

Synopsis and Fit with Green Stories Competition: GROUND UP is a short story (4950 words) in the genre of eco-feminist literary fiction, exploring the connections between personal and ecological flourishing in the Anthropocene. The narrative takes the reader on a psychological and agricultural journey of a rural American man, ground up by the industrial economy, who reconciles with his childhood friend and love interest Amy to repair both community and soil relations. Through personal reflection, Jake considers the implications of giving and receiving care for ecological regeneration, showcasing the green solution of permaculture and describing the necessary individual and ecological transformation required to realize this positive vision of a more sustainable society.

The story opens with a vision of healthy soil on a flourishing farm in the small town of Peosta, Iowa, a locale spared the destruction of agrochemical practices that have devastated neighbouring properties. The narrative unfolds from the perspective of thirty-something Jake Hutter, former college football star and now permaculture farmer, who is taking the final steps in his long journey to restore the family farm to a thriving enterprise.

Jake's contemplation on the past reveals how the paradise he and Amy experienced in childhood was, in retrospect, turning healthy soil relations into dust bowl dirt. He considers how this sense of loss fueled his own desire to escape from the difficult and degraded life of annual agriculture. Jake's impulse to preserve his individual ego carries him away from the small town where he has established roots, tearing up his connections to place and damaging his wellbeing as tilling practices in annual agriculture harm the soil.

Following his father's plan to parlay a college football scholarship into an agribusiness degree, Jake is used by his coach to ensure a winning season for the team, supported with access to opioids that mask his physical pain and ensure his productivity on the football field. Jake uses

others in turn, in increasingly careless and violent ways, to forget where he has come from and to go where his ambitions are leading him. As a farm sustained by synthetic chemicals turns soil into lifeless dirt, Jake's own body gives out with a career ending injury that takes away his professional football dreams and his plans for escape from life on the farm.

His frustration with this turn in events leads to an accidental overdose on opioids. Jake recovers when his childhood friend Amy reaches past his diminished state to see his best self. She offers him a diagnosis of *solastagia*, whispered in his ear at the hospital while Jake pretends to be asleep, ashamed to face up to his past in the form of his childhood friend. Amy leaves him with a mysterious cure, a bag of native prairie soil taken from an undisturbed lot on his family farm.

Jake tries to shortcut the inner journey required to understand the meaning of his *solastalgia* and the possible cure by asking Amy to engage in this emotional labour for him. Her rejection of his attempts leads Jake to realize the limitations of hubris and individual ego and to embrace his own capacity for care. Alternating between a sensuous vision of restoration agriculture and hard lessons learned on the way toward building a new agricultural vision, Jake embraces the value of nostalgia, regret, and ecological wisdom as experiential guides toward a better future. Through repairing the soil, Jake and Amy rediscover their love for each other, realizing the power of ecological relations and returning fertility to the land from the ground up.

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Ground Up

“The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life”.

~ Wendell Berry, “The Unsettling of America”

My oldest kin were in the soil. So many relations, all of them holding tight together, rich, like chocolate cake moistened with beetroot and no need for second helpings.

Dust bowl dirt never wearied this land anymore. It blew over our house for years, a relentless cloud of misery from nearby fields deserted by neighbours who had surrendered to the uncommon wisdom of agrochemical companies; a thought, a shadow, a plague that passed over us and slowly dissipated. We came to the brink but were spared the ruin of our own topsoil.

The more I think about it these days, the more I realize there was always someone trying to wring one last ounce of something out of me.

Except for Amy.

In my earliest memories, we are playing together in the mud, walking barefoot, letting it squish up high, soft mountains in between our toes. We liked the sticky feeling and the sounds that accompanied us as we hopped our way around the farm. We hid from well meaning adults who tried in vain to reunite us with our rainboots. When the sun came back out, we were fascinated by deep cracks that had formed on the hard surface and imagined ourselves on another planet. I didn't know why it made my mom cry, but I could tell there was a problem in our paradise.

