

# God and Land: Remembering Dreams of the Commonwealth

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## ABSTRACT

The author uses three quotations from Jedediah Purdy's *This Land Is Our Land* to structure her discussion of a commonwealth, the kind of politics needed today, and reciprocal flourishing. She surveys William Penn's "Holy Experiment" and the dream of a "peaceable kingdom," and ruminates on her family's history in Pennsylvania, romantic Mennonite agrarianism, "restorative nostalgia," settler colonialism, and radical visions of hope. The author observes that valuable themes persist in "our best old dreams": e.g., the rationale for the Germantown Quaker *Petition Against Slavery* (1688), was simply *Do unto others as you would have others do unto you*.

If you draw a perfect X across the breadth of Pennsylvania, the lines will intersect just about where *This Land is Our Land: The Struggle for a New Commonwealth*<sup>1</sup> rests on my desk. Delivered as a series of lectures in New York City, Jedediah Purdy's fine, narrative essays invite me, as stories often do, to reflect on my own place here in northern Appalachia. Not until I undertook a documentary poetry project that took me out to listen to people—really, anyone who cared to talk about their own experiences with gas drilling and hydraulic fracturing (fracking)—did I come to see how deeply I care about this place and to recognize what a rare privilege it is to live, even in the middle of nowhere, if your people have resided there for a long time. Particular memories stick and old dreams abide if you have been too stubborn, poor, religiously plain, or otherwise disinclined to move. Thinking alongside Purdy from this place, then, I look for whatever resources and experiences from here might orient us toward more just relationships with one another and the earth. All the while I wonder how a material commonwealth can be

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<sup>1</sup> Jedediah Purdy, *This Land is Our Land: The Struggle for a New Commonwealth* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2019).

realized out of language—whether the words of human longing or law.

## I

“. . . a commonwealth is not a gauzy utopian ideal: it is radical and practical.”<sup>2</sup>

Maybe the dream tracks back to the idea of Eden: Adam and Eve in the garden, naked and vegan, naming the beasts like poets speaking their truths, never needing to kill or till the earth for food or to shear or skin or sew their own clothing. The dream appears in the Sermon on the Mount as a list of reversals for “the blessed”—the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness’s sake. Not a fantasy projected into a life beyond this one but a possibility, the dream inspires us work to create a just and peaceable “kingdom of heaven” on earth. Except that we have to live on this earth in the meantime, the mean times.

A more specific dream of a commonwealth emerged around 1681 after King Charles II of England gave William Penn full proprietary rights to one of the largest tracts of land ever granted to an individual in the history of the world. The land came as payment for debts owed to William’s father, Sir Admiral William Penn, a Royal Navy Officer who established Jamaica Station at Port Royal, Jamaica, then sat in the House of Commons for a decade when he wasn’t visiting his confiscated estate in Ireland. The younger William Penn, trained as a lawyer and jailed for his Quaker beliefs in England, while still in his 30s dreamed of creating a province where religious dissenters and persecuted pacifists could live in peace with their indigenous neighbors. As for the Swedes already settled in what would become Pennsylvania, Penn wrote:

For you are now fixed at the mercy of no governor that comes to make his fortune great; you shall be governed by laws of your own making and live a free, and if you will, a sober and industrious life. I shall not usurp the right of any, or oppress his person. God has furnished me with a better resolution and has

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

given me his grace to keep it.<sup>3</sup>

War, global capital, and empire underwrote Penn's "Holy Experiment"—a peaceable dream realized through settler colonialism—which inspired leaders for as long as the Quakers were in charge here, about 80 years.

Among those whom Penn would invite to join his Holy Experiment were Mennonites who had moved up the Rhine Valley out of Switzerland into the Palatinate at the invitation of Elector Palatine Karl Ludwig, a grandson of England's King James I. Having proven themselves capable of working marginal lands in the Jura Mountains, the Swiss Mennonites cleared forests, drained swamps, and restored Karl Ludwig's fields and herds that had been destroyed by the Thirty Years' War, in return for religious tolerance but not citizenship.

