

North Country Notebook



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I almost killed my neighbor's cat the other day, and that was dumb, because, as Steady Eddy observed, all the poor cat was doing was being a cat.

Actually, I didn't lift a finger against the cat. When I saw it padding across the backyard with a limp chipmunk in its mouth, I thought murderous thoughts, and, for a moment, my gorge rose a little.

"Gorgeous George," Steady says of those moments.

The cat had killed the chipmunk, and so, I wanted to kill the cat.

Now, if the cat had killed a mouse, would I have wanted to kill the cat?

I had a nice cup of coffee and let the ruffled waters between my ears unruffle a little and settle into a peaceful, albeit shallow, pool.

Dynie would have loved my dilemma.

"You can play," he used to say, "or you can umpire. Only you can't play and umpire at the same time."

Judge not, Somebody said, that ye be not judged.

Steady says that sounds an awful lot like Beans Reardon.

Man is man, Robert Ardrey once wrote in defining the hunting hypothesis, *because for millions upon millions of evolving years, we killed for a living.*

To that you can append that Cat is cat for the same reason. Not to mention Dog is dog. And Shark is shark.

"Killing for food and spiritual reward," wrote Dennis Olson, a naturalist at the Environmental Learning Center in Isabella, Minnesota, "is the way of the Hopi. It is my way."

Olson states that there are two kinds of kills: one dulls, the other sensitizes. The former, he argues, is tragedy. The latter is a sacred celebration, as old as time.

"Every living being," he insists, "kills life. Some first-hand."

I felt as proprietary about that chipmunk as Johnny Conn always felt about the grouse in his beloved Wolf River country. Johnny carried a pistol in his glove compartment, and when he spotted a stray cat loose along the wooded roadsides, he'd screech to a stop and shoot if he could.

Domestic cats raised hell with the grouse, he said. Their domesticity was a thin veneer, and they reverted to the wild in a hurry.

Just like everybody else, Steady says.

In the heart of every man, the French say, there sleeps a little pig.

The truth is that the chipmunk is not my property. The grouse are not Johnny Conn's property. Indeed, the very land on which we live and hold deeds is not our land.

The land owns us, the poet put it, not the other way round. We are walking on eternal ground.

It's a hard lesson to learn, but learn it we must. We really don't run things down here, and every now and then Something will remind you of that—an earthquake—or a volcano erupting—or a cat killing a chipmunk.

"Purge your minds," biochemist Dr. Robert S. de Ropp warns us, "of all this 'conquering nature' nonsense. You can no more conquer nature than you can stop the rotation of the earth. You are part of nature, an integral element of the biosphere on which you depend for every breath you take, every morsel of food you eat, and for almost all your impressions."

I remembered the time long ago when we had cats, and the Siamese had brought a live chipmunk to the back door and seemed not to care as I urged the chipmunk to flee. When it wouldn't, I held the quivering little body in my hands and was literally *willing* it to live. It was unscratched, unmarked, the skin unbroken, the flesh unbloodied, and yet it was dying.

The central nervous system—the main computer—had read the situation, projected no escape: *terminal*, and was shutting down the systems. The chipmunk was in shock, the eyes glazing over, the circuits disconnecting.

The look in the Siamese's eyes was mocking, patronizing, almost unnerving: *Of the three of us, that look said, you are the poorest creature, man. You do not accept what simply must be accepted.*

"Damn you," I cursed the cat, and it seemed the cat shrugged.

We are infinitesimally small cogs in a very large machine, de Ropp says, and because we are very numerous, very greedy, and very clever at devising gadgets, we can, to some extent, damage the balance of this machine with consequences that may be disastrous for ourselves. Probably, after we have followed in the footsteps of the dinosaurs, the biosphere will balance itself again. We shall hardly upset the ecology as much as one Ice Age. In thinking we can depopulate the earth, we exaggerate our powers of destruction, the biosphere will destroy us before we destroy it.

After the neighbor's cat passed out of sight with its prize, it was only a moment until the howling began. Proud. Triumphant. The hunter, home from the hill.

I took my coffee and walked to the woodpile. There, perched at the very top, was a chipmunk. Alive. Watching.

We just hung out with each other for a while, and then, without hurry and slick as silk, it vanished into the pile.