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These words are a gift from the land and from the Divine. Please feel free to share them with others as you see fit.

FIRST STORM

On the eve of the full Snow Moon, out of the northwestern sky fly the wild white horses of winter. With furious hooves they pound the clouds into stormy furrows, flinging frozen flecks of moisture from their mighty tossing heads. In the darkest morning hour they come hammering and wheeling across the plains, rearing up short with chilling snorts and whinnies on the eastern horizon, arriving just in time to preempt the sun's scheduled dawn performance.

Through some mysterious ancient telepathy passed down from the wild aurochs, the cows urged their calves to the tree-protected draws a full ten hours in advance of the storm. The movement of the cattle, more so even than the latest report from our modern meteorologists, telegraphs to us a warning to make fast all sashes and lay in a supply of logs for the woodstove. Those of us who are dependent upon the land for our living may be forgiven for talking about the weather; there is nothing trite about this subject matter. Even in sleek steel elevators in climate-controlled high-rises in the city, I like to talk about the weather. Strangers somehow seem less strange when we are reenacting this age-old ritual of repartee that conjoins us at our collective agricultural roots.

How astute and fortuitous now seem our labors during the warm September afternoons on which we



loaded the wagon with mammoth logs and the air rang with the shrieks of shattering tree-atoms and tidy resin-scented wooden monuments arose to testify to our industry. Now the cats and dogs thank us in their sleep, murmuring gratefully as they vie for position in a furry heap by the woodstove. The wind caterwauls up and down the stovepipe like a roomful of glass-shattering sopranos vying for a role in a Puccini opera, or like the woodwind section of a middle school band gone badly awry on Yankee Doodle Dandy.

Something in me loves this first going to ground of the waning year. I turn on Handel's Messiah and adjust the draft on the stove, settling down with the bountiful list of foods to be orchestrated for Thanksgiving. I reach for my comforts: a second cup of coffee, an old-fashioned hot water bottle for my toes, the transporting wings of a book to fly me above the storm.

This wind is not merely flirting. At gusts up to fifty miles an hour, it fully intends to ravish whatever might be the least bit loose on its moorings. The dark and rootless husks of wild indigo are among the first to succumb. They hurtle and leap in disorganized packs, catapulting across the grasses like frantic jackrabbits fleeing a wildfire. If I step out broadside to the blast, I too lurch an unexpected step or two toward Greenwood County, in the general direction that would eventually have me, quite literally, in Thrall. I sail briskly southeastward, tacking erratically toward the lee of the chicken coop. Nary a single chicken is risking her lightweight feather-rigged schooner on the high seas of the morning. I peek in the windows at a scene of slightly malcontented domesticity. A few nests are occupied by egg-makers. Several hens are huddled shoulder to shoulder on the roost.

The rest are pacing the floor. This marks the advent of the cabin-fever season. The temperature is now cold enough to freeze drinking water, which complicates my daily chicken chores. Foul weather notwithstanding, the appointed hour for free-range recess finds a few brave biddies pacing at the gate, intent on demanding their daily dose of freedom. This I find amazing and inspiring. Current temperature and wind speed translate to a wind chill of about 20°F, an abrupt 30° transition from the previous day's temperatures. Even our fur-coated dogs are reluctant to go outdoors today except for the most brief and necessary excursions, but my chickens sally forth into the gale with courage and determination.

This house built of old barn wood and Indiangrass bales is a never-failing bulwark in the squally fray, stout and defensible. By contrast, I was recently reminded of the drafty North Dakota farmhouse in which my father grew up and which, although torn down long ago, is still a lively



Weigelt Farmhouse, 1963

repository of many of my earliest memories of inclement weather on the Great Plains. There, too, the coveted winter spot was next to the woodstove. The kitchen in which the stove resided was, in fact, the only remotely toasty locale in winter. The upstairs bedrooms in which we slept received no blessing of warmth at all. Each blustery morning found me pinioned to my father's boyhood bed under rough flannel sheets and piles of Grandma's quilts, a pleasant and sustaining weight that kept me occupied with counting the neat squares of dresses and suits from Sundays past while I delayed the

inevitable meeting between cold air and warm skin. I was in danger of becoming a slugabed in a family of early risers.

