

LOSS OF CHICKENS, DEATH, KILLING, ETC.¹

An old North Carolina superstition says that if you count your chickens, they will all die. I've just counted to one, but nothing has happened. There's only one chicken—a rooster—and I want him dead. As a doornail, as the scorpion I found in my boot this morning, as my good night's sleep: dead. I've been plotting this for a few months—every night for a few months—and I believe tonight's the night. It's not unjust hatred. First of all, I'm pretty sure the rooster has emphysema, and the truth is, I may be doing him a favor if I take a rock to his head the next time he sets to cock-a-doodle-doing at 12:43 in the morning, and it sounds like an old man working the phlegm from the back of his throat.

Secondly, it seems that fate has terribly misplaced him. He and I live in Honduras, where it is 1:15 a.m. That makes us somewhere between Mountain and Central Standard Time, depending, because Hondurans don't support the daylight savings move. Surely, somewhere in the world the sun is rising right now. I know it's not rising here. I just looked. Only darkness and mountains and dust lurk outside of my glassless window. And yet, on the roof, beside the skylight to my room, that miserable rooster is coughing his way through some morning ritual, like rusty taps. And so I look now to a map, to see where the sun is breaking, to find where the poultry gods might have better placed him.

He would have been a perfect fit for Tambacounda. The sun is rising in Senegal, and he would be right on time there. Maybe he could even learn to play the djembe, to eat sesame and bisaab. Instead of killing him, perhaps it would be more humane to simply transplant him, to change fate, to embrace serendipity and stick my neighbor on a plane to Tambacounda.

I will drop him off, and say, *You should really get that throat thing checked out. But...I know you will be happier here.* I will squirt a tear—a rooster tear—he will look up at me and flap his wings, making the sound of a wet mop hitting the floor, and I will turn. Away. Forever.

No. Better, I think, to kill him.

To send him somewhere else would be like intentionally spreading a plague, because there is always the chance that it wasn't fate that misplaced him in this time zone, but that he is simply a moron. A rooster moron that couldn't be a worse judge of the earth's movement, an embarrassment to talented roosters—to the rooster with genes full of natural time-telling instinct—to the rooster across the street who must wake up and shake his head and wattle every night. *There goes ol' gargly throat again,* he surely thinks, *someone ought to just shoot him.* Well, rooster-across-the-street, I am your man. I will enact some justice for all roosters on the planet, and for my sleep. I will kill that rooster.

The question is how.

I open my book, and here's another North Carolina saying: "When a shivering owl begins to screech, turn your right pocket inside out, and the owl will hush immediately." I try it on roosters. No luck. It must be specific to owls because he keeps on with the racket, and 80 lempiras falls from my pocket in the process. That's enough to buy 300 tortillas or a bus ticket to the city or three cokes. Not enough, however, for a (dead) quiet rooster.

What about this one; it's specific to poultry: "Whisper in the ear of a chicken what you want him to be, and he'll 'shore' be it." *Dead.* Nothing doing. He's still huffing and puffing outside my room.

I also read that "a rooster crowing in the night means trouble." So, you see, it's more

¹ This is the title to a category of superstitions within Frank C. Brown's *Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, Vol. 7. (Duke University Press, 1970). All quotes in the essay come from this volume.



serious than merely being upset because I wish I were sleeping and dreaming about ice cream and french fries. This rooster could be a bad sign. An ill omen. Something lurking around the corner of my future. He may be more than a menace, but rather a messenger.

And so the issue, now, in the middle of the pitch-black Central American morning, really has to do with North Carolina and Honduras. With myths and roots. I'm from the western mountains of North Carolina, but I'm living here in the western mountains of Honduras. Here, people say that earthquakes are caused by the movement of a giant snake that lives beneath the old, Spanish fort that stands above town. Here, they believe nearly all illness to come from the change in the weather (from dry season to wet). Here, roosters are proud animals—mythical creatures after which to name soccer teams. In North Carolina people say that a nose itch means someone is coming and that “chickens hatched in May will be crazy.”

I feel sure that this rooster was born directly in the middle of May, exactly as the climate was changing from dry to wet, and as he cracked from his egg, everyone scratched their noses and a tremor shook this little town.

In North Carolina, they say that “if you make smoke before sunrise on the first day of May, it is a sure fact that the hawks will get your chickens.” But May is a few months away, and anyway, I'm not entirely sure that hawks this far south would read the smoke signals correctly. They may mistake an “n” for an “ñ”, and that's an important distinction. That could be the difference between an “anus” and “year”

(*ano* and *año*).

What sort of sign is this rooster then? An anus or a year? Am I misreading him because I'm so far south, because of my displacement or ethnocentrism? Is he actually a great strike of fortune and luck come directly to me in the night? Is he Gabriel in feathers?

I'm not in North Carolina, so maybe my folklore doesn't fly here. Maybe he's no ill omen at all.

But then again, I'm also not Honduran, so it's entirely possible that whatever he may be to a native is naturally inaccessible to me.

I'm merely a guest, a visitor. The rooster is not mine, and who am I to bring my regional understandings into a foreign world and start killing livestock? No, this is Honduras, not Appalachia. I'll live and let live, play the role of casual observer, embrace cultural distinction, etc, etc. And so I decide that I'll let the rooster be a proud silhouette for tonight. I'll let him perch on the adobe *tejas* that form my roof. I'll let him wake me up in the coming nights and mornings, with his sickly call.

Tonight I feel good to have come to this understanding—such a mature worldview, and from an American nonetheless. I pat myself on the back, crawling back into bed. But deep down, I know that I'm still hanging on to another North Carolina superstition. The same belief that claims May chickens will be crazy, also assures that these chickens will “whirl about until they die of exhaustion.” Crow on rooster—be it a proud song or a death rattle, I'll lie and listen.