

SERIALIZED

(in four parts)

PART THREE

SECTION THREE (page 126 of the 2001 edition)
to “to a buck with velvet forks” (page 152)

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UPRIVER, BEYOND THE BEND
with
AT ABBY CREEK

poetry

by
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(AT ABBY CREEK was nominated for a Pushcart Award by Rick Bass;
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Section Three

when aspen leaves yellow as fresh-sawn lumber
float down,
I, in hunter red, sometimes
glimpse an antler flash
in the gray-green sage
of a distant hillside where Herefords
graze on
prickly pear, and pickup ruts
gullied by last spring's runoff
follow barbwire
stretched across green steel posts
dividing lands
as if the West were a checker board
for kings, public and private.

ALONG A SAGGING FENCELINE

in silence & fear
a doe surrounded
by fangs
slashing
devouring
but not killing
feels entangled
in bowels
she carried close
to her heart
& in dark memories
hears ageless howls
of hunter & hunted
as she feels warmth
gush from now cold flanks—

I lower my binoculars
when only two forelegs
& a stain of blood
remain above a fence post
& for a moment
feel less guilty
about a deer wounded
but lost.

OPENING DAY

1.

SEPARATION—

as I begin evening chores
I watch hunters whiz pass
leaving in their turbulence
memories of past deer seasons:
I drove one of those four-bys
loaded with tent & more
grub than possibly eaten
in a weekend or a week,
went to places like Hart Mountain
where camped by the hot springs
we built small warming fires
& large bonfires
& watched the stars
while remembering times past,
times when life was simpler.
A rifle & an axe were all
the tools necessary
to carve a life
from land now divided & subdivided
till there's not game enough
to satisfy hunter
or environmentalist.

2.

THE NIGHT BEFORE—

I bought a license & tag
so I might as well sneak
up the hill in the morning—
my scoped deer rifle is pawned
but I have a muzzleloader,
a .54 like Lewis & Clark
carried over these hills
& down this river.
I don't see its simple sights
as well as I used to, but retained
in deep memory is how to kill
with powder & ball
so I believe
I'll make meat Sabbath morning.

3.

opening morning—
in moonlight shadows a doe
watches me.
I pause
to see what I can't see
straining hard
to identify tail or head.
She waits as if expecting
the lover
I will jealousy kill
at sunrise.

4.

DAYBREAK—
on the ridge above the river
the one you see from town
I sit under a seedling pear
look downriver at geese winging south
& across at the mansion for sale
a million five—
they say Kevin Costner looked at it
but as I listen to turkey whelps
I watch two fawns kick heels
& sprint like colts on bluegrass
while I bet on their sire.

5.

MIDMORNING—
winding me the footsteps bark
as a puppy would as I turn
to see the warning flag
of a yearling ten feet away
a knothead that might someday
interest me but today I seek
the buck that drove him
from his mother
leaving him vulnerable
to hungry predators
& their ATVs.

6.

NOON—
with rifle in hand I pick
grape clusters on vines entwined

in a thicket of plum seedlings
above the bear broken apples,
all that remains
of morning dreams
& hard work.

7.

MIDAFTERNOON—

a doe under an apple
searches for remembered fruit
forgotten by the bear
I watch from a hundred paces
knowing I am to her nothing
but changed weeds
as long as the breeze
remains steady
& I steady my rifle
on the serpentine trail
her buck will follow.

8.

LATE AFTERNOON—

I have waited long for this buck
that steals ghostly from brambles:
smaller than I wanted
but large enough
I raise my rifle,
cock & send a patched ball
hard into ribs
that grunt & bellow
one last time
as I pour powder,
start another ball,
making ready to defend
my kill
from prairie wolves
quick to put their tags on him.

9.

the next morning—

I wake stiff sore
groan as I rise
knees snap as does a shoulder
I'm no longer the young man
strong enough to have towed
a keelboat upstream.

Now dragging home
even an average buck
makes it hard
to determine who is more stiff
the next morning,
but driven by collective memory
I will go again
till I too lie rigid.

10.

 resurrection—
three days is long enough
to let meat hang
so with knife in hand
I filet the backstrap
before severing shoulders.
I carry the long strips
to the kitchen
then return to butchering
while waiting to be called
for steak & eggs,
a ritual that predates
retained memory.

