

TRAPPING IN FOREIGN COUNTRY

From the age of thirteen to seventeen, during fall and winter months of the mid-1950s, I would get up at four o'clock on a cold New England morning, slip into hip boots, buckle on a shoulder-holstered pistol, put on a hat, gloves, and heavy coat, then ride off into the dark on my bicycle to tend a trapline. When it occasionally pops out that once upon a time I was a fur trapper, the usual question—after an arched eyebrow or a few words about animal cruelty—is how and why I ever got started. A rock classic of that era says Bo Diddley “caught a nanny goat / To make his pretty baby a Sunday coat.” Well, I wasn't doing this to make anyone a mink stole or muskrat muffler let alone a nanny goat coat. In fact, I knew that my first heart-throb, Mary Lou, would likely have nothing to do with me if she knew anything about this outsider activity, so I kept it to myself.

But why trap? It was something different, more challenging and a bit more profitable than a newspaper route. My father drove a milk truck in the morning and worked at a service station in the afternoon to have us just scraping by. Traps were a way to help out before I was old enough for a driver's license and a better job. But I wasn't pressured. In fact, my mother, a city girl who loved dogs and cats, was not at all enthusiastic about the idea. My father grew up on a farm, knew all about trapping, and wasn't sentimental about animals. He never owned a gun, but he hunted rabbits with a slingshot during the Great Depression and, according to his brothers, was a deadeye. When called on to prove this skill to his doubting son, he found a slingshot frame in the garage, cut up an inner tube for fresh rubber, made a new leather pocket, and was ready with some old marbles. I lined up beer cans on the stonewall behind our house and, after a few practice shots, he knocked them off at thirty feet, one after another. “Okay?” he asked with a grin.

On weekends we often got into the car for a twenty-mile drive to my grandparents' farm to visit with uncles, aunts, and lots of cousins. The farm is likely where it all began. One Sunday afternoon I watched my much older cousin Raymond, a successful trapper, skin a big buck mink next to the barn. It wasn't the first time I realized that killing animals for a purpose was a normal part of farm life. Several times I had seen my gentle grandmother casually snap a chicken's neck and proceed to pluck it, all the while telling me a story about gypsies or her girlhood in Poland. But Raymond with the mink—this was the first time I had seen the skin removed from an animal. In his skilled hands, the process was quick. Raymond said that a good trapper should be able to do the

job in three to five minutes, though he now slowed down the process to teach me how.

After several years and hundreds of muskrats (far fewer mink, raccoon, fox, and otter), I got the time down to maybe five minutes. But I wasn't interested so much in speed as in doing a good job. If you put a hole in the skin—which is easy—especially in the middle of the back where furriers make their prime cut, the pelt's value dropped anywhere from fifty cents to a dollar or more, a lot of money at the time. That afternoon I watched him skin two muskrats as well. Noosing each hind leg with a separate cord and hanging the muskrat from an overhead tree limb, he talked about the importance of a good sharp knife and how the process should be bloodless. He removed the small front feet with a pair of cutting pliers, made a circular cut on each leg above the webbed hind foot where black skin turns to fur. Same kind of circular incision at the base of the scaly blade-like tail. He slit the skin from leg to tail and, pulling down, dragged the blade across the silver fascia, front and back. The process was like removing a sock, turning it inside out, the fur gradually disappearing, giving way to a red carcass. Then he fit the pelt, still inside out, to the wire fur frame, sliding a band of metal teeth into the skin where the tail began, pulling everything taut. "If you've done a good job," he said, "there'll be no excess fat to trim from the pelt."

The Boiverts lived at end of our country lane and had three small children. Like my family, they were just getting by. They were from Louisiana. One morning at sunrise Mr. Boivert was about to get into his rusty pickup as I rolled past on my bike.

"You trappin', son?"

I made a U-turn and coasted to a stop. He asked me what I did with the "mush rats" after I skinned them. I told him that I buried them in the woods behind our house if I had time, or just wrapped them in newspaper and brought them out to the town dump. "Tha's a shame," he said. "They ree-yul good eatin', taste somewhere in between rabbit and chicken. Fact, we call it swamp rabbit where I come from. They clean animals. Don't eat no garbage like no dump rat."

