



My Brown Boy

Sunlight, magic, and pantherlike screams
on the frozen plains of north-central Montana

BY RICK BASS
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MY BOY, MY BROWN BOY COLTER—named for the mountain man who outran a whole tribe of Blackfeet—is a year and a half old. He’s proven himself a genius on grouse, and now I’m going to give him his first shot at pheasants. He and Tim Linehan’s six-year-old golden retriever, Maddie, ride nestled together in the back of Tim’s truck. It’s cold—somewhere just this side or the other of zero—but sunny, by God; we find sun less than an hour into our journey, and don’t look back.

We drive up and over the Continental Divide, somewhere east of Glacier: the world falls away before us. We ride down out of the mountains without speaking, merely gaping at the flat eastern country below, and blue sky, and sunshine. It doesn’t matter what town we head to—they are not all the same, but they are all similar.

We check into the only motel in town, where we’re the only guests. Because it’s so damn cold, the potholes are frozen over, and there are no duck hunters around. No other pheasant hunters either; the sensible ones did their shooting in the warm months, October and November.

Tom will join us in a couple of days, but for now it’s just Tim and me and Colter and Maddie. Tim loves his dog as much as I love mine.

Here is how it is done, according to Tom: you just go up to a farmhouse and knock on the door. You ask if you can hunt on the farmer’s land. When the door opens, usually—according to Tom—they say yes. It’s like Halloween, like trick-or-treat for grown-ups....

I’ve brought a spark collar, shock collar, behavioral correction unit, whatever you want to call it, with me, to keep Colter from running over the horizon—and I have got it plugged into the wall socket, charging, but sometime in the night it falls out, or Colter gets up and unplugs it, so that we will have to hunt naked. I am secretly relieved; I’ve never used it on him before.

We knock on doors that morning, and everyone says yes—hell yes—and we find pheasants. Colter’s not locking down on the scent yet—he’s not pointing—but he’s sure finding the birds, weaving wildly and joyously through the thick grass, bounding in goofy pogo leaps like a mule deer, or a fox pouncing on a mouse—head swiveling this way and that, delirious on the jetstream of myriad scents, hundreds of birds running, scuttling, and the ringing of the dogs’ bells, and the distant shouts of Tim and me trying to call our dogs back... Sometimes the flushed birds fly back toward us rather than away, so that we’re able to get a shot, but we’re missing and the birds just keep on flying, all morning long—some of them roosters, big roosters. One of them seems as large as a pterodactyl—Colter locks down on him, a perfect point—but I am so surprised by the bird’s immensity, and the proximity of him, that I miss both shots....

We spend the rest of that sunny, frigid morning wandering around one of the great square fields, trying to keep the wind always in our faces, even when the dogs are no longer in sight. Colter is still jumpy, twitchy, anticipating the flushes—after each

flush he runs after the bird, barking madly—but sweet and elegant Maddie is beginning to work closer, so that we’re learning to read her body language: the propeller-like spinning of her thick banner of a tail when she is trailing a running bird—the “spin-move,” like Hakeem Olajuwon in the paint, when the running rooster reverses direction on her, or when she hears or even sees it; and the double paw pounce—again, like a fox on a mouse under snow, when she flushes the bird—but still, we are missing, missing, missing....

We continue to be greeted at farmhouse front doors with unimaginable courtesy and hospitality. We try to remember the names of our benefactors, and jot down their addresses on scraps of napkins and paper bags, afterward; but in our enthusiasm for the hunt, in the mind-scrambling, mind-dumping, and reordering that goes on in the heat of the hunt, we usually end up forgetting the proper names and can speak of the coverts later that night in only a frantic, abbreviated shorthand: Red Barn Man. Happy Man. Hippie-Dude’s Place.

The great mountains—the Stony Mountains—shine white and blue in the near distance, like guardians over our mountain souls as we frolic down in the flatlands—land of monoculture, land of sun, land of fun. The scowling intensity of our deer season—the gray broodiness, the sneakiness—falls away into bright laughter.

It’s a day of many misses—all misses, in fact—but of unrelenting grace. Colter pointed a skunk, but all parties escaped unscathed. At one point he is gone for an hour and returns with a single porcupine quill stuck in his lower lip.

Back in the warm motel room Tim and I share a six-pack, bragging on our dogs, and watch a football game on that strange small blue-glowing miracle, the television. We’ve gotten so charged-up, so oversensitized and overstimulated, out on the strange magic prairie, that we need something to suck our brains out and back down to zero—to counterbalance things—and the beer and television are just the thing.

