

## **One-Hundred-Fifty-nine Spoonfuls of One Soil**

*“Uva Turnbull (1895 -1970)... started her hobby of collecting soil samples on a trip she took through Missouri and down to Texas. Eventually, she had over 100 scoops of dirt from every state in the Union and from such faraway places as Newfoundland, Greenland, about 800 miles from the North Pole, Africa, France and England.”—Evelyn Birkby, trustee of the Fremont County Historical Society in Sidney, Iowa*

### I.

I wanted to go to Iowa because the landscape I live in resembles punched pillows and rumpled bed quilts after a thrashing night of insomnia and I wanted to see it's opposite; I wanted to feel the vast flatness, experience the taut sheets of king- sized openness, to drive through a Sahara of soil: though Ohio, across Indiana, into Illinois and Iowa, the *heart land*, but most of all, I wanted to lay eyes upon Uva Turnbull's collection of dirt.

Not just *any* dirt, but 159 cream jars of dirt from around the world on display for all to see in Sidney, Iowa.

### II.

As a subsistence farmer, I grow food, and in doing so I touch, dig, destroy, consume and remake soil. Moreover, as Karl Hammer, owner of Vermont Compost Company, says: I am walking soil.

And he is walking soil.

Are you reader, walking soil? Yes, you are walking soil.

What Karl is saying is that not only do we come from soil, and to soil we'll return, but even in the present moment: we are the expressive form of soil. Even his license plate reads: *ONESOIL*

A few weeks before I leave for Iowa, I speak to the sultan of soil as we sit in his “office” under an exuberantly blue sky, in 19 degree air crisped with brisk gusts: wicked cold. We climb up to the topmost bark bed on his hillside. Karl scoops out a fanny sized nest of bark, releasing a great exhale of wintergreen-fragrant steam. He settles in, as if he were sinking into the bathtub, pronouncing, “I could live on a bark pile,” followed by, “I do live on a bark pile,” followed by mention of where he's to be interred, (bark, of course) with instructions, “And please, don't turn me.” I shimmy in beside him, and soon my butt feels like a spud baking in the oven, so I shift to my knees as we study the terraced landscape around us, a maze of windrows where food waste,

manure, and barkchips are fast-tracked into premium compost, beautiful friable soil.

To Karl the world is one big dirtball where nutrients slosh around. He sees rivers of nutrients sliding into grocery stores in the form of all the stuff that fills the shelves; and then he sees rivers of nutrients washing out into the parking lot, packed into cars and then he sees rivulets of nutrients leaking out of neighborhoods into landfills. He sees gravity pull down mountains into particles that silt up rivers, and rivers that carry a billion Edens of dirt to the sea.

And whereas Karl spends most of his time accumulating and compiling the materials to make One Soil right behind the house where he lives, his converse, Uva Turnbull, left her Iowa farm, equipped with a trowel and a jar, collecting each specimen on numerous family trips. Her project wasn't to make one soil, but to have a little piece of all of it.

I first learned of Uva's soil collection in a tiny article in a farming newspaper my neighbor loaned me one evening. Her son, then five, began a tantrum over the newspaper, so I handed it back.

Later that evening I googled "Dirt Sidney Iowa" which yielded one contact: Evelyn Birkby. I called and no one answered. Undaunted, I plotted the trip. I wanted to leave after the threat of pipes freezing, but before the full throttle of growing grass, the burgeoning garden, the North Country jumping out of dormancy. Poet James Galvin calls early April, "the stunned little interval" –this would be my window of opportunity. With a specific destination and a general direction set, next I cast about for a companion. Three weeks before I left I met Charlie through a friend of a friend of a friend. Marisa, my neighbor said, "Don't be mad that I got you this guy's business card."

In our first conversation, Charlie said, "Iowa! I was born there. Can I come?"

### III.

Walt Whitman, a Long Island man, lit out for parts west and south in 1848 when he was hired by a newspaper called the New Orleans Crescent. To get there he traveled by train, stagecoach, and steamboat, returning some years later via the Great Lakes.

