

Reading and Writing the Land



M I C H A E L C A R E Y

A graduate of Lafayette College and the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, Michael Carey farms in southwest Iowa with his wife and four children. His many books of poetry include *The Noise the Earth Makes*, *Honest Effort*, *Nishnabotna*, *Carpenter of Song*, and *The Holy Ground*. Carey travels two distinct, yet interrelated paths in his work, one that travels back in time to celebrate his Irish-American ancestry and one that travels forward to honor his wife's native ground in southeast Iowa.

Although Carey is a New Yorker by birth, he embraces the down-to-earth ways of his adopted state in the musical drama *Dear Iowa*, the anthology *Voices on the Landscape: Contemporary Iowa Poets*, and over the airwaves as host of the public radio program *Voices from the Prairie*. As a bona fide farmer/writer, Carey is, as needs be, versatile, spending winters traveling the Midwest as a poet-in-residence and, often, summers teaching at the University of Iowa. Carey's investment in the farm community is well respected in the Midwest, where he has been featured in the *Des Moines Register*, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, *Country America*, *Successful Farmer*, and the *Iowa Farmer Today*, among many other publications.

Carey is the founder and editor of Loess Hills Books and Carrauntoohil Books.

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I came to Iowa from New York City in 1976 to go to the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. I wasn't a farmer then, and I had no intention of becoming one. I intended to be a poet. But life has a funny way of shaking up your best intentions, and it felt so inclined to shake up mine. Over a vat of apple butter at an Amish Oktoberfest in Kalona, I met a beautiful young woman with golden hair who changed my life. So I married her and she married me, and in 1980 we moved to her family farm in southwest Iowa. This, to me, was and still is a rude but magical awakening.

Her father was a doctor and an only child. He had inherited his family's farms, but he didn't farm them. He left that to his cousin Merris. Luckily, half the county

is full of “cousins,” so it was easy to find one. About the time Kelly and I decided to get married, Merris had a heart attack, and my wife’s father asked us to come back and lend a hand. I wanted to teach, but I hadn’t found any openings. There was nothing better on the horizon, so we went. About a year after we arrived, Merris was diagnosed as having cancer. Within six months he was dead. By then, as chance would have it, I was the one member of the family who knew the most about what was happening on the farm.

For some reason, Kelly’s parents and siblings allowed Kelly and me to make a go of it on our own. The idea seemed ludicrous to me. What did I really know about farming? Five generations stared from the four walls around me. They had pioneered this place. They cleared the land, and held it through the Great Depression. Now, it was all up to Kelly and me—two, as my father might say, happy little morons.

We never saw the good days of farming. By the time we were ready to join in, they were over. Neighbors told me that it would be good training, that if I could make it now, I’d make it forever. I saw good farmers and hardworking families losing everything all around me. I saw that everything hinged on one’s debt load. If you had a lot of debt, it didn’t matter how good a farmer you were. If you had no debt, it didn’t matter what you didn’t know. This gave me confidence.

I saw that I had to get in without going into debt. For forty years, Merris used *his* equipment and *our* land. Once his old things were auctioned off, we had to buy our own equipment—everything. The family had always been conservation-minded, so I looked into no-till farming. I figured I could do my four hundred acres with one good medium-sized tractor, a planter, and a sprayer. They would get me by the first year anyway. I picked up a couple of wagons, an old truck, and some tools at auctions, and we were in business without going to a bank. Grandpa’s motto was always, “Buy what you can pay for,” and that’s what we did.

My biggest problem then was what to do with the equipment. No one I knew had ever done no-till farming. Most farmers are understandably reluctant to risk everything by changing over to something new; in modern farming, there’s a very small margin of error. But I figured it was *all* new to me, so it didn’t matter how I farmed. I just jumped in, fresh and ignorant as the morning.

I remember waking up that first year in early March and wondering just where in the hell I was, who was this woman beside me, where did this old house come from? When I looked out the window I saw a sea of soil I could easily drown in. Who am I? What am I? Why am I? The answers to these questions were changing daily. I didn’t know the answers, but I knew they were changing.

