

Though western South Dakotans can be a surprisingly tolerant bunch, there is something in the way Erney and I live that offends some. For them this land is a sort of factory and it should produce wheat and beef. The idea of enjoying the natural features of the country, minimizing human impact on the land, and deviating from the way people have traditionally lived out here simply does not compute. And what really puzzles some of them is that by managing the land for wildlife and grass we end up raising more and better-quality livestock than many.

When I first moved here some of the neighbors were suspicious of my intentions. It took almost two years to become friends with my closest neighbor. Those were in the years when parts of the West were dotted with missiles pointed at Russia. They are gone now, but back then there were a dozen within ten miles of the ranch. Steve Bestgen has become a good friend, but at first he seemed to avoid me. He farmed a field that had no good access except through my yard, and for a week or so in the spring and fall Steve passed back and forth outside my office window several times a day.

The road he took is not a public thoroughfare, it is our mile-and-a-quarter driveway, but I didn't mind. I would be at my desk trying to write, but since I welcome every opportunity to stop writing, I waved as he passed. He would pretend not to see me, and after a few trips past my window I was so desperate to stop writing that I would run out to flag him down when I heard the tractor straining to climb the hill. Once he was stopped, I'd crawl up on the tractor and attempt a chat with him. For the entire first year it did not go well. I got monosyllabic answers to my questions, but I refused to be dissuaded. I kept right on with my chatter about the weather and livestock prices and he slowly loosened up.

Finally he began to ask questions about the falcons perched in the yard, and one particularly beautiful autumn day he came out with a confession of sorts. "You know," Steve said, "you're really all right."

"Yeah?"

"We weren't too sure, you know."

"About me?"

"Yeah. I mean all this stuff." He waved a hand at the falcons, the bird dogs pistoning up and down in the kennel. "Some people said it was a front."

I grimaced, afraid the local gossip was that I was a drug dealer. "A front for what?"

"Well, nobody can figure out what a guy with an education is doing out here. We kind of figured you were a spy."

"A spy?"

"You know, a Russian or something. Keeping an eye on these missiles. But, heck, you just like birds."

-Excerpt from *Buffalo for the Broken Heart* by Dan O'Brien