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# Autumn's Fragrant Afterthought

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## November: Baking Bread

I don't enjoy Saturday mornings at the Antigonish Farmers' Market as much anymore.

The big green door at the front of the 4H Barn is closed, trapping the darkness and the cold inside. The vendors are stiff, stamping their feet on the concrete floor, their hands gloved and fumbling. I rush in and out—park my bike inside, now—and wonder, sometimes, why I come at all.

"It's the last of the pears," Jack MacLeod says.

He sets out a small plastic basket of a dozen or so Bosc pears from his orchard, La Dolce Terra, and that's it. They are just like his Quinte apples, in early September: the season's small start, its thin end. I see limited quantities of everything on Jack's table now: a handful of sprouts, little broccoli heads, a collection of carrots, three pint-size boxes of soft red raspberries, one white bucket of light green kale, and a small bin of butternut and delicata squash. Only two varieties of apples are left, Splendour and Golden Delicious, still colourful but cold. La Dolce Terra is ready to rest.

How do the farmers harvest their produce in such inclement and uncertain weather—in yesterday's long rain, and today's tempestuous wind?

The woman from Merigomish Market Gardens, who sold me her tender spinach—two bags of it, every week—all autumn long, chastens me, when I ask for it today.

"This is the end," she says.

She'll have a little Swiss chard for me next week, "if you want it," she adds, hinting at its inedible end.

Of course, I do, "but that will be it," she says, again.

I stop at Stephen Swick's Easting Bakery at the front end of the building, where the summer-autumn sunlight used to fall on his elevated counter—and linger. I liked to watch the light as it turned with suppleness around the corner of the big, broad entryway until it stopped right here, warming (and brightening) the breads on display.

Now, the corner is dark and cold, pressed up against the tightly-closed door. A small side entrance is all that serves as the public way in.

This morning, Stephen is selling two new loaves of bread, Red Fife and Acadian. Spelt flour is in demand, he says, which makes it too expensive. He can't compete with the big bakeries, so he invents.

He is happy with his new breads, and he stands tall, thickly sweatered and smiling under his winter hat, as he points them out to me. The loaves are neat and compact, the colour of sand, and he slices thin pieces for his customers. Stephen wants us to experience the difference in taste between them, the subtleness of each flour. He gives me two pieces, one of each, in white (neatly labelled) small baker's bags.

Stephen is joyful in his labour—in his art.

His hoop houses (little homemade greenhouses) fully cover the beds in his garden now, but the herbs won't survive the winter inside them, he says. He's nearing the final feast, before he cuts them down.

I think back to the first market in September, when Stephen and I talked about his baking in autumn—how his bread is altered by the seasons. He referred to this delightful mystery casually, but I've kept the thought in my mind since then. I mention it again, today, and he invites me to his home, where he bakes now. Scribbling his phone number on another baker's bag, he tells me to come on Wednesday. We have taken this long—two months—to set the date.

Before I leave the market, I look for the farmer who sold me his small sweet carrots and dark crinkled kale—it was long and slender, like a gentleman's tie, and I much preferred it to the stiffer, bushier variety, which is all that's left now—but he's disappeared. Last week, his table was still fresh and full; it has vanished now.

Time is turning. Autumn is dwindling.

I rush away, strap the bags on my bike, and ride out into the morning light, buffeted by the wind.

In November, Henry David Thoreau said, when the "afternoons grow shorter, and the early evening drives us home," we "become more pensive." This month is the "twilight of the Year." We hasten to "finish our work before the night comes," he said, and we feel "the shortness of life."

While November is "undoubtedly, a gloomy month to the gloomy," Leigh Hunt said, too, for others—those with "the healthiest and most imaginative" minds—November "brings but pensiveness."

What a delight: a whole month for twilight thought.

(Will winter, then, bring sleep—and delicious dreams?)

But thoughtfulness in November is also clipped by the cold: the body is clenched, the mind un-eased.

I first encountered Stephen Swick seven years ago, in 2008, during my initial winter in Antigonish, in rural, northeastern Nova Scotia. I was teaching a Twentieth-Century Literature course, a field outside of my specialization in the Romantic period, but I made a connection, in my mind, between the two eras through contemporary Irish poet Seamus Heaney.