The dogs lie resting on the bed, watching us watch the game, their eyes bright, waiting for tomorrow.

In the morning the Rockies are carved in ice, sculpted white with new snow, as are the Sweet Grass Hills to the north, though no snow fell down in the flatland. The sky is clear, as if that snow up in the hills and mountains was put there not by clouds, but by magic. Each of the three hills is burnished by the day’s new light, a strange distant copper color touching only the snow hills, and they seem almost a place to look at, rather than go to: as if they contain too much power to be approached by a frivolous state of mind.... We hunt around the missile silos that day. More birds, more shots, more misses. How can anyone miss anything as large as a pheasant? Colter and Maddie are both learning fast—Maddie trying to bend the running pheasants back toward us, or, if we’re close enough, trying valiantly to make them flush right then and there, while Colter continues to freeze like a viper whenever he steps in that kill-zone of hot scent. So jazzed is the young pointer that, though

he holds his points staunchly, as if cast in instant bronze, he has taken to screaming—not howling or yelping, but screaming—even as he holds that staunch point, and screaming louder than do the brightly colored birds with the long tails as they sail away unscathed, and the sounds of our presence echo and roll across the golden plains. There's so much shooting that I worry whether the security sensors around the silos are registering their alarm and red lights in Washington are glowing and beeping. Perhaps one more volley, one more fruitless fusillade, will send things over the edge, and the silo panels will fall away and the great doomsday rockets will emerge, lighting the sky orange and scorch-melting our flesh (the scent of cooked wheat all around us)—or perhaps Colter's panther-like screams will be enough to trip the signals and break the earth open below, cracking it in half and giving birth to the end of the world, all because we could not hit a pheasant....

That afternoon Colter points a short-eared owl in its stick-nest burrow on the ground. The bird refuses to flush, only hisses and clacks its beak at us.

Still later, he jumps a jackrabbit; both he and the rabbit are off to the races, moving so fast and in such a straight line across the horizon that they both seem to be drawn on a string, a fast string being sucked away into eternity...It's a lot of new stuff to throw at a young dog....

Just after dusk, making the long hike back to the truck, exhausted and birdless, with a full moon rising above the Sweet Grass Hills, we jump a big buck. His antlers are bone white, glowing in the moonlight: sun-bleached, out here on the plains, rather than the dark, deep-chocolate-colored antlers of the bucks we're used to seeing back in the jungle.

We're starting to drag. The dogs are covering over a hundred miles a day. We're getting lots of shooting practice. I think we're going to hit one soon.

Tom, perhaps the world's most skilled outdoorsman, joins us the next day. He has brought Paggon, Colter's mother. Tom promptly begins killing birds—hitting and dropping whatever he aims at—but we forgive him because he is such a good friend.

Tim and I don't understand that you're not supposed to hurry up to your dog when he's on point—that you're supposed to saunter, calling casual words of encouragement; that you're supposed to try to keep your heart to less than 80 beats per minute, to be calm and steady as you stroll up, with the world—all that you and your dog have been laboring for, all

autumn, indeed, all of your lives together—frozen as if forever.

Tom shows us how it's done. I've got to admit, he makes it look pretty cool: striding to his destiny, rather than charging high-kneed and panting through the stubble, shotguns broken and held aloft for safety as Tim and I do, storming the hills toward the frozen dark brown dog as if intent upon taking a beachhead.

At lunch, Tom lights a cigar and tells us that he'd be embarrassed if there was anyone around to see us. But there isn't. They've all gone south for the winter, for vacations in Billings, in Miles City, or the South Pacific. Farming is over 'til spring. The land lies silent, save for Colter's occasional screams....

Colter really wants a pheasant; so does Maddie. I don't care if I ever hit one or not—well, actually that's not quite true—but I do want these incredible, wonderful, steadfast dogs to have one.

We drive down the road, searching for a new covert to try. The mesh screen for the sliding window of Tim's camper shell flaps in the wind for where, on an earlier grouse hunt this fall, Colter,

*He courses the field as if in a mad slalom...
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smaller Zs with seeming abandon....*

rather than remaining in the truck where we had left him (for disciplinary reasons) chose to chew his way out, and joined us—proudly—out in the woods (terrifying us as he came bounding up silently from behind, dark as a bear, fast as a lion...).

