JAY BARON NICORVO

SUMMER CHICKENS

We have a dozen chickens on three acres in Saugerties, New York. My wife Thisbe and I are on a dogleg of the Plattekill Creek in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains, three miles from Woodstock. The west side of the Hudson River, the cheaper side, is where the freight trains chug by. Saugerties is blue-collar, and Woodstock is, well, Woodstock. Our living in between the two towns suits our union. Thisbe leans hippieward, and I've fled the working class. She grew up on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. I was reared on the west coast of Florida, where for years we had a station wagon raised on cinderblocks in our backyard.

In August of '08, we gathered our families and friends and got married before them, under a sugar maple behind our hodgepodge of a recently bought house: a brick box over a stacked bluestone foundation with clapboard additions done in three different decades, culminating in a literal raising of the roof by a retired rocket scientist. For our backyard ceremony, we made a surprise entrance, coming down the creek in an AeroCraft aluminum canoe we bought secondhand, and for Thisbe's thirty-fifth birthday two Mays ago, I ordered us our first half-dozen chicks from mypetchicken.com. A day old, they were over-nighted to the Post Office and arrived peeping in a cardboard box. We incubated them in a kiddie pool in our basement, under heat lamps. Through a grim calculus particular to chickens, we've lost two—to a duck hawk, a.k.a. a peregrine falcon, and to the neighbors' manic mutt. We've taken to burying our chicken dead under the marrying tree, and to assuage our losses we've added eight more.

They're a motley brood—twelve chickens, ten breeds—and their breed names do them justice: Dominique, d'Uccle Mille Fleur, Speckled Sussex, Red Frizzle. To make matters worse, we name them—Mapes, Hortense, Bonanno, Fishcakes—and two of our dozen hens have turned out to be roosters.

Chicken sexing, come to find, is more art than science. Myron (née Myra, the chicken formerly named after my mother-in-law) is a year-old Black Silkie bantam—bantams run about one-fifth to one-quarter the size of standards—and Silkies are the Ewoks of chicken breeds; they don't have feathers, they

have fuzz. Myron's our ineffectual stud, undersized and hobbled, having survived the second siege on our flock by our neighbors' dog.

Monsanto, a Jersey Giant whose glossy black feathers go iridescent green in the sun, is a cockerel hatched and shipped in June—he, too, was supposed to be a hen. But unlike midget Myron, Monsanto is a goliath, thigh-high and still growing. Like any ambitious climber, he has patiently and persistently worked his way up the pecking order, and Thisbe and I found ourselves talking about the possibility of having to kill and eat him if things got nasty, something we've yet to do with our pet chickens, a couple of whom, Sharon and Gail, bear the names of my mom and aunt.

This Sunday—of all days—I found Myron and Monsanto on the side of the house. The hens were in a tizzy, squawking madly. They don't like it when the social order is upset. The roosters were finally having at it, an all-out cockfight, our first. Monsanto towered over gimpy, feisty Myron, who burrowed into Monsanto's black ruffled chest, occasionally tucking his head under Monsanto's wing. It was almost funny, motherly even, until Myron pulled out his head. Then Monsanto pecked his crown and plucked feathers from his bouffant till Myron tucked his head back underwing.

I watched for a few minutes, wanting them to work it out, rooting for Myron all the while. He's our baby, a lap rooster really, in no small part because Thisbe saved him from his dog mauling, after which, stitched up and salved, he convalesced in our house for ten days last Thanksgiving. We nestled him in a basket on the sideboard during Thanksgiving dinner, where he crowed and clucked while we ate the turkey we roasted.

So I was playing favorites, rooting for Myron, when Monsanto tried to deliver the deathblow. He grabbed Myron's comb with his beak and jumped flapping off the ground, lifting Myron aloft before landing on him, pinning him underfoot, and brutally pecking him. I broke it up. And when I saw the damage done to Myron—he was bloodied, half scalped of his feathers, with a chunk torn from his comb and two purple knots swelling on his naked pate—I grabbed Monsanto just below the head, the heel of my hand under his beak, and I violently slung him around a few times, trying to quickly, if not painlessly, break his neck.

In my fist he jerked, flapped, not yet dead, and I gave him one more good yanking turn. He went limp. I held him at my side, his body heavy and lank. I lay him in the grass, his eyes open and unfocused. He had these beautiful, long-lashed amber eyes.

I'm an animal lover, a doter on animals. My family didn't have a lot of money while I was growing up, and one way we stayed poor was by keeping an excess of pets. (The fiscal conservatives among you may be pleased to know that our food stamps couldn't be put toward pet food.) I grew up with cats, dogs, fish, cockatiels, ball pythons, hamsters, mice, gerbils, rats, ferrets, fleas...you name it, my mother, a single parent raising three sons with help from her sister, took it in and fed it. Thisbe's the same way. One of our hens, Wunderchick, is adopted—we saved her from a soup pot—and Thisbe's dowry included two teenage cats that sleep with us most nights.

We're trying to have a baby, but Thisbe's not young. At thirty-seven, you might say she's a summer chicken. She wants to have children with me because even though I grew up without a father—or maybe because of it, raised as I was by two women—she thinks I'll make a good dad. She thinks this, in no small part, because of the way I behave toward animals.

