

Seven

7.0

As the population of the United States of America has become more urban, rural connections to nature and wild animals have been subducted under the heavy plates of city life. The talking animal no longer shows up as a messianic anomaly but as a perfectly natural occurrence. The teddy bear has become as familiar as the hunter has become alien. Bambi grows up with his playmates, a rabbit, a skunk, and his future mate in a forest nursery much like the home for which nostalgia yearns, until the mother is killed by a hunter, and American children by the score have to be carried from the theater hysterical at her loss. The quixotic imagination of the urban tourist has become so bizarre that there have been several tragic encounters between families and the wild animals roaming through our national parks. A man wishing to get a picture of himself with a buffalo was gored and killed in front of his wife and little girl when he tried to stand next to a mature bull near the side of the road. No doubt the two thousand pound animal seemed cute or even cuddly from the car. A few years ago couple of boys climbed into the polar bear cage at the Central Park Zoo and one was eaten. The animals involved were punished by death. And quite recently a woman in California was attacked and killed by a mountain lion. The lion, or at least a lion, was tracked down with dogs and shot, but when it was discovered that the lion was a lactating female, a fund was started to take care of her cubs. Ten times more money was sent by the public to take care of the lion cubs than was contributed to a similar fund set up to take care of the woman's two young children. Stories are very powerful. In hunting, of course, the situation is otherwise. The hunter rarely imagines the ways in which his prey is human-like. Rather he strives to enter into the environment of the animal, to become animal-like: a creature with a bow and the head of a deer.

There seem to be at least two separate senses in which a hunter may manifest the animal. The first has been discussed. The hunter becomes the occasion for the appearance of the animal as prey. Second, the hunter may attempt to become the animal in another sense. It is not unusual for a hunter to mimic the animal or the mate of the animal he wishes to kill. The elk hunter might cover himself with the urine of a cow in heat. He may conceal himself within a copse of cedar, cow-call to his lips appealing to every bull who will listen. Or from behind the massive bole of a ponderosa, he might imitate the bugling of a sexually aroused bull elk in hopes of attracting competition. Such mimicking is more than mere artifice. The hunter does and *should* lose himself in his part. He may dress as another species that allows him to approach his quarry more closely than a man would be allowed to approach. As a wolf in sheep's clothing, the hunter may on occasion become a man in wolf's clothing. There is a painting of a group of Sioux engaged in a buffalo hunt. In it the hunters, weapons in hand, are covered with wolf skins as they crawl towards the herd. Apparently, buffalo are much less nervous about wolves than men. The herd continues to graze as the wolves approach. It is just as true that game birds are more likely to hold for a dog than for a man.

7.1

I had already killed two birds from the big covey of California quail. Nick and Nora were crashing the heavy brush desperate for more. Only six months old, my 'bird detectives' were frantically trying to get at the covey that had retreated into a dense coppice that grew around a muddy spring at the bottom of a large field. Less than five hundred yards later, before the spring was even quite able to coalesce into a course and run clear, the soggy ground more dribbled than drained into the Snake

River, with the result that the wild-eyed pups were covered in the mud.

In the corner of my eye, I saw a cock-pheasant dart from the undergrowth and start across the mowed field that lay above the bracken in which we were hunting. I called to my brother. He saw the bird, started to run, put it up and fired twice. The second shot broke a wing. The cock came down running straight for a patch of un-mowed field about a hundred yards away. Calling the dogs as I went, I ran towards the high grass and away from where the dogs had been working through that tangle of willow and thorn. I was convinced the bird was in that acre the mower had missed. There was no need to call the pups. They had heard the shot and came flying.

With the breeze right, the dogs at a full run are able to scent a rubber bumper (a retrieving dummy) lying in deep grass more than fifty yards away. The aromatic intricacies carried in the wind and on backing air do not exist for me. The dogs relate themselves to their surroundings through their olfactory senses in ways that are only imaginable to me. The organization of the scent-world is as mutable as the drifting and the swirling of the air – movements that make what is far near and what is near sometimes vanish altogether.

The dogs started working through the ragged triangle of uncut grass. After a minute or so, Nick turned upwind and took off. I watched as he crested a ridge about four hundred yards away. So be it. He was only a puppy. My brother and I continued looking for the crippled bird. Nora was still with us. But a few minutes later, Nick reappeared over the ridge and came down the field with the pheasant hanging from his mouth. Somehow the cock had continued out the back of that bit of high grass and across the vast field towards the river without either of us seeing it and thus made his escape before we even got there. Nick, who had come up behind us, must have scented the bird at close to four hundred yards. The pheasant was still alive when he brought it to my hand. Later

on that same day, in the hills behind the farm, Nick descended more than a thousand feet to a stream bed to retrieve a crippled chukar and, after a ten-minute search, came back with that bird as well.

