



# THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

November 9, 2018

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

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My friend Bonner turned forty last month. He wanted to go down to Baja to celebrate. Things are old-fashioned there and it's easier to remain in denial about your age. Also, they have a fish called the blue dragon that Bonner was dying to kill. He was framing it as a sort of quest. He brought along his friend, Don, who we have always thought of as immortal. Don is maybe sixty or sixty-five and is in a wheelchair. He used to be in a motorcycle gang called Death's Doors and still wears the colors sometimes, even though he hasn't been on a bike or to a meeting or whatever it's called in years. So many terrible things have already happened to Don that it's hard to imagine anything could actually do him in.

"You had to drop out of the gang when you, like, lost your legs?" I asked Don when we first started drinking together.

"I got run over by a train when I was seven years old," Don said. "That's what happened to the legs."

"Jesus," I said. "Sorry."

"You see me cryin'?" Don said.

Don wasn't wearing the colors down in Baja, though. I guess maybe they weren't appropriate for the beach. He rolled off the plane in a black shirt with the sleeves cut off and his gigantic, tattooed arms sticking out. Bonner walked beside him in a brown polyester suit, cowboy boots and a bolo tie. I have been in a bar on more than one occasion when people mistook Bonner for Townes Van Zandt, even though Townes has been dead since 1997. I didn't really know how to dress. I had this striped Ben Davis shirt on, which, if you've ever met me, you're probably familiar with. The rest doesn't matter. I looked like myself. Who cares? I was pretty lightheaded. I hadn't eaten in three days. I don't relish the opportunity to be seen without a shirt, even by forty-year-old ghosts or paraplegic bikers.

"I'll drive," Don said.

I wondered how he would manage without any legs, of course, but letting him drive only carried the possibility of death, whereas questioning his competence seemed like a sure thing. Turned out he drove like a regular old crazy person. He had a duffle bag with underwear and tequila and one of those folding blackjacks that riot cops and, I guess, people like him carry. He took that out and worked the gas and brake with it while steering and drinking tequila with the other hand. I remembered this scene from Saul Bellow's novel, *Herzog*, in which the one-legged character, Gershbach, dances heroically and the narrator stands there watching, resenting the Gershbach and his disability because it only serves to make him that much more rad. It was like that. It was for me, anyway. I don't know how Bonner felt, he had his sunglasses on.

We arrived at the place, which was exactly what you'd imagine – white-washed adobe, vast beach, sparkling water, rotting piers, and hungry dogs – that particularly Mexican brand of sensual paradise that comes of natural beauty made purple at the edges by the creeping death of capitalism.

We got drunk all night and then went down to the beach at dawn and got in a little wooden boat with a Mexican guy named Pete. The fishing rods were lengths of palo verde and the line was made from pieces of monofilament of various weights braided together to form a section that was as big around as your little finger in places.

"El Blue Dragon es muy powerful," Pete said.

"That's what we're counting on," said Bonner.

He was smoking again. Little specks of ash flew off the end of his cigarette and hit him in the face as we motored out of the harbor and into the big water. It looked painful, but he didn't seem to notice. It was a beautiful morning in a beautiful place. The mouth of the harbor was made of great, pocked crags of white rock that I was sure had some fascinating geological history. God, my head hurt. The sunlight on the water made me feel like throwing up. I bent over the side of the boat. The water was so clear that you could see through it like the sky and it was full of fish like birds.



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“Hey, Don,” I said, “I think there’s a bunch of fish in this water.”

Don looked over the edge of the boat.

“I see fish,” he said, “but I can’t tell if they’re real. Are we on drugs?”

“No,” I said. “We’re just hungover.”

“Funny,” Don said, “I don’t mind it.”

We got out into the bay and turned what I think was south and skipped along the water with the verdant tropical coastline in close proximity and the surreal quantities of fish streaming by beneath us in the clear water. I had assumed all the places on earth like this had already been discovered and destroyed by people like us, but I guess I was wrong. After a mile or two, you could see the water go dark ahead of us and the air got noticeably colder. Soon, we passed onto a place where the bottom dropped away and the water was as black as night. Looking over the side now was like falling through space. There were glowing, yellow things down there, drifting around in the dark.

“What are those yellow things?” I said to Pete.

