

About 2300 words

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#### EDEN MOVES AROUND

Grouse can take you back,  
if you know where to look.

Yesterday I went hunting in 1917. The Montana farmhouse looked that old, anyhow, with its white paint struggling to maintain a foothold on gray boards. The friend who lives in the house told me that he had seen a couple of ruffed grouse running through the yard a while back. I thanked him and got his permission to look for the birds. There are easier coverts to hunt but this one is up on the side of a mountain where autumn colors start early, and grouse hunting does not feel right till the year shows its age.



A pup named Huckleberry jumped from my old Ford when I opened its tailgate, then searched ahead of me in a line of trees and brush that wound up the mountain's west face. The going was easy at first but the slope increased in a parabolic curve. As we gained altitude, aspens turned yellow, dogwoods red. Half an hour further up the curve, a few leaves were already falling. They floated in still pools where boulders held back water from an intermittent stream. Now if I turned quickly and looked back into the valley, the ground dropped away so fast that I felt as if I were flying.

My boots rustled through autumn essences that I could not detect. Huckleberry could, and one scent got him sniffing like a wine fancier at a glass of vintage Port. The smell could have been left by a snowshoe hare, but then again it could mark the place where a grouse had paused. I mounted the shotgun a couple of times, making sure that the stock did not catch on my vest. The gun was made in 1896. The pup is of recent manufacture and has few memories, but he brings mine back.

He found the source of the good smell in a half-acre thicket of hawthorns. The bell on Huck's collar stopped, waiting for me. I might have been able to crawl down a deer trail into that jungle, but I could assuredly not have waved the gun in there. What I did, for want of a better idea, was nothing. It took a flock of waxwings to break the impasse. They looped down from the



ridge behind me and flew low overhead with wings sounding like the roll of brushes on small drums. I flinched, the pup broke point, and a grouse lifted above the hawthorns with a deeper drumbeat.

The bird knew where I was, despite my silence, and chose an exit that gave me no shot. From my high ground, however, I could watch what happened. The grouse flew an S-curve in three dimensions: up out of the trees, down to within a yard of the ground, right into a clearing, left up its edge, and back to the right into another woods. It was a flight designed to fool a fox and it fooled young Huckleberry. When he charged off in the wrong direction, I whistled him back and gave an arm signal. He paid attention for once. And then he did a thing that lit me up like autumn sun.

Huck followed the low part of the grouse's flight path: hit it, raised his nose, and swiveled sharply to trail the scent. There had been other times when I suspected that he could smell low-flying birds. This time there was no doubt. Ruffed grouse have a scent that is strong even for me, and molecules of it that wash off a bird in the air are enough for a dog to detect, when conditions are just right.

This was a day when everything was just right. Huck went on point again, one hind foot off the ground, head turned, nose pointing into the cover where the bird had landed. Perhaps I



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would laugh if he performed such contortions in the house. In the woods, he looks as if he wants to pounce, and he makes me feel the same way.

Neither of us pounced, however. Huck held the point and I tried to sneak into a better position. The grouse flushed at perhaps twenty yards and flickered off through the brush. I could see it only in flashes, as I used to view the swimming pool of a neighbor who had built a tall board fence for privacy. Of course he attracted a crowd: grouse hunting is not the only sport that thrives on mystery. I found the solution to the neighbor's fence. The boards were so tight-fitted that no single gap provided an adequate view, but if I walked by steadily there would appear, outlined through a succession of tiny cracks, a moving picture of the neighbor's daughter tanning by the pool. To this training I owe whatever modest success I have achieved as a grouse hunter. Other people applied the principle to the making of fortunes in Hollywood.

Unfortunately, size 7 1/2 shot is not subject to optical illusions. I swung along the flight path and fired both barrels as fast as I could pull the triggers, harvesting only leaves. The grouse <sup>Curved</sup> swung upwards and ~~disappeared~~ into a tall pine.

Huckleberry ran around baffled while I approached in spurts, stopping where openings in other trees gave a view of the pine.

The next flush left an image that could only have formed at



this time of the year. Mountains and clouds observe a truce in the autumn, and a thin no-man's land of sky keeps them apart. Outlined against the strip of blue was an evergreen shaft and the round yellow tops of aspens, and then a grouse flew into the picture, fast. The muzzles of the gun erased the bird. In that vignette of sky, within the frame of cloud and pine and aspen, a pair of feathers came zigzagging down.

