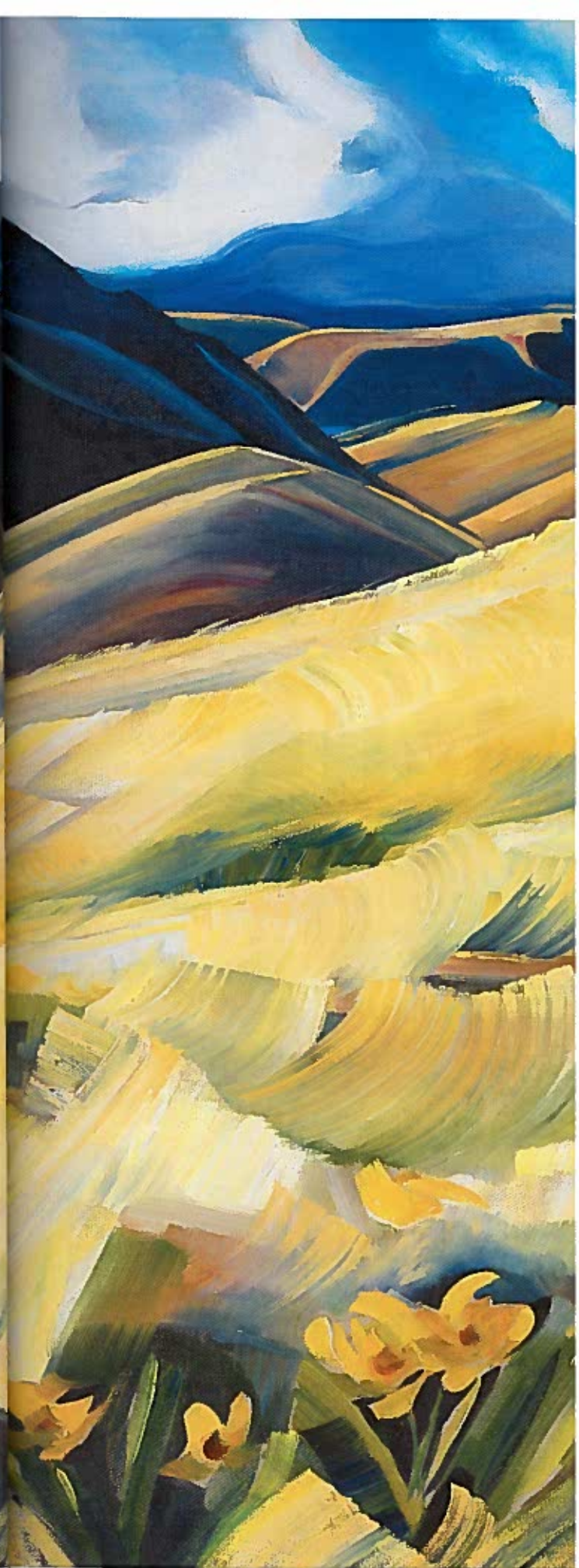
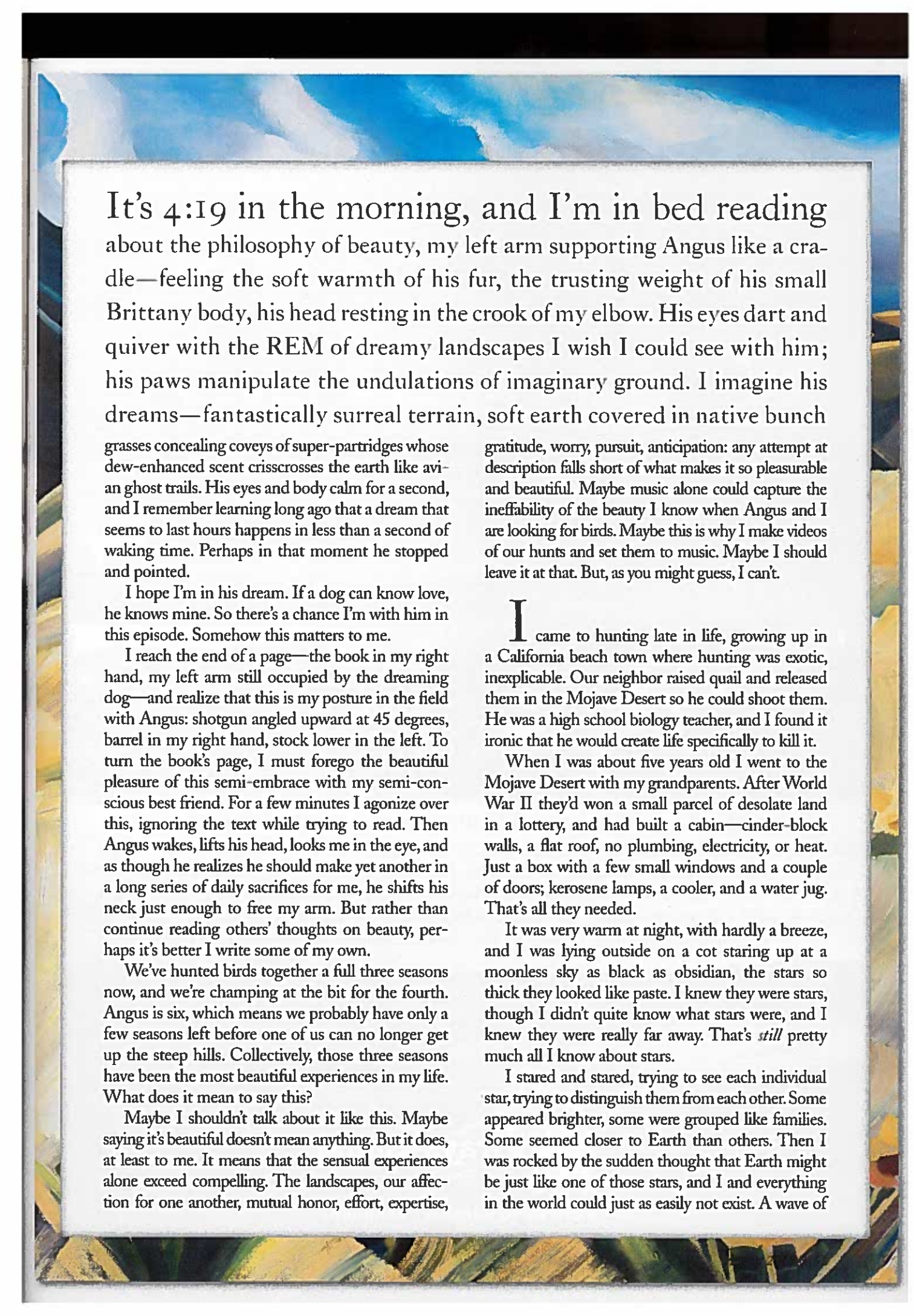


