WANDERING HOME

A Long Walk Across America's Most Hopeful Landscape: Vermont's Champlain Valley and New York's Adirondacks

Bill McKibben
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A Long Walk Across

America’s Most Hopeful Landscape:

Vermont’s Champlain Valley and New York’s Adirondacks
For Nick, Jackie, Gary, and Kathy on the west,
and John, Rita, Warren, and Barry in the east
My mood was darker than it should have been for the start of a journey. For one thing, I had packed too heavy; the stove, the pad, the water filter, the tent that would make my camp theoretically comfortable, were for the moment making my shoulders actually sore and my knees actually ache. And I hiked in a cloud—no views, just a soggy mist. The trail—Vermont’s Long Trail—ran up and down like a giant’s EKG, farther than my rather too cursory glance at the map had led me to expect. I’d taken an easy fall romp with a daypack along this path the previous winter, and remembered dimly that a field of ferns marked the approach of camp—now, heavy-laden, I walked through just such a fern field ten times in the course of the afternoon, each time more certain that this must be the one. But no, and no, and no, and no. Not until dinnertime, with ten solid hours of walking behind me, did I arrive, sore-footed, calf-crammed, and more than a little uncertain about the weeks of walking that lay ahead, at a small lean-to 750 feet beneath the summit of Mount Abraham, Vermont’s third-highest peak.

I sprawled out on top of my sleeping bag and commenced infusing sandwiches into my system. As I proceeded, the fog started to clear, and with it my funk. So I dug an extra layer from my pack and decided, after several moment’s hesitation, that I still had energy enough for the 20-minute climb to the top of the peak and the sunset view. It was, as it turned out, one of the better decisions of my life.

Mount Abraham—Mount Abe to its neighbors—commands a 360-degree view. South and north, the narrow ridge of the Green Mountains stretches off toward Killington and Camel’s Hump respectively. To the east, the vista stretches easily across Vermont, barely fifty miles wide at this point, and into New Hampshire’s White Mountains—on a clear day you can make out Mount Washington. But most times, and especially tonight, the western vista demands the most attention. Lake Champlain lies in the middle distance, gleaming like a sheet of gold foil in the late sun. It runs 125 miles from south of Ticonderoga to north of the Canadian border. Fourteen miles wide at its broadest, 400 feet deep at its deepest, Champlain is America’s sixth-largest lake. (Not Great, but great.) Behind it, the jumbled High Peaks of the Adirondacks rise hard and fast, 5,000 feet above the lake—as fast and as far as the Wasatch above Salt Lake or the Rockies over Boulder. And in the foreground spreads the broad and fertile Vermont valley that lies between the Greens and the lakeshore.

Tonight a scrim of rain clouds advanced toward me, a gauzy curtain of gray that only made the lake and mountains behind gleam the shinier. It was clearly about to rain, but the worst of it seemed set to pass just north and south; a slight gap in the line headed toward my perch on Mount Abe. Hearing no thunder, I stayed put, and sure enough, the cloud washed up over me. For a few moments, even as the world turned gray, I could still make out the reflecting mirror of the lake; finally it too vanished and all was gloom. But
then, even more quickly than it had descended, the cloud swept through, and behind it the world was created fresh. No scrim now, just the fields, the lake, the peaks. When a double rainbow suddenly appeared, it was almost too much—a Disney overdose of glory. But then a rainbow pillar rose straight into the southern sky, and east of that a vaporous twin appeared, and then a kind of rainbow cloud to the north. Soon seven rainbows at once. Then the sun reached just the right angle so that the mist whipping up the face of the peak flashed into clouds of color as it washed over me: a rose cloud, a cloud of green. And always behind it the same line of lake, the same jag of mountain. All at once it struck me, struck me hard, that this was one of those few scenes I would replay in my mind when I someday lay dying.

When I lay living, too—for the territory revealed this evening, the view west from this pinnacle, was the turf of my adult life. To the south I could see the Vermont mountain town of Ripton, set at 1,500 feet, hard against the western spine of the Greens. I’d stepped off this morning from my house there, which we built a few years back, on land once owned by Robert Frost. A quarter-mile through the woods I’d passed the writing cabin where he’d spent his last thirty summers, stocking our cupboard of Yankee imagery with his woodsmen and hill-farmers and sleigh drivers. Now that New Hampshire’s Old Man of the Mountain has crashed into granite smithereens, surely Frost’s white-haired, craggy visage is New England’s most iconic face.