When the bird next appeared it was limp and Huckleberry was in charge of it, frisking along like Eve carrying an apple. I knelt in supplication. When Huck was just beyond my reach, he abruptly discovered that the grouse was, after all, exceedingly heavy, and he put it down. Then he licked his mouth clean of feathers so that he could resume breathing. After much encouragement he managed to overcome his exhaustion, pick the bird up again, and stagger the remaining few feet to me. This dramatic production, mind you, was by a pup whose idea of a perfect week is eighty-four hours of hunting.

Huck enjoys all birds and would probably be just as pleased with a rabbit, if anybody would be so kind as to shoot one for him. I, however, like to think that he is especially reluctant to surrender grouse because they smell as good to him as they do to me. Back home, I hang each of them separately, check them daily, pluck them feather by feather, and serve them with chestnut dressing on special occasions. In a blind tasting, an impartial



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expert might rate a ruffed grouse as equal to, but not better than, a similarly pampered woodcock or pheasant or blue grouse. My family does not have blind tastings. My boy knows that irreverence in the presence of ruffed grouse (roasted as Mrs. Bates showed me) is punishable by banishment from the cherry pie. Eating my totem birds is a form of ancestor worship.

Every hunter, I suppose, has a picture of Eden, and mine is as clear as autumn light. It is in New England at the end of another century. The countryside belongs to small farmers, not small gentry, and the farming supports families, not corporations. This kind of farm is good for grouse families, too. The farmer and his friend from town each have a gun with two barrels and two triggers, and one of the men has a dog that can point. On fall mornings they walk out the door of an old frame house and look for grouse till the sun gets low. They pluck a couple of crisp apples for lunch.

This Eden seems ancient to me because I hunted there for four years, skinning my knees on the ruins of its stone walls. If you prefer a more precise version of history, however, the ruffed grouse is one of the world's youngest game birds. I don't mean that the species is young, but that the history is. History is always human. The first book on American upland game (published in 1783) failed even to mention ruffed grouse; the anonymous author lived in New York city and hunted nearby for heath hens,



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with some mention of bobwhites, snipe, and woodcock. Serious ruffed-grouse hunting started on the east coast late in the nineteenth century -- about the time when Americans on the west coast started hunting pheasants. According to a book by S.T. Hammond, even many easterners still did not think that the grouse deserved game-bird status in 1898.

Scotty Chapman is a friend who grew up in New York State back when some ruffed grouse were still fool-hens. In 1917, he tells me, Adirondack birds would sit in trees and gawk at men. Down in the Oriskany Creek farmland of central New York, however, the grouse had learned to avoid a boy sneaking along a rail fence with a shotgun. They were game birds now.

And by then, Burton Spiller was hunting grouse in New England. In 1935 he would publish Grouse Feathers. It was (as near as I can make out) the book that gave the sport its myth. Even before the book, he had begun to reach a wide audience through Field & Stream, and by 1967, he had done many articles and two more books on grouse. Spiller knew how to write.

The grouse tradition continued to make up in intensity what it lacked in age. William Harnden Foster's New England Grouse Shooting, published in 1942, is for me (and I am not alone) what the Koran is for Muslims: the language of paradise. The prophet Foster showed how life ought to be organized, once and forever. There are a few other game birds as good as the ruffed grouse



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but, in my biased opinion, there is no other with so powerful a myth.

Another man who created a myth -- Sigmund Freud -- wrote that "the only happiness is the satisfaction of a childhood wish." No one persuaded me, as a child, to wish for money, but my grandmother boosted me to the window of our cabin in Minnesota and pointed out a brood of "partridges" chasing grasshoppers at the edge of the clearing. I could go right back to that spot. I think I could find the place where, with my .22 rifle, I shot <sup>a partridge</sup> ~~one~~ ~~and took it home~~ for Mom to cook. I could, but would not, take you to the place in New Hampshire where I shot <sup>the</sup> ~~my~~ <sup>one</sup> ~~first partridge~~ flying, under the guidance of William N. Bates. He was my mentor in English as well as bird hunting, and there was some conflict between the disciplines. The English teacher had to point out that we were really hunting grouse, and I had to abandon an emotional investment in partridge stocks. It cost enough to make me more careful with words. I kept after the birds, though. By the 1980s, most grouse in the mid-Atlantic were so wild that I was counting flushes, not birds for dinner.

