

The
Pheasant...



*and the
Pandemic*

by Darrell Petska

*Old Rooster puzzles at
another old soul as I slip-slide
along the conservancy trail
drenched minutes earlier by rain.
I puzzle back at him,
surprised he stands his ground
before a hulking human.*

We've both had quite the bath, compliments of the abrupt downpour. His feathers appear sodden, his mottled brown wings flaring to catch the breeze. My gray hair straggles about my head like a sopping dust mop.

The approaching winter might be Rooster's second, if I judge correctly his long, pointy spurs and the faded red wattle circling his eyes. He tips his head as if reading my face furrowed by age and pandemic concerns. Coronavirus? He doesn't care, his most immediate goal drying off, then filling his gizzard before evening sets in.

Rooster is in no hurry to dart off into the tall rye grass lining the oak savanna trail, and since I need to catch my breath, passing our shared moments congenially seems in order.

"Quite the cloudburst we had," I could rightly declare.

But his look is dour: "Life is full of cloudbursts, and snow storms, and hunters looking for trophy feathers. Nothing to be done about it."

"Tomorrow is supposed to be absolutely perfect," I chirrup.

Clearly unimpressed, he looks up and down the trail, semi-vigilant.

I change the tone: "Nice spurs. I can tell you're a survivor."

I appear to have struck a nerve, for he stiffens. "My finest tail feather I lost to a coyote. My ear tufts are shredded from fighting some young cock. And there's buckshot in my left thigh."

Since he's taken our conversation up a notch, I reciprocate: "There's a pandemic occurring that's especially hard on old folks. I'll be living like a hermit all winter, trying to avoid it."

"At least you've got a chance. The odds I'll survive my second winter are zilch! Autumn already. How depressing!"

"Maybe it'll be an easy winter."

"They're never easy." Clearly, he's no master of small talk.

I'm running out of topics. I doubt my grandkids' exploits would interest him. The recent shortage of toilet paper? The elections? Nah.

A humid silence surrounds us. Finally, he cuts to the chase: "Why are you out here, anyway?"

I give him the easy answer: "I need to stay fit."

"Stay fit for what?"

"My kids have families. I want to be around so I can watch my grandkids grow..."

But he's bored with this. His feathers look drier. There's a golden soybean field not far – easy

pickings. With no further ado, he turns and strolls into the rye grass, the tip of his longest remaining tail feather the last of him I see.

“Maybe we’ll meet again next spring,” I call after him.

Several feet into the rye grass, a voice rises: “Not likely.”

I congratulate myself on our fortuitous encounter, having never been eye-to-eye with a pheasant before, then continue through rain-sweetened air along the slowly rising trail. The oak savanna spreads to my right. Tall prairie grasses tinting golden lean and sway.

Thoughts of tomorrow, the pandemic, my age and infirmities all take a back seat to what spreads before Rooster and me, today. I’m stricken, realizing the essential way in which our presence in this place, on this day, corresponds.

Step by step I manage the incline. From atop the savanna, my eyes follow its downward sweep to the spring-fed creek winding through a lush sedge meadow. Finally I turn, now to descend the trail.

Will Rooster and I meet again? Can we hope for tomorrow? My hope lies in living well each new day. Old Rooster’s hope rests with the next bug, the next soybean, the next bit of body fat he can accumulate to withstand the cold ahead. Hope is hope, however manifested.

I see a red-tailed hawk on an oak branch not far ahead. Perhaps he’ll linger awhile. I’d love to hear his views about the world seen from on high. ✧



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