One March morning I asked Kelly what she thought I should be doing that day. I only knew that by the end of April I should be planting. She said she didn’t grow up on the farm, that I knew more than she did. So I got in my ’69 Chevy pickup and drove around the countryside, looking to see what my neighbors were

doing. If it applied to my farm, I went home and did it, too. If I couldn't tell, I'd ask them. I'd drive up to their sheds and say (and this is an actual conversation):

"Hi, Gil. What are you doing?"

"I'm greasing bearings. It's a little custom we have around here called preventive maintenance."

"Great," I said. "What's a bearing?"

"Oh, they're little metal balls that go around your axles to keep your wheel from breaking it like yours did last week."

"Ah! Gil, how might I grease *my* bearings?"

And he'd show me. I'd ask lots of really basic embarrassing questions, like, Where do the seeds go in the planter? How deep should I plant them? How far apart? When? And everyone always told me. They were more than happy to oblige.

I became, I'm sure, the topic of much coffee shop conversation. "Did you see what that Carey kid did today? Turned the sprayer plumb over!" Soon strangers were stopping by just to see if they could help me. "You know, Mike, you don't really have to use your blinkers when you come to the end of a row. Who are you signaling to, the foxes?"

I was the idiot boy from New York City, and in many ways I still am. But eventually times changed and I became part of the rural family. Now, I'm an alleged authority on no-till farming, having done it for almost ten years. I took to futures trading quicker than some and eventually had neighbors calling me for market advice. Not that I had any worthwhile tips to give them, but I did begin to realize what I can only call a certain "poetic justice."

I knew things had come full circle when local people would read about me or my poetry in the *Des Moines Register* or *Time* or the *Wall Street Journal* and be proud of it. I was one of them now, and any glory my work might receive was also a reflection on them. Still, farming to me was like one string of miracles. It's still a source of mysterious wonder every year when I see those little things I drop in the ground alive and growing.

Well, what about my poetry? What was growing on paper as I was planting in the fields? My style changed completely, and so did my vision. I don't think I had ever finished a complete sentence in conversation until I moved to Iowa. My thoughts were always racing ahead of my tongue, and I didn't trust my memory to retain them. My written words had a nervous energy and a dark humor. The lines were short and restless: each one eager to fight for the reader's attention, eager to grab her so she'd notice I was talking.

Once the land took hold of *me*, all that changed—for the better. My lines lengthened in response to the day's endless labor. It was full of detail and at times it became repetitious, as part of me was always in that tractor going back and forth over the fields. My poem "The Thing about Farming" is a good example.

All of a sudden, the world seemed beautiful. It was still extremely dangerous and at times deeply sad, but it *was beautiful*. Every morning when I wake, I'm still amazed at how beautiful the world is. It's perhaps easier for me to name the things about the land that inspire because I'm so new to them.

I grew up surrounded by people and human-made objects, by cement and asphalt and glass. I knew the earth was down there somewhere below the subway, but I didn't know what it meant. I was at the center of a human-centered environment. I worried about the police, and laws, and schedules, and muggers. In Iowa, I became a dot on the horizon. It became easy to be aware of how we are all just one small part of something much larger than ourselves. Something out of which we came and from which we can never be separated. What we do to the land is what we do to ourselves. The way we think is the way we talk, is the way we live, is the way we farm. We always get the government we deserve. It's all connected—culture and *agri*-culture: both spring from the same source.

As a result, I can't help but speak in puns on the farm. Everything I say is symbolic *by nature*. The first spring we got chickens, I didn't know enough to put screen over the henhouse windows. When Kelly announced sadly that we had lost another chicken, I said, "What happened, has she flown the coop?" During a dry spell, I helped Kelly weed the garden, but it was rough going. "This sure is a hard row to hoe," I said before I knew what I was saying. I now, literally, have to make hay while the sun shines. I am always digging in fertile soil (whether it be in the fields or in my imagination). When I cleaned the old pig lot to make a new windbreak, I had to dig out five generations of garbage. It started with rotting car parts from the 1950s and ended with intact but fragile wagon wheels. We now have a full Model-T in the barn. I literally had to dig our roots to get them. Grandpa's old bedstead was entwined in the underground arms of the Chinese elms Grandma had planted.