Later I understood; how this hard shell on the surface of the earth ensured the runoff of the next downpour, setting up the cycle of flood and drought that our community knew so well. It was a time when rain in our county provoked as much grief as celebration; a thirst in the land that a history of bad farming practices guaranteed would never be quenched.

“Jake”, Amy would say, with a soft patience carefully cultivated over years of friendship, “you’ll realize soon enough that everything you ever needed was right here all along”.

She started telling me this in high school, while I was boldly sharing plans for my great escape from Peosta, a town whose proud claim that it was in the ‘middle of everywhere’ left me unconvinced. I postured with the bravado of a card player who’d been dealt a bad hand and was still going all in. Amy could see right through me. We walked home together then, sometimes holding hands if the feelings were flowing both ways, but never more than that. She had a good nature and good sense. I’ve never seen anyone prettier; not then or since. She had everything that was going to get in the way of where I wanted to go. One day I slipped through those deep cracks in the ground and rode a river of topsoil out of there, fast.

It didn’t matter that I was long gone. Amy’s words kept playing in my head when I left for Cedar Rapids, to sow my wild oats and figure out how to get away from a place that I never believed held a shred of opportunity for me. I built a wall inside my mind to block the inconvenience that her image caused, but her voice seeped through the weeping tile and saturated my thoughts. It was a siren song to me, reverberating through the badly treated soils of Dubuque County all the way to the University of Iowa. Every now and again I could hear her seductive melody, calling me back to where I came from.

Amy was right of course, then, and still, but that didn't tell me where I needed to go or what I should do when I got there. I made my way forward on the hubris of adolescence, using any signposts I encountered to mark my development along the way. All visible indicators from the outside world were welcomed without close examination and reassured me that my journey was headed in the right direction: efficiency, productivity, competition, success. They pointed me away from the dim, backward thinking of a small town unconcerned with progress, toward the shiny future of a fast-paced urban life reflected in my dreams. I measured growth by how far I could get from where I started and how quickly I could make the trip.

There seems to be more time now and I like it that way. The days are unhurried, albeit bittersweet. Even my heartbeat has slowed down to the deliberate pace of the land. I'm no longer trying to outproduce my ecology. Designing this system of permanent agriculture started with a futile attempt to avoid my best teachers: nostalgia and regret. I kept with it, even when I realized I would never unload the shame I carried from going against my own instincts. I was conned by charlatans who rode me like a rented mule. There are no take backs, no easy returns, no simple ways to make peace with that memory. They extracted the best from my youth and ground up the rest in their attempt to hide the evidence from me and the outside world.

But today was different, May the first. It was a day filled with simple pleasures and manageable adversities. I could sense I was coming through to the straightaway from a long corner I'd been turning for years. The sounds and smells of life on the farm, bursting from this restoration agriculture, had me humming in stride. I felt patient and unstoppable. I hadn't fed the itching in my veins for more than 5 years although I thought about it everyday, even in this heaven on earth, even deeply gratified with the new promise of spring. The tug and pull of old habits, a

lifetime of conditioning that had bled me of my own beliefs was impossible to fully erase. But it was manageable now, firmly entangled in these carefully established roots.

The road out of town had been made easy for me. Exploiting my natural athletic talents was simpler than the alternative; a punishing drama of pretending to make a living amidst the carefully arranged hardships of annual agriculture. It had become a way of life that produced a clear return for agrochemical companies in exchange for a lifetime of servitude from farmers who honoured their exponentially accumulating debts.

At college it was further simplified: physical risk yields instant rewards. Bowls of opioids, like my great-aunt's candy dish, made readily accessible on the desk of my equally accommodating football coach. His comforting assurances justified a regular habit of filling my pockets with a QB's little helper, no up-front payment required. There was more relief in those pills than the best protection a 300-pound offensive lineman could offer. I was there after all to contribute, to compete, to help my team. The less I was on the field the less productive I could be. If we didn't win, it hung on my shoulders alone, a heavy burden to carry. I also had the lion's share of glory channeled my way when we prevailed. My teammates kept their oars steady in the water, wordlessly accumulating their own lifetime of injuries, as I charted our course.

