

The Lonely Ruralist from *The Georgia Review*, Fall 2019

By Janisse Ray

Reinhabitation was my dream. But in rural America there's a chasm between what is real and what is myth.

I lived my entire life to arrive on the farm. Ten years ago this quiet, quiet place had everything I wanted. I loved the heartpine house so much I would kiss its walls, as if it were a shrine, and blurt out loud, I love you, house. I was smitten with farming and the idea of farming, using the old way and the new way, neither of which is the corporate way. The climate was unraveling, and to be able to provide basic needs seemed smart. We could grow food, build soil, learn essential skills, capture carbon, and maybe help restore a landscape.

It was all a dream until it wasn't.

The farm was situated on a dirt road in what had once been a thriving community. Altamaha, Georgia, had a river landing and a sawmill, a post office and a school. It had a church built in 1868, during the evangelistic fervor that followed the Civil War. A few homes are left, five or six in a square mile, depending on how you draw the square, and the church still stands, with four members and services the first Sunday afternoon of the month. There's nothing else in Altamaha.

In our county Archives downtown, I found a 1916 picture of Altamaha School, now vanished: about forty children were lined up in the yard to have their photograph taken.

The rural emptied out, fell apart.

When people departed Altamaha, they took the quilting bees, barn-raisings, hay-mowings, syrup-makings, and peanut-boilings of rural Georgia society in the early- to mid-twentieth century. They took the lowing and bleating of farm life, the beating of hooves on red clay. They took the fiddles and mouth harps. My neighbors, the last of the old guard, spool out their lives in these home-places, too old to square-dance or raise beams. In our ten years here Ben died, Leta Mac died, Howard died, Lynease died, Bill died, John had a stroke.

Almost every day on our farm, therefore, is a day with three people in it—myself, my husband, and our teenage daughter. I have seen days in which no car passed.

"May I talk to you a minute?" I ask my husband.

He takes off headphones. "What?"

"Are you at a stopping point? I'm wondering if I can talk to you?"

"Sure." He lays down the headphones and shuts the computer, completely present. His eyes are green like chlorophyll. Is this what I am craving, this being-seen-ness?

"I just find myself so lonely," I say. "I feel it almost all the time."

My husband glances back at his computer.

"I don't know what to do about it," I say. I start to cry.

He steps toward me and puts two muscled, working, handsome arms around me. He doesn't say anything. I want him to say something.

"I'm just lonesome. I spend most of my time alone. In truth, I feel like the most lonesome woman in the world. I'm sorry," I say. "I try to be self-contained."

I remember the loneliest morning one spring—oxymoron though that concept may be: a morning in spring should never be lonely. The mockingbirds were not lonely; they had each other, as did the rain crows, which had returned to find the tree leaves a tender green and the redbuds blooming.

I stood at the kitchen sink, glancing up from the day's dishes now and then to gaze into the pecan orchard. Any sort of movement attracted me—a bird, a leaf, a limb. I was reminded of a line in a poem by Patricia Waters, about farm people "driven by loneliness to see the one moving thing on their horizon." Out the window that particular morning the last of the white camellias offered no solace. Beyond them I could see the grove of large pecans, a congregation of live oaks across the pasture, and marching along the ancient, empty road some myrtle and haw and wild persimmon. Each tree was mute, silent, and possibly feeling its own form of loneliness. My loneliness went on and on like a fog.

We judge our aliveness by our relationships with others, I thought, in that we may experience a kind of death, a mini-death, unless we can see and be seen by others. If we are lonely we may as well be dead.

Attaching is one of the things we humans do extraordinarily well. We learn it early—in the womb, actually. We are attached to our mothers. Then we begin to attach to others, throwing out strings here and there like spiders. The incessant need to attach comes so naturally to humans that the only way it can be destroyed is if we have it scared out of us or beaten out of us.

I was born enmeshed in a wide net. I had a good mother and father and three siblings with whom I spent day and night. I lived in a town where seven generations of my family had lived. My white family attended a black church. I was taught to help relieve the suffering of others, to think of others, to share with others. Being from the rural South and of a certain age, I was taught to have manners—and manners meant you had to affiliate with people. The population of my hometown was 3,500, and a trip to the post office meant I'd see multiple people I recognized. I was expected not simply to recognize them, but to know things about them—their names, their histories, their jobs, their children, their sorrows. I was expected to remember what I learned.

In return, I was known by them.

After I grew up, I lived in towns and cities where the unremitting business of my life was connecting. In Brattleboro, Vermont, my husband and son made a game of guessing at the front door of the food co-op how many people inside I would know. I couldn't run in and grab a loaf of bread.

During the time I was away from the rural, we humans reached a landmark: for the first time in history, over half of the people in the world lived in cities. In the United States, the demography was even more marked—over 80 percent were city dwellers.