Mennonites from the Palatinate who were converted by Quaker preachers before they migrated to the New World were among those who drafted and signed the 1688 Germantown Quaker *Petition Against Slavery*, which asserted the equality of enslaved Africans with all other people. The document is strange, written by immigrants not fluent in English and unfamiliar with Anglocentric colonial culture. Unlike the British Friends, Mennonites from Germany and Holland were unaccustomed to seeing slaves used in the production of wealth, so they recognized the contradiction between Quaker spiritual values and their everyday practice. Thereafter, the morality of slaveholding was debated among Friends in Philadelphia for nearly a hundred years, until in 1776 the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting formulated a statement banning slaveholding in Pennsylvania. Rediscovered and preserved in 2005, the original 1688 petition remains important as the first universal human rights statement issued by Europeans in the New World, an inspiration to abolitionists.<sup>4</sup>

For as long as I can remember, Penn's Holy Experiment has persisted as the cartoon of a dream repeatedly rendered by the early 19th-century Quaker sign painter Edward Hicks. Hicks's 60-odd versions of the motif

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Barbagallo, "Penn's Pen: Caretaker of a New World," <http://www.pennsburymanor.org/penns-pen-caretaker-of-a-new-world/>, last modified July 1, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> "Germantown Quaker Petition Against Slavery," National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/quakerpetition.htm>, accessed December 28, 2020.

he called “The Peaceable Kingdom” depict a legendary meeting between William Penn with other Englishmen and Tamanend, Chief of Chiefs and Chief of the Turtle Clan of the Lenni-Lenape nation in the Delaware Valley, with other Lenape chiefs of the Turtle Clan under the great elm tree at Shackamaxon. That encounter takes place in the background. Wild and domestic animals crowd the foreground, lion and lamb of Isaiah 11 at rest with a European child or several children near a river, surrounded by dense forest.<sup>5</sup> Serene beasts, farm animals, and sweet-faced white children dwarf the distant, mythic conversation between Europeans and the first people at a spot now marked within the boundaries of Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love.

Although “the Great Treaty” is mentioned in transcriptions of subsequent meetings between Penn and Lenape leaders, that first conversation was preserved only in oral tradition and various imaginative renderings. Neither transaction nor treaty, the conversation persists in memory and artistic depiction as a pledge of abiding friendship and commitment to peaceful cohabitation in the words traditionally attributed to Chief Tamanend, “for as long as the creeks and rivers run, and while the sun, moon, and stars endure.” In addition to the paintings by Hicks (and later Benjamin West, commissioned for public relations purposes by Penn’s sons), a Lenape wampum belt showing two figures facing one another is said to memorialize the agreement.

In some versions of Hicks’s *Peaceable Kingdom*, a young Christchild holding a grape vine nestles among the wild animals. A verse paraphrase of Isaiah 11 frames the image, sometimes cast in the future, sometimes in the past: sometimes dream, sometimes memory of the commonwealth. A retrospective version, now in the collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, refers directly to William Penn:

The wolf did with the lambkin dwell in peace  
His grim carnivorous nature there did cease  
The leopard with the harmless kid laid down  
And not a savage beast was seen to frown  
The lion with the fatling on did move

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Hicks, *Peaceable Kingdom* c. 1884, National Gallery of Art, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.59908.html>, accessed December 28, 2020.

A little child was leading them in love;  
When the great PENN his famous treaty made  
With Indian chiefs beneath the Elm trees shade.<sup>6</sup>

In the syntax of these couplets, the wolf, leopard, and lion align with the British men, while the gentler lambkin, kid, and fatling seem to stand for the Indian chiefs. More could be said about the Lenape, characterized as “women” and peacemakers among North America’s indigenous peoples, but I will leave the scene there. What intrigues me is artistic repetition, persistent as nostalgia, stubborn as hope. All of the creatures—human and animal—appear to be equally serene gathered under the limbs of the great tree of life, of the knowledge of good and evil. “He began by making a league with the American Indians which were his neighbors. This is the only treaty between those persons and the Christians which has not been sworn to, and which has not been broken,” wrote Voltaire in 1764.<sup>7</sup>

Last spring, I spent a Saturday afternoon making phone calls to offer information and encouragement to voters who had received mail-in ballots for the upcoming primary election. As a number, name, and prompts popped up on my laptop, I’d hear a telephone ring somewhere in Philadelphia. If the person who answered stayed on the line to converse, the voice invariably registered as “Black” in my mind. The people who spoke with me were kind. Many had already returned their ballots. Nearly all agreed we need change. During the pandemic, homicide rates were soaring in the City of Brotherly Love, ranking it second only to Chicago.<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes people closed the conversation by saying, “Be blessed.” The phrase is a habit in some communities, a theological gesture, as only God can bless, or a simple wish for health and prosperity. In retrospect, I wonder whether this benediction alludes more literally to the Sermon on the Mount. Were those people wishing the well-intentioned “white” voice on a