# Angus

*The indescribable beauty of relationships,  
and the grim beauty of killing.*

by Bob McMichael





It's 4:19 in the morning, and I'm in bed reading about the philosophy of beauty, my left arm supporting Angus like a cradle—feeling the soft warmth of his fur, the trusting weight of his small Brittany body, his head resting in the crook of my elbow. His eyes dart and quiver with the REM of dreamy landscapes I wish I could see with him; his paws manipulate the undulations of imaginary ground. I imagine his dreams—fantastically surreal terrain, soft earth covered in native bunch

grasses concealing coveys of super-partridges whose dew-enhanced scent crisscrosses the earth like avian ghost trails. His eyes and body calm for a second, and I remember learning long ago that a dream that seems to last hours happens in less than a second of waking time. Perhaps in that moment he stopped and pointed.

I hope I'm in his dream. If a dog can know love, he knows mine. So there's a chance I'm with him in this episode. Somehow this matters to me.

I reach the end of a page—the book in my right hand, my left arm still occupied by the dreaming dog—and realize that this is my posture in the field with Angus: shotgun angled upward at 45 degrees, barrel in my right hand, stock lower in the left. To turn the book's page, I must forego the beautiful pleasure of this semi-embrace with my semi-conscious best friend. For a few minutes I agonize over this, ignoring the text while trying to read. Then Angus wakes, lifts his head, looks me in the eye, and as though he realizes he should make yet another in a long series of daily sacrifices for me, he shifts his neck just enough to free my arm. But rather than continue reading others' thoughts on beauty, perhaps it's better I write some of my own.

We've hunted birds together a full three seasons now, and we're champing at the bit for the fourth. Angus is six, which means we probably have only a few seasons left before one of us can no longer get up the steep hills. Collectively, those three seasons have been the most beautiful experiences in my life. What does it mean to say this?

Maybe I shouldn't talk about it like this. Maybe saying it's beautiful doesn't mean anything. But it does, at least to me. It means that the sensual experiences alone exceed compelling. The landscapes, our affection for one another, mutual honor, effort, expertise,

gratitude, worry, pursuit, anticipation: any attempt at description falls short of what makes it so pleasurable and beautiful. Maybe music alone could capture the ineffability of the beauty I know when Angus and I are looking for birds. Maybe this is why I make videos of our hunts and set them to music. Maybe I should leave it at that. But, as you might guess, I can't.

I came to hunting late in life, growing up in a California beach town where hunting was exotic, inexplicable. Our neighbor raised quail and released them in the Mojave Desert so he could shoot them. He was a high school biology teacher, and I found it ironic that he would create life specifically to kill it.