That frigid house was considered more up to date than its predecessors on the plains, but the sod house my great-great grandmother Wilhelmina built with her own hands out of slabs of densely root-knitted Dakota turf likely came the closest to being as snug and cozy as the house in which I live more than a hundred years later, built upon similar principles. Try as it might, the modern building industry has yet to develop insulation technology to surpass what the prairie provides.

In the cloud-muted dimness of this stormy day, morning is distinguished from afternoon only by the clock and the clamoring of my stomach for a midday meal. Succulent beef, roasted potatoes and vegetables divide the day in half. All afternoon the wild white horses of winter course back and forth across the sky, stirring up turbulence and successfully upstaging the sun. Only the lean nether edge of the day sees a last hurrah of flaming solar indignation from the western sky. Rowing head-on into the prevailing wind at sunset, my chickens make for safer harbor. Almost magically, the wild horses disappear into the distance after dusk, dragging the weighty clouds behind them. The full moon rises through the clearing sky like a prayer—both a benediction on the blustery day and an invocation for the cold and star-pierced night to come.



THINKING IN PERPETUITY

Take a moment to recall one of your earliest visual memories of the natural world—preferably a peaceful, private landscape rather than public land. What do you remember? A gracious meadow blazing with blossoms. A limestone cutbank revealing the layered chapters of an ancient story. A sun-deckled deer path through the woods to a lake. The colorful hieroglyphics of lichen on a sun-warmed boulder. A hilltop with an unobscured view of approaching storm fronts. Try to call up a scene that does not contain a single human-made element.



Can you still find your way to that place after all these years? If you could trace a route back across the map of your life to that precise location, would the elements of which your memory is composed still be visible?

Our culture is fond of dismissive phrases like *you can't go home again* and *you can't expect things to stay the same*. But why not? These landscapes that remain lodged in our memories also preceded our brief sojourns on the planet by a good many thousands, millions, and even billions of years. How is it that we have come to think of the natural world as fleeting or dispensable?

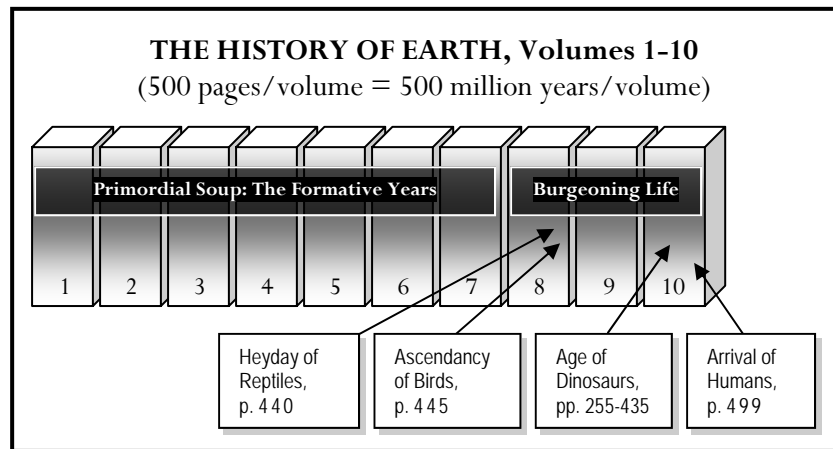
When I first learned the motto of the State of Idaho—*Esto perpetua: it is perpetual*—I did not, at age 7, have a framework for the notion of perpetuity. When I went back to visit after many years away, my disorientation testified to the truth that a significant number of my beloved landmarks were not, in fact, perpetual. Subdivisions encroached on some of my favorite private paths and hiding places. My secret tracks through the desert had been paved and riddled with signage directing passersby to my most remote destinations. A number of my retreats—the places in which I could take myself apart from the world—had been made a part of the world at large, their sacredness profaned by commercialization, their solitude desecrated by development.

I have always been drawn to the pristine and pastoral, those seemingly ageless scenes in wild or rural areas unbesmirched by gaudy progress—a flock of wild geese rising from the morning mist on a meandering river...the inviting gleam of lights in the windows of an old-fashioned stone farmhouse, glimpsed from afar across the fields on a dark night...a quaint and comely New England village in the snow—a sort of Currier & Ives nostalgia for life before steel beams and massive slabs of concrete, life in which the barrier between nature and civilization was thin. I have been, as well, a little envious of persons who are deeply rooted in such places, who have the privilege of living in a home with a long family history of habitation and clear ties to the land as a long-term legacy. I have lived in at least fifteen different houses during my life, not one of which had a deeper connection to personal history. In my own way, I carefully braided my ties to each place, but I also learned, as many of us do in this mobile age, to slip those moorings when the time came to embark for the next destination.

