

" We thought he could fly."

This was all the reason a so-called human being needed to kill a living thing, a thing of rare beauty, a vibrant, living, wonderful, irreplaceable thing, the object of our love. For this reason alone, a man, supposedly the highest manifestation of nature's wonder, an allegedly reasoning, intelligent, compassionate thing - a human being - destroyed another being it was beyond his power to replace. God of the universe with his hands on the steering wheel, need a man have further cause for destruction? Especially if he is a sleek Cadillac convertible.

If he destroys more of his own kind with no better cause, should we feel as ill and empty as we do over the loss of one of our honkers?

We do.

We feel even worse, for as he drove off, virtuous and saintly because he had told us, there was not a word of regret. Only a girl in the back seat had another thing to say.

"I think his beak got cut off."

Stunned and bemused, I rushed down the road, calling to Lil to remain behind. A half dozen of the geese were honking hysterically, in bewilderment at finding themselves for the first time on the paved road. We guided them into the lane, where my wife held them off the pike, and I rushed to where I could see the brown wingtips fluttering in the tall weeds.

An ancient, mostly faded blue car was approaching. The shabbily dressed driver heeded my signal and stopped 50 feet away, although there was nothing he could see. Then he approached slowly as I reached over to pick up the fatally injured fowl.

"Anything I can do?" the young man, bright-faced but showing his shock at the unbelievable, bleeding thing I held in my arms.

No answer came. I could merely shake my head.

"How in the world did it happen?"

Again I was mute, in a way that even in retrospect cannot be explained. I had seen death, human and animal, I had myself slaughtered thousands of chickens, hauled countless truckloads of meat to the market for our local butcher, been a soldier in history's most monumental tribute to man's inhumanity, and had seen the passing of man close and dead ones. But this time I could say nothing. I felt nothing, except a pervading unreality, a conscious void, and the beginning of a sense of horror and revulsion.

As I walked slowly toward our home, hoping my wife's preoccupation with the uninjured ones would lead her away from the terrible sight in my arms, I was almost nauseated by the dripping of the tick blood from the crimson, open end of the head from which the beak had been as closely separated as though it had been accomplished by surgery. Silently, without the ruffling of a single feather, the stricken goose was content to be held close to my breast, its brown eyes shining in perplexity, as though a bemused child asking a grownup "where did it do".

If it felt pain, there was no sign of it. It was quiet and motionless.

Every time I have had to kill a dog or a cat that was beyond assistance I felt a great pain, and always after the killing I was sick. Dog and cats have a way of dashing in front of cars, and often the motorist cannot avoid striking them, indeed, sometimes is unaware of having done so.

This time our rich murderer, proud and powerful in his spotless Cadillac, the symbol of his wealth and power, has no such excuse. The road is straight and it was clear. He had seen those geese for a long time before he ran into them. I had just begun a letter when my wife had called that the geese were on the road, that she could hear their high excitement. We were on our way out when it happened.

Get the full flavor of the majesty of man, nature's supreme creation.

Lord of all he surveys, determiner of life and death. Fly out of my way goose, or you die. I'm in a hurry to go nowhere, for no reason. Therefore, you die. First you suffer, then those who love you. No real reason. Just die. I have willed it. I am important. I can do it. Die.

So the goose does die. Omnipotent, with the curved power of life or death grasped firmly in his unthinking, uncaring hands, has so willed it, irrevocably.

For the first of so many painful times, the first shot missed. Fortunately, it missed entirely at five feet, such were my emotions andx their effect. At 200 feet I have shot turtles through the head, but at five feet I couldn't end the pain of the guiltless goose. Perhaps it was a guilt feeling that quaked my arm and beclouded my eye so the sights didn't register. At such a close distance, you don't even need sights, you need only point.

The blast of the missed shot startled the other geese, who fled in a silent panic after the first spontaneous honk, as though the historic relationship of their kind with mine suddenly broke though the bond of love and affection we had so laboriously woven over the years. I was sharply aware of the hideous guilt of my kind in its brutal and senseless decimation of their kind and their kindred kind over the centuries, dignified with the lie of "sport".

It died rapidly when the second shot hit where it should. A few flaps of the wings, the violent spasms of the nerves in the muscles as it pirouetted madly through the air in a gruesome dance of death. Then it lay still and I went to my wife, whose sobbing I could hear from inside our home.

She was without recomination, without question, completely silent. There was nothing to be said. It had all been said already.

"We thought he could fly."

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Thus, the full, senseless tragedy of the Orchards, both dead in tribute to the bestiality of man. It was, as I had suspected from the moment I had lifted the partly-decapitated creature into my arms as it had ~~instinct~~ instinctively sight shelted from the unknown terror in the tall weeds that it thought could hide it, our lonely, widowed grandfather, pater familias, the first who had become my good friend, the first whose trust I had earned, with the one ~~in~~ whom I had forged such a strong bond that he brough first his wife and then his children, in trusting defiance of every survival instinct with which he had been endowed by wise Nature, to eat from man's hand and walk by man's side.

