

A Sagging Fenceline

As I sit looking out a window, the ground frozen, tree branches bare, snow clouds heavy on benchland fields of wheat stubble, my hens on strike and not venturing far from their open door, I wonder where prosperity hides. Where is there a booming economy? Certainly not anywhere near Pocatello. If I didn't send my sculpture to Seattle, I couldn't buy cooking oil to fry the potatoes I've grown. In actual dollars, I have for a decade earned less each year than I did thirty years ago, when men first walked on the moon.

My hens stand with their backs to the wind, their feathers ruffled, as I finish breakfast: venison, biscuits with raspberry freezer jam that tastes like the berries were just picked. Apples and apricots were scarce last summer, but my raspberries bore heavy even though, while I was on the Clearwater, they overgrew several gooseberry bushes and spread into the alley.

I tell people I'm a starving artist, but I don't look like I'm starving. While I know what real destitution is, I am as unsure of where to find it as I am unsure of where to find Clinton's prosperity. What I can find is a nation with a weight problem, the almost unimaginable problem of too much food.

My extra weight isn't caused by too much sugar or fat in preprocessed food, but by simply too much food. Sure I can eat better, but my idea of better isn't necessarily a dietician's. I don't want to eat infertile eggs so I go through the hassle of keeping a flock of laying hens. Most years, I raise a hundred or so free-ranging meat birds because I don't like how commercial operations raise fryers. I have a strawberry patch because I haven't found a decent strawberry in a store for thirty years, maybe forty years, not since Marshalls disappeared because they were too soft to ship far—as kids we occasionally threw a strawberry at a passing car. We would've broken windshields with the strawberries in stores today.

I have three varieties of raspberries, twelve varieties of gooseberries, four colors of currants, jostaberries, service berries, strawberries, four varieties of apricots, nine of pears, two of plums, a cherry and I don't know how many apples (more than thirty varieties) and a house, all on one oversize city lot. I have raised beds for garden annuals. But I have no lawnmower; I have no lawn.

Thankfully, I don't have to grow anything. Stores are full of food, and if a person isn't fussy, it's all fit to eat. But I am fussy. I like the favor of my green beans better than the ones I buy in a can. No store tomato compares with one picked from a vine. Nor do the onions I buy compare to the Walla Walla Sweets I grow. Yet, for me gardening is a choice. It wasn't, however, for Grandpa Kizer, nor for most families in this country prior to the First World War. But something happened when we weren't looking: it might have all started with a can of kidney beans. Instead of sending a housewife home with a cloth bag of dry red beans, a grocer in, say, St. Louis or Minneapolis convinced her to take home this steel can of already cooked beans. She could save time. She wouldn't have to soak dry beans then boil them for hours. She could wait until the last minute, then open

the can and dump them into her three bean salad. And indeed, she did save time. She saved so much time between buying canned beans and then bottled milk (she no longer needed to keep her cow, and cows are dangerous; remember Mrs. O'Leary's) that she could take a parttime job at the hospital, which left her with even less time to cook. And the hospital became busier as less cooking was done at home, making her work of even greater value to the community. Now, she had a career, community respect, and independence, and all because she bought that can of red beans seventy years earlier.

Mom made sure all three of us boys—Ben, Ken and myself—could cook in case we found grocery shelves bare. But how much instruction does it take to cook beans, or make chili?

So I garden though I don't have to. Likewise, I butcher my meat though I don't have to. If I don't get an elk, I might buy that cow out there in the field; yes, that little Angus that doesn't know whether she should run as I approach, my rifle in hand. To eat meat or not is a choice, but I don't need to pay someone else to do my killing, and I don't want to eat meat loaded with steroids.

