

George Newtown
Et in Arcadia

“The trappers stand around talking guy talk with their hands shoved deep in their pockets, their hats tipped back on their heads.”

—Sherry Simpson

1

“To keep down mosquitoes this year, be sure to empty out the saucers under all your plant pots.” NPR droned on as I stared through the streaked window at the lake, miles wide and inches deep, confirming forty days of rain on the clay bottomland south of Shreveport. Clumps of fire ants floated on the surface like batter for red velvet cakes. The only visible landform was an odd mini-Ararat in the nearest paddock where my heavy-laden favorite broodmare, Handsome Molly, trudged in circles as if threshing Mesopotamian corn. On my 1 a.m. check I would discover her newborn foal there wrapped in a ghostly raincoat—dead, for all I could tell, until I put my hand on his slippery flank and felt him quiver. I tore at the amniotic sac and watched my future dressage horse Fred take his first breath.

That was 1991. Eventually Barbara and I moved our herd upstream to the “Louisiana Alps.” Even here in the hills, however, water didn’t respect its boundaries forever. Our stock pond unexpectedly flowed over its dam. It turned out a beaver had plugged the runoff culvert. Once Jeff, our off-again-on-again hired man, had finished tamping the restored earthwork, he took a swig of his Coke, splashed diesel on the beaver lodge, and lit a match. I surprised myself when I failed to intervene. *Well, did she have to gnaw off the willows that shimmered there like a corps de ballet?* When he offered to set a trap, though, I called him off.

A month later, following another dark weather report, I removed another blockage of matted branches, grasses, and mud from the culvert. I hunched and hauled and prodded and nearly pitched headfirst into the cinnamon-colored water teeming with curious minnows. After a sweaty half hour I propped myself on my hoe to watch the runoff spread into the swampland beyond. As part of the species that foresees its own death, I alone realized that blocking the pipe risked destroying the pond, but did that mean my vision should trump the beaver’s? She merely heeded her evolutionary mandate—deepening the nursery for her kits—whereas I flailed about for some legacy beyond merely siring our two children. After radical prostate surgery had rendered me impotent, I had to wonder what a standoff with a beaver would reveal about my place in this man’s world.

2

From a little research, I learned that *Castor canadensis* has a long history of providing American men with a measure of their manliness. Midwestern re-enactors still don furs at annual rendezvous celebrations to honor the fabled self-sufficiency of frontier trappers. Real flesh-and-blood trappers, however—in the brief era (1825-1840) of the original rendezvous of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company—happily exchanged a year’s labor for a week of rotgut whiskey and “female services” before returning to the tent cities where they lived with up to

sixty of their fellows. Few would ever retire their debt to the companies that grubstaked them. So, rather than highlighting the individualism of mountain men, the beaver actually celebrated the entrepreneurs who orchestrated the international trade in pelts.

Admirers of John Jacob Astor would eventually install beaver-shaped ceramic tiles in New York's Astor Place subway station to celebrate the mogul whose 1810 search for a fur trade route had opened the Oregon Trail. Ironically, by 1849 Astor Place became the site of mounting class tensions. The B'hoys of New York, a ragtag collection of Irish immigrants and native-born know-nothings, besieged the Astor Place opera house, where bluebloods applauded English actor Charles Macready's *Macbeth*. The working men outside, who championed the rawer histrionics of American actor Edwin Forrest in the same role at the nearby Bowery Theater, pitched fragments of concrete and took volleys of bullets from police. That night twenty-two men died.

Today Astor might point with pride to his role as job creator on both sides of the Pond, but the exploitation of trappers was typical in the industry he oversaw. The commercial preference for "greasy" over "dry" pelts encouraged Indians to wear their coats hair-side-in and then barter them away for firewater. Underpaid European workers, usually women, removed the fur in the first step toward making felt, the raw material for the top hats that marked gentlemen of means. Continental hat makers were skilled craftsmen, but a process that included soaking the fur in a toxic compound of mercury cut short their unfortunate careers and turned "mad as a hatter" into a cliché.