The search for a meaningful reference point for one's own place in time is a common longing. Even if, however, I can trace my ancestress Jane Morse to the Mayflower or my Somerville ancestors to

the time of William, the Conqueror, I am still standing in relatively shallow historical waters. I recently found an explication that greatly assists me in placing myself in a meaningful historical context on planet Earth (with thanks to Robert Overman and Larry Rasmussen).

Picture Earth's entire history to date as a 10-volume set of books with 500 pages per volume, each page representing a million years. Most of that history—in fact, 99.9% of the chronicle—took place long before humankind entered the proceedings on page 499 of volume 10. Most of the animals, plants, reptiles, amphibians, birds and bugs with whom we share this world were here long before we appeared. Despite our relatively late arrival, we have in a shockingly brief



period of time ceased to behave as respectful guests in fellowship with other planetary inhabitants—recipients one and all of Creation's gracious hospitality.

The next volume of the story, yet to be written, opens where we now find ourselves, at the beginning of the 21st century. Our micro-position in this macro-perspective ought, on one hand, to make us feel exceedingly small. On the other hand, consider what incredible alterations the human species has wrought in less than two pages of the planet's 5000-page history! Consider that the landscape imprinted upon your memory in childhood was perhaps billions of years in the birthing. If it has in only a handful of decades been altered beyond recognition, you have one small and personal glimpse into the sobering scope of our power and impact as a species.

Back on page 499 of Volume 10, in the early days of human habitation on the earth, *eat or be eaten* was the watchword of the times; our species was but one link in a complex food chain. Simple survival was the highest imperative—and by no means guaranteed—and mysteries undoubtedly outnumbered certainties. Out of living in the presence of so much mystery arose a sense of awe, reverence and restraint, three virtues that served us well in adapting to a world that did not in the least need us for its own perpetuation. We, however, could not survive without the precious store of resources it had to offer our vulnerable bodies, hungry bellies and curious minds. From hunter-gatherer to agrarian cultural development, our species did quite well at finding a niche that did not unduly disturb planetary balance, gradually developing nature-inspired cosmologies and spiritual practices that honored the divinity and relatedness of all the elements of creation. Family names were given to the earth, the sun and moon, the animals: mother, father, sisters and brothers.

There are still places on the planet where earth-based ethics are practiced among people who were bypassed by—or chose not to board—the great engine of the Industrial Revolution—from Aborigines to Amish, Basarwa to Hunzakuts, Pygmies to Waitaha. When we run out of the fuel necessary to keep this great mechanical beast hurtling down the rails of progress, we may find ourselves looking to these *backward* and *underdeveloped* pockets of the population for wisdom on how to survive in harmony and balance with our planet.

If we are not gentle with life, the garden within us dies.
Song of Waitaha

What have we gained from our vast body of scientific knowledge and our technological advances? In a world of specialists, how are we to develop a unified and integrated picture out of so many discrete puzzle pieces from disciplines as varied as genetics, astronomy, quantum physics, information technology, and medicine? So much of what we know today was still a mystery fifty years ago. "In the millennia since records have been kept," reports a Department of Defense document, "it is estimated that the world has seen a doubling—a 100 percent growth—in knowledge from the dawn of time until the 1950s, and that knowledge has doubled again since the 1950s." Incidentally, in measuring how far and how fast we have come across the last half-century, it is also worth noting that the number of automobile miles driven per capita has tripled since the 1950s in the U.S. alone.

What if, in attempting to impose our human concept of order onto the mystery of the planet's creative chaos, we are short-circuiting processes critical to our own survival? The combined power of the weapons we have developed around the globe is only the most obvious example of how we have, in the last half-century, achieved the capacity to eradicate our own species from the planet.



Our prodigious consumption, proliferation and short-sightedness are other, subtler, weapons of mass destruction. The

human population dependent on Earth's resources has grown from 1.6 billion to 6.1 billion in only a century. The amount of energy used each day on the planet required 27 years for the earth to create. How much of what was here when humans first arrived can we afford to extract, exterminate, consume, manipulate and develop before this biosphere—our home—loses the integrity that made it hospitable to the human life form in the first place? How and when will we call a halt to the consumptive, capitalist agenda and refocus our values on the long-term reverberations of our actions over the potential for short-term gain?

