

Four

4.0

Like Gregor Samsa, the gored horse struggled with its hooves in the air that it might win its feet again. I have no memory of the aficionados who must have been rushing to get out of the way. In a single heave of the bull's neck, man, lance and the ancient, well-padded horse were lifted from the ground and pitched into the second row of the stadium. Once the picador had been disposed of, the bull turned to make everything else that confronted him disappear. Thirty-five years ago I was eighteen years old, fresh out of high school and living alone in a strange Spanish city. I had never seen such a thing in my life.

It was a good fight. The tail or the ears or both were awarded. Dead, his hind legs were lashed to a spar, which was in turn harnessed to a team of horses. Black and bloody, the bull was dragged around the ring in a blizzard of flowers and cheers before being pulled into a tunnel that led beneath the bleachers in which I was sitting. It was over. Taken by an impulse to follow, I left my seat, while others were still clapping and yelling. I moved quickly to the exit. Looking for a way to the base of the stadium, I found a set of stairs and within a few minutes discovered a large chamber formed by the massive arches supporting the bullring in Barcelona.

The dead bull was already there. He had been drawn down the tunnel and onto a smooth floor of fitted stone. Freed from the harness and the team, the spar, to which the bull was tied, was being made up to a set of blocks that hung from the overhead. The horses had been led off to the side and were tethered to an iron ring set in one of the gray stone columns. All around the bull, men in leather aprons worked with knives. Two or three others had already started to cinch up on the blocks. As the spar came away from the floor, the hide, on which the bright blood had been so dramatic, was peeled loose and soon lay heaped on the stones under a steaming side of beef. The

body of the hunted animal is also put to use, but neither is the hunt merely the production of meat.

4.1

In hunting the real work, it is said, does not begin until after you pull the trigger. The guests at the mountain ranch liked to see the llamas about the place, as they also liked the lanky Texas ‘long horns’ kept in the big pasture close to the cabins. Their preferences together with the fact that Las Cruces is hot and dry in summer caused Stuart to come to an arrangement. He would load his herd onto a long-low stock trailer in the spring and haul them from his farm along the Rio Grande to a guest ranch in Colorado just outside of Creed. It took a while. In the fall, he would drive back up to Creed and take the llamas south again. The round trip saved him from needing to feed the beasts for the summer. It was not unusual that one or more of Stuart’s friends would accompany him on these drives, not only for the adventure but because in exchange for bringing his llamas to the ranch, Stuart and his entourage were given the run of the place for a few days. The fishing was outstanding: cold water and wild trout. My brother made the trip a couple of times.

Over the years I have heard a great deal about Bud. He lived on the ranch and was a guide. He was born in the same valley in which the main part of the ranch lay. His people were small ranchers and, like everyone else up there, made ends meet doing a little bit of everything. I have been told he left the state just once and that was to fight in the Second World War. As a boy, Bud hunted elk with a rifle. Later, he used a re-curve bow. When he was in his sixties, he took pleasure in sneaking up on elk browsing in the snow and giving them a slap on their brown haunches – a story as credible as the one Theodore Roosevelt tells about a mountain man who could jump out of a barrel without touching the sides and

was reputed to have killed grizzly bears in a most unorthodox manner. His dogs would track and then hold the bear at bay. While the bear was distracted by the dogs, the hunter would slip around behind it, push a long serpentine knife through the bear's back ribs in just the right spot and hollow out the heart with a violent twisting motion.

I understand that Bud, like other ranchers I've met, was a reticent man and disinclined to tell hunting stories. But there was an exception. His boy made a trip to bow hunt in the vast boglands for which this southern part of moose-rich Alaska is famous. The moose can be huge and Bud's son was alone. After having stalked and killed a bull, he found he had gotten himself ten miles from the nearest trailhead. It took four trips to pack out the bull. The meat was sweet and the rack is on the barn. That was the story Bud told.

I am sure it was an effort for Bud's son to find a bull. Moose hunting in that part of the state is very physical and bow hunting is always a challenge, but that was not the point. In his mid-thirties at the time, his son would have had to pack out the meat and the rack by himself. The walk could not have been less than eighty miles as the crow flies, but half that distance would have been covered carrying some very serious weight. The moose was unlikely to have weighed less than nine hundred pounds and could have come in at twice that. Even if all the meat were boned and bagged, a chore in itself, even if one were not inclined, as one should be by the letter of the law, to get every last piece from the carcass, the weight Bud's son must have carried on his back through a bog in hip waders would have been staggering. Four trips were both too many and not enough.