“Blue dragon,” Pete said, smiling, “muy powerful.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Don said. “What do I look like, Mickey Mouse? Gimme one of those poles.”

I didn’t catch anything. Bonner did, but the fish or whatever it was on the other end of the line, ripped the pole out of his hand and pulled it down into the water. I haven’t fished a lot, but I thought that was pretty remarkable. We sat there for a while, looking at the water, waiting for the pole to maybe resurface or something, but it didn’t. I was afraid to look over the side after that because I didn’t want to get my face bitten off.

Don got something on the line. The boat pitched sideways and started to move across the water. Without his legs, Don probably weighed about 300 pounds. He was lifted out of his chair and pressed against the gunwale. Through the forest of hair and tattoos, you could see the anatomy of his giant arms separated into their component parts, every piece of them fighting to keep from being ripped off their shoulders.

“Hold me down!” he shouted.

He was being pulled out of the boat.

We grabbed him around the stomach and held on. I expected Pete to be too tourist weary to engage in this sort of silliness, but he got right in there. So it was three of us holding onto Don, and Don holding onto the pole.

I’ll ruin the suspense here and tell you that, eventually, he lost the fish. But it took a while.

First, he reeled the reel and pulled the pole and shouted, “You monkey dog!”

“Get him, Don!” we shouted, grabbing his stomach with our hooked fingers, “Murder the son of a buck. Rip his face off.”

“You monkey dog!” he shouted.

At some point some birds showed up and yelled at us and crapped on our heads.

“No!” we shouted. “Why?”

Then, Bonner’s sunglasses fell in the water. I had never seen his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Bud,” I said.

“I’m a failure,” Bonner said.

Then, blood started to run out from between Don’s fingers and dripped off the end of the pole and into the water and these creepy little blue fish, presumably baby blue dragon fish, came up and looked at us sitting there in the boat, sweating and shouting and yanking on the pole. They blinked their slow, patronizing fish blinks and smiled their endless, fishy smiles. They were going to live a hundred years, you could see it on their faces.

“Hate you,” we said to the fish. “Hate you.”

After a while, they went back down, into the black water. They didn’t care what we said.

It had become a terrible day. There was white foam at the corners of my mouth. Don smelled like an exhausted football team.



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“My hands hurt,” I said.

I let go of Don and sat back in the boat.

Soon, Bonner did the same. Then Pete. Now, it was just Don and the blue dragon, dueling it out. We had had the sense, at least, to bring beer. I opened some and passed them around. We sat there in the boat and watched Don.

That poor fish, we thought. Nothing can defeat this man.

Just then, the blue dragon jumped out of the water. It was maybe fifty yards off the boat. As it came into the air, its pectoral fins unfurled like wings and it turned its head to look at us and opened its mouth and showed us its thousand triangular teeth. Its skin was many shades of blue, iridescent and layered and rippling, water dripping from it as its tail whipped the air.

I could tell you that the line broke or that the fish threw the hook or that the pole snapped in half, but none of those things are true. Don let it go. He took his hands off the pole and let it slip over the side. I expected Pete to be pissed, but he wasn't. He'd probably never seen somebody fight a blue dragon fish that hard before. It was worth the price of admission.

And don't worry about that poor fish, either, swimming around, attached to a pole and line. If you'd seen it, you wouldn't worry. After all, it wasn't a fish, so much, as it was a metaphor. In this story, it symbolizes either life or death. Maybe both.

I'll spare you the details of the rest of the trip. Bonner was forty. Don was beaten by a fish. I was myself.

“Blue dragon,” I said to Bonner at the airport, “muy powerful.”

“You got that right,” he said.

“I like being alive,” my daughter, Beatrice said later. “It's too bad we have to die someday.”

She's only ten, but she dwells on such things at night. I had raced home from the airport to tuck her in and was sitting on the side of her bed.

“Try not to think about it,” I said. “It's a long, long way off.”

“Not long enough,” she said.

*And isn't that the truth?* I thought, bending down to kiss her beautiful face in the dark.

This is the last time we'll ship our 2016 Home Chardonnay.

There are certain stylistic elements that distinguish this wine from most California Chardonnay, most notably that it is never exposed to new barrels and it doesn't undergo malolactic fermentation. These choices, made in the cellar, give it a lean texture and a certain aromatic profile that make it more akin, in some respects, to wines from Chablis than those from Alexander Valley. But, I think the cellar and winemaker are seldom what makes a wine special. Any bottle's greatest virtues and faults originate in the vineyard.

