The Rider

We soon knew how the hole in the fence was made. From our breakfast table we could see through the rearward facing kitchen window: a hole, in the fence, surrounded by the fence remaining. At least three boards were busted, their jagged edges leaning out from the anchoring posts like an illiberal lion’s teeth, the tan of the wood peeking through where only white overcoat had recently been.

We pondered it for a while, and scanned the portions of our backyard contained as a picture within the window, looking for any remains that might not be fence – that might instead be the shards of the thing that broke the fence and stole its suburban utility. I was about to go to change from my morning slippers into shoes that would do in the yard, steeled in my house coat to confront the cause, when the apparent impetus of the damage wandered ponderously into view.

It seemed to be following the ridge of grass that grew near the guttering, where water collected from our infrequent rains. In bar shuffles half the length of one of its own feet, it moved. It clipped the lawn near level to the ground. I thought at first it was ripping the grass out, roots and all. But no. It was severing the blades to ground level; daintily beheading each proud leaf in short, unhurried movements; its massive head bent down from the basketball jointed shoulders; its single horn tilting forward, swaying only slightly, swaying perhaps reluctantly, swaying unchecked, or not swaying.

I had seen a rhinoceros before, at the zoo. I knew there were many species of rhinoceros, some more endangered than the others, some more common; but I could have no way of knowing how to differentiate one variety from another. I knew of no category of rhinoceros generally native to southeastern Virginia; though, at the time, that was immaterial: in my backyard, after surely damaging my fence, was a rhinoceros. With these facts – damaged fence, rhinoceros, grazed grass - species and subspecies blended into one omnipresent effect: a rhinoceros.

Each of us watched for some time, wanting to make sure our yard held but one rhinoceros. One lone animal, mired in its own agenda. A herd of rhinoceros would require that we consider the event differently. The creature milled slowly about, following the best of the ordinary lawn grass, and we drained our coffee – my wife with her smaller cup actually having a second, while I worked slowly down the level of liquid in my oversized vanity mug. The beast cruised through the best of the top-notch grass, passing in and out of the rectangle of our window – I, keeping a mental list of the idiosyncratic features found on our rhinoceros, so to be sure that the rhinoceros wandering back into sight later was the same one that had earlier wandered out of sight.

Eventually, we thought to move about the house, and to look out of the many wondrous windows it supported: looking for more holes in the fence; or more rhinoceros in the yard; or signs of further, extended, or cumulative, damage.

By the time we had finished our pancakes, the consensus was that there was but one hole, and but one rhinoceros; and that he clipped the grass, not pulling it out roots and all; and that, after harvesting the greenest and sweetest of our grass, he was moving to the less calorically profitable, though still digestible, ground vegetation.

Our rhinoceros.
What to do? I slipped into day clothes as my wife lingered at the table, learning the grace of a rhinoceros, its imponderable promptness, its sterling sense of oblivion. She poured herself a third cup of coffee. She remarked how rough the skin must be, yelling up the stairs where I had disappeared in search of pants. She leaned forward on her elbows across the table, the cleft between her breasts deepening as she lay out almost immodestly, almost in contact with the table top, the whole of her focused like a neon arrow of advertisement. Here, our rhinoceros. Here. She adjusted a snarl of hair that cried loose from the translucent reflection of her, dimly staffed on our side of the window; a reflection only seen when the rhinoceros, on his side of the glass, was standing collected in the light just so, and ignored.

I would need to fix the fence. Soon. One day. Later. The rhinoceros was first mine to deal with.

There was so much to know. He could be two thousand pounds. He could be three. I knew no numbers for rhinoceros removal. And did I want him removed? How many people receive the gift of a rhinoceros? Possibilities fell into permutations, grew into complexities, slipped into cautions.

I thought I could enlist the help of the neighbors. But I knew that the neighbors would think their options through, would count their opportunities, and rise up self-serving to plan what was best for them and their families, not what might be fair to me and my indirectly destructive rhinoceros. They would agree with what I could already tell, festive at the corners of her eyes, were the rising expectations of my wife; those Saharan neighbors expecting themselves to extract a share of the gains she was surely imagining. Her morning gown barely containing the wrap of her collecting thoughts and arguing engrams, already my practical howl of a wife had been thinking of heat and oil, of wax paper and freezer bags, and of spent boxes of aluminum foil. She has always wanted a top load freezer for the open corner of our not too cluttered garage. One of those virgin white freezers where the whole top flips up, and frost rolls menacingly out over the edge only to dissipate in the air as it nears the floor. The type of freezer that a man could lie down in; or that you could - with an eye to geometry and a pattern of mind disciplined into seeing things in three unyielding dimensions - pack the best parts of an entire, sudden gift rhinoceros in.