That blissful fog: nothing had compared to it before or since, quickly taking all my pain away on a cloud that never let me touch the ground. On game day when I had to be clean, the cheering crowd carried me through. And those girls; the jam on my sandwich that I greedily devoured. I used them up too, pretending I was their ticket out of nowhere. I suppose I was too high then to remember or to care.

Amy was accepted on academic scholarship to the University of Iowa the same year I was recruited to join their football program. We hadn't spoken about it, but we didn't need to; news travelled fast in Peosta. I heard that she was living at home to help with the farm while I decided to move to student housing in Cedar Rapids. Every now and then over the next few years I saw her on campus as she headed into the Developmental Psychology lab close to our practice facility at the athletic centre. I managed to avoid eye contact. The day I bumped into her, knocking her books from her arms when I turned, laughing, from a crowd of friends scheming to skip class, startled me. It shattered the independent picture of myself I was creating, reflected on my junior year football card; the one where I appeared to be ascending into the clouds with light streaming behind me, some sort of football Jesus, with my polished helmet gleaming in the sun.

"Jake", she said, with surprise and a kind smile. Just my name, no other comments, no 'how are you doing?', no updates from home. I wasn't sure how to respond. On the surface it was nothing, but in the absence of small talk it felt profound, like she was calling me out, calling me home. I had an anxious moment of self-conscious awareness. Amy looked at me and I felt revealed, seen, right through to my inner core that the armour of my football gear had closely hid.

I helped her to pick up her things, muttering a quick apology as I jogged to catch up with my crew. I remember the look on her face. Not judging, but hurt, or, maybe disappointed, by how bluntly I moved on, barely acknowledging her presence. I shook off the feeling later with my friends at the bar. A few beers, some oxycodone, a couple of percocets. I was riding high above the ground again and thoughts of Amy retreated to some distant corner of my mind.

After that encounter I completely silenced the last bit of her echoing voice that had followed me on the 151-S from Peosta to Cedar Rapids. I blunted it with painkillers and replaced it with

adrenaline from a deep animosity directed at my enemies on the field, kids from other colleges who were obstacles in the path of where I was headed. No one was going to send me back to that place where I was treated like dirt, a local hick who didn't know shit, someone stupid enough to suffer at the hands of agriculture and never earn a living.

Football gave me a sense of pride, although I can't recall it now. In my senior year I earned the starter spot and played with a furious intensity to ensure I kept it. My coach fed off my rage, converting it into raucous locker room celebrations where I was held up as an example of what any man should aspire to become: focused, heartless, vicious. "Tear his head off and throw it back in his face" was our pre-game chant, breaking out of the huddle to act out our eye for an eye brutality as results piled up in the win column. Other teams were gunning for us, hoping to be the first to wipe post game smirks we couldn't suppress off our faces, to avenge their fallen ranks. I took no sacks until the last game that season, my uniform was spotless. Dirt was the great equalizer of all relations and steering clear from it was my chosen path forward.

The day the defensive lineman broke through our formation and threw me to the ground, tearing the pelvic muscles from my hip bones, I knew it was over. I didn't need to see the x-rays; I could feel that my body was broken for good. The last two operations in my freshman and sophomore years had created a weakness that the surgeon had warned me would never fully heal. He said the best he could do now was to patch me up. He told me to forget about my bowl game dreams and pray that the stitching would heal well enough for me to go early in the draft, but I'd given up on church years earlier and the scouts sniffed it out at the combine.

Undrafted. Cut loose. A washed-up star college QB, a has-been whose sorry bones refused to carry him to the professional ranks. It's still painful to recall. The price I paid to end up damaged goods. The realization of what I'd done and where I'd been. A pariah with former

teammates and old friends. Everyone steered clear of me, afraid of some voodoo that might infect them too. I was the unhappy ending no one wanted to believe was possible.

Cut off from my supply of adoration and medication, unable to go backward or forward, I had no Plan B, no energy to push against the current trajectory of my life for an uncertain future I wasn't sure I wanted. It took an overdose on opioids laced with fentanyl and the thankful grace of a roommate who called 911 to begin my painful journey of self-discovery and agricultural repair.