His literary achievement, a sequence of poems titled, *Leaves of Grass*, was first published in 1855, and in it one finds not just long-limbed poems celebrating the variety and complexity of America, but a spirituality that is both gritty and transcendent. He writes: "I will show that whatever happens to anybody, it may be tuned to beautiful results/... And I will show that nothing happens more beautiful than death. /How can the real body ever die and be buried? /...My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air. /...The smallest sprout shows there is really no death. /And if ever there was it led toward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it.

Walt Whitman, by Hammer's terms anyway, was singing soil.

And had Walt doffed his hat, then scrunched into the sedan with his rucksack to come with us, he might have penned new lines, verse beginning much as his previous did:

*On journeys through the states we start  
How curious! How real!  
Underfoot the divine soil...  
The soul,  
Forever and forever—longer than the soil is brown and solid...*

And then he might have celebrated the men and women of America, 150 years after his first encounter, his incantation running something like:

*I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear:*

The Ohio truck driver boasting a million career miles driven.

The hostess smoking by the lilacs, warning: you can't take your dog in there.

The Indianan and his retriever, Einstein, suggesting the Best Western over the Motel 6.

The Illinois hog finisher at the gas station asking, You're not from PETA are you?

And the Spanish teacher in Iowa wondering if his wife will ever love America.

Walt might have reveled in this opportunity to record the new news from the roadsides, as he once declared, "*Whoever you are/ To you endless announcements!*"

He would have reveled in:

Great Buy: Make it Pork;  
Welcome to Delphos: family community opportunity;  
Vote yes on issue 2; Miller and Coors lite pack \$10.99;

Fresh brown eggs \$1.50 dozen;  
Dan Quayle Birthplace  
and Indian Museum;

Sharfer for Sherriff;  
Coke \$1 any size;  
Vote Drinski prosecutor;

Kentland, IN: where agriculture and industry meet;  
Birthplace of George Ade --the buckle of the corn belt;  
Crescent City: small city with a big spirit;

He would have heard music in:

The Cowbird perched on roadside cross singing:  
*Welcome to Chenoa: Crossroads of opportunity;*  
*Blazing fast internet \$14.95; 86 pounds lighter and loving life;*

And the Robin atop a stop sign singing: *Private dancer now open*  
And two meadowlarks in Clarinda singing with a redwing perched on the  
sign for *Pioneer Park: True Life Taxidermy; Windmill for sale \$200;*

And a starling on a yield sign singing: *Bad Boys Bail Bond*  
*--your freedom is our business;*  
*Matt Tebbs for Sherriff;*

When we got to Ohio we found the rumpled landscape ironed out. Anything vertical was an event. A tree was an event. The world became one endless cinnamon brown expanse with an epaulette of trees, a corsage of trees at best; the vastness acted as a vacuum against our windshield. The bushel basket of my universe lost its hoop, its sheaves splattered open. I felt prone, revealed, like a weevil roving an almost empty table; once I counted eleven homesteads, surrounding us like numbers on a clock, each a mile away, and I am sure of it, that there were eleven, not possibly fourteen or twenty —because everything,

everything was evident. When we hit a crossroads and stopped: looking north—infinity; looking south—infinity.

The beige dust blew across us, lifted from fields by tractors discing in last season's corn stubble. Spring and the face of the earth was lifted up and tuned over, whole counties of sod tilted on its head, sprayed with anhydrous ammonia, seeded with corn and soybeans, by mansion sized vehicles, moved by a single man. His few hours on his few thousand acres—a diabolical miracle.

Occasionally we saw the focused work of a dust devil, dervishing in the field--as if a tree got loose and pirouetted...inimical of the tractors' work, only doing it less methodically, doing it beautifully.

Why, then, were we driving through the exposed heart of the heartland, surrounded by all the dirt we could ever want to see, headed to look at someone's collection of bottles of sod?

I can't answer that now.