In my hometown at that time, Southerners were a rarity. For me, at least. Their speech was so relaxed and musical it intrigued me. Mr. Boivert said he'd be happy to take some skinned muskrats off my hands and gave me a roll of wax paper and a few big grocery bags to put them in. He offered a small payment I declined. Once when I delivered two full bags to his door, he handed me a metal pot of swamp rabbit stew his wife had made. "Give it a try," he said. "I think you and yo momma and daddy gone like it." And we did. Correction: my father and I did. Mom wouldn't try even a mouthful and made it clear she wasn't having rodents on our weekly menu.

A city girl, raised in New London, Mom worked in the office of a fruit store when she met my father. She was Irish, schooled by the Sisters of Mercy, and had certain tastes and ideas about the way things

should be. Valedictorian of her high school class, she was well read, good at math, Latin, and from memory could recite—just for starters—the prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*. Raised in farm country, Dad was more casual, and without any irony whatever called her “the brains of the outfit.” I was to look to her for help with book matters but if I wanted to learn how to build or repair anything—that was his department, and he could build or repair just about anything. I had no interest whatever in books, but could easily spend hours in my father’s shop, loving the smell of freshly cut wood, learning about dowels, miter boxes, and beveled edges. Dad also knew about birds, taught me their names and how to recognize them by their songs alone. We also fished and swam in a pond near my grandparents’ farm. Mom had no interest in this kind of outdoor activity. Country and city were the tensions of my boyhood.

But back to the country, to Raymond. That Sunday I was full of questions for my cousin and he patiently answered them. He also gave me a few traps and a handful of tips that got me started. My father found a few more traps in the barn that my grandfather had no need for. As soon as I caught my first muskrats and had some money, I sent away to O. L. Butcher, an Adirondack outfitter, for a dozen more. By the time I quit some five years later I had more than sixty traps.

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If I spread my equipment on our picnic table, here’s what you would see: black hip boots with three red inner-tube patches to repair coon-bite punctures; traps for various situations and animals (long-spring, jump, and coil); fur frames of wire and wood to stretch and dry muskrat and mink pelts; a tan wicker backpack with red shoulder straps; a three foot metal hook; a hatchet; a spool of dull gray wire; a wood-framed sieve six inches square; an armpit-length rubber glove; a .22 revolver and holster; a flashlight; a Swedish steel skinning knife with stag handle and leather sheath; two six-ounce bottles of fox and mink lure; thick gloves; a green army-surplus coat; and a black wide brim fedora.

As far as the hat is concerned, a coonskin cap with ringtail dangling down my back would have been more in keeping with the role, but that was probably why I chose my father’s old fedora. I also liked way the aluminum-framed trapping license looked pinned to the black felt, the paper being either pink, orange, red, or yellow depending on the year. I had periodic encounters with game wardens but they were only concerned that I was licensed, checking my line on a daily basis, and that my traps each had a metal tag wired to the chain and stamped with my name and address. State law made it illegal for trappers to carry firearms but I, like some others, had convinced myself I needed one in case I had a live fox or raccoon to deal with. You risked getting bitten, and without a gun they took a lot longer to kill than a muskrat. I was always in a sweat whenever I talked to a warden. My pistol hung in a holster inside my coat but I felt confident I wouldn’t be frisked, unless a

warden happened to be in the area and heard a shot, which is why I always used .22 shorts that made less noise.

The wicker pack basket with red straps came from the Adirondack outfitter mentioned earlier. The basket was perfect because it kept its shape, sat upright on the ground, held no water, and could easily accommodate eight muskrats, or several raccoons, and a few extra traps.

The trap hook I made in my ninth-grade shop class; it was forged from quarter-inch steel so that one end was pointed and shaped into a three-quarter circle, the other end an oval handle that enclosed your hand with enough room to accommodate a thick glove. The hook pulled trap and animal from the freezing water; it also worked as a club.

The hatchet I used to cut and pound stakes, also to chop holes in a frozen pond or lake for burrow sets.

The wood-framed sieve I used to sift dirt to conceal land sets for fox and raccoon.

The armpit-length rubber glove allowed me to place traps into the underwater openings of muskrat burrows.

