

HAYWORK

Dear Laura Ingalls Wilder,

Staggering under a summer's squeezebox sun, I find my thoughts drifting to a wall of winter: no winter that was mine. Instead, I begin to remember the nineteenth-century feat of Ma and Pa Ingalls, sent indoors by nonstop blizzards for a season with three daughters in unsettled Dakota. Later, in her sixties, one daughter would write that winter down.

The Long Winter by Laura Ingalls Wilder beckons my mind, suggesting peril and safety together, at the same time. I fasten on one detail especially: Pa and you building "logs" for fuel from wisps of hay, with chapped and caloused hands.

You had nothing else to burn for warmth but hay. Every day, for weeks on end, you and Pa did it because there was no more firewood and no more coal, either. Frugal, stranded, you had already burned all of that.

24

True, the hay was really meant for your farm animals to chew: two cows and two horses. But snowfall buried you and the train pulling food and fuel your way. The small herd of human settlers in De Smet, South Dakota, had to burn what they could, meantime. Would it be enough? No one knew.

At first, Laura, you could not imagine how the hay would be of any help to you, even when it burned. You write: "Flame licks through the light, thin stems and is gone before the frail ashes can fall. How can a room be kept warm by a fire so quickly burning out...?"

Pa knew how, though. "The hay was in sticks. Pa had somehow twisted and knotted it tightly till each stick was almost as hard as wood." It could burn longer, then.

In fact, his hardy sticks of hay could heat all of you. And so, "except when he went through the storm to do the chores, Pa was twisting more sticks of hay in the lean-to."

Then Pa taught you how to twist.

From him you learned that being molded isn't what hay wants. You have to work at it. Hay is sharp. It cuts your coat. Soon your skin is cut and red. For hours while the blizzard blows, you and Pa must wrestle with the hay in a narrow, cold nook.

Because you do, you live.

The rhythmic stoicism of haywork says something to me now that I cannot quite hear. Your words: plain, explicit. Give or take, they are true. What am I hearing, then?

Something about craft and mastery, homemade and touchable. Something about the fitness of a single syllable, instead of three or four jammed into a word. The fitness of prominent small things, perhaps? Like hay. Like hands. Like changeable mere nouns and names, to be twisted and enflamed. Even like snow itself, which you melted down from drifts, then drank.

Things. Things.

Your book of winter holds on to a few things to save: Ma, Pa, sisters, lamplight, tea, bread, a violin; the fire and the fuel for it; the work of keeping something that's worth having. Still, one thing is missing from the others—the word “I,” mostly unsaid to us by you. In your book, you call yourself “she” or “Laura” nearly always.

“I”: yes, at times you must have said it, thought it, if you were to be you. It's there, someplace. Yet for me, there is no “I” in your writing even when you do.

There is only hay, et cetera.

Chronicling a frontier childhood many years after, most writers would happily accept “I” as the way to tell their story. As a reader, I could not object. For “I” describes. “I” avows. “I” becomes. “I” can be the loudmouth or the calm inquirer of time and place. “I” makes itself at home and does the work.

Instead, you wrote of Laura in the third person as your former self. You knew Laura inside out, yet you refused to write from within the bygone “I” of her. You were by then someone else.

Did you do with yourself in the book what you had already done before with hay? Or a little bit like that?

I bring up hay again because I admire how you handled it. Same thing with writing: you twisted it, formed it by hand, made of the raw a marvelous new medium.

Still, I wonder what you thought of her, Laura—that person on the page, written by yourself. For now, she's our subtle pal. We have decided this. For no one else will do for us but Laura.

That is the fact that probably matters most. Before us is the fiction, your story of a winter. There, you give us facts as you remembered and imagined them, hoping we could imagine them again.

You give us hay and let us twist it.

You gave hay to many others, too, for years on end. The evidence remains, though you do not. For from the young readers of the many volumes in your completed pioneer chronicle you received a lot of letters. Your desk was piled high with those for decades at Rocky Ridge Farm in Mansfield, Missouri.

Dear Mrs. Wilder,

...I think you must be the "Laura" in the story. I love you very much. I still have the last two books to read. I am eight years old.

Dear Mrs. Wilder,

...Please come and see me. I would love to see you. Please bring your husband to. [sic]

Dear Mrs. Wilder,

...I would like (if possible) the recipe to your sour dough, and sour dough biscuits. They sound so very good that I am dying to taste them.

26

Dear Mrs. Wilder,

...Is a covered wagon easier for a tall girl to ride than a car?

Dear Mrs. Wilder,

...My Grandfather has been through the same "Long Winter" that you talk about. He was in Pipestem County then. He says he had to endure the same hardships as you. He had to grind wheat, twist hay, and many other things.

Dear Laura,

We hope you don't mind us calling you Laura as we feel we know you by that name.

Dear Mrs. Wilder,

...I don't know why I am so bold as to write to you, but I am.

Fondly,
M.