

# Penumbra

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF  
CRITICAL AND CREATIVE INQUIRY

Issue 2, Spring 2015

*Penumbra: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Critical and Creative Inquiry*

www.unionpenumbra.org

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*Penumbra* is the official, refereed, scholarly journal of Union Institute & University's Ph.D. Program in Interdisciplinary Studies. The journal is published at regular intervals and dedicated to challenging traditional academic and creative disciplinary boundaries in the context of social change.

*Penumbra's* purpose is to promote theoretically informed engagements with concrete issues and problems. The journal publishes socially engaged, innovative, creative and critical scholarship with a focus on ethical and political issues in the humanities, public policy, and leadership. *Penumbra* is a peer-edited and peer-reviewed journal committed to spanning the divide between scholarly and creative production, and to fostering work from graduate students, junior scholars and emerging artists, in addition to more established critical and creative voices.

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## The Old Yellow Dog

Nathan was frozen. He carried a cold shotgun with mittened hands. He followed the procession out of the woodland of his childhood like a performer in a parade. It was a sad parade, like a funeral parade. The weary men tramped through the brushwood on and on across treacherous uneven ground leaving their tracks in the fallen snow. Nathan was by far the youngest of them. He was only a boy, and he watched the medical techs up ahead through a boy's eyes. Those uniformed men were breathless and resting of their burdensome load. Nathan circled around them with the other frozen fellows. All of them were armed with rifles. He could see the labored wisps of breath coming from the mouths of the responders as they leaned heavily upon the stretcher. And upon that stretcher was strapped the covered body of his friend and neighbor, Butch Lester.

At last the troop was rested. The men moved once again through the snowy thicket. Nathan caught a glimpse as they trudged along, or perhaps the shadow of a glimpse of yellow fur through the brush. Get away! He tried to project the words in silence. He glanced around wondering if anyone else had seen the dog. It seemed that no one had. No one was talking. Everyone seemed lost in their thoughts. Heads were cast downward. Steps were being minded on the slippery forest floor. Nathan risked another look but didn't see any other sign of the dog. Maybe he hadn't seen anything at all.

Finally, the crowd of hunters made it out of the woods. Nathan noticed that shards of ice clung to the beards of the men. Their camouflage clothing clashed with the he police-like uniforms that the medical techs wore. This time, the medical techs sat their load on the frozen ground beside Nathan's grandfather's hog lot. They stood catching their breaths. Jay Lester patted his brother Rolland on the back and then draped an arm across

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his shoulders and held him close for a moment. Then he broke that embrace and walked on, passed the hog lot. He did not slow down as he passed by the smoke house and the peach trees. The bee hives standing between the trees were quiescent and covered in six inches of new snow.

One by one, the others left too—a dozen in all—thirteen in, twelve out. They all left silently. There was no talk. There wasn't anything to say. Soon they'd all made their way across the barnyard to the driveway. They got into their trucks and started them up, and then vanished down the snow covered road toward Jay's farm. The Overbays were the closest neighbors. Nathan watched them pulled into their driveway a hundred feet down the road.

The two medical techs once again heaved up the heavy stretcher and sallied on across the snowfall to where their ambulance was parked in the pull-off just across the road. Nathan's grandmother strode out of her kitchen onto the back porch of the farmhouse alert to the uneasy quietness. Across the bare garden space, that same uneasy quietude brought Hazel Lester out of her house. The wind blew through Hazel as she stood like a wraith staring across the way at Rolland. Then her eyes followed the trail of the medical techs to the ambulance, into which they were loading Butch's body.

Hazel's cry pierced the crisp snowy afternoon. Nothing had been said, nothing needed to be said. The silence said it all. Nathan soldiered across the barnyard bearing his shotgun in tired arms and climbed the concrete steps to the back porch where his grandmother stood like a statue in her long-sleeve cotton print dress. She put an arm around the boy and hugged him to her side. "You're just about froze," she said. "You come on in and get warm by the stove."

Nathan and his grandmother went inside to a warm kitchen while his grandfather and cousin Rolland talked in the cold of the morning. His grandmother busied herself making hot coffee. Nathan propped his 410 shotgun gingerly in the corner by the tall stool upon which he usually sat at mealtimes. "I don't want that shotgun no more," he said. He pulled off his hunting mittens and laid them on the painted stool. He unzipped his camouflage hunting jacket. He pulled it off his shoulders and laid it atop his mittens.

"What happened out there?" his grandmother asked.

"Butch fell on his shotgun and killed himself." Nathan said.

"I knew you were too young to go on that hunt," said his grandmother. "Why did Basil take you along? You're only ten years old."

Then the screen door screeched open and Nathan's grandfather pushed inside and closed the cold wind out behind him. Nathan took up his shotgun from the corner and held it out to his grandfather. "I don't want this shotgun no more," he said.

Basil eyed the boy thoughtfully. "You clean that weapon and put it on the rack," he said. "And I don't want to hear no sass."

