Six Mennonite Stories; or, the Plough and the Poet; or, What the Skunk Said

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A Skunk, and the Narrator's Childhood in Niagara

I remember, when I was four years old, a striped skunk that burrowed under the back of the barn on our farm in rural Niagara in southern Ontario. Striped skunks keep as many as a dozen burrows, and whenever they end the night's foraging, they sleep in the nearest burrow. Somehow one of those skunk dens landed in our farming backyard. My sister Kathy stepped out one spring morning to gather eggs for breakfast, and discovered a skunk caught in the wire of our chicken fence.

This business of imagination and writing—I don't know why the skunk shows up. Someone asks for a paper; and after two hours' muddle, there's a flash at the edge of my vision and a skunk steps forward. It's a lightning rod effect—I'll talk about the skunk. Though it makes no sense—I don't know what the skunk can tell me about Mennonites, or how the story will sound stretched for twenty minutes, in pitch or meter. It's a place to begin.

My family owned a fruit farm. Seven acres. Peaches, cherries, plums. Which we sold to the fruit market and canning factory. One row of Concord grapes, and a plot of vegetables. The barn of weathered board. Tall, with a gable roof. Green diamond shingles. Three lightning rods along the roof's peak. We kept a Jersey cow in that barn. For milk, cream, butter. We kept two sows and a boar. Piglets. I didn't think about where they came from suddenly. The piglets. Birth was a common event. So was death. Sometimes the sow rolled over in her sleep and we found her young dead in the morning. We kept a fattened calf and slaughtered it in fall. Father stuck it with a knife and hung it under the willow tree so the blood could drain. We kept a bay horse. Molly. Clydesdale cross. In those days we still farmed with horses.

We threw the manure from our livestock through a hatch in the wall of the barn onto a pile. Threw table scraps as well. The youngest of many, I mostly got the job. I see your nose twitch when I say the word "manure."

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Manure didn't smell as bad then as it does today. We hitched Molly to the stoneboat, loaded the manure, and spread it with our pitchforks in the orchard in fall.

When we bought that farm in 1950, I hadn't learned yet how to talk, and I don't remember anything about the purchase. Don't remember the questions my father and mother asked. Should we this? Should we that? Or how much we paid. Father had been a blacksmith on the prairies. He and Mom watched their savings shrivel as farmers bought factory equipment. We borrowed money for the farm. Some from the bank, some from aunts and uncles.

Wild Brush, and the Knowledge of Good and Evil

I don't remember what the farm looked like when we arrived, the house or barn. Though everyone agrees it was a terrible mess. When we bought that farm in 1950, there was still bush on the property. My father told me as a child that in the first two years he'd cleared the last wild brush off the back of our seven acres. Those few years and acres to separate me from the wild frontier. Mennonites and the environment. We're all thinking about the environment these days—is there enough environment left to save any of us at all.

That acre of remembered brush clattered in my imagination. I imagined foxes and white-tailed deer. Imagined wild turkeys wandering in from the story of the Mayflower. I didn't imagine skunks. Imagined oak, hickory, dogwood. Birch trees and drums. Imagined Huron, Iroquois roaming our orchard. I didn't have a fruit-farming bone in my body. In those early years I already experienced doubt about the benefits of fence, car, civilization. I wanted something wilder, untamed.

My father cleared the last wild brush. He had a debt to pay, children to feed. Rasp of a bucksaw. Blow of an axe. Rattling chain. Pull, Molly! Whoa, Molly! Eight hundred kilograms [1760 pounds] of horse heaving and farting. A gathering of live trees, he cut, and chopped, and Molly dragged them into a heap of drying tinder. And then the bonfire, leaves and branches crackling in the breeze. Fire song. A wretched kind of music. The bush was gone, and in its place we planted cherry trees.

Questions about Leg-Hold Traps, about the Bible

I notice how one image of skunk and chicken wire bumps a series of other images. The way dominoes fall in a row. I remember cow, barn, and their stories. Remember a patch of wild brush. Remember Molly, the feel of her skin. This collection of stories. But not quite stories either. They're splinters of story. I notice that memory comes in fragments. With only a few details attached. And thinking about the skunk, I see how little I do remember. Who really discovered the skunk? Was it Kathy? Had she gone to collect the morning's eggs? Who called the Humane Society?