11.

 DEATH—
my turkeys came close
stretched necks & leaned closer
but wouldn't let the hide
of life-that-was touch them.
They didn't gobble,
didn't make any noise at all;
they just looked
as if making sure this strange
animal posed no threat
before returning
to barnyard squabblings.

12.

 last night
along a bend in the river
in the chill of October
I gnawed ribs
roast in a Dutch oven
in a tomatoless sauce
of my wife's improvisation—

she stirred coals
& I tossed bones
to hungry eyes glowing
in firelight
& together we listened
to prairie wolves howl
for more wild rivers.

A DIFFERENT WORLD—

the fellow from Minnesota
said I needed a salt lick
needed to clear shooting lanes
needed to build a blind
maybe a tree stand
needed to plant corn
more apple trees
maybe some oaks
then maybe I could harvest
a whitetail
& he told of the doe
he shot last year,
told of how she sneaked
under a neighbor's fence
to get treats he'd scattered
around his farm—
I listened
but I was remembering
dozens of large bucks
I've taken on windswept ridges
of aspen & sage
where the only fences
were three strands of barbwire
somewhere over the horizon,
ridges now closed
to trespass
by movie star owners
shooting imaginary bad guys
on some distant planet.

HUNTING—

when that eagle flew over
the one fishing along the highway
my turkeys fled—

toms fat enough to feed family gatherings
were farthest under young pines
growing scattered among stumps—

hens hid along the sagging fence
overgrown by chokecherries & chittams—

the smallest two poults, eyes wide
still as stones, were under rusting
tomato cages...

even my wirehair, chained to a stake
saw the eagle swoop low—

he barked & I left the shop
to see what was wrong
but I couldn't watch long—

I was in the middle of glass
bedding a gun wanted yesterday
but needed for this weekend—

since sawmills shut down
when lawsuits stopped logging
everyone is hunting
or going hunting—
my work never ends.

FEATHERS—

tall blue heron wait
for small mistakes by cutthroat
that snatch eggs from redds

a doe leaves timber
to feed on red rose hips, her
fawn driven away

juncos flutter loud
about red rose hips—the doe
listens for footsteps

meadowlarks flutter
around old apples hanging
lonely on bare boughs

in hard rain, the fawn
shivers as he stares at old
apples beyond reach

titmice swarm bare boughs
that held red apples & rain
droplets yesterday

a cold nightcrawler
caught by last night's rain wiggles—
the old hen hurries

dusk: a thicknecked
buck paws his scrape under the
apple where I wait

the last rays of day
highlight the round doe soft eye
that beams yellow death

ravens fly over
fat veined bowels, winter
meat still & steaming

owl hoots in darkness
fall from tall pines & settle
into rabbit runs

DAWN

In the damp gray of dawn, from a barrel
of salvaged screenings, field peas & lentils
I fill a bucket as my turkeys fly from roosts—
across the road, river, rail tracks wild turkeys
whelp & the old moon swings slowly away
its reflection in river whispers.

Laying hens begin to peck empty hoppers,
the ring of their pecks loud in the moist
warmth of their roughsawn house—
I gather a dozen eggs, most still warm,
one so fresh its brown dye still wipes,

then checking why their water doesn't flow,
I see raccoon tracks,
last night's,
alongside the spring.

Something still bothers my dogs,
has on & off all night
so I turn one loose—
he sprints past turkeys now huddled
along the fence, but after pointing
to the trail through blackberries
a bear came down last year,
he returns to sniff the still sharp tracks
but doesn't seem interested.

I pick an apple from the tree by the spring
as I watch birds & dog, the fading moon & flowing water,
wondering all the while if I should get a rifle.
I might later—
and on my way back to the kitchen,
to still warm coals in the shop
I add a shovel of wood chips.

Smoke, then a tiny flame, and the stove creaks
as steel expands—I shut dampers as I hear
highway traffic start up...
the first load of logs goes by
then another
this one leading a string of cars.

I can't hear the river now,

nor turkey whelps
nor the soft murmur of boot soles on dew.