But to the distant west I could see, or so I told myself, Crane Mountain, the peak in whose shadow I’d spent most of my adult life. Forget New England—Crane lies smack in the center of New York’s vast Adirondack wilderness. I have a house there, too, also set at 1,500 feet, and it was where I was bound on this walk. Seventy miles, perhaps, as the crow flies, but a couple of hundred on my planned route, which unfolded below me in the dazzling dusk.

I’ve not moved far in my life. But fairly few people have had the chance to know both sides of this lake with any real closeness. Anyone with the good fortune to own two houses would logically have one at the beach and one in the mountains, or one in the city and one in the country—I know that. But I’ve not been able to drag myself away from this small corner of the planet. To me, this country on either side of Lake Champlain, though it has no name and appears on no map as a single unit, constitutes one of the world’s few great regions, a place more complete, and more full of future promise, than any other spot in the American atlas.

This region (Adimont? The Verandacks?) includes the fertile farms and small woodlots directly beneath me in the Champlain Valley, where a new generation of settlers is trying to figure out new ways to responsibly inhabit the land—ways to farm and log and invest that enrich in the fullest sense of the word. It encompasses the fine small city of Burlington to the north. And across the lake it is made whole by the matchless eastern wilderness of the Adirondacks, the largest park in the lower forty-eight, 6 million acres, bigger than Glacier, Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, and Yosemite combined. At the risk
of hyperbole and chauvinism, let me state it plainly: in my experience, the world contains no finer blend of soil and rock and water and forest than that found in this scene laid out before me—a few just as fine, perhaps, but none finer. And no place where the essential human skills—cooperation, husbandry, restraint—offer more possibility for competent and graceful inhabitation, for working out the answers to the questions that the planet is posing in this age of ecological pinch and social fray.

My walk will carry me across this range of mountains—this range of possibilities. I'll go through the back roads of the Champlain Valley and the high passes of the Adirondacks, and through the plans and dreams and accomplishments of loggers and farmers and economists and biologists. I can see most of my route laid out before me tonight as the rainbows fade in the last light, and—sore calves be damned—I can't wait to dive in. Tired as I am, sleep takes a while to come.

In the flatter light of midmorning (for, once asleep, I slept), the view is still beautiful, but more daunting. Though to me this wide expanse looks so like a whole, that's only because unlikely circumstance has let me know all of it with some intimacy. For most of the residents of either side, the lake divides it neatly into two very different kingdoms of the imagination. Champlain acts as the border between Vermont and New York, which is not like the border between, say, Connecticut and Massachusetts, or Kansas and Nebraska. This line is rarely crossed. Partly that's because most places you need to take a ferry, but much more because the ferry connects two different states of mind. On one side you stand in “New England,” and you can still feel the ocean at your back, and maybe even Olde England beyond that. To a New Englander, Boston is the city—the radio mast a couple of peaks north from Mount Abe carries the Red Sox out across this valley on a summer eve. New England comes with as many icons as Holland—even here, 140 miles from saltwater, the lobster somehow still seems native. The towns tend toward neatness, gathering themselves around white churches—Congregational churches, governing themselves without the aid of bishops or the overly active intervention of the Holy Spirit. And town halls, with their March rite of town meeting—of good, crisp self-governance. It is a tidy place, New England.

Whereas, across the lake, the unruliness of the rest of America begins. Looking west from the top of Mount Abe, you look West. For a long time, New Englanders averted their eyes. Mount Marcy, New York, the region's tallest peak, shows up clearly even from the valley towns of Addison County, which were settled in the 1600s. But not until 1834, with Lewis and Clark home for a generation from the Pacific, did a white man bother to go climb it, and he came from downstate New York. Even now, the hikers and climbers of Vermont are more likely to stick to their narrow and relatively crowded mountain trails than to venture to the Adirondacks (there you're far more likely to meet adventurous Quebecois, who have crossed an honest-to-God border for their day's outing). A few years ago, conservationists seeking public support to protect a broad swath of land from Maine to the Great Lakes,
commissioned focus groups in Boston, Vermont, and New Hampshire. Testing different formulations, they found that participants didn’t want New England to be lumped in with anything New York or even “Northeastern.” New England was “serene,” “bucolic.” “Everything is so elegant,” said one Boston woman. “It’s a very classic place to live.”

Indeed they are right to perceive a difference. Cross the lake and you leave behind the neat town green with the bandstand in favor of a more Appalachian look: Methodists and Baptists and Catholics. No one goes to a town meeting—political power and patronage tend to pass on dynastically. There’s poverty on both sides of the lake, but somehow it looks rawer on the Adirondack shore, the trailers more numerous and nearer the main road. Boston is suddenly no closer than Detroit. Vermont, too, seems distant, all the way across the lake, a mythical land of Saab-driving, goat-cheese-eating Democrats. The Adirondacks are higher, colder, and wilder—people have lived here for fewer centuries in fewer numbers, and have never been able to make farming work for long. And so, over time, huge chunks have been left to rewild themselves, till in places it approaches the primeval.

