

## **K I L L I N G**

When we were children, when ‘playing’ ‘Cops and Robbers’ or ‘Indians’, the very common expletive was: “Bang! Bang!, Gotcha!, You’re Dead!”

I was eleven years old when my brother and I were present when the 76 year old farmer Joshua Bates and my father ‘did in’ one of the farmer’s pigs. The animal was corralled into a small enclosure in the barn; I don’t know whether it was father or the farmer who struck the pig upon the forehead with the sledgehammer. I cannot remember whether the pig squealed, I seem to remember it, suddenly, downed in a heap, after the sound of a heavy ‘thock!’. And I assume someone slit its throat. The next thing I remember was the carcass somewhere outside the barn, with my brother and I, in turns, scrapping the bristles (porcine fur) with a shallow cupped metal tool equipped with wooden handle. It seemed the carcass had been scalded before the scrapping began.

I vaguely remember part of the beast, most notably, the slab bacon, being stored in the cellar of the roadside tavern (The Pines), converted into a home, which my parents were renting, and where we were living at that time. I also vaguely remember my mother making ‘head-cheese’, which looked awful, but which eventually pleased the palate, even to the degree I have never found its equivalent elsewhere. Mother did things like that. Anyway, the unpleasant look of the stuff has assumed its former position of repugnance in my life.

Not long afterwards we moved to a really small farmstead in the Berkshire woods of New York, which had been the homestead of the farmer’s sister, and which my mother was purchasing with money borrowed from her sisters. The acreage was assumed to be 10 acres, as the farmer stepped it off from tree to rock to tree, which in reality turned out to be 4½ acres when the property needed surveying after my father’s death. On this small plot of land, located on a hillside with shallow topsoil atop a yellow clay base, we did our gardening. We also eventually raised chickens, a pig, and two goats. When the chickens, usually the cocks, Cornish and New Jersey Black Giants, had attained maturity, they made what seemed a regular appearance on the Sunday dinner table.

Dispatching the roosters became a ritual. Father would capture a rooster from the chicken house, sometimes in a most laughable manner, for which, if we were seen to be enjoying the momentary triumph of the beast (they were also our pets), whose end would soon come, would often result in a heavy rebuke from dear old daddy. The rooster would be carried to the ‘chopping block’ which

## *Killing*

served as the place for splitting wood and for beheading the roosters. Two nails were driven into the block upon each occasion. The roosters head would be placed between the nails, and the neck pulled taught by also pulling on the legs with one hand, while swinging the hatchet with the other, down upon the outstretched neck. The body of the bird released when its head was severed became a flapping, and if let loose, something that would seem to try to run, but father would hold onto the bloody flapping thing until he could deposit it in a wooden box while it thrashed out what remained of its life under the cover placed upon the box. I don't believe we had chicken every Sunday, simply because there were not enough roosters.

It was a family thing; my task being to pluck the feathers, which found the feathered carcass being placed in boiling water for a few, then plucked; the warm wet feathers smelled rather not pleasant; but usually only barely tolerable until the last pin feathers had been removed. But then my part was done, except for the eating. My brother somehow wound up with the task of eviscerating the foul thing, a job I could not perform. And my mother most usually cooked what was left.

If I was left with any scruples, it was only the manner of death, the weird smells, and whether or not it was my favorite rooster; but all seemed mostly forgotten by dinner time.

There was often deer in the forest, but father did not seem inclined to hunt them. I suspect we all thought of the deer as a kind of Bambi thing. We always seemed to have an ample supply of eggs and chickens, and often made trips to the local IGA store, located a mile away, for hamburger, bologna, bacon, Spam, cheeses, and so on. We fattened the one pig, taking it to market for auction. The two goats found new homes after it was discovered they were too easily made ill by the mountain laurel that was endemic to the Berkshire Mountains where we lived. And once, my brother and I removed three toddler raccoons found in a hollow in an apple tree in the abandoned overgrown orchard on the old farmstead next door. The raccoons were given away to someone who had a license to harbor wild animals; they became pets. A good story, no!? A happy ending!? We often tried to capture the woodchucks that would dig burrows nearby, sometimes in the garden, never succeeding.

Guns, per se, came into our lives only peripherally. A double-barreled 12 gauge shotgun came with the small farmstead. I can only remember father using it twice. Once he was outraged at one particular cat of ours which showed a definite appetite for all the small feathered creatures inhabiting our small farm. Father dispatched the cat with a blast from the shotgun, practically right

## *Killing*

before my eyes; a particularly gruesome death. The cat also happened to be a pet. Father was obviously not moved by sentiment; a lesson to be remembered. Nature had to have its balance.

The next evidence of father's ability to pull a trigger came when somehow or other we had acquired a single shot .22 caliber rifle. I remember him instructing us on its use. In order to perfect my eye/gun coordination I had painted a 'bulls eye' target with many concentric circles upon a piece of wood. I had set it outside on a fence post facing away from the house and its environs. Father thought this a novel challenge for his shotgun, blowing the target to smithereens before I had had a chance to use to as a device for learning gun/eye coordination; another lesson to be remembered.

