

Thorpe Moeckel

Yondering

We drove up Buffalo Road and then cut on good gravel over Garden Mountain, wound around Sugarloaf and Painter – way out past the old Dudley place, sky a raw milk, cold enough for the rime to stay in blossom all day, rhododendron leaves curled up, too. We ended over Mill Creek way, at the top by Smith Branch, hugged in among Middle and Brushy and Sandbank, mountains that look more gentle than they feel when you're in them hunting tangles where grouse might be.

It was a day in December, my friend Greg Whitt and his dog Lily and me. The woods were a lake of leaves and deadfall and stone. Not everywhere was the water stiff with cold. It dropped in places too quickly for that.

This was shale country, the Alleghany front. Picture a centipede and you'll see, scaled down, how the water drained for miles, how it ran together. This was cutover paper company land. This was the line where the counties changed names – Rockbridge, Botetourt. This wasn't nowhere but it was as close as we could get without having to go real far.

Lily's a German shorthair, a year old the past October – she's Greg's first. He's been training her according to books and local knowledge, but like a lot of young dogs, she hasn't seen enough birds. We hoped to help fix that today. I said as much to her as we wound around another long curve, brown mass of mountains, the sky ponderous and lovely, Greg all fired up by a grapevine mass close to pulling its host tree down.

"It's like a vineyard in there," he said. Lily, as if in response, stole up between the buckets from the backseat, her nutty, fierce eyes, ears tuned to the song of rocks under

tire, and she gave Greg a little lick on the neck without looking at him, saying let's get there, I care about you and those grapevines, sure, but I want to run those woods, I want to follow my nose. She turned then and slipped aft. I glanced back and saw the lean dog, rump foreword. She was rubbing her snout in my coat, which reminded me it hadn't been washed since the hog butchering a few days prior.

Lily's liver-ticked the way shorthairs are, and she moves like she's part cutting horse and part grasshopper, lean and trotty, bouncing and leaping and galloping, prancing or trancing, almost flying, too, when necessary. Her brown patches are islands among an archipelago of smaller brown spots, the white a kind of sea. She's a walking mural of gingerbread cookies, in other words. My favorite patch is two circles joined like an eight, a solid one, with a little three quarter circle, also solid liver, bulging off of it.

We were descending a long curve now. Greg was taking it pretty fast in the old Blazer. For a while, you could see so far to the north I wondered if we hadn't paid an admission fee.

"Greg," I said.

"Yo."

"You have a beautiful dog," I said. "But her tail reminds me of a scrap of PVC. There's one in our tool shed - same length and width - but I couldn't find it the other day."

"That's it," he said. "Sorry, I meant to tell you." Solemnity has a thin bladder, and we had punctured it. The miraculous thing is, she has more than one. This was shaping up to be a fine day.

Where we parked by the National Forest gate at Smith Flats, there were two trucks, steel cages in the beds -- bear hunters. Lily, eager to get going, slashed about the woods while we geared up and chatted with one of the bear guys, a big bearded man. He was friendly. When Lily returned and was checking the scent on this new human, he gave her some loving, clearly admiring. And we were friend-

ly back to the man, especially when he started in with reconnaissance. “Flushed two yonder,” he said, looking at us over Lily’s ear. “A few days ago, but it was right up there not even a mile.”

“We won’t be in your way?” Greg asked.

“No,” he said. “Billy’s off the other direction. Our hounds treed a sow and cub.” His voice was flatter now, a bit lackluster, like he’d been hoping for a big boar. I don’t know much about hunting bear and don’t have any interest in hunting them, but I do know that the few cuts of bear meat I’ve eaten over the years were delicious, nutty and of a texture and taste that seemed a rendering of the mountains’ very essence.

Behind the man, off the gravel in a pile of dumped brush, lay a coyote, stiff, its upper lip upfurred. I looked at it from a distance while Greg and the bear hunter kept talking. It was a big animal, darker than grey, fifty pounds or so. It seemed to have been dead a while and yet it looked as if it could pounce on us at any moment. The bear hunter didn’t acknowledge it. Greg didn’t either, not until later when Lily showed a nervous interest in the brush pile.