Yet it seems to me they belong together, this Champlain Valley of Vermont and this great Adirondack woods. Every bird guide, every alumni association, every corporate sales office considers one shore New England and the other the “mid-Atlantic.” But if you stand on top of Mount Abe and huck west, your gob will find its way into the lake and then north into the mighty St. Lawrence—a fur-trading river, flowing out into the bergy Atlantic north at the tip of the Gaspé Peninsula. Wild country. This crest of the Green Mountains is the last upwelling of the coastal geology, the last fold pushed up the colliding plates of the Atlantic shore; on its western slope you face the geology of midcontinent, the Canadian Shield. Once you’ve started down into the Champlain Valley, you really have begun the journey west.

They have so much to teach each other, these two sides: New Englanders have learned a great deal, mostly through trial and error, about how to successfully inhabit a land, experiments that continue to this day; and Adirondackers, often against their will, have learned as much about how to leave land alone. The distinction is easy to overdraw—Vermont, too, has stopped farming many of its acres, seen a smaller-scale reversion to the wild. The Adirondacks have seen an influx of tourists and retirees from the overdeveloped world to the south. And yet their dual personalities remain surprisingly intact—though roughly the same size as Vermont, the Adirondacks have one-fifth the population, with all that implies. And those two casts of mind, those two sets of skills, are rare, complementary, and extremely useful as we enter this strained century. In most places real husbandry and real wilderness are both disappearing, melted away by the economic sun of industrial efficiency and consumer ease. But neither side of Lake Champlain is yet thoroughly suburbanized, and so these two shores offer
some countercultural ideas about what might be, and some poignant reminders about how we once lived.

The sun is high, starting to bear down harder as the morning ebbs. And that’s enough airy mountaintop speculation for an entire volume. Time now, on aching calves, to descend the Battell trail down toward civilization. Time to begin the walk west.

LINCOLN, THE TOWN that lies beneath Mount Abe, may be the most picturesque in Vermont (if you needed to remake *The Sound of Music,* you could do it here), and among the most isolated. The only road east, a dirt track that climbs steeply through a mountain gap, is closed half the year by snow. The rest of the time, what traffic there is funnels to the west through another narrow gap on the route I’m walking today.

It’s hot, and my loping has turned into a meander. I pass the Weed Farm, a little herb nursery presided over by my daughter’s fourth-grade teacher and his partner, who gives my daughter piano lessons. Just down the hill there’s the general store, the town library, the white clapboard community church—you might as well be walking through an LL Bean catalog. It’s Ur–New England, with all the community virtues that implies: when the New Haven River flooded a few springs ago, it surged through the tiny local library. Almost all the books were lost—every last one of the picture books, down on the low shelves for the kids. But half the town showed up shovel out the mud and fork the piles of soggy fiction into hay wagons for burial. And when local author Chris Bohjalian told the story in the *Boston Globe* magazine, *Reader’s Digest* picked it up as a picturesque example of rural life; soon cartons of new books were arriving from across the country. Everyone in town gave what they could; now there’s a handsome new library, a little farther from the river. This spring’s fundraiser: a raffle where you have to guess the birth date, weight, and sex of the first lamb born this season.

Such intense charm carries its own dangers, of course. As I walk, my eye keeps returning to a hilltop overlooking the town, where some outlander has cleared a patch and then, as if from a spaceship, plunked down a “home” huge enough to be a junior high school. You can see it from everywhere, the first of many graphic reminders along my route that the scale of this region—herb farms, piano teaching, general stores, little libraries—coexist uneasily with the high-octane national economy, and that hence the values and practices of community come inevitably up against the hyperindividualism of our time, the hyperindividualism that thinks nothing of ruining everyone else’s view with a house four times too large for any conceivable purpose. I can feel myself starting to heat up from the inside—this is a sermon I’ve preached before, and once it gets rolling it’s hard to stop—so I find a shallow pool in the New Haven River and lie down for a good cold soak.

My destination tonight is the larger town of Bristol, most of the way down
to the valley floor. The last mile or so, the road descends through a tight draw between the Bristol Cliffs wilderness and the towering bluff wall that locals call Deer Leap; since there’s only room for the road and the river, I thread my way along the shoulder in the heat, counting Subarus. (Subarus are to Vermont what bicycles were once to Beijing, so nearly ubiquitous that it’s impossible to recognize your neighbor by his vehicle. The supermarket parking lot might as well be a Subaru dealership.) As the state road turns toward town, it passes an enormous boulder, what a geologist would call an erratic, left here by the departing glaciers. On it someone long ago carved the Lord’s Prayer—apparently because the teamsters tended to use less-than-Christian language as they maneuvered their loads around this tight curve. It’s a pleasure to be walking by instead of driving, slow enough to savor the rhythm of the familiar words.

