

## Wilderness House Literary Review 6/1

*Eric Day*

### **The Funny Farm**

**M**y parents had a dream for us: to live among nature, in all its glories and horrors. From our turn-of-the-century farmhouse we could not see much of the modern world, only our three acres of land, bordered by bushy blackberries or hog wire fence, and trees. Two acres stretched beyond the fence, sloping and yellowing untended pasture, and the rest we mowed, pruned, and swept just about every Sunday. At night we could see all the stars, and in the day we breathed fresh air. My parents had their dream.

One day, as though to complete the picture, my dad and some of his friends built a small barn, way at the northernmost part of our land. Then about every month or so he started visiting a guy who called himself “the bird man,” and he’d come home with something cooing, cawing, or clucking in a cardboard box with holes punched in it. These specimens were normal at first—hens, a rooster, mallard ducks, a turkey or goose—but soon the anomalies arrived. Hybrids with bright plumes, rubber chin wattles that became vivid with anger or stress, bug eyes, tall bare legs, feathery feet, translucent bald heads. Like the misfit that can hold his ground, their dominant emotion seemed to be defiance, with significant chips on their nonexistent shoulders. This, to my dad, made them all the more funny; so funny, he kept a chair and blanket in the outer room.

In addition to his eclectic birds, we had three or four sheep and always a pair of goats. These, too, were strange. One goat’s hair had somehow turned the color of banana toffee. The other had curl-around, evil-looking horns and a long crimson beard. We once experimented with a calf, named it T-Bone, and after a week of wandering the pasture as if lost, it fell down dead. We had two piglets for about three days. They were impossible to contain, as if they, too, did not want any part of this, and in the end fled for the hills.

Summers the sheep were shorn by a silent man with sideburns and a white circle on his back jeans pocket. The sheep would go from dingle-berry infested fluff balls to resembling large Chihuahuas. My mom would spin the wool and by winter I’d be clad in heavy sweaters and stiff mittens. The sheep would eye me, half suspicious in these clothes, and half like I was their brother. When the herd became too large a kind of butcher on wheels showed up one day. From inside, I parted the curtains as the man opened the back of his step van and swung out a heavy crane. I didn’t think much of it until later when I was roused from my TV show by an animal scream. I came outside to see. Sheep are supposed to be white. One of our midsize sheep was dark purple with a network of black veins up and down its body, skinned and suspended from the ground upside down on the crane. Blood dripped into a bucket below while the man prepared his knives. He commenced sawing off the limbs like dead branches. He carved the flesh and stacked it on special sheets in his truck. I was fascinated and sickened to watch a former animal disassembled like a 3-D puzzle. That night we dined on lamb chops and the basement freezer was full of blocks of sheep wrapped in white paper.

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It was not all gore, though. There were ducklings that trailed their austere mallard mother in weaving, wobbly angles down to the pond below our house where they swam in the sun. Chicks hatched under red heat lamps and peeped incessantly while you held them and swore they were nothing but yellow fluff with twigs for feet. If it rained, you could watch if the turkeys looked up to the sky, as the legend goes, until they drowned. We had mole hills, but never once saw a mole. There were wild bunnies, garden snakes, woodlouse, earwigs, water beetles and butterflies. And of course no farm is complete without its cats.

The idea of having an indoor cat was ridiculous with so many window views of the mouse-infested fields and neighborhood toms stretched out looking for action. We never had a single cat for long as they sooner or later got pregnant. We had many litters, sometimes two at once, the moms nesting in shrubs or inside cardboard boxes in the basement. I held new kittens in my palm, mewling with sealed eyes, and I wouldn't feel like the youngest for long—there was always something weaker than me. I discovered a dead runt that was smothered trying to get to her mother's milk and had nearly made it before its brothers and sisters stampeded over it. About a boy of eight, I held the thing in my palm, stunned stupid, then I felt reality travel up my arm like a serum. I wept, "you never had a chance, you never had a chance." Those who were granted a chance we put in an apple crate and drove to the Thriftway Grocery where one or more of us sat beside the sliding doors with the kittens mewling in the box, a "Free Kittens" sign on the side. By the afternoon they were all gone, and I imagined them in the homes of the children who fell in love with them, the whole cycle repeating itself.

Through the years we had so many different cats that after a while we gave up on the stock names like Socks or Muffin and went with names like Todd and Keith. I gave one cat, for his stealthy qualities, a name without any vowels and that I never tried to spell, but if I did it would be like this: Ssspssrss. No matter how loud you spoke his name it came out as a whisper. This particular cat was gaunt and the color of a used fireplace. One day he decided to open a bag of balloons and eat one. We thought nothing of this until later he appeared in the yard where we were playing, staggering and mewling almost in a baritone. Then he stopped and arched his back, his tail hinging toward the sky. Soon his face strained and something blue began to emerge from his bottom. His back legs widened and trembled as he ground his teeth, trying ever harder, until the blue thing began to—there's no other word for it—*inflate*. As he lurched forth, all of us laughing, it grew almost to the size of a nice water balloon before it sputtered some inches away in the grass. Finished, the cat, this Ssspssrss, scratched the ground and walked, head held high, into the shadows of a laurel shrub. We inspected the balloon. It was perfect. We did not use it.