Amy came to visit me in the hospital, but only once. I pretended to sleep while she cried beside me. I was too ashamed to look at her, for her to see me; to admit what I had become. She whispered one sentence in my ear before she left, pressing a small bag in my hand and squeezing it tight with her fingers wrapped warmly over mine.

“Jake Hutter, here's the cure for your *solastalgia*”.

I could have grabbed her and kissed her right there. I could have pleaded for her to forgive what I was, how weak and stupid I had been. But I wasn't strong enough then to own up to what I didn't yet understand.

I'm ashamed now to admit that the tremor of excitement I felt at opening the pouch was not at all innocent. I was hoping in my delusion of withdrawal that she had, in a great act of compassion, given me some magical elixir, a tonic that that could erase all of my pain in in one clear snort.

When she was barely down the hallway, I opened my eyes and tore it open, sniffing hard, agitated, tasting the contents inside. I shook my head and my eyes teared up; the sensation was overpowering; smelling salts that woke me to the purpose of my life.

I stayed up all night, inhaling the aroma of the damp soil, running my fingers through it, placing it on my fingers, tongue, letting it roll to the back of my throat and dissolve in my cheek. This

was pure stuff, wholesome, organic. There was no contamination from nearby industry, no taste of fertilizer, pesticides, or insecticides to be found. Dark and sumptuous, the smell slightly sweet with the aroma of geosmin, I instantly recognized this native prairie soil. It was taken from the small, undisturbed lot preserved by my great grandad and generations since, unaffected by and unconnected to our modern operations. It had been covered by perennials for thousands of years, before he had arrived with his wagon and family in tow, setting up homestead in Peosta; it was a font of ecological knowledge, an open classroom offering enlightenment for any farmer who cared to pay attention.

I stirred restlessly for the next 24 hours in a fever of torment and wicked dreams. When I awoke, I felt for the first time in years, a flicker of possibility that came from my own heart. I wanted to fan it into a fire before I stood up to argue for my future. I didn't say anything to anyone about it. I suppose I didn't know what could be said. Everything that had been done couldn't be undone. I had no real reason for hope, but reason wasn't my purpose, reason didn't drive me to change my life. It was that word, that one mysterious word that Amy had whispered to me before she left. *Solastalgia*. It was her promise that the soil could cure what ailed me. It was her ability to see my best self, beyond the broken shell that I'd become.

I would have laughed myself out of the room with those sentimental thoughts when I left for Cedar Rapids after high school, but I didn't judge things so harshly anymore. Experience had taught me that I needed the mercy of idealism more than a shield of cynicism. Amy planted a seed of possibility in a deeper place than I could reach. I let it grow its way toward me. I watered it with an aquifer of my own unshed tears until I felt like I had something inside of me again; something to give.

I don't know exactly why I decided to return to the farm when I was finally released from the hospital. It would have been easier to move somewhere entirely new, to make a fresh start. Was it a sense of unfinished business? A retreat to lick my wounds? The hope that some scrap of a world I once believed in might be left? The sound of *solastalgia* stirred in my brain, the diagnosis Amy had whispered that night; like a kiss on her lips that was waiting to be collected somewhere else.

My dad didn't fight me on any of the changes that I decided to make. He didn't know about permanent agriculture and never taught me any of those ways. He'd never cared too much for the plow himself, but it wasn't from a commitment to no-till.

"Jake", he would say to me with a sigh that invited no further conversation. "It's a useless struggle, I tell you. All a farmers' life and money...devoured, gone, eaten up by fighting against drought, pestilence, and disease. It's more of a punishment than a way of living."

He'd walk away from our conversations with his shoulders hanging down, burdened by his role as harbinger of doom. He had no vision of how to bring the best of those old days forward, to change the future rather than to run from the past.