THE BEAR

A bear's been bothering
the dogs at night—
they smelled her
while I slept
dreaming of another bear
a little boar
whose hide I tanned
but had to sell
a year later to claim
the pawned rifle
I sold to pay
another month's rent.

I built that rifle, yes
the one in the photo
of the little boar
whose blood colored its barrel.
A Newport museum thought it
original,
offered too much
& I was too poor
to tell what I knew
so they display the work
of a me who lived
before my time.

This bear that bothers the dogs
came close last night:
her dung is apples poorly chewed
that haven't yet darkened
so with another rifle I built
I wait
in shadows
with rent due
for another original.

FIRST BLOOD

where sea & sky merge
the dark surge tumbles dark stones
rolling them up the beach
then down—
ice clinks in a thousand glasses
heard by dark shadows
in dark timber against which
our white canvas tent glows
a mantle of light cast
into damp boughs, long & low
catching rising spark flies
that circle
then go black
catching fresh smoke
bent down & sent along the beach
a merganser scream pierces
the spruce huddle
scatters murmurs
it swings from our meatpole
then echoes away
its edge dulled—
hanging moss, moldy duff underfoot
kelp on the beach
the darkness smells
of decay
& smoke & frying potatoes

a November camp on Afognak
where my daughter
the age I was when I killed
my first deer, thinks she can
I left the tent so she will
get ready for the hunt

she follows me
as the southern sky lightens
letting shadows lean over the trail
as if they were bears
then fall away
being nothing—
trails cross, crisscross
I sense more than hear
her breathing a step behind me

we climb in a bear trail
two feet wide
worn inches deep
that parallels an unnamed creek—
Movement!
a martin
scurrying between spruce
I lower my rifle
she sees us, pauses
brown head raised
exposing her orange belly
her black eyes shiny
no farther away than I can spit
thin rays of the early sun
slide through
entwined boughs
stand shaft-silent
beside scaly trunks
as the ripple of flowing water
falls through the ravine

as we push through filtered sunlight
as if it were moss
spruce grow smaller, bushier
more scattered
openings of crumbled fern
bent grass & hoarfrost lie
on southern hogbacks reaching
the second ridge above the beach
I scan edges
hoping to see elk
expecting deer

heavy frost coats beaver-chewed willows
shredded bark hangs
like icicles
on elk-rubbed alders
we climb through devil's club
stickers like poisoned barbs
of upright twisted barbwire
frosted white
looking for blood
a raven larger than eagles
sails overhead

we must hurry

days are too short
we skirt a beaver pond
ice-covered
five acres or more
skirt patches of raw
salmonberry cane
their short thorns like ripper blades
we pass over frozen springs
sculptures of flowing ice—
scrub alders give way to moss
lichens
tubs of muskeg a few yards square
each ringed with dwarf willows
& on top, ground-hugging blueberries
stretch a half mile or more—
a small bucks pops up
a silhouette target on a combat course
my daughter whispers
she doesn't think she can hit him
only his head & neck show
a hundred fifty yards away
I think she can
but I also understand

the shot is not difficult—
killing meat isn't like
buying it from Safeway
it isn't that impersonal
once I pull the trigger

she glasses surrounding rims
sees sun reflecting
from the rack of a big buck
three hundred yards away
the buck, bedded, watches us
one leap into the ravine
we'll never see him again
he's chosen well
resting my singleshoot over my knees
I say, *Watch where I hit—*
a puff of splayed rock
appears just below the buck
on his feet, he ducks behind
dwarf willows
that hide his lower chest
How much low was I?

I don't know. I blinked.

guessing I was less than a foot
I hold atop his back
his antlers still flashing
but just as I tighten my finger
I push the Ruger's forearm up
as if fearful of hitting willows
so my shot's way high
he's had enough
apparently more impressed
with my shooting than I am
he disappears behind willows

*Stay high, I say, but circle towards him.
Don't lose sight of those willows.*

I scramble down
into the ravine between us & the buck
when I'm almost to the bottom
she yells, *He's on top of the rock.*

Shoot him!
the aggravation
shouldn't be in my voice
it's just I wouldn't have hesitated
when fourteen—
even if I couldn't have made the shot
I would've been quick to try

she delays
for so long
when she finally shoots
her shot takes me by surprise
I wait for a second
when none comes
I holler, *Get him?*
I think so.
Can you see him?
No.
Stay where you are.