The Romantic influence on Heaney's poetry is especially strong in his depiction of rural people—simple agrarian labourers whom he knew from his ancestral home in County Derry, Northern Ireland. Heaney's poetic figures echo the humble characters in William Wordsworth's poems, written two hundred years earlier about his own native region, Cumberland, northern England.

Heaney writes of rural labourers who dig potatoes, slice peat, pick blackberries, thatch roofs, thresh grain—and make bread. He venerates these figures, monumentalizing their simple tasks and their integrity of character: their nimble fingers, agile bodies, and immaculate neatness, as they complete their work with quiet, patient, selfless absorption.

Wordsworth, too, portrays his rural neighbours with reverent admiration: shepherds, beggars, leech gatherers, spinners, and storytellers. Like Heaney, he magnifies their worth as dignified human beings, who live with contentment and generous hearts.

As I taught Heaney's lovely poems to my students, in March 2008, when the winter term was nearing its end, I pointed out the window to the Main Street of Antigonish, just two blocks away, where Stephen, the baker, was making bread.

"This is what Heaney writes about," I said. "Go and see it for yourselves. We have one of Heaney's characters, right here."

That is how I encountered Stephen—when poetry met reality, during my first lonely winter in rural Nova Scotia. Stephen had opened his Easting Bakery that February.

I watched him craft his bread: with integrity, simplicity, and modesty. He was making his loaves by hand, without machines, each one lovingly kneaded, shaped, baked, cooled, and displayed. All day, he worked, and talked to his customers. The bakery was small, beautifully lit by the afternoon sun, and ideally placed at the centre of town, on the busiest corner, where three streets meet and people mingle.

At the time, I imagined that Heaney might like to write a poem about Stephen, similar to the one that he composed for his aunt, Mary Heaney, who made bread on their Mossbawn farm in County Derry.

Heaney's poem about his aunt begins outside, in the empty "sunlit" farmyard, where the "helmeted pump" was heated by the warmth, its "water honeyed." The sun was the "griddle," cooled by the wall.

The outdoor setting mirrored the indoor space, where Mary Heaney baked.

Inside, in the sunless kitchen, heat arose instead from the "reddening stove," where she "stood / in a floury apron / by the window." Her gestures, Heaney remembered, were precise, perfectly timed, sequenced, and stirred by her "love" for the task, as she "dusts the board / with a goose's wing, / now sits, broad-lapped, / with whitened nails." Her work was familiar, practiced "each long afternoon": intimately known, but never routine. While the farmyard was stilled by a quiet "absence," the kitchen was filled with her presence: her artful actions and "the scone rising." With white flour on her apron and under her nails, Mary Heaney's whole being was imprinted by her baking.

In January 2013, Stephen closed his Easting Bakery, five years after it had opened. He left an absence at the centre of town, but he saved a portion of his bakery for the Antigonish Farmers' Market on Saturday mornings.

Like Mary Heaney, Stephen bakes in his home now, in his small square kitchen. Like her, he uses his own "reddening stove," and leans over "its plaque of heat." He also stands "by the window," looking out to his garden—and his birds—just as she did to watch her "sunlit" farmyard, with its "heated . . . iron" pump.

For both of them, the barrier between the yard outside and the baking inside is porous: outdoor water and air mix with the flour to activate the yeast, which makes the bread. Mary

Heaney's warm sunlit farmyard was like an open-air oven in the sun, which is just what Stephen wants, I learn, as we talk this afternoon, on a warm Wednesday, late in the day, in early November.

I arrive on my bike at 4:00 p.m.

"I've been making a lot of herb breads," Stephen says. "I like having as part of the process, during the first rising, to go out in the backyard with a bowl to get the herbs—snip, snip, snip—and bring them back in."

He blends the herbs, while still fresh, into the dough.

"It's lovely for three months," he says. "The garden gets me out in the backyard while I'm baking."