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Hicks, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, <https://philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/56662.html>, accessed December 28, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Voltaire, *Dict. phil.*, 7, 17-18 quoted in “Peace Treaty,” Penn Treaty Museum, 2020, <http://www.penntratymuseum.org/history-2/peace-treaty/>, accessed December 28, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> “Philadelphia Among Top Deadliest Cities in the U.S. this year,” August 4, 2020, <https://6abc.com/philadelphia-crime-homicide-stats-philly-murders/6351850/>, accessed December 28, 2020.

long distance call the blessings and curses of the Beatitudes? In these times of plague, hunger, inequity, and unchecked violence in the streets, might “be blessed” also be an imperative to join the poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be merciful, to be pure of heart, to be a peacemaker, and to be persecuted for righteousness’s sake?

## II

“The ground that people stand on memorializes and divides them. What kind of politics could help people to turn and face one another?”<sup>9</sup>

On a topographical map of eastern Pennsylvania, undulating concentric green lines trace the contours of foothills at the southern base of the Blue Mountain, which once served as a boundary between the British colony and French and Indian territory during the Seven Years’ War. Superimposed on that terrain are the outlines of tracts for which the first Amish settlers received survey warrants in the mid-18th century. Here’s my immigrant ancestor, Ulrich Speicher: 193½ acres warranted in 1752 and surveyed in 1755, beside a 13-acre tract surveyed for his son Michael in 1770. Apparently illiterate, Ulrich had scrawled a signatory mark beside his name on lists of men disembarking from the *Charming Nancy* at Philadelphia’s port in 1737. During the intervening 15 years, he probably worked off his passage and saved money to buy this land.

The map is held in an oversized folio, *Early Amish Land Grants in Berks County, Pennsylvania*, published in 1990 by the Pequea Bruderschaft Library, an Amish outfit in Gordonville, Pennsylvania. A brief introduction to the book explains that the early Berks County settlers suffered “severe persecution” in their homeland because they would not baptize infants or worship God in a “state church.” Consequently, some were imprisoned, fined, even executed, and their children were taken from them and taught “the wisdom of the world.” They were compelled to flee from one place to another and worship in secret places, their religious books banned. “The government would not allow Anabaptists to own land. . . . This was the life

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<sup>9</sup> Purdy, *This Land is Our Land*, 20.

of our forefathers in the European countries.” The author then describes the dangers of Atlantic crossings at that time—“In 1738, 600 emigrants died at sea and were buried in the depths of the ocean”—before praising the courage of the ancestors so determined to find a place where “they could live the life of a Christian.”

Explaining that Quakers were persecuted for their religion in England, the author further asserts that the land settled by Amish farmers was acquired from Penn himself “for a very reasonable price. His theory was to assist the poor people to find a home where religious freedom could be practiced.” In fact, Penn was dead by the time Amish settlers moved into the Tulpehocken watershed. The land was purchased from Thomas and Richard Penn, the grasping sons from the Proprietor’s second marriage. Has it always come down to a hunger for God and land?

The book of Amish land grants makes reference to previous human occupants of the area only once, by implication. A photograph of a stone house rests on the title page above the caption, “Hochstetler homestead, the site of the Hochstetler Massacre on September 21, 1757.” I will not recount that tale except to say that its persistent repetition in popular forms—children’s books, novels, even a Mennonite churchman narrating it for a celebrity on an episode of the television show *Who Do You Think You Are?*—makes me think Mennonites need to control its meaning. The moral of that story always seems to come down to pacifist identity.<sup>10</sup>

On the edge of a farmer’s field in the Oley Valley near Reading, Pennsylvania, stands an oak tree, estimated to be 700 years old, that Lenape people hold sacred. They occasionally gather there to recall a time when their ancestors lived in that place and the tree had a powerful kind of medicine. In 2004 the Delaware (Lenape) Nation filed suit against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, seeking 314 acres of the more than a million acres appropriated by Thomas Penn through a notorious swindle orchestrated in 1737 known as “the Walking Purchase.” But the suit was dismissed. Some years ago, helping me to find my Amish ancestors’ land, historian John Ruth first showed me the Sacred Oak. I stretched my arms against the trunk for a photograph but