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As I've mentioned, my mother was not at all pleased with my early morning routine but allowed it just the same. Still, there were a few rules. Our washing machine and gray slate washtubs were in the basement. Monday was washday and Mom did not want to see any dead animals hanging from the ceiling joists where I'd leave them to dry while away at school. In the late afternoon, I'd comb away tangles and burrs before I set to work skinning. The dry brown fur, thick with dark gleaming guard hairs, was beautiful and I underestimated my mother's aversion to seeing a dead animal the day I caught my first mink. So excited and proud of my ability to catch an elusive, man-wary animal, I tore upstairs to show her this sizeable buck. Still in her nightgown, she screamed, covered her eyes, and pleaded with me to take it back to the basement. I could have said that her friend Betty wore a mink stole, and this pelt would be worth six or seven times that of a muskrat, but none of it would have mattered. My father, by contrast, thought trapping was fine, liked the money part of it, would sometimes watch me skin a few rats, and find praise for my improving skill with a knife.

One crisp fall morning, I was surprised to find a live skunk in one of my traps—surprised because I very carefully considered my sites and tried to avoid skunks, especially if I sniffed one in the vicinity or saw any scat or telltale sign. Their pelts were worth little and, if alive, they were difficult to deal with for obvious reasons. There was a house maybe a hundred yards from where I was standing in the water, so I hesitated to use my trail gun. A shot in the dark could be reported to the game warden or police and I might find myself in trouble, maybe hit with a fine. I stood there trying to decide what to do. Somebody had told me if a skunk is looking at you, he can't or won't spray. This one was held by the hind leg. I thought I could use my trap hook to slide him to deep

water and drown him as I would a muskrat. Still eight or ten feet away, I watched him, looking at me, flip his tail forward and wrench just enough to let go with a stream that made a line from my hat down my cheek, chin, and neck across the front of my coat. There was an immediate burning sensation on my skin. Later I learned this liquid (not urine as commonly thought) can cause temporary blindness. No longer worried about a shot in the dark, I pulled the trigger and left the skunk in the water. There were still eight or ten remaining sets to be checked, but I was in a panic and would have to deal with the rest after school.

My trapline sometimes had me late for school and sitting on a scarred wooden bench outside the principal's office. This led to after-school detention, which in turn led to a late start skinning out a day's catch and getting the pelts onto stretchers. Sometimes I'd have to deal with a few more muskrats after dinner and wouldn't get around to my homework, which didn't bother me in the least because school, except for shop classes, was painfully boring. My dismal grades and lack of interest in school, however, bothered my mother a great deal.

In the kitchen, she immediately smelled trouble when I walked in the back door. "Lord, get back in the yard," she shouted. "Take off those clothes and leave them there." It was freezing. I stood shivering in my shorts while Mom washed me off with a hot soapy towel. Once I was in the bathroom shower, she handed me a bottle full of some lime-colored concoction to wash myself with. Little did we know that tomato juice would have been the best solvent, or that skunk spray is so powerful you experience a kind of olfactory fatigue. When you think you are clean and unwiffy, you're not. This holds true even for the person who comes into close contact with you. So, after a quick breakfast, I passed my mother's sniff test and walked a quarter mile to the end of our lane to catch the school bus. Friends on the bus were immediately laughing, pinching their nostrils, moving away from me, and opening windows. I told the bus driver to stop, got off, and walked back home. In those teen years when we were pinning each other with durable tags like "Moose," "Bug," "Beagle-Nose," and "Feet," I was lucky to emerge from this episode without picking up the nickname "Stinky," "Skunk Boy," or something worse.

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One of the first things I learned in the marshes and streams was the lesson of conservation. Across the lane from our house was a cattail swamp with least a dozen muskrat mounds easily visible from our front porch. A brook bordered the swamp, and the brook itself was prime territory both up and downstream for a mile. This area produced a lot of muskrats, a mink, and a few raccoons. Second year the swamp produced barely half what it did the first year and it dawned on me why. Or perhaps my father told me why, and I understood how easy it was to over-harvest an area.