Stephen has planned for us to sit outside while we talk, on his rustic wooden deck, at his round wooden table. When I arrive, everything is set: the ceramic pot of herbal tea, matching earthen-coloured mugs, and seedy-oat cookies, four on a plate, crisply—thinly—made.

But before we sit down, Stephen wants to show me his garden, a labyrinth of raised rectangular beds, edged with plywood, their hoop house roofs flipped open to the air in the warmth today.

We meander through his herbs, vegetables, and berries, each little garden contained in a sandbox-like bed. Soon, he'll close the hoops, he says—like lids on a trunk, I think—the thick plastic holding its shape above the plants: letting in the light, holding in the heat.

Lettuce. Spinach. Broccoli. Chard. Peas. Leeks. Strawberries. Herbs (sage, parsley, and fennel). I see mounds of greenery, still fresh, as if it were mid-summer. Some of it will last into the winter, he says, under the snow, framed by the clear canopy, as it holds the moisture inside: a garden made of many little greenhouses, each one beautifully boxed and bridged with the hoops.

Before I arrived, Stephen had put on his big rubber boots to show me the garden. We walk around the boxes on still soft ground, wet from days of rain. But I am wearing my pretty black shoes, the heels sinking into the earth. Sensitive to a stranger, the dog follows us and then sits with us when we return to the table for tea.

Stephen's baking, I can see, is an indoor labour with an outdoor influence, as he braids—and kneads—the garden into his bread.

But the mixing and blending include more than fresh herbs.

"Rye sourdough starts to smell like apples in autumn," he says. The scent of apples infuses the bread beginning in late September, and it lasts for one month—or two, "until a really killing frost occurs." The smell gets into the yeast when apples fall to the ground, where they decay and ferment.

"As it rises, the bread smells very much like"—Stephen pauses—"like . . . a bag of apples just opened, or more like . . . a bushel of apples in the basement in the fall." When he and his siblings were children, they collected apples. Still now, he remembers "the cool apple smell around them" when they were stored—not fresh but strong. That's what the fragrance in his bread is like.

"Is it tart?" I ask.

"Sweet more than tart," he says, "a light apple-ish smell. I love having it while it's rising in the bread."

"Yeast is a community of organisms," Stephen explains, which are constantly coming and going—migrating—while the yeast establishes itself over time (days, months, or years). He bakes with wild yeast (not a commercialized, single strand), which absorbs the surrounding water and air. Sourdough, especially, changes with the seasons; it picks up the apple smell, soaking itself with tart-sweetness.

"It's all so inextricably linked," Stephen says.

November is the “twilight of the year.”

While Stephen talks, I think, again, of Thoreau.

The prefix *twi* means “having two”: two lights in the early evening, or, as Thoreau perceived, two seasons that converge in November, when autumn begins to mingle with winter.

Baking bread, perhaps, is a twilight labour.

It needs the light—and warmth—of two places: the outdoor farmyard, or garden, and the indoor kitchen. How fitting: my meeting with Stephen falls (by accident or fate) in November, the twilight month. He teaches me about two-ness.

But I have come with the wrong twilight in mind: the one that Thoreau spoke of, and the one set out by the Medieval *Labours of the Months* calendar.

In late autumn, preparations for the winter retreat were made: gathering and chopping wood, fattening and slaughtering the animals. January was a month for feasting, drinking, and keeping warm by the fire; outdoor labours ceased. I imaginatively added bread-making to the late autumn *Labours*, a task that anticipates winter feasts by the fire. Stephen, I thought, is a contemporary version of that Medieval tradition, baking bread in late autumn as a prelude to the winter feast. I have arrived at just the right time.

But Stephen turns my mind in the other direction: to September, not January. This is his twilight, at the other end of autumn, when the smell of fermenting apples enriches his bread: when nature mingles with art.

“That *is* a dragonfly. It’s really late for that,” Stephen says, interrupting my thoughts.

He was watching its flight as he spoke about the “sweet . . . light apple-ish smell” of his rye sourdough bread, his sentence broken off now, as his mind wanders to the joy of the open air.

