

MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 17 ISSUE 4
THE VALLEY REVIEW
CHÂTEAUBRIAND



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After six weeks touring the US and Canada by car, it felt great to see our cute little house in the country come into view. Our lawn, if you could call it that, badly needed a trim, and the indoors, after we unlocked the porch door and ventured in, badly needed airing out. Two apples we'd meant to bring along on our trip as first-day snacks, sat shriveled on the kitchen counter. The main-floor toilet had greenish-yellow scum in the bowl that needed to be flushed and scrubbed away. So far, not that bad, we reassured each other.

Bu, my husband, ducked into our bedroom to sniff out whether we should strip the bed and remake it with fresh sheets. Reappearing in the hall, he crooked a finger at me, an unreadable expression on his face. At the doorway, I looked at where he'd thrown the bedcovers back. Tiny black pellets and white grains of rice – enough for a scanty burrito bowl – sat scattered in the center. What? It took a moment for me to grasp the mischief that had taken place while we were gone. Mice had scurried back and forth from the half-filled rice bag in a kitchen cabinet to the master bed, inside of which they'd lolled snug and warm. The impertinence of these creatures, squatting while our house had been temporarily devoid of its masters!

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During the 2016 election, I felt baffled to hear Hillary Clinton repeatedly attacked as “corrupt.” In my mind – and in the dictionary – “corrupt” meant taking bribes or misusing political power to enrich oneself. The infamous 30,000 emails of hers that had been deleted represented at best a careless mistake and at worst dishonesty that didn't fit the meaning of “corrupt.” She'd had high ratings from the public while serving as Secretary of State, yet now that she was running for President, her opponent said, “Hillary Clinton is the embodiment of corruption. She's a corrupt person.” Why turn that word into a rallying cry?

One day while rebooting my computer, I remembered another meaning of the word. When unknown forces “corrupt” a file, bits or bytes that don't belong get mixed up with those that do. Information order becomes disorder. Digital contamination occurs. Aha! I saw the parallel perfectly now. Women didn't belong in the presidency. Hillary Clinton running for the highest elected office in the United States embodied disorder – defiance of the supreme cultural dictum “Men here, women over there.”

By crossing a line, Clinton in herself represented pollution. It was not anything she had done that opponents objected to so much as the threat she posed to how the world should be. No wonder the other rallying cry throughout the campaign, shouted gleefully by thousands of spectators bonding against an intruder, a cosmic gatecrasher, was “Lock her up!”

We'd heard scratching and pitter patters in the walls before our cross-country trip, but we didn't expect mice to have the whole run of the place during our absence. Maybe they'd invited in the neighborhood and held orgies? A long learning curve on our part followed. First we had

to cordon off where we didn't want them to go. Bu fashioned a door sweep to seal the guest bedroom that doubled as our pantry yet allowed us to go in and out. And before we next went away, he blocked the space under the door to our bedroom with folded cereal boxes.

With trial and error, we discovered which types of mousetraps worked best, what type of bait tempted them and what didn't. (Peanut butter got far better results than the proverbial cheese.) Still, incursions continued. In my downstairs office, I saw tooth indentations in the bar soap on the bathroom sink. I found turds and wet spots inside corrugated boxes waiting for me to take them to the dump.

Outside, a few times Bu spotted a mouse scampering straight up our shingles to the roof. From there they squeezed into the attic, he thought. And were they wandering in and out or only in? We didn't know. Years after all the chasedowns and sleuthing started, the house finally became mouse-proof when an energy audit made us eligible for blown insulation all the way under the roof, paid for by the electric company.

More than one conservative politician has orated this year, "It is a fundamental scientific fact that there are two sexes, only two." This is demonstrably false. Estimates of how many babies are born who physiologically don't clearly fall into the boxes of male or female range from two in 100 to one or two in 1000 births. In past generations, such intersexuality got swept into silence as a shameful abnormality that had to be medically adjusted somehow and then hushed, lest the "only two sexes" order crumble.

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In the 1970s, when I was a college freshman, a prim sophomore woman who lived in my dorm went everywhere on campus holding hands with a placid, good-looking boyfriend. One day the woman – not a close friend by any means – told me matter-of-factly in our communal bathroom that she and her boyfriend had gone to see a doctor because they'd tried to have sex and discovered that something was wrong. "I don't have a vagina," she said while brushing her hair. "But the doctor said specialists can fix me up so we can make love."

Later I wondered: So she never had a period, and that didn't raise an alarm? Did she have some male characteristics without realizing it or she only lacked some female ones? At a recent college reunion I asked my roommate from freshman year if she'd heard this story. Her eyes went wide and she slowly shook her head. "No. I would surely have remembered that."

While we eventually erected defenses that kept mice out of our house, our car remains contested territory. The first year we moved to the country, I began driving our BMW to the post office one day when a little mouse raced from behind the back seat, across the arm rests on the passenger side to the front floor, then up and across the dashboard area and down the driver's door toward the back again. I shouted, braked the car without pulling over and pushed out the door, shivering that the creature just missed running up my leg.

