

## Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

*Keith Drumbore*

### **What I Know About My Father**

I think I saw my father almost cry, once. He was outside the back screen door, looking in. I was on a kitchen chair, reading. My mother was on her hands and knees, rubbing a scrub brush over something I had spilled.

"I found her," my father said.

My mother jumped.

I'd seen my father's shadow before he got to the door.

He looked away from us.

"At the dump," he said.

He took us there, some Sunday mornings, when he wasn't working. We created a place for ourselves on a short open hill. We made a bench of wooden crates. Behind that, we arranged three chairs. One was missing a row of metal studs along its back, another the pads at the ends of its metal legs. I examined the third each time, trying to find what was wrong with it.

My father stepped carefully through the mounds, picking out tin cans, chipped dishes, burnt pots, occasionally a stuffed toy. He mounted these below the hill, paced off the distance to each. He owned maybe a dozen guns. He used a .22 rifle on these Sundays. I might have been seven when he handed it to me.

There was something in the sanded gloss of the stock against my cheek, in the fineness of the sights coming together, in the sharp chill, even on summer days, of my finger on the trigger, in the moment before the commitment. Firing never did anything for me, however. It too often hurt. The gun kicks in the hands. It recoils into the shoulder. I bloodied my mouth once because I didn't tuck the stock tight enough. The shot is a backlash that lingers.

So, I most often just held the rifle, until I felt my father moving in on me, and I jerked the trigger. He had me put the gun on the table then, made me look at him, as he went, slowly, each time, through his list of don'ts, from the beginning. My mother began going to the car when my turn came, so she wasn't there when I killed the rat.

It might have been a July morning – the heat beginning to lift from the ground. I was watching it waver when my father's hand closed over the trigger guard. He motioned with the other. I strained for several minutes before catching the movement – a brown quiver parting the bottom of a wet paper sack. My father leaned in behind me. He placed his arms over mine, spoke at my ear. I took a shallow breath, measured it out, squeezed the trigger.

My father ran down the hill, lifted the rat by its tail. I've wondered what that felt like. I ejected the shell, waited for my father to return to bolt in another.

"How'd it get down to there?" my mother asked.

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“Highway people must of picked her up.”

My father kept two beagles, full-bred, bearing heritage papers, in a pen behind the house. He fed them when he got home at night. He gave them fresh water. He cleaned their pens every other day. He put new hay in their coop once a month. I watched him from outside the wire. When he finished, he would sit on the short outcrop at the base of the coop, let them come between his legs. He would cup each dog’s ears, in turn, lower his face to the tops of their heads. They became still in his hands.

The first time he said I could feed them, they were all over me, ignoring my command for them to sit, leaping as high as my chest. I spilled their food on myself, trying to hold it out of their reach. My father kept a foot against the pen door. When I sat on the outcrop, they climbed on the coop, nipped at my hair and ears. They wouldn’t let me hold them.

“They’re not pets,” my father said.

They chased small game, mostly rabbits, pheasants, for him. I couldn’t get a hunting license or carry a gun in the woods until I was ten, but my father had me walk along with him before that. When the dogs hit a trail, he took my arm, knelt beside me, told me to listen, to how they sang, their voices rising as the scent grew hot, one running deeper than the other, yet always together, in harmony. On those mornings, while I stood at the trunk of his car, pulled on my canvas pants, my rubber boots, he often wandered away, along the edge of the field we’d parked in or at the tree line of the woods we planned to walk through. He didn’t like what he said was “staring,” so I had to sneak peeks at him while he did this. He stopped every so often, looked over the grass or into the forest. Then he moved on, as if something were calling him from that spot to the next. When he moved back to me in those mornings, he often touched me, his face the softest I’ve ever seen it.

I asked, once, “Find a good place to start?”

He shook his head. “Just getting a sense of things.”

I tried. When the dogs hit a trail, their voices peaked, my father told me to stay put, hurried into the brush after them. I held my face up, let myself feel the cold, hear past the squirrels in the dried leaves. I never got far beyond that though. My father’s gun firing usually brought me back.