Not to be dissuaded from shooting at something, one day I took the .22 off into the woods, where quite naturally, there were plentiful enough targets, birds being amongst them. I had to have my try at nailing a bird. As it turned out, it was quite easy to shoot a bird; that is, render it lifeless. I may have been fifteen years of age. I felt so badly after this shooting that I never wanted to kill another living thing. Senseless killing!

But I did not forswear guns altogether. One day when father was away, I fired a slug from the shotgun at the stovepipe sticking out of father's studio, somehow managing to put a nice clean hole, slug-sized through it. But I was indeed surprised at the 'kick', (recoil) from that gun. From that day onward I was always tentative in the use of a 12 gauge. But I did use another 12 gauge shotgun later, before I left high school. It belonged to a school mate from the village. A pump action 12 gauge. We had met at the deserted neighboring farmstead with some notion of hunting in mind, with two of us going somewhere to flush game and two of us to do the shooting. That got boring after awhile; I chose to put an end to it by firing the shotgun into the trees above where the flushers were flushing. They, of course, were rightfully indignant at the sound of shot ricocheting off the trees nearby. That put an end to hunting, but not an end to firing the gun. No Trespassing signs always invite the gun-toter to plug them. One such sign was located on the doorway of the abandoned two-story farmhouse. I placed a 12 gauge slug in the gun, aimed at the sign from a slightly elevated position; and fired! Boom! could be heard echoing throughout the nearby hills. A neat hole appeared in the sign. In investigating the course of the slug after it went through the door, we entered the house to find the slug had gone through the brick fireplace, to lodge in the wall beyond it in the next room. Surprisingly the hole in the fireplace was relatively small compared to what one might

## *Killing*

have expected. Impressive!? Obviously this was a nice piece of foolishness, and rather destructive of other people's property.

Then, after high school, I went Out West, and became exposed to one kind of arsenal by the son of my landlady, also the cook at the fast food joint where I washed dishes, peeled potatoes, made salads, and mopped the floor, and swept out the drunks at 3 AM. He was a 'sportsman', both a hunter and a fisherman. He was also a lady's man, and a fellow who went to dances looking for brawls, cradling lead sinkers in his hands when he got into fisticuffs. He also entertained the ladies in his bedroom at all hours. I went on a duck hunt in another state with him where his official girl friend lived, where four or five of us were to position ourselves at the edge of a marsh early in the morning, concealing ourselves in the rushes. At an appointed time, his lady friend some distance off, was to fire a rifle in order to startle the birds resting and feeding in the water. The timing was not what it could have been, or there was a misunderstanding, or the watch synchronization wasn't what it could have been; anyway, her gun went off before the hunter/shooters were in place. So the flock took to wing with the shot, while the hunter/shooters were not able to get their weapons into position, and properly aimed, before they were fired. By the time all that had happened, the ducks were out of range.

Then one day, secretly, I 'borrowed' this fast fellow's 30.06, transporting it out into the wilderness. I had intended to use an out of date Sears and Roebuck catalogue as a target. I had no idea what kind of bullet was in the chamber. I aimed at the catalogue which I had propped up against a fence post, and pulled the trigger; a rather percussive noise followed. I proceeded to examine the catalogue which had a smallish entry hole on the one side, and proceeded to examine the exit hole, to find a large circle, probably five to six inches in diameter tapering from the rear into the point of entry. I was impressed, and I began to imagine anything living still eager to live after being struck by such a projectile.

This should have been the end of guns for me, and was, until I purchased, my first and only such purchase, a single-shot .22 rifle, while still Out West, (before enlisting in the US NAVY, to avoid the draft, to become cannon fodder in the anti-something or other war in Korea). I soon parted with the .22, having never fired it, in payment for the repair of a broken spline in the drive live of my 1939 Buick sedan.

And was also soon in the military, where I learned how to fire an M-1 (at upper torso human silhouette targets) 100 yards away), a 50 caliber machine gun at no target, a .45 caliber burp gun (at another full figure human silhouette target at close range), a .45 caliber automatic pistol (at a human torso silhouette target at close

## *Killing*

range), and a Browning automatic rifle. And I often stood watch with a .45 automatic pistol on my hip. I never did fire a Sparrow III Air to Air Guided Missile. Each of these weapons had a substantial kick, the most controllable being the machine gun which had a fixed mounting, and the Browning automatic which had a tripod. But the .45 caliber weapons were virtually uncontrollable after the first shot, so great was their recoil. I was impressed with the firepower of these weapons. A Sparrow Missile was purported to have an 80% accuracy when propelled from a plane's wing at another (enemy) plane. I never stood watch with a loaded gun. I was never in danger of being fired upon, so I saw no necessity to carry such lethality upon my person. I only imagine I would never have fired upon another human being, no matter how grotesque his politics. But never say 'never'.

No longer a child, "Bang! Bang!" acquired a more serious meaning. Megatons! When I was twelve it was Kilotons over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What did that mean to me? I wasn't questioning the propaganda until later in life. Eventually I read John Hersey's Hiroshima. I can still remember the fire siren in the distance signaling the end of WW II.

And eventually it was the Strontium 90 in the milk; we had put a gun to our head.

Pardon the wandering. Killing is difficult to keep in bounds.

A return to a more modest tale.