Nathan nodded and carried the shotgun down the hallway. His footfalls clunked

upon the parquet floor. He took off his snow boots and sat them in their place. He gathered his cleaning kit and sat at the mirrored desk in the corner of his bedroom. He carefully unloaded the weapon just as his grandfather had taught him. And then he took up the brush from his kit and dabbed it in a little gun oil. At last, he began scrubbing the carbon off the weapon's bolt.

At last, Nathan ran an oiled patch through the bore of that shotgun. He remembered the day that his grandfather first taught him to shoot. It was back in the summer when Nathan's days began early. He and his grandfather were up long before breakfast. They milked the old Jersey cow. Nathan squirted warm fresh milk at the barn cats and laughed. Grandfather scolded him a little for being wasteful. Then he grinned. They took grain to the steers in the pasture. They fed the chickens. Fed the hogs. All before his grandmother called them in to breakfast.

For her part, Mary prepared fried eggs with salt and pepper and gravy. She baked fresh biscuits. She fried ham and sausage. There were sliced tomatoes on the side. There was fresh blackberry jam. And honey. Nathan was starved and ate a heaping plateful. His grandfather enjoyed a plateful, as well, and, afterward, sipped a cup of hot coffee while his grandmother washed up the dishes. Nathan had fresh milk to drink. After breakfast they all went out to work in the garden, Grandmother too.

In the garden there were long straight rows of sweet peas. There were half-runners attached to stakes and cucumbers growing in mounds. There was a lettuce patch and hills of yellow squash. There were rows of pinto beans. Rows of zucchini. There were tall tomato plants and potato hills. There were turnips, corn, and beets. The three weeded with hoes. Nathan took a break about midmorning and peeled a fresh turnip, and he ate it with a little salt from his grandmother's kitchen. His grandmother brought ice water and fresh lemonade to the shade of the big weeping willow in the yard beside the garden. Nathan had played under that old tree since he could remember among the ants and spiders and all sorts of bugs that loved that tree too.

After supper, his grandfather got Nathan and took him out past the smokehouse. "We need to have a talk," he said.

Nathan looked up at his grandfather solemn-like.

"Roland tells me that you've been feeding that old yellow bitch from the woods out back of the hog lot. Is this so?"

Nathan shook his head no.

"Don't lie to me, boy. Now, have you?"

"I like that dog," Nathan said. "She got between me and a sick fox once and saved me from getting bit. So I friended her. I fed her just like you said. But I bet it was Butch that told on me."

"That's a wild dog, boy. And it runs with a pack. Roland's afraid they'll start stealing chickens."

“That old yellow girl ain’t stole no chickens. Maybe a weasel will steal a chicken. Maybe a chicken hawk will. Maybe a fox will.”

Basil sighed; he ran a hand through his shock of gray hair. “You wait here, boy,” he said. “It’s time you learned to shoot.”

Nathan thought he was about to get his hide tanned, but no, his grandfather was really going to teach him to shoot. Nathan had waited for that moment all his life. He remembered all the times when Jay and Rolland and the neighbors had come to his grandfather’s after work. Or sometimes they came on Sunday afternoons. Sometimes they brought guns to show or to trade. Nathan’s grandfather had one of the finest gun collections in the county. Sometimes they came without guns to talk and look at his grandfather’s guns. Nathan had always been there. But nobody had paid him any attention much. But now he bet they would. Now, he’d know how to shoot.

At last, his grandfather showed up with a .22 lever action rifle. “Look here,” he said. He showed Nathan how to load cartridges into the ammo tube. Then he put the weapon in the boy’s hands.

“What do I do with it?” Nathan asked.

His grandfather showed him how to hold the weapon firmly in the crook of his shoulder. “Now, focus on the front sight, and line it up in the center of the rear sight. Now hold the front sight in front of your target. Now stop breathing and squeeze the trigger.”

Nathan took aim at a bean can on a post and fired. He hit the target dead center. His grandfather smiled. Nathan cocked the weapon and fired again. A miss. “You lost your form,” his grandfather said. “Get back in your stance.” By evening, Nathan was shooting fairly well. His grandfather’s coaching had paid off. The busy summer days passed quickly. Some shooting was a part of Nathan’s daily routine most every day.

Fall of the year came around and, before Nathan knew it, the garden was picked clean. His grandfather had killed a hog, and the hams and shoulders were hanging in the smokehouse. The tang of thick camp smoke was in the air. His grandmother had stocked the shelves in the basement with canned tomatoes. There were canned green beans and potatoes. Canned beets. Canned pintos and corn. There were canned carrots and squash. The freezer was filled with Turnips. There was corn on the cob. There was bacon. Sausage. Side meat and tenderloin. There was wild game that Nathan and his grandfather had brought home from the forest. Turkey, Venison, and Rabbit.

