

Fiction section

Edited by **Joe Gray**

Joe is a field naturalist and conservationist who lives on the island of Great Britain. He writes eco-fiction under the pen name Dewey Dabbar.

With the story that we publish below, I realize that we are laying ourselves open to accusations of cervocentrism. This latest offering takes our tally of tales to five, and two of them – this one included – have foregrounded the deer’s perspective. Back in Vol 5 No 2, Jamie McGill’s first-person voice ruminated on the lot of a stuffed-head seller, “offering the deer my silent and insignificant apologies for the damage caused by my species.” Now, Mike Murray, in his delightful story, tells of a world in which deer are very much alive.

Cervinity

Mike Murray

When the pandemic hit it wiped out a lot of humans. Those who lived stopped working in high-rise offices and laboratories and universities and stayed home because they could think and do everything from anywhere and they didn’t have to shower as often. Because there were fewer vehicles cluttering the roads, the deer stopped dying so much. They said, Now we can cross without looking like we always do but without the ugly consequences. Their population grew as the humans’ shrank. The deer became quite plentiful and visible not just in the forests and in the streets but in the yards of the humans and on the hiking trails the humans had built for themselves and on sidewalks and in plazas and in playgrounds and on vacated corporate lawns. They were everywhere, really.

Before the pandemic, the deer were skittish. Wary of the humans, they kept their distance. They said, Screw the delicious forbs and these acorns. Run. Now they said, This greenbrier is so tasty I will let the humans walk past while I partake and see what happens. Nothing happened. The humans stopped and stared at the deer, yes, and sometimes they took pictures, but that was it. When a child or a teenager came too close, the stag would wander over and the parents of the human child would whisk it away and the teenagers would back off because they were really afraid of the deer, deep inside, despite their bravado, as before the deer had been afraid of the humans.

Eventually, the humans would look without stopping and the deer stopped lifting their heads mid-meal. This is how it was for a good while until the deer got bored. Now that they were eating out of backyards and on patios and on condo grounds, they could see inside the big thicket boxes where the humans lived and noticed that they lay on things inside those big thicket boxes that

were not shrubs and were not cornstalks. The not-shrubs and the not-cornstalks looked quite cozy, and other things, which were illuminated and were not rocks and displayed other humans moving about, entranced the humans who were watching them. The deer said, How can we get these things?

Buck-1 was the first deer ever to hold a human job. He bused tables and washed dishes at the Pot Luck Café on Route 8, not far from his home range. He was hired without a reference check since the humans who owned businesses could not get humans to work in those businesses after the pandemic and thus were desperate. There were signs all over humandom asking for help for all kinds of things, but humans refused to respond no matter what the businesses and the government did to make working more attractive to their kind.

Buck-1 earned nine dollars and seventy-two cents an hour and was off Mondays and Thursdays. He saved all of his money except for that which was needed to purchase some of the things that the humans had which were enticing to him, having the bulk of it direct-deposited into an account at Commonwealth Bank on Trout Island Road. Six months into his job, at the age of three, Buck-1 collided with a minivan delivering prescriptions to the humans. He died on impact. As did the minivan. As did the human. The owner of the Pot Luck, Dinah Shank, said at the memorial that Buck-1 was the best worker she had ever known and that he had risen to assistant manager at the time of his tragic demise. Fresh Venison Chili was the most popular dish at her restaurant that week, and Buck-1's antlers were mounted above the sink where he had toiled.

Inspired by Buck-1's legacy, other deer took jobs that the humans would not, most of which were in the service industry. There were deer who tended bar, deer who became hotel concierges, deer who styled hair, deer who piloted domestic flights, and deer who were personal trainers. The deer were seen as excellent employees. They were prompt and polite, and they did not complain. They rose through the ranks quickly, often displacing the humans who had chosen to continue to work after the pandemic but not with the same level of commitment they had displayed prior to the pandemic. The humans did not mind that the deer took their jobs because, deep down, the humans did not really want to work anyway. They wanted to go for walks in the woods during the day and sit in their big thicket boxes at night and stare at the smaller illuminated boxes that were not rocks that entranced them. Generations later, the Secretary of Labor, Doe-86539, announced that the deer-to-human ratio in the workforce was 75:25, with the gap growing rapidly each month. It was widely assumed that in the very near future there would be no humans working at all.