We hunted then. We went where the man said they’d flushed two. No grouse emerged. We went another yonder and then another few yonders. I like yondering, when where you’re going isn’t all planned out but figured on the fly, something to do with a tip and the terrain and the dog and her nose and the promise of game. Your pace determines it, to a small extent, and the weather and season, too. Most of what puts you where you are is so close to the heart as to be illegible and perfect. Any time is good for yondering, but winter has its perks, especially in the wooded uplands of Western Virginia -- there’s less foliage, more room.

You could see North Mountain and Ad Cox Knob and Bearwallow Mountain, too, but mostly we saw a lot of brush and leaves and limbs and moss where we were stepping, where we were crackling the lobes and veins, looking

out for greenbriar and grapevines and ankle twisters, steep ground, the dog's bell clanging, our whistles now and then calling her to stay close, work this way, slash that, her tail docked and tense, wagging now and then, up even then like a fin for balance.

We walked up and we walked down. Hours passed. The sun stayed behind the clouds, and the earth moved, and we moved across a small, vast part of it. We walked across and down and up and up and across and down. We back-tracked. We looped. We sat down against trees and we drank water and ate bread and cheese and spoke a little, mostly to the dog, to Lily, saying good girl, stay close, find a bird. The walking was good. It was all about picturing everywhere you ever will and won't be and were and are at all times of day and night and year. How else can you look for something unless in every corner of experience. How else can you find that something when you likely never will.

Lily kept stopping. Her bell would quit and Greg and I would tense up in expectation. Then we'd see her. She'd be squatting the way female dogs do. She stopped often, every twenty minutes or so. She was in heat. Greg said it made her a little erratic. I couldn't tell. I know dirt about bird dogs except I like them. I go out there with Lily and Greg because I like to tromp around in woods that are new to me. New woods are new woods, good in their own right, and also good for renewing one's appreciation in the old, regular haunts.

My most regular haunt is the eighteen acres where my wife, daughter, and I feed ourselves on the slew of animals and soil and plants we work – hogs, sheep, milk goats, ducks, chickens, rabbits, and a big garden. A person is many things and many feelings, but I've come to feel an intoxicating satisfaction upon returning, after a day or more in wild country, to the rituals of care that raising food demands, all the surprises among the routines that grow, over time, a little more intimate – the crunch of an old coffee can digging in a

feed bin, water in the rain barrel slopping into an old spackle bucket, all the grunts and mews, quacks and clucks. Lately, the feel and sound of manure and mulch slipping off our shovels onto the garden beds had taken the sting off of a hard situation at my job. That situation was way off the radar today; in our first mile of walking, it was sighted somewhere south of Cape Horn, among the icebergs.

Of course, I like carrying the old over and under, knowing it's loaded, my fingertip aware of where the safety is, each of the two triggers. The promise of firing on game is forever a strong and personal pull, but seeing some new country, seeing a lot of wonders even if it doesn't amount to seeing a grouse or shouldering the stock, releases the safety on the senses and on desire, which are always tangled up in memory. Several times as we worked those woods, as they worked us, I heard the drumming of grouse in my head, way down between the ears, those lawnmower-like eruptions I hadn't heard since fishing the Jackson a few springs back.

The trees, by the way, were not a chorus. Except for the broken ones. The more a tree grows, the more it reaches down, night the only foliage one would ever care to count on.

For days – and I had a sense of this then -- my knees' pockets would be full of shale. It was hard walking, usually is on these outings. Every smile had some grimace. Look, I wanted to tell you a story about grouse and now you've got one that's not about where everything is coming from or where it is going, the stones sewing new jackets from the cloud's whittlings.

At some point, Greg said, "It's wild country this way for days, two hundred miles – maybe more."

"Any roads?" I asked. We were stopped on a flat, a kind of false summit. Greg finished drinking some water and offered me the canteen.

"A few," he said.

