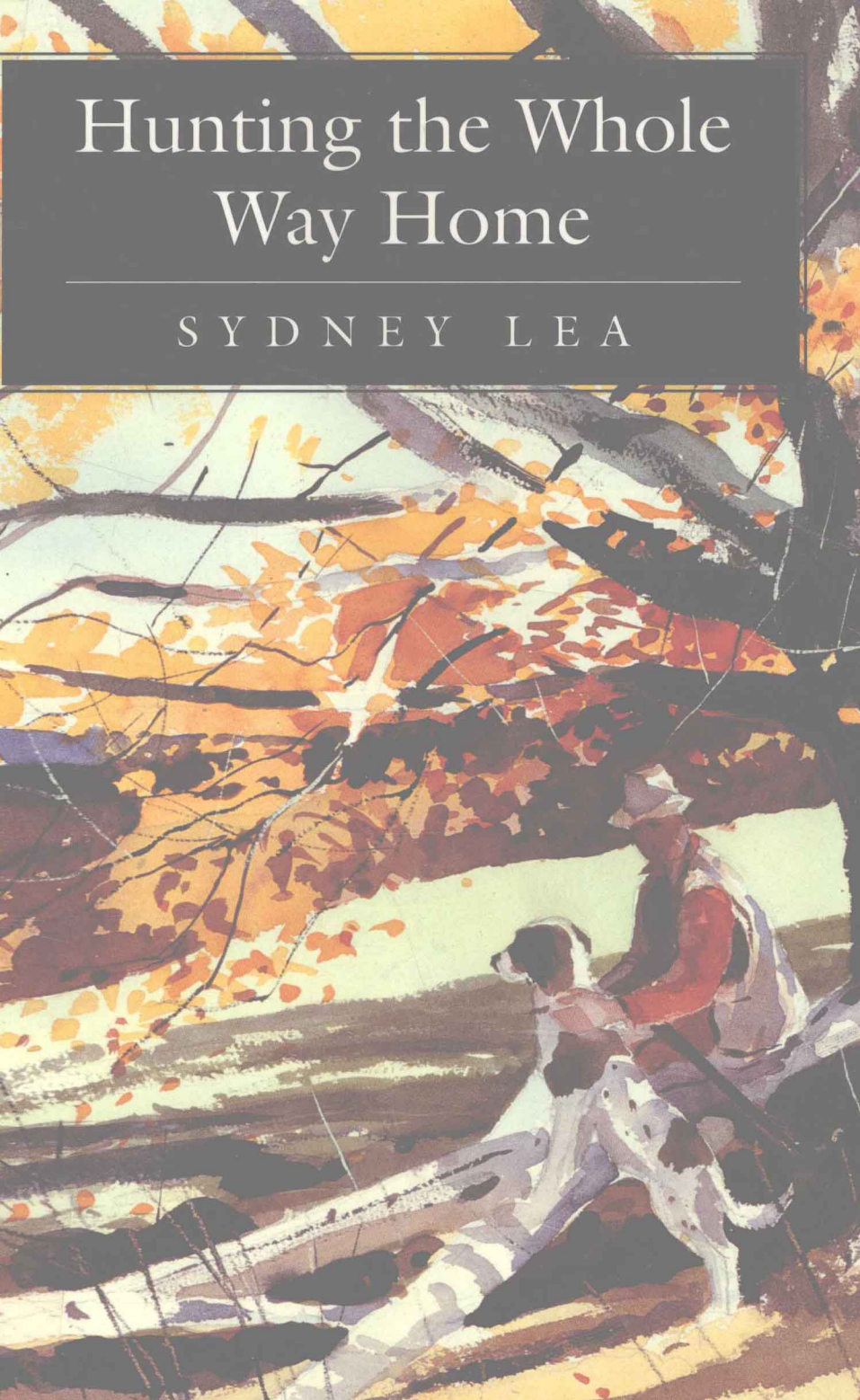
Hunting the Whole Way Home

SYDNEY LEA



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The dedicatory poem originally appeared (as "Dedication") in my collection *The Floating Candles* (University of Illinois Press, Champaign, 1982). The poems that head each part of the book have also appeared in prior collections of mine, as follows: Part I: as "Sereno," in *No Sign;* Part II: under the title here used, in *No Sign;* Part III: as the title poem in *Prayer for the Little City* (Scribner, New York, 1990); Part IV: as "Fall," in *No Sign* (University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1987); Afterword: as "Museum," in *Prayer for the Little City.*

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The final poem was first published in *Wilderness* magazine as "Hunter's Sabbath: Hippocratic."

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For Joey Olsen, Landy Bartlett, Terry Lawson,

and for my father, again

Late February. Orion turned
the corner into the long
sleep, blindness
on the earth's black side,
as you did.
Sleet. Cloud.
Woodsmoke creeping
like a whipped dog flat
to the ground, and heaven
was all occultation.
So the few last bitter lights,
down to Betelgeuse,
in familiar constellation—
they slipped away
before I'd caught the art
of naming. Early
fall now, now again
the wanderers—the winter
planets, memory, restless birds—
begin to shift. It will be greater
darkness if the language sulks,
unrisen. Flesh of my flesh,
you pause to take
quick breath
against the quick descent of evening.