I was always scouting out new territories. One Saturday afternoon, about five miles from home, I looked at an extensive salt marsh from atop a railroad right-of-way. I could see muskrat houses here and there and didn't need to wade around in hip boots, exploring more closely, to know that the place was loaded. Because it was private property, what I did need was written permission from the owner, a wealthy man who was a pilot and had a landing strip on higher ground parallel to the marsh. He owned hundreds of acres of woodland, all of it posted "No Hunting." Rumors abounded. I had heard about him strafing trespassers in his plane, but a few of those stories came from an unreliable classmate everyone called "Bunk."

I pedaled my bike along an old stonewall that edged his runway, rehearsing my speech. Suddenly a "Private Property" sign loomed into focus. I sat on my bike at the driveway entrance, looking down a slight hillside at his large ranch-style house when Mr. Gardiner, the man himself, emerged. He walked across the yard and leaned against a huge sliding door to the hangar where a plane's red wings slowly came into view. I shoved off and coasted down the drive. Given the rumors, he didn't at all look like the ogre I expected. He was tall and slim and smiled constantly. I explained myself, then told him I built and flew model planes, asked him questions about flying.

He finally told me he would write the letter of permission, but right now he had to deliver some legal papers to a friend in New Haven and would be back in, say, an hour and half. Had I ever been up in a plane? I said no and he told me I was perfectly welcome to come along. The plane was a Bellanca, red with black trim, and next thing I knew I was in the cockpit speeding down a grassy runway, lifting above orange and yellow foliage. Lakes and streams were like pools and runnels of quick silver. Landmarks of my hometown were transformed from this exciting new perspective. The Boston Post Road jogged at angles I had never been aware of. Some places hid themselves in the trees, everything wonderfully defamiliarized. Once on course, Mr. Gardiner let me take the controls and told me to watch the altimeter in order to hold us at 4000 feet. I became so entranced with the drifting landscape below that after a few minutes he told me we had dropped almost 1000 feet. "At this rate," he laughed, taking the controls, "We'll end up in Long Island Sound," the whitecaps of which were beginning to flash below us.

On the way home, he asked where I lived and would I like to see my house, so over it we flew, at a thousand feet, a tiny white house peeking from a stand of pines with an open backyard ending in woods. I could see the tool shed and red-roofed well, but not of course the driveway sign saying "Beware of Dog" that my father put up as a joke. And there was my father walking to the tool shed. I pointed and yelled above the engine noise to Mr. Gardiner that it was my father. We circled tightly above, but Dad didn't look up. It never occurred to me that he or my mother might be upset if they knew their son was circling above them

in a small plane with a total stranger. To the northwest, I noticed a body of water I was unaware of, maybe two or three miles from my house, and made a note to remember its location in the woods off Fog Plain Road. It turned out to be Stenger's Pond. In addition to exclusive permission to trap the Gardiner marsh, I also managed eventually—thanks to the plane ride—to get permission for the pond and stream on the Stenger property as well, both very productive areas.

Mr. Gardiner had unexpected guests when we touched down again. He apologized, asked if I could come back the next day and he would have my letter typed and ready. My father only worked a few hours on Sunday and, probably curious, volunteered to drive me out to pick up the letter. Dad had never been up in a plane and this time the ever-friendly Mr. Gardiner took us both for a short flight up the Connecticut River toward Hartford. North of the Baldwin Bridge there is a marsh called Great Island that I spotted from the air. A few years later when I got my driver's license and first car, a clunker Ford, that marsh was the last place I trapped. When we touched down on his landing strip, the sun was low, its light gilding everything. That whole lovely estate still lives in memory, not in reality. Mr. Gardiner's woodlands I came to know so well have gone the way of development, suburban neighborhoods. And his Millstone Point is now home to two nuclear power plants.

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Having written and taught in eastern North Carolina for thirty years, I drove up to Raleigh in the spring of 2006 to attend a small dinner party prior to a reading by Ted Kooser, national Poet Laureate. The spacious house inside the beltline had Persian carpets, varnished wood floors, high ceilings with sculpted cornices, cavetto molding and, in the living room, a great marble fireplace—a house far different from the one I grew up in. After introducing myself, I told Kooser how much I admired a number of his poems, especially several about birds and wildlife. We had been talking about our field-and-steam experiences when he looked at me more closely and said, “Something's telling me you were a trapper too!”

