

***Timothy Murphy***

## **Changing Of The Guard**

If I search far enough back in their pedigrees, I find that all five of my Labradors have descended from FC, CNFC Trieven Thunderhead, son of Super Chief sired by Paha Sapa. That's just the paternal line. On their mothers' side two of them descend from Candlewood's Tanks-a-Lot, surely the greatest competitor in history. Bitches are at a distinct disadvantage, it being in the interest of their breeder/trainers to keep them pregnant in the whelping box. She won the National Field Championship in three of four years, and I am deeply indebted to her for the puppies she threw, my dogs' closer antecedents.

I knew that Elmwood's Bold Fenian, aka Feeney, would be trouble as he screamed in my lap on the 49th day of his life as I drove him home. I put him to sleep two weeks ago. At age twelve dove season had been too much for him. Novox, condroitin, glucosamine, nothing worked, and his hindquarters gave out.

Feeney was trained by Carl Altenbernd of Gun Dog Kennels, who acquired him from Steve Blythe of Lone Willow Kennels. Almost always hunting solo with his not-very-good gunner, Feeney harvested about 2000 doves, grouse, ducks and pheasants in his career, a remarkable run. At age one Carl couldn't get him to sit at a distance on a blind retrieve. So he buckled two TriTronics straps together and fastened the shock collar under Feeney's groin. It was a horror to behold, but it worked. Part of Carl's genius is knowing just how much a bull-headed male puppy can endure.

Crazed though he was, Feeney was the smartest dog I ever knew. Though Carl had told me, "When he's ten you'll be able to keep up with him," Feeney figured out right away

that my killing range was forty yards and rarely went beyond it. And he figured out right away that pheasants dropped by my 28 or 20 often took off running. His first cripple chase was at four months when I dropped a bird way beyond my range in unmowed grass and he came up with it fifty yards from the fallen feathers. He trusted his nose, and I trusted him.

He became a celebrated retriever as *Gray's Sporting Journal* published poem after Feeney poem, and he dominated my *Hunter's Log*, a book with thirty years of black lab poems. 2011 was really his swan song, and I want to incorporate into this prosimetrum two accounts in verse of some of Feeney's final hunts. Here is his dove opener:

### **The Trautman Gelbvieh Ranch**

#### I. Maggie, Feeney, Stevie and Timmy

The Holy Grail? To fill within the box,  
fifteen birds with twenty-five rounds or less.  
I beg Michael the Archangel to bless  
the Mojodoves whirring above our blocks  
in stubble. From their batrachian pillows  
frogs are waking; and from riparian willows  
here come the doves to meet our murderous noise.  
Dogs will be pups, and grown men will be boys.

*September 5, 2010*

#### II. A Dove Too Far

Not yet dawn and it's seventy-eight degrees,  
the humidity is pushing ninety-eight.  
Low overcast, doves hold in their dripping trees,  
mosquitoes in their millions hum in wait.  
Not fit for man or dog, but forth we go,  
wishing we hunted pheasant cocks in snow.

Our fifth dove sails into the corn test plot.  
I mark it and line Feeney down the row,  
following him, cursing my too-long shot.  
I hear it fluttering, trying to fly, to know  
the freedom of unfettered skies again,  
and blame “this limitless trait in the hearts of men.”

I find it dog-slobbered, flightless and stunned  
at a ploughed pathway through this test plot field.  
Feeney has left it for me. I have gunned  
for thirty years here and never seen such a yield.  
But no Feeney. My dog has gone to ground.  
After the combines, will his corpse be found?  
I need to realize that he’s now eleven  
and cannot hunt like a young male anymore.  
After an hour he limps from rooster heaven,  
and I race him to the Maple River’s shore  
to give him a dog paddle, let him cool down,  
then truck my aging athlete back to town.

*September 1, 2011*

### III. Reconciliation

Steve Trautman called. “Thanks for the draft,” he said,  
“I’ve got a better place, an abandoned yard,  
wheat stubble where the retrieving’s not so hard.”  
Cold front comes through. I plant my decoy spread  
just past the farmstead trees, near to the river,  
then shoot my Holy Grail in the morning dew.  
Thirty minutes of action, and we’re through,  
Feeney’s my friend again, my fond forgiver.

