door, as if forgotten, has no steps; a storm door stands ajar. The barns have lost their paint and faded to weathered wood. The roof of the original barn has collapsed, and the roof of the house is shedding metal shingles. The courtyard is overgrown, although Spring yet brings a muted riot of once-cherished blossoms.

Although I do not know the personal history of these particular buildings, they are, together with so many barns and farms in the County, stoically slipping into decay. There are various reasons for this – a change in transport, trade, prestige or lifestyle that has made certain farming less profitable and/or desirable; a landowner vision that did not outlive the landowner; a faraway field that actually was greener. Many different factors and individual stories, but their net discouragement to this way of life is undeniably documented by the hollow hulls of barns or, increasingly, the rock outlines of their foundations which scatter the landscape, often standing in fields of brush or young forest.

Today, no one lives in the house's stale rooms nor in the mobile home still lit by a defiant backdoor bulb. This farm is now inhabited not by humans but by their monuments. The impersonal incarnations of human intentions, expressed in stone, wood, cement and glass. But there is still one small banner of individual human presence: behind the mobile home, a clothes line, and on it, suspended by persistent pins, a fading dish towel; one last sign not of grand architecture, but of mundane human practicality, a reminder that, no matter what tides of the era drained such houses, it happened one-by-one and, at each, lives – defiant, restless, helpless, flexible, tragic, pragmatic – were lived out in the currency of daily words and habits midst the clutter of small decisions.

It is a human blessing and curse that we can, while hugging, laughing, arguing, feel both the immediate heartbeat of those emotions and, by counting the likes of empty barns, also mark the larger trends that bear down on us and stretch out behind us. We celebrate the stunning immediacy of our personal lives and yet put our small heads and hands to wonder and work on the human condition.

But there is more life here than us. If that dish towel had ears, it would likely be consoled by the seasonal urgency of animal life in the marsh below. At this time of year, the Red-winged Blackbirds flash red epaulets and cry their hoarse challenges, geese in uneasy pairs are prone to honk alarms, drakes

steam like little battleships in orchestrated confrontations, perhaps a beaver slaps the water, and soon the frogs will call. There is a vivacious bustle here that once may have found reflection in the human hum around these buildings – the cry and laugh of its children, the noisy realization of imagination that built house, barn and grounds.

While we are all participants in the daily human tumult and frequently conscious, if only vaguely, of the deeper currents of our own kind's affairs, we are, in our awareness of the rest of nature, often more half-witted. If we have the luxury to pause in our list of tasks, many of us revel in the flurry of life around us. We note the birds who visit our verandas, we bathe in the spacious green of a fresh-leafed forest, we sniff like a hound at animal tracks followed as hunter and/or naturalist. In other words, many of our daily lives regularly intersect with the wild. Thus, in part, our awareness of the rest of nature mirrors that of ourselves, but only in part. For while we can appreciate that immediate bustle, we are less apt to notice nature's 'empty barns' than our own. Absent such observations, we are then less able to gauge long-term change in the rest of nature. We are less adept at hearing the challenges those changes pose to other life and to ourselves, less adept at assessing their imperative and at asking ourselves what role we have had in their creation and can or should play in their moderation. What of that marsh, how has it changed? What did and does the Parkway's bold path along its edge mean for those frogs and fowl? What has our ever-increasing web of roads meant for the nature of similar marshes elsewhere?

We see the individual plants and animals with whom we daily interact, but in our guts we rarely sense the building or decay of nature's monuments or sense, for wild nature, something corresponding to the 'human condition'. Science, including citizen science, does its part to red-flag long-term trends, but numbers do not kick like experience. Until it bites at our own daily needs or affects those of family or friends, the decline of dairy farming or any other profession, is but a line on a chart. Similarly, if we do not train ourselves and our children to befriend the rest of nature, if we do not see in nature's corresponding lone dish towel on a line the symptom of a pattern to be marked, then its losses and its triumphs will not move us. This callousness should trouble us. Human monuments like farmsteads, once they have been drained of daily human life, reveal that the skeleton of human intentions is no more, no less than the re-arrangement of nature's elements such as that wood and stone. And further, as those sculptures slowly slip from their blue-printed shapes, one finds that nature, despite human dreams of self-importance, was not only the materiel but even the true architect of those intentions. Not to pause our walks at wild nature's 'farmsteads' and ponder their evolution is thus to accept ignorance not only of such nature but of ourselves.