

2-18-2013

Property

E. W. Oldenburg
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus>

Recommended Citation

Oldenburg, E. W. (2013) "Property," *Amaranthus*: Vol. 1971: Iss. 2, Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus/vol1971/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Amaranthus by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

PROPERTY

No crawling, groveling, sprawling,
And no unsightly grass stains,
Playing property was more dignified
By far than jack-knife baseball
And more sedate than mumblety-peg.
Of all the kids' games
Played at knife point,
Property was the best training
For an upright adult life.

It required a space
Flat and grassless and packed hard--
Not to repel a knife blade
But to hold one firm;
Not a spot baked flaky by the sun,
But a square in the cool shadow
Of a back porch packed and smoothed
By someone's mother's feet
Constant and flat and patient
Walking back and forth
To hang the wash. A spot
Where the old man might come out
And stand at dusk with his cigar
And spit and smooth the bare earth
With apologetic sole and promise
Grass seed in the spring.

You drew a square
With the knife blade,
Kept a stiff wrist,
And made the lines as straight
And undeviating as you could.
Then you drew a line
Through the middle of the square,
Divided it into equal parts;
One side was yours, your land: you faced him
Across your property line, your friend,
Brother, enemy, neighbor, opponent.
You took your stance , stretched out
Your arm across the property line,
Jack-knife held by handle,
Blade pointed at enemy land:
Your bombardier's finger and thumb
Released the glinting missile.
Or like a carnival knife-thrower,
You could balance the knife by its point,
And flick it, turning, gleaming, slanting,
Earthward for the stab of conquest.
But the steady sure and accurate way
Was the simple release and drop--
No strafing, no divebombing--
Deliberate, accurate, devastating.

When the blade stuck fast
You drew a line the way the blade
Was pointing from dividing property line
To enemy's outside border. You rubbed out
A segment of dividing line with the toe
Of your shoe and added the slice
Of conquered land to your own.
And dropped the knife again.
You kept dropping it until the knife
Refused to stick, until a stone
Hidden under an inch of sand
Repulsed your conquest. Or if your luck held
Until you had sliced away the enemy's land
And left him a place too small
To fit his heel in.
The game was over then.
You drew a new line
And started again.

But miss once
And your enemy got his chance
To win back what he'd lost and more.
The shining blade falling, falling,
You were forced back and back
Toward the last heelsized corner,
Toward the last unlivable reservation,
Pushed back and back like Crazy Horse
Until the shining blade made quietus,
And the game was over.

In a good run of luck
When nothing would make his blade stop sticking,
Your enemy's face made all the difference--
If he gloated you could forgive him,
If he grinned you could grin like him
When your own turn came,
But if his face was as blank
As the ground he had won,
And his eyes were as cold
As the steel of his blade,
Then he carved out pieces of your heart
When he carved off the pieces of your land.
Then when his blade tottered and failed,
Spurting a small geyser of dirt,
And your turn came around again,
You went him one better: you imagined
Him spread-eagled on his own property,
A captive pegged down on his bare hard ground,
And you aimed your blade not for his land
But his flesh, and when he was drawn and quartered,
And the game won, you could look up,
See his flesh intact, wipe your blade
Clean on a pants leg, obliterate
All the lines, and deny you'd ever
Knife your brother in the heart.

E. W. Oldenburg