

The Fox

The morning sun casts pink shadows across last night's snow, drifted white against fences and ditches, as I begin chores. Starlings flutter about the neighbor's mountain ash; they seem intent upon plucking the last redorange berry before it falls. Juncos and house finches wait on my apricot's budded branches for me to refill a feeder, but I have to first carry hot water to my pea fowl, reluctant to leave their house, their water pan again frozen. My laying hens, on strike for their first time, are still on their roosts when I put two scoops of mash in their hopper; they seem more interested in the potato peels I tossed in their yard. I intend to turn them loose later this afternoon, but change my mind when I glance across the ditch, across the road, and see a fox dart from the corner of Brent Anderson's chickenhouse.

There isn't time to grab a rifle; plus, I'm in town and can't shoot legally anyway as the fox pushes snow with her chest, one of Brent's young cockerels in her mouth. She jumps through a break in Harold Gerber's back fence and disappears into the mayor's gravel pit.

I haven't seen that fox for several years. Brent's boys told me last summer that she had a den in the gravel pit. They had intended to hunt her once her fur became prime, but they have been too interested in hunting ducks to worry about a fox. And skunks have been more of a problem for them this year than that fox, which, until now, has been satisfied harvesting the surplus cats in the neighborhood.

When I last saw that fox, I was on the phone to a museum curator in Ohio—she had called to see how I had spent Thanksgiving.

The connection between her and that fox is, in addition to its literary potential, one I have never been able to shake, for while talking to her I was reminded of a proverb about an ox. I wrote the following lines while on the phone:

THANKSGIVING IN IDAHO

Snow on the sage, the stubble beyond white
as the squatting clouds across the valley,
the ridge there somewhere, like the three
strands of barbwire outlining the plowing
& planting, or the fox that, at twilight,
chased a vixen past where eight head of beef,
no, nine, now graze, their frosty breath
stapled to the leaning posts, split juniper

weathered gray. I was on the phone to a woman
in Ohio when I first saw the fox—she invited

me for Christmas, said she was horny but she'd
wait till I was there. Now, I watch two hands
and a border collie haze the cattle towards
a steel loading chute and a waiting truck.

While still in Fairbanks in 1991, I became acquainted with the curator, who was involved with a historical publication for which I wrote a poem about covered bridges. The image of poets as free spirits might fit Galway Kinnel, who I once hauled around Fairbanks when he came up for a writer's conference. He was older, but he still fit that free spirit image.

Imagination, though, can be far from reality. One of the stories I remember Dad telling was about him dating a red-haired daughter of a local minister there in Indiana. Her image was squeaky clean, but she was one-way glass through which her father couldn't see. I remember Dad saying that she was away too fast for him. So image or persona isn't necessarily the person. However, my image of poets as long-haired members of the Beat generation, the image I took away from high school English classes, still prevents me from identifying myself as a poet. Others might deny me that identity because of what I write.

The curator in Ohio inserted my face into her image of poets and artists as we exchanged correspondence after I returned from a two week visit to Ohio in July. Actually, I believe she perceived me to be a stable pole within the artistic community. Her friends were growing funny mushrooms and smoking pot and drinking away too much, and while back there, she saw that I liked my conception of reality unaltered by the means her friends used. She wanted to make a change, and on that basis we corresponded.

But all of us are much more complex than the image we project. In a way, our images are masks behind which we hide from associates and acquaintances, and too often, from ourselves. I am, and I am not the old deer poacher from Lincoln County that my acquaintances there know me to be. I am, and I am not the writer faculty members at University of Alaska Fairbanks know me to be. But this is not news: the apostle Paul wrote about being all things to all men.

A fictional character can't display the mutability of a flesh and blood person. Such a character would not be consistent, and perhaps as we age that is what we look for in ourselves. Consistency. Predictability. But in artists we value creativity, the reinvention of social mores that stifle our lusts.

Most of my generation fled the constraints of parents and grandparents, and tried to become artists, psychedelic and pure, uninhibited spirits as free as the future. But war in Vietnam threatened both freedom and the future, which was out there in front of each of us, waiting to be ingested but always a little beyond our grasp.

That Thanksgiving when I watched a dog fox chase the vixen as I talked to the curator, I felt the tugs of image, of liberated cultural expectations, and of physical desire. I also felt like the Lone Ranger. I was baptized into the Body of Christ nearly twenty years earlier. I taught the morality of my Dissenter forefathers to daughters. My expectations of them were high. My expectations of myself were equally high.

As a writer I was once accused of being a neoRomantic in the vein of Ken

Kesey. I was amused; for if I am anything, I'm a Medievalist, a throwback to an era of morality plays and cloaked criticism of the Church, of the whole Christian establishment.

When that curator arranged for me to come to Ohio and carve with adze and crooked knife for two weeks, I had forgotten how much I disliked the Midwest's hot, humid nights. I wouldn't have gone if I had remembered. I wouldn't have gone if I hadn't been eager to advance my image as an artist. Nevertheless, those two weeks were enjoyable even though I spent nights sitting in a chair, sweating and watching lightning bugs. I'm sure I must have slept some, but it wasn't much. It was just too hot.

The historical society's living history blacksmith at Hale Farm invited me to return in the winter when the farm was closed to visitors. My blacksmithing skills are weak—I have more head knowledge than experience. His intentions were to give me a crash course on forging, and mine were to return in December to take that course.

But when I returned to Fairbanks, I learned that Idaho State University (ISU) had offered me a Doctor of Arts fellowship for that 1991-92 year. I hadn't been sure what I would do since I only lacked completing my thesis at University of Alaska Fairbanks, where I was apparently considered educated: the university hadn't offered, by the end of July, another TAship although one was offered after I accepted ISU's fellowship.

Journeying to Idaho meant driving the pickup I purchased on Kodiak after Kristel's car was vandalized. My daughters told me I was old enough to leave home with their blessing (all three of them were enrolled at UAF). But there was some security in having them live with me: their image of me was a trust I didn't want to violate. Their expectations of me made it easier to fulfill my expectations of myself.

I started down the Highway with a few dollars in my pocket, and intentions of renting a place in Pocatello and of buying another pickup, used, of course. But I ended up buying a house in a little town south of Pocatello, and driving the same 1975 Ford pickup.

I needed the museum curator's help with the twenty percent downpayment on the house ... now we were involved.

On that Thanksgiving, after those two foxes disappeared over the snow covered alfalfa field between where I live and the L.D.S. church, the mayor and his son rode the irrigation ditch bank as they herded a few Herefords into a waiting cattle truck. The Herefords were headed to auction, and probably slaughter.

The sentiments I would have expected of a later 20th-Century poet would have been about the purity of love as the vixen, in fresh snow, felt nature calling her to den and raise kits and another generation. But my thoughts were those of that ancient preacher for whom nothing was new under the sun. I knew why. I didn't know, though, if I wanted to explain that why to anyone and thereby destroy one of many cultivated images.

Being like one of those Herefords herded by the mayor and his son would have been easier than writing about them when the goal for all of us seems to be that expressed by Rodney King: *Can't we all get along?* Well, no, we can't. Not

right now. I can't even get along with myself.

I spent a month wondering what I would do when Christmas break came. I really didn't know until the break came.

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