

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 42  
Number 2 *Fine Arts Issue 2013*

Article 32

---

December 2013

## Just Plains Crazy

Howard Schaap  
*Dordt College*, [howard.schaap@dordt.edu](mailto:howard.schaap@dordt.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Schaap, Howard (2013) "Just Plains Crazy," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 42: No. 2, 42 - 47.

Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol42/iss2/32](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol42/iss2/32)

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

# Just Plains Crazy

---

*Howard Schaap*

God has laid the prairie chicken on my heart.

There, I said it. I said it and it feels ridiculous—crazy—like I thought it was going to. It feels ridiculous because this is not the kind of thing God lays on one's heart. God lays on one's heart to pray for the young people of the congregation, to pray for revival in this land, to suddenly pray for a traveling relative about to have a close call on the Interstate. In short, God does not lay creatures from the natural world on one's heart. Were I to ask, during the evening service, when the pastor descends from the pulpit to ask for prayer requests, to please pray for the prairie chicken, no one would know what to do.

"Okay," the minister would say, jotting it on his notecard, then looking up and smoothing his already smooth silver hair. "Is it endangered or—what's the concern, here?"

"Just pray for its return."

"Do you mean yours, you've lost one?" A chuckle would bubble up from this man whose dry humor can be slaying but which is almost always saved for outside of service. The congregation itself would titter, looking back at me for explanation, to see if this is some kind of joke.

"I just think God wants it back on the prairie, wants us to bring it back."

"O. Kay." He would realize I'm in earnest, and he would try to be in earnest for me, too. "Perhaps we can pray for renewed environmental concern—is that? Is that—what you're asking?"

"No, the prairie chicken is enough."

Crazy. There was a time where an outburst like this would have insured that the outburster would never again be nominated for a seat on the church council. We may be past those times, but it's touch and go.

2

My dad has always been—excuse the pun—a brooder. His brooding was the twin—no, the triplet, really—of almost superhuman labor—in haymows, among cattle, in the close confines of farrowing barns, in unending hours of monotony in shoddy tractor cabs—and mad buffoonery—supper table hijinks with spaghetti and butter, voices in falsetto and bass solos, pranks that included firecrackers and cherry bombs.

But the brooding had always been there, and the longer the 1980s dragged on, the deeper the brooding got. He'd sit in his orange lazy boy in the evenings or lie on the floral couch on Sunday afternoons and mutter to himself, sometimes squinting and shaking his head. I could figure out what he was doing usually, somewhere between replaying a line of indirect criticism my pious grandfather had slurred out at Sunday coffee and kicking himself for some financial wrong decision he made regarding the farm he was slowly losing.

From there, he'd fall deeply asleep, his mouth falling open, uttering deep guttural snores that rent the afternoon or evening stillness.

The more he lost the farm—selling the dairy cows and getting hogs, selling the hogs and crop farming supplemented by day labor, selling the machinery and renting out the land and going long distance trucking—the more frequent the sleeping, and the louder the snores.

One afternoon he pushed himself up from just such a sleep, and, blood-shot eyed and gravel-voiced, said I should follow him. He grabbed a fat tin can from the bag beside the furnace in the basement, pulled his .410 from the closet, and grabbed a box of shells. I carried the gun as we walked back behind what was to have been the new free stall barn for his modern dairy, and along the old grove that had been slated for Catting under to create more farm space, and finally emerged at the edge

of the new grove of row trees that was to have been the new boundary of the farm. A wind bullied us from the northwest, wagging the fingers of the bare trees at us. The trees opened up here as did the land, offering us a clear view of the creek that ran below our farm and the fields surrounding it.

The creek drew the eye naturally north where it angled around a flat, roughly square field of twenty-five acres or so. In my lifetime, this field had been alfalfa, had been corn, had been oats. Going far enough back, it had been flax when my grandpa had gambled and sowed the entire farm in that one crop. That year, the rolling land must have been a sea of soft blue flowers that looked like anything but profits. In the end, though, it was a winning gamble; Grandpa paid off his farm in one year and solidified himself as the protagonist in his own story of success.