And a greater pleasure to be taking my pack off on the broad side porch of John and Rita Elder’s maple-shaded Bristol home, to sit down on their porch swing and unlace my boots. I stretch for a few moments before I knock, close my eyes and savor the sense of, as Isaac Newton would say, a body coming to rest. This was not my home, of course, but I knew the Elders would make me feel like it was—anyway, arriving on foot gives one a slight proprietary sense. It’s not like arriving in the car for a dinner party. On foot you arrive late or early, without excuse, and settle into whatever conversation is under way. It took you a while to get there, so you’re obviously going to stay awhile. It feels like visiting in an older sense of the word, and you bring with you the news of the road, not the news you heard on All Things Considered.

I’d planned the first part of my route around this house, for John and Rita are among my favorite people, and John is the great writer of these few mountains, this small valley. Not that he’s from here—like Robert Frost, he’s from California. He grew up to be a literature professor, and moved in the there’s-a-job-open fashion of academics to Middlebury College in the early 1970s, never intending to stay. “We always figured we’d eventually go back to the West,” he says. But like many of us he found himself falling under the spell of the new breed of nature writers whose great teaching was place: Barry Lopez, Ed Abbey, Wendell Berry. (His particular guru was the poet Gary Snyder.) Just as important, John was falling under the spell of the Green Mountains. Before long he was teaching one of the college’s most popular courses—“Visions of Nature.” His seminars and symposiums originally met in classrooms—but increasingly on mountaintops and by the shores of ponds, and in the spreading fields of the college’s Bread Loaf campus, Frost’s old summer haunt.

Elder—tall, skinny, goofy warm smile, constant twinkle—nonetheless lives up to his name. He has an innate and generous sobriety, an earnestness a little out of place even in the not-very-cynical world of Middlebury College. You want to be thinking your least selfish thoughts in his company, which is what we mean, I guess, when we say that someone “brings out the best in you.” And more and more he was trying to bring out the best in the land around
him. After years of describing these slopes and pastures, he's begun to work the land as well.

Which is why in the morning I left my pack on his porch and headed off for a morning of labor in his sugarbush, a hundred acres of prime maple woods in nearby Starksboro. With his sons Matthew and Caleb, he's built a stout sugarhouse near the bottom of the land, and now he's ready to put in a bigger boiling pan, allowing him to expand his operation from 175 to 500 taps. Today we're hauling out the old plastic tubing that drains the spiles and carries the sap down to the evaporator. It's companionable work, especially since John interrupts it every few minutes to show off some particular delight: “There's blue cohosh, and that's maidenhair fern,” he says. “They indicate lime-rich soil. So does that plantain-leaved sedge. We counted thirty-one species of wildflower up here one day.” The slope was likely clearcut sixty or seventy years ago, but the rich soils have bred another stand of big trees. And now it won't be clearcut again, not ever; earlier that week, John and Rita had donated a conservation easement on the land to the Vermont Nature Conservancy, assuring it would never be developed—except for two small house lots, one for each son. “See those huge ice-wedged erratics over there? That's where Rita and I want our ashes scattered.”

Driving back to Bristol in his pickup with the old tubing piled in back, we pass example after example of just the kind of careful reinhabitation he's been promoting. On the northeastern edge of town, for instance, a tidy farm occupies the one broad stretch of flat land. A group of Elder's neighbors have been trying, thus far unsuccessfully, to buy the land because it would serve as a natural plug on further sprawl. To pay off the note, they'd need to lease some of the land for a community-supported agriculture farm, an ecologically sound woodlot, perhaps a fishery on the brook that flows through. On the ridge above the land, the same group of neighbors is trying something even more exciting: the Community Equity Project is helping buy a big piece of timberland, and then selling shares in the property, allowing residents without much cash to become joint owners and managers of the landscape. If they have no cash but own a backhoe, they can help maintain the skid roads and pull logs out—sweat equity will do. All of the logging will be done according to the strictest set of environmental criteria. So, no second homes sprout, local people find work and ownership, the forest flourishes.