We traded stories about finding our way in the dark, talked about animals we caught, the kind of traps we set and how many, the kind of sets we favored, what fur prices were in the mid-1950s. Prime spring muskrats with thick fur, extra large, brought about \$3.50 per pelt I recalled. Mink, six or seven times that price. I remembered how cagey one local fur buyer was, how ready to take advantage of a kid. You could afford to be innocent about lots of things, but not going price of fur. Oddly, what Kooser and I *didn't* talk about was poetry, and I've since wondered what the two activities might have in common.

Craft requires time and there is a period of apprenticeship to both. You have to be a student, learn to read the woods, lakes, streams, and animals, develop an intimacy, build a vocabulary. Henry James says that the writer is a person on whom nothing is lost. If you want to be

successful, trapping requires close observation, the habit of noticing: different kinds of tracks, scant droppings on a waterside log, slight underwater trenches that indicate a burrow, a small raft of watercress, chewed up cattail roots, bark scrapings, faint runways in the marsh grass, a fresh scatter of mussel shells. After a while you understand what cannibalized your trapped muskrat and how to profit from your loss. Both crafts involve solitude, taking chances, self-reliance, and the glory of being quietly on your own in another kingdom.

Apparently Ted Kooser had not met anyone on his circuit who shared the same kind of outdoor experience and, as an adult, I had never met anyone else who trapped as a teenager. After a fine reading, he signed my copy of *Flying At Night* and, beneath his name, quickly drew a long-spring trap with open jaws, the circular pan trigger tight on its dog; it also had a chain complete with a terminal O-ring. I can't draw a line and was now doubly impressed with Kooser, the gifted draftsman. As a joke, I named a few of the companies that made our equipment. The trap he had drawn was generic, and I teasingly reminded him of the importance detail in poetry. He laughed: "It's a Blake & Lamb, but I made it too small to print those words on the pan. Sorry!" More laughter.

But earlier at dinner he told a story not funny at all, one that involved taking chances. Once before sunrise he was checking burrow sets in the bank of a swollen river and either tripped or stepped into a deep hole and got swept away by the current, his boots filling with water, pulling him under. As he sped downstream, he grabbed at exposed roots, limbs, and shrubs, finally snagging a thin limb, just strong enough to save him. He had my attention. I, too, once had my boots fill and felt myself being pulled under, but I'm certain Ted came much closer than I to the black waters of oblivion.

We also talked about how little young people today seem to know or care about the natural world, how children now grow up with far less freedom, how their after-school lives seem to move from one organized activity to another, how parents deliver them to schools or bus stops in SUVs or wait with engines idling to pick them up. Only my dog Jonesy waited for me at the bus stop (dogs, too, had more freedom then). By the standards of today's helicopter parents, my mother and father would likely be viewed as guilty of either gross irresponsibility or criminal negligence. Before we parted company, Kooser smiled at me and said, "We were very lucky to grow up when we did."

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Kooser's near drowning reminded me of another frightening experience during the years I tended a trapline. It happened in a moonless pre-dawn swamp. Having seen evidence another trapper was working the area, I was careful not to leave signs, boot prints or otherwise. I even hid my bicycle in the bushes. The best way to keep traps from being stolen or looted of animals by another thieving trapper

is to keep them invisible. You don't make a stake, say, from stand of nearby bushes without smearing mud on the chopped white stump so that it won't shout to a passing eye. And if you knew what you were doing, the caught mink or muskrat would be out of sight because you had wired the trap chain to something in deep water so the animal would quickly drown and stay on the bottom. This other trapper was not making what you would call blind sets. Several times I heard the clink of one of his trap chains in the dark, the animal still thrashing about. Once I saw a shiny new trap, not dyed or waxed, sitting atop a muskrat feed bed, no leaves or cattail fluff to hide it.

Good trappers are up and about early because the animals are largely nocturnal and you don't want them to suffer or chew off a leg to escape. I had no idea when this trapper made his rounds, but suddenly I saw the bright circle of a flashlight, the beam slowly stabbing its way toward me. Water deepened at my back. There was nowhere to retreat. I was pretty good at moving about in minimal light and only used a flashlight if I had to. This morning I hadn't, yet his light was approaching ever closer to its target. Suddenly came a loud voice: "I know you're in here. I found your bike and chained it to my truck. You want it back, you better show yourself, now!"

