

*Three*



## 3.0

June 1971. Trying to maintain an apartment downtown with my first wife, I took a job in the carpentry section of a maintenance company that took care of 102 funeral parlors in Manhattan. I was nineteen. Prior to this work, I had never seen a dead human body. Within weeks, I had seen hundreds. Naked, under sheets, sporting toe-tags tied over long untrimmed nails, the cadavers were lined up in the basement halls on gurneys: name, sex and age. The morticians rolled them in and out of the embalming rooms. I once touched the face of an old man. What I remember most about my mother's death was the coldness of her brow. Lying in bed, with the sheet pulled to her chin, it seemed she might be sleeping. When my hand touched her forehead and all doubt vanished.

The dead in the funeral parlors were mostly older persons, their corpses more weird than frightening. The oscillation between horror and attraction slowed after a week or so, and the tone of being around so many cadavers dropped an octave. I grew accustomed to their presence. Corpses are unlike other entities. There once human quality is loud. And then quite out of nowhere, the thought of finding a young person, dead and cold, flashed in my head at some point during the summer. The idea took hold and grew both appalling and irresistible. I looked without looking. Then the thought of finding a young woman dead and naked, maybe even beautiful, under a sheet in the darkness of the basement occurred to me. I was as horrified as you probably are now and did not allow myself to think about it.

Achilleus takes Briseis into his shelter and into his bed. A prize of war, she is also a beautiful young woman in a camp of foreign and dangerous men. She is in shock. All she had known is destroyed. The smells of her city – sacked and burned – are still fresh in her nostrils. She is unable to resist Achilleus any more than her city was able to stand against him. Neither

can she forbear her desire to have a place. And so finally she cannot ignore the excitement of penetration and the relief that comes with the intromission of intimacy in a world at war I can barely imagine.

Achilleus tells Agamemnon that he loves the girl. Does this make sense? Perhaps Achilleus' wrath, born from the bitter aggravation of being cheated by Agamemnon, was actually nurtured more by the loss of the girl Briseis than it was fed by the loss of his prize, a mere token of honor, the value of which he had begun to question? Young men become very attached to young women, even if their attachment is most acutely felt in separation or threat of loss.

Opened by longing, Achilleus quickly loses track of the fact that the explicit flowering of his attraction for the girl has its root sunk into the lightless ground of the arbitrary. Why should she see any better? The quiddity of friendship is something political – possible only between equals – but love, erotic desire and the relations that belong to the domestic and the private, demands no such parity. Erotic desire *makes* us equal. Achilleus commands the love of the girl and perhaps is commanded by this love in return. A weaker man may seek to have such power over only the dead.

Traitors against the English crown in the sixteenth century were often hanged, drawn and quartered in front of cheering and jeering crowds. I remember as a schoolboy reading detailed accounts of the hangman's part in the grisly evisceration of the traitor. I was filled with a combination of fascination and repulsion so powerful that I was only able to read a sentence or two before I would feel compelled to cover the page with my hands. But after a moment, I was equally compelled to look down at the book and continue reading. As with Leontius outside the gates of Athens, who could not keep himself from looking at the carnage of a criminal butchered by the city's executioner, my appetite for the spectacle of death and dead bodies is as bipolar as the status of killing itself. The fact that

slaughter is as attractive as it is repulsive puts me face to face with the fact that killing is not only sometimes necessary, it can be pleasurable as well. The quality of pleasure taken in violence may be related to revenge and the pleasures of justified anger or the pleasure may spill over into the demonic. It is impossible not to understand that great pleasure has been taken in slaughter of the weak and the helpless, even if we refuse to know it or hide our eyes from this horrible fact.

Our tradition has preserved accounts of the kinds of relations that sometimes obtain between erotic pleasure and violence: bacchanal bloodlust and various orgiastic rites blending orgasm and blood, sometimes – in fact, most times – the blood of the innocent and the powerless. But in every case, violence, once loosed, seems mostly to seek out the available. To take pleasure in doing violence to the merely available smacks of decadence. That hunting can be decadent is beyond doubt.