After the military, I felt little inclination toward firearms, and never owned one again unto this very day, and never fired one again until some 35 years later. Not that I hadn't imagined doing so when outraged at my fellow man. But as far as other forms of life, I felt no compulsion to hunt or to kill for sport, or for trophies, or even for a more plausible reason, like hunger. I have never truly experienced hunger. Sometimes I would get into a meal and suddenly lose my appetite, but that would not engender a desire or lust to kill. I remember when my maiden aunts, the ones that loaned the money to my mother, their sister, to buy the small farmstead, yes! my maiden aunts took us out to dinner at Nick Beni's in Poughkeepsie. Eating at a restaurant was new for me. I didn't really know what to order, so when my godmother Madeline ordered trout I thought that would be a good idea. Until it appeared whole on the plate eyeballs and asshole included. I lost my appetite, and would have settled for peanut butter and jelly.

I was operating the big old worn out Navy Surplus South Bend lathe in the University Science Shop during lunch hour when I heard that JFK had been shot. I can't remember where I was when Harvey Lee Oswald was shot; or when Jack Ruby died in prison. I

## *Killing*

can't remember where I was when Sylvia gassed herself; or when MM swallowed all those pills.

Not that my life was uneventful during all those gunless years. I had used a Daisy Air Rifle to harry, and sometimes hit, the squirrels that frequently visited and gorged themselves on our birdfeeder. And, of course, often I missed the little creature and once made a hole in a window instead. And with that same device I had hoped to chase away the raccoons that were taking over our eaves and attics. I often wanted to use the Air rifle on my neighbor's dog, but feared I would hit the thing in an obvious place, thus bring an investigation that would result in a lawsuit. My neighbor's dog's continued always to plague me, and still do, to this day. Fortunately for me I spend a lot of my time in another country. But there are guns there too, but I am not allowed to have any of them. It's a place where dogs that are on the loose get shot as a matter of course.

On another occasion I had come by a Wrist Rocket sling shot, something David might have appreciated when he took on Goliath. I was demonstrating this device to my first wife one day, shooting large pebbles at trees where blue jays were scolding away. The notion behind this activity was never very clear in my own head; I was just taunting the scolding birds, who frequented our trees. The Sling Shot used by David might have been accurate, but the Wrist Rocket® I used proved inaccurate when the pebble aimed at the tree struck instead the bird, rendering it lifeless. My wife was outraged. Well, what can you say?! Dumbass! comes to mind; or Stupid! These assessments might have been true, and still may be true, but I want it known I did not feel good about that one. And since then I have not attempted to become a perfect dumbass.

Meanwhile Vietnam was in full force, stretching itself into Cambodia, and then suddenly on the Home Front, at Kent State. And I can't remember where I was when RFK or MLK were shot. I can remember marching in protest against the Awful Carnage in Vietnam. Don't you find Carnage a feeble word when stacked up against 3,000,000 dead Vietnamese? And then they awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to that glib egotistical Peace With Honor Secretary of State; that sunuvabitch we had to listen to day after day insulting us with his nothing talk. And the Norwegians fell for it. Maybe that was part of the deal for ending the war.

And, as if this kind of reality were not a big enough dose of the bizarre, and brutal, the media plagued us with the daily doings of the species, and when that proved limited, it provided all forms of entertaining ways of killing in their evening TV dramas, from reliving the wars to street crime; and Hollywood found the genre profitable as well. I would not want to fail to mention the race riots;

## *Killing*

even though I lived in the city that was assessed as one of the ten whitest communities in the USA (upon returning from a goodwill visit to South Africa, the mayor of our city was headlined by our white newspaper: "Apartheid Works"), one could not ignore completely the violence of confrontational black and white in the big black and white cities. I was fortunate to have escaped these awful embroilments (our mostly white city didn't have race riots). Vietnam was already more than I could handle. And I never could understand the unwillingness of our country to make peace with the commies. It seemed so Medieval.

The time arrived when we had elected to take leaves-of-absence from our jobs at the University to travel in our boat into Alaskan waters from the State of Washington. In preparation for the trip I had borrowed a 12 gauge pump-action as a precaution against bears. I had purchased slugs and double oughts to use in the gun. On the way, as we had anchored in a remote place, I thought it wise to fire the weapon at some kind of target that might represent a bear within a reasonable distance. I chose as a target a protuberance from a tree root lying on the beach, assessing the distance to be approximately 75 to 100 feet away. I placed a slug in the chamber, aimed and pulled the trigger. Boom! I investigated the protuberance to find a hole where I had aimed. I felt the trial sufficient. But I had also noted that part of the device that had been on the end of the barrel, identified as a choke, was missing. Upon some thought about this I imagined the choke was designed for bird shot and not slugs, and that the slug as it passed through the choke, perhaps being larger than the passage, simply tore it free from the barrel end. Of course, I searched for, without any hope of finding, the missing piece. I imagined I had learned a little more concerning guns, about which it appears I was mostly ignorant. As it turned out I never fired the gun again, and had to buy a whole new choke assembly before returning it to its owner. And, although we did encounter, in close proximity, black bear, we were in a place that did not allow one to carry weapons. And we managed to survive; whereas another had not.