If the air is warm and still, the dogs may not find a bird fallen on plowed ground until they trip over it. The scent is not blown down out along the ground; perhaps it lifts in updrafts and is dispersed? The environment with which the dogs cope depends on an organ that is atrophied in me. The scent-world's topology is essentially dynamic and eschews every analogy to familiar notions of space in its submission to the whimsy of the troposphere. The geometry of scent must be even stranger than Einstein's universe near the speed of light, or the ambit of a gravitational singularity where the profundity of matter radically bends the Euclidean imagination. The scent-world opens and closes with the wind, growing bigger or smaller with every change in the elements.

I point to the truck. It's a half-mile off. Finger navigation. Polar coordinates formalize a point and a wave with bearing and range. Theoretic modes of getting around are known to me. I may even use them in a pinch. But when I say, let's try the draw a mile west of the ranch headquarters, I am not really thinking about a compass rose or laying out 5,280 feet from here to there. I have already been directed over yonder and the next step has already been laid out. I do not relate to a mile as to some number of feet. A mile is long enough to need a coat or enough of a walk to settle down the dogs. What I seek is over there, where the sun will drop behind the mountain. I do not posit where I am, let alone do I calculate the bearing and range to my destination. I am going behind the ridge and up the draw. I am directed within the penumbra of a familiarity more original than formal measure as I sniff along in a manner already long adopted.

For the most part, how I navigate within my surround remains submerged within the foundations of my behavior. Mostly, I

arrive at where I am going without much thought at all. What is near might be missed, a beetle crawling along the ground, and the mountain at a great distance kept in sight. My world is as familiar to me as the scent-world is to my dogs. The longer they have been with me, the more the dogs and I have in common.

7.2

The dogs, my wife and I have a domestic life together. She gets a kick out of the way ‘the puppies’ – now four years old – stalk sparrows in the back yard. Nora catches the little birds too busy eating the fallen fruit in the back yard to notice her on her belly like a cat. When she appears at the backdoor with a sparrow in her mouth, my wife gives a shriek and scolds the dog for killing it, but she does it in such a way Nora takes all her fussing as praise. Nick and Nora follow my wife around the house and sleep at her feet even if she is more than a little disgusted by the killing they seem to do. She spoils them with treats, threatens to put them on vegetarian diets, worries about their rashes and more often than occasionally teaches them silly tricks, gives them goofy names and yet, when I hunt, these dogs are completely predatory as they quest inexhaustibly across a landscape she chooses not to visit. She prefers the city.

Once the dogs know there is a wounded bird on the ground, their intensity escalates an order of magnitude. The dogs start moving faster, more deliberately. They do not hesitate to crash cover, almost any cover. Nora has been badly torn up trying to get to quail hiding in the mesquite. The urge to get a bird into the mouth seems to be what drives each of the dogs. They retrieve dead birds with enthusiasm, but are even keener about chasing down a cripple. They snatch it up on the run and hold the bird just tight enough to keep it from flapping about. I have watched Nora grab a bird as it tries to flee, start back, then stop a moment, adjust the bird in her mouth, with the pressure of her jaws, bear down on the bird until it stops

moving and then continue on to me. The bird does not move again until it is in my hand.

7.3

I find a field. The pups only ten weeks old are excited. They start scampering out ahead of me. They want to be first to everything. I change direction. A moment later they scamper back and then run out in front of me again. If they let me get too far away, if they get too involved in the scents of this new place, I do not call to them. I lie flat in the grass. Sooner than later they notice I am not where they left me. The search begins. We enjoy a happy reunion. Nick and Nora are in their sixth season now and they still search for me. Nora hunts in close and Nick, who may work out as far as a mile, always knows where I am. They hunt with me.

Hunters develop and exploit habits. Mountain lions are remarkably powerful creatures and yet these cats run from and then tree for a pack of dogs they could just as easily kill. Deer and elk, usually so elusive, are reckless about showing themselves during the rut. Most upland game birds hold for a dog. To hold and to go on point are terms of art. The dog points. The bird holds. Each knows the other is there. The dog wants the bird and the bird wants to escape. The ecstatic stillness of a stylish point expresses the relationship between dog and bird: a balanced standoff. I walk up and tip the balance. The bird flies and I shoot it. The dogs are unable to catch wild birds without me. And I cannot cover the ground they do nor sample the air of every draw we pass. I do not know how to point or how to hold a bird in cover. I cannot enter the scent-world. The dogs not only look *for* me, they look *to* me. And I look to them. Being together is not *mere* habit. It is a kind of cohabitation.

The pointing instinct is displayed in a good dog sometimes before it is a few weeks old. Pointers instinctually point what

they want but are unable to catch. If it is not allowed to catch it, a puppy will soon point a bird wing tied to a string. How pointing and holding happen is not to be explained in terms of the distance between the dog and bird. Perhaps it is not to be explained in language. The animals seem to feel one another. The dogs teach themselves where to find the birds and how to pressure them, how to get the birds to hold, to be still.