Everything I see and touch and do now has *resonance*. My whole life has become a metaphor. Most probably it always was, but it was so hard to see it back in the city. I don't have to try to be a poet now, I've just got to talk.

I think this is why things slowed down so much when my voice matured. When I have something to say, the land speaks through me. It doesn't matter who listens. There's plenty of time. Just listen yourself and the words will come.

My children sleep in the same crib, eat out of the same high chair and even play with the same toys that their grandparents did. They're growing up in the same house, using the same furniture as their great-great-grandparents. This year Uncle Elmer was 104; he retired ten years ago. Uncle Dewey, at 89, still will work on the farm with his grade school buddies. I don't remember who I went to school with, and I can hardly remember where. When you see this continuity and you become a part of it, it's easy to have faith and it's easy to sing about it.

Iowans, especially farmers (unlike me), don't talk a lot, because they're good listeners. They communicate loud and clear if you have a subtle ear, but they don't always use words. They're used to reading the subtle signs in the landscape, and

they expect you to as well. You learn to write by reading, by listening. My writing increased in detail and subtlety as I was forced to read this subtle landscape.

At first, I was amazed at how much both Uncle Dewey and Merris knew about everybody and everything without ever getting out of the tractor.

"That poor Jackson girl's having trouble again at school." Dewey once said.

"How do you know?" I said. "You never speak to the Jacksons."

"Isn't that her red car in the driveway? Isn't this the middle of the week? Doesn't she go to school in Ames? I heard she was having trouble. Poor kid!"

"There goes Mrs. Beadle," Merris once said without being close enough to see who was at the wheel of a distant Pinto. "Burt Brambaugh will come down J32 in about fifteen minutes, and he'll head down the dirt road by the McGargill place. They'll come from different directions at different times, but they'll be there. It's Wednesday, isn't it? Yup, they'll be there. The dry gumbo on the bottom flakes like shaved chocolate after a heavy rain. It crackles when you make love on it."

"How would you know, old man?" I shot back to see if he was teasing me.

"Never mind how I know," he said raising an eyebrow and smiling. "I was young once too, you know."

I soon learned to tell when it was 12:30. Our mailman, Mike McNeilly, always parked under our row of cedars to eat lunch. He could pee there in privacy (he thought) under the green foliage. I could see the roof of his faded green Ford shining over a rise in the road. I could almost taste his bologna sandwich. Despite his precautions, I could always see him in my mind's eye, fertilizing our windbreak. No sooner was he done, than Mr. Brambaugh's T-Bird would come sailing over a distant hill. "Fifteen minutes." Merris would say. "Right on schedule. One more round and we'll get a bite to eat."

Every day, over and over, they knew about everything. They could tell you about a stranger's agricultural, marital, and financial successes and failures just by looking over his land and equipment. I thought it uncanny until it started happening to me.

One day my family and I were coming home from our summer vacation and I started commiserating with a farmer's apparent ill-fortune. "Oh, look!" I said, "It stayed dry here all spring and the poor farmer's chemical didn't work. Then it turned wet and he couldn't get back in to rescue his crop. What a mess!"

"How do you know?" my wife asked. "What rain?"

Last May," I said, "About the twentieth. I'd say about eight inches. See how the terraces are broken and the channels are filled with mud, how dark and shiny the earth is, how stunted and weedy his crop? He had to plant a lot of it over."

"The twentieth?" she replied incredulously. "How do you know it rained here on the twentieth of May?"

"Don't you remember?" I answered. "It rained everywhere in western Iowa on the twentieth of May." In the local coffee shop, the veracity of my contention was confirmed. My God, I thought, *I must really be becoming a farmer!*

Probably the most painful ride I take each year is the ride to my in-laws' cabin at Lake Okoboji. Wherever I am, the crops around me are either much better-looking than mine or pitifully behind. They demand you second-guess every decision, making it nearly impossible to actually enjoy a summer vacation. The crops themselves either praise or mock. Things would be easy if God treated everyone the same, but He never does—with a vengeance.