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<sup>10</sup> Beth Hostetler Mark, ed., *Our Flesh & Blood: A Documentary History of the Jacob Hochstetler Family During the French and Indian War Period, 1757-1765* (Elkhart, IN: Jacob Hochstetler Family Association, 2003).

could not reach even one-fifth of the way around, as I once held my arms partway around the old oak at Salm in the Vosges Mountains of what is now Alsace, France. Amish people had moved up out of Switzerland after 1690 and figured out a way to survive in that place, and their descendants finally became legal citizens and could own land there as a result of the French Revolution. They planted the tree in 1793 to commemorate their being granted special exemption from military service.

Around that time, a generation or two after Ulrich Speicher, the search for more and better land drove the Tulpehocken Amish west, as Lenape and other native people suffered what the Anabaptist ancestors had survived in Europe: hiding in secret places, forced migration, children separated from their parents and compelled to learn new forms of knowledge and faith.

In 1790, Amish people first arrived in the Kishoquillas Valley of central Pennsylvania, named for a Shawnee chief who befriended John Armstrong, an Irish civil engineer who came to Pennsylvania to work as a surveyor for the Penn family and later served as an officer in the Seven Years' War and the American Revolution. Now commonly called "Big Valley," this is where my parents were born and raised, and where I lived briefly. As a boy, my father walked behind a horse and plow in those fields, sometimes pulling up arrowheads, quartz crystals, or limestone fossils studded with silver mollusks. What we call "mountains" around here—ridges, really—were once as high as the Himalayas. What we call "valleys" were once submerged under oceans. The earth holds it all, and we live on the layers, plowing, writing.

Mennonites from Lancaster County migrated north to settle unceded land along the Grand River in Waterloo County, Ontario, after the Revolution. A man from Big Valley rode a horse to that settlement, sold it, and walked back—a distance of about 700 miles round-trip—twice, to gather enough money to buy land in Big Valley. That story is told to show how precious the place is, how hard we have worked—and how shrewdly mindful of markets we have been—as if such labor, like persecution, might somehow eclipse the memory of those others who also loved the place before us.

"If you own land, you have blood on your hands," the late Jewish-American writer Jerome Badanes told me years ago when I came to know him at an artists' colony. "Since the formation of Israel, the most significant



cultural contribution of the Jews has been the invention of the Uzi!”<sup>11</sup> Blinded by romantic Mennonite agrarianism, I found his words almost impossible to absorb, and only now can I hear in his reference to “blood and land” the genocidal resonances and consequences of settler colonialism.

By the end of the 19th century, groups of Amish people, enabled by the Homestead Act, departed from the settlement in Big Valley for Nebraska, Kansas, North Dakota, and Oregon, places recently taken from tribes in the west. For most who stayed behind, land did not come easily. Both of my parents were born on tenant farms owned by absent, worldly landlords. Not until the prosperity of World War II could their fathers purchase modest homesteads. As a child I spent summers in Big Valley, and my affection for Holstein cows, pasture streams, a full and fragrant hay mow, and the barn that burned in 2001 has long fueled my writing. Considering the power of nostalgia in politics after the end of communism in eastern Europe, historian Svetlana Boym diagnoses the variety of nostalgia (nostos [home place] + algia [ache]) I feel, brooding as I often do on “the ambivalences of human longing and belonging.” This nostalgia she calls “reflective” and suggests that it has some uses beyond the production of literature, among them the interrogation of another kind of nostalgia she calls “restorative.”<sup>12</sup>

Restorative nostalgia makes dubious truth claims that prop up traditions that probably never existed, at least not in the pure forms it recalls. It fuels populist political movements with slogans such as “Make America Great Again,” whether championed by Ronald Reagan in 1980 or Donald Trump in 2016 and 2020. Trump’s restorative nostalgia underwrites the ideology of far-right groups that seek to expel or exclude outsiders with a rationale similar to the “blood and soil” ideology of the *Völkisch* movement that opposed modernity from the late 19th century to the Nazi era in Germany and today inspires alt-right “Folkish” groups in Pennsylvania and elsewhere.