Back in town, we head for the Bristol landfill. A few other guys in pickups are unloading debris, and so is the town's sole garbage truck, a flatbed pulled by a phlegmatic pair of Percheron draft horses. Their driver bid low for the town contract a few years ago, and ever since then he's ranged the town's compact streets, picking up trash bags and recycling bins. The team walks at a pace that lets him load easily—indeed, he can usually count on the assistance of one or another young girl eager for the chance to be near the massive team. We came home, washed up, and then headed out for the short walk to dinner at Bristol's new Bobcat Café, built with money loaned by community residents. Many of the financiers were lined up at the bar, enjoying their 25
percent discount on the Bobcat’s home-brewed beer. Do you see what I mean? People are trying things here.

And so to bed—it wasn’t precisely the same glow I’d felt in the sunset on Mount Abe, but it was a glow nonetheless.

Like John, I am primarily a writer. We are, that is, good with words, verbally dexterous, jugglers of symbols. And so we have a role to play helping to nudge our communities toward some more reasonable path, toward something that might not rely quite as deeply on the environmental ruination of cheap oil, on the human ruination of cheap labor. We can coax, we can alarm, we can point to possibilities. But let’s face it—the Western world is knee-deep in symbol-manipulators right now. We verbally facile folk form an enormous tribe—throw a rock in Vermont and you’ll hit a published author, who will let out some creative oath. What we need more of are people who actually know what they’re doing out in the physical world—who know so well that they can not just carry forward old tradition but work out new and better ways of doing things. And so the next morning I resumed my walk again, this time in the company of one of John’s neighbors, a man named David Brynn.

Oddly enough, Brynn is tall and skinny, too, with a smile about as sunny as Elder’s. He grew up just across the border in Massachusetts, but swears he was conceived in Montpelier, Vermont’s capital; his wife, Louise, is a sixth-generation Bristolite. He studied forestry in school, and now serves as the Addison County forester—but he’s never been swallowed up by the industry status quo. He founded a group called Vermont Family Forests (VFF) in his spare time, and many of the best ideas in this slice of Vermont sprang full grown from his brain. Or sprang half-baked—he has plenty of colleagues, who help make real his multitude of visions.

So it’s always a pleasure to walk with him in the woods. There’s guaranteed to be a mix of down-to-earth and pie-in—well, pie hovering in midair, not yet quite in reach but getting closer. When he ventures onto a woodlot, oddly, trees seem to be the last thing he notices. Instead, it’s the condition of the logging roads: have they been built away from steep slopes, for instance, and with enough waterbars to keep soil from eroding? “I get emotionally involved with broad-based dips,” he says this morning as we stroll. “There’s a formula to getting them right. You divide 1,000 by the grade, and that’s where you need them—so this is a 7-percent grade, you need a dip every 140 feet. Yes! Right here! We’re going to get a deluge this afternoon, and there will be water on this surface, but there won’t be any erosion.”

Once the thrill of road maintenance subsides, however, it’s clear he can see the forest, too. We haven’t been walking five minutes when he drops his voice, motions me off the trail, and leads me to a little grove. “These are two of my favorite white oaks on earth,” he says, patting a pair of lovely straight
trees. “I get goose bumps when I come over here, and I’m getting them now.”

VFF enrolls woodlot owners who agree to follow the program’s strict ecological standards—not just about sound road building, but leaving lots of dead trees as standing snags for wildlife, staying far away from streams, and a hundred other details. The guidelines fill a thick manual, but of course there’s a rub: building all those waterbars and broad-based dips takes longer than cutting an eroding track straight to the trees you want to harvest. It takes longer to be responsible, in logging as in every other thing on the Earth. And time is money, so in some sense bad logging is efficient.

Brynn’s basic task, then, is not just figuring out how many trees you need to leave standing for birds’ nests—it’s figuring out how to increase the return to landowners and loggers so that they can afford to be responsible. “We find bare-bones logging around here costs $150 per thousand board feet, and doing it the right way costs $220 to $260 per thousand board feet. So we had to come up with some way to pay for that difference.” VFF has played with many schemes to make up that gap; most of them come down, in the end, to eliminating some of the middlemen and to branding the wood as local and sustainable so that people will pay a slight premium. “Right now the Vermont timber industry is worth more than a billion dollars, but stumpage—the money paid to the guy who owns the woodlot—is only 3 percent of that. It’s exactly the same as growing potatoes for McDonald’s. You’re completely at the mercy of the mill.”