### 3.1

Ortega y Gasset's essay, *Meditations on Hunting*, was first written as a substantive introduction to a long and edifying treatise on sport hunting. The treatise, written by a Spanish nobleman, contends with various kinds of game, their habits and methods of capture, but it is also well-stocked with anecdotal stories concerning aristocratic hunters, guides and the quest for exotic game in the wilds of distant continents. Ortega y Gasset's introduction was published separately several years later. In it, he has a tendency to keep hunting situated within the context of the aristocratic. He both assumes and demonstrates the noble nature of hunting and does so in two registers: hunting as an activity favored by the social aristocracy and as an activity appropriate to a natural aristocracy.

Hunting has long been a symbol of social privilege. The English yeoman, on the eve of North American colonization, took umbrage with the local clergy for a multitude of reasons,

not the least of which was the cleric's fondness of the field. The parish priest, often a pluralist, was all too often found courting hare with the local gentry while a barely literate curate was left to tend the flock. Tolstoy writes that in Russia during the Napoleonic period a good wolfhound had a value exceeding that of a serf, and, in certain exceptional cases, a value that exceeded the worth of a whole village. Over hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, the right to hunt in Europe has almost entirely accreted to the landed classes.

Sport was a privilege desired by more than had it. After the French revolution, one of the first acts of the liberated middle class was to fish the streams of the countryside, previously a rigorously protected prerogative of the landed classes. Despite the jealousy with which great families guarded their hunting and fishing rights, the ruling classes were never completely successful in keeping the poor from the chase. In Europe, poaching and sport hunting are parallel traditions. Sometimes the local population was sufficiently isolated from baronial control that hunting could be done without much consequence. At other times, even under the nose of a very powerful landholder and at great risk of punishment, some men were still inclined to poach. Hunting and entitlement, even freedom, are persistently linked in the European sensibility. In the New World, in the English Colonies, the right to hunt was more or less universal. Even on private property, permission to hunt was easily given to the person who asked. Only recently has the relationship between hunting and property been asserted as broadly as we find it today in the United States.

An early seventeenth century account of the approach to the North American continent speaks about the scent of wild flowers while still two hundred miles at sea. New York harbor was a churning shoal. Salmon, bass and shad ran thick and hard. The meadowlands – where now a sports stadium and a shopping mall stand on the wreckage and waste of the industrial revolution – was nursery to the Atlantic and home to

millions of migratory birds. Off Staten Island, there were oysters a half a foot across, geese and ducks in unimaginable numbers, muskrat, deer, fox: the mass of life was as astounding as its diversity. In the New World, hunting became economically important in ways that had been subducted under the development of the European continent and its culture hundreds of years before.

Game made up a meaningful part of the colonial diet, while deerskins from South Carolina and furs from the north provided the hard currency colonists needed to buy the imported manufactured goods they needed. Even if the majority of the skins and furs were supplied through barter that ultimately depended on the skills of native hunters, some of the early settlers became accomplished professional hunters and served both the local urban needs of town and city persons, as well as those of more distant European markets. Later, folk heroes Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and even Buffalo Bill – wilderness hunters and explorers – became cultural icons reflecting, perhaps even forming, cherished national values: courage, independence, toughness, resourcefulness and a certain, if perhaps dark, relationship to nature. My own grandfather was said to have hunted alligators in Louisiana to raise some cash on his way west at the very end of the nineteenth century. The frontier-hunter was admired and his skills praised. He was widely understood to be something of a natural aristocrat.

The word aristocracy is a Greek compound meaning something like power in the hands of the virtuous or the best. *Aristos*, particularly in Plato, has a meaning that is sometimes coupled to a notion of fundamental nature. The best horse is the horse in which the quiddity of horse – speed, strength, spirit, beauty, et cetera – was most manifest. This quiddity was the *aristos* of horse-ness. Conforming to the sense in which gold is said to be true, ‘*aristos*’ was later translated into Latin as a word related to the word for ‘truth,’ a word that is also related to the English word ‘virtue.’ In ancient philosophical texts, virtue

is a common English translation of the word *aristos*. Both Plato and Aristotle used the term ‘aristocracy’ in their discussions of political science, but in a sense that was closer to our sense of a meritocracy than the kind of hereditary plutocracy by which we have come to understand the term. What is aristocratic in a natural sense is that which is inherently noble or best. Ultimately, the natural aristocrat is that person who most fully manifests human being or what a human being is.