When I returned to the university as an older student, I engaged a bias against hunting and killing that devalued the experiences of a literary underclass that is as far removed from Hemingway, Faulkner, Kesey as it is from Joyce, James, and Lawrence. Only from within the humanities can the lethal silliness of releasing fur farm mink be celebrated: the boars will try to kill each other once out of their pens, and will often be successful. American universities have produced a generation of Carey Nations, each with a hatchet looking to chop off my head. And in the liberal environment of humanity graduate classes, I am more bitterly condemned than in any evangelical revival meeting where I'm identified as a *Judaizer*.

As a nation we choose what we eat according to taste or calorie count or moral dictates; we are not a hungry land, at least not at the end of the 20th Century. We can let our emotions rather than our stomachs make determinations about whether we kill or graze or pay Colorado's proposed *fat tax*. And that is our problem: we have such an abundance of food, of resources that we let our emotions decide moral questions. The pleafull face of that starving child on evening television loosens purse strings and encourages military adventurism. The child-like eyes and hands of the raccoon on PETA's announcements touch clenched heartstrings. And that raccoon is like a child: when you have a raccoon for a house guest, it will never close a cupboard door, guaranteed.

My stepfather was a Seventh Day Adventist. Half of his acquaintances from church were vegetarians, and most of them did not eat either milk or eggs. They were as a group very healthy, but they worked at being healthy, at eating as balanced a diet as possible.

In my graduate humanities classes I encountered vegetarians who were not healthy, who either didn't know how to eat a balanced diet as a vegetarian or as a vegan, who didn't have the means available to eat a balanced diet. Inevitably, they were offended when they learned that I hunted deer and ate venison ... perhaps I should have asked if I had the equal right of being offended by students and faculty that served crabs and shrimp at departmental get-togethers, neither of which I'll eat for reasons of conscience. But my question would've made less

sense to them than their offense makes to me.

As I sit here today, the promised snow finally falling, I remember last November when across the Clearwater and up the hill, my wife spotted what she thought was a fawn. She found my binoculars. What she spotted was a coyote. And within a minute, she spotted another one that appeared to be hiding, waiting.

She called me to the window. When I took the binoculars, I saw a yearling doe leave the pine timber and work her way along an abandoned drift fence. Evidently the doe didn't see the two coyotes that waited ahead of her. But about this time, a third coyote emerged from the timber behind the doe.

The coyotes were using the sagging fence to cut off the yearling's downhill flight, and the one behind her was slowly hazing her, careful not to spook her into running ... the yearling saw the attack coming, but I don't know if she ever really stood a chance of escaping. She couldn't jump fast enough to get away. The coyotes had, indeed, used the fence to their advantage.

The coyotes didn't kill her immediately. Instead, they started eating her while she was still alive and struggling. She died from, I suspect, loss of blood maybe three, maybe four minutes after the initial attack.

I wanted to step out of the house, shoot across Highway 12, across the river, across the railroad tracks and kill those coyotes: they were three hundred yards away, and within my range. I felt protective of that doe, felt those coyotes were stealing from me. But they were only doing their *coyote thing*. And I wasn't about to shoot across the highway, river and rail tracks. Hunters don't need that kind of press.

I was mature enough when I was in those graduate humanities classes not to say anything to the *cheechakos* about cruelty in their idealized natural world, if *cruelty* is the correct word for the bloodletting within prey-predator cycles. Instead, I wrote a line in a poem about holding a beating heart in my hand—it was thought I wrote metaphorically. No, I have held beating hearts. And I am certainly not about to waste any of the animal whose beating heart I have held. In fact, I understand why a Native American would thank the animal for giving itself to him or her. With its heart in my hand, that animal is not merely a target. It is like me, and it will become part of me.

Humanity sits atop prey/predator cycles and is the predator most likely to prey upon itself. No emotional response, no emotional outbursts will remove us our topmost position. We as a species live by preying upon other species even though we as individuals may opt out of killing. We can eat only grains and nuts, the seeds of completed life. But those beans sprouts feel pain as we crush them. They really do. So we had better leave them alone if we object to killing deer.

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