

The Great American Landscaping Novel

— AN ESSAY BY —

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Before I became a bestselling writer, I was perpetually broke. For me being broke was not only an enduring condition, it was my legacy. For generations the beleaguered Evison tribe had been all kinds of broke: hopelessly, urgently, even willfully. I can honestly say that young Johnny Evison never expected to be anything but broke. That I decided to become a writer in third grade ought to be proof enough.

The fact is, I'd always sort of resented money. When you grow up broke, you don't learn much about money except that there's usually not enough of it. Nobody teaches you how to attract money, or leverage it, or even save it. And capitalism is not exactly teeming with possibilities for those individuals who lack capital. Basically, you're just left with the ism.

In 1976, four years after my sister died in a freak accident and our family life began its not-so-gradual unraveling, my old man managed himself a work transfer from Sunnyvale, California, to Keyport, Washington, moving us eight hundred miles north to the relatively affluent community of Bainbridge Island, whereupon he promptly managed himself a transfer back to Santa Clara, effecting his escape from domestic life, and leaving my mom a broke single mother of four.

Not everybody was wealthy on Bainbridge Island, but the majority of families, as far as I could see, were getting by better than us. At thirty-nine, my mom entered the workforce for the first time in her life, as the milk lady at my elementary school. A couple years later, she landed a post as the safe deposit attendant at a bank, where she stayed for the next twenty-odd years.

I started working off the books at eleven years old, bussing tables in downtown Seattle for my older sister, a waitress, who paid me out of her tips. The next summer, I walked up and down the ferry line, selling newspapers to commuters. When I was lucky, I didn't have change. So, it's not

that I was lazy or incapable of industry. I knew from the beginning that work was — and would forever remain — a necessary evil, provided I could get it.

Throughout high school I worked afternoons as a dishwasher at the Streamliner Diner. The morning dishwasher was a guy named Michael, about forty. He had laminated his master's degree and hung it above the sink. I thought it was a joke. I told him it was hilarious. He told me in no uncertain terms that it wasn't a joke, that he stared at that master's degree for six hours every day to remind himself he was more than just a dishwasher, which was a convenient stance, considering he wasn't much of a dishwasher.

After graduating high school (barely), I spent the next twenty years working dozens of jobs to support myself, none of them glamorous, all of them low paying: gas-meter-checker, auto detailer, caregiver, sorter of rotten tomatoes, telemarketer of sunglasses. If I had ever earned a master's degree, or even an associate's degree, I would have almost certainly laminated it for display at whatever my place of employment. I guarantee my co-workers would have loved it. "That's hilarious," they would have said, just like when I told them I wrote novels.

Among all those low-paying jobs, by far my favorite was landscaper, the profession I arrived at by default in my mid-thirties. By thirty-five, my tolerance for money was at an all-time low. I actually avoided the stuff, and it avoided me. Every year I got a tax refund, and it always went straight to rent or groceries. Had you asked me who was ruining the world, I would have pointed to the people with the most money.

Other than my aversion to wealthy people, I was not a disgruntled landscaper. I enjoyed working outside, provided it wasn't raining pitchforks and my back felt tolerable. The tasks were mostly satisfying: weeding flower beds, pruning hedges, raking orchards, blowing leaves, deadheading hydrangeas, spreading mulch, and mowing lawns, all tasks that lent themselves to a heady mix of concentration and abstraction, the perfect state of mental equilibrium for the author of six unpublished novels.

Mowing lawns was the most satisfying task of my trade. I liked the clean, straight lines, the visible progress the work offered, and, of course, the smell of fresh mown grass.

The only downside of landscaping was the clients — not all of them, but some of them, specifically the ones that went out of their way to let you know

your place, the ones who treated you not as a professional tradesperson but as their personal lackey. The ones who asked you to clean their garage, or move furniture around, or take their garbage to the curb, without even acknowledging that you were going above and beyond your duties. Never mind that you were a virtuoso with a push mower. To them, you were merely someone they were paying, whose name they couldn't remember.

For many years I'd been stewing on a novel centrally concerned with wealth disparity and class. It's a theme I've explored to some extent in all my previous novels. But I wanted to write one that zoomed in specifically on the double standards that exist between the haves and the have-nots, a book that highlighted the myriad indignities, vagaries, and obstacles of poverty in America in the twenty-first century. I wanted to write a working class novel that did not patronize the working class, one that did not politicize them as such or ennoble their poverty, one that painted them three dimensionally, so that the characters came to life on the page.

I arrived at a single working class voice that spoke to me so clearly I couldn't ignore him, a protagonist with a worldview that brought the quagmire of wealth and class into fine focus for me. His name was Mike Muñoz, and he was a twenty-two-year-old landscaper who lived on the res and worked in the yards of wealthy Bainbridge Islanders. Mike was a bit of a misfit: brutally honest, irreverent, compassionate, conflicted, funny, full of yearning, and more vulnerable than he'd have you believe. I loved him immediately, and I love him infinitely more three years later.

Such was my unconditional love for Mike that I wanted to build a world for him in which he could reinvent himself as he wanted to be, not who the status quo set him up to be. In this world, Mike would be tested again and again, his efforts often consigned to futility, his success borne back by the ceaseless tide of cultural and financial inequity. Yet Mike would ultimately overcome, because he learned to engage the world on his own terms.

And thus *Lawn Boy* was born. With this novel, I wanted to wake up the moribund American Dream, grab it by the collar, and splash some water in its face. Or better yet, invent a new American Dream, one not beholden to the tenets of capitalism, or identity politics, or any measure but the human will to invent ourselves as we wish. Call me an idealist, but I wanted for Mike what I want for my children, what we all deserve: an opportunity to thrive.

I don't think I've ever had more fun or taken more satisfaction from the act of writing a book than I have from *Lawn Boy*. I loved living in Mike's world, and watching him own it. I loved hanging out with Freddy in his underwear, and drinking tumblers of chardonnay on ice with Mike's mom. I loved sharing their every defeat and small triumph. I laughed my ass off, and cried, too — from sadness and from gratitude. In the end, the writing of this book gave me hope and clarity in a muddled-up, crying-for-help world. It is my sincere desire that all of this translates to you, the reader. There are Mike Muñozes all around us, and in telling this story I hope I've shown him the respect he deserves.