Although it may not be totally relevant, more irreverent than relevant, I am an inveterate killer of spiders, wasps, mosquitoes, most species of flies, knats, termites, carpenter ants, caterpillars, moths that appear intent upon laying their eggs in wool, and huge weird looking flying bugs, not butterflies, or dragon flies, and huge beetles, with formidable looking jaws, and other creatures that might be considered biters. I am a person whose palate likes some varieties of fresh sea food, most of which I will harvest myself, since old sea food is not pleasing to the palate; most of the marine

## *Killing*

harvest in the sea food market is not fresh enough. So I am a killer of fish, and shell fish. And once we caught an octopus upon which a venturesome wife dined; I was too squeamish. I do not assault snakes, but when we lived in the Berkshires we were wary of rattle snakes and copperheads, only seeing one live copperhead. The largest snake had been a six foot black snake we had seen in a pasture belonging to the adjoining abandoned farm.

While residing in that previously mentioned ten whitest community, we owned two sheltie canines who were trained to never leave the property, but we were ever watchful of them. In the evening, usually after dark we let the dogs out into the uphill enforested yard which was fenced. They did their routines in a business like manner, unless interrupted by our Maine Coon tabby cat which very often would playfully leap from behind a tree to spook the dogs. But one night we heard an awful yowling of a dog in pain, and when the yowler appeared in running flight it had been clawed in its abdomen, and mauled in other ways. At first we didn't know what to suspect other than raccoon. But there were many sightings of possums in our yard, particularly after dark, and one was even so bold to come into our entry way though its door, and when my wife went outside to close the door for the night, the beast hissed and showed its teeth in a very threatening manner. Well!, that would never do, so bwana, Tarzan, Ernest, Daisy Air Rilfed at it without any effect; but drove it off. But the beast, or its relative returned again and again, so bwana had devised a new scheme, the pitchfork. Bwana waited for the beast to show; ordinarily not a swift moving creature, bwana chased the beast with the pitchfork heaving it at the fleeing animal, impaling it, but not killing it. It had a very tough hide that would not easily release the goring tines. It was knashy thing, scowling and growling, and thrashing but held in check by bwana. Bwana drove the fork deeper and through the animal, driving the tines into the ground to hold the beast while he looked for the hatchet to bash it about the skull. Bashed it became, and dead. Nice job bwana. Now to dispose of the carcass; burial. It all seemed too brutal, even for the ugliest of beasts.

To continue with the more relevant Killing theme.

After the Alaska adventure, I began spending more time on an island to which we eventually moved for a good part of the year. The island was located in a neighboring foreign country. Most of the early years were spent part-time caretaking a small farmstead with livestock. Some of the live stock belonged to the ubiquitous bands of feral sheep that were part of the island fare. The only predators were dogs that occasionally would break away from their



## *Killing*

master's watchful eye, some of which earned their demise through an unwritten covenant that dogs on the loose would be shot on sight. Feral sheep were a food source for a sometimes hungry, and sometimes not so hungry populace. Fresh lamb on the island was considered a delicacy; and as an occasionally ritualized sacrificial animal. The farmer for whom I did the caretaking routinely killed and slaughtered the feral sheep as well as his own polled Herefords. And he raised turkeys, chickens, ducks and geese, each of these from time to time being slaughtered for the table, and at other times snatched by raccoons. John, for that was his name, savored most parts of a butchered Hereford, from prime cuts to the chitterlings. It was while at John's that I was introduced into the island's primitive art of the killing, evisceration, skinning and reducing to cuts the Herefords and feral sheep. The tamed animals were lured to a place where they would be hauled ass skyward with a shaped piece of wood that fit in their hocks tied to a rope reeved through a block suspended from a stout branch on a Douglas Fir; what I came to label the Hanging Tree.

I must mention that I was minding my caretaking duties which involved writing stories in order to discipline myself as a writer, and swooning while the winds raged outside, so exhilarating was it all, when one day a knock on the door brought about a different reality. There appeared a gentlemanly looking fellow accompanied by his Springer spaniel, more or less telling me he was going over to the swamp to 'hunt' ducks. It was something he did every year with the farmer's blessing, so he told me. The farmer hadn't told me, so I was not happy with the gentleman hunter doing as he proposed, but did not say so. Anyway it was disturbing to know that those ducks so unsuspectingly setting upon the pond were in for a shoot, and a grab by a spaniel. And indeed unhappily I heard the shots. This was not the first time. The following year he came to tell me the same thing, this time asking me if I would like a duck, which I declined with a very disapproving look. But this guy was not to be discouraged, and when he asked again the following year I told him there might be somebody on the other side of the swamp, that he better take careful aim, he desisted. As time wore on and grew to know more of this man, from other's accounts, I now know I shoulda tole him to f-off. You have heard the expression, a 'duck shoot' or 'like shooting ducks in a rain barrel'. This was accomplished by a man who had plenty of everything, everything but wild duck.

