

## **Killing Rattlesnakes**

The last rattlesnake I killed, the yellow-eyed, triangle-headed serpent coiled, getting ready to kill our cat, so I grabbed the shovel and cut its head off. Andrea and I ate that snake.

Before that summer on NimsheW Ridge, when we ate the rattlesnake, I bid on contracts and did blister-rust control work in the National Forests of northern California's mountains, simple, quiet work. With hand tools, I dug out currant and gooseberry bushes, intermediate hosts for blister rust, a disease that kills pine trees. Digging out the bushes interrupted the spread of blister rust and protected pine trees and the lumber they would become.

My crew and I camped as close to our work as we found good water. Everyone else slept on cots, up off the ground in tents, but I slept on a pad on the ground, out in the open. I wanted to smell, hear, and see the outdoor world, and a tent cut me off from that. When it rained, I pulled a tarp over my sleeping bag.

We named the years after the natural cycles we saw as we worked in the mountains, far from human habitation, spring, summer, and early fall, the year of coyotes, the year of meat bees, and the year of rattlesnakes.

People call the yellow and black hornets yellow jackets or meat bees. They land on meat, carve out a piece, and fly away with it. If the meat is human and alive, they still try to harvest some of it.

Meat bees nest underground. We used rabbit-eared picks and uprooted ribes bushes. Sometimes, we unintentionally dug into yellow jacket nests. When we heard the high-pitched, angry song of yellow jackets' rapid wings, it was usually too late, but we dropped everything and tried to outrun the hornets. They hit at terrific speed and stung on impact.

The Sierras supported myriad yellow jackets the summer of meat bees, in the forest, in mountain meadows, along the clean, rushing streams, in camp. Biting food without biting a hornet was sometimes difficult. Trapping a hornet under clothing or brushing against one became a violently painful mistake. Yellow jackets sting repeatedly, and the last sting hurts as much

as the first and gives as painful aftereffects.

We declared war on yellow jackets. We swatted them. We trapped them in jars of soapy water, where they drowned. We waited until many yellow jackets gathered in the garbage pit, and we threw in gasoline and ignited it. Diaphanous wings burned from hornets who survived the explosion, and they became easy prey for swatting. Sometimes the explosion in the garbage pit burned hair and eyebrows and knocked the match thrower backward. That fit our idea of entertainment. All the diabolical methods we invented to kill meat bees didn't dent the population, but we kept trying.

The next year, the year of rattlesnakes, we didn't see many meat bees, but we saw rattlesnakes. At first, we killed every rattlesnake we saw.

That was also the venison summer. We had just finished winter and early spring in college, and we were broke. We ate white-tailed deer until we completed our first contract and the slow wheels of government turned out our first check. I killed four deer to feed everyone camped on the mountain with me. No one else in my crew would kill a deer. "Too pretty," they said.

I said, "You eat the pretty deer I kill. You shoot ground squirrels and leave them to rot, but you won't kill a deer to feed yourselves."

My anger increased as the number of deer I killed increased. I talked to my crew. I said, "I'm going to kill another deer, because I have to eat, and I have to feed my family. The meat won't keep until we can eat it all, as hot as it is, so I'll share. I can't pay you money to buy groceries until we get a check from the Forest Service, so I'll provide food. But the next time someone kills an animal for sport and leaves it to rot, the killer goes down the road."

Phil and I worked through brush around the face of a bluff thrusting up from the canyon slope. Ponderosa pine trees, Douglas fir trees, whitethorn and manzanita brush, wild roses, pine grass, and ribes bushes grew above Muggins Creek. We jumped away from whitethorn bushes when a rattlesnake's dry, loud rattle buzzed through clean mountain air. I saw the snake coiled, tail straight up in the air and vibrating, under a bush. Phil started around me, ready to kill the snake.

I said, "If you kill it, you eat it, and I'm not going to help you kill it or gut it or skin it or cook it or eat it."

"We kill rattlesnakes. We've always killed rattlesnakes. Everybody kills rattlesnakes."

“If you kill it and don’t eat it, pack your gear and head for low country. I’ll pay you when we get the first check.”