Then I moved back to rural America.

My loneliness is nothing new, I told myself. Plenty of people live far from community. They find animals. They find libraries and books on tape, radio and the internet. They find religion. They find all the things that make a person more resilient. They find themselves.

Remember, I told myself, human community is being battered in many ways. There's a father's mind pocked with holes, a brother's alcoholism, a neighbor's trauma, a buddy's opioid addiction, a friend's illness, a town's racism, a region's storm, a landscape's industrialization, a climate's coming undone. Most of us have erected glass walls around ourselves as we hide behind our technological devices, so much so that social scientists say we're in an "epidemic of loneliness." Plus, a part of loneliness is universal, existential, irreparable.

Think about cities, where people can be found. They have their drugs, their diseases, their violence, their rat races, their homeless and downtrodden, their anonymities. People have forever experienced a tension between city and country, and many can't live long in either. Look at E. B. White, Marjorie Rawlings, George Sand. Look at Thoreau, who couldn't stay out with the wild ducks forever.

Community means relationships, the people you know. Community is like an atom. In its nucleus are beloved kinfolk and dear friends. Beyond that are loops strung with people, loops for church, clubs, school, jobs. "In my circle of friends," we say, or "part of my sphere." The circles are not concentric, but elliptic, meaning their orbits cross, collide, tangle.

Of course, these rings depend on geography—people have to live within a certain distance, because too far and they're not your community. And the rings depend on shared interests. In the rural, as we replaced small farms with large farms, we took away the jobs. We took away the people. The people who were left were more dispersed in terms of geography and like interests. So if the people who are beekeepers or krautmakers or brewers live at such distance that seeing them more than once or twice a year is difficult, then do they exist? If they live online, do they exist?

After I'd lived at the farm about six years, I found myself traveling in rural Ohio. One afternoon I stopped at an Amish farm for apples. What I was looking for was an answer to a question that hounds me, which is how to live well in rural America.

Because it was late winter, nothing stirred in the modest farmyard or at the windows of the white clapboard farmhouse, although some distance away horses in a sere field cropped sprigs of dry grass. The silence was dense, almost impenetrable, and very familiar.

When I eased open a barn door marked "Store," a young man about twenty-eight or thirty looked up. He wore simple dark clothes and a black felt hat with a brim. He carefully bent, laid down some mechanism, and smiled. His eyes were clear as green marbles.

"I saw your sign for apples," I said.

"What we have left are there." He nodded toward a raised bin. "Plus vinegar." His voice sounded creaky.

Light streamed into the barn from a brace of windows, through which I could see the horses intent on the meager February meadow. I could see that this man had a beautiful life, a life I wanted—a life I had. How did he manage it?

"Looks like we'll get some snow," he said, pleasantly.

"I've heard it's a blizzard."

"Well," he said. The thing the man had been working on was spread out around a pot-bellied stove, which was not lit, and he seemed in no hurry to return to tinkering. In fact, he seemed to need something from me, too. Maybe it was my money—but I thought not. I rested my hand lightly on a spill of apples. One bin said McIntosh and the other Golden Delicious.

"What are you working on there, if you don't mind me asking?"

"It's a sheep-shearer," he said. "I'm trying to get ready for shearing."

"Your own sheep?"

"Yes. And I shear for the neighbors."

I hoisted a paper bag of McIntosh. "The horses?" I said.

One was a mare his father gave him when he turned sixteen. He had ridden her too hard, racing other boys. Now she was lame but he couldn't bear turning her over to the meat buyers.

I chose a gallon of vinegar and brought my items to the counter. The man totted up slowly. I told him I lived on a farm in southern Georgia, a long way from Ada, Ohio.

"What do you grow?" he asked.

"Mostly for ourselves," I said, and I listed some things. I told him we had acquired a couple of horses, that I was new to them.

"I've been around them all my life," he said. For ten minutes we stood talking about horses.

"What's your name?" I asked. "If you don't mind me asking."

"I don't mind." There was that smile again. "I'm Amos."

As Amos spoke, and as I spoke, our words in the vast silence of the hushed landscape wove something. They were like tendrils of mycelium, a delicate fiber, lacing together to make sentences, looping into an invisible network that began to fill the unlit barn. Our small and amiable conversation was a loom that, if we kept talking, seemed as though it could produce enough loose webbing to engulf the whole of that countryside.

The rural problem isn't only that the people have vanished. The pastoral is often beautiful and nostalgic, but that's not the only truth about it. It is also depopulated, made depauperate, debased, destroyed, and, most tragically of all, dulled and dimmed. As the body seeks companionship, so does the mind.