**M**ostly, he and I hunted alone. There were times, however, when he got a call the night before, and in the morning, we drove into town to pick up his father.

His parents lived in one side of a two-family house. My grandmother was always in her chair, in the living room, two rooms away, reading the morning paper when we came in. She never came to us. She called out that there were sticky buns on the table, milk in the frig.

State workers took her away when she was in her late-sixties. She turned violent, began hitting my grandfather, with her fists, one night with a curtain rod. He needed stitches, called the police to get her under control. She told them my grandfather was the man who came at night to rob her, that he had raped her. She said she wanted back everything he

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had taken. A doctor diagnosed her with Alzheimer's. I heard that in the hospital, she called my mother the "town whore," said my father could have had his pick of anyone if my mother hadn't trapped him by getting pregnant.

My grandfather put her in a state nursing home. She escaped. The sheriff found her, barefoot, her gown untied, slipping from her shoulders, nothing on underneath, running along the shoulder of a county highway, several miles from the home. Her knees and palms were bloody, cinders embedded in the cuts. She died strapped to a bed.

**W**hen my father and I hunted, we carried sandwiches and candy bars in our coat pockets. I hung a canteen from my belt. We ate in the grass, or leaning against a tree. My father brought dry food for the dogs.

My grandfather made us go out for lunch, always to the same place, a two-story building, curtains sagging in the upper windows, the lower dark, except for a Schaeffer beer sign. A dirt parking lot ran up to the back door. There was a fast step down as we went inside. The bartender pulled drafts for my grandfather. On those days, my father drank coffee. I don't know how he took it then.

The first time we went in, the bartender asked me what I wanted.

"Red crème soda," I said. I never had to tell him again.

I drank it out of the bottle.

"So how's the hunting," he asked.

"Doing a lot of walking," my grandfather said.

Everybody, but my father, laughed.

**O**ne of the few pieces of himself he ever deliberately shared with me came on the day he bought a second car, a turquoise Oldsmobile station wagon, for my mother to use for work, after we moved. I stood with him in front of our house, looking at it.

"My first night back from the service, I asked to borrow my dad's car," he said. This might have been to me. "I was supposed to meet some of the guys. He didn't even bother looking up. He just said, 'No.' Made me walk. Now I got two of 'em."

He got behind the wheel, told me to tell my mother he was going out. He was gone for hours. My mother went to the top of the steps as he came in. "How are we supposed to know if anything happens to you if we don't know where you're going or for how long," she yelled.

He walked passed her, into the living room, turned on the t.v.

"Someone will come and tell you," he said.

My mother strode out the door.

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The car started. It ran a few minutes. It stopped. My mother came up the stairs, went into her bedroom.

**M**y grandfather was there the second time I shot something. We were walking along a tree line. The dogs were in front of us, working the ground. One of them charged forward. The other right behind.

A squirrel sat between the roots of a maple. Its back was to us. It was chewing something. The dogs literally ran over it. It flipped, righted itself, threw itself at the tree. One of the dogs just missed the tip of its tail. It disappeared around the trunk.

My father gathered the dogs, quieted, leashed them, handed the lead to my grandfather, gave me his shotgun – a .12 gauge automatic, told me to stand right where I was. He circled the tree.

The squirrel, keeping the maple between it and my father, backed itself right in front of me, but no one was behind me to whisper in my ear. The dogs nearly pulled the leash from my grandfather's hand. Their barking became frenzied. The squirrel's tail twitched. It scrambled to the first branch, flattened itself. I've wondered why it didn't climb higher, hide among the browning leaves. My father slipped around the tree. I aimed where he pointed.

When I picked up the squirrel, my grandfather told me to look at its front paws. The tips of the fingers on one just touched those on the other.

"It's praying it gets into heaven," my grandfather said. "But they never do."

I asked, "Why?"

"Cause they'd shit all over the goddamn place."

I shot several more squirrels, a rabbit, a pheasant, an owl, a doe during buck season.