I feel that exhalation
along the throat, I wear you
as I wear your threaded
hunter's coat, my father.
From which in this gust
into night there climbs
—like word or star—
a single feather . . .

ON THE MARGINS

A Foreword

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.
—Robert Frost
"Two Tramps in Mudtime"

MOST OF THESE pieces were originally sent on assignment or speculation to magazines or newspapers. If when pieced together they approximate a book, then, its unity came about in a delightfully nonmethodical way, and spared me most of the usual occupational anxieties—is there a sustained argument, an overall structure, a sufficient array of particulars, a cohering point of view? I composed something here, then something there, and took no thought for the morrow.

Of course this nonchalance may have generated its own defects. Presented in a continuous format, a prose collection should indeed show thematic and narrative continuity, a distinguishing fabric of imagery, a shapeliness. I believe such criteria are satisfied here chapter by chapter; but without having construed any one of those chapters in relation to another, I worry that in gathering them I try to mask reiteration—of topic, figure, and even fact—as consistency.

Despite (or because of) all that, point of view has at least been no problem. Though in some cases undertaken at significantly different times from each other, these essays do reveal an enduring set of private obsessions, and thus perhaps my most honest version to date of "I." Not always gratified by that protagonist, I can't deny being interested in him. Like anyone, I'm curious about my own thoughts and emotions over a span of years, the concerns that once stopped me in my tracks, and that, subjected to meditation, turn out to have mattered so. But like anyone I'm also distracted enough by dailiness that such insights can prove surprising.

Writers, in doing what they do, often stumble on this sort of surprise. Indeed, I've always considered that one of their best *motives* for writing; we persist because we run into things we didn't know we felt, and in the process glimpse the foundations of our faiths and fears, morals and vices, hopes and despairs.

I frankly can't conceive of proceeding otherwise, keeping an eye for example on an editor's imaginable response, or even a reader's, much less on dim prospects like money or reputation. There are fine authors who can specifically choose their subject matter, or even their settings, and I don't mean to denigrate them; I'm simply not among their number, my subjects seeming always to choose *me*.

All this is closer to a confession of limits than a claim of virtue, since my own motives may in fact strike some as solipsistic. I take heart from the immanent genius of my neighborhood; bending an Horatian aphorism, Robert Frost once declaimed, "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader," by which I think he meant that without his or her personal discovery an author's work will fizzle. (The dreariness of so-called Socialist Realism, with its aprioristic agenda, is perhaps the classic modern instance.)

We may of course be unpleasantly surprised by our self-discoveries, even to the point that we balk at publishing some of them, yet in the act of writing itself we are obligated to acknowledge them. That's what writing is for. And never mind certain voguish critical theory of the moment, with which I here and there quarrel, perhaps amateurishly, in what follows: the fact that authorial discovery, no matter how alien from a reader's own

insights, is *shareable* accounts for such allegiance as real literature has always commanded. And will command: However darkly we're warned of a serious readership's diminishment, it will never truly vanish. There are those who won't accept a substitute for the power of the genuine, penetrating word.

Back, however, to private reckoning. In putting this collection together, I notice my ongoing struggle to make sense of a life. To say so is scarcely to confer distinction on individual essays, the book at large, or me—who doesn't engage in that struggle, as author and as person? Yet I hope that very distinction is false, because I trust in a continuity between my writing and all the other things that hold my closest attention: family affections, religious beliefs (uncanonical, and more implicit here than actively explored), hunting, dog handling, fishing, natural surroundings. While not excusing the repetitiousness I fretted over a moment past, such a trust does account for it. The relations of Then to Now, of child to parent and parent to child, even of this dog to that, this quarry to the next—for me, ideally, all these must fall into an integrity, and a book is a place for such integration to occur.

In my time there may remain no other place. Attitude toward place itself is of course central in each essay that follows—which too often, sad to say, means an attitude toward the *despoliation* of place. My feelings on such a matter are sometimes elegiac, sometimes furious, usually both; but they are entirely ungovernable. Given the things I write of, the things I do and love, the things on which I have based the quest to unify my experiences, I cannot edit the feelings out.

Rereading these essays, in fact, I almost comprehend the zeal of crusaders with whom I bitterly disagree. Though five times a father, I do not, for example, accept the guiding assumptions of the anti-abortionist—that even the earliest embryo has a right to life, that to deny it is therefore murder. But if I momentarily imagine I *did* accept these assumptions, I simultaneously imagine my own outrageous rhetoric and behavior on the issue. In the face of what one considers filthy crime, moderation itself seems criminal.

It is clear that I do cling to powerful—and maybe related—

premises. I will never articulate them so movingly as the great Aldo Leopold, who proposed that land had *its* right to life; but following his lead I insist that greedy violations of landscape are . . . murder. This is not, however, an ideology tricked up to protect my own backyard. As I write, to be sure, there's a vicious scheme afoot to "develop" a gorgeous New England mountain on which we have lived; but I can affirm in good conscience that my hatred is no stronger for this ruinous plan than for the wreck of a New Mexican or Siberian or Brazilian or Norwegian wildness.