#### IV.

On the morning of the fourth day we drove into the sleepy Sidney, Iowa. There were no signs indicating a museum so we drove over to the rodeo arena, billed as "The greatest Show on Dirt" and found it deserted save one beefy man discarding an empty charcoal briquette bag. We asked, "Excuse us, but where's the dirt museum?" He looks stunned. *The what?* He said he'd lived here all his life and had never heard of such. And then he stared at his boot, *Wait a minit—you must mean the Lois Hill Museum over by the interstate, towards Omaha.*

Well, according to the retired couple Stanley and Shirley, who volunteer once a month at the Visitor Center, No, this is not *the* dirt museum, but they do have some dirt we can take a look at, seeing as how we drove so far to see some. Shirley retrieves a bucket of the special soil beneath the interstate and the roots of corn and the parking lot where our car hunches like a jackrabbit taking a breather.

The tan Loess (pronounced like *luss*, *less* or *Lois*) feels like a handful of baby powder. Its fine grains are made of glacially milled feldspar, quartz and mica. These soils, though not inherently rare, have accumulated in mammoth swaths in only a few places, the Hunagtu Plateau near the Yellow River Basin in China and here, where the Missouri River divides Nebraska from Iowa.

After the initial glacial churning and milling, winds blew loess dust into great dunes and swales. The three major episodes of deposition include: the pretty old dirt of Peoria Loess (12,500 to 21,000 years old), the thickest and most common loess in Iowa; the very old dirt of the Pisgah Formation (24,000 to 42,000 years old); and the freakin' ancient Loveland Loess, (which strikes me as a poignant statement, as well as an era: Love, Land, Loss, or the three word synopsis of my essay) which accumulated 140,000 to 160,000 years ago.

This is a colossal story, albeit somewhat dull, of dust in the wind for damn near 50,000 years.

It's so easy to let the soft powder pour from my palm into Charlie's, and it is so hard to grasp its immortal formation.

"And have you seen these?" Shirley says offering a plate of knob sized objects. Charlie and I fondle the small eggs of loess kinderchen, German for "children" or "chicks," formed when water leaches out the calcium carbonate from the soil grains.

They'd dent the body if you pelted a truck with them. Charlie asks behind Shirley's back, "Isn't this stone?"

Meanwhile Shirley's husband, Stanley, sits at a broad table prodding puzzle pieces. The picture on the box is of a white church in Sharon, VT. I ask him about his life, and learn: While Walt Whitman was writing *Leaves of Grass*, Stanley's grandfather was hitching his mule, driving a plough into the Iowa sod, raising 300 acres of corn. Stanley's father doubled the farm and grew it to 600 acres, until Stanley took over and doubled it again, and again, and Again: trading his mules for tractors Stanley planted and harvested 3000 acres. I had to ask: And your son? How many acres does he farm? He farms 6000 acres.

I see E Pluibus Unum and it's opposite. From many one, as in the indigenous prairie sod has at least 300 species of plants. But there is less than one percent of one percent of virgin prairie left, and it's mostly in cemeteries, as Whitman would call it, the "*beautiful uncut hair of graves.*"

However, one corn seed can reproduce itself 700 times from a single ear of corn in one growing season. Three hundred prairie plants usurped for one plant.

After pawing the loess soil, hefting the kinderchen, and browsing some dusty exhibits, I ask, Have you heard of Evelyn Birkby? *Oh yes.* Mind if we use your phone?

Evelyn's husband tells us she's at the beauty parlor getting her hair done, call back in an hour.

*Well where are you?* Evelyn asks, thinking maybe we could set up a time to meet next week. Uh, we're here. *Well, then.*

We pick her up at her house, (white house with black shutters) on Maple street, since now her husband has the car, and, oops, the key to the museum. Edna, a Trustee, who works at the Law Office brings over a spare and lets us into The Fremont County Historical Museum, which is officially closed and under renovation.

