

Tom Sheehan

**Talk from the Back of Tim's Barn**

**T**hese were more than echoes, the soft sounds I was hearing from the rear of the barn sitting back from Route 182 in Franklin, Maine, half a dozen fat pigs to one side, corn as deep as Iowa on the other side, and the terrain level across the road flush with blueberry bushes until a slow rise tipped the landscape in its favor... and in mine. In my son Tim's favor, too. He lives by this barn. Perhaps I had lived waiting for its sassy voice.

There, in his barn, I was a listener as well as a watcher. Maine mornings I must say, even on torrid summer days, are as placid and as huge as glaciers, and crawl into the mind through more than one sense. But there you have it: Maine mornings are also like Maine barns, always having something to say to you, never taking no for an answer, shaking you awake as if the scruff of your neck is in their hands, leaving a bit of dust for memory's sake. These wooden memorials to sweat, old times, another life, crept into my notes years ago, at first promising poetry, and now they creep out again, reasserting their observations, touching on the process of memory as I look in on old hand-written journals of trips to and through Maine, seeking the ever road.

I have seen these northern barns merely announced by Bull Durham signs, or knotted and slabbed vertical boards twisting their long signatures, saying how long they've been at the job, the squared edges of a barn long gone to age or antiquity. At another glance, usually from some rise in the road I'd been dusting for a few miles, a ridgepole, perhaps angry, perhaps too long under duress from angled sides, perhaps the snow of too many winters still with a hand in a kind of slow-combustion's weakening, shows its tendency to sag, to bend under that duress. A ridgepole draws down into itself in the threatened manner of implosion, and a compelling universe of interest. Barns, Maine barns for sure, have their own signatures. They roadside leap at me, every last one of them, from Kittery to Fort Kent (where my fictional heroine Maxine Humdroph came from), from Eastport to Westford, from Calais to Kezar Falls.

My son Tim's barn was once a schoolhouse. In fact, it was once *the* schoolhouse in Franklin; and was, as he says, called the Ryefield School. Is that name so simply conceived? Can I really see the waving grain? I would grant that it is, and after one final graduation of sorts, and gentled by the slow, steady, plodding rough draft of 100 oxen, it was dragged from its first setting to the land he now farms there in Franklin, just below the Little League Field. Now it houses a home-made 50-gallon-drum stove, a tractor for all purposes, a Harley motorcycle past its prime, tools an inveterate collector would love because the labor expended with them is almost visible to a keen eye. And leather goods have hung so long on one wall that their legends are inscribed like vertical signboards, and their odors hang on for eternity. Off on one wide-planked bench taking up one whole wall, sits the old Jonsered chainsaw I used for twenty years in the Topsfield State Forest fighting the cost of oil; my gift to Maine winter and a warm hearth. Tim says it still operates with a vengeance, but now with a 20-inch blade. One might say I have passed my former strengths on to him.

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One would also be keen to know how many McGuffey Readers had passed through this old barn on the way to intelligence, awareness, imagination, above and beyond 'ritin, and 'rithmetic. That revelation would take the highest art of contemplation.

Yet it is not the only barn he has. Here, they come in twins. Just across the yard, closer to the road, over a slab board fence we erected one day a few years ago to keep the corn in and the horses out, past the 40-50 foot long, 4-foot high walls of logs set for the next winter, sits another barn. Which one predates the other, I have no idea, but this second barn has housed Tony the pony (a bit wild in his time if you ask me, being an outlander), sheep and goats and ducks and chickens, and mice to be sure, and perhaps a small army or lusty battalion of termites, dust beetles, unusual mandible-carrying small critters, somehow intent on destruction. It is sure that such creatures come the same way and at the same speed that erosion hits Mother Earth herself, a slow onslaught and assault you may not be able to see, but you sure have to fix, "once the weather gits good enough for toolin'," as Tim might now say in adoptive speech.

From its stalls, its storage bins, its freezer against one wall standing like a foreign icon, has often come every bit of a late meal at his table. Squash stuffed with sausage, sweet and regular Maine spuds, green beans so thick they could choke you, tomatoes red as Old Glory, ham in slices so sweet and so thick they seem without end, and once salty enough to have been dragged through the surf a few miles away. I think now of rhubarb pie, apple pie, blueberry pie or blueberry muffins, some now and then tossed with "a thickly spun heavy cream takes your breath away." If there was one thing that exists now and one thing existing back when the Rye-field School was first built, wherever it was located in town, the meals are the same; "they stick," as my mother used to say about her oatmeal, "to the very backbone that carries your day."