“Aren’t you afraid it’ll bite you next time we come through here?”

“Not very. Rattlesnakes aren’t aggressive. Give them room, and they’ll get out of your way.” I walked on around the bluff, looking for ribes bushes. Phil left the snake and followed me down the canyon.

Rattlesnakes’ beautiful colors of green, tan, yellow, and black dull when they die.

The snake’s venom is an enzyme that starts digestion of its prey before the snake swallows it whole. Rattlesnakes don’t waste venom in self-defense unless they feel cornered. Snakes blend with their background, but once I decided I was through killing rattlesnakes, I always saw them before I walked close enough to threaten them.

Everyone on the crew went back to school in the valley. I kept working. College could wait.

Every night, when I slid down into my sleeping bag and zipped it up, I thought of rattlesnakes. A rattlesnake might crawl into my sleeping bag with me or coil beside my sleeping bag, where I would disturb it when I moved. My worst nights, I lay awake too long, afraid, my imagination gone wild, thinking of snakes everywhere. Does a snake make a sliding sound when it crawls across the ground, or is that a small breeze approaching me in the dark through the mountain forest?

It would have been easy to get a folding cot and use it to sleep up off the ground, but I never did.

I called Sharon and told her I was coming home to the valley for a few days.

When I got there, all the members of the crew were there. Don was there, and Phil, and David, hovering. Sharon said, “You’re moving out.”

“This wasn’t exactly what I expected.”

“I don’t care what you expected. You’re leaving. I’m staying. Shawn and Michele are staying.”

I looked at Don, Phil, and David, waiting, and I laughed.

As if a window opened and let in light, I understood the way Don looked at me. I understood the way Don looked at Sharon, the way Don looked at me when I approached Sharon and implored her to listen to me.

Awareness blossomed like a complex flower opening larger and larger in intense sunlight.

I felt despicably stupid, that I hadn’t seen what was going

on between Don and Sharon, that had been so obvious all summer, that was glaringly obvious now. I also knew, without anyone telling me, that Sharon had told David, Phil, and Don she expected violence from me. They had come to protect her, to protect my children from violence. I felt violent realignment of almost everything I thought I understood.

I couldn't analyze what was happening to me as it happened. I didn't know then that profound change came to me that day in the small, brick house in the Sacramento Valley's hot summer sun. A long time afterward, I understood that that day, I lost all naivete. I never again looked at reality and missed clues because I wanted reality to be different from what it actually was.

That day, underlying the turmoil of emotions and thoughts that roared through me with all the sudden changes in my life, most without my intention or consent, with all my sudden realizations, my beginning calmness and acceptance that this moment had been decided for me surprised me. I sorted through my possessions.

I said, "I can't deal with all of it now. I don't have anywhere to store stuff. I can't take all of it back to the mountains with me."

Don said, "Take it all now. Clear all of your stuff out of this house before you leave."

I stepped closer to Don. He flinched. I imagined starting from the ground with an uppercut to Don's chin, the hardest blow I had delivered to anything ever. In my imagination, I lived every detail of that violent motion. Sharon stepped over and stood close to Don. Her eyes burned with excitement. I looked away from her, at Don again.

Even as I imagined hitting Don, the knowledge that I wouldn't turn my thoughts into action and smash my fist into Don's face underlay and threaded through my thoughts. Tenuous as it might be in its beginning, my own script, of non-violence, of a peaceful existence, upstaged what Sharon had written for me.

I said, "Tell you what, Don, you think I have no power in this situation, and mostly, you're right. I don't have much power. But this power I do have. I owe you about eighteen hundred dollars from the lots we just finished. You think you can do anything you want, and it's okay, because you've convinced yourself I'm evil and you're good, but if you want to see the money I owe you, you respect whatever I own here, and you give me time to finish my work in the mountains, then time

to get someplace arranged for my stuff and come and get it. Now, you glow with victory, but don't push too hard, and don't believe too strongly that good has triumphed, because what you're doing is slimy stuff, and you know it is."

