Muskrat Ramble

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Abstract

Fergus was a Swede, and he’d been trapping Iowa marshes and streams for most of his fifty-five years. His hands showed the scars he’d earned learning how not to handle muskrats, and his fingers were swollen from years of plunging them into half-frozen water to make a set or recover a trap...
Funeral. I wish they’d just bury me
As my sister did once; she put me on the train
And stood outside the window making very
Funny faces, pretending to invoke
Some grave and sympathetic thought. It was plain
We could not hear each other, so no one
Had to mourn.

If you want to talk, the last
Two hours will get you nowhere. You must leave
And come back later if you want to say
Something new.

I really would much rather
Assist in the delivery room than stay
Around while they inter my earthly remains.
Farewell parties should provide a shot
Of local anaesthetic for the pain
Of finding out that taking leave of friends
Boils down to my impatience to begin
This next rebirth and pinch the old life off.

Muskrat Ramble

by Douglas Thompson

Fisheries and Wildlife Biology, Sr.

Fergus was a Swede, and he’d been trapping Iowa
marshes and streams for most of his fifty-five years. His
hands showed the scars he’d earned learning how not to
handle muskrats, and his fingers were swollen from years of
plunging them into half-frozen water to make a set or recover
a trap. You didn’t have to tell Fergus that trapping was a
dog eat dog way to make a living. He’d been cheated, shot at,
robbed, and tricked too often to think his fellow trappers
were just a sweet bunch of petunias. He’d learned what sur-
vival meant.
Fergus pulled four muskrats that he had trapped that evening from the trunk of his battered '51 Plymouth and let them fall to the ground. He then admired the big buck mink he'd caught. It didn't take much light to make the sleek fur shine. It had been a long time since he'd caught one that big. He grabbed the mink by the hind leg, tossed it into the snow beside the muskrats and slammed the trunk shut. He knelt down and rubbed a little snow into the right side of the mink, wetting and matting down the fur. The scar was almost covered. Five muskrat skins from the morning check were in a small cardboard box, and the mink was carefully placed on top of these. Fergus grabbed the other four muskrats by the tail, picked up the box and started up to the fur buyer's house. The rats swung and dangled, hitting his leg as he walked, and he remembered the warning the service station man had given him about Meggers, the new fur buyer.

"The old bastard's a real weenie so you'd better be watching him. He'll steal ya blind if ya turn yer back."

Fergus felt ready. He had made a special trip over to Zubin, forty miles from his regular territory, because of the unusual mink he'd caught and the new buyer in the area, Meggers. Buyers had come and gone, and Fergus had been around longer than any of them, but the buyers around home knew Fergus too well. "Ah, buyers are a slimy lot; sure, every one I ever met'd skin out his grandmother if prices was right," he always used to say.

Fergus felt he had a good come-on today with half skinned and half unskinned muskrats and one mink. Since he looked like he was testing out the buyer before moving into an area to trap, he might get good prices. A buyer likes to have a continuous supply.

Fergus pounded on the outside porch door of the farm house extra hard. The yard light went on, and he could see the curtains part slightly and then fall back together before the kitchen lit up. A huge, fat, bald man in greasy coveralls came out on the porch.

"Yah?" The man's voice was abrupt, and Fergus could see Meggers' eyes checking him over from face to hip boots to dangling muskrats and finally fixing on the big mink on the top of the cardboard box.
“I got some rats to sell.” Fergus shifted the box a little farther under his arm snapping the stare at the mink.

“Hmm,” the buyer sneered, showing two rotten teeth. He switched on a light to a basement stairway just outside the porch. “I’ll take a look.” He barged by Fergus and started down into the basement. Fergus followed and just missed hitting his head on the low door frame. The half-dark basement stunk with a mixture of the smell of half-rotting meat and grease and nostril-stinging preservative rubbed into the muskrat skins which hung stretched on wire frames in rows along the low rafters of the basement. Fergus ducked to avoid getting the first row in the face.

There was one dirty light bulb stuck in a socket over a greasy work bench.

“Sit down.”

The buyer pointed to a rickety, paint-spattered chair under the drying skins. Meggers swung one fat leg over a box and plopped down, resting an arm up on the work bench covered with worn knives and stained scrapers and piled with empty stretching frames. Fergus dropped the muskrats down in front of him and set the box beside them. His fingers ached from gripping the slippery tails of the muskrats, and he flexed his fingers as he sat down facing the buyer. Meggers was sitting with his shoulders hunched over, and his mouth gaped open, making him look remarkably like a caveman. His square little eyes peered out from under his brow, searching for some weakness in Fergus that the buyer could use against him.

“What’dya want for ’em?” The buyer began carefully brushing the fur of one of the unskinned muskrats.

“What’ll ya give me?” Fergus looked at Meggers, but the buyer didn’t look up.

“Well—what’dya think they’re worth to ya?” Meggers didn’t take his eyes off the muskrat he was checking.

“Oh, I don’t know. What’ll ya give me?” Fergus was a little more emphatic.

The buyer stopped momentarily, then continued. “You must know what you want.” He was working over the muskrats very rapidly now.
"Yeah, but what I want you may not want to give me." Fergus remembered the dollar and a quarter price he'd heard in town.

"Depends on the pelt you know." The buyer was stalling. "Whether they're skinned or not or whether the fur slips any." He pulled hard on a tuft of hair on the back of the muskrat skin he held. The hair stayed firm.

Fergus had pulled out his pipe and held it now in one hand while with his right he fumbled in his shirt pocket for a match. Apparently the buyer had missed the rip in the pelt for he tossed it onto the pile of the others. Fergus struck the match with his thumbnail, stuck the flame down inside his pipe and puffed hard—never once taking his eyes off Meggers.

