

## GREEN DREAMS

### Looking at Life: The View from the Wisconsin Homestead

*Paul Buble*

Richard Quinney, retired from his career as a sociologist (and textbook writer) with a steady Marxist take on criminology, has during the last decade become a small-press publisher, including several of his own works, which comprise a sort of nature-and-culture photography interwoven with ruminations on the role of memory.

His later academic life had brought him back from the East to his native Midwest, the northward edge of Illinois not more than an hour's drive or so from the family farm in Southern Wisconsin that, with his brother, he had inherited. In retirement, living in Madison and interacting with the community of environmentalists and photographers, he has devoted much of his time to a return, physical and spiritual, by way of photographs that document the multi-generation family past, and by nurturing Borderland Books, now distributed by the University of Wisconsin Press.

The “borderland” in question is no simple matter. In Borderland’s *Field Notes*,<sup>1</sup> published a couple years ago, Quinney continued his previous work sketching out how badly he had wanted to get away from home 60 years ago, and how on his repeated, later returns, he came across increasingly pleasing physical memories embedded in the old toys and abandoned farm implements in the barn and alive in the ecologically rich marsh on the property. Quinney was lucky that his mother lived on to an old age and that the farm was consequently not sold, as so many others were. After her passing, he could open it up to environmental restoration and sustainable agricultural experimentation by young people trained at the University of Wisconsin. But these were not the only borders in question. *Things Once Seen*<sup>2</sup> advances the close look at physical memories still alive to him on the farm and recalls a multitude of other scenes across a lifetime of snapping shots.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Quinney, *Field Notes* (Madison, WI: Borderland Books, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Quinney, *Things Once Seen* (Madison, WI: Borderland Books, 2008).

In *A Lifetime Burning*,<sup>3</sup> published by Borderland earlier this year, he turns to another method of documentation: something like the postmodern clip-art style, illustrations taken in this case from old family scrapbooks of assorted kinds that he found, perfectly preserved. He begins, “The farmhouse is empty now,” that is, empty of these objects but definitely not of the memories accompanying them. He happened across the treasure trove of objects including the scrapbooks as he prepared the house to be occupied by tenants about to be involved in sustainable farming. He knew, as he removed artifacts, that the 160 acres of farmland, woods, and marsh would live on, perhaps even resound with chords from the piano left behind, too large to move.

Quinney was fortunate enough to come across diaries and farm ledgers in addition to the usual photos and letters. He has chosen for reproduction, however, mainly the charming album scraps, mostly domestic and nature scenes from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, along with some excerpts from letters and diaries. Many readers—anyone who has spent time at flea markets, paging through random volumes or sets of greeting cards—will be familiar with what these scrapbook items, letters, and diaries portray. They are, as much as photographs, a view of a world now long gone, a sensibility we can hardly imagine. Quinney does imagine it with what seems to me considerable success, because it is all at hand as passed down to him, willy-nilly, now come alive again from childhood memories to the present.

His running comments on the farm, as mirror of the natural world, are the most interesting here, inevitably set alongside his leaving for college a half-century ago, and his later return. The morning routines, the milking of cows, the feeding of chickens, family social routines around the Grange and church sit alongside memories of bad years of little rain, and then of life made easier by rural electrification thanks to New Deal programs. Fighting the limitations of the physical environment, including the weather, with any method at hand (in his boyhood days, cultivation had not yet been replaced by heavy doses of pesticides), the family nevertheless lived in their acreage relatively intact, leaving behind

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Quinney, *A Lifetime Burning* (Madison, WI: Borderland Books, 2010).

everything that eventually would be turned into the model sustainable farm of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Quinney has one especially vivid recollection of his childhood just as, in 1941, the nation was about to shift irrevocably from peacetime to war (and the permanent military-industrial economy) and from productivity of badly needed goods to a very different kind of economy with waste and war predominant. He fell and fractured a leg, and he lay in bed for weeks, while his mother dutifully enumerated the visits he received in those weeks—more than a hundred! Her notation of little gifts of all kinds—gum, candy, puzzles and such, mementoes of the human community around the farm—bring back for a moment an age disappeared. Was it better than ours today? Not really. But the proximity of so many to the land offers an inescapable difference from our own times.