We stop at a homestead owned by a man we've named for the huge leaking plug of tobacco he keeps stored in his cheek as he talks. He has a little 40-acre piece up on the hill—we can identify it by the mass of rotting hay bales that rest at the bottom of the hill like a sinking ship, hay bales from the century before, perhaps—and he has more land too, he tell us, but those lands have coyote-getters scattered all around. Whether he means cyanide traps or explosive, baited cartridges buried just beneath the skin of the earth, I don't know, and don't ask. Tobacco Man advises us that we might want to keep our dogs away from those places, and we agree. We don't get into it with him—the studies that show that the harder you trap coyotes, the more offspring they produce and the younger the population becomes, and that it's those young coyotes who are usually the troublemakers....

Feeling troubled by the endless, useless war on coyotes, who would eat the rabbits and pheasants that eat the grass and grain that the cattle could otherwise eat, or the farmer could otherwise sell, we head over to the 40 acres. The other dogs are a bit winded, so we run Colter solo.

Forgive me for bragging on my dog. Forgive me always for doing this. It is not meant to be any reflection upon myself, by any means, but rather, simply, an astonished marveling, a celebration,





of my undeniable good fortune to be blessed, graced, by his all-encompassing talent.

He runs the table. We point him downhill and into the wind. There are seven roosters in that 40 acres and he points them all. The reason I know there were not eight is because he did not find eight.

He courses the field as if in a mad slalom, a giant, seven-legged Z—a canine Zorro, slashing innumerable smaller Z's with seeming abandon—reckless, until the moment, the point of truth with each bird, when he locks up solid, sometimes almost pitching forward in a somersault, so sudden is his stop—his hind legs and bony rear end almost piling up over his front legs, or swinging like a jack-knifed trailer way out around in front of him.

The birds hold; then they flush. We fire, and miss. We miss and miss, and it doesn't matter. In bird hunting, one piece of bliss—one little window of dog perfection, one wedge of success, 30 seconds of grace, is enough to obliterate all the errors of a lifetime—either yours, or the dog's.

By the bottom of the hill, Colter is trembling as he points, locked up on that seventh rooster. Streams of snow-white slobber trail from his jowls, fleck his face. My dog; I'm so tired of letting him down.

The rooster flushes, flares left; I swing and shoot and keep swinging, and the bird tumbles almost inexplicably—so unaccustomed am I to this result—to the ground, a small cloud of feathers floating above him, marking his descent. Colter rushes over to the

bird—we can see its copper and black feathers sticking up out of the brush where he has crash-landed—and sinks his inch-long fangs into the dead bird's breast and begins shaking the bird like a rat terrier, making more feathers fly. I hurry over and take the bird from him and pat him.

Tim and Tom are cheering, as happy for Colter as I am, and they come over to congratulate us, as if we have done something difficult, not simple: not blood-earth simple.

If the bird had flared right, Tim would have hit it.

A night of celebration. The three dogs wrestling on the bed, playing like puppies: aging mother, her young son Colter, and the elegant, peak-of-her-prime Maddie: three dogs writhing, yipping, panting, grinning—pouncing on one another and playing tag.

The weather report says there's still a blizzard going on, back up over the other side of the Divide—back in the dark woods.

The freezer is full of Tom's birds. There are pretty feathers everywhere; the dogs have ripped into the paper bag full of them that we have saved to take back home, to show our people what pheasants look like. Feathers on the tips of the dogs' noses, feathers all over their backs, all over the room.

The last day is even colder and more brilliant. Hoarfrost falling through the sky, sparkling in the midday sun.

Midday, Maddie runs a rooster zigging and zagging through the covert; the bird erupts, flies right past Tim, and he fires and drops it: Maddie retrieves it. Tim is smiling, as quiet, as she brings it in to him, as I was exultant, yesterday—but I know he is feeling the exact way, inside: the very same.

We hunt almost all the rest of the day, in that sun-glittery cold, stopping to marvel at the scenery often. When the dogs' vertebrae begin showing, we turn around and go back home, back across the prairie and up and over the pass, back into the heart of winter; but our blood is filled, once more, with sunlight and magic. 🐾

Rick Bass, who lives in Montana's Yaak Valley, is the author of 17 books of fiction and nonfiction. Stan Fellows, of Iowa City, Iowa, has illustrated articles in Atlantic Monthly, Field & Stream, and Harper's.