I drove back up the mountain after dark. I drove into camp after midnight. The hurrying stream ran black and noisy in darkness. Shadows behind the trees from my headlights threatened dense, unknown blackness. I shut off the engine and the headlights, and starlight and light from the waxing sliver of moon changed blackness to greyness. Threatening shadows resolved to my familiar camp, simply there, neutral.

I got ready for bed in starlight and moonlight, slid down into my sleeping bag and pulled it tight around my shoulders.

I slept late and woke to sun shining down into my camp through tall pine trees. I didn't work that first day, but I started back to work the next morning. My emotions ran wild, and sometimes I felt desperately lonely, but I knew, wherever my life was going, I was going to need money. Finishing the contracts was the best way to get it.

Sometimes, I felt nearly as crazy and moved to violence as Sharon said I was. I daydreamed I lined Don up in the crosshairs of a scope on a high-powered rifle and squeezed the trigger.

Gerrit drove down from Oregon and worked with me four days. We sat around the fire late. I talked about Don and Sharon. Without trying it out, I wasn't sure if talking clarified my thoughts and directions or just held me where I was and slowed my progress out of this time.

Gerrit said, "Why don't we take Don down to the river and castrate him and roast his testicles? A fool and his testicles are soon parted. Mountain oysters make some good eating."

I laughed. I saw the scene in vivid detail against the night around our campfire. In my vision, the river ran quietly, with deep, dangerously violent currents. Don moaned and cursed, tied to a tree and bleeding in the light from the fire Gerrit and I squatted by. We roasted small pieces of meat on sharpened willow skewers over the fire.

I hadn't yet pulled all my thoughts into harmony with what I began to understand; I willingly made my last exit. With violence, without violence, no matter what I did, it was over. My role in Sharon's life was finished, played to the end. I had no power in her life, in Don's life, in the plans they made together. I walked away from everything they were and from the world they lived in, and now that I was walking, I knew it

was a good journey for me to make and a good time for me to make it.

Alone in the mountain forests, I asked a question, "If I walk through this world without aggression, will the world attack me? Is the natural world vicious or gentle?"

Lying flat against the earth, exposed to whatever might crawl into my sleeping bag, I became part of the earth and the night around me. I listened to every sound. I heard a small breeze. I heard deer browse the grass close to camp. They tore grass free from the meadow and chewed it, moved a few steps, and tore grass from the meadow again. I heard something climb a tree just beyond camp, something small, maybe a flying squirrel. I heard animals call in the night. I learned what animals made sounds of the night. Odors of the wilderness drifted past me, and I identified some of them.

All the rest of that summer, I intruded into the wilderness with my work, my camp, my sleeping bag. Every night, I surrendered to everything around me. Nights of my deepest fear, I surrendered my life to rattlesnakes, to everything that lived on the mountain, and I slipped into sleep.

When the Forest Service inspector drove up to my camp to inspect my work in Muggins Creek Canyon, he stepped down from his green, government truck and asked me, "How many snakes have you killed now?"

"Eleven. Same as last time you came up."

"What'd you do, run out of snakes?"

"No. I've been seeing as many as we ever did. I just don't kill them anymore. I saw eight on this lot, but I didn't kill any of them."

"Thanks a lot. I have to walk through all that brush."

"I know. I figure it keeps everybody on their toes. You walk through all that dense brush, and you get so you see with your feet, right through your boots down into the brush, and what you see is snakes, snakes, rattlesnakes everywhere."

I slept on the ground that night, after my work passed inspection, and I answered a question that rose inside me in a place of awareness and action that preceded words. I watched brilliant stars move across the sky above me as the earth turned. I saw flying squirrels, nocturnal animals, launch from one tall pine tree and glide through the air to another. I saw a great horned owl, silent as shadow, drift above me on wide wings, hunting the night. The eastern sky turned gold, and I watched the moon rise above forested ridges. Some time during that night, sounds, visions, and smells of the night became dreams

as I slipped into sleep, totally free of any concern about what could happen to me as I lay against the ground in the wild forest.

