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Land in the country provides sounds and silence

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Well, February's finally gone.

Those of us who live where glaciers once roamed and have a selfish interest in a little global warming are in better spirits. This is a quiet time in the country. Everything is brown, about 377 muted shades.

The cattle pastures are gummy and sour from being dumped on all winter. Trees stand bare and dark against the white slope of Devil's Backbone. The dirt is wet. Mud rears its ugly head, hungry to swallow an unbuckled galosh. The average temperature has risen a little since January. This morning is warm. Melissa's two Tennessee Walkers are flaked out flat on the ground, sun bathing. They look dead, but usually aren't.

Sugar maples pump their sap without fanfare. It's nice that we can make syrup without harming them. Robbery normally involves a victim and strong language spoken loudly. It looks like I'll have enough firewood to get through the season, which, around here, can hook a claw deep into early May. I've kept a fire each winter for 35 years, using wood I've cut and split. Keeping warm this way does not merit an award, but it is a little something.

Wood heat is primitive. It keeps me connected to the earliest humans in Africa, cave dwellers in France and the Asian migrants who were the first to make campfires in Blue Grass, which used to be known as Crab Bottom until a majority around here felt we were sending the wrong message to non-residents. Wood smoke is not so good for global warming and human lungs. These are inconvenient truths that I conveniently choose to feel bad about.

February is always a big fat funk. A neighbor's child with Downs died hard at 32. Three hundred came to her service in a snow storm. Then Ivan Puffenbarger's sugar camp burned down two nights ago, taking 700 gallons of good cheer with it.

Five hundred years ago, some guy like me was running around on a morning like this, his shoes muddy, looking for something to shoot with a stone arrowhead and take home to the missus. He drank out of the spring where I smoke cigars in the summer.

I hold his business card in my hand. The stone point is symmetrical, balanced and still sharp-edged. It's pretty. His consciousness is there in his "product," to use MBA-speak. His workmanship is his signature. What have I done, I ask myself, in 62 years that's anywhere nearly as good? What have I done that will last? What of my consciousness will survive like an arrowhead?

The end of February stirs up such questions, which have been conveniently hibernating all winter. Like most everybody else, I haven't done anything that history will record as having amounted to much. Nothing I've produced will last very long. Human beings leave piles behind them--pyramids, garbage, ruins, money, war dead, tax receipts just in case, a box of URGENT MAIL from 1967 and foundations (including 501c3s).

My pile is mostly paper. Perhaps I should have written in stone like my predecessor in title. The best of us leave art, music, something we've made for someone else, an idea, an insight, a kind act, something figured out. If we're lucky, we leave children who are better than we are.

February is quiet only on the surface. Crummy weather gives rise to cosmic turmoil among those of us far beyond all beltways. Farm work is mostly inside—planning, figuring, hoping, rolling the dice. Everybody is putting a pencil to the near future and dollaring things out.

Livestock, of course, still need to be fed. Cattle say nothing until the food wagon appears, then the leader of the pack remembers that mooing turns the tractor's wheels faster. Shoveling manure out of a winter barn is useful work, though it's never gotten the poem it deserves.

It's a tranquil time that you can't find in a city. Just you, a shovel and about 200 square feet of pleasant muck two feet thick. When you take a break, your mind wanders to important items like good friends you haven't talked to for three or four decades, grammatical mistakes from the 1970s or wisecracks you didn't think of at the time.

Occasionally, I think that every Presidential candidate should be required to clean out at least one barn before taking office. That will make him or her ready for the White House on day one. Psychologists say daydreaming is very creative. Manure presents endless opportunities for highly productive work of this type. It also allows you to transfer it from one place where it's not wanted to another where it will do some good.

The nice thing about February is that it ends. Raucous spring lies in wait. Birds are the worst; they disturb the peace of April and May like revelers in Times Square on New Year's Eve. The arrowhead-maker whose land I now occupy could not have imagined the Blue Grass Valley 500 years later. He could not have envisioned electric lights, television, blogs, computers, cell phones, vehicles or 1040s.

But he knew all the big things--war and peace, love and hate, belief, full belly and empty, family, work, laughter and maple syrup. In March, 2508, America will be stuffed with people. We will have found better, less-polluting sources

of energy. We will have figured out ways to keep ourselves healthier longer. We will routinely travel in space, undersea, around the globe. We will know more, spend more, have more.

We will surely have killed many millions of our kind in wars over land, resources and religion.

We will still be rich and poor.

Maybe, we will be stupid less.

The odds are good that this arrowhead will still be around.

And in any case, March is here with all its huffery and puffery.

It's time to do something more useful than write a postscript to an arrowhead. Perhaps what that is will come to me this week.

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