Training as habituation amounts to learning how to allow the dog to be with me in what we are doing. We learn to live together as we learn how to make ourselves available to one another. Training a gun dog is far less a matter of gaining control of the animal than of a certain kind of making room for the dog. Controlling a dog is both easy and illusion. Rather in working with the dogs, I welcome them into my world and they do the same for me. Good training binds us. It increases the size of the world we share. What is beyond dispute is that training presupposes the possibility of communication.

7.4

There are many reasons to suspect that the ancient definition of man – man is an animal with *logos*, sometimes written man is a rational animal – is more descriptive than prescriptive. Not the least of these is that some animals, some of the time, seem to exercise considerable powers of reason, memory and even expression. And neither does it seem that human being can be grasped by imagining an animal to whom speech or rationality is added. Indubitably, language marks a divide between the dogs and me, but it does not mark any particular obstacle to communication.

My behavior includes language, whistles and gesticulations. The dogs behave in ways I have learned to read. They understand specific words: ‘bird,’ ‘hunt-bird,’ ‘dead-bird,’ ‘fetch,’ ‘come,’ ‘whoa,’ ‘where’s the...,’ perhaps ten or twenty other words and a variety of distinct whistle signals. They read me

and I read them. The manner in which the dogs lock up on point lets me know where the bird is. The way they bark clues me into whether there is someone at the door or just walking by the front gate. To communicate is to share an understanding of how it goes. The dogs and I communicate because we share something like a common world.

A strange language is still recognized as language. I may not speak Kikuyu but, when I hear it, I recognize it as a language and not just gibberish. It is closer to the truth to say, body and all, I am nothing without you. Communication is not an effort to be being together but presuppose our togetherness. Communication speaks of our being together *as* a belonging together. In the sense of belonging, you are no different from the dogs and the dogs no different from you. I might even forget to whom I am speaking.

What communication does not depend on is my interior. My secret thoughts are so often even a secret to me. You cannot verify what is in my head. What passes across my mind. And I have no idea what is in yours. Even less do I understand what passes though the mind of a dog or even if a dog has a mind. Understanding one another has no respect for any failure of verification. Communication has no respect for an interior, or for any boundary established by our usual sense of time or ideas about personhood. With respect to my interior, it makes little difference to your understanding of me now reading these words across the page if I am dead or alive. How could it? The capacity to determine what is in my mind has little or no effect on your ability to understand me in some way or another. The opacity of my interior is manifest only because someone made the assertion that I have an interior. To posit an interior – by conducting an internal dialogue, for instance – is not so much to hide away some essence of yourself from me as to engage apostrophe. Consciousness is precisely how an interior comes to be. The interior is a species of you, of an interlocutor, in fact it is like someone I am with. My so-called interior has no more to do

with our communication than any other third person. The broken flow of thought that passes through my mind is not between us and usually has very little bearing on what we share. In fact the more intensely we speak, the less interior I usually have. This does not mean that if I am angry with you, you may not be able to read this on my face. What is on my face is already there between us.

What gets communicated is what *is* between us. What is between us is our relationship. It is our articulation of the world we share. I do not invent the relationship. But if I am attentive, I may discover what it is that is here between us, merely in the sense of making our shared world explicit. Friendship is one mode of being together that has to do with the task of making what is between persons explicit: a task that is impossible in one register and obvious in another. Nick makes what is here explicit in the world we share by the staunchness of his point, but you understand me because you are able to follow, and so lead, what it is I have to say here about communication. When I say something, you follow me by re-articulating what is being said. To the extent that you and I vanish into the talk, the world turns between us. You follow me because you are capable of allowing what I say to articulate meaningfully what is *here* between us. I say 'Paris,' and Paris is present – quite literally: in a manner of speaking. Nick – by the way – knows nothing of Paris.

If I were to speak to you about Gardone Val Trompia, the gun makers' town, then the little Italian city would be here with us. It is. This is true even if you cannot picture the valley in which it lies and the mountains that rise up around it. It does not matter that you may not be able to feel the texture of the cobbles of the streets against your feet. It is present even if I cannot quite imagine these things. It does not matter if you have never heard of Pietro Beretta. You know the person of whom I speak as a whole person, not because I have described him fully, or exhausted him or his character in any way whatsoever, but

because whole persons are the only kind of persons available to you. You are able to re-articulate what I say to you because what I am talking about is available to you. What is articulated, what is bent at the joints, expresses this availability along with what is said. What is articulate includes the availability of the world that gives what is here between us. I speak the available into the offering between us, for we are always in the middle of the world. Of course, the world, what is available both has and does not have an edge.