The museum is in disarray (That's putting it nicely). It looks like a multifamily yard sale. And in the corner, beyond the horse drawn hearse and the frontier woman's tin speckleware, there it is: in what looks like a spice rack, all the jars of soil. In the dim light, they look like turmeric, cinnamon, pepper and nutmeg. Each labeled jar contains two spoons full, (or perhaps, thinking adventurously: a mouthful). I have just driven three days and 989 miles, through seven states, almost to Nebraska, crossing 14 rivers to witness: 159 mouthfuls, a spice rack's worth of dirt, yes.

V.

France had one specimen. France—all 67,464,300 hectares of France of it, represented by this cream jar. A synecdoche—when one stands for all, this palm-able jar: France. Another simply said: Wyoming. You might think all of Wyoming's soil would be just as this.

Yet another says: "Eishima Island where Ernie Pyle was killed 40 miles by plane from Okinawa," and its contents are dark as poppy seeds. Grave soil as if to assert, Here, exactly, nowhere else.

And so it goes on this way:

In general:

\* Louisiana's paprika soil

\* Ozarks' peachy tan

\* Georgia's cinnamon- cola colored  
(and Kansas, and Kentucky, and Winnipeg...)

And specific:

- \* Frankenstein Castle's bits of black twig, chocolate crumbs
- \* Woodrow Wilson Flower Garden, in Staunton, VA, a grey silt, like ground pepper
- \* Boone Ledges, Iowa, a wood -ash colored silt
- \*Iwo Jima spot where two flags were raised, some fine brown grains

Evelyn confesses, "When they donated it, I said we don't want it. Why would we want a bunch of dirt? It's just dirt."

But now she waits patiently as I take notes, and I sense her proprietary concern, what if I slipped a bottle into my purse?

As I am cupping the jar marked, "Bottom of a well 141 feet deep Feb 7, 1958," she says, "*I keep thinking what if you dropped it?*"

\*

Uva said of acquiring the collection, "People think something big is afoot when they observe you painstakingly collecting a soil sample from their road side or field."

\*

My great grandparents saved their plastic orange pill bottles for me to fill with sand from various beaches. The idea of parsing the universe, comparing sands' hues and textures, was nullified by the translucent plastic: lined up in a row, it all looked like orange sand.

\*

Edna said her eldest brother kept a bottle of soil from the dust bowl. Their soil was black and this soil, the soil blown into their life, was red.

\*

In each bottle there is the implied action of searching, finding, and crouching to collect. Each is an artifact of a brief relationship, Walking Soil reaching toward the planet Earth.

And returning with the evidence.

Again, in general terms:

- \* the coarse sand of Lake Superior rattles in on the glass;
- \* Thule, 800 miles from North Pole, is like a collection of rocks;
- \* Tower Isle, Jamaica, contains red-brown nuggets;

and specific terms:

- \*Delaware, Near Capitol has golden pollenish grains;
- \*Silver Mine, Taxco, Mexico are like little chips of bacos.

It's like looking through a family album of dirt.

## VI.

Suddenly I regret not bringing a sample from my silty land in Vermont. I could have offered some bran colored dirt to round out this united nations of terrains. But then, how would I have labeled it?

According to the Lamoille County Soil Survey, "Soils differ in texture...slope, stoniness, salinity, wetness, degree of erosion...a soil series is divided in to soil phases..." The kinds of soils within 50 miles of my homestead have decidedly British names: including Adams, Allagash, Berkshire, Boothbay, Borohemists, Coulton Duxbury, Croghan, Fragiaquepts and Haplaquepts, Hamin, Histic Fluvaquepts, Londonderry-Stratton, Lyman Tunbridge, Marlow, Ondawa (the exception), Peacham, Peru, Podunk (yes, really), Potsdam, Ricker Peat, Rumney, Salmon, Scantic Variant, Searsport Muck, Stratton- Londonderry, Swanville, Teel silt loam, Tunbridge, Udifluvents and Walpole.

## VII. Soul of Soil or: Why Does This Matter?

Or in lieu of teaspoons of dust from my garden, what if I had brought instead the soil of a loved one, say, a cream jar marked, "Uncle Chris."