I'm no animal whisperer, but I do believe you can talk to animals; you just have to speak their language: body language. And it helps to be a good mimic. My mom has a six-year-old Military Macaw that has the IQ, as they do, of a three-year-old child and will most likely outlive any children Thisbe and I may have. My mom agreed to watch Daniel—nicked from Jack Daniels—for a month when his former owner went into alcohol rehab. That was five years ago.

Daniel took abandonment reasonably well. In addition to being adaptive, Military Macaws are among the smartest of non-mammals, smarter than pigs. Intelligence is not simply a function of brain size. A more accurate approximator is brain size correlated to body mass. Birds' brains may be relatively small, but their hollow-boned bodies are featherweight, and macaws can have hundred-word vocabularies. Daniel fakes injuries, crying in pain and limping, until let out of his cage, whereupon he laughs a laugh that's familiar to my mom because it's hers.

They're social and intensely, sometimes violently, loyal, and as breeders, Military Macaws are monogamous, mating for life. When they like you—and they don't like many people—they do a little dance for you and you alone. This courtship involves a lot of bobbing of the head and lolling of the tongue, culminating in the regurgitation of their last meal and the offering up of it. I've never gone so far as to eat Daniel's regurgitation (though I've received it), but I have mimicked his bobble-head dance, and offered him regurgitations of my own, of which he's partaken.

This is to say that, as an animal lover, killing Monsanto killed me. I left him on the lawn—a black slackness—picked up Myron, whose wounds looked bad but were superficial, and brought him in to Thisbe. I hoped his gruesomeness would help absolve me of murder, in her eyes. Myron's her favorite, too. After I relayed what I'd done, tearfully she said I had done the right thing, ensuring Myron's safety, something she wouldn't've been able to do. I told her I thought it my responsibility to take Monsanto to the chopping block where I split wood, lop off his head, and pluck him. We had to eat him. It was the least we could do. To bury him would be a waste. Besides, we'd always outsourced the hard work, the slaughter and butchery, for the meat we ate. We thought we should know what it feels like to have tended what we'd be tasting. Thisbe said okay, but she wanted to see him first, say goodbye.

We went outside and I rounded the corner of the house ahead of Thisbe as she carried bleeding Myron wrapped in a towel. As I arrived first at the scene, she watched me stop short and pull up, my grimace pinched and anguished. She couldn't make sense of my expression, my posture, nor the low dismayed moan that issued from me, making her think that when she rounded the corner and saw what I saw, some critter—raccoon, black bear, groundhog, fisher cat—would be devouring Monsanto feathers and all.

What I saw, what we saw, when we came round the house was Monsanto, standing, standing with Hortense, one of the hens. Monsanto was alive. And what Thisbe witnessed play across my face was the baffling paradigm shift of the moment, both horrific and ecstatic, as it went from outright murder to poultry miracle—as if the boulder had been rolled back from the tomb on the very first Easter morning to reveal...an upright Jersey Giant rooster.

I'm still unnerved, relieved to discover that I'm an inept killer, disturbed by the idea of now having to care for a creature I've tried to kill. Maybe Oscar Wilde was wrong; maybe each man doesn't kill the thing he loves. Maybe each man simply tries. And I find that comforting, that there are times when we do our god-awful damnedest to abet death only to discover the harsh persistence of life.

Myron is fine if temporarily less adorable—he's Frankenchicken to Monsanto's Jesus Christ Superchicken—and Monsanto's been unsteady on his feet, wobbled, but he's doing better each day. His neck is swollen, sore, and a bit out-of-whack. We kept him apart from the others for a few days, and when I reintroduced him to the flock last night, his strut into the coop

lacked assurance, but he received a warm welcome from the hens. They clucked and trilled and made room for him on their roost (at night when bedded down and jostling for position, they make a call that sounds like a slipping fan belt). Terrified Monsanto would stumble, fall, and finish the job I'd started, I spent a breathless minute watching as he unsteadily navigated the sundry ramps and hay bales we've stacked in the stone shed that serves as the coop. When he reached the highest roost, he settled in and shut his heavily lashed eyes, Hortense on one side, Zsa Zsa on the other.

Today, outside while free-ranging, Myron has shown he can hold a grudge. He's harassing Monsanto at every opportunity, and Monsanto is newly shy where he had been bullying. Their call-and-response crowing had been a contest of anything-you-can-do-I-can-do-louder, but now when Myron crows there comes no answer.

What an emotional riot it is, tending chickens. Thisbe and I joke that we'll never need to have blowout arguments and affairs to enliven our marriage, never mind children. The tumult of chicken rearing is drama enough. If it turns out we're unable to have kids, I don't know that we'd adopt, and given our so-it-goes attitude toward the possibility of becoming parents, we don't imagine ourselves resorting to fertility treatments and specialized basters. Chickens will suffice—though for years I've talked about wanting a small herd of pygmy goats, and Thisbe has fantasies about holding her coffee mug under the udder of our very own milk cow and giving a tug. We love our animals, and unfortunately we never love them more than after we've done them harm.