With the death of the beast comes a shift in the nature of the hunt. The difficulties entailed in maintaining concentration and containing the passions of the hunt climax with the kill. The epoch of the questing experience wanes into the toils of the butcher and the bearer. Like becoming a father, through which

the complications of an erotic relationship transmogrify into the rearing and support of children, the woodcraft of the hunter gives over to labors made with economic ends in mind.

4.2

About two years ago, I was hunting quail in the desert west of Las Cruces, out alone with my dogs bouncing along a two-track. I saw a kit fox asleep in the road ahead of me and assumed the fox would wake and get out of my way. But I never saw it move. Without much thought, I glanced into the rear view mirror as I passed by. In the mirror, I saw the fox staggering like a drunk propped up against a jam and wondered if I had run over it. I quickly dismissed the idea as impossible in much the same way I dismissed the bewildered look I had imagined on the face of the fox. But on my way back to the main road, for I had not forgotten, I saw the fox dead on the side of the two-track just about where I had seen him in the rear view mirror. Had I been hunting for fox, I would have been pleased to kill him. But I had not been hunting fox and I went back to town without stopping and hauntingly ashamed, haunted by something about clumsiness or catastrophe.

The kill disconnects the quarry from its body. The animal hunted, like the last breath of a man, vanishes into the mystery from which it came. In its place are packages of meat. In death, the animal becomes something other than a corpse over which I mourn. It becomes something I use – without use perhaps I would always grieve? I nourish myself with its meat, not dead animal muscle. When I eat the flesh of an animal, the living animal has not only been eclipsed but also transformed. I do not eat a pig or a cow. I eat pork or beef. The labor of preparing game for the table trails in its wake both a conversion and a forgetting.

There is a scene in a contemporary Mexican film in which quail are prepared with a rose sauce made from a bouquet

given a young girl by her forbidden lover. The girl is cook and magician. Her guests salivate over the birds crisped in a broiler. What the guests have most in common with these animals – the urge to live – has been distilled into an essence, into a fragrance and a taste. The dish turns out to be an aphrodisiac of remarkable potency that disrupts the household in an altogether funny, appropriate and touching manner. In this comedy, the transformation from animal to meat is delicious and hopeful. In the tragedy, the meal prepared by the lover and mother is sometimes the horror of a bitter flood that drowns the bloodline of a father who consumes the flesh of his own children prepared in a stew. The mysteries of flesh know no bounds.

Even if I usually eat meat and not flesh, it is still possible to encounter flesh as having been alive. Conscious or explicit involvement in and with the flesh of the dead is not usual. What I mean is that meat-eaters, doctors, butchers, cooks and morticians have for the most part lost contact with the particular body before them as having been alive – though they know perfectly well that the hamburger in my hand, the cadaver on which the doctor is performing an autopsy or the crown roast the cook is basting was once a living creature. When I have explicitly encountered flesh as the muscle of a once living animal, I have usually moved quickly through a sense of strangeness and become disgusted or entered into the realm of the orgiastic. The quirky horror of meat on the tongue, real or imagined, is part of almost everyone's experience. In some persons this sense is strong and in others weak. Orgiastic abandon may be hard to locate in one's personal experience, but it haunts literature and myth: the pre-patriarchal blood feasts in a time so dark there is only a flicker of this fire left in the civilized world. Perhaps we catch a glimpse of this fascination with flesh in *The Bacchantes* or even in the fire that burns in Plato's cave. Perhaps the same poetic magic that, mocking the sun, made shadow appear in that cave also rendered the aphrodisiac from the quail in its rose sauce – a magic

that makes either disgust or pleasure. Killing animals and eating their bodies is the everyday all mixed up with the mystical in ways obvious and obscure.

4.3

Peter Freuchen made several expeditions into the deep north and then unexpectedly vanished. The Danish explorer, as it turns out, spent ten years with an Inuit wife living in Greenland in summer and on the ice cap in winter and only returned to civilization after she died. He never wrote about his time with her except to say that it had been the best ten years of his life. In the arctic, all there is to eat is meat.

At the end of the summer when most of the arctic creatures start south, the polar Eskimo waits for the pack ice to freeze solid and moves north to winter along with the polar bear. In this environment, both man and bear live mostly on seals. The material existence of the so-called polar Eskimo was an extraordinarily thin affair and perhaps it is a consequence of their material fragility that the Inuit peoples of the far north seem to live with a vitality and in an immediacy with the world that I and many others have found compelling – at least within the compass of books and stories.