On those nights, in bed before I fell asleep, I heard them – those things I killed, in the corners of my room, some nights louder than others, sometimes so close I had to pull the covers over my head, burrow into my pillow. I stayed there, until it got too hot to breathe. I squeezed my eyes closed, as I came up for air, ducked under as quickly as I could. I keep checking to make sure the quilt hadn't slipped away, exposed a foot, come off my ass. I didn't blame them. Where else could they go, after they'd been refused by God?

I waited until the end of one Saturday, when my father and I were alone, to try to talk to him about this. We were changing out of our hunting clothes, at the trunk of his car.

"There's this boy," I said, "on t.v. He's got these things after him. Like ghosts. He doesn't know how to get them to go away."

My father set his boots in the trunk, tied his shoes. "He ain't got the problem, you do," he said.

I had no idea how he could have known.

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"You waste too much time sitting in front of silly crap." He jerked the truck closed. "When something's dead, it's dead."

I tried to use that – in a sort of song, my lips moving, the words almost silent, a hedge against the noises finding me, in case I hadn't understood exactly what my father had told me, and I never made a conscious decision to do this, but I eventually stopped shooting my gun, in the woods. My father stared at me a few times.

One gray afternoon, after he'd climbed into a tree stand with me, to check on me, he screamed "Yours, yours," as a six-point buck twisted through the undergrowth below us.

My answer became, "I didn't think I had a shot."

This didn't stop the noises, but it did seem to return them in their corners.

"Why didn't they read the tag?" my mother asked. The dogs wore collars. The tags bore my father's name, address.

"Too twisted, I guess," my father said.

He'd been off work the day before. We drove into town. He was in a good mood. He played the car radio, let me sing with some of the songs, recited the lyrics I got wrong. When we got home, he said, "Let's you try helping me again."

I went into the garage. I opened the bag of dog food, measured out two cups. My father was standing short of the pen, as I came out. The pen door hung open. The first thing I hurried to remember was whether I had gone out there that morning. I sat at the pen sometimes. I snuck out bits of bologna or cheese to draw the dogs to me, so I could scratch their ears. Sometimes I opened the door and reached inside. My mother hadn't let me out, however. It had drizzled during the night. The grass was damp. She had me help her change the sheets on the beds. I can still feel that breath escape me.

**M**y father found one dog – I don't know which – on the far side of the county road below Graverville. The truck that hit them both, must not have thrown the other as far. A highway clean-up crew picked her up, dumped her.

My father came to blame the older boys who lived on the next level. My mother said, "I seen them looking around here." Their parents claimed they'd both been inside the whole day. The police said there was nothing they could do. We were talking about dogs, after all.

"You coming in?" my mother asked.

My father looked away again. "I gotta take care of this," he said.

He had the bodies in burlap sacks. He twisted the necks, held both in one hand. He threw a spade over a shoulder.

I slid from my chair.

"Where do you think you're going?" my mother asked.

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"To help."

My mother pushed her bucket aside, formed a "V" with her legs. She pulled me inside them. She draped her body over mine. "You stay here," she said.

"I want to go."

"When things aren't right, you don't always need other people around. They can make it worse."

She tightened her arms around me, the last time she held me in this way.

I know he was in the Air Force during the Korean war. The most he's ever said about that was that he was stationed on an island in the Sea of Japan. My grandfather showed me a photo of him next to an anti-aircraft gun. I asked my father if he ever killed anyone.

He said, "There's better questions than that."

I wish I would have known what they were.

We rocked together for a few minutes. Then she said, "Go to your room. I got to finish wiping this."

My father took the dog pen apart the next week. He built one in New Jersey, brought home two more beagles one summer's afternoon. He hadn't told my mother he was doing this. They fought about it, for years.

I went to look for the graves of those first dogs. I walked the woods carefully. I tried to imagine where my father would have gone, what he would have been looking for, but I came up empty every time. Whatever holes he'd dug, he covered them well.

### **The Rabbit**

The last thing I shot was a rabbit.

I was 16.