One conclusion that meets all sizes.

But before I can think meat, I have to try leather, and stitchery, and the thrilling industry of dispassionately taking measurements by sighting from the second story window. The front half of my arm will be a yard stick. The width between my fingers will be multiplied by distance, and compensated by angle, for girth. A saddle. Before any irrevocable actions, I must try a saddle.

After all, it soon will be I who engages the contractor to fix the injured fence, who will see the yard dourly reseeded. I think it should be my right to try my crisp and brotherly idea first; to hold reins I have cut myself, and press my knees against the muscle that destroys fences, bedazzles women, befuddles men. If I fail, meat it can still be. I want my time in leather chaps, on a leather saddle, my leather hat waving unyieldingly in the air. I want to bound across my yard, fence to opposite fence, astride more power than any man has a right to wrangle. I want to hold on with but one hand and raise my free hand selflessly electrified in the air!

For years I have loved the feel of wearing a costume; of my costume growing thinner and lighter from contact and use; and of power prodded to action by the presence in my thighs driving together, by my shifting side to side; of finding, in what might have been meat, the well of civic
mastery. Horn proudly in the air, and me shouting encouragement from his back, he will have no need to break more fences. He will be pure domesticated power, ferrying me down our bedroom-community streets, cracking our pavement as he goes: a thundering conveyance, a conveyance of me, one that school children will run after and uselessly imagine that someday, with their paper route money, they might possibly own for themselves. Foolishly, they will be engorged at the sight of me. Yes, their own power and purpose; yes, their own rhinoceros.

    Just look what he did to the fence!
    But, if meat it comes to, my wife - for all her dark imaginings - has at least to leave me the best parts to unravel with my fearful grill.
Author Notes

Ken Poyner lives in the Tidewater region of Virginia, with his world-class powerlifting wife, four rescue cats, and two demanding fish. His first book of poetry, Cordwood, came out in 1985; his second, Sciences, Social, poetry, in 1995; and his most recent book, Constant Animals, short fictions, in 2013. He has appeared in Poet Lore, Asimov’s Science Fiction, The Iowa Review, The Alaska Quarterly, Analog Science Fiction and Fact, Watershed Review, and about eighty other places. He has had multiple Pushcart Prize nominations, and taught once on an NEA Community Teaching grant. He is looking for a home for his latest book of short fictions, and working on a collection of poems rooted in radical cybernetics.

About the Work

I am a creature of revision. Yes, getting the idea can be tough. Usually, I will go through dry spells, but then the backed up ideas start stumbling out all on their own. Someone else’s good work prods them loose, or some other experience that knocks me a bit off kilter pushes them to the exit, and I have Morse code in my hands to work with.

Generally, the first draft is little more than an outline, punctuated with passages here and there that are idyllic romps through the story line, or around the emotion of the developing piece. Immediately after my race to the end of the story, I turn around and begin again, often expanding the work by as much as a third. Then, I will go back and start yet again. Elements in the story inform me that they need more substance; others tell me that they have their middle, but no beginning or no end. I apologize, and try to meet the story’s demands. I can place perhaps a new longing here, a closed door there. A rude handshake for the butler. Carnivorous butterflies in a gentle afternoon rain.

I can go over a draft initially four or five times. It is here that it moves from a musing to an attempt at something literary. It is here that it moves from opinion to politics. I twist and turn the possibilities, looking in each dark corner and deciding if it is there I want to go. I watch my original idea slip away and I learn to love the construct that has replaced it. Then I leave it alone.

A few days later the story and I box for a few turns, and quite often what may have started as 700 clipped words has, by the end of these sessions, become 1200 or 1400, or even 3000, with a character I did not suspect, or a turn of the tongue I was not originally looking for. The goal is for the work to surprise me. If it does not at some point push me with the unexpected, then it is hardly worth working on.

In the end, the story must tell me what it wants to do. It must have an independence. It must stand its ground without me. When the story and I sit glaring at each other across the computer screen and I have no keystrokes to give it, then it is ready. Ready, at least, for its first trip off the reservation.

I stand by to help it with its wounds should it come bedraggled back.
Ken Poyner on the Web

www.kpoyner.com

www.downdirtyword.com/authors/kenpoyner.html

www.microliterature.org/search/poyner/feed/rss2

www.friggmagazine.com/issuethirtytwo/poetry/poyner/gatherer.htm

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