Susan, my sister, when I phone her, tells how she braided the cow's twitching tail while Jake pulled rich Jersey milk into the pail. She doesn't remember the skunk. But Jake and Kathy do. New skunk images begin to emerge. The image of the leg-hold trap, for instance. That skunk caught in our fence because of a leg-hold trap clamped to her hind leg. I wonder now where the trap came from. How many kilometers had the skunk dragged it before appearing in our lives that morning? Had she dragged it from the neighbors? From the creek nearby? Or hauled it from another of her burrows? And suddenly, I wonder whether Father planted the trap near the manure pile behind our barn. Jake is quick to defend. He says, no, no!

We construct our lives from memories. And, much as we enjoy the cascade of images, talking to siblings about family history often causes trouble. Sometimes memory leads us where we'd rather not go. We notice how our stories have become misshapen. We remember the Bible and our God-given right to dominion. But we forget to ask about the rights of skunks. I don't think anyone in my family raised questions of morality in this case of human versus skunk.

You might feel surprised that a Bible enters the text here. The Bible held a prominent place in my childhood. We read from it every day at breakfast. A worn brown hardback. In German. I look up the English words now to make sure. . . . "and let them have dominion over all the earth." A memory of the creation story. Order out of chaos. To subdue the earth. Is that what we did on our seven-acre farm, practice dominion?

Bird Behavior, Scatterguns, the Wonders of Science

The wild brush from the farm in Niagara may have been chopped down and burned before I had memory or language, but the birds from that brush lived

on. I was keenly aware as a boy of the lives of birds around me. I remember orioles, nests hung in maple trees, and their splash of dazzling colour. Remember goldfinch, their undulating flight and call. And robin parents. The way they built their nests above light fixtures. Remember Barn Swallows that nested along the rafters in our barn. And after we bought the tractor. On days we hitched the tandem disk, the way Ring-billed Gulls gathered to feed on the turned soil. In spring kettles of raptors passed above while Father, Jake, and I worked in the orchard. While my father and Jake worked, and I stared into the sky.

The bush was gone. And in its place we planted cherry trees. Leaned their tender trunks into the northwest wind so they'd grow up straight. By the time I was six years old, I was up on a ladder summers picking cherries. I remember, in July, the mixed hordes of birds that settled in our fruiting trees for their evening feed. Eating our livelihood. Grackles gorging on our cherries. My father borrowed a shotgun and took a few shots one day. Hoping to end the chaos. But decided that the scatter of shot did more damage than the invading birds. That's what he said, the gun ruins more cherries than they do.

The golden age of pesticides. DDT. Parathion. Developed for use in the world wars, they were released in the 1950s as agricultural pesticides. And maybe that's what chased off the birds, or killed them. Springtime we hitched the sprayer to the tractor. We filled the sprayer tank with water. We dumped in bags of chemical. Chemical dust swirling. Father and I, we drove into the orchard to spray. We came home wet from the poison mist. We lived at the cutting edge of agriculture. Tractor, sprayer, crankshaft, pistons pounding. A song of industry and progress. Poison, and machine music.

A History of the Striped Skunk, Lots of Excitement

Skunks. They live in farming areas, mixed woods, cities. They're not afraid of humans. They feed heavily in fall to build reserves for winter. Any dark place underground will do for a den. They wake to mate in February. And after sixty days the kits are born. Skunks eat both plant and animal material. Nuts, roots, mice, frogs. They scavenge carcasses. They're reluctant to use their spray; it takes a long week to replenish. There's a popular notion that skunks can't spray if you lift them off the ground by their tails. Think carefully

before you try this. Research shows that skunks can spray no matter how or where you hold them. Getting rid of the smell? Tomato juice and hydrogen peroxide work.

The skunk's greatest natural predator is the Great Horned Owl. Owls have almost no sense of smell. Motor vehicles don't count as natural predators. Skunks, with their poor vision, are particularly vulnerable to road traffic. About half of skunk deaths in North America are caused by humans. Roadkill. Shooting. Poisoning.