“You sit outside and you see stuff, whereas when you sit inside you don’t.” Stephen laughs, as if perfectly content with life: these interludes from his work, on his round wooden deck. “I sit here and I see herons and more than the occasional eagle.”

Stephen motions towards the front of the house, along the road, where the trees are tall, some still canopied with leaves. “It’s a thicket out there,” he says, and he talks about watching the bats. He likes to swim in the ocean in autumn, too, with his dog, when the water is warmest. “But it’s cooling off now, for sure,” he says.

Our conversation darts often like this; then it pauses in silence and starts again.

"Easting Bakery was a small operation open to the four winds." Stephen smiles as he recalls the cracks in the walls—the "very porous" setting for baking bread and the difficulty of adapting to fluctuating weather: rain, humidity, barometric pressure, cloud cover, or a sunny "bigger sky day."

The variables were immense, he says, and the adjustments constant. He added less water to his dough in humid conditions and knew that croissants wouldn't rise as much on cloudy days. That was the challenge: to learn how to "grow bread."

Stephen draws on language from nature—*grow*, *wild, organism*, and *migration*—to describe his life as a baker, knowing that growing, in both instances, is easiest in the summer.

"Working in that kitchen was kind of like baking outside," he says, laughing again, our conversation unfolding in this relaxed sort of way.

But Stephen now cultivates that experience at home—by choice, not accident—of "kind of . . . baking outside." When he isn't making bread, he gardens, or watches birds—or sits outdoors, just as we do now.

In the late afternoon coolness, I put on my black fleece jacket, as time slips from four to five o'clock.

Overhead, flocks of birds are winging by—crows, especially. Hundreds of them beat their wings and caw as they descend into the trees several blocks away. Our conversation stops as we watch, astonished by the flight of so many birds, black arrows thundering by, almost near enough to touch.

Stephen knows—loves—their patterns, and watches them daily.

"They've been out there every night for weeks now," he says. "I always thought it would be fascinating to know more about what they're doing, where they're going, and the decision-making." Five go here, twenty go there, and ten over there, he says. "Did you guys talk at all?" he calls out. "We've never had them roosting like this, right in these trees."

I can't draw Stephen's mind back to his bread, right now.

"Look at them. That must be such a blast!" he says, "zooming around . . . cawing loudly . . . filling the air with your buddies."

Watching wild yeast—and wild crows—defines Stephen's unconventional approach to life.

Wildness permeates his whole method of making bread. He shuns machines and artificial ingredients—anything mass produced, but the cut in his profits is clear. Stephen pauses and reflects as he mentions this, a decision of great weight, I can see. But the choice contents him: baking without unnatural colours and flavours and any processed foods. He abhors the

problems in the food system, the "disquiet," he says, that he feels in a grocery store when he is surrounded by "non-food."

"It isn't just the ingredients. It's the whole industrialization process. At these big plants, the stuff they have to use, to make those machines go, gets into your bread."

Everything gets in—everything, that is, except natural air, water, and flour—and the smell of fermenting wild apples.

"I feel good about what I make," Stephen says. "It's what I believe in." He uses real cream and butter, roasts his own almonds, and beats his eggs by hand before brushing them on his croissants, one by one.

"Bread making doesn't really have a season, or off-season, does it?" I ask.

Unlike local fishers, Stephen doesn't resist the onset of winter, when the wharves are empty, and he doesn't long for rest, as Jack MacLeod does, after the long summer-autumn harvest from his orchard. Have I made a poor choice of labour for my *Book of Seasons*?

"I like to keep going," Stephen says, "but I like that there's a lighter season, a time for experimental things." In the winter, he writes and works on his house. That lighter season is near. The Antigonish Farmers' Market will close on the final Saturday before Christmas. Like Mary Heaney, though, Stephen will continue throughout the winter months to stand beside his "plaque of heat," making bread for his winter customers.

But Stephen is thinking about more than the continuity of year-round baking.

"We talk about moving out-of-town," Stephen says. He and his wife, Karen, want to live in the country. "I would build a wood-fired oven . . . do some of the baking outdoors." Stephen pauses, as if imagining the prospect. "I'm sure my dog would like that."