The birds and the bees were never discussed by my parents much. Living on a farm, they didn't have to. I once saw two field mice do it; it was over in about three seconds. Goats kicked each other and thrashed about, the male biting the female's neck and suddenly dismounting to greedily lick its own pink wand, all right in front of the discarded female, who commenced chomping grass, nourishing her future kids. The sheep seemed to be a little gentler, if only for their fluffiness, the female still dis-

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playing apathy, if not annoyance at the wild hooves and thrusts, and the male seeming angry, like when my dad wrote checks. Cats were loud and just outright violent. The dogs were stranger still.

We started out with two shelties, the male large, the female medium, with the idea of breeding them. The male was so sweet and loyal he wouldn't dream of even sniffing the female, who, walking backwards at times, offered herself freely to him year round. We suspected he was gay and gave up having puppies on the farm. But all that changed the afternoon I visited a pet store with my mom and witnessed the employees there becoming more and more exasperated at this small black dog that kept escaping, no matter where they tried to put him. I fell in love with him immediately. His black hair was wiry and his tail was the kind that revealed his business at all times during the day, erect and curled like a question mark. The employees practically paid us to take him and I whined until my mom gave in, perhaps seeing this little terrier mutt as another piece of the dream. He jumped into our car like it was the most normal thing in the world. We took him to a park and he bolted out like a shot and I spent the better part of an hour scouring the hills and fields and jungle gyms before I spotted him, completely content, lying in the cool shadow of some lady as she sat on the ground petting him. I got him back into the car and we went home, where I was sure he'd fit in.

I named him Max, a normal enough name, but soon it was twisted into Mayjokes, and finally it ended up being simply Coy for no apparent reason. Even though he was about the size of a cat, or half the size as our female sheltie, who had started out being Bonnie, but was currently going by Caw-uh, Coy mounted her the first chance he got, and that summer puppies were born. Eight of them, each one awesomely cute. One was a runt who I befriended and supported. He was so amazingly rubbery that I called him Gregory. He soon went by Gweg. Seeing his comic potential and the lost heart of his youngest son, my dad let me keep him while the other seven went the way of the grocery giveaway. Once grown, Gweg mounted his mother like no one's business. I looked outside one morning before school and there it was, under the pear tree, a double-faced dog with eight legs. My dad looked, too.

"Oh, no!" he groaned, and raced outside bringing me along. Mother and son were connected end to end. Both looked deeply embarrassed. More so when my dad, desperately not wanting more puppies, ordered me to pull one end as he pulled the other. Lifting them off their feet with our efforts, it was like trying to tear a car in half. It was useless. I went to catch my bus with that image in my head all day at school. When I got home they were back to normal, but I could not respect Bonnie, a.k.a. Caw-uh, anymore. We began to call her "Whore," and the gentle male, "Pussy." Coy and Gweg, now there were some heroes we could believe in.

One day whoever was feeding the chickens in the barn noticed the feed grain was moving. On closer inspection in the form of my dad shining a flashlight into the barrel, it revealed the grain was no more, replaced by many bloated rats, which were now trapped.

"Savages," my dad said.

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Now, my favorite character in the movie version of *Charlotte's Web* was Templeton the rat, an admission that had once earned me a severe admonishment from my dad. I had to say another character was my favorite or else I was going to get a spanking. I did, but in my heart I loved Templeton; his independence and gleeful gluttony were heroic to me. My dad's alarm left an impression, though, and I couldn't help but feel all rats were somehow evil. Indeed, there was a wicked rank in the barn, a sweet-sour death smell over the regular manure and dust. I stuck a stick inside and one found purchase, climbed up in a flash and was about to mount my arm when I dropped the stick like a snake. My dad clamped the lid down.

"Their last meal," he said.

Soon my brother and I were shuffling sideways carrying the heavy barrel of live rats through the pasture—Coy and Gweg sniffing along as though it were full of steaks—down the big hill, and to the pond where my dad was waiting with a large black Hefty bag. He had us remove the lid—the rats energized from their travels, some hopping as though shot with electric charges, noses poking over—and in one movement draped the bag over them and turned the barrel upside down, the bag catching all that fell in. My dad cinched the bag, tying it off and hurling it as far as he could, falling to one knee as he released it. The bag arched and landed in the center with a slap, a sound that made the dogs bolt for home. As the rats scrambled from within, the bag punctured, claws showing, and began to fill with water and sink. Most went down with it, though a few dispersed, dog-paddling off. One seemed to see us and swam in our direction. Scrambling on the mud bank, my dad kicked it back in, and I felt a similar pang as the one I felt holding the dead kitten. Such a struggle for life, for survival, only to be rejected once the shore was reached. The bag was gone. A few had made it, sleek and black as they shuffled into the shadowy reeds.