We had argued over where to put him, my bachelor uncle. Some of us thought his ashes should be halved, to install some of him in Philadelphia where he was born, and grew up, where his original family still lives...and scatter the rest of him in the Rockies, near Boulder, his chosen home. My dad, as his brother and in some ways father, felt that to halve his ashes would dilute him, abstract him in a way, such as to lose him beyond even death. Their father, Pete, an ephemeral presence even during their childhood, had made his own funeral arrangements, instructing a cremation and dispersal so that no one, not even my father, knows exactly where Pete's dusts were loosed or perhaps dumped.

Thus Chris' ashes were wholly interred at Cavalry Cemetery in West Conshohocken near Philadelphia. So now we can all say: Here he is, like Ernie Pyle 40 miles by plane from Okinawa, he is here, exactly, for eternity.

Like Uva can say here—here is France.

## VIII.

“The sea is, in fact one ocean, one ocean with five great names and a thousand little ones...”--Alan Villiers *Oceans of the World* (1963)

On March 24<sup>th</sup> 2009, the New York Times published an article by Carol Kaesuk Yoon about the world's largest known colony of clonal social amoebas. Scientists had found a 40-foot patch in Texas consisting of billions of genetically identical individuals oozing around and behaving cooperatively in a cow pasture near Houston. The significance of this macro-patch of micro-organisms cooperating as a whole, “raises the possibility that cells might evolve to organize on much larger spatial scales.”

Though the patch was short lived—“just one week later it rained a lot and then it was basically gone.” Dr. Manfred Sliwa at the University of Munich, one of the scientists consulted for the article said, “I used to joke that there might be a giant organism in the soil spanning the entire continent and where ever you dig up a shovelful you get a giant piece of it.”

This is what I think Walt's song is about: infinite nature, expressed temporarily, as specific beings. As he attests: “I am large, I contain multitudes.”

Therefore in his immensity he includes Karl, the husband of Onesoil; and he contains Uva, the farmwife curator of distinctive dirt.

Does he contradict himself? Very well he contradicts himself, for he also contains my uncle, reduced to an urn, and my grandfather, freed to the air.

And which camp do I belong to: generous visionary or proprietary connoisseur? Is my reverence, my brand of understanding, particular or galactic?

Uva lived in the spacious place of Iowa, so maybe encountering dirt by the spoonful served her purpose of managing overwhelm, whereas Karl lives in the rumpled blankets, the knees and shoulders of northern Vermont, maybe for him the whole totality of soil alleviates the oppression of tilting hills.

Whitman ends his poem 'Song of Myself,' the big hymn in *Leaves of Grass* with:

*I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love. If you want to find me again, look for me under your bootsoles. You will hardly know who I am or what I mean. But I shall be good to you nevertheless and filter and fiber your blood. Failing to fetch me one place keep encouraged. Missing me one place search another. I stop somewhere waiting for you.*

How do we behave if we recognize land as the source of our being: whether as teaspoons or as one planet-sized dirtball; how do we behave if we recognize we, in our human form are a phase of soil's endless formations?

## IX.

On the drive back Charlie and I decide to switch places. We pull off to the side of a county road beside an endless field in Indiana. The corn has germinated, and rows of green sprouts flicker. As we stand beside the car for a moment, the stillness and vastness obliterate a sense that there is anywhere else but Here. In the hush we imagine what it would be like to quit this road trip and stick ourselves like scarecrows amid the field, what would it feel like to rise incrementally from the dust as a stalk of corn? Or to be the soil that feels the clench of roots?

We stop for the night near Brunswick, Ohio. As we stretch our legs, behind the motel, tramping around the undeveloped plot, its orange-red soil gunks up our boots.

The next morning, at Charlie's insistence, we stop at Lake Eire to fill a glass jar with its sediments.

X.

Back home in the buxom version of Iowa, the stunned little interval is over, the lawn, shaggy. I pull on my boots still gummed from the ramble behind the motel. I wear the orange clay of Ohio into the dewy pasture in Vermont, as one “here” meets another “here,” and I am the walking next installment of it all.