Trusting Mr. Orchard! The complete gentlemen, the unthinking creature, by man's science and standards, who had refused to hurt man as represented by me when I encroached upon his sacred domain until I had left him no choise. He couldn't fly, because man so arranged it, not Nature. All the reason man needed to kill him. Not for food, not for sport. He just didn't fly.

The days of his needless and pointless death was perhaps appropriate as a further tribute to man, especially man as the highest form of life through the millions of years of patient evolution. The President had just, the day before, announced the commitment of an additional 50,000 men to the senseless slaughter half a world away in Viet Nam, where unknown thousands had already died, where women and children would as long as they live bear the searing marks of civilization on their scortched andntwisted flesh, maimed by bombs and nepalm unable to distinguish between them and the wild creatures.

It was a very depressing day for us. We were unable to work, write, clean the house and perform the other chores of living, for suddenly the meaning

Reason for living seemed unclear. Man destroys living things simply because they are there to be killed? Because he has nothing better to do? Because he pledges his sacred honor on a piece of paper, the highest embodiment of civilization, a treaty, and then finds excuses for having no honor?

Because he has a steering wheel in his hand?

Paradoxically, we had had a plan for Mr. Orchard. It hadn't taken full shape and our first effort had failed. But we knew that through him we could do some good and make others, unknown to us, happier, and perhaps a little better for him.

With the death of his wife we had pondered his future. Should we let him roam our farm a lonely animated and befeathered assemblage of atoms, a living pulp whose living had been reduced to the performance of only those functions necessary to survival, a meaningless, loveless life? He could not fly away to a different place, to some cool place in the north for his summers or a warm place in the south when it was cold in the north, to others of his kind where he might forget his tragedy. We had decided decided to arrange such a change for him.

First ~~Abn~~ Mathias had suggested Jane Day, a writer for the county paper with an attachment for animals and a child to give them company. After some thought, for she found the offer attractive and her farm certainly would have made him a comfortable home, Mrs. Day decided against taking Mr. Orchard for she feared the jealousy of their day.

"I'm afraid he'd be killed", she had told me.

Then we read of Sterling Seagrave, an acquaintance when he had worked for the Washington Post. His father, the famous Burma Surgeon, had just died, and young Sterling, in as fine a demonstration of those wonderful qualities in

some men that distinguish them from some animals, had dedicated himself to the continuation of his father's selfless service and his jungle hospital/ Perhaps we could give Mr. Orchard to Sterling, who might in turn sell him to some kind people, who might give our friend a warm home. The funds, no matter how little, would be enough to supply bandages, medicines or antibiotics to some sick Southeast Asian. This was a very attractive solution, but I hesitated writing Sterling because I'd never know who had Mr. Orchard. All people who intend to be kind to animals are not always kind, for often people don't recognize that in man's society animals must live in their own, not man's way. I thought of the rich women I had known, the lonely women who had fed their dogs from their own table, thinking this was the real measure of their love and equality, not knowing man's delicacy is the animal's slow poison.

The folks at a dude ranch \approx 15 miles away had expressed an interest, but apparently had changed their minds without letting us know, for we hadn't heard further from them.

Then the Embassy of Ghana phoned to see if the Ambassador might visit us in July. We looked forward to the visit, for he was a fine man whose company was gratifying, and he brought back to us our happiness when we had been able to share our enjoyment of our beautiful duck with his countrymen, who now have a pleasure such as American enjoy when they see the former African animals in their zoos.

"That's it!" we had both decided when the secretary hung up the phone.

"Mr. Orchard to Ghana, if they'll have him."

He could have been a thing of beauty, thus attractive by his mere presence. More, he could have tangible values if I could arrange something of which I had often dreamed but never been able to undertake.

Honkers are so close to nature they can live and prosper entirely without help from man, if man just doesn't kill them. Other geese of the domesticated varieties are more prolific and much larger. They will lay more eggs, from which more geese can be raised. They geese will supply twice as much food. Most of the emerging countries suffer a lack of protein in the diet, but except for desert areas, no lack of vegetation.

My idea was to cross the Canada with domesticated geese. If the offspring were less monogamous, if the loving male would lavish his affection on more than one female, then perhaps this new species would be a valuable asset for the protein-poor countries, for they might produce more progeny at lower cost who at the same time could mature with little or no food other than what nature provided, and harvest it themselves.

In the United States, such a crossing is a technical illegality, for it is prohibited by an admirable law intended to protect and perpetuate migratory fowl, which the honkers normally are. A further problem would come from the reluctance of a Canada male to mate indiscriminately, and with any of a different species. But the way around his unwillingness to cooperate for emotional reasons is simple: collect his seed artificially and inseminate with it. The equipment required is simple and inexpensive. It can be made at little cost from readily available materials.

The idea has merit. Any introduction of natural grazers into protein-poor countries is a benefit to their peoples. The possible development of a new species might work even better. It is one of our dreams.

Only Mr. Orchard will now not make it possible.