To follow a sequence of the demise of one Hereford, I relate the following. The gate to the pasture was opened, the animal intended to meet its maker was lured, as mentioned, some fresh hay placed beneath the Hanging Tree. The farmer, and a somewhat squeamish

## *Killing*

neighbor, were doing this thing, with me as a friendly, but reluctant observer. The farmer brought his 30/30 to the tree, fairly close to the standing animal, aimed at its head, pulling the trigger. Boom!, the animal seemed momentarily dazed, then simply slumped down, its legs folding beneath it. It seemed to now be sitting down with its head still held mostly erect. "Good shot John!" exclaimed the neighbor. Only John wasn't so sure; but he got about the business of severing its jugular, while the animal still seemed to hold its head somewhat erect. John didn't seem to feel the need of another shot, even though the animal's head was still raised. The breathing of the animal was painfully audible, with gurgling sounds, and blood spurting from the cut in its neck, and squirting through its mouth and nostrils. John thought it best to go into the house for 'a cup' (of coffee) while the animal bled to death. His comment at the time, "If that wouldn't turn you into a vegetarian, nothing will".

After the 'cup' the three of us returned to the tree to find the animal indeed expired, its head now fallen to the side. The farmer set about cutting a place in the hocks to insert the raising board. He then tied one end of the line reeved through the block to the board, and the other end to the bumper of the pickup truck. Then, as he drove the pickup forward the beast was indeed hauled ass skyward. Yet another pickup was used underneath the hanging animal both as a platform, and a receptacle to capture the guts as the animal was eviscerated, carefully knifing its hide away, and for chainsawing the animal through the spine to reduce it to more manageable pieces. I distinctly recall the smell of the chainsawed flesh. As the man said, becoming a vegetarian was the only other alternative. But old habits die hard. And still one more Hereford slaying.

At another time, the farmer had had three Herefords he had placed with the bull for breeding, he believed that two of them were successfully bred, and the third he marked for the meat locker. This time others were involved in doing most of the labor after the farmer had pulled the trigger. The farmer arrived again at the scene shortly after they had eviscerated the beast, only to learn that the animal was pregnant. John paused for a contemplative moment, then said "I guess its too late now." It was a morose statement, not intended as humor. The breeding was an important aspect of the farm life. The animals were free rangers, and there wasn't any real roundup in the bush. The bull's appearance was rare, so when he appeared and the farmer had corralled a few heifers he intended to breed them, and hold the bred animals until they calved, and feed and fatten up the calves for their eventual entry into the food chain; and most animals were released back

## *Killing*

into free ranging, making their periodic appearances. For the most part this worked well, until some prized animals were rustled; or disappeared. There was much controversy, and fingerpointing. Shortly afterward, the government disallowed free ranging on government land on the island. The romance had ended.

One day the farmer and I went as much for a walk as for a hunt for a young year old feral ram. He carried his trusty 30/30, by all accounts a bit of a cannon to use on a young sheep, but I was carrying also his single shot .22. We did walk down the public road for a ways encountering a resident with whom John had a private beef (growing dope on John's property) and whom John wanted to playfully intimidate. When the resident asked about the guns, John said he was just looking for something to shoot, and continued walking. We did eventually return to his place after some walking through his favorite haunts without sighting anything worth shooting. On the perimeter of his own property there were often seen the feral sheep attracted to clearings where the grasses grew in profusion after the rains came. And often these animals would be seen only a few feet from the hanging tree. There were some animals there upon this occasion; John tried to encourage me to take aim at a young ram; but I hesitated, so John dispatched one without so much as an adieu. Anyway, it was just John and I on this occasion. The pickup was fetched to transport the animal to another place for hanging and eviscerating sheep. There I managed to curb my squeamishness as John gutted and skinned the creature. And then left it to hang. It was late fall and cold, so the animal was not in danger of flies and rapid rot; it was 'hung' to cure somewhat. It wasn't long after that I was scheduled to return to my home in that 'one of the ten whitest cities' in the USA. The farmer had butchered the sheep, and packaged half of the animal for me to transport home with me. Believe it or not, this was an honor. It was an honor because of the relationship of this reserved man and myself. It was a gift from a friend; and, as it turned out, as substance for the palate, perhaps as fine a specimen of red meat to be found anywhere in the world.

Killing had had its own reward; is that true? Was this destined to make of me a hypocrite?

I remember reading, or was it an interview, where the American actress Shirley McLaine, a believer in reincarnation, spoke of Jawaharlal Nehru, the prime Minister of India, whom she had met, as an individual who was always careful where he stepped, afraid of crushing some insect, into whom some day he might be incarnated.

## *Killing*

Wow! Just, Wow!. Think about that. My wife says “Sure, just think about malaria or ring worm.” “No! I wouldn’t want to live the short happy life of a mosquito”

Then came the day when raccoons were being trapped at the compost pile on the island farmstead. This was after John had passed away, and his widow was being pestered by the animals tearing up her compost which she was carefully layering. I tried with my live trap unsuccessfully, the trap was always sprung with nothing inside. A neighbor took over with his leg-holding traps. His traps managed to catch a few, while often the traps were sprung without having caught anything. I did not witness the results of these ‘catches’. The neighbor lost interest. I continued to use some of his traps, the ones I felt I could set without catching myself. With two of his traps and my live trap all setting upon the top of the fencing around the top edge of the compost pile, it seemed we ought to get more. The widow had left the island the morning I appeared to check the traps, where I found indeed a raccoon caught in a leg holding trap, obviously very unhappy, bloodied, with what seemed a very mutilated front leg. A large animal, one that might have been springing the traps. I suspect it had sprung the live trap, perhaps accidentally, causing it to startle momentarily, only to have landed incautiously upon the leg trap with its foot. I felt I could not let the animal loose without getting myself bitten, and I felt I could not leave it in the trap until it died. I got the .22 single shot rifle from the house to dispatch the suffering animal. At close range I placed the muzzle of the rifle very close to its head, and pulled the trigger. Not a pretty sight watching anything dying; this poor animal, the Hereford, our blind Sheltie which had fallen over a cliff, breaking its neck, finally dying in Charline’s arms, and a friend dying in the terminal ward of our hospital, in the nearly all white community, from the spread of prostate cancer; this last an agonizing death; how life fights for life, for breath; and how death arrives anyway. How much the death throes of the raccoon resembled those of my dying friend. I had wondered if I deserved to live.