As it happened, the same chemical, used in misguided medical treatment, would hound nineteenth century syphilitics like Flaubert, who observed ruefully that he'd spent one night with Venus and the rest of his life with mercury. In both haberdashery and prostitution, enterprising men extracted a saleable commodity from an abundant resource and incorporated it into a sure-fire business plan. After all, what male could resist embracing tactile pleasures that confirmed his alpha status before other men? Indeed, much of the imagery of hat making and whoring seems interchangeable: in order to tune the fibers into an interlocking web, the hatter, perched above the carded beaver fluff, plucked rhythmically on a long phallic rod resembling a one-stringed cello bow; the resulting *batt* attained proper stiffening *via* dousing or "planking" with beer dregs and wine lees; still ahead lay shaping into tall cylinders (not to mention the loving attention represented by blocking, waterproofing, steaming, ironing, brushing, and trimming, which included sewn-in linings). Items so profligate with human capital ably separated men of means from their inferiors.

Beavers and prostitutes remained outside the normal channels of redress, but eventually some nineteenth century workers would protest their exploitation. Most, however, would simply misdirect their resentments toward other victims of the economic system. The younger brothers of the B'hoys, for example, showed their displeasure over the Civil War draft by lynching Negroes in the streets of New York—attacking the reason, they thought, for their conscription; meanwhile, profiteers sold the army shoddy boots and hired mercenaries to replace their sons on the battlefield. Things haven't changed much. Even though George W. Bush presided over the largest transfer of wealth since the Gilded Age, I couldn't convince my horse shoer during Bush's 2004 re-election campaign that the \$900 scammed by the latest welfare queen didn't compare with the \$9 billion unaccounted for that year in Iraq. Like Civil War blacks dragged from New York streetcars, nickel-and-dime welfare cheats posed a clearer

threat to Joe Average than the fatter cats profiteering via no-bid contracts and industrial kickbacks.

Alongside establishment families like the Bushes, who made their money manipulating armaments in WWI, immigrant entrepreneurs too would similarly finance society marriages and presidential bids—the Kennedys through bootlegged liquor. The underclass didn't disappear, however, when the sons of Ireland abandoned it on their way up. Seven generations after the ancestor of Jeff our hired man arrived as a gentleman from Essex, Jeff's parents would be a pimp and a madam. Now their forty-year-old son, looking enough like a leathery Brad Pitt to attract a string of grateful menopausal women in bars, has refused to obtain a driver's license—lest the alimony police pick up his trail—but insists on driving his girlfriends' cars even though he's been pulled over on his third offense, when the cops uncovered yet another controlled substance in the trunk.

"They're just not our kind of people," said our neighbor as Jeff emerged from jail to find that his latest wife (the third he'd actually married) had abandoned their son and followed her gold-toothed crack supplier to Houston. But I know I'm no better. In my day-job as an English teacher I rationalize selling unsolicited textbooks, fully aware that Jeff would serve time if he fenced objects that didn't belong to him. I offer penance through providing him with an off-the-books wage, but I can't afford the health insurance that might help him deal with his anger management. So I watch his resentments trickle down to his son—who bullies his classmates and who by his thirteenth birthday, Jeff announces with parental pride, has already fathered a baby. Periodic fines for Jeff's public fisticuffs over women will permit the Bossier Parish Police Jury to repave our streets. Meanwhile, dark-skinned immigrants compete for jobs that, if Jeff were willing to accept so low a wage, could be his. He remains valuable only as a consumer. Whether he snorts coke or swigs Coke, he underwrites dealers happy to part a fool from his money.

A poster boy for natural selection, Jeff has spread his seed admirably; only the local abortion clinic saved him from explaining away his confused relation to the fetus in the belly of his stepson's ex-wife. But he ranks well below those deemed fittest to survive in the social Darwinism of capitalist America—those A-List achievers who generate the most wealth through mastering the greatest resources. If Jeff ever recognized his place in the underbelly of the American dream, we might have more to fear than the specter of Arab terrorists. But he grew up believing along with the rest of us that, like Jed Clampett, he would someday unload a moving van next door to Bill Gates. As Joe the horse shoer said—before driving off to vote again for Dubya—he didn't want to see taxes on the wealthy because he didn't want to pay them when he got rich.

What prospects did Joe or Jeff or I ever have that an "eager beaver" work ethic could land us on streets paved with gold? Better to invest in a Powerball ticket. I kind of wish I had, given my success in the prostate lotto—both the initial shocker that I figured among the 2% of men afflicted before sixty and the eventual good fortune to join the 20% who survive seven years after a Gleason 8 predator has already invaded a neighboring lymph node—well, my doctor and my wife are right; I should feel lucky to be alive.