Our Chardonnay comes from the same vineyard my family has been farming on Chalk Hill Road since 1972. I'll share a brief anecdote from this year's harvest to illustrate what a special spot I think it is:

Earlier this week, we harvested our last fruit from this ranch, 50 tons we farm for a neighboring winery. It was too much for us to fit in a single load so, I asked my friend Bret Munselle to bring his truck out and haul a load. We picked all night and had the trucks filled when Bret arrived at about 5:15 am. He lives in Alexander Valley, a few miles south of the town of Geyserville. When he left his house, it was 52 degrees there. When he arrived at our Stone Vineyard, only about eight miles south, it was 31. The high that day was 78 degrees at both locations.

The moral is: cold nights make great Chardonnay.

Our Merlot comes from another vineyard my family has been farming since the 1970's, this one off of Red Winery Road. We only have a few acres of Merlot planted here and it grows in tight, clay soil – far from the



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theoretical ideal of porous, well-drained soil we winemakers all look for. But, as with our Chardonnay, I think the vineyard is what makes the wine. Both Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot from this site tend to evolve complete and harmonious flavors and aromas at lower brix than in our other two estate vineyards. The Cabernets from Red Winery are never the purple blockbusters like they are from Pyramid and Stone, but they have a balance, elegance, and floral character the other two vineyards seldom achieve.

I take special pleasure in these qualities when I find them in Merlot, which I think of as more delicate than Cabernet. I like to keep the alcohol and oak at a minimum and let the character of the varietal shine through. Our two acres of clay at Red Winery Vineyard let me do that. In the 2015 Merlot, I get dry rose petals, a touch of nutmeg and allspice on the nose and lots of black cherry on the palate. Drink the 2015 whenever you like, as long as it's before 2030.

This is the last shipment of 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon, both our Alexander Valley Estate and Pyramid Vineyard. This is one of the greatest Cabernet vintages California has ever seen and, luck allowing, it is one I will be drinking long after I stop making wine or writing these letters.

The 2014 Alexander Valley Estate is 100 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, composed of fruit sourced from all three of our vineyards. It was harvested on about a dozen dates ranging from mid- September to early October and aged for 18 months in French barriques. I love the combination of tannic texture and aromatic freshness in the 2014. It smells like violets and fresh plums and has great density presence on the palate. It's a powerful wine, but I wouldn't call it a heavy one. As I taste it today, I notice a pronounced savory, salty character emerging. This is a pleasure to drink now, but it will age beautifully. Save some until 2025 and be ready for a rare treat.

The 2014 Pyramid Single Vineyard has changed quite a bit in the last few months. It's the second shipment we've sent of this wine. Last time, it took hours to open in the glass; today, I find it remarkably expressive and generous from the outset.

The Pyramid is named for its terraced front hill that looks like, well, a Pyramid. But, the whole ranch is a collection of rocky hills and extreme exposures ranging from about 300 to 500 feet above sea level. The wines from here are always big and purple and dark and I think the vineyard shows its best when I let the fruit get good and ripe. What you risk in letting fruit ripen too long, is a loss of aromatics. Too much California Cabernet smells like blackberry jam and French oak and nothing else. I don't mind a touch of stewed fruit in the flavor of Cabernet, but I don't much care for it on the nose.

Anyway, the 2014 Pyramid is certainly very dark, but it's more than that, too. The nose is amazingly floral. I know I said the 2014 Alexander Valley Estate smells like violets, but the 2014 Pyramid does, too. It even has some of the orange blossom I associate with Pinot Noir. The palate is both sweet and salty. It's denser and heavier and more tannic than the 2014 Estate. I must also admit that I get a touch of bitterness in all the 2014 Cabernets we produced, especially the Pyramid. It reminds me of the 2005 Stone, a wine that took about eight years to lose its rough edges and start singing with the beautiful clarity of fruit you could taste there all along, struggling to get out. Given that the 2014 Pyramid is exciting and compelling now, it will undoubtedly improve with age.

I only wish the same could be said for the rest of us.

Be well and thank you for your support.

- Jake