

Wish You Were Here



Love & Longing
in an American Heartland

ZACHARY MICHAEL JACK

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*To Edward Lee
and Michael Allen,
who taught me that Stayers
can also be Dreamers*

“There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought! And when I grow up, I’ll write one—but I’m grown up now,” she added in a sorrowful tone: “at least there’s no room to grow up anymore *here*.”

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

“I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man’s jurisdiction. This was the complete dome of heaven, all there was. Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. . . . That is happiness, to be dissolved into something complete and great.”

—Willa Cather, *My Antonia*

“The talented youths who, in the expansive era of unlimited prosperity, were carried away on waves of enthusiasm for projects of various sorts, wanting nothing so much as to get away from the old things of home, now, when it all collapses, come back solidly to the good earth.”

—Grant Wood, *Revolt Against the City*

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Preface

Wish You Were Here

We 70 million rural North Americans are tuned to lonesome places. Maybe this explains why we often work best left to our own devices, or why we choose to spend our days—or dream of spending our days—in America’s Big Empty, the sprawling region in the center of the country whose silences many urbanites find positively unsettling.

The fashion when writing about the great American Middle—flyover country, as it’s sometimes called—is often to portray us as graying and evangelical. We’re imagined to be stoical types, balding and pitchfork-wielding, or else lone-wolf cowboys, embittered, in either case, by what writer Carol Bly in the 1970s called our “sexual chill” and our subsequent alienation from the rest of an urban, sexed-up, screen-time nation.

Each year I make my home in two such intensely rural places, bookending the traditional Heartland from north to south: Iowa, where the number of acres planted in corn exceeds by 10 million the total number of people, and the remote timberland of southeast Missouri, a state with more live trees—an estimated 8.2 billion—than people living on earth. And I’m far from alone in making the difficult choice to spend my early middle age, my young at heartland, unfenced and unbridled. Statistics show that thirty-somethings and early forty-somethings are returning to the Big

Empty to roost in ever-increasing numbers. In northern Montana, for instance, Toole County experienced a 25 percent increase in the thirty to forty-four age group from 2000 to 2010. Likewise, in frozen Minnesota, sixty-one of sixty-seven rural counties experienced a net gain of thirty- to forty-four-year-olds from 1990 to 2000. They're coming, many of them, to build nests. They're coming to live a sweeter, simpler life, though the living here is far from simple. Like any class of pioneers, they find the going sometimes harder than they thought, and begin looking for others with whom they can share their experience.

Like them, I don't see our country's hinterlands and hinter*loves* as chilled or empty. Instead I see immense love and longing in the prairies and plains and grasslands of the nation's midlands, as well as great hope and participation, earnestness and vision, fostered by a life lived along the horizon-line. Where some see stultifying ritual and repression, I see romance born, as romance so often is, from the distance between ourselves as thinking, dreaming, yearning beings and the difficult visions we, month after month, year after year, create and sustain, each in our own unlikely places. Allowed to stew, sweeten, and mellow, our hinter*loves* often take on an erotic quality, a keening and a pining born organically from the country places where we choose not just to sharpen our axes but also, and importantly, to hang our hats and feather our nests.

These bittersweet distances we court and ultimately befriend are the very things, in the end, that make us pine. They teach us that from love comes longing. Distance is the secret ingredient that enlivens and enlightens the plaintive wail of Bill Monroe's bluegrass tenor, for example, or Slim Whitman's high lonesome yodel. It's what lends the Mexican *corridos* and *rancheros* their powerfully nostalgic pleadings. Distance long-stoked cannot help but create the heat and fire that sometimes cause us to throw open our windows at night and yap in the starshine along with the coyotes.

As its title suggests, *Wish You Were Here* consists of pieces and *pensées* from an American hinterland, championing and sometimes

challenging what was once well understood as “the romance of open places.” These essays and explorations and expeditions offer a slip of how we navigate the twenty-first-century American Heartland, how we long, how we love, how we live, leave, and sometimes lose here: not Lonesome Dove, but lonesome love.

