

Five

5.0

In order to hunt something in the wild there must always be a reasonable chance of catching the game that is sought. I cannot hunt things that are not there. A tiger hunt along the Hudson River is not hunting. On the other hand, if I were to walk into a field of deer tame to the hand and shoot one down with a pistol, I should not say I had been hunting either. Hunting is not merely a way to kill an animal. I do not hunt chickens in a barnyard in much the same way I do not fish in a barrel. It has long been understood that game is scarce as a matter of principle. When I say that the Owyhee is covered up with chukar, in some modality, scarcity obtains along with these birds as part of what it means to speak of them as game. Hunting is foremost a quest.

Neither is hunting a competition. Against his quarry, even dangerous game – bear, lion, cape buffalo, et cetera – the hunter is *expected* to kill the beast. It is an accident if the hunter is injured or killed and it is always unfortunate if no game is found. The point is that game never ‘wins,’ even when it gets away. So even if hunting cannot be defined as successfully killing the quarry, the hunt comes to its proper conclusion only when game is killed. With respect to other hunters, if I hunt with friends and find that I am competitive with them, it is only to my shame. A full game bag is surely a good thing and something about which one should be grateful, but the hunt is at bottom tied to that which is given. In an important sense, being good at the hunting means being properly prepared to receive what is given. No matter how skillful the hunter, luck always plays a part. Developing hunting skills is a matter of respect for what is there more than a matter of personal accomplishment. To hunt is a way to be that has been handed down. It comes complete with its codes and practices. I do not determine what hunting is by my behavior. Who I am gets taken over in the

hunt. In the most authentic moments of the chase, it might even be said that who I am is not even there.

Why must I kill what I hunt? Why not take a picture and eat a peanut butter sandwich? I am capable of asking such questions only when I think about hunting. When I am actually hunting, the bull elk does not show up as a wonder of nature. Rather the animal is encountered in its availability to my weapons. In hunting, the animal is game and is there to be killed. When I think about hunting my prey, making game gets broken into steps. One: find the bull. Two: stalk him. Three: take aim and shoot. Only after hunting has been sundered in a storm of thought do I discover that thinking, like “all the king’s men,” lacks the power to weld finding game and killing game back together again. That the whole is always greater than its parts is a mystery I cannot explain.

Of course, when I am not hunting but rather standing before the question of hunting, the reasons I hunt spring up like mushrooms along a grassy dyke: I hunt for meat; I hunt for the challenge; for fun; to be in nature; to bond with friends and family. Such assertions are true but, nevertheless, open more questions than they answer. They therefore function more efficiently in covering up the quiddity of the hunt than disclosing it. But I can still remember when hunting through the trees, my prey was there in the shadows of the timber. As a hunter who is hunting, I do not come across the bull elk and then decide to shoot it. In *making game*, the bull shows up in his availability to being killed. The hunter looks for elk with a rifle.

5.1

A good friend of mine was hunting elk in the Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho. Bob happened to have a mountain lion tag in his pocket. Idaho Fish and Game seems to sell state-resident big-game tags in a triptych: elk, mountain lion and

bear. After a long morning working hard in the severe country, he sat down against the trunk of a large pine to take a midday rest. No sooner had he settled than a mountain lion walked out of the timber. The big cat looked at Bob, moved across the clearing between them, lay down under a tree not forty feet away and went to sleep. It is unusual to see a mountain lion in the wild. They are aloof, but it would be a mistake to suppose that these animals are fearful. These big cats seem rather to do pretty much as they please. Bob watched the lion for twenty minutes fully aware of the tag in his pocket and with a loaded rifle across his knee until the lion stood up, looked at him again and ambled back into the wild. Bob later told me he had barely thought about shooting the animal and he almost no desire to do so. It did not seem right. Without respect for the tag in his pocket, he was there to hunt elk, not mountain lion.

5.2

I was in Utah to hunt deer. I pulled off the fire road, stepped from the truck, loaded my rifle and clicked the safety on. I was thinking about where to go, if I had enough water and food with me and whether or not should I lock the truck. I wanted to get back to the cabin a couple of hours before dark so that I might get some work done. It was a half hour before dawn. I would hunt until lunch. As I started to move away from the truck, I slung my rifle on my left shoulder and simultaneously jumped up a legal buck. I had not taken ten steps from the door of my vehicle. Had I killed the little buck it would have been because I had managed to shoulder the rifle, click off the safety and swing the barrel around before the buck vanished down the slope. I would not have killed him because I was hunting. In fact, that buck was long gone before I even really thought about shooting him.