It is strict testimony that some barns you come across on these roads know how to kneel down in their slow absorption without being too melancholy about it; both of Tim's barns do, looking over their shoulders, sighing, whispering, I'm never sure which in these Maine-gray mornings. Beams, long checked since their greenery, seams at log lengths, remain as strong as the tree they were sprung from. They tolerate much that is happening to them, have patience: surely, inwardly, they host the sly armies of creeping squadrons, dragooned columns gnawing away at time, flighty creatures busy as downtown on Saturday nights, ceding fathoms to dark hungers. The warp and twist of checked timbers sit silent as skulls, heady lintels and cross braces at straddled chests are being crushed, sills aching to cry, all standing their serious doubts. They cling at themselves, sing a song of reprieve at dusk, and eventually heave into morning's mirror another night of survival. It is why I love these old Maine barns, Tim's barns, like many of the others on similar roads coming up here from Saugus, and riding away to more distant parts of Maine, like Machias and Eastport, and eventually taking the long, silent road to Woodstock over the border and Lakeville and bean suppers most likely the way Franklin bean suppers once were, or still are as far as I know. I think I'd bet on that.

Yet, the straggled barns en route are still falling down slowly, taking pulse at rugged oak wrist, finding their own bright hearts of trees cored in gallant crosspieces, joists, perhaps in hoof-thinned grasping planks. Even

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in the fading ever-summer lofts, there are dreams to rediscover, dreams cached away for yearned awakenings. After all their times, barns have a right to keep up their odors, their signatures, the silence in the mows, the secrets in check.

Here, at Tim's place, I look over shoulder at a barn looking too, back at its slow, labored beginning. I feel a crosscut saw vibrate and whistle, feel axes shiver at wood's edging, see the breaths of two men rising in a column as if one lung works for the two of them, ritual of a barn-raising, cutting at air.

A poet friend, as close to me as only my family might know, says his barn always accepts the graces of early October evening. He swears that miniature shadows stroll cautious as kittens out of hay-golden eaves; the mow is night itself, a spectral darkness inflated against hazardous roofing where a dozen knot holes pinpoint a constellation and long against morning light reveal the truth of north. Wall nails and spikes are crucial with evidence; old leather traces, bridles, other gear bays or roans sweat into, hang limp as bookmarks marking the last data of a thousand journeys one man has taken along the fence, the rides into town and back. Where a whisper leans in the weaving of a heart striking for new legends, a child's dream is etched.

Friend says his father's great gray horse, Humboldt by name, froze standing up in '38; that magnificent creature, leg broken, heart-heaving, brought the gentleman safely to his final bed. Only the barn remains, October light fissuring through checked walls. Even the photographs are gone. Fire, pasture and old age have captured everything, except the barn revolving axially above his eyes, stabs of light drifting through this dark planetarium. Oh, how I envy his memories, the tales he might spill if such were his calling.

I know, when they finally die, move to a newer century, these hallowed barns, these homes away from home, the dust from last century (more likely from the one before that, and then another move back) settles deeper in the earth. Their wide doors tattle tales when jammed open by a heavy broom, a toe dragged through lifelines, and show the demise of contours. Barns of this size, kneed in the groin by too many January storms, sucker punched, that have taken wet coughs from too many Aprils, August retreats from fire when gummed capillaries draw back to old dowsing grounds, always show age; it's stylish, classy, the way blue ribbons are worn, proud, head high, a look straight into the eye.

It is here in Maine barns where iron and wood trade their final secrets. Under rust's thickest scab, metal keeps its black shine. Abrade it with rock or stone and the line of light leaps out, just like the flesh of wood flashes its white mysteries as it orbits marks of lunar growth. Often it is here where a mole tortures underground, a host of bats hangs above like gloves out to dry in the dim light, and in the twisted by-roads and blossoming paths the termites, carpenter ants and dust beetles chew the cud of oak sills or risers an ash released to two-hand saws.

Through once-green pine, now checked, stippled, full of eyes where knots continue to let themselves down, or square nails, blunt as cigars, are suddenly toothless, you'll find occasionally a star if you're still in your tracks and breathless. Stars incessantly thrust themselves into holes where

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barn parts continue to fall to earth, never to be mined. A century or two or three of shivering takes its toll, shakes elements free as slowly as earthworms at work.

For all the standing still, there's action, warming, aging, the bowing of an old Maine barn, the ultimate genuflection we might miss if we don't pause on the road, take a breath, smell the old barn itself, beside beds of roses.

You can bet, those barns talk back.