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Barns

My Grandma Cauble's old white barn still has the Frankfort Milk Market's Grade "A" Milk Permit tacked to the milk room door. The barn, standing between Kempton and Ekin in Tipton County, is typical of Indiana—a gramble roof, a hooded hayloft door, snapped-off weathervanes, a silo. In 1974, the previous owner sold off his herd and his fields and sold the house and outbuildings to my retiring grandparents.

During my childhood, the barn was a playground of heavy doors to dark rooms and stalls, of a forbidden hayloft still full of hay. My grandma used it as a garage for her car, mower, and freezer. The farmer across the road stored some implements there. But the barn wasn't used daily for all of its possible purposes.

What I remember of the barn are the dark spaces, the silence, the stories contained in that silence.

I'm a writer, poet, and teacher. Places like my grandma's barn are filled with possibilities of narrative, not only of people but also of land. Barns are a Carnegie Library of these stories, more complete than any book, newspaper clipping, or photograph. Only a barn can hold the fullest record of the family that settled and worked the land, of the generations that followed, of the land itself.

Recently, I drove up to my grandma's barn to see what I'd forgotten, to put together the story of what's left. The foundation isn't fieldstones, but concrete block, hauled from somewhere; "1910" is etched in a concrete slab.

Posts and beams are rough-sawn and hand-planed, likely from nearby trees. Not one bolt or nail holds the frame together. The end of each piece of lumber is hewn perfectly to fit in a deep, rectangular notch in the other, pinned in place by wood pegs.

The nearly empty hayloft reveals the art in the beams, posts, and braces. Bark still shows on some beams, a story of local trees.

At some point, the previous owner leaned a large sheet-metal shed across the back and built a silo so he could accommodate more dairy cows. He tried to get bigger before he got out.

Barns are all that remain of farmsteads that once held houses, windmills, and outbuildings—an existence. No livestock in the stalls, no hay in the loft, no life; maybe a four-row cultivator, some rusted fence, a broken-handled shovel. These unused barns litter Indiana, their chipping paint, missing siding, and rotting roofs now a sagging part of our state's iconography of red barns, sweet corn, and basketball goals.

I'm in awe of the inherent usefulness of these barns, but dispirited by their disuse.

My grandma's old white barn contained a cow manure pile that had rotted into soil. In the garden each spring, we dropped a scoop in the hole of every seedling we transplanted.

Although we lived near Lebanon, my family grew much of our own food on a half-acre plot at my grandma's house. That magnificent Tipton Till Plain provided enough sweet corn and vegetables to freeze or can for winter. We gave away what we couldn't eat. For meat, neighboring farmers sold us a pig or a side of beef.

We weren't hippies or treehuggers. But we knew from where and from whom much of our food came. When my grandma's strawberry patch died out, we picked at U-Pick patches until we had enough quarts to freeze for winter.

Eating locally is the way my grandparents raised my mom, and that's the way my parents raised my sister and me.

Eating locally made my grandma's barn and our neighbors' barns a little less quiet.

My grandma's old white barn symbolizes the loss of some of my ties to rural culture and local food. My granddaddy passed away in 1976, my grandma in 1996, and my mom in 2003; with each loss, we've struggled to maintain these ties while honoring their memories. My dad still plants a big garden, and we can and freeze what we grow, storing food and memories.

My first child was born recently, and she'll learn to can and freeze, too. She'll poke seeds into the dirt and scoop manure for transplanting seedlings in our little downtown garden in Indianapolis. We'll pick at U-Pick patches and orchards. She'll know where her food comes from.

More people can know this by simply buying some of their food from farmer's markets, roadside stands, or even the back of pick-up trucks. More people can know this by starting a small garden.

This way, farmers can share their stories with new generations, before a barn is all that is left for a writer like me to create the past.

This way, not all barns will fall into silence and disuse.

This way, we'll all recover—and honor—a small bit of what we've lost.