

The Tick of Time

... and in the twilight

Autumn comes on silently.

End of Day (G.B.E.)

Watching the clock too often becomes an adversary relation with Time in an effort to get there before the hour hand. Clocks cut Life into pieces, seconds that can add up to years taken away before you realize it.

Musicians have their own concept of Time, beating the tempo of music with their foot, or with their big toe inside their shoe, or with their brain inside their skull, or more elegantly with a conductor beating time for them with a little stick. There are metronomes, small machines that beat time for them—three, four, eight, sixteen to the bar, even, even, even, never varying, ticking *allegro*, *moderato*, *lento*, but they can't stop Time as it flows from Present into Past, beating time but never winning.

Time should measure happiness; too frequently it marks anxieties. It is impossible for me to say how many times I've watched the second hand on my wrist watch while taking the temperature of one of my dogs, or checked the clock when they were on medication. We counted months, one by one, following Belton's operation for sarcoma, the six months we were told would put him in the clear if it didn't recur, and, thanks be, it didn't. We counted the time that was left to Briar when he was on chemotherapy, months, weeks, days, Time that ran out. I count the time I had with them, these splendid setters, glorious Time that shaped me, made me glad.

Living as Kay and I do, we are masters of our time, yet there are

times when time gets crowded. Watching the clock is something I appear to do when dealing with people; with lather on my face, I hear our guests arriving punctually or even earlier, “the late George Evans” struggling to catch up.

There is a larger Time than watch or clock time—the first light of day breaking golden in the east, the afterburn of a sunset glowering behind the mountains as a November hunting day goes down. Time is the Woodcock Moon coming up, huge and orange, over the eastern ridge as you walk out of covert with your dog still questing the bosky damp for 'cock he is unwilling to give up.

Time is the cloudiness in an old dog's eyes, patient, irreversible. His is the art of counting Time: *how old would you be if you didn't know how old you are*. Time is the ache that takes him from you.

I've been blest with having been my own man with my own time for all my life with two exceptions. It still seems incredible that there was a period when I punched a wartime time clock in an aircraft factory, followed by the Navy, where I learned that clocks ran from one to twenty-four hundred, coming at me with a recorded bugle reveille over a bull horn snarling *Now hear this*.

There is a kind of Time called Indian summer, when lazy hazy afternoons are counted by the tick of falling lemon-yellow leaves, birch, aspen, maple, beech, sprinkled on dark green fern and loam of the forest floor like the pattern of an Oriental rug. I watch the clock of Indian summer as each throbbing sugar maple comes into flame, hoarding certain favorites hoping they will last, willing them not to turn too quickly, counting each miracle of colored leaf.

In this, our fiftieth Autumn at Old Hemlock, writing about it is like painting it from life even as it happens, the immolation of October—fire creeping through the four Big Ones above the house, Ruff's Maple bursting into glory, the Kennel Maple (there hasn't been a kennel since the late forties), the North Porch Maple beginning to burn at its top, the towering White Oak Maple glowing where the giant Springhouse White Oak once filled the sky, all of this is ours, Kay's and mine, sensing as the setters sense it that this is the peak of a year dying in its glory, the time of the Woodcock Moon.

Happiness is now, to be grasped before it slips away, for soon it will be November and December, the shooting season going, gone

away. How much would be lost if I hadn't, didn't, and I do, dissect each day into hours and microcosm moments, loving each hurting bit of Time, feeling it pass through my fingers and my heart. I remind myself that it would be possible for me here at Old Hemlock where clocks tick slower, to simply notice time as Light and Dark, the Open Season and the Closed, but I prefer to live it in microscopic fragments. Who is better qualified to say than a man who has lived all those tiny ticks of Time with fervor, counting the weeks for each approaching season, the days until we take off on a shooting trip, the time to get back to that wonder place called home.

My dogs know Time and make the utmost of it without the nonsense of regrets. Each scent they have known becomes a scent to happen again, remembered and accumulated as experience overlaid over all the scents passed down by their dim past of ancestors.

There is the kind of time my setters watch, more accurate than a clock, when meals are imminent. Gun dog time is yearning for hunting, brought to fever pitch if they see me in shooting clothes, enhanced by the smells of Fall, the clock time of the Season. My dogs' clock is never out of synchronization, even in age when old eyes follow my every move, wanting terribly to go along. I try to give them faith that all these wonderful things are going to go on happening, a good kind of time to run on for a dog or his man.

My setters and I share other kinds of Time—disappointing time on rainy days when they know we're not going out, or when I'm dressed for that foolishness about going to town, and they have to go back to their sofas and stop hoping.

There is the kind of Time watching the clock until a lost dog returns, or is found, or isn't. There is time, and you must take it, to lay your hand on your dog's head as you walk past him lying on the floor or on his settle, time to talk with him, to remember with him, time to please him, time you can't buy back once he's gone.

Dogs can look at a clock but never see it, hear it strike without counting, and after a lifetime with them, I think they best know how to live.

For the gunner, there is shooting time, or more nearly timing. Taking time to see the bird clearly before mounting, followed by that volatile something in the brain and reflexes that synchronizes

man-time, gun-time, velocity, and bird-time, taking Time away from that airborne miracle of energy and beauty twenty or thirty yards out in front.

Time is an essence built into my gun seventy-four years ago by four men now dead whose names I know; men who put their time and skill into it as certainly as they put their initials upon the parts they crafted, meticulous time spent with a file achieving “sucking fit” of barrels to action, time that is trigger pull and lock time, relation of sears and tumblers that make the workings of a watch seem primitive by comparison, lines of barrels and stock that flow in the motion of mounting, eye-punishing time with a burin describing scroll and rose design on the sidelocks.

There is Time in everything we do—the timing of words, beginnings, thoughts, commas, periods. I ask Time enough to get it done, not mere pulse time “to sit and nod beside the fire.” Time enough for that when Time is past. Andrés Segovia, who played his legendary guitar to the end of his ninety-four years, said, when asked about retiring, “I have eternity to rest.”

One early Autumn we found daylight-saving time so compatible with our way of life we didn’t set our clocks back in October. No one noticed, and it gave us an extra hour of gunning at end of day.

There is Star Time moving the constellations arcing the sky with the majesty of queens. One predawn October morning I stepped outside with the sky still dark, and straight above me saw an Orion such as I had never seen, with Venus in line between the Pleiades and the Hyades and Orion’s belt tipped at an angle, with Sirius low in the southeast blazing like a Kohinoor.

There is the half-light time at dawn and again at twilight when the gunner sees Indian-summer color burn more intensely than at any other time of day.

To know Time is to know what it would be like to be without it. Time is a continuum, passing even as it comes. You may try to measure it but all you are doing is dipping out portions as it flows.

When clocks run fast it is well to remember that there is Time to work, Time to love, Time to hunt, Time to sleep. And always, Time to dream, once upon a Time.