Introduction

Your True Regionalist

“Your true regionalist is not a mere eulogist,” the Heartland’s most iconic painter, Grant Wood, reminded his followers in the throes of the Great Depression. Wood was forty-five years old in 1936, at the height of a career that nearly every one of his most-trusted advisors said would be better spent in New York City or Paris. “Seven years ago my friends had sincerely pitied me for what they called my ‘exile,’” Wood recalled. “They then had a vision of my going back to an uninteresting region where I could have no contact with culture and no association with kindred spirits.”

Throughout my late teens and well into my middle twenties, I had heard similar get-while-the-gettin’s-good messages from friends and well-meaning mentors and colleagues until, a few years shy of thirty, I decided to strike out against a sea of geographic troubles, hoping to end them. I wanted to make manifest Wood’s claim: that to love the rural and small-town Midwest didn’t mean leaving it, only to mourn when it inevitably died for the absence of my very demographic, but to vote with my feet and become partner to a regional solution. I didn’t want to go quietly into that good night, so I contacted a handful of public meeting halls and civic organizations, told them about my beef with the brain drain, and barnstormed my way across what proto-regionalist Hamlin Garland once called “the Middle Border” (from Minnesota to Missouri) to

let the pollsters and census takers and academic sharpshooters know we were out there—we educated, twenty-, thirty-, and early forty-something lovers and fighters—and that we choose to put a very personal plug in the brain drain, attempting to find life and love right here in the midlands. Before I knew it, the *Des Moines Register* and state NPR affiliates had gotten wind of my trek, splashed it across their front pages and headline news, and spread it around the Corn Belt. Almost overnight, the voice of an oddball brain retainer had reached potentially a quarter million midwesterners.

But there were other, more sobering numbers motivating my trek, a slew of which had been released as demographers digested the 2010 census data. By July of 2011, the Associated Press reported rural America's share of the total population at just 16 percent, its lowest ever, alongside the macabre headline "Rural US Disappearing?" In March of 2014, PBS's venerable *NewsHour* followed suit, splashing the headline "Is Rural America a Thing of the Past?" across its national topics webpage. Rural America, the AP reported, had reported its first-ever population loss. From 2011 to 2012, census estimates showed a net loss of 40,000 people from non-metro areas. Globally, the news wasn't much better. In its *World Urbanization Prospects: 2014 Revision*, the United Nations projected that by 2050, 66 percent of the world's population would be urban.

Back in the Heartland, newspaper and radio services picked up my story in part because it told the unlikely tale of the stayers, the holy grail population desperate Midwest policymakers target in their efforts to staunch the out-migration of young professionals. I couldn't claim that my story was typical of my age group and education level—after all, it was my demographic outlier status that had powered my interstate trek in the first place. Still, I hoped that those who were young and similarly wedded to rural Middle America, or those who once were or who cared passionately for someone who is (or was), would recognize the tune and dance to it. Despite the gloom-and-doom statistics documenting our historic losses, globally there were still 3.4 billion of us rural-dwellers, roughly 46 million of us in the United States alone. The real story

is what it meant, and what it means, to be young, or young at heart, in America's great graying middle, to be deeply rooted in a place demographers wouldn't think to find us, having long since given us up for dead. It's about sinking roots and laying down one's welcome mat in a region where, since the Great Depression, successive generations have been told to leave while there's still time, to leap from tall-corn and tall-grass hometowns cast and castigated as sinking ships. It's about the good folks who have somehow found the courage not just to stay afloat here, but to fight the good fight, and even sometimes to thrive.