*September 2, 2011*

## Last Rides Together

### I. Not Skunked, but Totally Skunked

We've walked four miles, and Feeney's longtime limp suddenly worsens. There's aspirin in the truck. We flushed not so much as a hen, worse luck. Five feet behind me trails my aging gimp

when a swamp monster roars out of the crop. Steven and I fire simultaneously. Down goes the cock which Feeney doesn't see, and Maggie blasts right past the pheasant's drop,

quartering into the wind, behind a runner? Steve sprints, kicks at a scrub oak deadfall, sunk on the prairie. Brave Maggie points a skunk which blasts her in the nose. The slower gunner

strolls to the drop. The cock is tunneled, dead in the tall weeds ten feet from where he fell, blasted, bled out and bound for rooster hell. I kneel to scratch my sage retriever's head.

Stevie is in a state approaching wrath: rubdown with ketchup first, and then stage two, tomato juice, Johnson's Baby Shampoo. Maggie, disgraced, goes home to take her bath.

### II. In My Boots, Not In My Bed

Feeney was too wiped out to wake last night when I crooned Robert Burns, turned out his light and dreamed him dead. Strangely, I wasn't grieved, glad for the trophy rooster he retrieved now bubbling, stewing in my gumbo pot.

Slow, then slower, Feeney's and Murphy's lot.  
This year, no floundering in drifted snow,  
but heart attack afield? That's how I'd go,  
my corpse scavenged by foxes, found in spring  
when migrant swans and ducks are on the wing  
and winter wheat stages into the stool.  
My friends will say, "Tim was a hunting fool."

### III. Monday Morning

Two nights of rest. Feeney is fit to go.  
The Olson Section has been hunted hard,  
the cocks flockshot into the posted yard.  
They will be slow and sleepy, that I know.

Bob Olson planted trees here, row on row,  
lilac, spruces, chokecherry, summit ash  
shadowing ponds where blue-winged mallards splash.  
Bob sold me this farm. In blowing snow,

Indian Summer, I have hunted here  
twenty-five years. I load my Twenty-eight,  
open and close the pasture's creaking gate  
where Feeney knows the trees for which we steer.

Four shells, three cocks shot in the heart or head.  
*The days of man are grass*, King David said.

In July, home came Chucky, Lone Willow's Cuchulain. He  
was death on Feeney, hanging from an ear, chewing at his  
neck, but the old master loved the attention. Midway  
through September the score was Feeney, 43 doves, Chucky,  
0. So I let Feeney sleep in my bedroom, changed to hunting  
togs in the basement, and smuggled out Chucky in the dark  
for his first solo forays. As best I can puzzle out the pedi-  
grees, Chucky is Feeney's great, great nephew. He needs to

wear a choke collar and check cord, for when he gets his bird (he's at 25 retrieves at day 130 of his life), he thinks the proper destination for his triumph is in the next zip code. Here is his first pheasant:

### **Passing the Torch**

He pointed his first pheasant, then he pounced.  
It crashed into a shaven soybean field  
but took off running; and the puppy trounced  
our target with a passion labs can wield,  
full somersault on impact in his glee,  
then fetched his flapping trophy to my knee.

Two years ago I wrote a poem here.  
I had a winged bird twenty feet away  
from Puppy's flush. Though young dogs rummaged near,  
old Betty found him. That was her last great day  
before the cancer. Now my eyes well up.  
I watched her somersaulting as a pup.

In my preface to *Hunter's Log*, and in James Babb's introduction to my book, we discuss the lessons we've learned from Ortega y Gasset's *Meditations on Hunting*, chief of which is this, that each hunt is a practice session for our mortality. I guess I've most centrally addressed this theme in my poem "Pass Shooter," first published by *Gray's*, then in *Hunter's Log*.

### **Pass Shooter (IV)**

Meditations on Hunting: years ago,  
corn strips, the winter food plots in these fields  
held all the birds our Olson Section yields  
when the ploughed soil is flecked with fallen snow.

Two brothers and their labrador, footworn,  
worked to the wind. Their father capped the drive,  
never quite so alert, quite so alive  
as when his sons were coming through the corn.

Arthritic, diabetic, short of breath,  
he'd seen the sun rise on a mallard blind.  
Ortega y Gasset much on his mind,  
his hunts were dress rehearsals for his death.

### **Acts X, 13**

In Heaven you'll be twenty-five years old  
but know all that you learned in your long lives.  
You'll leave the Elysian Fields to bed young wives  
once every week. You'll never have to scold  
two-year-old dogs. Each bird you shoot, released,  
will fly to summon sunrise in the East.  
New snow will fall. It will be cool, not cold.

Sam Adams' Ale is running in the creeks,  
never a badger nor a rabid skunk  
to threaten pups, and when the sun has sunk  
and evening's flush is rising in your cheeks,  
you'll sit in council at our Father's feet,  
sober as angels or a novice monk,  
to hear Him say "Rise, Peter, kill and eat."