But localizing the timber supply is just half the battle. The other half is convincing consumers that what they want in their homes is the same thing that the forest wants to yield. A few years ago, for instance, Middlebury College decided to erect a vast new science building, Bicentennial Hall. The architects specified, as architects usually do, that the interior wood be “Grade 1”—by the standards of the Architectural Woodwork Institute, that means it should be uniform in color and grain, with few “flaws.” That kind of wood, though, comes only from big trees with few knot-forming side branches, and removing those trees from the forest (“high-grading” is what the loggers call it) has left the forests of the Northeast filled with smaller and weaker trees. It’s as if we were some species of wolf that, instead of culling the sick and the feeble, only went for prey in its prime. The alternative is to decide, as Middlebury College did, that what you used to think of as flaws could be reimagined as character. “That tree has been standing there two hundred years, taking whatever nature can fling at it,” says Brynn. “That’s not a problem, that’s an asset.” If you walked through Bicentennial Hall, you’d immediately see what he was talking about, for the walls are filled with little streaks and swirls and flickers that please the eye like the dance of flames in a fireplace. Before long you’re beginning to think in other ways that used to be heresy—like, why does my floor have to be all one type of wood, a big expanse of unbroken oak? Why can’t it be like the forest that surrounds us, which is roughly equal parts birch and beech and maple? VFF supplied the timber for the home we built in Ripton a few years ago: local wood, local
mill, local carpenters. It looks beautiful to the eye, and to the mind’s eye, too, because I can walk you to the forest it came from and show you that it’s still intact. Show you the broad-based dips.

If you can make the economics work, then there’s a chance the people who won the woodlot won’t sell it for subdivisions. Brynn and I reach the edge of the forest and peer off into a new clearcut with a nice orange No Trespassing sign. “This was a beautiful forest. But the owner has cashed out, and he’s going to put in houses. And the people who buy them—well, they’ll be here a couple of years and then we’ll come up to do a new cut so this guy can net enough money to keep his forest intact, and those new owners will be outraged we’re cutting trees.”

“It’s never going to be a huge wildland here,” Brynn says as we come to the edge of this small forest. “It’s always going to be more of a patchwork quilt. But there are so many people who could develop a positive experience with their piece of the quilt. See this stump? A beautiful white pine, shot straight up, not a pimple on it. Then it got blister rust, right about the same time that the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum came looking for clear white pine for the mast of a replica pilot gig they were building. The schoolkids who were doing the work came out here, one cold day in December, to harvest it. They weren’t the luckiest kids—a lot of them wouldn’t look you in the eye. But by the time they’d finished building that boat, well, each of them was able to stand up and give a little talk to the three hundred people who came to see the launch. That’s the real harvest of this place.”

BRISTOL MARKS THE divide between forest and field—between cutting trees and growing corn—in this part of Vermont. Upland, to the east, Addison County tends toward woods broken by occasional opening. West, as the valley levels out toward the lake, more and more of the land is open field, interspersed with woodlots. Brynn and I came out in one of those fields around noontime, a vast expanse of cow corn already higher than our heads. We set off down parallel rows, two feet apart but invisible to each other, and David began talking about how agriculture presents many of the same paradoxes as forestry in this area. There’s the same pressure to produce food and timber as cheap commodities, because most customers buy on price. But cheapness always carries a cost. In the forest, it’s clearcuts and eroding roads. It’s not so different for farmers.

This field, for instance, belongs to one of the county’s biggest dairies—they bought the land, ironically, after they made a bundle selling off a parcel near Burlington that became Vermont’s first big-box development. On the one hand, they are reasonably conscientious farmers, not spreading their ocean of liquid manure until there is enough spring growth to make sure it won’t flow straight into the river. On the other hand, says Brynn, “there used to be fifteen different houses filled with people farming this land. Now it’s all one big farm.” The cows are confined to a huge barn instead of walking in the fields,
standing all day on pavement like city commuters waiting for the bus. The farmers are producing milk at commodity prices, hoping to stay big and efficient enough to compete with the mega-dairies of California and Arizona and Wisconsin, hoping to defy the odds that have shut down 80 percent of Vermont’s dairy farmers in the last thirty years. For the hardworking family it might mean a necessary path to survival, but for the region it didn’t really replace the smaller-scale farming that had once thrived here. It was, perhaps, a kind of holding action—keeping the land in use, unsubdivided, till an economy emerged that could allow it to be more diversely farmed.

And so, when we finally reached the edge of this sea of corn, emerging on a dirt road, I bade David farewell and set off again to the west—interested to see, among other things, if there were signs of that new economy emerging anywhere. If the same kind of creative thinking he was bringing to forests had begun to bubble up on area farms. If the trend toward bigness was inevitable, or if other visions beckoned.