A decade earlier, when I'd returned to the rural Midwest with a freshly minted degree in hand, I found myself in the exact place and at the exact age about which the panic over departed "brains" had reached a fever pitch. At the advent of a new millennium, the Associated Press newswire hummed with the bumper news that a third of Indiana residents left the state after graduating from college and that Nebraska's top performers on the ACT exam were increasingly out-migrating for their four years of university. The gloom and doom on the AP wire soon found other smaller newspapers piling on to augment and amplify the blue note. The *Toledo Blade* reported that the more education its citizens had, the more likely they were to move, while the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* asked with a note of desperation, "Is there any possible regional solution to the brain drain?" Lacking a panacea, the paper urged its readers to "talk to friends and relatives who have left. What made them leave? What might draw them back?" Pining like this, it seemed to me, amounted to a lover's lament over a courtship gone south, where one party—the abandoned—rehearses over and over what went wrong.

My home state of Iowa, by virtue of attracting so many young brains to its affordable universities, suffered the worst of the population hemorrhage after graduation. The IRS tax return tracking service showed that Nebraskans were the only Heartlanders more likely to move to Iowa than Iowans were to leave for neighboring states. As a relatively recent graduate of Iowa State University, the

Young at Heartland



Part I

Hinterloves

“I can’t tell you how many people I’ve spoken to who have said, ‘I would love to live in x or y small town but I’m single and I *just can’t*,” Stephanie Larsen of the Center for Rural Affairs tells me when I call her to ask what prompted her move back to the Great Plains from Washington, DC. After enduring a forty-five-minute Metro commute during her days as a nutrition and food security legislative advocate in Washington, DC, thirty-something Larsen and her partner bought a twelve-acre parcel, dubbed it Thistle Root, and rooted down outside Lyons, Nebraska, a town of roughly one thousand located forty-five miles south of North Sioux City, South Dakota.*

Already Steph and her partner find themselves conspicuous outliers in a town where the population is older (just 5 percent of the population falls in the eighteen to twenty-four bracket) and profoundly homogeneous (in excess of 98 percent white). Life-partnered, the impressive pair has chosen for their home a place where well over half of adults are conventionally married. So I ask the prairie-enthused Larsen why more of her thirty-something peers haven’t followed her road less traveled.

“If I didn’t have a partner, I probably wouldn’t live here either,” she confesses. “Especially when you’re doing something different than everyone else around you. It’s really hard to have the strength completely within yourself without someone who’s in it for the

*Since the time of this interview, Steph Larsen and her partner have moved to a twenty-acre ranch in rural western Montana, where they graze sheep and cows.

long haul with you to say, ‘You know what, we’re gonna be these weirdos; we’re gonna do that crazy thing.’ Because you get it from all sides. There’s your neighbors, who are like, ‘Organic, what’s that? That’s dangerous. That’s a threat to me. I don’t like it.’ And from urban friends, who say, ‘You wanna go *where*? Why would you choose *that*? Can’t you just go to the farmer’s market and be happy about it?’”

Larsen, who grew up a professor’s daughter in the university town of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, says the credibility issue for young urbans who choose to live in the region’s agrarian hinterlands can be a daunting one—the struggle sometimes boils down to how to get farm and ranch people to recognize that you’re something other than a snot-nosed, fresh-faced kid from the city with high-falutin’ ideas about how things ought to be. “I have advantages because I have fresh eyes,” Larsen maintains. “I hear a lot from people who grew up on farms, ‘Oh, it’s such hard work. I would never go back to the farm. It’s dirty. It’s stinky.’ Quite frankly, I don’t find those things to be true.”

In a sense, Larsen’s sentiments reflect both the answer and the problem for young ’uns with the nerve to move to the nation’s brain-drained midlands, where demographics dictate that the highly educated young will be a conspicuous minority. Larsen’s not a wimp or a prima donna, as her comments make plain. And yet the citizens of this rural town on the Plains might recognize in her assessment a certain kind of naïveté . . . after all, working a desk job from nine to five and coming home at night to a dozen acres with a handful of laying hens and a large garden is a world apart from the dirtier, smellier, more visceral world of farming and ranching many of them grew up with by necessity. Even the idea that Larsen considers herself a farmer, and writes about it, rankles some of the natives to these fathomless grasslands.