When I recently drove by my Spicher family’s home farm in Big Valley, I noticed a large Trump campaign sign stood in front of the implement shed. It was placed there by the local Republican party, my resident cousin told me apologetically (at least acknowledging the Amish Mennonite tradition of non-involvement in national politics), contending that it’s easier for farmers

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<sup>11</sup> A submachine gun adopted by Israel in 1951, reportedly sold to more than 90 countries.

<sup>12</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xv-xvii.

when the Republicans are in charge. Our home place is now the largest dairy in the county. Two Spicher brothers farm more than 900 acres, renting and owning some of the fields our grandfather tenant-farmed in the 1930s. They haul daily tanker-loads of milk to a grocery chain bottling plant to the east and a Land-O'-Lakes butter factory to the west. Almost 600 milk cows and 600 heifers produce enough manure to generate electricity for the dairy and five households, with some left over to sell back to the grid.

My cousins employ three local “retired” crop farmers and a crew of six short, dark-skinned men who live in a trailer on the property and milk the cows. I noticed bicycles propped against the side of the trailer—to ride to the milking parlor? Or to the Dollar Store, the Sharp Shopper, or the thrift shop down the road? The men come from rural parts of central America and are good with animals, I’m told. One has lived in Big Valley for six years without returning home. Two brothers on this farm and another on a dairy over the mountain send their wages home to a father who intends to purchase a coffee plantation in Guatemala. I guess these details were shared with me to show that those gentle herdsman from the countryside have more in common with their employers than meets the eye.

Like the man who walked to Ontario to trade horses, my cousins have found a way to work an unpredictable, tight market and secure the family farm. Their workers come from a country where wealth distribution is among the most unequal in the world, and where crises caused by climate change are among the most severe. What contradictions do these men notice on the Spicher farm? Or are they solely focused on earning the funds impossible to obtain at home? More than three-quarters of the indigenous population in Guatemala lives below the poverty line, mostly in rural places where malnutrition stunts almost half the children.<sup>13</sup> Remittances sent home by workers living abroad were expected to account for 15 percent of the country’s gross domestic product in 2020, nearly all coming from the United States.<sup>14</sup> In the global economy, any place can be a borderland.

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<sup>13</sup> Hector Delgado, “Wisdom of Guatemala’s Indigenous People Needed for Sustainable Development,” August 30, 2020, *UN News*, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/08/1070862>, accessed December 28, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Mario Arturo Garcia, “For the first time Remittances in Guatemala Have Surpassed US \$1 Billion in One Month,” August 21, 2020, *El Faro* (Spanish language news source), <https://elfaro.net/en/202008/internacionales/24742/For-the-First-Time-Remittances-to-Guatemala-Have->

About 30 miles from the Spicher farm, I live in a small town that serves as the governmental seat of Centre County, named for its central position in the Commonwealth, one ridge and a narrow valley south of the Allegheny Front, the western edge of the old English colony. When people spoke three European languages in Bellefonte, this place was also crossed by an east-west trail used by Lenape hunters driven westward, and an important north-south trade route for the Haudenosaunee, or Nations of the Iroquois Federation that extended from upstate New York to the Natchez Trace in Tennessee. Early Presbyterian settlers, themselves driven by religious and land disputes in Scotland and Ireland, found maize growing in clearings already planted in these valleys. When the newcomers thrust plows in the ground, they hit iron ore, so ore mining, limestone quarrying, lumbering became our first extractive industries, fueling the region's earliest iron furnaces and forges.

The Allegheny Front also marks the edge of the Marcellus Shale Formation, the largest natural gas field in the United States, extending from New York to Tennessee, roughly mapping onto coal fields, and developed in the 21st century through horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing (fracking). "Eminent Domain" is the term local judges use to grant access to land the owners have refused to lease to drilling and pipeline companies. "Criminal contempt" is the ground on which one judge sentenced a woman to three months in our county jail because she allegedly baited bears and mountain lions to interfere with construction of the pipeline that will haul liquefied natural gas to the port at Philadelphia for export to Scotland.<sup>15</sup> Game wardens say that the last mountain lion around here was shot well before the 20th century, yet the creatures persist in myth and personal testimony, figures of faith like God, a student once wrote in an essay. When I sent a poem to the woman in jail, she replied that she'd like to embroider samplers of all the nice things people had written to her during her incarceration. About a mile from my home, a 48-inch natural gas pipeline lies buried under

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Surpassed-US\$1-Billion-in-One-Month-What-Does-this-Mean.htm, accessed December 28, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Scott Blanchard, "Ellen Gerhart, fighting pipeline on family's land, jailed for allegedly violating court order," *State Impact PA* (collaborative broadcast and online media service), July 28, 2018, <https://stateimpact.npr.org/pennsylvania/2018/07/28/ellen-gerhart-fighting-pipeline-on-familys-land-jailed-for-allegedly-violating-court-order/>, accessed December 28, 2020.

a cornfield. Compressor stations posted along the right of way keep the gas moving to urban markets; the pipeline passes under the Big Valley Spicher farm.