Now that field, a flat sandy knoll just above the creek, was a tangle of sweet clover, brown at this season of the year, the entire field and the sharp slopes of hills on either side of it sewed down and set aside, left unfarmed thanks to the Conservation Reserve Program—CRP land we called it, or occasionally CPR land—sponsored by the Reagan government. To the eye of my farmer father, it no doubt looked wild and wasted, a sign, I'm sure he said to himself, of his failure.

"Failure." That's the other word he began muttering then, a word which still makes its way into his mutterings.

Where we stopped with the can and the gun, the final feet of the new grove blocked the wind a little, and the hillside that fell away before us offered an open area to shoot. Dad instructed me on loading the gun, a .410 he'd owned much of his life. The lip where the shell was supposed to hook was worn from use, and he showed me how it could slip past that lip and create a potentially dangerous situation. I had to be careful. I fitted the shell carefully in the lip and clicked it shut. Then he showed me how to pull the hammer back and how to ease the hammer off again. The hammer, too, was worn. That was another dangerous part he said, because if you let it go too fast it would shoot the shell when you weren't ready.

Then it was time for the shooting. "Okay, pull your hammer back and aim," he said. "I'll throw the can and you follow it and shoot it."

"What? You want me to—do I aim right at it?"

"Yep, just look down your barrel and the can should set right on top of your bead."

"On top?"

"Yep, your bb pattern will spread a little bit when you shoot. Ready?"

I wasn't but nodded. When you're given a gun by your father and told to shoot it, that's what you do. The can spun skyward and then quickly back down, gravity's law and the wind's urging forcing it in a very specific arc with a slight list to the right. I didn't pull the trigger.

"That's—that's quick."

"Yep, you got be ready."

My dad walked after the can, reset, and tossed it up again. I shot quickly this time and missed. He walked after it again.

"Sorry."

"That's all right. It takes some getting used to."

He might've just as well been talking about the trajectory of childhood, of the arc into adulthood. He'd addressed this arc with me often enough in other contexts: "I don't want you to have to stack bales on other people's farm—you save your body and live a little. I broke my back doing it and I don't want you to have to. Okay?" It was not a question.

On the third throw I saw the flipping can at the end of my bead, pulled the trigger without thinking. The can shot forward wildly from its regular arc.

"Nice shot!" Dad said, as if he hadn't actually expected me to hit it, as if I was a lot closer to something than he had reckoned on. Still, there was pleasant surprise in his voice too. I set the gun down and ran to retrieve the can. It was flattened, oblong holes torn in its side where bb's had ripped it open.

Below us, a pheasant flushed from the tangle of sweet clover in the CRP, rode the wind down to the long grasses along the creek bank, its cackle trailing behind it.

### 3

*Tympanuchus cupido* is the scientific name for the prairie chicken. Literally, the drummer of love. Cupid with a timpani. Cupid; with a timpani; on the prairie. Like some avian version of Clue. It's madcap is what it is. A crazy bird out on the prairie, "booming" from his timpani, doing a love dance.

The prairie chicken's allure comes primarily from the glowing orb that dangles from the male's neck. This orb, warm and vibrant as the sun, swells portentously during its mating dance, during which it also tilts forward its long head feathers and stamps its feet on the ground, alternately, in rapid-fire succession. It looks like it's sprinting in place but with a certain rhythm, more of a triple-step jive than a square skip, and more American Indian fancy-dancing than either of those. The prairie chicken's dance may be the source of all plains dancing.

The orb—the timpani—is also the source of the “booming”—think a richer, slightly more ominous and rumbly pigeon cooing. This is the baseline. The counterpoint, the top line, which you can't really call a melody since it's anything but melodic, is a Joker-like cackling, the laughter of a crazy person, as if it has survived the openness of the prairie and the flat, brutal hand of winter, only to lose its mind.

The prairie chicken is quintessentially prairie. Those residents of the prairie crazy enough to stand out from the infinite range of earth tones usually do so in all manner of gaudiness, signaling one of three things: they are in desperate need of a mate; they are making themselves a target; they are burning out in a blaze of gaudy glory and despair. The last two in this list are not mutually exclusive.