“It is hard work. It’s not for everyone and I respect that,” Larsen says. “But I think where it’s important to me is to listen to and respect the experiences of people who have done this for a lot longer than I have. And at the same time it’s important for them to

respect the questions that I have, because sometimes you're so close to the problem you can't see the obvious solution. That's where having some fresh blood and fresh ideas in a rural community can really be a benefit."

Here again, the decision to live young and in love in a land associated with gray-haired staidness and puritanical repressions (picture the man and woman of Grant Wood's *American Gothic*) can create an identity crisis similar to the one experienced by college students who, for example, leave their native inner city for an affluent suburban liberal arts college. Such students routinely report that when they're speaking to administrators or professors or classmates, they feel the need to be one kind of person, and when they're back home for weekends or holidays, they feel the need to be something completely different, that the two worlds are seemingly mutually exclusive.

Larsen's life embodies that dichotomy. When she occasionally writes for the local hometown newspaper, she can't completely be herself there, sticking to safe topics that are homey and, at best, gently challenging. But when she blogs for liberal, post-feminist websites on the West Coast, she revels in playing the role of provocateur. Should a mix-up occur—for example, should one of her post-feminist blogs accidentally get submitted to the *Lyons Mirror-Sun*—the results could be either catastrophic or comedic. It's a *The Importance of Being Earnest* dilemma, wherein the charismatic, identity-riven Jack splits his personality by necessity, explaining to his pal Algernon, "My name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country."

"There's definitely some challenges associated with insularism and the fact that I don't know people's names," Larsen admits. "They are sometimes wary of outsiders. . . . It's taken me several years and a newspaper column before people really know who I am. . . . I know there's much less agreement among my neighbors about the way I choose to think about things than, say, in an online community. . . . Here we have place in common; [online] we have a subject area in common. And so there are certain topics where I'm, like, 'I'm not so sure I want to put this out there for people who've never met me.'"

Escape Velocities



Part II

Jack and Jill

“A trip to Expo '67 with a friend in his 'Vette was an interesting experience in this senior boy's life,” read Sandy Donohoe's February 1968 “Senior Interview” with her classmate Michael Jack, the Midwest farmer's son who would become my father. For thanks, my dad credits in his interview “his parents for all the help and guidance they've given him, and Gail W. who is a wonderful and understanding person.”

The mysterious Gail W. was my father's sweetheart from Rural Route 2, Mount Vernon, the farmer's daughter (my future mother) my father had met at the local A&W drive-through where, my mom recalls, his first words to her were “Careful not to scratch the car.”



Parked in the drive on the farm, the Corvette that took my dad all the way to Canada and back.

The '67 Expo was the Category One World's Fair held that year in Montreal to celebrate Canada's centennial, and my father had shocked the senior class by loading up with a buddy and driving the Corvette the one thousand miles and twenty hours required to get from the self-proclaimed Pork Center of the World, Mechanicsville, Iowa, to the

capital of Quebec, stopping—or not stopping as the case might have been—to send Gail W. and his family postcards along the way. The first arrived bearing a George Washington five-cent stamp, post-



My father, circa the late 1960s, posing in front of his first love: wheels.

marked July 24, 1967, from Rolling Prairie, Indiana. The front showed a cartoonish map of the then eleven-year-old highway across which was splashed “Indiana Toll Road,” and on back my father had written a single-word message: “Hi!” The boilerplate caption above his cheeky inscription read, “This beautiful super road provides services for the motorist and his car every few miles.” Speed-minded motorists throughout the Heartland had cheered the arrival of the major east-west artery in 1956, dubbing it “Main Street of

the Midwest.” The Indiana Toll Road Commission seconded the motion, producing in 1962 an eight-section foldout brochure thick enough to qualify as a paperback. The booklet’s title, “You’re Never Alone on the Indiana Toll Road,” was accompanied by an equally promising subtitle-cum-slogan: “Safe, Swift, Scenic . . . an adventure in pleasant motoring.”