There, his bread would be nurtured by more than the sweet apple smell in autumn. His yeast would live and breathe the wild water, earth, and air—all year.

Yes, of course, Stephen's labour belongs to my *Book of Seasons*.

As I pack up my bike bags and cycle away on this warm Wednesday evening, with Stephen's gift of two seedy-oat cookies in a small paper bag, I follow the crows to the trees where they've landed several blocks away—still hundreds and hundreds of them, en masse, at this twilight hour.

My conversation with Stephen has taken me out of time—my time: its narrowness and orderly rigidness, my one manner of thinking as I lay a ledger across my days, teaching routinely in blocks of time. At Stephen's, I stepped into a dense world that is not my own and into the mind

of another person who lives differently, with an unconventional kind of intelligence: an insightful relationship to the world. As I listened, slipped away, and left behind the rush of the day, time was altered . . . slowed. My imagination stirred as I surrounded myself with a new place: a different pace.

Centuries ago—beginning with the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, some say, but it goes back further than that to the philosophical tradition in ancient Greece—intellectuals were "carriers of . . . *Bildung*: slow, linear, cumulative, cohesive knowledge." As Thomas Hylland Erikson reminds us, they had "oceans of leisurely time to think and read, and to write heavy, voluminous . . . texts for readers who had plenty of time to spare."

The Greek word *schole*, from which many modern languages derive the word *school*, or *scholar*, means leisure. Plato, especially, emphasized the relationship between leisure and education. *Schole* was not a matter of aristocratic pretense, or disdain for healthy work, but a reverence for contemplation: the freedom to be able to think, engage in conversation, or see a play. Not idleness, *schole* was revered as thoughtful reflectiveness, springing from leisured time.

Now, as Eriksen and others warn, "slowness . . . is threatened." "Modernity *is* speed," and the pace has become "too fast." No one takes time to dawdle, stroll leisurely with openness to accidental discoveries, cherish delays as gaps for afterthoughts, or wander spontaneously to the theatre. This radical distortion—and acceleration—of time, fractured into smaller and smaller units, diminishes the quality of human life.

We need an "architecture of slowness," Eriksen says: open squares, narrow pathways, winding streets and naturally beautiful buildings, which encourage passersby to meander and stop.

Thoreau found a simpler solution. He discovered it in November, when the bare earth reveals its organic linearity—its own circuitous "architecture"—which compels the pedestrian to be slow. At this time of year, he wrote,

> A man advances in his walk somewhat as a river does, meanderingly, and such, too, is the progress of the race. The law that plants the rushes in waving lines along the edge of the pond, and that curves the pondshore itself, incessantly beats against the street fences and highways of men and makes them conform to the line of beauty which is most agreeable to the eye at last.

Wild apples trees, too, he said, unlike "the more civilized" varieties, are "irregularly planted . . . and the rows so devious that you would think that they . . . had grown while the owner was sleeping." They "spring up" haphazardly among rocks, swamps, woods, and roadsides, planted, sometimes, by birds and cows. Wild apples, Thoreau said, should be eaten "in *season*" and "out-of-doors."

Only wild apples, surely, not "civilized" varieties, could permeate Stephen's bread.

They set their scent free to the air and water and earth with ease. When cultivated apples fall in a farmer's orchard, they are quickly collected: rescued for cooking or preserving or pressing for cider. Their smell is suppressed. But wild apples stay on the ground, sink into the earth, mix with the leaves, bake in the sun, roll down the hills, and rot with time. Their fermentation is the earth's (and Stephen's) winter feast.

But that warm Wednesday afternoon when I met with Stephen two weeks ago is distant now, its remoteness a measure of turning time.

The apple picker turns the fruit in his hand. Jack MacLeod did this for me, when I visited his orchard in October.

Thoreau, too, liked the streaking and spotting and rusty blotches as he turned the fruit in his hand, observing the "uniform clear bright yellow, or red, or crimson, as if their spheres had regularly revolved, and enjoyed the influence of the sun on all sides alike,—some with the faintest pink blush . . . some brindled with deep red streaks . . . or with hundreds of fine blood-red rays running regularly from the stem-dimple to the blossom end."