What combination of myopia, denial and greed, you might wonder, is required for the human species to continue using resources at a rate that exceeds their renewal? To bring this counterintuitive behavior down to the personal level, consider the phenomenon of revolving credit. The first credit card—Diner's Club—was issued in 1950. There are now about 20,000 different credit cards available in the U.S., and average credit card debt among all American households is \$8,400. In the last decade, aggregate personal income in the U.S. rose 188%, while the amount of purchases charged to credit cards rose at nearly twice that rate—350%. Taking into account other debt from mortgages, car loans and student loans, some 40% of American households now spend more than they earn. My cash-and-carry grandparents would be flabbergasted at these figures.

We are not now, nor have we ever been, omnipotent, and yet, isn't that the illusion that enables us to spend more than we have or use more than the earth can replenish? Are not our rationalizations built on the notion that we are smart and clever enough as individuals and as a species to solve these pesky little problems before we and the earth are bankrupt in every sense of the word?

This is overwhelming, I know. Sustainability—or the lack thereof—is a frequent topic of discussion in our household.

So take a break, if you can make the time, and go back again in your mind to that soothing and renewing landscape you pulled up from your memory bank a bit earlier. Rest for a moment by your singing stream or your softly rustling tree or your warm, solid rock and allow yourself to become an organic part of the nature of that place, for here is where, perhaps, the answer resides in utter simplicity. Forgive yourself your debts and your debtors. Forget the statistics with which the last two pages have been littered. Forget the staggering quantities of information that pace like restless tigers in your head, in your desk and filing cabinets, on your computer's hard drive and the Internet.

Recall that you are made of the same elements as the soil and the water, the plants and the air you breathe. You are a member of this glorious and irreplaceable creation. For all of our prowess, we cannot replicate the complexity and diversity of a prairie or a forest, a blade of grass or a tree. This is the mysterious whole of which we are but one part. This is the sacredness from which we have become separated in the dizzying quest for money, power and possessions—none of which will offer us the least solace or saving grace if we devour our source of sustenance.

Remember your connection to the earthly mother of us all, by whatever name you know her—*Ala, Aramaiti, Asase, Banba, Chaabou, Chicomecoatl, Edda, Gaia, Gatumdu, Khon-Ma, Magna Mater, Mawu, Mother Earth, Pachamama, Papatuanuku, Tlalteutli, Urd, Yaa*—and you may also remember your relationship and responsibility to the family into which you were born. Cultivate compassion for all created beings, bearing in mind that whatever tends to separate and alienate its members—into *us* and *them* or *haves* and *have-nots*—is an assault on the family's integrity, and thus, a potential instrument of its extinction.

Now, if you had the power to protect your most beloved landscape in perpetuity, would you do so? If you desire to leave a lasting testament to your brief stay here, you'd do better to protect an acre of unspoiled land than to build a skyscraper. If you do not own an acre of unblemished land to protect, *live as if you do*. Live as if your drinking water, air and fuel came from that lovely place and your wastewater and fossil fuel emissions went back to it. Behave as if the trash you do not recycle will be delivered to your sacred landscape rather than to the local landfill. Think and plan as if that acre of land will eventually be inherited by the seventh generation of your family, long after you are gone.

What does it mean to think in perpetuity? How are we, with our finite and linear concept of time, to make sense of words like *eternal* and *everlasting*? Whether or not we can fully grasp the notion of *forever*, one truth seems certain: unless we as a species make a sharp course correction back to sustainability—living within our own means and those of the planet—there will be no perpetuity for us.

perpetuity (deriv. of *perpetuus* continuous, unbroken, permanent)

The quality or state of being perpetual; endless or indefinite duration or existence.

perpetual

Lasting or destined to last for ever; eternal, everlasting, unceasing.

Because we are consciously trying to live sustainably out here on the ranch, these topics come up with some frequency. This year has offered a singular opportunity for intense discussions on perpetuity, in particular the protection *in perpetuity* of this rare bit of tallgrass prairie upon which we are privileged to live.

One instrument for accomplishing this protection of privately-held land is known as a Conservation Easement, a legal deed with a stated purpose, in the case of this land, to:

...assure that the Protected Property will be retained forever substantially unchanged from its present natural, scenic, agricultural and open space condition.