5.3

As long as I am actually hunting, I cannot suffer *buck fever*. I do not startle. I do not jerk the trigger and I do not miss. To be fully engaged in the quest is to lose the capacity for surprise or suffer a burst of nerves. In scouring the countryside for game, no one is there to imagine game. In losing oneself to searching, there is no one there to dream of the future. Who I am dissolves into making game. For me to get excited about killing an animal means I have projected a future in which the animal is to be killed. When I vanish, the past, the future, even the present vanish with me. There is only a purposeful leaning forward. Without a future, there can be no surprise.

The best shot, and perhaps the most successful hunter I know, once gave me some advice about buck fever. Not many years ago, he had gotten a little too excited about a bull elk standing at the far end of a meadow: a good sized, six-by-six herd bull. He began thinking how good the mount would look in his trophy room, about how pleased he would be to have his second success in the one season – he had already killed a cow – and proceeded to shoot over the elk’s back at about two hundred yards. The bull was spared. Buck fever had struck my friend down. He looked at me and said with a determination I found somewhat unsettling that once he realized what had happened, he swore to himself right then that such a thing would never happen again. His lesson to me: daydreaming is cured only by an oath.

5.4

There is a saying about big game hunting that goes something like this: excitement for breakfast, desire for lunch and perseverance for dinner. The hunter who really wishes to hunt makes a pledge and then keeps it at every meal. My eye shall search absence and question shadow. My ears shall reach into

the noiseless deep. Attention shall be kept in the wind. And I shall never let hope cover over the wild.

The hunter does not hope for game. He does not maintain himself towards his prey as if it were there. There is no fantasy. The activity of hunting is altogether different from imagining the animal where it is not. It is precisely the reverse. To make game, I imagine my prey to be exactly where it is.

Game is found by remaining alert, not by looking towards success or worrying about failure. One must hunt without a future. Do not think about the end of the day or the pleasures of the hearth and bed. When I am fully engaged by the activity of hunting the desire for game does not stimulate excitement for the kill but rather improves my endurance to be there. I vanish into a stand of ponderosa, the yellowing grass and the flitting of birds. I slip into the complicated currents that pass over the skin of my arm. Disappear into the scent of the soil and sink into earth as my shins press upon the soft ground. I have forgotten all the stories I know about myself. As I grow small, the world grows large.

It does not matter if I was hunting before or if I will be hunting again soon. I *make game* by opening to game in its being where and how it is. When absorbed into the hunt, there is no time for thought or dreams. The senses grow long. The difference between forest and sensation fades. Time thins. It vanishes like a mist. There is not even a present. Without past and future, there is no need for a present. There is only the steepness of the hill, the cold of the dawn.

I do not stay at home out of the weather. My desire to hunt is so strong I throw on a coat, lace up my boots and go into the wild. Walk for miles. Sit behind a tree. Walk again. Desire matters, but if I search for game through the optic of my excitement for success, I am going to catch buck fever – that excitement for a kill that interrupts the appearance of the animal as prey. Childish longing runs out ahead of my capacity to persist. Desire must mature. It must be plowed back into

awareness. Difficulty becomes an ally. Physical exhaustion may be just enough to break down desire into the loam in which my attention roots. Concentration, counterintuitively, is made easier by the difficulty of the hunt. Up to a point, the harder the hunt the easier it is to hunt. When I tire, the edge of my enthusiasm dulls against the hardness of the trail and the future flows from my head into my feet. Not just me. The dogs hunt better a little tired as well. They run wild. Then they pant. They rest and settle into dogged effort. When I drop away, when I fold into the wild, my nervous eagerness for the kill soaks into the mountain soil and drains away into deep pools that reflect the sky and the interlacing of trees. Hunting depends on the fact that excitement may yet be transformed into perseverance as I vanish into the chase. I cannot know hunting at all.