#### 4

CRP land—er, CRP land—resuscitated our land and changed my life. The Conservation Reserve Program was an old program that got expanded in the 1980s, just at the point where my dad was snoring louder and I hit adolescence. The Eighties version of CRP went something like this: farmers would sow marginal land in a mix of grasses and then leave that land alone for up to seven years, with the government paying the producer up to 50 percent of what the land would have yielded in crop value, according to some abstruse formula. This beefed-up version of CRP was a provision of the 1985 farm bill, a bill in which farm-state politicians worked like the devil on behalf of thousands of farmers who the government had been “unable to protect from themselves”—which often meant they weren't “modern” enough, that they hadn't, for example, upgraded to more efficient, meaning larger, machinery. As prices plummeted in the

eighties, farmers who had been encouraged to borrow in the '70s with high prices and a new market in the Soviet Union suddenly had their loans called in without the offer of new loans. CRP tried to relieve the pressure of poor prices by taking land out of production. In a final attempt to hold onto the land, Dad sold his machinery, rented out the good part of the land, sowed the rest of it in CRP grasses—all the knolls that showed clay and rock and all the foothills above the two creeks that ran through our land—and went long-distance trucking for Bayliner Boats. Out of the deal I got a father who was often on the road and my very own pheasant preserve.

I winged my first pheasant while hunting with friends, as it came out of some CRP grass, brome, just above where Champepedam Creek ran through our land. Its left wing buckled, but it managed to hold it in place defiantly, drafting enough air in order to waver down to the plowed ground below but not with any real control. It bounced twice, hard, but kept its wits enough to run pell-mell across the plowed rows of shiny-backed dirt in the adjacent field. I chased it for a quarter mile on pure adrenaline, heart beating in my neck and armpits, stopped once to crack and reload my single shot twenty-gauge, fired after it where it ran, but only peppered the soil. It was headed for the creek, where it entered the cover of deep canary reed grasses and cattails. It should have been safe; it probably thought it was safe in that yellow-eyed lizard-brained way that a pheasant thinks. I laid my gun down in a place I thought I'd be able to find it again and then started turning over armfuls of grass, pushing it aside and carefully peering down. I wasn't a seasoned enough hunter to realize the odds against finding this bird. The God-awful gaudy apparel of a rooster pheasant, the court jester of birds, should be impossible to hide in the tans and browns of fall grasses.

Should my ass. Pheasants that are winged just hunker and run. Or, if your lead BBs have undered the bird, shattering one of its strong, dinosaur legs, it will just hunker. The odds are perhaps better of finding a hunkering bird over a running bird, but they're still not good. Not without a dog.

We've never had a hunting dog, and in those days, when I was thirteen and knew nothing about hunting, I had no sense that I needed one. No, I had finally hit my first pheasant, and I was sure I

would find it. It was fated that I would find it.

I worked back and forth on this side of the Champepedam, first randomly, then, once the adrenaline settled out of my system, systematically, working right down to the creek's edge, where, pushing aside an armful of canary reed that grew right down at the water's edge, I saw it, sitting in the actual water of the creek. It was a dry year that year, a dry fall, so dry that the creek had stagnated, and my pheasant sat with its auburn shoulders and neck above the surface of the water. It watched me unblinking with its yellow eye, counting on its stillness. I extended my hand slowly, like in cartoons, then snatched it around the neck and swung, spinning the flapping bird and cracking its neck, holding it until the last paroxysms of wing flaps subsided, its eyes squeezed shut and beak opened.

It *had* been fated, and, once I located my gun, which seemed to have relocated itself while I had looked for my bird, I was a happy conqueror, high on adrenaline, already shaping in my mind the story I would tell, about the bird that took refuge in the creek.

It was the fall of 1988. I'm not sure where dad was. Maybe he was out on the road. He came with us sometimes, with his single shot .410, plunking birds down occasionally as if it was no big deal.

## 5

Of course, head to head with the formidable ring-neck pheasant, he of symbolic dress and evolutionary superiority and North American legend, the bulbous necked prairie chicken is certainly an underdog—that is, underfowl.

In reality, the pheasant is the carpet bagger of birds. Its costume should alert us to this fact: it's a circuit-riding preacher with its collar, a pseudo-gentleman with its ascot, and a target for gentlemen with its cross-dressing ways and red eye-paint. It's clearly exotic, clearly a traveler.