When I crawled away from the ashes of my college dreams, there was an apathy that settled in between us, replacing the eager conversation that had fueled our hope of a different future. He didn't speak to me about my plans anymore and in return I didn't pretend to have any. I sat in the dark for the first few months, brooding on what I'd lost, trying to understand why I was there and what to do next. In hindsight I suppose it was my first attempt to listen to the needs of our landscape and to allow our farm to adapt to my new choice of practices.

I wasn't like my father. I had believed that there was good in my grandad's operations. When my grandad died in my first year of high school, my dad's own best intentions got in between me and my healthy soil relations. Everything my grandad had taught me in those early days on the farm was quickly replaced with my dad's own ideas: a college degree in agribusiness, a football scholarship to pay for it and large-scale production opportunities that would follow. It was as if my grandad's passing had released the pressure built up in our operations, the gradual decline in profit and yield over a lifetime of work. In the absence of any viable alternatives, my dad was completely signed up for the modern program: GMOs, nitrogen-based fertilizers, pesticides, fungicides, and herbicides. US Farm policy was an invisible hand that firmly shaped my life, more than nature or nurture.

After weeks of debating my next step, I picked up the phone and called Amy. My fingers dialed her number without thinking; it hadn't changed. I was relieved to hear her answer and eagerly demanded more information.

"Solastalgia, Amy, what did you mean? Why did you say that dirt was the cure?"

She was angry.

"Is that what you think I gave you? Dirt? Dirt is soil without life Jake. I didn't give you no bag of dirt."

Her antagonism caught me by surprise.

"And how dare you call me up and ask me the answer for anything? What about, 'how have you been'? What about 'I'm sorry for being such an asshole to you and everyone else I've been treating like nothing more than dirt since I left for school.'"

I sat in silence, realizing that she was right. I was so urgently in need of something, anything to preserve myself. I hadn't taken a second to think of anybody else for a very long time.

"I'm sorry Amy, it's just that..."

She interrupted my feeble apology with a swift rebuke.

"Listen Jake. All our life you've treated me like I'm your muse, someone who you can go to for inspiration whenever you need a quick fix, some font of knowledge or comfort or whatever you need. Then you hide from me when you're hell bent on doing whatever stupid thing you've decided to want next".

Her words stung but I didn't interrupt. I was hearing something that I had never heard before, that I was finally ready to hear.

"Listen up. I'm not some ideal you have of mother nature, a breast you can burrow in to make everything wholesome and good again. And I'm not a loving mirror reflecting your true self back to you, so stop running away from me whenever you see something in yourself that you don't like".

"Amy, I'm really sorry".

"Jake, forget sorry. This is much bigger than any apology. You've got to turn your eyes out from your own damn self and see everything that you have around you. I'm a human being with real feelings. We were friends. Call me when you figure that out."

Her voice cracked and I was left alone with a dial tone. I listened to that high pitched sound for over an hour to avoid the pain of silence that I knew would shake my body when I put the receiver back in the base.

I started my new journey that afternoon with some simple research on the computer before I immersed myself in the ecosystem of our farm that would become my best teacher. Solastalgia, it turned out, wasn't so cryptic after all. I only had to look.

A philosopher had come up with it to describe a special kind of ecological grief, feelings of nostalgia, desolation and yearning for solace. It was the constant feeling of homesickness that I felt even when I was at home, a feeling of anxiety that was provoked....*because my home environment had been changed or even destroyed.*

It had been naïve, or perhaps more truthfully, ignorant, to think that Amy would take each step with me, that I could use her to do the inner work that needed to be done, all the stuff I didn't want to face up to. She was right to hang up on me, to cut me off from a line to more excuses and delays. I realized that soon after and was grateful for the gift she had given me that day, a caring nudge in the right direction.

Looking back on it from a clearer vantage point today, I suppose my saving grace was my senses. I liked the smell of dirt and sweat, the communion of working with others who were close to the soil. Even playing football, when the exaltation of a good performance made me feel that I couldn't get further from where I'd come, I knew that I couldn't throw a pass unless my feet were firmly planted on the ground. It seemed to be some intuition of my future survival.