The last time our bottom flooded out, I knew from over eighty miles away, coming home from Okoboji, and I hadn't seen a weather report. I can tell when a stranger has stepped onto our land usually a mile before she gets to the house. Dust on the road, a movement of wild animals, the dogs, the guinea hens, a rumble in the earth—something tells me. Even at night, it's as if I now have antennae.

Just last year, I helped a neighbor harvest because his father had cancer. Usually, I drove his grain truck to his bins while he ran the combine. One morning when I arrived, he wasn't there. Neither was his combine or the truck. We had finished the one field the night before, and I didn't know where else he farmed. I almost went home. Then I noticed a tractor and a wagon lined up the wrong way, pointing to the fields instead of into the shed as usual.

I had never touched his tractors. He treated them like his children, so I was reluctant to mess with them. When I got into the cab, I noticed the gate to the fields we were in yesterday was now shut and locked, but one about fifty yards to the west was not. So I drove the tractor through it, and it brought me over a hill to about fifty acres of corn but no combine. I followed the fenceline for about half a mile to another gate and yet another field, over another rise in the land. Still no neighbor and no combine. I shut the engine off in frustration, almost lost in the maze of terraces. When I did, I could hear the faint hum of a motor, so I followed it down past the woods on the river bottom. I got to his combine just as he was ready to unload. We drove in tandem so he could dump without stopping. When he was done, he called, "See you got my message."

"Sure did," I said as I drove toward the bin. In his mind, he left me a message; he just didn't think to put it into words. I discovered his thoughts on the landscape.

Iowa is a subtle, gently rolling land with subtle people. The language of its people reflects that. It's not like the blatant mountains always calling attention to themselves. It's not the *A-Team* or *Charlie's Angels*. It's a warm story before a warm fire in a hundred-year-old house. You have to stop to hear it. Most strangers zoom by on the highway, lured by the siren call of the big-breasted mountains. They think Iowa is flat and boring. But that's like saying you can't love a woman if she's not Sophia Loren. Iowa is neither flat nor boring. I wouldn't stay here if I were bored; and if my land was flat, I wouldn't need to be a no-till farmer.

You stay in Iowa because you love it. You can only keep writing poetry if you love it; there's little monetary reward. I find myself writing poems and living them, seeing now how we're metaphors for a mystery far beyond our greatest imaginings.

I feel closer to God on the land. When I see a colt born or a mother cow lick her newborn calf conscious, when I turn the eggs in the incubator so my birds will hatch, I participate in the process that brought forth my body. We will never explain God, or reduce Him, Her or It to a formula. The best we will ever be able to do is hint toward a partial understanding, an ignorant awareness—dare I say an “appreciation”—of this terribly beautiful mystery. In this life, the best we can do is to write poetry, to listen to the songs all around us and, in the silence, sing back.

Elmer and Besty¹

I never knew a family to save things
like my wife's family—our furniture,
our house, everything we cling to—
eighty years old or older,
still clean and still in use.

On the dresser to the left of our bed
are two dolls that my wife's great-grandmother
made for her grandfather—still
strong enough for our little Helen—
handstitched, two-dimensional faces
in the faded farm clothes of a century ago
and just the suggestion of purple limbs.

When I was young, I would turn my limbs purple
by dipping them into the raw sewage
of the Passaic River. When
no one was looking, I followed
rainbows oozing from the mist
by the perfume plant. My
family never saved things.
We worried, worked and wasted,
fading slowly without comfort,
fiddling while Rome burned,
fumbling, fighting,
stale dreams in the acid air.

Tonight, after the day's labors,
I have come into my wife's sweet arms.
In the moonlight my mind comes to rest
on the faded remains of Elmer and Betsy.

1. Michael Carey, “Elmer and Betsy,” in *The Noise the Earth Makes* (Cumberland, Iowa: Pterodactyl Press, 1987); now distributed by Mid-Prairie Books, Parkersburg, Iowa.

I almost have faith again in continuity,
that if I talk, someone may listen,
that between darkness and darkness,
my life is slowly becoming the poem
I've always wanted to write—digging now
with a shovel as well as a pen.
Soon I will wake from this dream,
kiss my family, turn the tractor over
and ride it back and forth over the cold wet fields
saying: "Abracadabra. Abracadabra."
And believe in the power of words.