The Corvette my father piloted across the U.S.–Canadian border to the Expo that summer of 1967 was the same star convertible on whose backseat my mom had perched, waving Jackie O.–style, as my dad cruised her down First Street in the Miss Mount Vernon parade her junior year. The punny banner hung over the side of the



My mother (on the far left) in the 1967 Homecoming Court, Mount Vernon, Iowa.

'Vette read “Jack ’n’ Jill.” My mom might well have been a candidate for the Iowa’s Favorite Farmer’s Daughter contest instead of just Miss Mount Vernon. She was possessed of almond eyes, wide yet discerning, a fashionable sweep of chestnut-colored hair falling somewhere shy of shoulder-length, and a flawless complexion. Like many country girls of her era, she did not do backbreaking “out-door” chores alongside her father on the farm, but instead threw her energies into community and school events, where she was elected to the homecoming court and cheered for the Mount Vernon Mustangs during football season.

Black-and-white glossies of the 1968 homecoming court show Mom cradling a bouquet of flowers twice as wide as she was—the only candidate for queen not wearing black heels and the only one to pose gloveless. My mom wore a green velvet dress and yellow patent leather shoes with a transparent heel; she’d had them for years, waiting for the right occasion. To her left stands another farm-girl classmate, Carol, who looks as if she could be my mom’s

Country Love Songs



Part III

Mona Lisas of the Prairie

To be young, or younger, on the windswept acres of Middle America is inevitably to be haunted by a sense of generational inadequacy. Across the miles an inheritance seems to unite us, the young at heartland: the daunting, haunting, fairy-tale relationships of our forebears. With uncanny gravitas they seem to trump, in advance, any supposedly more enlightened, more educated love we might muster ourselves in a digital age. Our well-rehearsed we-are-not-worthies seem somehow a part of the fabric of our generational hand-me-downs—the unspoken yet certain knowledge that our own lovelights are destined to burn more dimly than the mythic loves of our ancestors.

Years ago, whenever my good friend Mark would come to the end of a love affair, I would be summoned to his front porch to lament the swift souring of his romantic fortunes. Gatorade proved our hard-luck drink of choice, and as we guzzled neon-colored electrolytes he'd retell the rose-colored story of his parents' meeting, who met by happenstance at a far-flung tavern in rural Minnesota and who, a mere two months later, married hastily in the kind of starry-eyed daze baby boomers dread for their own children. Nearly fifty years later Mark's parents are still happily wed.

Back then Mark would wonder aloud why, in his early thirties, Cupid hadn't yet aimed his sharpest and most soulful arrows at him, why his latter-day relationships seemed forever to pale by comparison to his folks' fairy-tale romance. Underneath my good friend's sincere lamentations, however, it seemed to me he possessed a quiet

kind of certainty concerning his future. Graduate degree firmly in hand, he would return home to Minnesota, where the family wagons would dutifully circle around him. He would eventually find a local gal, buy a nice house in Apple Valley or Edina, and live happily ever after. Privately, I knew my own return to my rural home, equally as inevitable as Mark's to Minneapolis, promised to be more deeply riven. I would be returning not to a thriving suburban place where a space had been reserved for me, but to a ruin—a hard-pressed hometown, a farm with no clear heir, a deeply loving yet darkly troubled father who'd stayed behind to man the fort, draining the resources of the farm even as he dutifully tried to save them.

In my weaker moments I wondered whether my own attraction to my demographically challenged region hadn't in fact morphed into a fatal attraction, one destined not to delight but to dictate life and its possibilities. Lately, I had made myself an expert on studies of rural demographics, most of them substantiating demographer Richard Florida's claim that "people born in disadvantaged locations tend to carry that initial disadvantage across subsequent life stages." Florida quotes fellow geographer Bethan Thomas, as saying that folks born into such an environment will find, at every step along the way their "chances much more constrained" and concluding that "where you live can limit or assist your life from cradle to grave."