All morning, walking the back road from Bristol toward Middlebury, I was in open country. There were fields in corn, and meadows and pastures, and there were abandoned fields growing in. An awful lot of former farms had been divided up into house lots—until recently, Vermont law exempted parcels over ten acres from state septic laws, so the houses tended to be spaced about the same distance apart. Many had expanses of grass out front, and for some reason, probably because a thunderstorm was threatening for later in the day, it seemed as if every single man above retirement age was out on his rider-mower. Some had clearly cut their lawns just a day or two before—their passage left no discernible wake, like the Russian babushkas forever brooming their spotless patch of sidewalk. But it was a sign of atavistic devotion nonetheless. Farming may have all but disappeared in this country (fewer than 2 percent of Americans list it as their occupation, making farmers scarcer than prisoners), but some desire to tend the soil persists.

And occasionally it erupts, despite all efforts at suppression. I reached Chris Granstrom’s farm about one in the afternoon, and slung my backpack down in his garden shed because the rain was clearly just minutes away now. Granstrom is, come to think of it, tall and skinny, with a broad smile. He arrived in the region twenty-five years ago to attend Middlebury College. “Between my junior and senior year I worked the summer for a dairy farmer a little ways west in Bridport,” he says. “As any good farmer should, he did his best to talk me out of staying with agriculture. But I loved the whole thing.” And he loved it still, though a little more sadly and wisely. “We’ve farmed U-pick strawberries here for twenty-one years,” he says. “Between that, and my wife teaching, and a little freelance writing, we’ve made it. On a Saturday in the spring we’ll get vast crowds. But you know, we’ve been growing them in the same soil. Rotating them, of course, but still, by the fourth rotation, they just weren’t as vigorous. And I was learning about all this,” he says, with a sweep of his hand that took in a small pile of cuttings, his daughter Sara who was busy transplanting them, and a greenhouse beyond. “This” was his new
project: wine grapes specially bred for the North, a concept he stumbled across at a website called littlefatwino.com.

Only a year after planting, Granstrom now has row upon row of sturdy vines where his strawberries once grew. We’re walking them, clipping promising-looking twigs that his daughter—a few weeks from heading off to Middlebury College herself—is transplanting by the greenhouse. “This whole idea of taking cuttings and making them root is kind of magical to me,” says Granstrom. “It’s sort of astronomical the way it multiplies.” Indeed, his business plan relies on that magic—he plans to concentrate on selling nursery stock to others in the area who want to start vineyards of their own.

“Look, the wine will be really nice wine. But probably not world class. So it will be for local supply”—that is, for people who want the pleasure of tasting it not only on their tongues but in their minds as well, who will appreciate the story that comes with it, the same way I cherish the local wood in my house. “There’s a huge glut of wine right now in California, New Zealand—that’s why you can get Two Buck Chuck or whatever in the supermarket,” he says. “But in places like the Finger Lakes in upstate New York, it’s worked out better—it’s for a local market.”

Right about then the thunder finally cracks and the downpour starts, so we retreat back into the shed. Granstrom opens a bottle of the wine he’s made from his initial harvest—crisp, like a Riesling, delicious—and he and Sara engage in what is clearly a long-running debate about what to call their winery.

“Lincoln Peak,” he says—a peak in the Mount Abe range, clearly visible through the trees.

The New Haven gurgles nearby, now almost flatwater after its tumbling descent from the height of the ridge. “Breadloaf Mountain Winery,” I suggest—for the source of the headwaters of the river, and also for its “glass of wine and thou” overtones.

“I just don’t know,” said Granstrom with a laugh. “My whole life used to involve dealing with words, and now it involves dealing with heavy objects.” He looked out through the open doors, where his vines gleamed in the lightening rain. “I have a much more complicated relationship with nature since I became a farmer. Things that seem benign or beautiful when they don’t threaten you directly become something else. Like thunderstorms. Or deer. I was out on the tractor the other day and this mother and fawn wandered in—I ended up chasing them around and around the rows in the tractor. Or take the weeds under the grapevines. I talked to a guy not long ago who was going to control the weeds organically—well, they got out of control and now he’s using a chainsaw to take out pigweed. So I use Roundup, maybe once a year, in a backpack sprayer. Monsanto is a big, evil, nasty company, but that Roundup starts to degrade as soon as it hits the soil. And what are
the alternatives? Well, you could use a mechanical cultivator, but it tears up the vine roots and the soil structure, and it’s spewing diesel fuel as it goes. You could do flame weeding, and maybe I will—but that’s just driving down the rows with a propane tank. Or I could hire a bunch of migrant workers with hoes. Which is the right answer?”