Or, if you like, pheasants are the British Empire of birds: the sun never sets on them. They made themselves attractive with their eastern exoticism and got themselves exported from Asia to Europe, where they became symbols, it seems, of kingliness and exoticism. Thomas Beckett is said to have dined on pheasant the night before his death. Pheasants didn't come to the U.S. until relatively late, not catching on until 1881, when a

gentleman imported fifty pheasants to his home in the Willamette valley in Oregon. From there, they were exported all over the continent that had been largely bereft of game birds since small farms had taken over the prairie. They especially took to Midwestern states, where they became roadside decoration everywhere, rising to become the state bird of South Dakota, a multi-million dollar industry and the pox of Dick Cheney.

In short, pheasants are highly adaptable, evolutionary geniuses. They thrived on the piecemealings of a plowed-up prairie when the prairie chicken and sharp-tailed grouse couldn't.

Evolution is only partly the story, though, as it always is. The comedy is, of course, that men have come to think that pheasants make sense on the prairie, have come to think of them as belonging and therefore as sane. In reality, however, the situation on the prairie is so mad that apparently no game bird has evolved enough to survive on the ever-decreasing prairie without the props of subsidy.

The truth is that the Minnesota DNR was worried about the pheasant in the early 1980s, pre-CRP, just as it had been nervous about the pheasant in the late Forties and throughout the late Sixties and all of the Seventies, as farmers inched out to every margin and waterway, making even pheasant survival dubious. In any case, just as CRP remade our farm, it also saved or at least spurred on the pheasant. With CRP, possum and raccoon populations exploded, thanks to pheasant eggs. Deer populations grew, thanks to cover. CRP brought coyotes back to the area, to the chagrin of local farmers but to my own delight—we now had our own major predator, I thought. CRP also helped our creek, which had muddied and gone turbid for years, to run clear and deep.

The truth is, the only thing that established the pheasant and the only thing that saved it—the only thing that saves anything marginal on the prairie—were ideas: the gentleman's ideal of a game bird and politicians' mechanism to aid farmers.

Few species, truth be told, can survive in pure geometry, as the prairie—the tall grass prairie—has become.

## 6

I don't have to go far to find stories of insanity and its bordering states of nervousness and de-

pression. Not far, as in my own family: my grandmother went as far as the Mayo Clinic to counter the insomnia caused by watching the floaters in her eyes which made her feel like something was crawling through her brain; my aunt needed ECT as a young mother; my mom needed valium to settle her racing heart at a similar time in her life; my dad needs lithium to balance out his mind.

And stories of suicides are not far away either. My dad tells the story of a relative of ours who hung herself in the barn two miles from our farm. I know a local man who tried to get his tractor to run over his own head. Within recent years a father of four shot himself in his car in a local town, and a young man with a bright future—good grades, homecoming royalty, college aspirations—went AWOL from the army and shot himself as the authorities pounded on his door; he was a second-generation suicide. In the same month as I write this paragraph, a man in town who had trained at Le Cordon Bleu killed himself; a teen in a local high school, a football player, killed himself the morning of his prom.

Madness.

7

I realize I live in flyover country now. I heard it a dozen or more years ago and was aghast. This place where I live was as beautiful as any other, I would have argued then, an argument I was sure to lose, based as it was solely in nostalgia and not in connoisseurship of prairie. Later, I came to appreciate the gentle role of the landscape where I live, a geographical structure called the Buffalo Ridge, and would have argued that the place where I live was more beautiful than the dead flatness of North Dakota, where you must count on Interstate overpasses for any sort of break to that flatness. *That* kind of openness is crazy, I would have said then, barrenness, like baring your chest to the brunt of heaven, without place to hide. *That* was a lunar, foreign landscape, but where I lived was the best of the prairie—a place with long, barely undulating vistas, at the pinnacles of which you could see for twenty miles in any direction.

Viewed at dusk, in early fall with the panoply of fields, the light spilled across the russet soybeans and luminescent corn, the light a thick almost palpable orange, as pheasants burst from the grass seams of this landscape, their wing flaps coming to

you now, a second later, their chortles echoing off the flat hills, a crescent moon rising in the dusk, I would have honestly declared it the most beautiful place on earth. When I read Bill Holm's essay "Horizontal Grandeur" and his defense of the "prairie eye," I felt stirred. Finally, I felt, someone had given me a vocabulary to talk about the place where I lived. Finally, I felt I had come home to Eden.