Despite a history of approbation sometimes approaching veneration, the American hunter is no longer valued as widely or as much as he once was. I am not suggesting he should be: the world changes. But as a result of the dubious ethical status of hunting and hunters we find today, any nod towards the nobility of the sport has become a gesture of questionable taste. As ever-mounting social forces oppose hunting, participation in the sport has not been seen as an activity that promotes self-reliance or tests one’s character so as much as a sadistic and barbaric display of aggression towards the natural environment – a display, some say, that should no longer be tolerated by a civilized people.

As with everything else that gains its authority from the past, hunting and killing of animals does not have any obvious ethical sanction. Voices from the past, the tradition, have opportunely broken through an effected independence, made suggestions, offered hope and even admonished when I have been without bearings of my own. But I have discovered that these ghosts to whom I have sometimes appealed will not speak without a sip of blood. The tradition says nothing of value without first tasting the flesh of my own understanding. Without offering myself to the dead, the tradition is merely a collection of artifacts – written and plastic articles dropped along the path of disembodied human development. These relics tell a story concerning one I no longer am. The multitude of its voices is the babbling, no matter how pleasant, of a fomenting past.

So while making an effort to uncover a sense in which hunting may participate in a natural *aristos* or virtue, I need to be as careful as I can possibly be not to celebrate any mindless killing or violence merely for the sake of unification. Without committing to any claim that is too large about the relation of hunting to virtue, or even beginning to refute the charge that hunting is *also* decadent, I would like to return to Ortega y Gasset and sort through some of what he has said about hunting and its relationship to human excellence, and in particular work through what amounts to an astonishing claim for nostalgia.

### 3.2

With the advent of modern technology, a foundational crisis undermining mathematics and nagging the sciences, the death of God, and perhaps even the end of experience, a systemic nostalgia seems to infuse the substrate of early twentieth century European thought. Ortega y Gasset, in step with many thinkers of his time, looks back to better days when the expression and fulfillment of our most base desires was possible. But we have evolved. Contemporary persons hunt within a long shadow cast before our progress, a progress Ortega y Gasset strongly connects to the atrophy of fundamental organic drives. The urge to chase and to kill has weakened, but not disappeared. The satisfaction of certain vestigial instincts turns out to be not only enjoyable, but a way back to something like origin. Origin appears in its enactment. It is because the pleasures one takes from such original modes of being are not just physical but also existential that hunting gets said to be a pastime appropriate to the natural aristocrat.

I startle at the sound of a window crashing down in the next room. Reflex. Instinct is the cause of an action over which the agent has little choice – what one does naturally. Breathing. But for Ortega y Gasset choice is the issue. *Who I am* results from the choices I make: what I have done, what I have not

done. But I cannot be whatever I want to be. Common usage has already stipulated that who I am is subject and never object to my own constructive will. I may breathe or not breathe but I cannot hold my breath forever. Already I am my choices and have found myself in a world that does not always bend to my will. Choice is subject to disappointment. And so self-creation, perhaps like every other duty, is sometimes a burden.

While readily acknowledging that hunting can, and even should, meet some of our material needs, Ortega y Gasset maintains that the modern hunter takes to the field mostly for the sake of satisfying a mode of nostalgia that stems from the very nature of human existence. In leaning towards the gratification of my more original urges, hunting frees me from the existential responsibility that necessarily falls to one who becomes through choice. Such is the case (even if this freedom is only tasted) because he has noticed that hunting shares in the same kind of temporality associated with the *best* vacation spots: the timelessness of a mountainscape, the unhurried pace of a tropical island. To hunt, the Spanish philosopher writes, is to “vacation in the Paleolithic.”

This bizarre locution seems to articulate the center of Ortega y Gasset’s *A Meditation on Hunting*. But it would be a mistake to think the pronouncement embraces science fiction. He is not interested in traveling through time. He is interested in a way to be that turns out to be trans-temporal. Hunting designates a mode of being that transgresses and so erases the usual differences between past, future and present. To “vacation in the Paleolithic” is to collapse time.