And if my relationship to home is indeed a fatal attraction, in opening up the boxes containing the more blessed artifacts of my grandparents' courtship there, am I, in my own way, opening up Pandora's box? Does their kind of platinum golden oldie amount, now that it's gone, to a hard-luck swan song for me and my generation, a tear-in-my-beer country and western? A swan song for our town? For an entire rural region? Are our parents' and grandparents' gold standard ditties better left on the shelf . . . a bottle of good whiskey? And is the singing of such sweet songs bound only to evoke the nostalgic or the melancholic, reminding us of the sobering gap between the greater harmonies of their cultural moment and the lovelorn dissonances of our own—Glenn Miller

versus Lady Gaga? Or is singing the golden oldies of our regional and familial Thens necessary in order to hear the historical rhymes with our Nows, turning the old songs into sing-along songs that help sing us home when the light grows dim?

What would happen, we lovelorn sometimes wonder, if we voted for love made local, for that homely, homey place of our birth, for that boy or girl, man or woman, that only seemed inadequate but which our native soil grew for us? And what if the near-mythic relationships enjoyed by our parents and grandparents—those we long ago turned into gold standards to play when our own personal love-lights flickered and grew dim—weren't so destined as we first supposed, but were instead the product of tough, should-I-stay-or-should-I-go-now decisions not unlike our own?



Chicago, the lodestar, the place demographers class as one of the nation's urban magnets, its Second City. It remains the place to be, whether your aim is to wheel and deal in profitable pork bellies at the Chicago Board of Trade on Jackson Street, or to woo one of the upwardly mobile young professionals filling the high-rises on Lower Wacker Drive—the tens of thousands who stream out of their office buildings at 5 p.m. to catch the fleet of Metra trains waiting to spirit them away to cozy, steam-heated North Side studios in trendy places like Wicker Park and Wrigleyville. In the heart of the Chicago Loop, two-thirds of the “creative class” boast four-year degrees and they're out to match up in what demographers not-so-jokingly call “the great mating pot.”

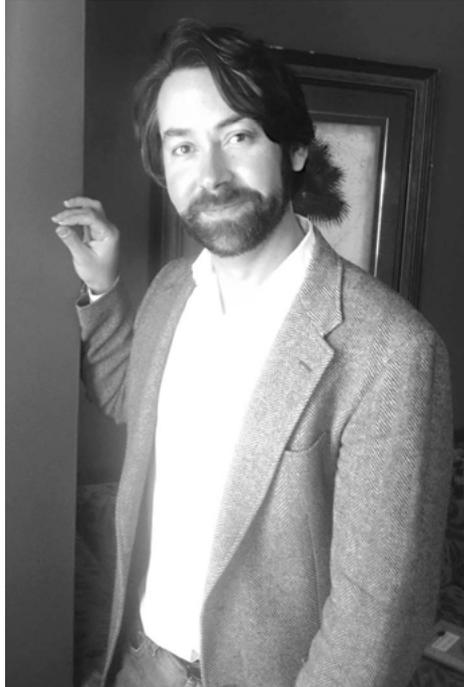
My friend Mark was born under a prosperous star into an upper-middle-class Minneapolis suburb destined to accumulate culture and capital, in part because his own father left a midwestern farm a generation earlier, found a stellar gal, and had enough horse sense to settle down in a dynamically diverse community. I, on the other hand, drew first breath on a farm outside a blink-and-you-

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About the Author



Zachary Michael Jack is an award-winning author and editor of many books on rural life. Twice nominated for the Theodore Saloutos Award for the year's best book in agricultural history and a national runner-up in his class for *Foreword Reviews* Book of the Year, Jack teaches courses in writing, rural, and place studies at North Central College and is on the board of the Midwestern History Association. The author was raised on a heritage farm on land that has been in continuous family ownership since before the Civil War. His ongoing legacy on the land includes living in and operating farm homes in Iowa and Missouri, states his ancestors helped pioneer. Jack is the seventh generation in his family to make his home in the rural Midwest.