



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

November 8, 2021

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

“What,” I said to Jeremy, “would you say is the most noble of beasts?”

“We talking wild or domestic?” Jeremy said.

“Wide open,” I said.

We were sitting in his backyard in Los Angeles, looking at the fence. There are no views in Los Angeles. One hears that there are hills out there, mountains, even. It is said the city lies between those mountains and the ocean. But these are just things people say. There are no mountains. There is no ocean. There is only Los Angeles.

“Did I tell you I got a new job?” Jeremy said.

“Yeah?” I said.

“Advertising sales.”

“I don’t know what that is,” I said.

“I think we’re gonna redo the kitchen,” Jeremy said.

“Congratulations,” I said.

“I’d have to go with the English bulldog,” Jeremy said.

“The bulldog is a sad clown,” I said.

“I’d like to see you say that to a bulldog’s face,” Jeremy said.

“What about the lion?” I said.

“A bulldog is basically the same thing as a lion,” Jeremy said, “only with more personality. You can’t cuddle a lion.”

“What of the eagle?” I said. “The majestic golden eagle? The bald eagle?”

“Birds of prey are probably the most overrated category in the animal kingdom,” Jeremy said.

“I like an orca,” I said.

“What’s an orca?”

“It is what is so often and erroneously referred to as a killer whale.”

“The fish?” Jeremy said.

“It’s a marine mammal,” I said.

“Talk about sad clowns,” Jeremy said, “listen to yourself: marine mammal. Erroneous. Orca. Get the stick out of your butt and get with the bulldogs.”

“I suppose you’re here to represent the barbarians?” I said. “You’re with the unwashed advertising salesmen masses?”

“I’m an employed professional living in an upscale neighborhood, is what I am,” Jeremy said.

I made a fart noise.

We sat there for a moment without speaking.

“Want to play darts?” Jeremy said.

“Sitting darts or standing darts?” I said.

“Sitting,” Jeremy said.



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“Sure,” I said.

He went in the house and came back with the darts and the dart board. He hung the dartboard on the fence and sat down and handed me the darts.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Please,” Jeremy said. “You’re my guest.”

“You know,” I said, “I was thinking about kicking your ass earlier,” I said.

“That’s good,” Jeremy said, “because I was thinking about kicking yours.”

“Go for it,” I said.

“Just play darts,” Jeremy said.

I threw one of the darts. It went over the fence. I don’t know what was on the other side. A house, presumably.

“What now?” I said.

“We go get it,” Jeremy said.

“Should I put on a shirt?” I said.

“We’re not going to the prom,” Jeremy said.

Don’t we all feel all feel like losers approaching the house of a stranger? And these were clean people. I could tell. Looking at their house reminded me of everything that was wrong with mine. Jeremy knocked.

“There’s a doorbell,” I said. “Why didn’t you use the doorbell?”

“Knocking is more subtle,” Jeremy said.

I made another fart noise. Nobody answered. I rang the doorbell. Jeremy made a fart noise. Nobody answered.

We walked around the side of the house. We were soon presented with your standard fence, your standard gate. Jeremy pulled the string and we walked into the backyard. It was as well-appointed as a dimly small yard can be: tightly trimmed lawn, undersized topiary, minor water feature. The dart was sticking out of the siding next to a glass door. I was pulling it out when I noticed the face of an English bulldog staring at me.

“Holy magoly,” I said. “Look at that.”

Jeremy came over. He put his face right up to glass. The bulldog put his face against the glass on the other side. There was fog on both sides of the glass.

“Is this a spirit quest?” Jeremy said. “Did you lure me into a spirit quest?”

“Not intentionally,” I said.

“I bet a hundred bucks this guy’s name is Marvin,” Jeremy said.

“His name is Bruce,” I said. “He’s decidedly a Bruce.”

“Let’s ask him,” Jeremy said.

“Go ahead,” I said, “ask him.”

Jeremy opened the door.



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The dog stepped out and stood on the stoop and looked at us. We looked back at him.

“That is the cutest goddamn thing I have ever seen,” I said.

“What about the majestic bald eagle?” Jeremy said. “What about the fish?”

“I take it all back,” I said.

Jeremy reached over Bruce and closed the door behind him. The three of us walked through the yard and out through the gate. We closed it behind us and went next door and through the gate there and closed that one and went back to the lounge area. There was a third chair there. Bruce looked at it. Jeremy picked him up and put him in the seat. He made himself comfortable, settled in. We admired him.

“This calls for a beer or something,” Jeremy said. “What do dog’s drink?”

“I think water is typical,” I said.

“That seems like an injustice,” Jeremy said.

He went in the house. Bruce and I waited. I didn’t want to come off as dorky, but it was hard not to look at him. I’ve always aspired to be the strong and silent type, but it’s just not my vibe. Jeremy came out with a couple of beers for us and a bowl of whipped cream for Bruce. He set the whipped cream in the chair. Bruce licked at it, took a break, looked at the sky, licked some more.

“Shall we resume?” Jeremy said.

I tried to hand him the dart I had thrown over the fence but he waived me away.

“Please,” he said, “what’s a mulligan among friends?”

I took my seat and tossed the darts. Two of them hit the dart board, one hit the fence. I got up and retrieved the darts and handed them to Jeremy. He tossed and retrieved. We drank beer. It slowly got dark. At some point, we heard a car door slam. House doors opened and closed on the other side of the fence. There was excited conversation we couldn’t make out. Then shouting. Calling.

“Wesley!” a man shouted.

“Wesley!” a woman shouted. “Wesley, honey, where are you?”

