

States of the Union

THUNDER STICKS AND AVOCETS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



SUNDAY. I wake up late, but not so late as I might have wished. Diane is in Boston at a conference and the boys are away at college; one way to deal with solitude is to sleep through it.

What woke me were the gunshots. Lots of people around here like to shoot at targets in their yards, and there appears to be no law to stop them, though both the noise and the danger are disturbing. At times, I've seen small boys carelessly firing large guns into the dark of the woods. No hiker is safe, yet people shy away from regulations. The guns preserve the myth that our town is still rural, when in fact it

is becoming mainly a bedroom for urban and suburban executives.

If you live in a "rural" place, you don't have to love your neighbor as yourself because presumably your neighbor lives far away—out of earshot, gunshot and loveshot. That's what two-acre zoning does to a community: It sanctifies selfishness and spreads illusions of noninterdependence; it de-Christianizes the place.

One evening last autumn a couple we know were watching the sunset from their patio when a bullet whizzed by them and gouged a hole in the trunk of a nearby maple. They learned later that the bullet had been fired three-quarters of a mile away by a man who'd been target-shooting in a gravel pit. Now, persons who claim to be experts in such matters say the safest place for outdoor target-shooting is in a gravel pit: If the bullet misses the target, it buries itself harmlessly in the side of the hill. In this case, however, the marksman not only missed the target, he missed the hill. So it seems reasonable to conclude that the safest place for outdoor target-shooting is none too safe.

A while back some of us in town tried to get an ordinance passed that would have limited the outdoor use of firearms. It was a paltry proposal, designed less to solve the problem than simply to acknowledge it, yet it never stood a chance. The local branch of the National Rifle Association mailed postcards bearing the imprimatur of the "NRA INSTITUTE FOR LEGISLATIVE ACTION," urging members to come to the Town Meeting and vote "no."

Well, they came and they conquered. One of their spokesmen argued that the U.S. Constitution, in giving him the right "to keep and bear arms," thereby conferred upon him "the privilege of practicing." As he pointed out, "If I can't practice readily [outdoors], my skill will diminish." Among the speakers for the NRA was none other than the gravel-pit marksman who nearly killed our friends on their patio. He said, "We came here to lick this proposal for good. Let's get on with the vote."

I drink a cup of coffee in the dining room. The gray sky presses against the window, and through the mist I see our pond asimmer in the rain. A wild duck, looking green and primal in the odd light, drifts sleepily upon the waters, while his mate sits half-concealed on the opposite shore, coddling her eggs. It's a good day for ducks.

It is also a good day for dawdlers. I decide to idle away an hour by watching television—not any show in particular, just "tv"—and I am soon rewarded with a screen-scene that seems uncannily to parody the view from my window. In the foreground a grotesque bird squats over her eggs. The bird has huge webbed feet, long spindly legs and a slender beak that curves upward like a bent toy sword. A disembodied voice explains that we are looking at an avocet, a shore bird found both in North America and in Europe. We see her here surrounded by the tidal slime of San Francisco Bay.

Behind the avocet a bulldozer creeps into view. We watch it work the ooze; it seems to be digging channels, letting in the sea. There is much backing and filling, whirling and roaring, until it becomes clear that soon—perhaps within the hour—the bulldozer will overrun bird and nest.

The camera pulls back to a close-up of the nest. We see cracks in the egg shells, and feathers pushing through the cracks. The voice says, "These fledglings may win their race with the bulldozer; if so, they will almost certainly be the last avocets born in this part of the bay. In drawing up plans for the bay, the engineers did not consult the birds."

I switch off the set and reach for my dictionary. Avocet: "any of several small limicoline [mud-dwelling] birds of the genus *Recurvirostra*. . . . The American species is rapidly becoming scarce."

Loud squawks and snarls interrupt my research. I run outside in time to see a neighbor's dog, a dappled English setter with an instinct for the chase, harrying our mothering mallard off her nest and into the pond. For an instant the dog pauses at water's edge; then he, too, takes the icy plunge. He swims toward the two ducks, who are paddling in tight, panicky circles and quacking to the heavens.

I throw a pebble at the dog. "Get out of here! Go home!"

The dog seems mildly surprised. After all, he has only been doing his job. He gazes longingly at the quacking ducks; then he gazes appealingly at me. I pick up a larger stone and throw it in his general direction. The splash makes him sorrowful. With what I imagine to be a canine shrug he scrambles out of the water. Then, accelerating, he romps across our field and streaks up our neighbor's steep driveway, all in an instant.

I make my way around to the far side of the pond and find the hastily abandoned nest. It contains three eggs, all intact. But will the

duck return to her nest now that she has acquired a knowledge of evil? In the Garden of Eden there were no neighbors and no dogs. What spoiled paradise for Adam and Eve was not banishment but subdivisions.

PARADISE lost. I return to the house and find my copy of Mari Sandoz' *Old Jules Country*, that fine collection of essays about pioneer life on The Plains, which opens with an American retelling of the fall of man. "The evening sun lay warm and brooding on the upper Missouri valley," she begins, while half-naked Indian children frolicked alongside a pond, playing with a wool-filled



ball; out on the pond, atop a beaver house, sat "two half-grown beavers . . . idling and combing their shining brownish fur." They felt safe on their patio. "Not until the ball came soaring into the water did either of the young beavers look up. . . ."

The moon rose; an old beaver climbed out of the water and started dragging a fallen sapling toward the dam. Then: "An exploding burst of light broke from the blackness there and knocked the beaver forward, the roar of the blast followed by loud plungings all along the ponds, the echo of the shot lost in the cries of alarm and warning at the village, and in the shouted orders, the running moccasins."

The frightened Indians found two white hunters standing over a dead beaver. Each carried "a long thin pole." Very puzzling, until their leader solved the mystery. "Do you not see," he asked, "that they are the thunder-stick men of whom we have all been told?—those with the hairy faces?" In time the Indians learned that they, too, could own a thunder stick: "that it could be obtained with the hide of their beavers—and that there were other dangerous things to be bought with their animal neighbors."

Guns thus destroyed the balance of weakness between men and animals, turning the men into killer-merchants and the animals into victim-merchandise. From that moment on it was, ecologically speaking, downhill all the way. First the beaver, then the buffalo, and now the whale. The Japanese and the Russians prowl the waters in their killer-boats, equipped with powerful harpoon cannons and each year they massacre more than 40,000 whales. The species is dying a hideous death.

Crack. Another shot from another neighbor. It is a country full of thunder sticks, Sunday afternoon specials. *Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!*—but this town is not a wilderness and it long ago reached the far side of paradise, the place where nature stops and community begins. Now, says *Time* magazine, communities like this one are fast filling up with people eager to escape the cares and crimes of the city. They are welcome, but we should take pains to see that the bulldozers preceding them do not, while we feather our nests, make avocets of us all.

I pour myself a drink and silently toast the jittery city-dweller. His is a dismal choice: Either he stays where he is, and risks being mugged, or he moves out here, and risks being shot by some votary of the National Rifle Association who can't hit the broad side of a gravel pit. *Cheers!*