My parents' dream was no Disney movie.

My brother and I had just finished watching hours of vacuous TV and were getting into bed. The window was open, the upstairs room stifling. Suddenly the silence was broken by a sound that was like all the birds in the world making their individual sounds at the same time; then silence.

"What the hell?" we said, jumping out of bed and running outside. My dad had left the light on in the barn. In the little viewing area the chair was positioned just so, the blanket unfolded. At first we saw nothing out of the ordinary. Or, rather, nothing out of the ordinary weirdness. The turkey, a father and mother duck, a pair of guinea hens, some sort of quail with a bright red growth on its head, awkward teenage chickens, a rooster, all passed back and forth pecking the ground, preening, fluttering, quacking, clucking and cooing. But they seemed to be doing so nervously. Plus the laying hens were all standing up in their nesting boxes. Then we saw it, perfectly still and unblinking—a large owl sat on the rafters looking right at us. My brother went to tell my dad and I stayed.

Eventually, I sat in the chair and covered my legs, and I watched like never before. It began to make sense, there in the quiet. A kind of order fell into place, when before I'd seen only chaos. They speak of a pecking order

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but this appeared grander and more nuanced. They adapted to their predatory guest, though every time it moved the concentrated gaggle would erupt, calm again over time. Ducks settled down beside each other, covered their faces with their wings. Chickens pecked, the turkey strutted and eyeballed, the rooster displayed absurd and totally unnecessary bravado, what looked like a miniature pheasant with black plumage shooting out of a helmet of glossy green stumbled among it all with supreme dignity. To and fro they went, regarding me occasionally, and it was mesmerizing and funny. They were natural, taking the good and the bad, and continuing on.

My brother never came back. My dad never showed. Apparently the occasional barn owl was not cause for alarm, despite the trembling hens. I watched, and then I watched some more before returning to the house. Crossing the farm in the night, I felt it was all in a kind of good order.

Why my dad chose to wear a white undershirt for this I will never know. And why he wanted me to watch also remains a mystery, the kind of shocking sight that's chalked up to the It's Good For His Character category, I suppose. At first I thought he was going to cut wood—a hatchet lay across the cutting block. Behind me, two cats watched inside from the window sill. When I saw my dad coming down from the barn he appeared to be holding an orange flame, but that fire soon became a Rhode Island Red that he held flapping by the legs. He put it squabbling on the block, gathering and pinning it with one hand, and he raised the hatchet. At first I thought he was going to clip its wings—we had renegades who literally flew the coop—but it became definite as the hatchet came down.

A spray of red dotted across my dad's chest and muddied his glasses. He backed off as the chicken, most of it, hopped off the block and began springing around the yard like a happy child, spurting blood with its every effort. The dogs yapped from within and the cats stood against the glass. Soon, but not too soon, it collapsed, twitched and was still. My dad came up to me. I found it hard not to look at the red constellations on his undershirt, but he unfolded his arm and opened his palm, revealing the bird's head, eye open, looking right at me.

One winter night, my two brothers and sister and I were summoned from bed to head to the barn. Half asleep in my pajamas and wool sweater, I watched as my dad, in his gray sweat suit and moccasins, sat on his knees on the barn floor beside the goat, who lay on her side. My mother held towels nearby with Dad's jean jacket over her robe. The birds were outside in the black night, the chute shut tight. All of us gathered around as a bubble emerged from the rear of the goat, and I thought, Oh, no, another balloon! But not this time. Inside the scarlet bubble was a tiny version of the mother's face, and I fell to my knees on the hay. The bubble leaned to the barn floor where it gently popped, releasing a mass of liquid and a wet animal the size of a dog. My dad picked it up with his bare hands, wiped its mouth and eyes and gave it to the mother. In yet another bubble, a hoof now appeared. The mother licked at the first one relentlessly while my dad was aiding the second. After the licking ended, my mom dried the first with a beach towel. Soon it tottered free and tried to walk, and was half way to its feet before it slipped and tried again.

They had bottles waiting. My dad handed one of the babies down to me, my brothers and sister behind me, laying it across my lap and hold-

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ing it there as my mom gave me a bottle. The baby goat was solid and pointy-boned, and jabbed at the nipple roughly, its hunger shaking me as I watched the milk drain down. I looked around at all of us and saw that everyone was smiling, here in this dingy, warm barn in the middle of the night.