We humans often associate the noun "skunk" with the verb "amble." I imagine a skunk on my street in Winnipeg. It ambles down the pavement. No hurry. Ambles five meters in one direction. Four in another. Curves to my boulevard. Sticks its nose under the root of an elm. Maybe a Junebug larva down there. It ambles on. Turns left. Stops to poke at my bergenias. No one knows ambling the way the skunk does. I wonder about this skunk. What does it remember as it wanders my street. Does it remember my bergenias? Does it notice the new cranesbill? What does it think, this skunk? Does it think about history, or justice? Does it think at all as it snuffles across my yard?

But I've wandered from the story I promised. A skunk had burrowed under our barn in Niagara. I woke one morning to unusual excitement. Raised voices. Strong odor. One of my sisters had gone to gather eggs for breakfast. Kathy had stepped outside and found a skunk caught in the wire of our chicken fence. The skunk's back leg wedged in a leg-hold trap. And during the night, when it tried to crawl through the fence, the trap snagged on the wire. That poor skunk, twice trapped. I'm not sure which details registered in Kathy's memory, about the trap and wire; but the skunk did register. I heard her shout. I jumped from my bed. I clambered downstairs, and stepped outside to check. At the back of our yard, black and white, tail raised and ready, the rear end of a skunk turned in my direction. I wonder, in the moment I observed the skunk, is that when I became a writer?

We stood behind the house and talked about options. A family of eight and everyone had an opinion. Kathy said we should free it from the fence with wire-cutters so it could wander off to die elsewhere. Linda said we should sneak up and catch the scent in a bottle to make perfume. Britannica, she said. And I heard Susan snicker. Someone said to find a gun, but that

would surely release the scent. It wasn't a question of morality, you see; it was a question of odor. Father said to call the pest control. Could someone remove this skunk without creating a lot of skunk smell? No problem. Within an hour a pickup truck pulled onto the driveway. A man stepped out. He pulled a gun from the cab. He didn't say a word. He shot the skunk. Bang! And drove off.

Heaven and Hellfire, a Problem with Endings

I see this podium—a kind of pulpit, and chairs set in neat rows. I think of the preacher. It's not a pleasant reminder, given my church experience. Hard words. Black and white thinking. Not much grace. Preacher bumping his fist on the pulpit and chattering about unpardonable sin.

We washed the car under the willow tree on Saturday. We put on our best clothes on Sunday. And went to church. Looked like a fortress, that place. Heavy, and built of brick, with giant stairs and towers. Once inside we kept quiet. There was nothing to do, you couldn't talk, or read. Couldn't look out. Windows rippled and frosted. Blocking out sun, moon, weather. Blocking out trees, birds. Anything living. And then we sang. Grievous and mournful melodies. Even the cheerful ones we managed to weigh down. As though there was no connection between music and earth at all. The preacher stood, presented his versions of frontier. A city of precious stone. Streets of gold. One landscape. The other, a dark and cavernous hell. The gnashing of teeth. Two landscapes, and no real land in either of them.

Some question the harm done by DDT and Parathion. Others insist on the necessity of guns. We were just trying to stay alive back there in 1955, to feed ourselves and pay our bills. But most of us can now agree on the dire consequences of the history of our human action. It's not a joyful story. I can't count off the number of seconds it took for the skunk smell to reach our noses. It wasn't many. Our yard smelled awful when the man arrived with his gun, but it smelled worse when he left. Our barn smelled, house smelled, clothes smelled. And when we sat down finally to read from the Bible and eat breakfast, even that smelled.

Jake, within minutes of the rifle shot, picked up a spade and walked into the orchard to dig a hole. He accepted his place in the scheme of things. He put on a pair of gloves and worked the skunk free of the wire. He carried

her into the orchard and buried her. No one sang. And yes, the skunk turned out to be a 'she'. A few days later Helen passed by the manure pile behind the barn and discovered a litter of baby skunks scrambling from a burrow under the barn. Orphaned, and hungry, baby skunks. Not only had we killed a skunk, but by the time the thing was done we'd killed the whole skunk family.

It's not a happy story told this way. But that's the record of our farming in Niagara. That's who we were, and what we did. Soon after the smell had cleared we forgot about the skunk. And maybe this is not the way to end. Maybe I should find some happier words to say. And maybe not. I can tell you this. That striped skunk came to visit me again, but I'll save that story for another time.

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