5.5

The hunter in hunting is neither skeptical nor cynical. Skepticism and cynicism have to do with the kind of stance I might take towards a statement or a proposition. I take such stands all the time – I may be cynical about one thing and skeptical about another. But the hunter in allowing does not *know* where his prey is. He is open to game. There is no proposition against which the hunter can take a stand. Of course, the hunter has become familiar with his prey, its habits and its habitats. He understands. He may have a great deal of understanding, but it is his manifest ignorance that opens or may even be the space in which the animal manifests. Because he does not know where the deer is, the hunter extends to the margins of the forest where the trees give out into pasture. The desire for game is properly manifest in a specific kind of ignorance, a certain open space that is the occasion of game. Ignorance as a freedom from opinion or knowledge, is the basis for allowing the possible to manifest in accordance with its nature. Ignorance,

understood as the being of a certain kind of absence, of a certain mindfulness, seems to be the basis of human creativity or making. It may also be the most proper expression of finitude, and complete embrace one can make of one's essential shame. For I cannot do one thing if I am doing another.

Finitude means *there could be more*. Availability is the essence of human finitude. To be creative is to be related to availability in accordance with what is available. To be in availability is to be aware. To be aware is to be without location, without context. Dreaming gives way to the keenness of an unfolding of what is about one as time collapses into wide-circumstance of availability. There is always more to availability than meets the eye. I can see only what is there in the offing. In allowing game to be *where it is* as *it is*, the hunter relates himself creatively to the givenness of game. There is no seeking. This is what it means to *make game*. The way of the hunter is to be the occasion for the appearance of game in its susceptibility to his weapons. Finite creation is an allowing. This kind of allowing is neither active nor passive but profoundly middle-voiced. The middle voice is not so much between the active and the passive as before. It is the most original form of action. Creativity allows what is sought to unfold in accordance with the particular nature of its contingency. Contingency is how I actually experience the abundance of what is given into the openness of the wild when making game.

The buck comes into view under the cedar in a way that may be compared to how a shotgun finds its form in the workshop. I am a gunsmith and so I have an explicit understanding of what a shotgun is and the procedures by which it comes to be. Familiar with the nature of the shotgun I am and its use. Its fit. Making a shotgun is possible for me. What is possible is rooted in the past. The materials have been sought and procured. I have enough experience to coax a barrel from hard billets of steel. I have taught my fingers to round the trigger with a file and paper, to tap threads into the nickel-rich

casing. In making a shotgun, I enact a method which consists in practices that have been handed down to me. The act of gun making informs the modifications I make. In this way the gun finds its form in my allowing the materials to be worked as they should be worked: namely, in allowing particular parts and pieces to come together in accordance with the nature of a shotgun. I am a craftsman and so am capable of being fully engaged in the craft of gun making. There is no need to speak of allowing the gun to be as it should be. Craft articulates the gun as it *should be*. I keep the chisel sharp. The bench clean. The oil clear. In the most bizarre manner of speaking I can imagine, the gunsmith and the occasion of his craft, in his way to be is *the should* of how a gun is well made. There under the bench grows a pile of shaving from a blank of finely figured walnut. The gunsmith has vanished into his work and what does not belong to the gun drifts silently to the floor.

The creation of a shotgun, even including its proud new locking mechanism, is a manifestation of the past rooted in what is possible for a gun maker. Who knows where contingency is fastened? Who knows the past? A properly crafted shotgun – in manifesting the relationship between hunter and bird – is all that the past can ever be. The craftsman makes room for the gun on his bench as I make room for the deer under the sweet-smelling trees. The hunter does not lose track of the nature of his prey as something given, just as the craftsman does not lose track of the givenness of his creation within the order determined by the hunter's relationship to game.

At my bench and leather apron, I am no different from the gun stock I am checkering. In my disguises, costumes and camouflage, lying in the thickest parts of the bracken with rifle, knife and an open eye, I am no one at all. In the light of finite creation all pronouns have vanished like flames in the sunlight. Attentiveness not only makes possible the appearance of the thing made, but in the twinkling of the world, a pronoun may reemerge. As if by accident, 'I' may precipitate from the

whole of the world-mist. I never appear because I am looking not for myself. When I first appear into uncanniness from my engagement with the world, my way to be is not so much a point of view as being everywhere at once. Perhaps I would be omniscient if I were not also blind. The sensation that accompanies the emergence of the self into the activity of the day is the strangeness that belongs to the sensation of again being the same: the uncanny, the mood of the familiar and the strange. My mood is experienced in a seamless manner with the world in which I am immersed. Such moments seem to have no practical weight whatsoever, and yet are set deep in memory. I am telling a story.

