

THE JOY OF JUGGLING

I've missed Metuchen. For the past week I've been sharing a farmhouse in Goshen, Vermont, with Lynn, our dog Nellie, a gray mouse, a family of houseflies, seven sheep, and two young chocolate-colored oxen named Bright and Buster. Lynn's favorite of the sheep is a low-slung female of a breed named Babydoll Southdown. Because this particular sheep is so sluggish and plodding, compared with her comrades, we go out in the morning to feed her fallen crab apples.

I came to this farmhouse to watch the leaves change to the color of pumpkins. The leaves have spent the week watching *me* change. I hear them whispering at sundown:

“God, he’s getting older.”

“Does he really need two pairs of glasses?”

“Is he still talking about his hemorrhoids?”

There is no heat in this place other than a wood-burning stove, so I arise at six in the morning and attempt to light some birch logs. Nellie watches patiently (hungrily) during the half-hour it takes me to get the stove to throw a little heat. Then I feed her with a mix of her special digestive food bought from the Scottish Dog on Main Street in Metuchen. I watch her eat through my new gray-framed glasses, bought at Optique Unique on Main Street, and I realize I carry my small town next to me like an old, comfortable friend.

Nellie's in love with the two oxen. I feel her heart racing as I hold her up to the fence—and they approach with the curiosity of beings who have only been alive for four months. Their nostrils steam in the morning air. Their eyes are large and liquid. Hard to eat an Angus burger after encountering the beseeching look in their eyes. And Lynn has been rescuing living things all week. She finds caterpillars pushing themselves blindly across Carlisle Hill Road, and she gathers them up (brown/cherry striped; lime-green striped) to place them safely in the grass. I hang up strips of flypaper in the house — and even that is too much for Lynn. We hear the flies buzzing (screaming?) in the kitchen; their tiny legs stuck to the yellow, curling Revenge fly tape — and it suddenly feels as if we're two heartless commandants supervising the Housefly Holocaust. Soon these strips come down altogether.

The mouse cube I set on the kitchen counter at night is filled in the morning with a small gray mouse who seems to be still enjoying the salted cashew he found inside it. I drive one mile to the Goshen Town Hall where, with a little encouragement, he leaps two feet out of the cube and disappears into a dark crack in the foundation. The next day Lynn tells me she saw him hiking back up the road with a checkered knapsack over his shoulder.

The music that's accompanied us on this interlude is the remastered *Abbey Road* — which sounds as if it were recorded yesterday, not 50 years ago. I'm delighted that, on the

outtakes, Lennon relentlessly parodies his own lyrics. From “Come Together”: “He’s got high-school lyrics...he’s got Doris Duckers...he’s got hotrod baldie!” All my life I’ve loved language juggled for the pure joy of it. I remember as a kid watching *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In* and hearing the band introduced as “Burt Bacharach and His Band of Renacharach.” I’m not quite sure that, back then, I understood it was a parody of Les Brown and His Band of Renown—to me it was just silly, wonderful words spun and spiraled in mischievous delight. That was enough. The deep pleasure of that verbal prestidigitation has informed much of my (so-called) adult life.

J.D. Salinger lived most of his life about 90 minutes from this farm. And I think briefly of visiting the Windsor Diner to eat my lunch (alone!) in the shadow of Salinger — in the hope that some inspiration might still be clinging to the porcelain plates. But I drive home to Metuchen instead. After five hours of driving, I’m back downtown watching a bespattered crew repainting the exterior of Hailey’s Harp and Pub from green to black. There’s a party atmosphere surrounding this band of mixed-aged painters. A radio/CD player is accompanying them, and, miraculously or deliberately, it’s playing the Rolling Stones’ “Paint It Black.” I laugh out loud (“I see a red door/And I want it painted black”) and the juggling, the spinning of those silver plates, sparkles in the autumn air around me.