

RURAL GENIUSES

Michael Mayerfeld Bell

University of Wisconsin-Madison

We are it seems
ambivalent about our rural ghosts
and perhaps all our ghosts.
Not ambivalent in the uncertain sense of not caring much.
Just the reverse: Ambivalent in the sense of how our rural ghosts
hold our passions simultaneously in strongly contrasting ways.

Our rural ghosts scare us with their haunting reminders
of what we have lost and tried coldly to forget.
And our rural ghosts fill us with nostalgic warmth.

Our rural ghosts seem the stuff of the past
echoing visitations from the quieter recesses of the collective gray-matter.
And as well our rural ghosts make a claim for the future
calling on our capacities for stewardship
and hospitality for their continued charisma.

Our rural ghosts, with their sepia histories
evoke a landscape of the stiff and the dead
now gone from us.
And yet it is through the attribution of spirit
of *geist*, of ghosts not given up
that we count any entity alive
and reckon the depth of the eyes that look back on us.

Our rural ghosts seem forever what they are
a permanence of character
that cannot be denied
the unchanging truth of the land
and what has passed on and by.
And too the vital spirit that we cherish in the living
exhibits itself through continued appetite for change
and for passing on and forward.

Plus our rural ghosts seem immaterial matters
evanescences, wisps
mere breathes of the mind
that no seriousness could count as real.
And also our rural ghosts are what makes solid
our connections to the land and to each other
through their manifestations of meaning
in the physical lay of the seen
the felt, the smelt and tasted
and even the heard.

Such articulations of twoness
should not be taken as a demand for resolution.
We should not ask for an easy finality of contradiction escaped
or inconsistency ignored.
Each in our own hues and tones
we should instead invite a continual re-solving
not an ultimate resolving
and the granting of endless presence
to the geniuses of rural place thereby.

Note: This poem derives from a commentary that Michael Bell was asked to prepare for the Wisconsin's People on the Land exhibition of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters in the James Watrous Gallery of the Overture Center for the Arts in Madison, WI, April 3 to May 20, 2007. The exhibition accompanied the conclusion of a statewide discussion on The Future of Farming and Rural Life in Wisconsin, conducted by the Academy. Bell wrote the poem in response to the work of the four artists in the exhibit: painter David Lenz and photographers Tom Jones, Julie Lindemann, and John Shimon.