In September, the local newspaper confirmed what we felt all summer around here: hottest days since 1892, nearly six degrees warmer than last year and combined with a drought in July and August, the likes of which we haven't seen in at least 60 years. One farmer told me he measured eight-tenths of an inch of rain in all of July, whereas a typical summer sees about an inch a week. He stood on a hill on his farm at the foot of Harry John Mountain and pointed to eight farms that once were dairies; seven of those, including his own, can no longer support a herd of milk cows. Not wildfire in the West or hurricanes flooding countries in Central America, collective crises caused by the climate emergency, these quiet catastrophes—also caused by raising temperatures—are mostly experienced as personal failures: debt and bankruptcy, shame for having made the wrong choice somewhere. One man wondered if it was “maybe a hundred-year cycle.” Someone else blamed Michele Obama and her push for healthier school lunches that serve unsavory skim milk and kill the taste for dairy.

Whatever nostalgic claims I may lay on the Spicher home farm, I moved to Bellefonte to take a job at Penn State, a public land grant institution established in the 19th century and endowed by “Indian removal” and federal sales of vast territories in the west. Unlike the wives of some farmers around here, I do not work on campus to stabilize a fluctuating agricultural income or provide employer-funded health insurance for my family. In recent elections, Centre County shows up as a blue island in the rural red sea stretching from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. Here, as elsewhere in the US and Canada, cities occupy a tiny sliver of the land mass but are home to a majority of the voting population; cities generate the media, control wealth, graft off the young people, and consume nutritious agricultural products from the country, define the values of the dominant culture, and write its laws and regulations. Cities create “the wisdom of the world.”

### III

“These are the terms in which a commonwealth is possible: a way of living in which our survival and flourishing do not prey

constantly and involuntarily on the lives of others, in which instead, my flourishing is the condition for your flourishing, and yours reciprocally of mine.”<sup>16</sup>

A praying mantis, his tan back nearly matching the parched grass of my lawn, stops me on my way back from the garden. As a child, I heard “preying” and feared these uncanny creatures with their shifting, angular heads, bulging all-seeing eyes, and tiny, barbed claws. Just now, looking it up, I see not “preying” but “praying.” Things are not always what we think.

Maybe things are not as bad as we imagine, doomscrolling the news. Maybe it’s not too late. Maybe the global economy has not grown so complex and politics so polarized that there’s nothing left to do but collapse under the weight of our own making. Maybe the moral authority of religious leaders and institutions is not so compromised that they cannot intervene on behalf of the poor. Maybe the climate emergency is not so far gone that we can’t wake up and finally see that there’s no place left to flee this vast and general assault. No new world to find, despite the recent maneuverings of Mennonites from Belize, hell-bent on clearing more of the forest in Peru in order to maintain the agrarian lifestyle, insisting in the old familiar way that “The calling of God is higher than the calling of this government.”<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the longing eyes we cast on the land will finally inspire us to conserve acreage rather than acquire it. These days it’s easy to see history as a repository of cruelty and abuse, easy to blame Evangelical Christians or nostalgic flag-waving gun-toters, harder to find radical visions of hope or see common ground. What would it mean to pray?

Prowling around my town on pandemic lockdown, I see so many yard signs, not just from the contentious presidential election in this “battleground state” but from a more local war that’s raged for months. Last spring, around the time Washington DC’s football team dropped the name “Redskins,” alumni and students of Bellefonte High School gathered more than 4,000 signatures on a petition to retire the school’s sports mascot, a clichéd image of an “Indian,” complete with the kind of feathered war bonnet

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<sup>16</sup> Purdy, *This Land Is Our Land*, 146.