This was all great news for the deer, who were living longer than they had in the wild. While they were not technically in captivity, like the deer in the petting zoos, they were living among the humans now in big thicket boxes of their own. In the wild, the deer lived, oh, three to five years. Predators were the number-one killer of such deer, those predators being the coyote, the bear, the bobcat, the wolf... and humans. The deer in the big thicket boxes enjoyed much

longer lives, especially once the Secretary of the Interior, Stag-Z, announced the deer hunting ban. Despite protests from many humans, this law was upheld by the Supreme Court, which was made up of more deer than humans.

Still, there were humans who continued to kill deer for sport. They did this clandestinely. They did so in forests and in other remote areas, so the deer moved to the cities and suburbs, where humans who liked to kill deer for sport were less likely to fire upon them. These humans became frustrated because deer in the wild became quite scarce, especially after the humans had killed most of those, so the humans killed the coyote, the bear, the bobcat, the wolf... and other humans.

It was a messy time for the humans once the coyote, the bear, the bobcat, and the wolf were gone. This did not bother the deer, however, as they were flourishing. They relished city life and shopped in boutiques and ate in fine restaurants and attended classical concerts.

Lady Dama was the first deer to learn to play the harp. By all accounts, Lady Dama was the most beautiful deer any human had ever seen—a statement perhaps tempered by the severely reduced human population due to the humans dispatching their own kind. But still. Lady Dama's barrow was a rich russet-brown blessed with white spots in the shape of hearts, which may or may not have occurred naturally. She featured a pale, buff rump and a white tail that waggled in most mesmerizing fashion while she played.

While performing with the Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra was indeed a notable accomplishment for a deer, Lady Dama was perhaps best remembered for mating with a human. His name was Clifford Mintz, a handsome lapidarist who had sent a bouquet of tulips, lilies, and tender greens to Lady Dama's dressing room after witnessing her solo from Donizetti's Lucia di Lammermoor. This cervine-human consummation resulted in the first mixed-species child, an unnamed male who died three days after birth. Such a sad consequence did not deter other deer and other humans from mating with each other. Quite the contrary. The humans were especially keen on this activity, having lost most of their potential partners due to the popularity of their kind's intraspecies slaying.

Stags and human females were thus intercouring with tremendous frequency, resulting in the births of many deer-human offspring, some of whom lived. Early on, there existed an unspoken competition to see who could produce the longest-living offspring, the does who mated with the human males or the human females who mated with the stags. In short order, however, both sides agreed that what was best for all was for the offspring to survive regardless of the pairings, and when it was clear that cervine-human intercourse was not a passing fancy and was indeed the way of the future, scientists discovered, after years of research and testing, how to prevent such premature mortalities.

In time, the number of cervine-human unions surpassed the number of human-human unions by a ratio of 86:14, with the gap growing rapidly each year until, generations later, there was but one pure human remaining.

Emily Quick was forty-eight when she became the last pure human alive. A seamstress who fashioned, by hand, business attire for today's cosmopolitan deer, she was both celebrated and reviled by the cervine-human community. Celebrated, because those who identified more with their human side adored her with an almost-religious fervor; reviled, because those who identified more with their cervine side could not forget that for untold generations her kind would routinely kill their kind for sport and eat their meat and mount their heads and pose with their ancestors' racks.

Being the last of any species is a tremendous burden. Emily Quick had not sought out such a role, nor was she enthusiastic about achieving it. In fact, in her only interview on the subject, she pointed out that she had done nothing to achieve it at all beyond living her life, and that in and of itself is not truly an accomplishment, certainly not one worthy of the suddenly attendant fanfare. Both she and her doe partner wanted nothing but to be left alone.

Alas, Emily could no longer dine at restaurants or attend cultural events without being bowed to or, at times, heckled. Years later, when Emily Quick died, a profound sense of loss was felt by both camps. Most significantly, those who identified more with their cervine side had lost the face they had attached to their hatred. Some of these were humbled and expressed remorse to the deer-priests. Others chose, instead, to hate goats, who had recently petitioned for citizenship and, in fledgling numbers, were taking jobs from the deer that the deer did not really want to do anyway, not anymore, such as accounting and mail sorting.

These goats were quick learners. Quicker, it was said, than the deer had been when they first joined the human workforce. Some, it was rumored, were quite fetching.

About the author

Mike Murray – a writer, web developer and book designer living in Pittsburgh, USA – is the winner of *Colorado Review's* 2022 Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction. He has been further recognized in *Best American Short Stories* for his Distinguished Story of 2022. His work has also appeared in *OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters* (Buttonhook Press), *The Rag*, *A River and Sound Review* and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.