Up until the mid-twentieth century, the circumpolar Eskimo family groups relied exclusively on stone-age technology because until very recently the indigenous equipment was really the only gear able to meet the extremes in temperature and weather that characterize the far north. European explorers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who did not employ Inuit clothing and methods suffered and died. An account of expeditions to the North Pole prior to Byrd's provides a number of tragic examples of what happened to staunch men who preferred woolen coats and good English leather boots. Later explorers all wore native gear. But quite recently the hunters who go into this frozen country after musk ox, walrus and

polar bear are encouraged to wear modern clothing. The native guides recommend the latest equipment to their clients and use it themselves: snowmobiles, exotic synthetic fabrics, wicking underwear and down.

The migration of the men onto the ice cap in winter has all but vanished. It is conceivable that there were functioning stone age Eskimos as late as 1950 or 1960, but in all probability that culture disappeared sometime before the 1940s. The polar Eskimo, whose survival was completely dependent upon his enormous skill at finding and killing animals, might be taken as the paradigm of a people who must hunt for purely practical reasons. But such a conclusion is just as easily turned on its head. The existence of a culture as extreme as that of the polar Eskimo does not prove that man must hunt to live but that not even the polar ice in mid-winter is a deterrent to a people in quest of game.

Only a fool asks why we did not remain in the garden where all our needs ripened on the bough of a tree. There must have been lots of practical reasons to migrate: overpopulation, feud, war, scarcity of resources. Moving became necessary. The nature of this necessity found its way into myth. Man was expelled from paradise and born into the world as a result of his gaining knowledge of death. Perhaps at the same moment we gained knowledge of hunting as well?

4.4

A meat hunter is distinguished from one who hunts for horns. Big game hunting is a lot of trouble and has a way of getting expensive. Stuart says he is a meat hunter. Having grown up killing varmint with a twenty-two, hunting rabbit, deer, elk and quail, he only occasionally hunts big game anymore. He never did much trophy hunting. Still he likes to shoot some bunny, even if he is a little nervous about the plague these creatures carry. Killing big animals bothers him just enough

that he is never quite enthusiastic about it anymore. If Stuart has lost some of his enthusiasm for hunting, it would be inaccurate to say he is squeamish about killing – when the right opportunity presents itself he kills without qualm. Nor would it be right to say that the thrill of the hunt does not affect him. These days, Stuart hunts birds in the desert. He hunts with me when I am around and I am grateful for his company. He has been a good friend for many years and generously taught me about hunting quail in the great southwest.

Some hunters claim to hunt for purely economic reasons. I don't. Others argue wild meat tastes better than domestic. I cannot say. For others, game meat is taken to be healthier than domestic animals grown for the purpose of slaughter. I have not thought much about it. Domestic meat is accused of being too processed: too artificial, too filled with drugs, too much fat. There are even ethical reasons given by some hunters for killing the meat you eat – at least for those who eat meat. Basically, the claim is really two. Meat is not (or should not be) a consumer good like other goods. Second, a hunter is more in touch with what it means to eat meat than a person who goes to the grocery store and buys a package of chops. When I was young, I certainly felt that if I ate meat it was better that I kill the animal myself than foist the task onto someone else. It seemed more ethical to do one's own dirty work. I am not as convinced of this point of view now. If killing animals is an ethical problem, how did I imagine I would escape responsibility by killing them myself? It may be more honorable to kill your own food, enemies, et cetera, but it is not more ethical.

Hunters for the Hungry is a not-for-profit group that distributes wild meat to the poor. If I look past the organization's good intentions, its existence is probably the best example I might use against the claim that hunting is merely a practical affair. Despite the uses that are made of the hunted animal's

body, the idea that we kill merely for the sake of our own material needs ignores several facts, not the least of which is that modern hunting is, in most cases, very hard to account for by an analysis of its return on investment. It even seems likely to me that the possibility that we hunt for meat has always taken a share in the impractical. I realize the second claim might be controversial, but the first is not. We can all agree that in this era, at least abstractly or in most cases, there are more practical ways to feed and clothe oneself than hunting. The direct cost of hunting, for most hunters, is so high it is an embarrassment to discuss. The indirect cost of the wilderness is also getting higher all the time. Wild animal habitat has become a commodity like any other, and it does not make economic sense to set aside land for the sole purpose of providing a food source for hunters. Hunters for the Hungry attests to the fact the meat comes along after the hunt, almost as if by accident. You kill game and then you figure out what to do with it.

