

Growth Cycle

During one of the years of our displacement, and unfortunately not the last, I took refuge every weekday in a field of developing corn. The field spanned about a mile down one road and another at the turn. Perhaps you'd call that a square mile, but I can't say for sure--I can measure emotion, risk, danger; but distances, weights, things that are mathematical, these are beyond my reach.

The field belonged to an upstate New York farm family. It was mostly a visual refuge that I took, as we were on the schedule of my two children's schools and I couldn't stop or leave the car. Instead I would send my gaze deep into the field, down some perfect row of what at first were just little babies, corn plants not yet struggling for their share of the sun.

My eyes would settle for a moment on some golden ray. I'd call out encouragingly to the slender seedlings, "Go on, l'il babies, reach up and grab it," and in this act, felt myself protected; harbored from the fear of my newly destabilized life. Harbored by my own coaching of corn babies planted down farmer's rows. I've heard coaching is a way to face your life. But it's just as much a way to avoid it.

We passed this field only minutes after leaving our home in the woods, a weathered rental frequented by skinny bears. Out of the driveway every school morning and onto a county road, turning off toward the south, we came upon the corn.

We were newly arrived at my husband's hometown because, in what he put forth as an unrelenting, unsolvable depression, he couldn't live in the southern city where our children were growing up from a soil foreign to us all. His affect had been as if departing from the body he

walked in, unable to participate in his own rote actions or the life of the family. He said he needed to move home to the mountains of New York, and because I took his vacancy to be real and unintentional, I resolved to undertake whatever might revive him. Which of course wasn't my job to do.

I drove our children to school nearby, where the mountains started flattening and farmers used that change to their commercial advantage. They planted corn, and corn was something I knew well from my own Midwestern childhood. It pulled me into its growth cycle, its steadiness, its outbursts along the way.

As the spring spurred the baby plants' growth into adolescence, I drove slowly by, calling out, "Come on, little darlins! You can do it! Stretch up! Reach out!" In my mind's eye, I glided down the rows, pulling my children along where everything grew and nothing receded. They could reach upward, too. If I was the coach, corn was the role model.

School ended, but summer camp was also down that road. The corn plants had grown fat and tall, obscuring the rows. "Lean together, friends! Wide and long, now, Outward! Upward! Keep it moving!" I yelled. By this time, my children had gotten over some sense that mine was a strange pursuit. They trusted my enthusiasm, joining their voices with mine, chanting, "Go!....Grow!" The less they saw of their undecipherable father, who spent all his time building furniture that was never finished and delivered to the people who ordered it, the more they saw of the corn.

By August, camp was nearly done. During our last drives, we saw farmhands out helping the family cut the stalks and gather the corn. A hand-painted sign pointed around a bend to the

farmer's stand. Beyond jam jars and baskets of other produce, we found the plump ears that had surely responded to our cheering.

I don't recall how many I bought. We returned to our car, driving back toward the gutted field, and I stopped, jumping out. I pulled an ear from the bag, tore back the husk. I put the raw, hairy corn to my mouth and bit in, the rubbery kernels breaking away. My children balked.

"Taste it," I told them. "Just taste it."