When I hunt, I am taken over by a more ancient temporality. *Now* I follow the track of the elk that was here an hour ago so that I might kill it in the meadow later this afternoon. Time is unified in the single act expressed by the preceding sentence. *Who I am* vanishes into the temporal thickness of the hunt that does not separate the future from the past. Like a flickering lamp, I push into the darkness of the quest and, in having

vanished into the wild, in *being at home* in the wild, in being complete, I put down the existential burden of self-creation. Nostalgic longing is sated because I am absorbed into a way to be that will not support the temporal modes by which self-creation is made possible. Not every kind of nostalgic longing is a whimsical dreaming into a perfect past – a past that has already been sealed away from experience. Nostalgia may also be the longing for the taste of existential freedom, the thirst to be at home everywhere. This kind of nostalgia is quenched in the chase.

Even if hunting is actually able to satisfy the longing for existential freedom by direct experiential access to that for which this kind of nostalgia longs – a kind of absorption into, and so being at home in the wild – there are several issues pertaining to the aristocratic nature of the quest that remain clouded. It is not clear whether the more original state of being that I am suggesting is achieved in hunting is the best way for human being to be. Or, if hunting is a mode of access to some way to be that is the best or most authentic, it is not obvious that hunting is the best way to develop this way to be.

### 3.3

Hunting is never a harmless walk in the woods. In killing anything, for most any reason, a person cannot quite say he has done a good thing. Yet nearly every culture, and so nearly every person, seems to claim that under the right circumstances killing is permitted: for food, in self-defense, as punishment, to preserve the ones we love or the nation. In an ever-expanding sense, survival is taken to be a natural right and is almost never actually subordinated to equally ubiquitous prohibitions against killing. When killing is sanctioned in some sense or other, it is often wrapped in ritual, odd customs and mysterious codes. In the space between a killing and its justification opens a field of many and motley acts of propitiation, obviation

and obfuscation. At the very least, anxiety pervades the act of killing. The acts of ceremony, conciliation and reconciliation that are a matter of custom demonstrate publicly some of the disquiet that belongs to the taking of a life – acts that generally seem to smooth the way towards a kind of forgetting of the dead. The subsistence hunter often pays homage to the animals he kills.

Eskimos are inclined to speak to the animal or its spirit-guardian after a kill. The hunter might beg for pardon and otherwise adopt a conciliatory manner toward the animal's soul and the spirit or god that protects it. Native hunters do not seem to blanch at bald lies. It is as if they are trying to convince the spirit world that the death of the animal was an aberration. The point of the hunter's apostrophe seems to be to situate the animal's death within a blameless setting: I am so sorry to have killed you; it was an accident. My arrow flew off the string. You understand. We need your flesh. I'm sure you will not mind. My children are hungry...

The traditional subsistence hunter makes his atonement not because of any psychological guilt he might have about killing the animal, but because he is afraid that an unpropitiated spirit will queer future hunts. The hunter propitiates the dead out of respect not just for the animal that has died but also for the greater cycle of life and death: the spirit or god that cares for both the living and the dead. Out of respect, the killing must be acknowledged or cleansed. Purification sometimes is a kind of magic performed to lull to sleep the protecting spirits of the animal world. Elaborate expiations for successful hunts occur in indigenous cultures that unambiguously permit and utterly depend upon the killing of animals. The traditional hunter appeases the souls of the animals he kills without respect to the fact that he plans to continue to kill.

The thought that hunting might be an ethical problem never crosses the mind of the hunter when he is fully engaged in the hunt. Once the animal lies dead, the modern hunter perhaps

has a tinge of guilt as the Paleolithic recedes leaving a corpse at his feet – at least until he gets to work preparing the carcass. The modern hunter pays his respects in his obedience to certain codes: a clean kill and using as much of the animal as possible. Each is involved in something like a ceremony. These acts of conciliation move to liquidate blame. The modern hunter, the indigenous hunter, each asserts the practicality of his act. The indigenous hunter tries to curry favor by pointing to necessity as the ultimate cause of the animal's misfortune: It was not my fault. I had to do it. The hunter asks that his deeds be forgotten, not because he is sorry that he has killed but because he has acted out of necessity. It is as if in pleading necessity the hunter announces his connection to and his place in the natural world. Of course, the spirit world does not seem as actual to me as perhaps it does to the traditional hunter-gatherer. I am also a creature of my time. Spirits seem like the superstitions of others to me. It is unclear how much I should differentiate primitive pieties from my own obedience to and concerns for ethical principle.

