

She Got Herself Shot

By Hope Burwell

It's autumn in Iowa. Already a winter's ability to steal one's breath threatens as we wade through the predawn blue completing chores. Now, livestock and wood furnace fed, I sit, stocking feet propped on the picture windowsill, a cup of coffee in my left hand and binoculars in my right. Against a backdrop of scarlet sumac, orange maples, golden hickories, and burnt umber oaks, 17 white-tailed deer graze our hayfield. They blow warm breath against the frost coverlet muting emerald alfalfa, and when the ice has melted, pull water-drenched protein into their mouths.

It's difficult to describe the pleasure we derive sitting here, sharing our morning coffee in silent reverence for this land and the wildlife who share it. Moments like these make bearable the hours stacking hay in the blazing sun, or stretching fence among mosquitoes; make bearable the months on end chained to livestock who must be fed twice a day. So we sit, enjoying one of the perks of rural life, and luxuriate in the pleasure.

The old doe, the one with the scars on her left flank, is here again, this year's twins just out ahead where she can keep an eye on them. Several of the younger does, some of them her daughters, fan out, maintaining the same formation: fawns out front, mothers behind, ever watchful. And far behind them all, visible near the does only in this rutting season, the buck stands, blending against low oak boughs. "Nine points this year," Sandy whispers beside me, and two does look up, turn their heads warily in our direction, hesitate, sink slowly back to grazing.

Suddenly, all the sleek brown necks jerk. Before their heads are completely raised, the whole herd is moving, flowing like a muddy river over alfalfa. We hear the shots, late and distorted. By the time the *pop pop pop pop* reaches our ears the deer are sailing over a second fence line and heedlessly across the highway.

"Damn it," I snarl as my feet hit the floor. "Did they get the buck?"

"No." Anger clenches Sandy's teeth. "He went onto the road last."

And the slow simmer of blood roiling in my ears marks another deer hunting season.

It begins sometime in August: a steady trickle of pickup trucks, Broncos, and station wagons crunching down our quarter-mile gravel lane. Out of them step men, usually alone, usually strangers, who want to know if they can speak with the man of the house. "There isn't a man in this house," we say if we are feeling polite. "No," we say when we're cranky, hot, tired. They shuffle, grin, talk about the weather, and finally get around to it.

"Umm, ma'am, would you mind if I hunt your place this fall?"

"Yes," we say, "we'd mind."

They always look surprised. Often they look affronted, like boys did back in high school when they believed that because they'd screwed up the courage to ask for a date we were obligated to go. The rare ones smile, shrug their shoulders, and say, "O.K., just thought I'd ask." More often, they argue: how badly the deer herd needs thinning, how cruel it is to let them die of starvation.

In response I am beginning to ask why I never see starving deer, just healthy ones feasting on our crops, crossing our roads, decorating our landscape. I am beginning to ask if they realize that an autumn loss of body weight is a purely endogenous cycle. I am beginning to ask which is more cruel: apparently starving deer or wounded ones?

One fall we built a gate at the end of the lane. We posted a big orange NO HUNTING sign in the center. They had to get out of the car, open the gate, get back in the car and drive through, get out of the car, and close the gate to keep the cattle from getting out while they drove down the lane to knock on our door and ask if they could do what the sign said they couldn't. Still they came.

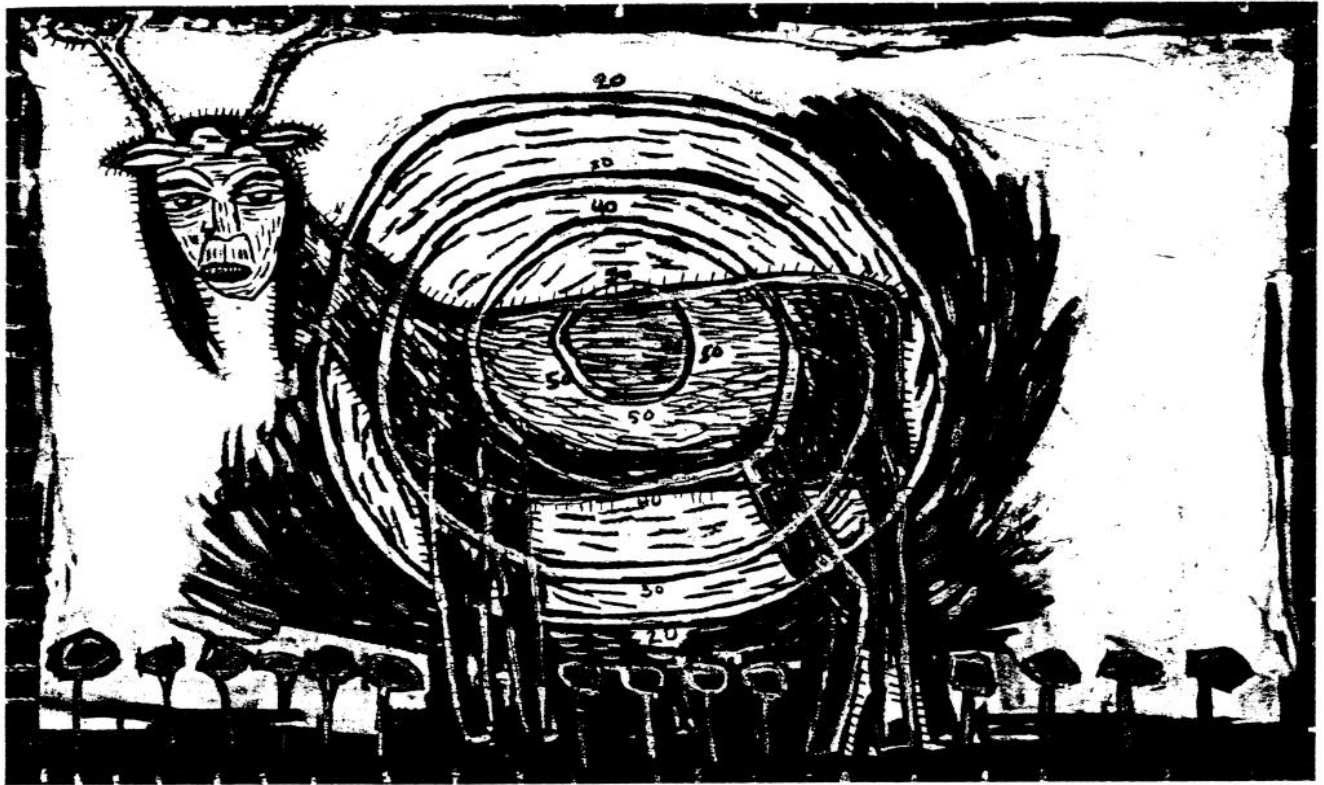
It's our land, in the sense that we work it, keep up the fences, pay the taxes—and we choose to see it used for other purposes. We walk it, marking our seasons by the transformations under our feet. We spend long autumn