A town twenty miles from our farm holds an annual Sweet Onion Festival with a Saturday morning parade. The three of us went. Shriners came through in go-carts, dressed like hillbillies, spitting tobacco juice on the fly. The high-school marching band moved languidly past, their missed notes flying off like startled sparrows. The mayor pasted a little sign on the side of his car and rode by, waving. A bunch of churches filled hay trailers with kids.

Later, at home, I tried to remember one cultured, far-thinking, progressive part of the parade: What had we learned? What had spoken to our values? What had made us proud?

"We should have entered a library float," my husband said.

"Anything," I said. "Even a sign that said, READ A BOOK. IT MAKES YOU SMARTER."

A hundred years ago, when the educated class was better educated and when more of us stayed where we were born, a person in the countryside could experience erudition: scholars of arts and letters, imagination and idea; talented people engaging in culture and civilization. Rural intellectualism was alive and well—admittedly among the white male elite for the most part, but not exclusively. We had black intellectualism, female intellectualism, poor intellectualism, even uneducated intellectualism.

Where I live, most people now have one foot firmly planted in the Baptist church and the other in the Tea Party, which usually means that they have found everything they need. They get what news they obtain from the most conservative sources. Most don't have a college education, often not even a high-school diploma.

We have been replacing real, live, interesting, and clever people with ghosts.

Too often I get the heart-flopping news that another friend is leaving the hinterlands, and by this I mean anywhere within an hour's drive of our farm. Larry and Cindy are filing for divorce and selling their permaculture fruit-tree haven. Phyllis is buying a place outside Athens, three hours to the north. John and Giana are talking about Asheville, North Carolina. Other friends leave for Savannah. Or Floyd. Or Amherst. Or Boulder, where they will smoke pot without going to jail, where plenty of hip people are starting nonprofits, doing yoga, practicing their art, and having meaningful conversations about subjects that matter.

One day I found myself in Eastpoint, an Atlanta neighborhood, to record an audiobook. As I was leaving the studio I noticed signs for a farmers market. When I reached it, vendors lined either side of a crowded greenspace selling not just milk, bread, and meat but mulberry sodas, chestnuts, morels, and fresh vegetables. A New Age bluegrass band honked and jammed down by the street. My old pal Robby Astrove recognized me. He was one of the market organizers and after a big hug he asked if I wanted a tour of all the cool stuff they were doing. "Back there's the community garden," he said.

"We're planting a community orchard here—fig, persimmon. We're trying to plant native fruits too. This is serviceberry. Here is an edible hedge of blueberry, sumac, and elderberry. Those herb beds are open to the neighborhood."

Kids dashed around among the trees and beds, playing.

"Isn't this kid-tastic?" Robby said, grinning.

The whole enterprise seemed imminently civilized, progressive, intellectual, colorful, open-minded. Who wouldn't want to live among that beautiful circus? Later someone would remind me that Eastpoint had been 80 percent African American in 2000, before gentrification, reminding me that demography is fluid and that most of us seek some kind of community where we feel at home, where we are home, a fact that does not diminish the anguish any one of us may feel over losing our place.

Back home, I watched the cows in the pasture. Emma, our oldest, was an orphan and my husband and I raised her from a calf. Her own calf, Zinn, was born without trouble, and now Zinn is grown and has birthed a tiny, brown, doe-eyed grand-calf. My daughter and I discovered the newborn not even two hours old, a mound on the ground. To use the word "tan" would not do justice to the shining sepia-hued velvet of this baby. Her lashes were long and fluttery as black butterflies.

"Let's let them be," I said. As we went about our afternoon, we kept an eye on the cows. When Zinn felt strong enough to rejoin the herd, she presented her tan calf first to her mother. That was Emma, the grandmother. Emma touched Zinn's nose with her own and commenced to licking the beautiful calf. The calf stood trembly-legged. Over the next few hours Zinn slowly introduced her calf to the other fifteen cows in the herd. I felt grateful to witness that.

Cow society or not, Facebook or not, I needed people. To that end, therefore, at least part of my daily life became an engagement with creating community. I organized countless events, from full-moon potlucks to organic conferences to clothing exchanges to cheese-making workshops, from readings to concerts to harvest festivals.

People came—usually from Savannah, the closest city—nostalgic and hungry for a country life.

And then they went—back to their homes far from mine.

One night I dreamed an amazing dream.

Altamaha, Georgia, was thriving again. It had a tavern in John Sanders's useless barn. People gathered every Thursday evening to make wood-fired-oven pizza, and this was my first night going. I was trying to get my bicycle down to my neighbor Leta Mac's house, to return something, and after many thwarted attempts I arrived at the tavern. I was surprised at the number of interesting, colorful people, not a crowd by any means but a strong gathering of folks who looked like me: down-to-earth, free-thinking, outside-the-box people with long hair, long skirts, and denim jeans, sitting among the potted flowers and herbs. Fire burned in the clay oven, pizza coming out.

