

2015 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Essay Category

Second Place: “*All That I Owe to a Squirrel,*” by Andrea Gallagher

It all starts with a twitch of a finger on a trigger. This releases the hammer which sends the firing pin in to the middle of the primer. The primer sends a tiny spark up the breach and ignites the powder that is formed into two black cylinders called Pyrodex pellets. Together these pellets equal 100 grains of black powder. The powder explodes, causing the .45 caliber bullet to rocket out of the rifled barrel, through the crisp, cold, winter air and straight into the chest of a four point buck. This all happened because a squirrel decided to slyly duck a bullet and continue to eat corn that the combine had spilled a month earlier.

It was the morning of December 14, 2014 and I had to shoot a buck. I had won a \$100 processing coupon at the Fish Creek Sportsman’s Club 19th Annual Rabbit Hunt that previous January, and my dad was determined that I use it. Today was my last chance, and I was determined to succeed even though my chances appeared to be slim. We had hunted every morning and every night for the past week and only saw one doe and two fawns, but today was the last day of muzzleloader season and that changes everything. Every buck I have gotten over the years has shown up on the very last minute of the very last day of the season.

We stepped out of the back door of my house and into the crisp predawn air. It was only 6:30 in the morning, and the stars were shining against the pitch black of the sky. We set off along the driveway between the old wooden barn that housed calves from two days old to two months old, and the newer steel barn that housed cattle from six months to sixteen months. After those barns came the steel tool shed, the wood and steel paneled corn crib and the end of the driveway. The only thing left to cross was the forty acre cornfield. The field had been harvested a month earlier, and the only things left were cornstalks that stood a foot high surrounded by shredded leaves, and other cornstalks that had been rejected by the combine. Snow had fallen the night before, and that helped to quiet the crunching of the leaves beneath our insulated boots.

Finally, we rounded the last knoll and could see the woods. As we neared the woods, my dad whispered to me “Pick up your feet.” We couldn’t risk spooking the deer in any way, as they had already been hunted for two months and wouldn’t return if they thought there was a human in the area. The stand that we were going to hunt out of was my dad’s usual spot called the “Treehouse.” We called it this because it was a green shack with a brown roof and trim that was sitting on used telephone poles about sixteen feet in the air. My dad climbed the ladder first with his muzzleloader hung over his shoulder. I had put the sling of my gun over my head so that the sling rested against my chest and the barrel of the gun was over my left shoulder; this made it a lot easier to climb with two hands. Inside of the shack was a shelf, a small stool, a worn out office chair, and a gas heater. The walls of the shack were lined with carpet the color of pine needles to dull any sounds. Mice loved this carpet, so of course there were mouse droppings on the floor but mice also provide a little bit of entertainment when hunting gets slow.

We saw the first buck at 7:30 a.m., and he was followed by five does and fawns that were all too small to shoot. The buck was a small six point that I deemed too small to shoot. It was now 8:00 a.m., and we hadn’t seen anything but squirrels for a good fifteen minutes. The squirrels

were scampering to and fro and making all kinds of noise. They would chase each other across clearings, through the canopy of barren branches, back down to the nice dry leaves chattering and squealing all the way. They were like a bunch of toddlers in pairs playing tag. It was fun to watch, especially when my dad would tell me stories about his uncles.

“Uncle Dan always made Uncle Steve go squirrel hunting with him, ya know” he whispered. “Why?” I asked.

“Because he didn’t want to shoot any momma squirrels, so he would make Steve sit there with binoculars to make sure that the squirrels had nuts before he shot them.”

“Wow, they really only shot the boy squirrels?” I said.

“Yup, Dan was serious about saving the mommas so that he could still hunt the next year.”

By 8:45 we had given up on deer hunting, and were going to pluck off some squirrels. There was one that had ventured out into the corn stubble and began munching on leftover corn. My dad leaned over to me and said, “I’m gonna get him.” He silently raised his gun up and rested it on the window frame. The squirrel was in his crosshairs, and he put the cross right on its head. BANG! He shot and then started cussing.

“What’s the matter with you?” I laughed.

“That little son of a bitch ducked the bullet,” he hissed.

“Well, it’s my turn now, and I’m gonna win this race,” I said.

“Shut up. My shot was at least 60 yards and you’re not going to be able to shoot that far sitting over there,” he returned.

He turned to reload his gun, and I looked out the front window. I had a squirrel all picked out when I glanced over to my left.

“There’s three of them.” I said.

“Where?” he replied.

I was already on my knees with my gun in my hands. The angle was wrong, so I couldn’t shoot from the stool that I was sitting on. “I’m going to shoot the second one; it’s the biggest,” I whispered as I rested my gun on the door careful not to make the latch knock. My breath was coming fast, but I was doing my best to keep calm. It was a little buck, and I didn’t really want to shoot him but this was my last chance. I lowered my crosshairs onto his shoulder, careful to remember to think of the vitals as a volleyball in the middle of the chest. I shot and the deer all scattered. My dad told me to reload my gun, but I couldn’t steady my hands enough to dump the Pyrodex pellets down the barrel. Even though it was only a small buck, the adrenaline had still gotten to me and I was plenty excited. My dad had seen the buck go down along our neighbor’s fence, and pointed it out to me.

I was confident in my shot, but we still waited for a little while to be sure he was dead. We went over the shot, and the circumstances surrounding it together.

“Where do you think the bullet hit him?” he asked.

“Well, he was turned towards us, so I put it on the front of his shoulder instead of just behind it. Where do you think they all came from?” I answered.

“They must have been bedded south of us in that little orchard of Ike’s. That’s why they came from behind us” he replied.

We came to the conclusion that the bullet that the squirrel ducked must have been ricocheting across the field and that is what spooked the deer out of their bedding ground. “All of this because of a squirrel,” my dad laughed. Finally, we got down and headed over to the buck. It was a small four point, but that didn’t matter.

Now we had to get the buck out of the woods to gut it. We dragged all 175 pounds of it up a steep hill, through a prickly briar patch, and on to the grassy lane that leads to our cabin. My dad gave me his knife and walked me through gutting the deer beginning with, “Just grab the whole rig” and ending with “pulling the butthole out is the hardest part, so put some muscle into it.”

After gutting the buck, we walked to the house, dropped off our gear and hopped into my dad’s truck. We drove down the lane to our cabin until we were almost to the buck, and then we turned around in the corn stubble and backed up the rest of the way to it. We loaded it into the back of the truck and went back to the house to show my mom and little sister. My mom insisted on taking about a thousand pictures before we could take the buck to town and get it processed using my certificate. It might not have been the biggest buck, but it tasted good, and it gave me one great story to tell.

JUDGE’S COMMENTS

This essay is a strong piece, in which the writer makes full use of his/her knowledge and love of guns, hunting, and the November farm landscape. It’s a pleasure to read. The first paragraph, though, doesn’t work well, with the jump to the squirrel at the end. I’d begin with the second paragraph, which has a great first sentence. Use the gun detail from the first paragraph later in the essay, where it fits.

*Catherine Frerichs is retired after many years of teaching writing, literature, and other humanities courses at Glen Oaks Community College, Albion College, and, most recently, Grand Valley State University. She is the author of *Desires of the Heart: A Daughter Remembers Her Missionary Parents* (Cold River Studio, 2010), in which she uses her parents’ letters, journals, and other research to write about her parents’ 40 years of working in Papua New Guinea and the costs to their children. Currently, she is working on a book that explores her relationship with her three Sudanese children whom she foster-parented for seven years and who have remained her children.*