My father and I were on opposite sides of a hedgerow. I could see him in broken blotches of brown canvas through the bramble, until he called, "They got it," ran ahead.

We'd hunted this spot before. A hundred feet or so ahead of me, the field I stood in spilled into a farmer's track. I moved toward there, stopping as I went, to cock my head, listen.

We might have been in New Jersey a year or two when my father bought the new dogs. He was gone when I got out of bed that morning. After our chores, my mother invited me outside for lunch. We sat on a picnic throw in the backyard.

We weren't quite finished when a car door slammed in front of our

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house. My mother picked up her napkin. Before we could get up, however, my father, bent at the knees and waist, his fingers curled under their collars, ran the two beagles past us. He had closed in a corner of the back yard with chicken wire. He built a pen there. It became a point of contention with the neighbors. The dogs barked when they smelled a cat, someone cooking, or heard voices, regardless of the time. The pen stank on hot days. My father cleaned it, before he went to work, again as soon as he got home. He stopped talking to those neighbors. He told one to mind his own business. I went to school with that man's daughter. We were friendly there. They had enough money for a built-in pool. She invited other kids from school over to swim. Sometimes when their squeals reached a certain pitch, I went to a window to watch them. I hide behind a curtain. The daughter told me she wanted to have me over, but her father said my family "belonged on a farm."

**M**y mother dropped her napkin onto our blanket, walked slowly into the house.

Later, she yelled at my father, "We were supposed to agree on it first."

"I would have lost them. It was then or not at all," he said.

The dogs came with papers that traced their pedigree back generations. My father's signature was in the lower corner.

"You weren't supposed to take the bank book."

They fought again when the check cleared - \$300.

My mother slept on the living room couch for several nights. When she went back to her bed, she said, "My back's hurting." I said she should see a doctor. I spent the next week in my room.

My father padlocked the pen. He put a chain-link fence around the back yard, padlocked the gate. Later, he put up a stockade fence, closing off all his neighbors.

**T**he farmer's track was dotted with low stubble. The ground was frozen. The sun was out, but I could see my breath. I moved to the far end, just outside the ankle-high grass. I curled my toes against the cold.

The dogs' voices rose slightly, turned my way. My father preached never looking toward them, because the rabbit isn't with them. I took the fingers of my right glove in my teeth, pulled my hand out of it. I tucked the glove in a pocket, pushed off the safety, put my finger inside the trigger guard.

**I**'d had to take two tests to get a hunting license in New Jersey. The first was written; it was based on a manual. My father quizzed me after dinner for a month. I scored 100.

For the second part, my father had to call the Department of Fish and

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Game. Maybe a month before my birthday that year, my tenth, my grandfather called, said I had a choice for a present - a mini-bike or a shotgun. My mother told my father I needed a sports jacket. My father picked the gun - a single shot .20 gauge. It had a rubber pad on the end of the stock. We took it with us when we drove to the second test, on a Saturday, to an open field. I got a number.

When my turn came, a tall, grey-haired man in green flannel led me away from my father. The field had a wash. The man and I stood over it. He carried a clipboard of papers. He said, "Load up."

I had a shell in my shirt pocket. When I said I was ready, the man rolled a pink rubber ball into the wash. I missed it by at least five feet.

"You comfortable with that piece?" he asked.

"I just got it. I haven't shotten it much."

He marked me "Passed."

Everything I killed made the mistake of pausing.

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The dogs' voices stalled. I'd watched them work undergrowth, casting in separate directions, returning to the last scent, taking that with them to reconnect the trail, their tails wagging, the tips scabbed, reopening as they caught on the bramble, bleeding, tiny droplets. The lower pitched of the two found the jump the rabbit had made, still coming my way.

My father traded the single shot .20 gauge, for a double barrel, just before this hunting season started. He said I was finally ready, that it was the next step up, to a gun like his. I hadn't shot anything with it yet. I wanted mostly for my father to like me.

The second dog chased after the first. Their voices meshed.

I took several steps into the track, for what I guessed was a better angle.

The dogs' voices picked up urgency.

