



Shane Brill appreciates the relationships that lead to interdependence and resilience in his backyard foodshed.

Urban Homesteader

BY SHANE BRILL '03 M'11

IT LOOKS ORDINARY enough by Chestertown standards, a 1950s single-family home within earshot of campus lacrosse games. But unlike most houses in the area, its lawn recedes each year, the grass monoculture yielding to a forest of fruit trees. By last count over twenty: cherry, pecan, persimmon, and peach among others—a canopy designed to filter light for an understory of blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, aronia, grapes, hazelnuts, and kiwi. Herb spirals and vegetable beds flourish on less than a quarter acre. So do bees. And chickens.

But I don't grow food. I write a story.

As a first-year creative writing student at Washington College, I aimed to master the art of fiction. My poetic

pro prowess garnered the first ugly tie awarded that semester from Professor Day's neck. I hobnobbed with visiting authors whose work I esteemed. I rewrote inspiring passages till I discerned the tools of fiction at play. And then I began to use literary devices to read the stories of our culture, awakening to the consequences of an economy poised to expand through endless consumption.

From my love of literature emerged a passion for ecological literacy. I could trace the journey of ancient sunlight to fossil fuels to fertilizers to food. I could follow power lines to rivers to mercury in our bodies. I could travel with potential, kinetic, and embodied energy from bloodstreams to jetstreams.

Amid a burgeoning awareness about resource drawdown,

pollution, and climate change, I started to comprehend that food presents our most intimate way of connecting to the natural world. That realization belonged to a bigger, older, and mostly forgotten story: the more we nourish the life forces that sustain us, the more we revitalize ourselves and our communities. With sunlight and water as pen and ink, I started to write my story of belonging, a story of home.

Wafts of slow-cooked vegetables, broths, and wild-yeasted sourdough draw visitors to the kitchen. Intrepid guests sip from proffered brews of kefir and kombucha, snacking on seasonal provender from local farms.

No television. A few books hinged open on a window seat. Plenty of candles and tranquil spaces for reading or conversa-

tion. A well-provisioned pantry en route to the backyard, where, on warm days, honeybees burst from their hive in a golden thrum. They take respite by a shady watering hole: a bog garden profuse with aquatic flora seeded by birds from the Chester River shores.

Ensnared among espaliered apple trees, one finds the ladies—Amelia, Astrid, Reinette, and Oswin. The gregarious gals specialize in pest control, composting, and entertainment. They also contribute up to two dozen eggs per week, which I share with friends and neighbors along with the copious harvest from my prolific pear, pomegranate, and fig trees.

The more I observe and encourage energy cycles through the space, the more I see foreshadowed in the remaining contours of lawn: cordoned fruit and nut trees, a rainwater cistern, a pond for aquaculture, a root cellar.

As I cultivate the story of a regenerative local economy, the homestead energizes my life with the knowledge that we have untapped capacities as individuals and communities, and undiscovered gifts to share with one another.

In honor of its street and diminutive size, I call my dwelling the Little House on Pine. But the magnitude of the undertaking overwhelms me with joy at the mystery of how it works, and awe that my story fits in a larger place we can all call home.

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