By this time, he was twenty feet away. "Okay," I said and got his three-cell beam right in my face. I responded with my own light and found myself looking at a great bear of a guy with a black beard and a pistol pointed in my direction. "Hey, man, calm down," I said.

"So you're the little shit who's been stealing my rats."

Somehow I had the wits to tell him where in the last two days he caught muskrats I could have easily taken. I myself had several traps tripped, empties in very promising sets, and was certain somebody else was about, craftier than either of us. When he saw how young I was, he apologized, put away his pistol, and extended his hand. "I'm Russ Gomes," he said. He became more friendly and relaxed, asked me a few questions about school, trapping, and who I thought might be stealing our rats. We each had the same suspect in mind, but unless we caught him red-handed (we never did), nothing could be proven. Russ told me he was married, worked the graveyard shift at Electric Boat, and lived about five miles from me. He had been raising mink for over a year, he said, and invited me to come by his house to see the operation. A week later I took him up on the offer.

He lived outside Jordan Village on a rural dead-end road. A few homes were sided with tarpaper. Russ's next-door neighbor had a washing machine and a sofa on his front porch. I followed Russ and his two little boys into the back yard where mink pens went down the side of the garage to the fence and along back of his property. Russ had done a good job making the pens, which were about six feet long and three feet wide, each with a nest box inside. They were off the ground on legs made of two-by-fours. He explained how the cage bottoms of tight wire mesh

allowed droppings fall to the ground so they could be shoveled away. Not much, however, could be done about the scent from their glands and the equally potent smell of their urine. Mink, of course, preyed upon muskrats and Russ put his rat carcasses to good use once he had removed the pelts.

At this point he had only standard brown mink, but he was planning to order breeding pairs of both platinum and rose. The hybrid pelts sold at a much higher price, he explained. Ranch mink were also worth more than their wild cousins because, kept isolated, the males wouldn't fight and scar each other defending their territory. And you could plan the harvest for spring, he said, when winter had thickened their fur and the pelt had reached its greatest value. I stood looking a gorgeous male with a white spot under its chin, glistening whiskers, tiny eyes and ears. Long and sleek, it quickly turned, movements a blur, then stopped to sniff the air and pick up my scent. You wanted to hold him in your lap and stroke that gleaming thick fur. But Russ rightly kept telling his boys not to stick their fingers in the cage. "These ain't pets and they'll bite you good. You hear me?"

Pets or not, I wondered about killing animals I had raised from kittens for more than a year, feeding them daily and watching them grow. I didn't often have to kill muskrats or mink; they were drowned by the time I arrived at a set. That made things easier. Russ led me into the garage where rows of mink, muskrat, and a few fox pelts hung from the rafters. He showed me his kill box with a protruding rubber hose that connected to the tailpipe of his truck. "These," he said, "are what I pick 'em up with." I held a pair of heavy leather gloves that gave off an odor of decay. "They're wicked biters," he said, his tone implying they deserved to die.

"I had one that put a hole in my boot," I said.

"Listen," he said. "I was going to kill one of them big males later this afternoon, but there's no reason I can't do it now if you want to stay around and see how it's done."

I thanked him but tapped my wristwatch. "I've got to have a book report written by tomorrow morning," I heard myself say, a shameless liar who had yet to read anything longer than an article in *Fur-Fish-Game*.

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With a single exception I haven't deliberately killed an animal since I was a teenager. One summer while I was in graduate school, home for a visit, my father presented me with a shotgun borrowed from his brother and asked me to take care of a rabid fox that had been lurking around the house. "Your eye is better than mine," he said. A day earlier the fox had stood ten feet from Mom as she hung wash on our backyard clothesline. We waited on the porch. Out of the woods at dusk came a gray fox; it zigzagged and turned in circles, a silver string of saliva dangling from its mouth. I took the shot and next morning brought the

fox to our town hall for a six-dollar bounty. The price had gone up a bit since I quit. Fox pelts were worth little when I was in high school and bounty supplied by the farmer's grange was the only reason to trap or shoot them.