Across the road from the tavern was a large meadow, and the man who kept it mowed and looking beautiful had invited a choir to sing, a youth choir from a church. Metal folding chairs were faced so that people could look at the meadow while they listened to the children. The choir was dressed in emerald robes, brighter than the green grass.

In the dream I was deliriously happy. For days to come the memory of it would bring tears to my eyes as I, alone, planted running butterbeans in the warming ground.

Weeks and months and years passed on our farm in Altamaha, Georgia, which had been a ghost-community before we arrived and which will probably stay dead forever. Gradually something changed. More and more the memories of and the desires for the trappings of society fell away—and by “trappings” I mean the sidewalks, the telephones, the holidays, the expectations, the schools, the fashions, the newspapers, the advertisements, the readings, the parties, the window-shopping. I sank, as so many others in the empty corners of the earth have done, into seasons, weather, birdlife and animal society, breath, my own company.

Rural people can self-actualize, even in the vacancy and the vacuum, and this sense of self-actualization derives from the relationships we do have in the rural, relationships with ourselves, with our beloveds, with our places, with art and ideas, with our sense of what some might experience as the divine and others might experience as the essential. After a while, anything that was not this quiet, deliberate, even transcendental consciousness felt dead to me.

Community is attachment. Much of what people suffer is caused by disattachment. In hollowed-out places, disattachment looks different than it does in populated places. Rural loneliness can look impenetrable, dark, roadless, like a thicket. It can look like a wall. So the attachment must look different, too, maybe something like a meadow or a gate. A bell, a nest, a wood.

Any night now, lying in bed, I see the gray shadows of the camellias outside the open window hanging with clumps of wispy moss in the moonlight. A night bird makes a sudden call. It sounds like a wren, or maybe it is a mockingbird mimicking a wren.

This could be community enough.

The facts have not changed: We need each other. We live longer and are healthier in community. Ultimately our evolution is communal whether we like it or not—friend and foreigner, comrade and foe. I would still choose to stand in an apple barn with a friendly stranger, creating a temporary, fragile, amorphous connection, something that bound his existence to mine, and I would hesitate to break that web. I would hear the threads popping behind me as I left, and I would carry the memory of the stranger with me.

But something did change, with the transformation taking years: where I was, and that I was, became enough, I think. Owls screeching, crows cawing, mare in heat whinnying her displeasure. Strip of pink sunrise across the sepia orchard with its pecans bare-limbed, line of seven deer running across the

pasture as if it's the Serengeti. Golden webs of orb weavers, last bloom of the Prosperity rose, rickrack of a snake's passage basted in the sand of the road.

To all of that I am deeply attached.

Maybe some of my story is a map, some a warning, some an invitation. Maybe some is breath, me breathing as wind flutters strands of Spanish moss hanging from crepe myrtle: I am. This is me.

I have learned at least this much: in the twenty-first century, as human beings face the growing necessity for sustainable living, rural life is a challenge. If a person wants to live far from the madding crowds, with roosters crowing and hawks overhead, with forests and meadows and rivers, helping to create a more ecologically oriented and thus more sane society, she or he will have to reckon with what life is really like in the country.

One morning my daughter and I walked to the barn to get horse leads. Skye noticed that Sojourner, our oldest ewe, was missing from the flock. Sojourner was pregnant and had not lambed with the other five ewes, whose singles and twins bounced around the pasture. When we checked, we found Sojourner ensconced in a stall, bedded down with two newborns, their umbilical cords dangling wet and bloody.

We brought feed and sat in the hay near Sojourner. I leaned against the old gray planks of the stall, picked up her smaller lamb, an umber girl with a white face and a snow-tipped tail, and I cradled her in my arms. Tired from her first hour, the lamb relaxed, her head falling against my chest; I've known loaves of bread that weighed more than she did.

I breathed in the smell of hay, of sheep droppings, of lanolin, of birth, of old wood. Through the bars of the stall the other sheep watched me, their eyes level.

I could hear them breathing.

*Janisse Ray is the author of five books of literary nonfiction as well as a volume of eco-poetry. Her first book, the best-selling *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (Milkweed Editions, 1999), is a memoir about growing up on a junkyard in the ruined longleaf pine ecosystem of the Southeast. It was a *New York Times* Notable Book and was chosen by the Georgia Center for the Book as a "Book All Georgians Should Read." Ray holds an MFA from the University of Montana, where later she was the William Kittredge Distinguished Visiting Writer for 2014. She is a 2015 inductee into the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame, and she won the 2017 Southern Environmental Law Center Award in journalism for her piece on coal ash, published in *The Bitter Southerner*: "From Ashes Such as These, What Can Rise?" In 2019 Ray was given the Georgia Author of the Year Lifetime Achievement Award from the Georgia Writers Association.*