The indigenous peoples in North America who are trying to preserve what is left of their cultures assert their right to kill the animals of their regions not on practical grounds, as if they believe their material needs can only be met through hunting and fishing, but for cultural reasons. These identified ethnic groups wish to fish and hunt in order to maintain or even revive a way of life. There are cultural, and perhaps existential values belonging to the hunt that, even in a hunter-gatherer culture, outweigh hunting's raw practicality. Such reasons for hunting are not isolated to the indigenous hunter either. It is to social values that many modern American hunters appeal when called upon to defend their sport. Hunting, the argument goes, builds strong and good relationships inside families and communities – hunting is a bonding experience. Of course so is going to war.

4.5

Adopting the title ‘meat hunter’ makes primary one of the basic codes of hunting: one must eat (or put to use) what one kills. Just because hunting does not necessarily find its origin in the merely practical considerations of biological need, does not discount the fact that hunting is *also* practical. Practicality is an essential element of what is meant by hunting, which means that I must have some use for what is killed in order to be said to be hunting. Even varmint hunting is obedient to the principle of use. Animals are classified as varmints because they destroy property. Killing the varmint is practical in that it protects property. It seems that killing is always searching around for a justification. The connection between killing something and sustaining oneself is actually felt, but it is felt in the negative as a disconnect. One hunts for food but one does not hunt *merely* for food.

I remember a guide I once had saying that he was going to lodge a complaint with Fish and Game that some young and physically fit hunters had the habit of killing big elk up on the ridges and then packing out only the trophies and the choice cuts of meat. In every state in which I have hunted, it has always been a criminal offense to leave in the field any part of a game animal killed that is consumable by a human.

In 1936, my father and both his parents were driving out somewhere near Spokane, Washington, in *the Pierce Arrow*, as my father used to say – an elegant, half open car with a great huge hood and fine flat grill. As they came around a turn, a buzzard found itself unable to build up sufficient speed to take off from the road. The car struck the scavenger and killed it against the grill. Much to the horror of my grandmother, my granddad stopped the car and pulled to the side of the road saying or perhaps muttering: “if you kill it you eat it.” He was wearing a coat and tie. He took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, plucked and gutted the bird, built a fire

and ate the thing while his wife and my father huddled together in the back seat of the car. As far as I know, a buzzard is not considered either a game animal or a varmint.

4.6

Of all the ways in which we kill animals, the rearing and slaughtering of domestic animals seems to be the most closely tied to the production of meat. A hunt is less exclusively tied to the practical. What constitutes a bullfight has even less to do with the *mere* production of meat than a hunting expedition. Death necessarily concludes both the hunt and the bullfight, but the act of killing defines neither. The bullfight and the hunt are alike in other ways as well.

There is a strange asymmetry between the intent of the bull and the intent of the matador. The bull in his rage strives to make those who have been placed in front of him go away, whereas the matador is neither angry nor trying to make the bull disappear. This asymmetry brings forward a quiddity belonging to the bullfight that is shared with the hunt. Quite contrary to the intent of the bull, the matador wishes to make the bull appear. Naturally, I do not mean that the matador aims at making the bull *merely* appear, but to appear in its virtue as a bull. Danger is essential to the bullfight and opens the space in which the bull is to demonstrate his own virtue. In the face of danger, the bullfighter summons that which makes a bull a *good* bull – what Aristotle would call the virtue of the bull – and it is precisely here that another feature shared by hunting and bullfighting manifest. The bullfighter and the hunter are both conjurers of animals. The bullfighter has the bull show up as brave. The hunter causes the animal to appear on the field in its availability to his weapons.

Unlike a hunt, the bullfight has some of the character of the theater. But bullfighting is a spectacle that only *half* engages the ‘as if’ that belongs to dramatic performance. Players enter

the ring to the sound of a horn: two *picadors*, three *banderilleros*, the *torero*. The bull is bred from an ancient race. The tendons of the bull's neck are weakened and cut with lances and sharpened barbs. The head and horns drop and expose the space between the shoulder blades under which beats the bull's heart. The blood runs. There is a final blast of the horn and the matador appears. He approaches the bull as if to fight, but then there is the *veronica*. The spectacle is not so much a fight as a dance – a dance done to rhythms of real and actual danger. The cape grows smaller, the dance more intense. A sword appears from the red folds of the *muleta* and the bull's heart is pierced or the aorta is cut. The character of the performance is suddenly revealed. The *Corrida* is neither combat nor theater, but a kind of piety. The virtue of the bull is first demonstrated and then given away or offered up. The bull's excellence shows in the dance between man and beast and is not disclosed in the bull's death or the matador's bravery. The former unmasks the matador as priest and the latter measures the matador's *faena* or mastery of the bull alone in the same way the cleanness of the kill is to the credit or disgrace of the hunter.