

A GRAZER'S ODE - Rebecca Goodman

Winter snows have melted away
the drying winds have done their work
change in weather patterns cause extremes
warmth is bringing rapid growth to the grasses
planning becomes action.

Armed with piles of posts and rolls of wire
grazers are out in the greening fields fencing perimeters
stepping off spaces 16 between each post
attaching wire to clips
lamenting broken posts and wire splices from deer damage.

This pasture looks exceptional
a place where cows ought to be
the water tank is full, the float operational
the fencer is on and the wire is at 5 volt
that should hold them.

Ok, let them out
what torture now, skeptics, all lacking memory
then with tails high, udders swinging and heels airborne, they are off
sound of 45 mouths, ripping grass
munching on the the first fresh grass of the year.

Cows feasting on grass de jour
while udders fill and they spread their manure.
Farmer smiles and sighs
the barn will be empty all day, you guys!

Northwood Farm, Sauk County, Wisconsin
a dairy farm in our family since 1889
fifteen years now of re-learning sustainable practices
knowledge on knowledge
always something to be learned.

Spent pastures rotate to corn, then small grain, then hay
move them through fast at first to keep ahead of the rapid growing grass
then settle down to intensive rotational which manages the pasture well
use multiple legumes and grasses
diversity is what makes it all work.

Alfalfa can be deadly when heavy rains follow drought
a dandelion core or along side a burdock is the place to put a step-in post on hard ground
nature can't be improved only aided
pasture not so good now will rebound later in the season
always worried about pastures lasting.

Cows never seem to be satisfied
whoever said "the grass is always greener" knew cows
they will group together making a big slop hole when the flies come
breed for good feet, tight udders and strength
there is still always plenty of work to do.

Twice daily cows in the barn giving milk
farmer walks out to the pasture
stops to enjoy the serenity in the silence
observes how they liked their last meal and prepares for the next
they have consumed everything except the thistles and tufts of green around their pies.

The same amount of fresh grass should work nicely
detach the wire from the tripod, pull the posts
advance 40 paces and reset the tripod
ouch, some new kind of thistle
stop to look up, didn't know there could be so many shades of blue.

Cross the pasture detaching the wire and pulling the posts
stop to look at the intricate lark nest in the grass
advance the other tripod 40 paces while watching the gathering clouds
place step-in posts and attach wire across the green
cross fence tight, secure reel on the tripod, pasture is ready.

Proud neighbor says, "My cows are on BGH"
have heard this before knowing he means "Big Grassy Hillside"
brome, quack, timothy, crab, orchard, rye, canary, blue and indian.
nitrogen producing alfalfa and red, white alsike, alice and ladino clovers.
diversity makes it work.

All combining in ruminans for energy to produce full udders of milk
milk to make locally produced and sold organic cheeses
cheddar, pepper jack, farmer, and tomato basil with the Cedar Grove label
milk for Willie Lerner's specialty raw milk cheddar
milk for our morning cereal and Sunday night's grilled cheese.

"Now, if this isn't nice, I don't know what is"
an apt expression of the late Kurt Vonnegut
only one of a multitude of mentors
some of great fame and others none
some still among us while others live only in memories.

All around this sustainable organic farm
neighboring steads are expanding or taken over by land barons
custom planting, chemical application, harvesting and tillage is the norm
performed by loud large machinery
commodities packaged nicely in petroleum based plastics or taken away in trucks.

This farmer measures profit in bigger terms than just economic
there is value in walking the land
and acquainting yourself with its specific composition
value in knowing your animal by name
and referring to each one as "Daisy" when a certain gentleness is required.

There is good sense in working with nature
letting it do what it will and knowing it has more sense than you
sensible to keep body and mind active with a never ending to-do list
sense in trusting cows to choose what their bodies need
and when they need it.

There is enrichment in forgetting the vets phone number
in letting nature's beauty sooth the savage beast within
spiritual richness in seeing cows on pasture
awesome bringing cows in by morning moonlight
enrichment in being present to Wisconsin's changing seasons.

Cow feasting on grass de jour
while udders fill and they spread their manure
The farmer smiles and sighs
finding comfort in the nourishing essence that grazing implies.