Unlike fox, raccoon pelts were quite profitable. In fact, my first lesson in supply-and-demand economics came in the mid 1950s to the tune of "Born On a Mountain Top in Tennessee" when Fess Parker hit the big screens as Davy Crockett in his coon-skin cap. Crockett hats were a must for young boys and the price of those required pelts doubled in six months time. Another plus about the surge in price was that raccoon are easier to catch than mink, otter, or fox, are less wary of humans. You didn't have to worry nearly as much about leaving your scent behind. But the downside of raccoon, like fox, was that I felt guilty about killing them. They were beautiful to look at, far more so than a wet muskrat.

Though I had killed hundreds of animals, I was never completely comfortable with it. I remember once standing in a stream under bright starlight with a live muskrat under my boot sole and being annoyed at how long he could hold his breath, as if he were deliberately trying to make me late for school. I could see my own frosty breath and suddenly became aware of breathing, of the beauty entailed, and what the opposite meant. A product of nuns and Catholic school, I felt bad enough to confess killing animals to a priest one Saturday afternoon. In the confessional dark, behind the screen, his silhouette sleepily told me that hunting and trapping were not sins but if what I was doing bothered me, I should think about stopping. "On the other hand," he whispered, his voice now edged with quickening interest, "These impure thoughts you've been having about girls . . ."

I didn't immediately stop trapping but continued to think and reason with myself about what I was doing. One late winter dawn I was making lakeside rounds about fifty yards below two sizeable chicken houses that were natural magnets for mink and fox, and a productive area for me. I began to entertain, not impure thoughts, but self-justifying thoughts about these animals as predators. Minks ate chickens and muskrats. Foxes ate chickens, mink, and muskrats. Otters ate fish and the occasional kit rat. It was a Ben Franklin moment: big fishes ate little fishes, therefore Rounding a point of white birches, I saw that my next set held a handsome red fox with black forelegs and a thick white-tipped tail. As I approached, she just stood there and wouldn't react, I knew, until I got close enough to trigger a frenzy. The trap jaws barely held two toes. Muskrats were lowly rodents but the fox made me think of my dog Jonesy, my best friend. The fox looked at me just as Jonesy sometimes did with her tongue out, panting on a hot day. I began to think about how I could release her without getting bitten. I had moved from a Franklinesque moment to a Pascalian one where the heart has reasons that reason itself is unaware of. I wish I

could say I was successful at freeing her, but chain and wire gave her too much slack. A turning point, however, had been reached.

Within a week or so of the fox episode, I was standing in a shallow stream, cocking a trap on my thigh. Beyond the soft chuckle of water, it was very quiet—a few crow caws, almost no birdsong this early in March. It was slightly misty too. I happened to look upstream and saw a bobcat with tufted pointy ears on the trunk of an oak that had fallen across the water. The cat was maybe twenty feet from me, but I was downwind and she had her focus fixed on a pool where a trout might have been holding in the current. I didn't move. I had never seen a bobcat and just stood there wondering at the compact beauty of the thing, gray fur, stub of a tail. The sun, barely clearing the tops of trees, backlit the peripheral fur in such a way the bobcat seemed to have a halo. I'm not sure how long I watched her twitch and slightly adjust her hindquarters as if preparing for a leap into shallow water. Finally, I coughed. For a moment she looked right at me then, poof, the log was empty, as if the cat had been entirely a creation of my imagination. But the image stayed for days, especially the gleaming whiskers and those sharp intelligent eyes. The vision thrilled me and I knew, knew it was over—I could never set a trap for that creature even if the pelt were worth a thousand dollars.

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Last year my son was home visiting and we went to see the remodeled Pine Knoll Shores Aquarium on the barrier island where I live. We were standing in front of a beautifully realistic series of waterfalls in the new otter exhibit. Two of these exquisite creatures were playfully chasing each other and sliding on their bellies. I almost knew what was coming when Keith cleared his throat and said, "Dad, I know money was involved, but how could you ever have wanted to kill beautiful animals like this for their pelts? What kind of a *psycho* were you?" After I released him from a quick headlock and we quit laughing, I tried to describe the values and imperatives of my boyhood world, and reminded him that he grew up in a city across the street from a large university. I grew up in the country. By way of further explanation I gave him L. P. Hartley: "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."

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Winner of the Monroe-Spears Award
The Sewanee Review, Winter 2010