

Resilience

Editor's Introductory Essay

One of my writer heroes, Jack Conroy, in his pre-*Grapes of Wrath* Depression novel, *The Disinherited*, has narrator Larry Donovan setting paving bricks in a road during a sun-blasted summer. "I was thirsty enough to spit cotton," Donovan says. Conroy, himself, survived a Depression winter by eating carrots he dug with a pick from a frozen field. We don't know yet how new weather extremes will affect us in the long term, but here in western Missouri, the summer of 2012 seems haunted by John Steinbeck's depiction of 1930s drought. "Now the wind grew strong and hard, and it worked at the rain crust in the corn fields," he writes. "Little by little the sky was darkened by the mixing dust." I have felt that dust in parts of eastern Kansas this summer, though not with a darkened sky as those days. My wife, Lisa, started out by horseback this May and rode, solo, four weeks and a day through Kansas and Missouri farm country, in heat that, in the early weeks of summer, reached 100 degrees only on a few days. At the start of her ride, farm ponds still looked full and the young corn green with promise.

By mid June, however, the heat and dust became hard to endure. Her horse, Chief, learned fast that he no longer could find a convenient trough in his comfy pasture, and he'd better drink up whenever he got a chance—usually water my wife carried from a pond in her collapsible bucket. Meanwhile, at our suburban home, the back yard evolved into a little dust bowl, loathe as I am to pour water onto grass. At least one stock-market analysis website has invoked *The Grapes of Wrath* to predict what might happen to our farmer friends in 2012 and beyond.

Literature and art almost always give people extreme circumstances—morally, psychologically, physically—to deal with.

Literature tests us and does not back down. The story here by Brian Doyle walks us into intricate questions of faith and morality and, in its own, subtle way, out again. I look at pictures here of kids playing in a fountain, yet I feel mostly the intense heat of summer around and outside the frame. Both Mariko Nagai's unflinching look at war and violence and Judy Blunt's tough-minded yet tender assessment of her Western homeland enhance our appreciation of human resilience. Donald Hall looks at his life in literature through the culture of our nation's capital and its media; and he seems to be putting his big, sweet, tender hands to our faces in comfort.

Let me offer two qualities found wrapped inside most great writing and art: love and gratitude. If literary art does not ultimately relieve us of hopelessness and cynicism, then I don't know why we bother. A researcher for the Harvard School of Public Health, Dr. Laura Kubzansky, reported in 2007 and again in 2011 on the healing effects of what she termed "emotional vitality." Resilience is the key, she said, to physical and mental well being. Literary readers generally know that some positive movement must come out of the process born by struggle, even tragedy. "Soft nurse of dear idea, near me stay," quotes Mia Leonin here, from 18th-century poet Ann Yearsley. That quote implies nurture, engagement. Forgive me if logic and rationality bend a bit to hope and intuition, but if emotional vitality remains a goal for psychological and thus cardiovascular health, perhaps we can extend that to our engagements with each other and with nature, also.

My wife, Lisa's, ride included more extreme challenges than I know; but I did learn a few fascinating things about rural life: There are a lot more family-owned, small farms and ranches than I formerly believed. Farm families answer to Amish, Mennonite, Lutheran, Catholic, Baptist, and everything else in the range of faith and nonfaith, and, as it turned out for my wife, all amounting to much the same sort of people—loving and grateful. She met older men who choked up with affection for their wives; she met kids who said, *Yes, Ma'am*, when spoken to and rode alongside her awhile when she said goodbye after a night on their land; she met women

who rode, carried rifles, cooked, farmed and told good jokes. Like Jack Conroy, whom I knew in his later years, the people who live now, in the drought of 2012 in the rural Midwest, sustain us with their resilience.

I am not saying times are easy, but, as Flannery O'Connor surely would say from the grave (in Jo McDougall's poem here) to all fretful souls, "Go away. And take / that maudlin moonlight with you." The poem has it right, even for these times. Emotional vitality, research suggests, holds at least the possibility of a restorative biology; the stories we tell each other have their own restorative qualities, I believe. Try this example: At the end of each day, without fail, Lisa would find some family of strangers, on some randomly chosen gravel road, that would always offer her horse a pasture for the night and her a place to pitch her tent. Often, they brought her food and coffee, invited her inside for a shower, posed with her for pictures in the morning, exchanged phone numbers and email addresses, and, more often than not, teared up when they said goodbye. Each day, every day.

—Robert Stewart