I climb a break in the rock
feeling pride mixed with fear
that she didn't hit him

when I reach where the buck was bedded
I see her—
she directs me to a rock
outcropping
twenty-five yards farther away
I find blood
not much & not bright red
like lungs shots leave
but enough to trail
I wave for her to cross the ravine
& I notice the sun
has already begun its downward arc

THAT NIGHT WITH NO LANTERN

Curled leaves cling to alders & lie scattered
over mounds of bear dung,
speckled white
from salmon vertebrae
here, along Kodiak's Sacramento River.
Charlie unsaddles my horse—
he does his no-pay job as if nothing happened,
as if that breaker hadn't slammed him against cliff
& cape, as if he were weathered stone.
I neither want to eat
nor pitch camp—
my mind plops
from image to image
with the rhythm
of shod hooves—
only one part of me is not stiff;
all of me is sore.

Bill's kindles a fire.
He steams—
red light cast
from the blaze curls
around him, pulls
at his chaps, stands
on his boots...
he needs a shave
needed one yesterday.

We're seven miles from Bill's Narrow Cape ranch,
rode the last three in the dark.

Glenn, a minister who didn't set out to be one,
spreads his, Bill's & Charlie's sleeping bags,
wringing out what water he can.
I'm the only one the surf didn't drench
so with hobbling steps
I blindly gather firewood
while Charlie hobbles horses
& Bill sets coffee to boil.

Bill turns his back to the flames that push
against the darkness
& play on his Stetson, stained & steaming.
Away from the fire crackle, breeze rustled spruce

boughs beckon to neighing horses & the gurgling river
as it wraps itself around a fallen tree.

The retreating surf rolls stones over stones.

Bill now chops wood, the ring of his axe small
against the quiet rumble of the surf.

Charlie coughs.

On Slope Peak a fox barks. A second answers.

Across the valley, a third barks at the first two.

And an owl silently glides low overhead, passing
directly over the flames.

The breeze backs up, changes directions
mingles fresh salt air with thick, pitchy smoke.

I smell horse lather as I wonder if spy
satellites high overhead can see our fire.

"Bill, where's your lantern?" I ask.

"Don't have one."

"You shoulda said something." I dig my tent from wet
panniers: "I've got a couple."

"The hiss of the darn things go against nature."

"How about a flashlight?"

"Batteries were about dead. Didn't bring it."

"Guess firelight will have to do."

What about this curious blend of light & darkness
we all live in: I used to sleep under stars,
camp with axe & rifle as if I were a mountain man—
I didn't wear fringed shirts or buckskins,
but I killed both bear & deer with cap & ball,
could split a ball on an axe offhand at ten paces
before age blurred the edges of things
making right & wrong hard to discern.

Just beyond the fire cast ring of light,
I pitch my tent on a sandy spot bared by runoffs.

Glenn, appearing younger than his thirty years,
reaches across the leanto frame Bill used
on previous hunts, stretches Visqueen taut
while Bill weights edges with saddles & driftwood.

Charlie, squatting beside the fire, stirring it,
sends sparks skyward where spruce boughs catch them,
hide them, making us harder for satellites to see.

"Fire's ready," he hollers.

"We'll get," Bill says, "something to eat
& everything will look better."

Bright orange coals spread between stones
send swirling whiffs of pitchy smoke around
& around, chasing Charlie
from side to side as he balances two frying pans
across charred limbs. Diced potatoes & onions
in one, still cold grease in the other.
Unable to see into either, he turns potatoes,
flops a floured steak into the grease when its sizzle
sounds right. A pitch seam pops, peppers
steaks & potatoes with ash & embers.

The smell of seared meat fills the night
but the steaks hide in shadows.
Even holding tipped pans fireside,
Charlie can't see the steaks; yet he hollers
"Come & get it, Reverend," as he shovels potatoes
onto a tin plate, then slaps a crispy steak atop them.
"Just like home."

"Bow your heads a moment," Glenn says.
"Father, let our lights here shine—"
He says more
but how interested are you
in prayers or sermons?