Writing this ramble about Killing is a kind of penance.

Since the farmer John’s passing, more than a dozen years ago, I haven’t as much as handled a gun. The Daisy Air Rifle hasn’t been fired, for the lack of targets and the lack of conviction. When John died of his last heart attack, he lay on the floor with people pumping on him, and Jane Meadows breathing into him, Dana talking to him, Charline rubbing his feet; with his wife Jean, sighing and softly lamenting, Oh John! Everyone knew that John

## *Killing*

was no more, but he did not leave; his body lay there; why did it not take flight? Finally the Medics came, whisking him away, pretending to keep up the life support by mechanical means; a useless, and hopeless gesture.

I'm getting on in years, and perhaps more cowardly, since, with age, I am losing physical strength and have more tentative coordination. Also I have seen friends age and die, some die of illness, heart attacks and cancer. And my own mother died in a nursing home, not wanting to live, unfit for life. I'm probably dying.

I have never been very comfortable with the killing part of fishing, but still I do it. The thing is, I do not need to do it. I have never needed to kill anything, but I have done it anyway. Nothing has really threatened me, even though I might imagine some threat prevention, which is rhetorical thing as easily rationalized one way as it is the other, to kill or not to kill.

I have to get serious about the implications of the statement that I quoted in another writing, the paradox: *'Where wildlife cannot live, humans cannot survive'*. Does this contain some hidden meaning? Do we know this to be true?

Shall I recall some of the litany of lore and gore? So you will know I am thinking about them? They are so gross as to shame and squander any rational statements used to explain them. The passenger pigeon, the buffalo (still), seal pups (still), reindeer (for tongues), whales, wildebeest, countless species of marine life; and what about the bounties on predators: wolves, coyotes, cougars, and the decimation of all wild species for sport, for trophies, for lucky charms, for aphrodisiacs (animal parts to get it up and keep it up)? And some kill just for the sheer pleasure of the kill. The bwana complex. The big game hunter complex. The love of gun complex. The kill complex. The survivalist complex. The only good Indian is a dead Indian, the only good tree is a dead tree, the only good bear is a dead bear. 'I like my spotted owl fried'. Can you imagine it?

Geeeeeezzzzzzuuuzzzzzz Ffucckkkkinngggg Keeeeericsssstuh!  
Bugger all! Dick all! Fuck all! And the NRA came out for the biggest dick: Dubya!

Stop kidding yourself, this will not pass as penance. More like vengeance. Guilt perhaps. Everything I have killed was an unnecessary act of violence. But I have been party to a host of other killings through consumption; filling my gut. Will that ever stop? Am I ready for bread and cheese? Why not? Oughtn't I?

My wife in her former life with another man from a foreign land told of high castes not eating onions or green beans grown in animal or human manures.

## *Killing*

And these other ones stand around telling of the art, the art of sausage making. There's a kind of salaciousness in their renderings. Man is a proud arrogant gluttonous survivor, serving his palate. Reverence for his palate. And he does not think of himself an animal. Put him on the spit and feed him to a bear.

Beyond that, the holy war, the holy war for oil. They have us over a barrel, but we are afraid to use the bomb. Bring the soldiers home, and drop the bomb. I'm known as the bomb candidate for president. These other candidates quibble over things they don't believe in, trying to impress their neighbors with their toughness or their humanity. The alternative is to build a fence around what we got; and let the rest of the world rotate. We can walk and eat cheese. We can go coal and shale oil, and rape seed, we can reduce, recycle, and reuse (rape and reuse). Anybody forks with us, they get nuked; or worse.

Who wants to be a world leader? We have had our day at profit-making; and consumption; now its time to eat our tails.

Or shall we kill to prevail, down to the last man? The question was improperly phrased, Durchanek. Shall we prevail to kill?

Preempt! Preempt! Preempt! Its ours for the taking.

I guess I am getting off the subject into a polemic; worse; a rant!

This opus all began because of something that occurred on our remote island. In the memory of those living and perhaps those dead, there have been no predators, or what might be considered dangerous animals associated with the island. There are no squirrels, no chipmunks, no cougars, no bears, and/or most other animal species. Deer, raccoons, grouse, other 'wild bird' life, and domesticated birds and animals; the most dangerous, the big Hereford bull, or a temperamental billy goat, deranged dog, or overconfident rooster or goose; or MAN.

