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The Capricious Critic
Essays and Dispatches



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Evil Druids	11
Better Banana	15
The Lute	19
Gift Guide	22
Threat Bear	27
Dueling	35
Fountain Pens	42
Catapults	47
Hell	55
The Video Games	67
<i>Twilight Wizards of the Dragon Empire</i>	71
Subways	80
A Treasury of Irish Folk Songs	94
Bloodsports; Rehab	98
The Bow	111
The Wisdom of My Dog	116
Seasonal Male Activity Inventory	121
The Moon	124
The Bicycle	142
Death	172
<i>Afterword</i>	205

Seasonal Male Activity Inventory

Splitting Wood

Tradition: *****

Masculinity: *****

What other activity combines antiquated technology and mute male rage so seamlessly and effortlessly? The sweat-darkened wood of the maul, the scarred, silent chopping block, and the bright wink of the killing edge; they're simply an unbeatably weird and intense seasonal package. If there's a better way to tell your son in-law that you think he's a mincing fairy without actually saying it, we haven't found it.

Shooting

Tradition: ***

Masculinity: *****½

I'm talking here about target shooting—hunting is of course another matter, but since your modern hunter wears a space suit and eliminates deer with GPS-directed earthquakes, I think we can safely rule it off this list. Target shooting is a delightfully male way to while away the holiday virtually killing things in a way that even the gore-drenched battlefield of the Nintendo Wii can't provide. Provide your son in-law with priceless memories: you, standing there not exactly pointing the shotgun at him, your eyes perfect discs of reptilian blankness; the winter hush; no one is abroad and you have the car keys. Also let's not forget that it's a competition!

Abusing Family

Tradition: **

Masculinity: ***** (California: ***)

Well, Brenda, maybe if you had a little more *respect* for yourself, you wouldn't have married someone like Lllelwyn.

Gazing Moodily at Fire

Tradition: *****

Masculinity: **** to *****

After you've split the wood and angrily carried it inside, what are you to do with it? Hoard it? "Cure" it in the basement? No! It's time to burn it. This is another perfect opportunity to let your son-in-law know exactly how you feel about him by staring intensely at him while he vainly tries to light the fire with tequila-soaked pages from the *Utne Reader*. Bonus points for stoically wearing a sweater which is so woolly and scratchy that it is visibly drawing blood. And of course, fire-staring time is also time you can use to get angry and/or depressed drunk.

Staying at Work

Tradition: *****

Masculinity: *****

Everyone knows that geese take turns at the fore of their flight patterns. The goose in the lead provides a slipstream that eases the flight of the following geese. But sometimes the lead goose just wants some fucking peace and quiet.

Competitive Gift Exchange

Tradition: *****

Masculinity: **

Let's not forget the "reason for the season"—battering down everyone else's name through your extravagance! In Papua New Guinea the quickest route to becoming a great man is by giving away a lot of pigs. In the Pacific northwest, certain curiously

inscribed copper objects exist only for prestatation—Marcel Mauss tells us that they speak and grumble, and that the Kwakiutl and the Haïda protect them from the cold with blankets. Gifts given work a subtle power on their recipients, and the giver becomes a giant and a hero. The recipient squirms under reciprocal obligation. So despite all this: for Brenda, a Lexus, for Lllelwyn, a pack of size S Kirkland briefs with price tag.

Being Awake all the Time

Tradition: *

Masculinity: *****

Looks like Lllelwyn has planned a little midnight trip to the lavatory! What better time to be planted like some rude idol in the living room, lit with ghostly tv-light and halfway through *Full Metal Jacket* and a bottle of Jameson?