I worked the rest of that summer alone. I walked into the autumn of owls. I saw more owls in three months than I'd seen in twenty-seven years. Big owls. Little owls. Some of them quite close. I saw owls I could identify from books, and I saw some I never could identify.

Nights and mornings turned cool. I worked along the face of a ridge. Deciduous trees and brush showed the first colors of autumn. I looked up.

A great grey owl stood on a low limb in a ponderosa pine tree. I walked closer. The owl looked huge. The owl watched me. I said, "What's up, owl? What are you doing for yourself these days?"

I looked at the large, almost furry-looking great grey owl for a long time. I spoke to it, and the owl looked down at me. Nothing I did bothered the owl. After several minutes, I realized another owl stood on the ground at the base of the tree, its large greyness blending with its background, but its huge yellow eyes fixed on me.

I said, "Wow, owl. I'm standing here fifteen feet from you, and all this time, I didn't see you."

The owl spread huge wings, lifted itself through the air on soft, silent wings, and settled on the branch beside the other owl.

I watched the owls for a long time. I told them everything that was on my mind. After a long time of silence, I said, "Nice meeting you, owls. Have a long and rich existence. Watch out for people."

I walked away, around the hill, looking for ribes bushes. Two great grey owls perched in a ponderosa pine tree and watched me walk away. Autumn faded toward winter, and the leaves on deciduous trees and bushes fell to the ground, and the work season ended. Nights turned too cold to camp out with the equipment I had. Snow storms brushed the mountains with new whiteness. I drove to the valley, disposed of most of my material possession and went in all the new directions living took me.

I haven't killed a deer since the venison summer. Several years after the venison summer, I killed one rattlesnake.

I sat on a wooden chair in the cabin on Coutolenc Ridge, playing my guitar and building a song, early one summer morning. Andrea called from outside. "Do you want to see a big

rattlesnake?"

I walked out. A rattlesnake, a beautiful animal, varying shades of green, yellow, tan, and black, stretched across the driveway and watched Andrea.

Our half-grown cat attacked the snake, playing, but the snake took it seriously and struck at her twice, then started to coil for some serious cat-killing effort. "Get away, you stupid cat." I couldn't stop her nor catch her, so I grabbed the shovel and cut off the snake's head. For the first time, it buzzed its rattles.

I said, "I don't think I would have wanted it to live here anyway. Might make me jumpy, wondering where it was when I walked around on a dark night. Now that I've killed it, we'll have to eat it."

I scooped the snake's head into the shovel. The snake's fully alert, bright yellow eyes, with black, vertical slits of pupils, focused on me. It showed me its fangs. I buried the head below the fence.

The snake's body writhed as if alive. I reached for it several times before I said, "I can't handle it. Can you do it?"

"I think so. Let me have your knife." Andrea gutted it, skinned it, and cut it into five pieces. Then I handled it, though I jumped when the pieces flexed. I put the cast-iron lid on the frying pan to hold them in. "Hard to convince this one it's dead."

We pulled the flesh from the bones with our teeth. I said, "I've heard people say it tastes like chicken, but I don't think so. What do you think it tastes like?"

"Rattlesnake. Good, tough rattlesnake."

Summer cooled down, and leaves turned many colors and fell to the ground.

Eventually, Andrea went her own way in the world. I didn't want her to go, but I didn't yet know enough about myself, nor about the ways of the universe, to change everything that led to her going her way as I went mine.

My friends followed jobs that would pay for their living. Few of them kept in touch.

I followed mountains and forests and living away from cities more than I followed a concern for making a living. My values and priorities didn't fit the civilization around me, the consuming culture.

That was okay. It was the way it should be, for me. I didn't acquire many material possessions. I didn't make money beyond what I needed to meet immediate needs, and that makes

it tight now that so many years have gone by and I don't do much physical work anymore.

I stand on the earth. I walk on the earth. I lie down on the earth. The natural, wild world lives around me. I remember everything I learned those summers when I camped in the mountains and slept on the ground and wild, beautiful rattlesnakes crawled through my dreams.

I am at peace with the wild earth and with rattlesnakes alive and beautiful on the wild earth.