It began with a sighting of what was instantly identified as a bear by one who had seen bears before. It was black. It disappeared at the detection of man. The sighting was relayed by telephone to a nearby residence where the person who answered the phone laughed, saying it was a Bouvier. But shortly thereafter it was seen again by others working on the neighbor's property. Thus it became established that a black bear was indeed upon the island.

Hah! That took everybody's mind off'n the pot raid. So we got bear lore, and sightings, and cameras that didn't work, and plans to track it down for the kill, or plans to save the bear. The island was inundated with rumor and speculation; and tales of encounters with bears. As described the bear was entering peoples

## *Killing*

orchards to gorge on apples and puke its guts out from sheer gluttony. The island was often regarded as Paradise; and so it was and so it was. A convenient arrival, how achieved was as much cause for speculation as what to about the beast. For, to some, it was precisely that, a beast, a *bête noir*. To others it was a miracle, something to be revered, and maybe worshipped, as in some primitive Indian lore, a totemic figure.

Then there was the guy who was determined to get it, to kill it. He had to be patient, because the No Hunting signs were beginning to appear on private property. And patient he was until the bear, ignorant of the King of the beast's designs to Off it stepped on an unfriendly shore. The Offers beat the Savivors. Boom! OFF!

Reverence For Life!? You gotta be kidding. No! I'm not kidding.

Guns make these Offings real easy. Telescopic sights, high powered projectiles that will go through a brick wall.

Bwana Killed, Guttled, and Struttled. Made sausage, pickled and bearbequed. A jaunty fellow he was.

She had said, "It makes me sick; and they are eating it too?"

My sentiments.

A flash back. The island is a place where anyone and all can venture out at night, fearing not molestation from man nor the wild. A very unique, near paradisiacal situation. Drunken drivers driving an island wreck are the only real danger to life and limb, and those who ride bicycles in the dark, or people who walk at night when there is a storm brewing. Young women, and children are safe at any time of day – so far, in paradise.

Only dogs on the loose suspected of chasing the feral sheep, have been singled out for one kind of shooting, Shoot first, no questions. Another kind of shooting involves the feral sheep, for food, for food, and for celebration. And deer for food, for sport, for food, for variation. And of course, as I have already intimated, people do raise beef, not to send off to market.

Into this settled paradise doth appear *Ursus Americanus*, an omnivore, by reputation, but who feeds mostly on fruit and berries, and where accustomed, human garbage, and compost, and/or whatever is available. While it is true that black bears have had 'encounters' with humans; in hand to claw combat a human is at a distinct disadvantage.

I do know of an instance where a black bear was suspected of killing a particular individual, an innocent individual, in one respect, but one who should have taken precautions. The unfortunate individual was a lone kayaker, who had camped upon an island, whose tent it appears was entered by a bear while the individual slept. An encounter ensued where the unfortunate one

## *Killing*

was killed. The suspected black bear had left signs of his presence, perhaps unobserved by the person killed by the bear. A short time later, upon the discovery of the dead person, a search was conducted upon the (small) island. The suspected black bear was seen, shot, and eviscerated to find human remains in his gut. Case closed! It is not know what was the bear's intent, upon entering the tent; perhaps attracted by tempting smells. One can only speculate what happened. But it was a unique case.

I have seen several black bear, and only one seemed not bothered by the presence of humans, that is, did not move away when seeing a human. My wife an I were the humans. And it was this very bear we suspect of killing the kayaker. It did not attack me when I threatened it. It moved off.

But I would not want to prejudice my assessment of bears based on this one bear. And even if I did, I feel there were different ways of responding to the intrusion of this animal. I do not prejudice my view, although I might be in more of a position to do so than many others. We have been in the proximity of other black bears without ever considering them a threat to our persons. That is not to say we are casually unaware of them, or where we are when away from civilization; despite all the bounties and generalized killing of assumed predators, we necessarily always proceeded cautiously. But we never found it necessary to withdraw because of caution.

So I am a bit of a taskmaster in this case, since no one was harmed or threatened by the animal. Some fruit trees were reported to have suffered some damage from the bear. I guess the question would follow, does this warrant the sentence of death? Were imaginary fears sufficient reason to kill the animal?

What we are assessing here is the prejudice of the higher animal toward the lower, without magnanimity or any mitigation. A very narrow spectrum of tolerance. Tolerance of other forms of life.

The person who killed the bear is my neighbor. We have shared moments together that one might construe as friendship, doing neighborly things. I knew he wanted to kill the animal, for what ever reasons, which he did not share with me, perhaps sensing my aversion to the whole prospect. I have never lauded myself as a hunter; and have never spoken of guns with him. He has had very strong views on some aspects of wildlife. I do not know if he would be educated contrary to his views, whether or not he would change them. Actually even as a 'neighbor' with whom one feels he ought to be cordial and social, most of the relationship is superficial. That is, I believe neither one of us knows where the other is 'coming from'. We do not share the essential things of character definition. Perhaps to him I am a shadow because I seem to



## *Killing*

advocate tamer things than himself, who is often influenced by his own macho temperament.

I suppose I do not 'come from' anywhere in particular; but I do want to be fair in my assessments. I might 'come from' a 'reverence of life' position, but if I judge myself as a whole, there have been times when I have failed to live up to this dictum. However, with age, I have grown more precise in my feelings and I have grown in tolerance. I am reluctant to tolerate my neighbor's behavior, but must consider how far I would press the issue, because he would most likely cease to be a friendly neighbor. Do I care if I lose a superficial conviviality over a matter of principle? And what is the principle?