The decision to take this step was not lightly made. Jane complained that her grandfather Roy kept whispering in her ear, telling her she was a fool to give up any of the bundle of rights that goes with land ownership, and further, she must be a few sandwiches short of a full picnic for entering into a legal agreement with *the damn government* (Natural Resources Conservation Service) and *the tree-huggers* (The Nature Conservancy). Poor Jane! Chief Seattle, or someone like him, was whispering in her other ear: *How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us.*

Meanwhile, we wrangled for months over the details of a twenty-some page deed (and Exhibits A-F) that will forever pass down with the ownership of this land. Our daunting charge was to attempt to foresee the potential consequences of myriad restrictions and allowable uses *in perpetuity*.

There were, at last count in 2003, some fifteen-hundred land trusts in the U.S., with 5.1 million acres protected under easement agreements. In essence, according to The Nature Conservancy:

A conservation easement is a voluntary, legally binding agreement that limits certain types of uses or prevents development from taking place on a piece of property now and in the future, while protecting the property's ecological or open-space values. Conservation easements protect land for future generations while allowing landowners to retain many private property rights and to live on and use their land as they have traditionally.

What this specifically means on the Homestead Ranch is that several thousand acres of prairie are



now protected in perpetuity from being converted to non-agricultural uses, subdivided, industrialized, commercialized, mined, excavated, dumped upon, built upon, or otherwise altered from their natural state. We, and future generations of inhabitants, may continue to live, work and play here in a sustainable way, which includes grazing, haying, hunting, fishing, prairie restoration, and any other

activity that does not diminish the inherent natural values of this vigorous, wild, and wide-open parcel of holy ground.

After months of rumination and wrangling, all parties to the agreement at last came to consensus on the language of the document. We attended an official closing at the lawyer's office and hosted a celebratory luncheon. The formalities were accomplished, but there remained one last bit of ceremony that was not required by law or custom, but rather, compelled by our own covenant with the prairie.

For more than an hour that afternoon, Jane and I threaded our way thoughtfully in and out along the seams and borders of the ranch, driving slowly in companionable silence in our battered feed truck, stopping from time to time at a favorite vista. We were each wholly absorbed in laying down the last tiny stitches that would tie the fabric of our intentions to the whole cloth of the land.

"I don't know if this makes any sense at all," said Jane finally, "but I feel as if the land is actually *relieved* and somehow thankful for what we have done." I knew exactly what she meant. As best we can, we have given the land back to herself, back to her mother, the earth.

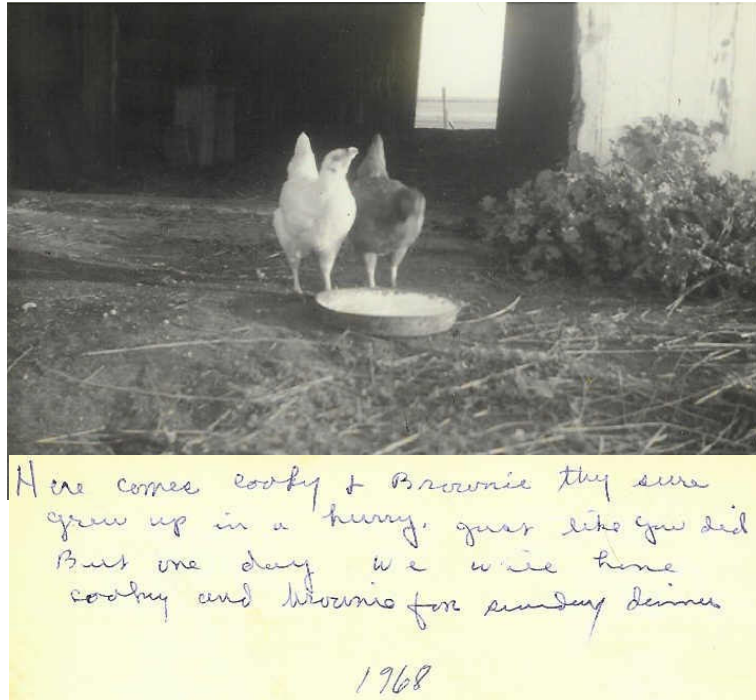
It is comforting and gratifying to think, as well, that the children who visit here now and upon whose memory-slates the prairie etches an indelible picture of herself—an image that persists across time and space as an icon for the earth's wild nature and open-handed grace—may chance to come back fifty years from now. If they do—if they come in search of a touchstone, a peaceful and dependable reference point on the busy, circuitous maps of their lives—they will find exactly what they seek: the prairie's familiar and beloved face, unchanged.