Sin is sin.

My belief in the rights of wild place extends to wild *creatures* as well. Since fair numbers of these pieces touch on hunting, that posture may be perplexing to anyone but hunters themselves. Though to some degree I write for these hunters, I hope also to address open-minded nonhunters, a category that necessarily excludes the committed *anti*-hunter. I know from experience that no advocates of so-called animal rights, whatever their position along the movement's reasonable-to-kooky spectrum, will associate bloodsports with even so mild a term as conservation.

But let me explore that term's implications for other readers' sakes. It is derived from the same root as our word "conservative," and—despite my lifelong allegiance to progressive politics—one thing I also discover in these pages is how aptly the conservative label fits me. It fits me, that is, if it means a person who wishes to *save*, to hold *together*, who is concerned for what I've called integrity. Like me, that person may find odd the American right wing's persistent appeal to an ideal of unfettered growth, one of whose catastrophic results is the vision of land as mere real estate. (Just so, women have for too much of history been viewed in a similar, proprietary manner; we speak eloquently in referring to reckless subdivision or timbering or drilling as rape.) I can imagine, say, the horror of a genuine conservative like Edmund Burke at the worldwide sundering of rural cultures—ancient and organic, but pitiably fragile—by this grotesque vision.

In my corner of the globe, it is not only the ladyslipper, the woodcock, the indigenous trout, the black duck, the painted trillium and countless other wild marvels that give way to the ski

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condo, the mall, the office park; it is also a certain honorable way of reading the world. The genuine hunter or fisherman feels a Burkean revulsion at all this dislocation and pillage. No one knows better how the trampling of landscape's rights affects human community: the promised jobs for locals come and go, nature and human nature are split, and wild surroundings are flattened, in several senses, into one more wonderless zone. Forever.

All this in turn affects, even more irredeemably, the community of wildlife. No untamed species is threatened with diminishment, let alone extinction, by legal bloodsports; the unspeakable threat lies in the eradication of habitat, so often justified, precisely, by the imperatives of "growth." Unlike many of their detractors, then, true and worthy sportspeople are likely active in efforts to reject those imperatives, to sustain or restore the wild things' domains.

Note that I've just spoken of *true* and *worthy* sportspeople. It is, alas, impossible to deny the existence of other types. Whatever heat I feel for the misprision, misrepresentation, and general mischief of the organized anti-hunting lobby, it's nothing compared to my rage at those others. Slob hunters better pray I'm never in charge of their punishment. I'd make it a felony to apply the word "hunter" to themselves, even if modified by the adjective "slob." This book's periodic censorship of such thugs is as close to reasonable as I'll ever get.

But once again, in what follows my main objective is to discover and to convey *why* I feel the angers and raptures I do, and not in a facile way. If I reject the animal-rightist, I cannot then resort to the morally idiotic yap of the National Rifle Association and certain other "sportsmen's alliances," which can equal the frothy foolishness of a Cleveland Amory. My mission after all is as much artistic as philosophical; as I said at the outset, I hope I may reach people whose principal interest lies, simply, in an author's effort to write well. If nothing else, this must surely mean his avoidance of rhetorical shortcuts.

Tom McGuane, having gutted a Montana antelope, reflects that "this is goddamned serious and you better always remember that."

Exactly.

And the same applies to writing. One's aim in either case should be disciplined, steady, true.

For my purposes, of course, the hunter/author parallel cannot extend indefinitely. For one thing, I here occasionally address other pursuits than hunting, and for another—though I touch on subordinate successes—the primary standard for a hunt's success, like it or not, is a kill.

No such conspicuous standard existing for a writer's accomplishments, even in his or her own eyes, it seems impossible entirely to free the writing life of unease. If I started, for instance, by claiming that any relation among this book's parts was unplanned, I can't by that claim simply gloss over certain gaps in what follows. The reader will notice, for example, that the "I"—for all his insistence on the primacy of a kill—often deliberately stops himself from shooting, and unfailingly releases his fish. One could surmise (as I'll often do myself) that the protagonist dwells in states of marginality.

And yet all this is at least metaphorically appropriate: Prime cover for quarry tends to occur at edges, young growth giving way to old, relatively open terrain to dense, a vigorous flow to a gentle. Just so, "I" often finds himself between pure indulgence in narrative and a deep suspicion of any story, especially his own. There are moments for him when the connections, say, between Then and Now seem fictional in the very worst sense. No matter his search for resolution, integrity; all closure seems to give him pause. He may sniff at the trendy literary theorists who ascribe an irremediable indeterminacy to verbal constructs; yet how often I and "I" are prey ourselves to a chilling indeterminacy: We lower the gun rather than shooting the last grouse of a season. We leave conclusions cloudy, as if all the things to which we testify here were *too* damned serious—as often they are—for words alone.

Newbury, Vermont, 1993

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IV. ALONE, WITH FRIENDS

I

Goodbye, Boy

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