

About 885 words

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#### ESCAPING GRAVITY

Yesterday we took our youngest bird dogs for a run -- Al's white setters and my brown shorthair, all bouncy and female and shiny of eye, more enthusiasm among the three of them than any dozen rodeo cowgirls and less mass than one robust Labrador retriever. To these pups, life was not a weighty matter.

Al and I enjoy house dogs (even lap dogs on a winter's night) but the pampering has not confused them as to life's larger purpose. They'd rather hunt than eat and we'd rather chase around with them than do anything else that's legal in February. The best alternative would be dibbling nymphs along the bottom of a stream and hooking a few trout, but no-kill hunting is a faster sport by some thirty miles per hour.



We released the pups on an empty section (which is a square mile, for those of you who are spatially deprived) and there we humans hiked along earthbound, conversing. Al would ask me if I'd seen his Peach or Thumper lately, and I would ask him if he'd spotted my Tess on her last fly-by.

The land we circumnavigated did not have much cover -- just enough grass over near the stubble to hold one covey of Hungarian partridges. Peach picked up their scent from fifty yards, slowed, stopped, and raised her tail decisively. Tess came in at an angle and pointed without seeing Peach. Thumper, age five months, saw Peach and backed. (Al actually trains his pups instead of just turning them loose and hoping for the best, like some of his friends.)

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When Tess realized that this was not really her covey, she sneaked in and flushed it. I picked her up, stood her on point again, and gave her a lecture on stealing another dog's find, which may account for what happened next.

Tess made a long cast. A rigorously impartial observer might have called it running off, but I think she just wanted to prove that she too could produce game and, for all I know, she might even have tried to point that fox. Besides, how was she to know that she wasn't a whippet? Puppies can't read pedigrees.

If you have visited the site of Custer's last stand, you will have some idea of the terrain -- ragged draws and gentle bowls and steep rounded ridges. (Whoever called this landscape "plains" was plainly daft.) I ran up the highest knob and tootled



my whistle, to which Tess reacted as if I were shouting tallyho. Her blur and that of her quarry nearly merged, sepia streak chasing ruddy stripe. He was a big, speedy, dog-fox, accustomed to running from coyotes (which treat foxes as Crazy Horse treated Custer).

In principle, Tessie's high spirits did not bother me. Any pointer pup worth its salt will chase anything that will run, and any owner of such a pup will have to help it kick the habit. I knew how to do that. The problem was that Tess was winning the race and might get torn up by her fox, who certainly knew more than she did about fighting. Speed was the only violence in her, anyhow. She yipped like the puppy she was, wanting a romp, not a kill.

Nothing you have seen on the ground approaches the fluidity of this chase. No motorcycle is so agile, no skater so fast. Coyote and Roadrunner are fun to watch in the cartoons, I suppose, because they do what no real-life terrestrial can imitate. To picture Tess and Fox accurately, you must go airborne. You must imagine a Cooper's hawk at inhuman speed, twisting hot after a quail.

Al and I had a private exhibition as our streakers used up a few minutes and a great deal of space. They would emerge on a ridge, vanish down the far side, course up the bottom of a draw, and reappear in seconds on a hill distant by hundreds of yards. Tess avoided the prickly-pear cactus as easily as Fox. He doubled around a tall sagebrush that interrupted her line of sight for a



few seconds, but his scent was head-high and easy enough to follow.

The crisis came when Fox's lungs began to let him down. Taking me as the lesser risk, he ran across a flat, open field in front of me, heading for the road and hoping to time his crossing so that a car would hit the nemesis closing in on him. (I don't know that, but Foxes in tales are always sly.)

Tess stopped -- not because of an attack of conscience but because she could no longer pretend her duty away, not with me standing right there tweeting at her, so instead she pretended to be contrite and I pretended to be angry and neither of us believed a bit of it.

James Joyce called them epiphanies -- things you hunt with every step but find seldom and purely by accident. The chase ran again in my sleep last night, little brown dog winding over endless pale contours with perfect grace, but this time I saw the whole show with no ridges in the way. Tess and I had both escaped gravity.

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