<sup>17</sup> “Belize colony Mennonites look to Peru,” December 9, 2020, *Anabaptist World*, <https://anabaptistworld.org/belize-colony-mennonites-look-to-peru/>, accessed December 28, 2020.

associated with the plains people rather than the woodland tribes who lived around here. A counter-petition to save the mascot and team name, “Red Raiders,” gathered more than 5,000 signatures. All in a town of only 6,000 people! Those agitating for change created a Facebook page and website to offer resources and explain why such mascots are outdated and wrong, noting that the “Red Raider” name, which everyone holds in such nostalgic esteem, was only adopted in the 1930s. Since then, the conflict has played out in newspaper letters, protests, and signs that have proliferated the red silhouette of the mascot with the mottos “Save our Mascot” or “Proud to be a Bellefonte Red Raider.”

In one lawn, two signs signal a connection between this local issue and the Black Lives Matter protests inspired by a police killing in Minneapolis this past summer. One homemade sign reads “All Lives Matter, Especially →.” The arrow points to a “Save our Mascot” sign. The connection between BLM and the mascot, I guess, is the desire to keep things as they have been, to tend to this local place and resist a perceived threat from the outside cultural arbiters affiliated with the university and distant urban places who call for change. On one e-mail chain, an older woman who grew up in Bellefonte and is now involved in historic preservation wrote, “If we get rid of the mascot, how will anyone remember that Indians lived here?”

Pennsylvania was established as a Commonwealth in 1776, the same year Quakers banned slavery. Massachusetts, Virginia, and Kentucky (formerly Virginia) are the other commonwealths among the US. Practically speaking, being a commonwealth today means we have stronger local governments, which mainly plays out as an elaborate tax system and confusing liquor controls. Township and borough police have the power to arrest, while county sheriffs do little. Municipal zoning boards can sometimes fend off fracking and pipeline construction. One township declared “home rule” and successfully fought an energy company’s decision to dispose of fracking waste in their area, as shown in *Invisible Hand*,<sup>18</sup> a recently released documentary created in conversation with members of the Seneca Nation.

The dream of the commonwealth persists in an amendment to the Pennsylvania Constitution passed in 1971. Article 1, Section 27 recognizes the citizens’ civil right to “clean air, pure water, and to the preservation

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.invisiblehandfilm.com/>.

of the natural, scenic, historic and esthetic values of the environment.” It makes “Pennsylvania’s public natural resources . . . the common property of *all* the people, including generations yet to come” (emphasis mine). The Commonwealth is designated as the “trustee of these resources,” required to “conserve and maintain them for the benefit of all the people.” Some other state Constitutions have one or the other of these two statements but few have both. Our legislature has a long history of selling commonwealth resources to the highest bidder, but this amendment proposes that the land beneath our feet deserves the same protections as freedom of religion or speech. Long dormant, it has been revived in recent decisions to challenge fracking legislation, and environmental law experts believe it can support regulations to address the climate emergency and support draw down of greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>19</sup> At protests, I have seen people wearing T-shirts printed with nothing but the text of this amendment to the State Constitution.

In the flowerbed in front of my house, tubers shared by a colleague last spring have grown into verdant shrubs crowned with rich bursts of ruby the size of my fist with a blush of gold at the base of their petals. Dahlias along with marigolds and zinnias astounded the Spanish conquerors when they arrived at Tenochtitlan, now Mexico City. All the hot summer, whenever I washed dishes, I carried rinse water out and dumped the dishpan onto their gorgeous, complex, violent beauty, remembering my mother who, after she and my father returned from the 1997 Mennonite World Conference in Calcutta, could no longer bear to pour clean water down the drain. She took it outside and watered a rose bush because, I suppose, doing even that tiny thing felt better than doing nothing.

And where does God go by the end of an essay about land? When we pray, *if* we pray, what do we do but open our hearts and minds to change? Maybe it’s not what we think. New ideas and new deals, yes, and let us also hear themes that persist in our best old dreams. “Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the

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<sup>19</sup> Robert B. McKinstry Jr. and John C. Dernbach, “Applying the Pennsylvania Environmental Rights Amendment Meaningfully to Climate Disruption,” *Michigan Journal of Environmental and Administrative Law* 8, no. 1 (2018): 49-114, <https://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1083&context=mjeal>, accessed December 28, 2020.

future,” Boym puts it plainly.<sup>20</sup> The rationale for the first universal human rights statement in the New World, the 1688 Germantown Quaker *Petition Against Slavery* was not a complex argument but simply an outsider’s insistence on an ancient ethic: *Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.*

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<sup>20</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi.