

RICHARD K. WEEMS

DOGS

NELS: HE'S GOT A BAD CASE OF DOGS. I'm over at his place at least once a week when it gets hot like this, and it's worse than mine. He talks sometimes like he's going to buy a tank of cyanide gas and flood his holes with it, but I know it's never going to happen. Not just because you can't see how much damage you done; got to do with the black-footed ferrets. The sheriff wouldn't let me or Nels take a leak in private if he knew we had us some cyanide. The ferrets are dropping all over, dying of rabies.

It's tough believing they're out there, dug deep in the colonies, feeding on dogs late at night. I don't know how they stand it; imagine being surrounded by what you feed off. It's rare if they ever come out during the day for any reason. Matter of fact, I've never seen them. Cyanide hits the ferrets the worst, but we'll never be rid of dogs. I don't know what took me so long to figure it out. I used to think we could do them in.

The only part I don't like is the sitting and waiting, waiting for a dog to take the bait. I don't remember anymore who showed who the best way to do this. We did other things, me and Nels. That's years back, but I remember. You leave bits of onion stems just outside their holes, and parsley leaves, and they fall for it every time. Nailing a dog anywhere with a .30-.30'll pretty much finish it off, unless you go blasting off a foot, but even that might do the trick. All you need see is that spray or chunk of blood and fur to tell you it's done for. I seen some

practically split in half. Dogs don't quiver or lie there kicking when they die. Either they're up and scurrying about, or they're stone dead. Even when they can get themselves back up and in their holes, it don't matter. There's always more coming. Nels is pretty good at getting heads. We drink as we wait. It's something to do.

Nels and me shared a woman once. She was a nurse. She wore white shoes, and Nels and me almost went ahead and killed each other over her, but I'm not holding anything against Nels. Never bothered finding out what's become of her. Not that it matters. I never ask Nels if he's forgotten because I don't have to. He's still coming over. You sit with your feet up on the rail, barrel fixed between your heels, stock on your lap. We like to keep our ammo boxes on the armrests right behind our beers so we can reload quickly.

Baiting always works. The dogs keep coming.

NELS PEGS ANOTHER. It gets its whole head spread out over its back like a sweatshirt hood and drops flat. It's keeping clear out today; the sun's high against the field. It makes dog flesh a deep, dark red and look really juicy. Things only get clearer. When it's like this, I can almost believe that group who still says the world is flat. I don't believe I can see Cheyenne from here or nothing, but things do look level, like you just might be able to see some things if you looked hard enough. Nels used to grin over his headshots. He'd even toast himself: raise his beer and tip it. Now they're just a fact of life.

"Little shit," he says, resting the barrel in the V he makes with his boots. You have to keep your feet up high on the porch rail so the barrel don't touch your legs. A barrel gets hot on a day like this. My dog-shooting boots have dents softened into the arches. "Give it up," he says, picking up his beer, keeping his trigger-hand in place.

Since Nels and me don't talk much anymore — not much reason to — he talks to himself sometimes. He wipes his face on the can, but he won't stop sweating. Not just because the beers are warm: he glistens on days like this. We never bother getting ice for the cooler.

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I used to think it'd be easier if we each covered the half-field in front of

us, but I can always see Nels in the corner of my eye when I'm scanning my half, and I know he can keep his eye on me. Nels covers the right half. I got a feeling one's coming, so I put down my beer and put my hand on the grip of the barrel. I always keep my trigger-hand ready.

I think a lot how easy it'd be to shoot him: Nels. Just pick up my .30-.30 like I'm going after a dog, turn it on him and pull. I think about it every time I go to pick off a dog. I think about it the most when he's aiming himself. I used to wonder if he'd just shoot me back.

I have my chance again. A dog peeks out, sniffs, then comes out all the way. I aim, but I can see Nels moving in the corner of my eye and I miss. "Fuck," I say. I level off, and the dog freezes. They're that stupid. Like all dogs live for is to get shot. A miss like that makes you remember how far you're into the day. Nels was just drinking.

The second shot is on the mark: right through the gut. The dog runs back into its hole, floundering. It happens that way sometimes. You see the spray, then the dog takes off like you just stomped your foot, like all that got it was the sound of the gun firing. I used to think they blocked up the holes they ran back into, leaving fewer to cover, but it isn't long before dogs are coming out those same holes again. They crawl all over themselves to get shot.

I WAS ON A BOURBON DRUNK and pissed when I first wanted to kill Nels, and I burst in on him and that woman. Nels picked up this pipe and took such a bad swing at me that he fell, and I had a clear alley. He was lying there, drunk, buck-naked and looking stupid, and he probably would have died that way if I had had any guts. I probably could have even done him in with just my whittling knife. It wouldn't have taken much to put the blade in the soft spot of his throat and cut up, right through his Adam's apple, but no. I just stood there with my .38 cocked, listening to that woman scream, Stop! Stop it!

Nels and me were just fighting when he first had his chance. We'd do that now and then: fight. Sometimes we did it so we could get ourselves kicked out of bars, sometimes not, but that night we were going at it over that woman, and then Nels pulled out a 9mm and clicked off the safety. He would've had to plug me a few times since he was aiming at my gut, but I wanted him to go ahead and do me in. I dared him; I opened my shirt, as if I had a target painted on me, and I slapped myself on the belly and said to him, "Go ahead," and I meant it. Sometimes I'd get so mad I'd wish either one of us would go ahead and do the other.

A DOG CATCHES ONE through the side of the neck. It flinches at first, as if Nels had missed, but then it just stops and keels over, oozing. I keep wondering how much it takes dogs to realize they're bleeding. It's like the ones that run when they're done for: how much does it take to realize that you're dead? This one falls right next to the others Nels has put away from the same hole. We call those the 'meat holes' because they're like meat grinders. Dogs get squeezed out, and then they fall flat, leaving red stains and wet chunks of flesh all over. I can usually keep an exact dog-count when we first start out, but when we're getting on in the day, I can only be sure we're running about average. The first ones we shot today are already starting to steam. When the afternoon surge starts slowing down like this, the field looks like a war zone. It looks bad for dogs, but their strength is in their endless numbers.

Nels pulls his Browning into his lap and puts his feet down so he can reload. He does it quickly, but dogs never appear when you're reloading. It's like the sound of empty cases hitting the porch floor makes them nervous. It's not that I don't trust Nels, but I always reload quickly, like I'm just getting ready for another dog.

NELS LOSES A LOT OF AIM the more he drinks. Every now and then, when he's at that point, he looks like he's about to take off his toes, but it's like something won't let him. It makes him pull up in the nick of time. Maybe it's his rifle; it's a Browning and it's got kickback. The blades of the rocker he sits in have worn grooves into the porch. He's done the same to the porch at his house.

We're running low now. The dogs are starting to lose interest, as if they know when we've had enough. I used to think we were rid of dogs at the end of an afternoon, even when I'd see more the next day, but one time, right after Nels left, I went out and felt the field bulging with dogs. I was sure I could even hear it: piles of dog-sex going on right under my feet.

I still didn't learn my lesson right then and there. Not completely; first I got stupid and started thinking maybe dogs have some sort of order, where me and Nels get rid of the useless part of the herd, or clan, or whatever you call a bunch of dogs, like me and Nels were dog-gods, wiping out misfits. The smart dogs coax the dumb dogs out of the holes, and the dog-gods strike them down. I don't think that anymore. I know better now.

Nels picks up his Browning for one more, and I already know it's the last one of the afternoon. Nels says, "Last one," because he knows it

too, and he pegs it through the chest. He couldn't do a headshot at the end of an afternoon if his life depended on it.

Not even then.

WE DON'T CLEAN UP THE FIELD because Packer-down-the-road's Dobermans will feed on the carcasses during the night, or whatever ferrets might be left, and what they don't eat is usually taken off by the carrion birds or cleaned off by bugs. I used to wonder if more dogs were disappearing than there were ways for them to go—as if dogs could bring in their own dead—but there's no smarts to dogs. That's what I know now. They breed, then peek out of a hole after some bait, then get plugged, then get chomped on by whatever feels like a little dog meat. That's all there is to it.

Nels puts his feet down, holding his Browning away from him so the barrel don't touch his legs, and gets up. He holds the rifle by the trigger-guard, pointed at the floor, to unload. He usually don't start popping bullets until I'm about to.

We don't say good-bye anymore. I don't see much sense to it. I know when I'm supposed to be at his place so we can work on his dogs. He goes around the side of the house and has to make a long walk down the trail to get to his truck. He used to walk backward, making good-byes and yelling jokes the whole way, but he walks with his back to me now.

I like to stand out in the field and aim at him. The ammo boxes are always back on the porch, but I'm in the habit of keeping a couple of shells handy. I don't remember anymore if I started doing this after I felt him aiming at my back while I was leaving his place, or if I started this myself. If you pump your target in the spine, it'll just fall and lie there, paralyzed. It probably won't die right away, but you're open to plug it a couple more times until it's finished. If you put your shot between the backbone and the shoulder blade, you'll probably puncture a lung, which'll kill your target eventually, and it'll still be able to get back at you before it kicks it. It's a tricky spot to get at, but Nels walks slowly and steadily, so I'd have little trouble. There's just this one thick muscle guarding the back of the lung. A well-placed bullet'll slice through it like tissue paper, and Nels always wears a T-shirt that really shows it off. He'll probably feel himself dying, then spin around, going into his pocket, for his chance.