I find the last easiest to answer. I would say there were other alternatives, that those alternatives were not explored to any degree, even by those who advocated them. No one else was able to prevail for a different happening. Was it necessary to remove the bear? Even in a more anthropomorphic way? Many will say Yes!, even those who were more tolerant. Had anyone advocated trapping the animal to put in an enclosure, like a zoo? Perhaps, but while contemplating the matter, another was in pursuit of the animal with the intent to kill it. He got there first.

Some on the island are grateful. Others feel a twist in their insides empathizing with the life that was snuffed arbitrarily.

Since we do not know the purpose of life, any life, ours included, it seems particularly brutal to end life while living with such uncertainty. If in fact life is precious, and to be revered, and tolerated, especially when it has not proven to be a threat to one's person, is it right to end it as a matter of convenience?

This is the middle of October 2004. I sit upon my rear in a comfortable chair with a keyboard plugged into the laptop so I can claptrap my way along. I can make myself aware of my isolation from the world, from its strife. I can choose to ignore the bear thing, burying its significance in a general overview of violence. In my native country's grasp for OIL, since March of 2003 it has been responsible for some 15,000 civilian deaths in Iraq. Is that supposed to mean something to me?

Does it mean anything to you to hear me ask, "Who the hell does our president think he is?"

It is my opinion that my native country is not going to get the OIL, no matter how many Iraqies it kills. The OIL will belong to others always.

All the WMD, Nuke, Al Quaeda smokescreens cannot obscure the real motive of my native country.

## *Killing*

I cannot believe that my native country could elect such an asshole for its president. And that it would fall for such a line. But my native country fell for the commie thing, the yellow peril thing, the domino thing, so why not go for the other bullshit as well. Is my native country so acquiescent to bullshit, or is it just plain stupid? It always seems to be the same: flag, motherhood, and apple pie; the eternal verities. OIL.

The most corpulent nation better get its act together. So when they come over the oceans to attack, you can move, and hide. And your finger has to be small enough to pull the trigger. Your only chance is to chuck the automobile, learn to walk, shed those lbs. and kgs. And begin to think for yourselves. Think about death, and about killing. Protest against any advocacy for violence. Burn the books that preach violence, tear down the towers of those who promulgate violence over the airways; smash the presses that turn out the headline violence. Take away the guns; all the predators are done-in; all the Indians are gone, the only purpose for the gun is to shoot humans beings, and mad dogs. Every village would be allowed to have its own mad dog exterminator; (and wild attack bear exterminator).

Shit, its useless to write this way. If the grossest graphic images cannot persuade a leaving-off of this horrible enterprise, this aggrandizement, this accretion of human existence, then its here to stay until the Gods themselves sicken of the whole prospect, and bring on the flood (Water); No Noah and his nepotism this time, Done, Finis. And (Fire) to consume what remains, and eruptions (Earth), and strangulation; (deprivation of [Air]). Down into the bottomless black hole canyon to suffer the whims of the Gods. Whim! Whim! Whim! Wham!

Like I intimated before, this all began because someone shot the bear, the lone bear, that somehow found its way to this island. The motive for killing the bear was not clear. It became a personal thing; something someone lost sleep over. Perhaps a bwana macho thing; bringing notice upon oneself as the bwana savior of nebulously righteous things. Like I said, it was my neighbor. I will find it difficult to talk to him in the future, because there will be this killing come between us.

The bear wasn't given much of a chance to live with us. Xenophobia. Our little paradise is reserved. A Bear For The Killing, as Mr. Mowat might have titled the episode, for which he and Claire would have been given the bum's rush; Ostracized, and unbearable.

I imagine John might have thought the bear killing OK, and might have easily partaken of the bear sausage; a novelty for the

## *Killing*

palate. Philosophically John would not have been against the killing. I know that philosophically John was against Adolph Hitler and the Third Reich. I know he was against Franco and his thugs. And I know he was philosophically against the War in Vietnam, especially with two young sons waiting in the wings as fodder. But the killing idea was a selective thing. Perhaps if he had lived longer the whole idea of killing would have become odious to him. He was in a position to not to need to kill; he wasn't starving, or even hungry for that matter, at least to look at him, he didn't look hungry. So the killing thing was just part of what you do when you feed yourself. And it was a part of the American way, and Texas culture, from his earliest days. Snare, bow and arrow, knife, tomahawk, gun; what's the difference?

I would like to believe that by the time everyone leaves this life that he would become opposed to killing, even Charlton Heston. Or Saddam Hussein, or Dubya. Because death is so final. Dubya had his chance when he was governor to commute death to life, but refused more than any other governor in any other state. Dubya is a murderer of at least 15,000 Iraq civilians, and over 1,000 soldiers from his own country. Yet he can freely stand up before his countrymen ranting his bullshit about flag, motherhood and apple pie as justification for more more and more. And even though he lied and lied and lied, he thinks his countrymen are sure patriots, and if they are not, they will be thrown in prison incommunicado for eternity; he needs good listeners. Adolph Hitler has returned.