Over the days and years that followed, I grew to realize something Amy already knew when we were back in high school. Football wasn't my dream. It was a compromise, brokered by my father, as a way out of our old life, a vehicle through a dying landscape that was going to hog shit around us all. My dad wanted me to use my physical talents to make my way toward a new future, one where I could run the machinery, but he hadn't counted on me getting caught up in

the gears. It helped when I figured that out, to know that I hadn't lost the core of what he and I were both after, only the map of how to get there.

I didn't call on Amy again until I had something to show her, something that would prove I'd really listened. The word she had whispered haunted me for years, it was a companion to my reparations to the soil, my first act of care. It was more than a strong breeze blowing through the farm that carried me back days after that phone call to the place where my granddad's plow once stood. It was...I'm still not sure entirely what it was. But I know that I heard voices, as if there was a crowd in the stadium again, anticipating a Hail Mary pass in the fourth quarter. I knew what I needed to do, the conviction of my own prime directive to care for the land, for people, for justice. There was no work around, no quick fix. There was no easy dodge to forget the misery I'd felt and that I'd caused. I had to go straight through. I needed to rebuild my soil relations from the ground up.

The problem of the plow was that it was the start of all this trouble. It went well back to some early advice from old books and outdated ideas of how to meet nature head on and show it who was boss. To the violent energy that called men to tear up the structure of the soil, to do their own bidding, to ignore the wisdom of the earth, to challenge the intelligence of seeds that knew where to plant themselves, to wipe out perennials that grew naturally under tree crops whose yield was easy and full. An order to annually destroy all of creation in a misguided effort to endlessly increase yield.

This 'agriculture of eradication' that became the neighbourly approach, every living being annihilated until an eerie stillness set across fields that no longer buzzed with pollinators or pests. The deafening silence of a death zone my dad had affectionately referred to as 'the farm'. I threw it out, all of it, that day I hung up the phone with Amy. No till, no chemicals, no assault

on ecological rules. Crop trees, ‘a million hills green’ that Smith had proclaimed in his ode to permaculture. It was the purest feeling of longing that filled my heart, desire without any shame. I burned for the land with an unrelenting need, to be close to the earth was my only preoccupation. These amends I made were preparations of a sort, opening myself to receive her love.

This was the reconciliation that took place before the restoration of a devastated landscape. And now this scene I surveyed today, a diversity of perennials: fruit and nut trees, vines, berries, and fungi. A cropping system that was both wild pollinator habitat and conservation practice; the lushness and abundance was staggering.

May Basket Day. I put together the traditional Iowan offering of flowers that were meant to be delivered to a neighbour in a carefully arranged hamper. As kids we had served as willing couriers, dropping our gifts to each other, and then running away before the messenger could be seen. I placed the basket on the step and rang Amy’s doorbell, retreating around the corner. When she came out for the delivery, I re-appeared before her, standing my ground, hat in hand, asking her to hear me out.

“I’ve prepared the soil. I’ve gone as far as I can on my own Amy. I’m asking you now because I still don’t have the cure. Can you help me?”.

Amy took my hand and led me behind her house, across the shortcut to our farm, to where she had seen me work from season to season, patiently waiting for what she believed in, for what she knew would emerge with time. She stopped in the middle of the landscape that I had carefully rebuilt with the guidance of ecological wisdom and turned toward me.

“The cure is simple Jake. I can’t help you alone, but I can help us. The cure...it’s not in me, Jake. It’s not in you either. It’s between us, between all of us; it’s in our relations”, she smiled, settling into the damp ground, soil so rich with dark organics it appeared a purplish black.

Her body was a revelation, reclining on the bed that nature had made, the work done by a billion microbes, plants, an ecology that was pulling together effortlessly in the direction we needed to go.

I don’t know why I ever fought so hard before against such generous help. I just couldn’t see it, I suppose. My spirit had been drained by a world that believed in linear pathways, but I discovered it again that night in the cycles of the soil; nature repaired herself and Amy and I followed.

Rain fell, slowly on us at first, then much harder. It absorbed easily into the porous soil that could finally receive its relief. We were heady with delirious anticipation, building from the ground up. The fertility of the earth had returned, and we were in it.