I brought the double barrel to my shoulder, but it was heavier than the single shot, and I was never a strong boy. My arms began to tremble.

The dogs charged closer.

The tip of my barrels dipped slightly.

The rabbit hopped into the clearing.

I snapped the gun up, was too quick on the trigger.

My shot cut through the dirt just behind the rabbit. It leaped forward.

I swung the barrels with it. Its hind legs came down on either side of its face, thrust its body out to its fullest. I pulled the second trigger.



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That shot broke the rabbit's back legs.

The dogs' voices stretched into a howl. The rabbit's eyes went wide. It reached out its front paws, dug its claws into the dirt, pulled itself, perhaps an inch, did it again.

Twigs snapped in the thicket.

I broke the breech, tossed the empty shells aside, reloaded.

My father stepped around me, hurried across the track. He put a boot on the rabbit's head.

I yelled, "Let me shot it"

"You'll blow it apart and ruin it," my father said.

He put his weight on his boot. The rabbit screamed -- high and shrill. Its skull crunched.

The dogs burst into the clearing. My father picked up the rabbit, let them sniff it, a reward for a job well done. He shoved the body in my game pouch. "You gotta learn to lead 'em more," he said and grabbed the dogs, led them away, left me with that little bulge in the small of my back.

### **Cleaning Game**

My father had me clean the game I killed.

He told me, "Always have the right knife."

He kept a bone-handled serrated two-inch blade for small game.

You start by gutting. You put down a thick layer of newspaper. You put the animal on its back, on the paper. You spread the back legs, insert the tip of the blade, at the anus, through the skin, not deep enough to slice through the intestines or stomach, and you come up to the rib cage. You spread the incision. You reach in; you take a handful of what's inside. You stretch it out, cut it at the esophagus and the rectum. If it snaps, you gotta go back in.

You skin it, beginning with small slashes at the intestinal incision, between the layers of skin. Once you have an opening, you can part the two with your fingers, make a deeper cut. Do it right and you'll have a layer of skin attached to the hair, and you'll be able to almost peel it away. Do it right and you'll be able to inside out the hair, so that you can pull it as one piece, down the legs. Then all you have to do is cut off the feet, cut off the tail, cut off the head.

Do it right and, on one piece of paper, you'll have the outside of an animal; on another, you'll have meat and bones.

### **Done Hunting**

I hunted until I was 18.

It was the only invitation my father ever voluntarily offered me.

College became my way out without having to tell him "No."

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I set it up the first month of my first semester, saying I had a standing test every Monday, 7:30 am, and with all my other schoolwork, and my part-time job, I needed Saturdays to study. My mother had refused to let me go away to college. She said she wasn't paying for that kind of disaster. She needed me where she could keep an eye on me. When my brother turned ten, my father took him into the woods.

I was baptized, confirmed a Lutheran. My father left our church after a sermon on "Loving Your Brother." The pastor used Communist and Christian in the same sentence. This was at the height of the Vietnam War. My father told my mother he was "done with that."

The pastor came to our house the next week. My mother let him in. My father was in his chair in the living room. The pastor and my mother sat on the couch. She sent me and my brother to the rec room. I cracked the sliding door.

"We all can grow," the pastor said. "When we reach out for understanding, God's hand will be there to guide us."

"So what do I need you for?" my father said.

He told me sometime later that when he needed to talk to god, he talked to god. He said how could a middle man bring you closer to that?

My mother made me go to our church very Sunday until I graduated high school. "Now," she said, "It's your choice."

I tried other churches, Methodist, Episcopalian, Catholic, for short times. I've spoken at length to several rabbis, a Jesuit priest, a witch. I kept returning to the woods, on my own, always after a particularly bad day, mostly at night, on my way home from some bar.

I wandered along the fields, the fringes of trees, and it was there, as I stepped over a dip where melted snow had collected that the air seemed to fall away from me, yet, for several seconds, I felt enveloped, a part of everything.

I went back to that spot, repeatedly, to find only envy, for my father, for what I was sure he could grasp whenever he needed it.