ESTO PERPETUA

POULTRY NOTES

Chickens have been a part of my life for many years, in varying degrees of closeness. Grandma Pauline gave me my first opportunity to form relationships with poultry, as I was recently reminded when sorting through a shoebox of family pictures at my folks' house. Given my grandparents' limited budget for either frivolousness or nostalgia, it is touching that Grandma bothered to take this charming picture of two chickens I'd been given the honor of naming when they were chicks. Pauline, you'll notice from the inscription, was only indulging me up to a point. She made certain I knew that Cooky and Brownie had one-way tickets to the dinner table. Thanks to the magic of Verichrome, however, I could imagine the girls forever enjoying a pan of milk in front of the barn instead of pan-fried with cream gravy on the side.



Grandpa Henry, Grandma Pauline and Tony

For somewhat similar reasons my mind's eye still pictures Grandpa and Grandma in front of the barn on a lovely spring evening after milking chores are finished. Here they will remain—arm-in-arm, vital and lively—until the fragile film of my memory fades.

The North Dakota farm was the first place I became closely acquainted with my food before it ended up on the table. I recall being cognizant of the ultimate destination of Grandma's hens, even to the extent of participating in the memorable ritual of ushering the girls from the chicken yard to the freezer by way of the chopping block and the scalding pot. Nevertheless, I persisted

in establishing short-term friendships with the hens who offered such pleasant and undemanding companionship during my summers on the farm, and who provided me with my earliest lessons in animal husbandry, with the additional benefits of fresh eggs and bounteous Sunday dinners.

I must pause a moment here to articulate my frustration with Microsoft Word's grammar checker. This aggravating tool is urging me to change "hens who" to "hens that" in the previous paragraph, an insidious attempt to depersonalize my relationship with my chickens. If I change "hens" to

"persons," the program is happy to allow me to use the word "who." Please join me in a gentle rebellion against this senseless rule.

And while we're on the topic of rebellion, you might give some thought during this food-oriented holiday season to protesting unspeakable factory farming techniques simply by being more mindful of the food you buy and eat. Think locally-grown. Think organic. Think free-range and grass-fed. Think happy. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that eating food from unhappy animals is not a good idea. The anger and despair of the animals is manifested both chemically and energetically in the milk, meat and eggs, he says. Maybe you think this is a little flaky, but it made sense to me, especially after I read this sensible statement: "We have to eat happy eggs from happy chickens." But, of course, I've been saying this right along. Now I have the backing of a Buddhist monk.

I personally know the man who raised the turkey we ate for Thanksgiving this year. Ken is an extraordinarily entrepreneurial farmer who lives near Yoder, Kansas (www.jakoinc.com). He believes that animals raised naturally on grass in a stress-free environment do not need antibiotics, hormones and other supplements. He also raises his animals in harmony with the seasons. Because of these philosophies, Ken's chickens, turkeys, lambs, pigs and dairy cattle are all, I think, unusually happy. We, in turn, are happy when we eat the meat and butter we buy from him. You might think I'm kidding, but I'm not. Jane declared this Thanksgiving's turkey the best she had ever eaten, which is another benefit of eating happy animals: they have a cleaner, richer flavor. If you don't live anywhere near Yoder, it is certainly worth investigating to see if there are farmers near you who raise happy animals and happy vegetables.



Our friend Michelle carves the happy turkey while Jane and I supervise and sample. Photo by Don Wolfe.



Silvia is reluctant to attend her Poultry of the American Revolution meetings, claiming she looks "frumpy" and "a mere vestige of my former self."



Some of my happy chickens are a little chilly these days. One by one the girls are entering the molting phase, each in her own unique style. Silvia's transformation has been the most dramatic. We came home from a week of visiting with family in Michigan to find her half-naked. Egg production has dropped off markedly. I count myself lucky to get three or four eggs a day—just enough for our breakfast—when not long ago I could count on at least a daily dozen. My customers are already puzzling over how to have a Happy New Year without eggs from the happiest chickens in Kansas. The girls and I sincerely hope they figure out a way to do so.