Another year I opened that car's hood to check the oil, and atop the old T-shirt rag we kept for that purpose, tucked into a corner of the engine compartment, were three newborn mice. Pink, hairless and obviously helpless, they wouldn't survive if I drove the car with them there and probably not if we transferred them to the woods, either. Bu moved the rag and mice as gingerly as he could to our wood pile.

The car we have now, a Toyota SUV, seems even more attractive to the mice who live around us. When the weather cools in fall, they begin to visit. Their poop in the front footwells shows where they cavorted during the night. Not wanting a repeat of the mouse that spooked me while I was driving, we set up spring traps for them. Once for twenty days running I discovered yet another teeny corpse sprawled by a trap in the morning. But then day after day I'd find a trap licked clean of refreshed peanut butter and no mouse, dead or alive. Were they lucky now or had some wised up?

The past few times we've flown away for several months, we came back to cracked nuts on the front floor of the car along with mouse droppings, indicating that chipmunks had taken up residence as well. Bu disassembled the dashboard to find a small bucket's worth of nuts stuffed inside it and the air filter chewed to just filaments. Supposedly mothballs keep away mice when a car isn't being driven for a while, but that remedy made little or no difference other than forcing us to drive with all the windows open for weeks once we came home until the harsh chemical smell vanished.

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One year Bu lamented that apart from a squat Japanese maple in our backyard, we didn't have plants that turned scarlet in the fall. So when the foliage colored, he pulled up red-leaved plants growing wild down the road and brought them home. Using a trowel, I was replanting one of these halfway up our driveway when a neighbor walking by called out, "Hey, you shouldn't! That's Burning Bush. It's non-native." I straightened up and shot back, "So are you and I." She glared. I added, "And what do you think the tomatoes and carrots in your garden are?"

After she left, I looked it up. Burning Bush arrived in America from Asia decades before one side of my family did from Ukraine and the border area of Poland, Austria-Hungary and Czechoslovakia. This was not long after ancestors on my other side immigrated from Germany. Tomatoes were brought to North America from the Andes, carrots from Persia and zucchini from Central America. My neighbor's apple tree originated centuries ago in Kazakhstan.

The next time I saw her she tried again. "Burning Bush is invasive!" I thought that over and asked, "So does that make it worse planted here than down the road where we got it from?" Later I thought some more. Human immigrants today, along with citizens of a despised ethnicity, are often denounced as invaders. Whether plants or people, invaders are not only going where they have no right to be, but also unfairly multiplying and taking over. Resisting an invasion is considered justified and even heroic. That's how torch-carrying young men march and chant like an army of the righteous, "Jews will not replace us!"

Although we watered our red-leaved transplants and marked their locations with stakes, the new Burning Bush plants didn't survive. The following fall, we didn't have any more red leaves in our yard than the year before.

In his 1902 masterwork, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James tackled the category of evil. He noted how some religions included evil as part of God's beneficent creation while others regarded it as some kind of "dirt" – that is, "matter out of place." This may seem like a theological nicety, no more consequential to everyday life than how many angels can dance on the head of a gun bolt. But anthropologists have wrung quite a bit of significance out of similar insights. Exploring in depth the beliefs and practices of cultures around the world, they demonstrated that humans everywhere make sense of life through ideas about which things belong where and which do not belong anywhere at all.

Things that cross mental boundaries or appear ambiguous represent danger. So cultures enforce taboos and have rituals for restoring order after transgressions. What violates category rules in one part of the globe – like a man wearing women's clothes or animals running around within a house – may prompt yawns or shrugs someplace else. But no one escapes the psychological dynamics involved. As Mary Douglas put it in *Purity and Danger*, "The yearning for rigidity is in us all. It is part of our human condition to long for hard lines and clear concepts."

Some years back I watched a neighbor uproot a few weeds from the roadside near his house and throw them into the woods. "My wife is allergic to ragweed," he volunteered when I approached. "If I can get rid of it, she won't be sneezing so much." As I walked on, I thought back to my childhood, when I got a weekly shot that our family allergist mixed up against my sensitivity to ragweed, mold, dust and dogs. I don't recall having had symptoms related to those substances, except for reddening at the site of the scratch test they did on one's forearm back then. Yet because of those test results, I got to have an air conditioner installed in the window of my bedroom while everyone else in my family suffered summer heat with just fans.

Who knew if I was still susceptible to hay fever – or ever really had been? What my neighbor was doing stuck in my head, and I decided to follow his example. Summer after summer I pulled up and tossed away stalks of ragweed along the road from our house in both directions. Its roots dislodged from the ground with a gentle tug, and after a few years I had created a quarter-mile-long, easily maintained ragweed-free zone.

A weed, most gardeners know, is a plant we don't want to be growing where it is. Native to North America, ragweed and its pollen trigger hay fever in vulnerable individuals. This August I looked at a ragweed plant in my hand and wondered, "If I were allergic to this thing, shouldn't I be sneezing and itching from touching some so often?" I wasn't. I shook my head at my silly thoughtlessness. Still, something about pulling "bad" things out of the ground, grooming a small part of my neighborhood, gave me a weird, private satisfaction. Like wiping snot off a baby who didn't care one way or the other, culling the ragweed put a smile into my soul.