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hours bent over collecting sticky green butternuts, ashen rock-hard hickories, black walnuts like chunks of charcoal, so that we can feast on fresh nuts and fall mushrooms, the last of the garden's broccoli, all braised in fresh butter. We collect wild apples, with snow-white flesh that turns cinnamon-brown in the sauce kettle on rainy afternoons. We step quietly listening for turkeys, watching the blue herons taking rest after raising their brood.

And we watch the deer, as voyeurs peeping in on their life cycles. In late October, a raw patch of naked tree stands out against bark black with autumn rain. Go close enough and you can smell the musk, acrid natural incense left by bucks marking out their mating arena. Autumn after autumn they choose and mark the same squares of land.

The adult does breed first. We can tell from the picture window when the timber is drawing them. For the



first time since fawning in late May they leave their young unattended, creep off to the starkly naked timber. Two weeks later the female fawns follow. And all of this necessary activity occurs in the peak of hunting season.

On our autumn walks we are also confronted by the presence of strangers. One can step over or crawl under barbed wire fences, but cutting lets us know they were there, so they do it. We find discarded liquor bottles, the entrails of poached deer bright red against the snow, and bodies of decapitated bucks abandoned because all that was wanted was the head, the rack. We find fox and coon and squirrels shot for the thrill, and abandoned. We find deer stands, vinyl-padded metal chairs, bolted to the trees we nurture; spikes driven into their sides.

Last month a fellow customer at the feed mill leaned against the doorjamb, blocking my passage, and said, "You'd better start wearing some orange out there when you're cuttin' wood. Heard ya 'bout got yourself shot last weekend."

Got myself shot? That's an interesting grammatical construction. Two years ago a jury in Maine acquitted a man who had shot a woman 130 feet from her house. It was deer season. She was wearing white mittens. The jury thought it reasonable that a man with a gun had mistaken a woman with a laundry basket for a white-tailed deer. She got herself shot.

Yesterday my basset and I were snuffling through the timber, picking up the tangs of autumn. An irregular glint of light pierced my eyes and I dropped instantly to the ground. Beside me Grace "boofed," a guttural, lip-blowing sound of fear. Then the man's eyes and mine fastened, experienced the same instant recognition of hu-

man iris. I eased to standing at the same pace that his gun barrel slipped toward the ground.

Before I could recover my voice, he snarled, "Jesus, you could get killed, lady. What're you doin' here? Don'tchya know there's a season on?"

Finally, Grace barked, raised her hackles, ran for the gutted buck I hadn't yet picked out of the forest floor.

He followed her with his gun barrel. "You'd better call off that dog," he said, "or I'll shoot her."

And so it started, the conversation I've had more times than I can count. Alone in the woods, unarmed, facing a man, or two, or three, with loaded guns and often bellies loaded with liquor. "On whose property do you believe yourself to be hunting?"

They hesitate, they shuffle, they look anywhere but into my eyes. They offer a name out of a plat book, hoping it isn't my own. I explain more or less angrily where fence lines lie and ask them, firmly, to leave. Now.

This man was waiting for buddies to help him drag the gutted deer the mile or more he was from anyone else's fence line. This man may have heard the news from Maine. After I had called the dog off and his buck was safe, he cocked the butt of his shotgun on his pelvic bone, aimed the barrel directly over my left shoulder and said, "You know, lady, you got no orange on. I could shoot you right here and they'd call it a huntin' accident."

We wear blaze orange stocking hats now, in the woods, or even when we're moving from barn to pump house doing chores. We wear blaze orange, and we wait for the season of rut to end. **Ms.**

Hope Burwell, a feminist teacher, writer, and farmer, lives in Dundee, Iowa.