Just like the woodlot owners trying to figure out how much environmental conscience they can afford, Vermont farmers have to figure out how to stay afloat in an economy where food is treated as a commodity. For many, “organic” agriculture was the salvation—a label that could induce consumers to pay enough more for their dinner that small, local farms stayed viable. Behind the label was a story, just like Lincoln Peak wine will be a story, and VFF wood. “Organic” was “value added” in an almost psychological way, as shoppers looked for some kind of real connection that the shiny rows of supermarket apples, the yellow rafts of “chicken parts,” couldn’t offer. Organic carried those fuzzy feelings—but now the organic story is being quickly rewritten, as huge growers start to dominate the market. And so, as we shall see, the search is on for the next story that might allow small farmers the margin they need.

Whatever else it turns out to be, that story won’t be a fairy tale. “I’ve watched many intelligent people arrive and try to farm—they’re well capitalized and all—and most of them go down in flames,” said Granstrom. “And the reason, I finally decided, is that they expect things to go right. You can’t think like that. You have to expect things to go wrong. Like, I used to sell apple trees. And when people would come to get them, I’d say, ‘You have to watch out for this disease and this scab’ and so forth. And they would look at me like ‘I’m a virtuous person, my tree’s not gonna get that.’ But they would, of course. I used to think that way, too—the rain was a blessing on my efforts. But what if it doesn’t rain? You’re cursed? You can’t think like that. You have to replace that kind of thinking with sheer competence.”

The rain ended, and from Granstrom’s farm I crossed Route 7, the two-lane road that is western Vermont’s main thoroughfare. (Until last year, all traffic stopped twenty miles south of here every morning and afternoon when a farmer led his herd from the pasture to the milking parlor. The state, with its usual unswerving commitment to speed and efficiency, finally paid to build him a barn on the pasture side, and so one last small reminder of what life once was like disappeared). A little farther west I hit Otter Creek, just above the spot where the New Haven flows in. Despite its diminutive name, Otter Creek is Vermont’s longest river; it flows mostly north, rising in the hills around Rutland and eventually pouring into Lake Champlain near Vergennes. Along much of its route it winds through farmers’ fields, but this is diverse country—I met Otter Creek just at the top of a rocky whitewater gorge. But instead of exploring that canyon I turned south, walking upstream, through a large forest park that runs right into the county seat of Middlebury.
The thunderstorm had done little to cut the late-afternoon heat, and steam was rising off every puddle. But along the riverbank, giant hemlocks provided their own deep shade, and a spring-loaded carpet of red needles. Peering out through the branches, I watched dragonflies float above the lazy river, and listened to the rising tremolo pulse of insect song, and felt my belly full of wine. Leave Provence to the Provençals, and Tuscany to the Tuscans—the world was altogether sweet enough right here. Why, Provence could kiss my sweaty derriere, I thought, with the slightly sodden pleasure of someone just a trifle drunk. Drunk on that fine Riesling, but even more on the close, humid, singing torpor of an afternoon in the hemlock woods on the edge of Otter Creek. And even more on the sense that life, which in most places seems to me to be spinning apart, was somehow slowly gathering here, deepening, threatening to make sense.

After a couple of miles, the path I was following emerged into Middlebury, shire town and gravitational center of Addison County. It’s not a perfect New England village—a sprawling suburban subdivision of cul-de-sacs and split-level ranches bounds the town to the east, and the town fathers carelessly let a short string of McDonald’s and Marriott franchises bloom south of town along the highway. But Middlebury still boasts an actual manufacturing district. At the spot where I emerged from the woods, I could see the Cabot Cooperative cheddar plant, the Otter Creek not-so-microbrewery, and half a dozen similar enterprises. And with its downtown, Middlebury hits the New England trifecta: bandstand on the green, towering white Congregational church, and at the far end a college-on-a-hill. In between, past the bank and the bookstore, you cross a bridge over a plunging waterfall on Otter Creek. There’s no other bridge for twenty miles to the south, and only a small covered one nearby to the north, so if you’re going east to west in this part of the world you pretty much pass through downtown Middlebury. As a result, there’s none of that left-out-to-dry-by-the-highway look which afflicted so much of rural America. The college and tourist trade has driven rents high enough that too many of the stores specialize in “gifts,” which is to say things that by definition no one actually needs. Still, a Ben Franklin remains, full of venerable merchandise and heavily patronized by my daughter and others of the ten-year-old set who enjoy its penny candy, still priced at a penny. Also a movie theater and a library and an overgrown shoe store that sells underwear and dungarees. Also a fancy restaurant for anniversaries and a smoky bar and a very fine bakery and really what else do you need?

I stood on the bridge in the center of town, watching kids kayaking in the white water beneath the falls, and listening to the passing babel. Most of the year, Middlebury College is a top-tier liberal arts school, as good as any in New England (though just a trifle worried whether Williams and Amherst think of it as often as it thinks of them). In the summer, however, Middlebury gives itself over to a long-running and equally illustrious language school, an