When I was about five years old I went to the Mojave Desert with my grandparents. After World War II they'd won a small parcel of desolate land in a lottery, and had built a cabin—cinder-block walls, a flat roof, no plumbing, electricity, or heat. Just a box with a few small windows and a couple of doors; kerosene lamps, a cooler, and a water jug. That's all they needed.

It was very warm at night, with hardly a breeze, and I was lying outside on a cot staring up at a moonless sky as black as obsidian, the stars so thick they looked like paste. I knew they were stars, though I didn't quite know what stars were, and I knew they were really far away. That's *still* pretty much all I know about stars.

I stared and stared, trying to see each individual star, trying to distinguish them from each other. Some appeared brighter, some were grouped like families. Some seemed closer to Earth than others. Then I was rocked by the sudden thought that Earth might be just like one of those stars, and I and everything in the world could just as easily not exist. A wave of

## 10 pm | Quail Fields

*Just follow the dogs...*



the perfect plantation.  
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nausea overtook me and I ran inside—weeping, terrified, and embarrassed.

My parents, who were splitting up at this time, had each treated me to nature. Animals were my primary interest. Bird-watching, field guides, identification, tracking—all were part of the games my brother and I played, a contest to become the most expert. In elementary school I spent recess in the library, training to be the biologist I wish I'd become. I got sidetracked by other things—music, mostly—but as the years passed the focus of my interest in nature sharpened and centered on alpine forests and their wildlife.

What little I knew of hunting was negative, borne from watching fat guys wearing camo and riding four-wheelers with gun racks behind our cabin, which bordered national forest land in eastern Idaho. Having spent most summers hiking there, and occasionally finding trash in places I couldn't believe anyone would disrespect by littering, these guys were to me the culprits. And, by extension, so was hunting. I'm not exactly a tree hugger, but those fat guys on

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the four-wheelers would definitely characterize me as an embracer of the conifers. They made it easy to throw out the hunting baby with the messing-up-nature bathwater.

Like some who write about hunting, my first kill was a reptile, a horned lizard. I must have been eight or nine, on a walk by myself near my grandparents' cabin in the Mojave, carrying the BB gun I shouldn't have been entrusted with. My favorite desert animal skidded across the sand beneath a nearby mesquite. As I went for a closer look, the lizard froze. I'd never before been lucky enough to see one of these beautiful creatures at such short range. Wanting to capture more than the moment, I shot it—at least 10 times, point blank. A thrill of evil flooded through me, but when I understood what I'd done, I crumpled into the sand, my hand over the dead lizard, and cried hysterically.

Twenty years later I killed my second animal, a pheasant—an albino pheasant, on a game farm in

eastern Washington, hunting with my brother. It was spring, and I didn't know enough about hunting to understand the abnormality of this experience, hunting in the spring and not the fall. And with my brother, too, from whom I'd felt involuntarily estranged for years. It felt like a chance for a miraculous reconciliation, and if I had to kill a few birds to make it happen, so be it. I enjoyed the hunting, and especially enjoyed my first exposure to bird dogs, but my interest in fraternal bonding meant that I didn't honestly encounter the hunt for its own sake. In the end, I should have focused more on the birds. The other thing didn't happen.

Looking at Angus, I'm often hit hard by his beauty. It is physical, social, emotional, more. He wants to connect with me, and I with him, but because the language we share is so beautifully inexact our connection is limited to what any attentive but linguistically disconnected couple of beings can share. Which is a lot, actually. When he drinks his own pee I understand, though I don't practice it myself. We also don't share perhaps the most important thing, which is the knowledge that each of us will die. This, too, is in some way part of the beauty I see in him.

Perhaps because I think he's beautiful, I can honestly say that I love Angus. I also love the birds we try to relieve of their existence, but I love them in a different way.

Is it the difference between those loves—defined perhaps as personal versus impersonal, or imaginary or idealistic—that allows me to do something I find categorically abhorrent? Is my license to kill located in that space? Or is it an issue of a greater good, honoring Angus' instinctual bird-hunting desires and the intensity of the dependent bond between us over the sadness and repulsion of killing a bird?

Is making such a big deal about this an attempt at some kind of penance? If it's such a conflict, why then do I keep doing it? Even more, why is this my favorite thing to do?

I really don't know, and I'm not sure I ever will. ■

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*Bob McMichael teaches middle and high school English in rural Idaho, near Hell's Canyon. He and his wife dote on Angus, for whom Bob's bagpipe teacher titled an elaborate composition ("Salute to Angus of the Chukar Hills") after watching Angus hunting birds on YouTube.*