I trust Greg's knowledge of the region. He's fished

and hunted all over these nooks since childhood, and his appetite for local history gleaned from books and locals runs as deep as he wears it gently. He often travels the back roads of Western Virginia in his work as an environmental engineer, sampling soil and water and overseeing the remediation of contaminated grounds – healthcare for the land. Essential, it seems, to his doing good work are the relationships he strikes up with people on the jobsite and in the small towns, his infectious love of nature and culture regularly inspiring them to relate stories about their own places and people. Greg often shares snippets of these experiences with me, but the spring he was involved in the cleanup after the Virginia Tech shootings, he offered very little, except that he was there, and I wasn't going to ask.

The day was progressing nicely. Those who claim that a scarcity of game inspires you to hunt harder are on to something; whether you hunt better is another story. The clouds seemed to share their thickness and endurance with us, but they kept their heaviness to themselves. And though the dirt was frozen, you could fall all the same. I busted my butt a few times. It was that steep in places. You had to use your hand, the one not holding the gun. The grip of the ground was the grip of the cold. We went and we went and for a map we looked at Lily and we looked at the trees, at the bark, the limbs, all the joinery.

Every now and then, I had to imagine living there forever. Not to do so would have been irresponsible.

We were squirming through the dense new growth of a clearcut when I came into a small opening and discovered the skeleton of a buck. Many of the bones were missing, but the upper part of the skull was intact, the two outermost of the six thick tines gnawed a fair bit by mice. I couldn't see or hear Greg through the trees. It was a damp, icy place, a seep, golden sedges matted every which way. I squatted there and let my breathing subside to regular. There's no good place to die, but this looked as fine a place as any. I

thought of the coyote and figured it and this buck had probably known each other, at least by scent. It seemed we weren't that far from the truck, having circled around, but there was something intensely private and remote about the spot now. My eyes went from the knobby base of the tines to a small beech, its leaves sharp, parchments. I wanted to linger but had to get going. Being a collector of sorts, I hung the skull by its rack through the straps of my game vest and starting walking again, awkward with the new bulk. Lily's bell clanged not too far ahead.

More hours passed. You still couldn't see the sun or its outline behind the dense and darkening clouds, but the big star was lower on the horizon – the quality of light said so, and the light seemed an accurate meter for the remaining energy in our legs. We had pushed a lot of covers with no points from Lily and no grouse. My gun seemed to be putting on weight. Snow began to drop, big flakes. Greg said, "This is last summer's burn." We had come over some ridge or other and were out on a rise between drainages – just over from some old iron mines where we'd paused for a look, little caves and stone piles that Greg connected with a furnace on Mill Creek he said was operated until the 1850's by the Tredegar Iron Works out of Richmond. Where we stood on the rise, it was hard to look at the burn line on the stumps without imagining the heat. Greg was to still my left – him a righty with the gun and I the opposite. Lily, meanwhile, worked the scarred ground roughly thirty yards out, tail tight back and forth, bell the sound of something later than old.

"Not much food in here," I said.

"Not much," Greg said. We'd been working the burn for a little while. Where we'd brushed them, charred sticks and stumps had smeared our boots and pants with black marks. What greenbriar remained was yellow. "Let's cut across the contour – find the edge of this," Greg went on. "They could be piled up in there."

We hunted the edge with new degrees of hope. The

cover was good there -- a recent clearcut, some grapevine, laurel, greenbriar among the young trees. Turkeys had been scratching the duff -- dark, rich soil littered with acorn husks -- and a few deerprints were frozen in one of the cleared spots.

The snow didn't last long. And there were purples, yes, but even the gray could not speak of them. I mean we were lucky sometimes and we saw each tree as its taproot sees the crown. But we were luckiest because for much of that day we were unknown to ourselves. We wanted nothing, least of all the smell of pollen.

Later, there was a grouse. It flushed sixty yards off, from down in a gulch beyond the edge of a clearcut, far from where we were headed and far from Lily. We turned and went the yonder it had flown. We crossed the bottom and walked edgeways across the contour up the slope. Soon, we heard it flush again. It was a ways off, beyond the dog. We heard it, we both said so. And we saw things in that hearing and in that saying so. There were big oaks in there, some poplar.