In Mary Heaney's hands, and Stephen's, too, the soft dough is kneaded and turned, "revolving" in its roundness on a flat floured surface.

November is revolving, as well. As we approach the end of the month, the wild apples have mostly fallen, like the leaves. They have lost their beauty and are beginning to freeze.

On the third Sunday in November, I notice the first frozen pockets of water on the ground and the new beauty in the leaves and grasses: not dew, but frost, lightly brushed. As I walk early in the morning, I stoop to look more closely at the delicate whiteness: little crystals stacked on the uneven surfaces of the crisp and curling leaves—the few yellow, crimson, apricot, and amber remains. The frost doesn't sparkle in the morning's grey light, but sits beautifully still, unlike the dew, which softly moves.

A few days later, the first snow falls.

It is dry and powdery, the kind that stays, without the wetness of near-rain, which melts and slips away, slushing underfoot. This snow is ice-like—it crackles and snaps—and the wind from the north is steady and cold.

Having lost their canopy of colour from one month ago, the trees are bare. Light gets in, falls through their slender trunks, lines the road—runs everywhere. The sound of waters comes up, too, as it rises from out-of-the way rivers and streams, hidden until now by the fullness of the leaves.

Walking, now, is a longing for warmth. My steps quicken and move towards the sun, as my body tingles and shakes. I think back to summer and early autumn, when I walked further and further along the country roads, regretting the return, my joy rising as I wandered, each journey becoming a little longer. Now, time is clipped—and cold—and I feel the great change: the long wait for warmth again, after the winter retreat.

"I harvested my best crop of sprouts yesterday," Jack MacLeod says, at the final market in November. How does he labour in the cold and heavy snow?

"I recorded minus seven degrees," he says, his notes careful and meticulous, right to the end.

He is dressed in a warm red-and-black checkered coat—the hunter's kind—with layers of clothes underneath. His table stands close to the small side door, the only way in now, where cold air funnels past. Still, he talks to his customers—to me—as he sets out what's left of his produce.

I buy a large Chinese cabbage, the last one, marveling at its oval firmness, pale white-

greenness, lovely wrinkled look, and watery thinness. I wonder how it endures the frost and snow. It is fresh, unblemished by the weather, and the kale, too, with its tall stiff stalks, still stands in the big white bucket. Golden Delicious apples, the only variety left, hold their yellow warmth, with little blushes of rose on their skins. But the carrots and broccoli are gone.

On the fourth Sunday in November, I cycle far into the country—my last long ride. Darkness comes quickly now, but the afternoon light is distinct today, softly and thickly diffused: an autumnal haze, in melancholy gold, not the radiant clear light of mid-summer and the fullness of life.

Perhaps the sun is tired, having laboured too long to give life to the earth—the many months of this, its spring so long ago. This is its glimmering residue: pale yellow light, moist and soft. Having matured, the sun harvests itself; it is ready to rest, like the damp fallen leaves.

The surroundings offer up little beauty today, only glances of loveliness in the sparkling river by the roadside, the bright red berries, and the up-and-down rolling of the long ribboned road. I feel alone as I ride through the ruggedness, pass the inertness of quiet homes, and see the bones of trees—edged too close. Relieved to turn back, to cycle home, I know that I won't take that road again at this time of year.

Perhaps this is the beauty of November: the longing for insularity.

When the body is driven indoors, the mind looks inward, too. Nature withdraws its beauty to propel our thoughts elsewhere—to an inner eye, to the fire within.

November "brings but pensiveness."

As I step outdoors, on the final day of the month, I see that we have, indeed, fallen to the end of autumn—to the end of the fall term (the last day of classes). Time tumbles with the snow, soft and large-flaked today. It fell suddenly as if it were a fragrance, unwilling to stay still—a gentle incense sinking into the earth, its white wetness underfoot, the first of its kind.

Autumn is felled, finding its end.

Twilight is leaving; darkness is arriving.

It is the end, too, of Ordinary Time. The mystery of Advent begins as the world waits for a birth—for an end to the fall.

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Photographs by the author.
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