In speaking to you about how something goes, the whole extent of the world stands ready: not as context but as availability as such. Availability is finite and unbounded because I am finite and do not know what the future will bring. I seem to know this as certainly as I know that I shall die. There is not time for everything. The infinite is an idea-especially if the infinite is actual. I cannot contact it. Even my imagination abridges it. But my finitude does not impose upon the available or in anyway delimit it. The available is a vast and mysterious reserve that can neither be configured nor will it tolerate being ordered. What is available is surely finite, I am finite, but too dynamic to be mapped. Abstraction loses the richness of world. Even as something finite, if the world is always as finite as what is between us, the reserve of our conversation exceeds every view.

This reserve in its availability, the world that is there, is our relationship. What is between us is not a mere set of things but also a range of possibilities encountered one at a time, that stand ready *to be* what is available between us. The ultimate communiqué of *poesis* (that art which marks human being) is a rendering of this availability in being what it represents. The entirety of what is available to us and between us is the world. The world is the basis of every relationship and every relationship is in turn a modality of the world. I don't see why I should ever become more worried about my capacity to detect the actual content of your mind than I would

be in knowing whether or not you had sugar in your morning coffee. Moreover, and most important, it appears that the flickering of my mind, its content of thoughts and feelings, is not even mine.

7.5

When I train the dogs, I have *just as little* idea about what is going on in their minds as I do about what is going on in your head. The eyes of the dumb are no more blank or savage than yours or mine. The mystery of my relationship to an animal is not kept by some radical otherness that divides the articulate from the dumb. Neither are trees, rocks, nor the action of the waves against the beach *especially* mysterious to me *because* they do not speak. I say this even if the world and everything in it appears from time to time (perhaps all too infrequently) as mysterious. It is precisely because I do understand something about what it is like to be an animal that the question of 'being an animal' or 'what it would be like to be an animal' can even present itself to me in the first place. The real difference between Nick and me may not be so much that I do not understand what it is like to *be* Nick but that Nick does not quite seem to understand what it is like to *be* me. But even this statement begs the question of who is asking it. Nevertheless a consideration of such a difference might step closer to finding the border between man and animal than mincing the capacity for speech or choice.

Mostly when I look into the eyes of an animal I see myself. But if I look more closely, I may see through my own reflection and into what belongs to the living. I may be absorbed into an encounter with that animal in the same sort of way I am sometimes washed into the sounds or the silences of the forest. Silence is the most profound moment of articulation because it is the expression of pure contingency. To whom do I listen when absorbed by the silence of the night? I am familiar

with the animal even if I do not bother to conceive of the basis for our relationship. It is *against nature* to be clear about what lies beyond the offing.

In making the dogs welcome, my wife and I were seduced. I might project upon the animal the kinds of feelings I imagine I would have under circumstances similar to those in which I observe the animal to be. I might imagine how Nick feels in being left behind in the truck or how a deer might feel who is being hunted in the woods with a rifle. When I imagine another creature to feel as I do, do I not *erase* the animal that is there and replace it with the idea of the animal? Such imagining is not an allowing. It is a taking. Such personification has nothing to do with the animal in front of me but with manifesting self, myself.

Offhand it seems there are other ways in which an animal may be personified. I might manifest as the animal itself, not in actually inhabiting its body, but allowing the distance between us to be forgotten by my own disappearance into the world we share. In hunting, the distance between the animal and me is forgotten when I fall fully into the activity of hunting, even if this kind of immersion is a flickering affair. It is mysterious how the availability of the animal to me as a hunter has already been absorbed into hunting: the animal shows in its susceptibility to being killed. The kind of unity whereby the animal and I maintain the possibility of difference and yet are not separated at all is *an event* that is destroyed in any self-expression on my part. My capacity to identify with anything – in the sense of allowing this anything to manifest (without me) – is utterly dependent on my capacity to vanish into the world. Such vanishing is an experience that is marked (only?) when it comes to an end by the uncanny re-emergence of the I that I seem to be.

Because I am able to *identify* with animals, to care about them, indeed because I am able to manifest as the animal itself, it has occurred to me that in hunting an animal – in allowing the animal to be in its availability to my weapons – I may

sometimes be confused as to the nature of what it is that I am killing when I kill the animal. In identifying with the animal, there is a sense, and perhaps even a danger, that in killing my prey I am also killing myself. I don't know quite what this means. The natural confusion between the animal and me may contribute to the disquiet that seems to accompany every kind of killing. Or my identity with the animal I kill may be felt in feeling that I have taken something I cannot give. I do not notice these relations as acutely when I eat a carrot. A carrot does not bleed or cry when pulled from the ground or when it is broken between my teeth. I do not know if or how this matters. My uneasiness seems to keep me in something of a free fall. I cannot be sure in this tumble if I am moving toward or away from a question, a question I may not even know to ask. I do not even know what counts as gravity.