Eden moves around. In the year 5000 B.C., it may have been located where the Euphrates ran down to the sea. Some 6900 years later, Adam hunted grouse in New Hampshire while Eve sun-bathed by the pond in a cover that I would come to know, later, as the Oaklands. By my time, there were just memories of paradise when



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the sugar-maples turned red. Eden had paused for Spiller and Foster, then swung on like the path of an eclipse. I caught up to a corner of it on a Minnesota logging-road and am searching now on a shoulder of the Rocky Mountains. The grouse family must love the high west, because Montana has six species.

Some of the ruffed grouse I hunt now as innocent as their relatives in the Adirondacks back in 1917. Most, however, have learned a thing or two. Perhaps they are about like those of the northeastern farm-country early in the century: wary, but still willing to hold for a pup who is, I am sure, as wild as William Harnden Foster's English pointers. My Rocky Mountain high is the same as the New England kind, too.

There is never enough time to hunt ruffed grouse anywhere. You cannot stretch the season at game farms or even by flying around the world. My totem bird hates travel and does not suffer pens gladly. The ruffed grouse is only here, only now, and only for folks who work for their shots. Maybe that's why Huck and I were alone on the mountain yesterday.

I knew that it was time to turn back when light poured over my shoulders. This is part of the autumn truce. For half an hour just before evening, the sun is allowed to fill the gap between clouds and mountains, turning the world as bright as it ever gets. On our way down the mountain, Huck hunted as if he might never have another chance to find a grouse. I coasted. The



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sun's rays were so strong and flat that I could almost swim home in them. The valley before me had been settled just a century earlier, but in this light it had the look of an old painting with varnish yellowing and cracked. I drifted to the center of the picture, where a river ran down toward the sea.

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woodcock visible. Eden had swung on like the path of an eclipse. I caught up to a corner of it in the Minnesota birches and am searching now in the Rocky Mountains.

There are birds out here that have still not heard gunfire. They look puzzled when you shake their tree, but when they do decide to flush you jerk your gun up and go bang-bang-damn, as with grouse anywhere. What surprised me was the discovery that even the better-educated birds hold as tight as woodcock. That's before heavy snows, when the ground cover provides good concealment -- so good that, at first, those draws winding down from the mountains seemed empty of birds. They would not flush for a human and my old dog Trooper had lost his nose. Then Huck found his.

Some friends have followed the path of virtue with more courage than I. Bill Horn bought a grouse-strain setter pup even when warned that she might take four years to settle down. During an entire mid-Atlantic season, as I recall, he did not fire a shot -- because she was not yet pointing staunchly. In the end she rewarded him. My part of the country, however, is the free world's leading producer of burrs; the Department of Agriculture must subsidize them. Setters have silky hair designed for harvesting burrs and, other things being equal, it is more rewarding to pluck a grouse than a dog. Perhaps Mr. Foster would understand. Huckleberry is a German shorthair who might not be



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cautious enough back east, but knows what to do with grouse in 1917.

The one that served as a prop for Huckleberry's drama was grey-phase, not red, and smaller than the eastern birds. My Rocky Mountain high, however, was as big as any other kind. There is never enough time to hunt ruffed grouse and you cannot stretch the season at game farms or even by flying around the world. My totem bird does not suffer pens gladly and hates travel. The ruffed grouse is only here, only now, and only for folks who hike miles between shots. No wonder Huck and I were alone on the mountain.

Before long, snow would sift over leaves and feathers, but today the clouds and the mountains kept their truce. I knew it was time to turn back when the gap between them filled with setting sun. The world turned as bright as it ever gets. Huck hunted hard on the way down, trying not to waste a moment of daylight. I coasted. The sun's rays were so strong and flat that a man could almost swim home in them. The valley before me was settled scarcely a century ago, but in this light it had the look of an old painting with varnish yellowing and cracked. I drifted to the center of the picture, where a river wound down toward the sea.