"You trapping around here this fall out at Sweet Marsh or Barringer's Slough?" Fergus just nodded. The buyer looked at Fergus, looked at the muskrats, he looked back at Fergus, but Fergus showed no emotion in his face. Fergus didn't mind lying to buyers, but when he was talking to real people, he was a regular George Washington.

The buyer picked up the mink and began carefully stroking and blowing the dry fur to check the prime as he eyed the length.

"Had a lot of business this year?" Fergus' almost too urgent voice broke the trance Meggers was falling into looking at the mink, and he jerked up his head.

"Ah—yeah, too much," he said cautiously. "The big boys in St. Louis don't want to buy from anyone now. They really put the squeeze on a guy. Hardly can make a living at fur. Rats are low and mink are dirt cheap. Looks like this'll be my last season."

Fergus had heard it all before. Meggers was working into his spiel. "Don't see how an honest man can make a living now. Goddam women want fur collars, they run the hell out of ya. Next minute they don't even want a collar and you're stowin' and sellin' your soul. It's really been rough this last year."

Fergus puffed on his pipe and nodded slowly. He figured he had to agree with the bastard just to keep him talking.
"I'll give ya a dollar ten each for the rats. What'dya want for the mink? He's pretty fair size." Meggers sort of twisted his mouth down as if he was trying to cover up his obvious understatement.

"Damn right he's a good mink, and they're good rats too, every one of 'em." Fergus never moved a muscle from his position and leaned back in the chair.

"The mink ain't skinned, and he's an old one. He might have scars under that fur." Meggers began to go over the mink fur again.

"Now listen here." Fergus slammed his hand on his knee and again caught Meggers attention. He talked very deliberately, very coolly. "I want a buck thirty-five for those rats. You know they're worth that, and he's the best mink I've ever trapped. He should be eighteen if he's a penny."

"I'd like to pay you that price. I know they're worth every bit. Now I can see you're a good trapper. These fresh kids come in here, and I could tell 'em anything, and they'd swallow it, but I don't. I'm a fair man. I can't pay that much for this mink. He wouldn't even make it into extra-large class for St. Louis."

Fergus had been looking away but turned and stared right into Meggers' eyes. "Got a ruler?"

Meggers just looked at Fergus grimly, then got up and went to the corner of the basement and returned with a soiled yardstick. He stretched the mink out on the bench and laid the ruler alongside. "Twenty-two inches. He don't quite make it into extra-large so he's not worth the extra two bucks to me."

Fergus eased his chair down, slowly got up, and walked over to the bench. He gripped the mink by the neck and pulled him out to full length. "Twenty-three. One goddam inch short."

"One goddam inch," he thought. Fergus returned to the chair and sat down hard. An extra-large mink would have meant an extra dollar or two in price.

"Now I'll give ya a buck twenty-five for the rats and fourteen for the mink. I can't give ya any more, besides one
rat's got a scar in him.” Fergus acted surprised for he thought Meggers had missed it.

“That might go for the rats, but that mink’s got at least sixteen in him. He’s as prime as they come. Hardly a speck of white on him.”

“Can’t do it. I can’t take the chance. Fourteen!” Meggers began to look over the mink again.

Fergus acted fast. He got up and grabbed the mink from the buyer, threw it in the box and began to pick up his muskrats. “No deal!” he said firmly.

Meggers jumped up dumbfounded, knocking over the box and stuttering for something to say. Fergus got up with his fur and started for the door.

“Wait a minute. I’ll make it fifteen.” Fergus slowed down.

“Can’t do it.”

“Fifteen-fifty and that’s top!”

Fergus stopped and slowly turned around. “All right, fifteen-fifty and a buck twenty-five each for the rats.” Meggers pulled out a battered checkbook and a stubby pencil.

Fergus returned to the bench and dropped the four muskrats on the floor and set the box beside them. The buyer was figuring on the back of his checkbook up against a post by the stairway. He had a dirty little grin on his face, and he was trying to hum something Fergus didn’t recognize. Fergus relit his pipe and waited.

“Sixteen-seventy-five total. Here’s your check.”

Fergus took the check covered with smudged figures and black fingerprints, quickly glanced at it, folded it and put it into his shirt pocket returning the sneering smile Meggers had given him.

“A pleasure to do business with you, Mr. Meggers.” Fergus emphasized the Mr. and stretched up to his full height looking straight into Meggers’ little eyes. “Maybe we’ll do some again.”

Fergus brushed past him and climbed the stairs. The air smelled fresh after the stink of the basement. He went to his car.
The check felt extra heavy in his pocket as he started the car and let it warm up. He slowly turned his smile up into a chuckle, wishing he could see Megger's face when he started to skin that mink. When the fleshing knife came down the right side, hit that scar and slashed a three or four inch hole in the pelt.

"Nope! Fifteen-fifty for a three-dollar mink ain't bad!"

He jammed the shift down into low, made a wide circle running across a corner of Meggers' yard, pulled through the gate and headed the sputtering Plymouth for home.

Monuments

by Paul Kratoska

English, Sr.

The mines died forty years ago.
The soft, brown coal was gutted from the earth
And the cinder offal laid on the land—
Red mountains of rust and cinder
In the midst of fertile fields.
Valleys have eroded the mountainsides,
Baring twisted ribs of slag
And bleeding into the soil.

The coal has long ago been swept
Ashen from hearths.
The miners are old and cough up coal dust,
Carrying the dust of the mine
To the dust of the grave.
The cinder mountains remain,
Barren cairns in the living fields,
Monuments of their life and labor
Standing to the wind and stars.