"How wet," I ask Bill, "are the saddle blankets?"
"Soaked, sweat mostly. That was a good idea,
putting your bag in a garbage sack."

The night's October cold even next to the fire.
I'm glad I'm not wet.
Bill's jacket sports mottled wetdry patches—
I can't tell if Charlie's black-&-white
mackinaw is still wet.
Glenn wears a pile-lined military surplus parka,
warm even when wet.

"This other steak, Homer," Charlie says
"isn't done yet so you can have it how you want."

Bill kicks the coals with his pointed toe.

"Are you," I ask him, "gonna be warm enough?"
"It won't be like home."

Glenn, the grease on his once warm plate now
hard, reappears from blackness beyond the light
dome cast by mounded coals;
he holds his plate over the light.

Charlie dishes me up.
I withdraw to timber's edge & hear a fourth fox bark.

Moonlight sparkle
on frosty sedges
across the salt marsh—
the tide has turned
the night has cleared.

A late salmon splashes through riffles,
its silvery sides shining,
long flashes of light against the current,
the doubly reflected sun dim
but visible.

reflections—

I follow the elliptical path
of mountain men, a twisted
helix along which Meeks
preached Christ for a bride.

GOOD INTENTIONS—

traded for a rifle yesterday:
I haven't seen it.
The fellows who have say
the bore's clean
stock's okay
for a military piece.
I intend to sporterize it—
knock off its ladder sight
shorten its barrel
change the trigger
change the safety
drill & tap it for a scope
grind away a little metal
fit it to a new stock
reblue it.
I'll have more money in it
than in a new rifle
& it will still be worth only half
as much so why am I taking on
another project—
I might just leave it
the way it is
an ugly shooter
on the gunrack
with my other good intentions.

IMAGINATION—

I shot a deer
a little deer
carried him
on my shoulders

hung him in the shop
hung him from a beam
hung him so I could skin him
after I sharpened a knife

but I didn't find the knife
didn't find the whetstone
didn't get back to him
till after he cooled off

then there were those ticks
I never saw so many
never saw them drop off the hide
never saw them crawl across the floor
while feeling them down my neck

hobbling along—

had another deer down
had to drag it home
so we started up the hill
a strange lot
a dog at heel
a cat running ahead
& six hens cautious
but hopeful
strung along behind

hobbled on a bad knee
paused by our spring—
the dog lay down
the cat chased a squirrel
the hens scratched
where a grouse had
& I wondered whether
anyone will believe
such a procession still possible

but I saw across the river
a deer hobbling along
followed by a prairie wolf
(two ran ahead)
& a half dozen magpies
fluttered along behind
while an eagle circled overhead
circled over
both sides of the river

fool hens—

jumped a grouse this morning
her & her summer hatchling
still a little small
there by the spring
where raccoon tracks reached
for fallen apples

the hen didn't let me invite
her for dinner, but her hatchling
was uncertain

I had a charge in my .54
I'd been carrying for days
figured it was time
to freshen it

so I aimed at the young head
tightened my finger
but at the last moment
I pushed away

the whistle of my ball
must have been deafening

the young bird flopped down
floundered
like it'd lost its head
then flew
after momma
hopefully a little wiser

IN CALF-DEEP SNOW, A MOOSE

nose warm against our cabin window,
sees steam rise from sizzling steaks—
last fall's bull, shot behind a berm red
with cranberries & frost-nipped fireweed.

meat—

in the middle of town
in the middle of a block
on the back porch of a square
brown house with a metal brown roof
& brown leaves on a fading lawn
a doe hangs, her brown hide
silently stripped from fat white
flanks that bounded across hiways
over fences & along sale boundaries
flagged with blood red tape—
she stopped to catch her breath
in the green standing timber
where a brown four-by waited
idling...

spoor—

where the road dips
a doe stands in dust
testing the breeze
her fawn hides beside
a jammer & butt rigging
rusting peacefully
under blackberry brambles
all that remains
of yesterday's logging

who will translate paint spills
to unborn generations
who will argue for leaning
sheets of steel
who will preserve an "I" box
or my words
when our sterility makes our art
forgettable for even us

"of making many books there is no end"

a buck with velvet forks
trots past my open door—
I'd invite him for dinner
if salvation were by works.