It was later still that real prairie people, mixed grass and short grass prairie people, South Dakotans, who could name a dozen grasses and explain the value of each, suggested that I live in a place that's decimated, beyond hope, that tall grass prairie is so shredded it's unsalvageable, already extinct. This suggests I need a new metaphor for where I live: the valley of dry bones.

No, the valley of dry bones is too worn. As is the comparison to being an amputee, of continuing to feel something that's gone missing. It has taken me years to feel what's missing where I live, the landscape formerly known as the tall grass prairie. That's exactly the problem with describing something that you don't know has been missing. How do you come to miss it? I was born without knowledge of tall grass prairie, grew up thinking that prairie grass was gone, then, in my twenties, spent all my time angling off roads and onto gravel shoulders and across yellow lines as I discovered that big bluestem and prairie cord grass and switch grass and Indian grass still dotted the ditches. I was exultant, almost giddy; I expected a herd of buffalo over the next hill.

Over the next hill, though, was more of the same. Or, rather, less of the same. Except for the brief resuscitation that was the CRP program—and even that was emergency life support, the grasses that were sewn being some expedient combination for purposes other than replenishing prairie grasses—the pageant of my life has been, like my father's before me and his father's before him, back to my great grandfather's, who broke native prairie, one of the creeping ubiquity of corn and soybeans within a geometric system of straight lines and right angles. The gospel of Midwestern settlement has been one of the crooked made straight, the rough places plain, the valleys exalted and the hills made low.

I have lived to see several changes to the landscape of our farm. Most recently, the mad farm-

ers who rent my father's land tiled through a lush waterway, favorite hunting ground of many in the neighborhood. They now plant straight rows across its angling absence. Before that they took out the fencerows of built-up earth, pocked with the dens of badgers and fox, and tilled it flat. Before that, the very first change they made—the very next season after they took over farming from my dad—was to take out the contour rows that my dad had farmed in, rows that elegantly followed the subtle curves of the landscape. My dad himself, it should be noted, was complicit in this process. Once I returned home from school to find an earth mover carving a new path for the creek that had wandered aimlessly below our house. Champepedam Creek itself, where my first pheasant hid, had been straightened before I was born.

All this is to say one thing: the Upper Midwest is an industrial landscape. Land is farmed right up to the roadside ditches, which are mowed and baled. Lowlands along rivers and creeks are tiled into those rivers and creeks so that the black soil can be sewn in more straight rows of corn and soybeans. When possible, these rivers and creeks are themselves straightened. This adds up to a frightening geometry. In the Upper Midwest, at least where I live, roads are straight, creeks are straight, people are straight, and corn rows and soybean rows—millions and millions of them—are straight.

8

Sometime after my dad got up off the couch

and tossed a fat tin can in the air so that I could flatten it, shred it with led shot from his .410, sometime after the Christmas where he bought me my first gun, a single-shot twenty gauge that was probably the cheapest on the market, sometime after I'd grabbed my first pheasant out of Champepedam Creek, my mom asked me to move all the shotguns upstairs into my closet. "Dad's really down," she explained, "and I don't think he'd do anything, but if the guns are upstairs in your room, I know he won't go to get them there."

This was after the part of the farm crisis where the greatest part of the deaths had happened. Several of these deaths made national news: two bankers were lured out to a farm on the Buffalo Ridge, near Ruthton, a twenty-minute drive from our farm, and ambushed, shot and killed by a father and son, the father turning the gun on himself after he'd realized what he'd done. This was after the bulk of the suicides that had come with the so-called farm crisis, too, after the crest of the latest wave of prairie madness.

I padded on bare feet across the kitchen linoleum, through the porch, and down the cement stairs to the basement closet. The .410 and the .22 with its grooved pump came on the first trip; grandpa's old 12-gauge with the cracked stock and my 20-gauge came on the second trip. I tucked them in the back of my upstairs closet, slowed my breathing, and cried.

He was crazy, I told myself.