We looked over at Bruce. He raised his head up ever so slightly.

“Wesley!” somebody shouted. “Wesley! Wesley! Wesley!”

Bruce put his head back down and closed his eyes.

“Do you know anybody who’s been to Heaven?” I said to Jeremy.

“A few,” he said.

“What do they say it’s like?” I said.

“Lot like here. Warmer in the morning and cooler in the afternoon. No commercials. That sort of thing.”

“Are there dogs?”

“Where else would they be?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Their own Heaven?”

“There is no Heaven without dogs,” Jeremy said.



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I looked over at Bruce.

“You think we’ll make it?” I said.

“Wesley!” Somebody shouted. “Wesley! Wesley!”

“Not a doubt in my mind,” Jeremy said.

Depending on the club you’re in, you’ve received either two or three different bottlings of 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon from my family’s vineyards. I never expected to like this vintage the way I do. It never stuck out. – I never thought of it as flawed, neither did it stick in my mind as having to the potential to stand out among its peers. I’m a tough crowd. If you’re lucky enough to be farming Cabernet where my family has been farming it for nearly 50 years, you’ve seen a lot of vintages come and go, most of them excellent.

I was about to write that there isn’t much vintage variation in California – it almost never rains here between the beginning of June and the end of September. And rain (or the lack thereof) is what makes or breaks a vintage in the touchstone appellation for the work we do (Bordeaux). That’s one of the reasons people make a big deal about winemakers in California – as boring and redundant as they are, at least they’re more varied than the weather.

Enter 2017. That was the year fall fires began visiting the North Coast at every harvest. Fires either burned in or directly adjacent to Alexander Valley in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020. 2021 was the first harvest since 2016 that we’ve been able to conclude in relative peace and quiet.

Lack of impending disaster gives you room not just to work, but to deliberate. And most of us probably deliberate too much: we leave the grapes hanging there, hoping that something will happen to make us like them better. They could be the best grapes we’ve ever tasted and if we think there’s some remote chance they might improve, we won’t pick them.

This period of dawdling is called “hangtime.” In the old days, when the springs were later and the falls were colder, hangtime was essential to softening tannin and letting flavors other than sugar and acid arrive. But vintages aren’t the same as they were when I was a kid. They’re better: earlier springs, warmer summers, dryer falls. All this makes for grapes that are ready to pick much earlier than they used to be. We used to pick nearly every berry of Cabernet in October. In both 2020 and 2021, the last day of harvest was October 1st.

Blame the changing weather for the wildfires and blame the wildfires for the early harvests.

Leaving essentially ripe grapes hanging on the vine in September is very different than leaving them there in October. September often includes heat spikes that go over a hundred degrees. The days are longer. The air at night is dryer. I don’t know why it didn’t occur to us winemakers that something was lost by leaving grapes hanging on the vine in these new conditions. It’s scary to break from convention. If you things the same way they’ve always been done, the same way everybody else does them, you’re less likely to be blamed when the product of your labor sucks. You’re also less – much less – likely to make something exceptional.

In 2017, the threat of losing the crop to wildfires helped me decide to start picking our Cabernet earlier than we have in decades. It was a lucky break. In these wines, I feel I’ve stumbled on a new freshness and vitality



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that an obsessive compulsive farmer with no sense of context or proportion like me might be dumb enough to call a goldmine.

This shipment includes our **2017 Red Winery Vineyard Cabernet**. My parents bought this ranch in 1972 when it was planted to plums. Over the last seven years or so, we have been replanting it, piece by piece. I was just there this morning, this afternoon, and this evening; it has never looked better: the young vines are beautifully tended and healthy, without being over-vigorous. The 2017 Red Winery includes wine made from some of these young vines, and I think they give it a welcome vibrance and intensity. I get violets and black cherry and nutmeg. A hint of toasted French Oak. A lovely, full-bodied embodiment of this vineyard's character. Surprisingly easy-drinking. Drink now through 2035.

Some of you are receiving a bottle or two of our **2018 Alexander Valley Estate Merlot**. We have produced every vintage of Merlot we've ever bottled from the same few acres of clay and loam on Red Winery Road since our inaugural vintage in 2002. Our customers and friends in the industry love this wine, and I do, too. It doesn't have the color or tannic intensity of our Cabernet, but it has a grace and elegance they rarely achieve. The 2018 is still young. There's a lot of fresh blueberry and blackberry here, along with the signature baking spice this wine always delivers – star anise, nutmeg, cinnamon. This wine has a long way to go. Drink now at a barbecue, drink in ten years with your best friend.

The **2017 Alexander Valley Estate Cabernet** is one of the most fruit-forward editions of this wine we've ever produced. It has strong acid and tannin, but the nose and palate are already remarkably developed. I get violets, anise, cinnamon, black cherry in the aroma. Wow. A little Oolong tea. I don't believe I've ever said that about one of my own wines. It makes an interesting contrast to the 2017 Stone Vineyard Cabernet. It has a lot of same dark fruit but, overall, it's brighter and leaner. This wine wants food, preferably something red and grilled. Drink now through 2030.

Also in this shipment is the **2020 Home Chardonnay**. This wine comes from our family ranch on Chalk Hill Road, where, on a give day, it is about 5 degrees cooler than the rest of Alexander Valley. The vines row in the sand and gravel of an ancient riverbed, and the wine expresses the character of its origins - flinty, saline, decidedly cool-climate. I get Meyer lemon curd and honey and bread dough on the nose. This is still a racy, high-tone version of Chardonnay, but it's dense and oplicated and engrossing, too.

Be good to each other and be good to yourself.

– Jake