Outside, the summer greenery had turned to ruby red, sparkling gold, and lavender. Nathan spent his days in school, which he liked almost as much as he liked shooting. He spent his evenings communing with those brilliant fall colors. Then a chilly wind sent Nathan indoors. It blew all those russet leaves to the cold ground.

A snow took pity come November and covered all the auburn undergrowth. One Saturday morning his grandfather woke Nathan up early. “Dress warm,” he said. “And load your shotgun with some buckshot.”

Nathan was surprised to see Jay Lester and his brother Rolland when he made it to the kitchen. Earl and Jerry and Carter were sitting at the table sipping coffee. Butch was sitting on Nathan's favorite stool. Nathan was uneasy. He'd never been around Butch much except when he was about to get into trouble. Graham Overbay and his son Michael and three men Nathan didn't know were in the dining room at the big table that was used only for company. His grandmother was busy keeping all their coffee cups filled. She gave Nathan a jelly biscuit, and then she gave him another one wrapped in a napkin to go in the pocket of his hunting jacket.

At last, all the men drained their cups. There was much nervous talk. Nathan could feel an excitement he'd never before felt. Everyone had their hunting rifles with them. Carried like weapons of war. He noticed that his grandfather carried his Benelli semi-automatic 12 gauge. It was the first time Nathan had ever seen him carry that prized possession. Out the door the men filed into the bite of the frigid winter morning.

Across the barnyard, they trudged through the stinging wind toward the woodland. Nathan's retreat and refuge. That enchanted forest where he'd roamed and played since he was old enough to walk. He had hunted there with his grandfather many times. But now he strode silently with the others. Each man was an experienced hunter and knew the value of a noiseless approach. Past the chicken house they marched in a single-file line. Past the smokehouse. Past the peach trees and the beehives. Past the hog lot and into the snowy wood, they walked.

Nathan's grandfather was known to be a skilled tracker. It was said that Basil Ratliff could track a snake across the surface of a pond. So Basil led the way. On and on the troop traveled through the dense snowy forest. At last, Basil stopped short and pointed to his right. Jay Lester headed that way, Rolland and Graham Overbay followed close behind. The others followed suit moving in single file. At last the men encircled a thick patch of wild blackberry.

The brush was thick, so Nathan couldn't see his grandfather over to his left. But Butch was crouched about forty feet to his right by a Hawthorne tree. Then the dogs caught wind of the men and the howling began. Nathan didn't know exactly how many dogs there were. He guessed about a dozen or fourteen. About the same number as the number of men who were there to kill them.

Then the first shots rang out, some of them finding their marks. High pitched wails of pain reverberated through the wood. Then the thick brushwood in front of Nathan began to rustle. A large brown and white dog ran in a panic straight toward him. A big male. The dog saw him and turned and scrambled the other way, toward Butch. Nathan waited for the animal to turn again, but it growled a fierce growl instead and continued straight for Butch. Butch raised his weapon, but Nathan heard no report. The terrified look on Butch's face told Nathan that his weapon had misfired. Still the dog dashed onward.

Nathan raised his shotgun and trained his sights just below the dog's right ear and squeezed the trigger. The dog jerked his head once before falling over and lying still on the frozen forest floor. Butch stood staring at the dead animal as it lay just a few feet from him. A crimson patch formed on the snow around it. Then the thicket in front of Nathan began to rustle once again.

This time it was the old yellow dog that Nathan had befriended. It was breaking toward the area between Nathan and Butch. Nathan decided quickly to let it pass. All it wanted was to get away. To his horror, however, Butch had his sights on the dog. "Don't shoot," Nathan yelled. He headed over toward Butch.

Butch eyed Nathan coolly. "You shot one," he said. "I get to shoot one too." He fired and barely missed the animal.

Nathan closed the distance between them. "I said don't shoot." He stepped up and put a hand on Butch's weapon knocking his aim askew.

Butch pushed Nathan back and set his sights once again on the dog, but it was too late. The old yellow dog had disappeared into the thicket. Butch ran furiously over to where the dog had vanished. "Let it go," Nathan yelled.

That's when Butch stepped in a hole obscured by the snow and tumbled headlong down an embankment. Nathan ran toward where Butch was floundering in the snow drift. But something was horribly wrong. Butch's shotgun cart wheeled under him and the barrel wound up pointed under his chin. His finger was still on the trigger. Nathan saw the blast like it was a gory figment of war. He didn't remember hearing it.

Nathan saw that muffled, exploding blast again as he sat at his desk. He steadied himself by focusing on cleaning his shotgun. At last, he considered how the men had reacted to what had happened. They'd been sorely aware of the gravity of the nature of the accident. There was no doubting this. But the thing that surprised Nathan was that no one examined the role the gun played. No one seemed to have given this a single thought. The gun was an accepted fixture in the household. He gave his own shotgun one last polishing, just as his grandfather had taught him to do, before hanging the weapon on the gun rack.