

Eight

8.0

Irony seems to belong to gravity, to every genuine attempt to say what cannot quite be said, and so to a kind of foolishness. Properly, irony is never the point of anything. When asked if she knew what irony meant, a young friend defined it as “a bad coincidence.” If irony has any value at all, it is because it cannot be avoided. I am trying to corner necessity as it relates to killing and death.

The problem with killing, and perhaps with violence in general, is not that it is evil – killing is often evil – or that we do not know it is evil. We *do* know it. The problem with killing is that it so often seems to be *necessary*. It is ironic to say that evil is not a problem or, perhaps equivalently, that evil is necessary. In fact, it may be evil *to insist* upon the relation between what is evil and what is necessary. Because no matter how prevalent, intractable or justified, no matter how attractive, compelling or even necessary, violence, and so killing, is never inevitable.

I do logic no honor when I speak of the contingency of violence. Neither do I have my head in the clouds. My pronouncement is empirical. A person, without respect for his capacities may, as if guided by angels, simply fail to respond to the obligations wrath, fear, or self-interest put upon him in the turning of fate. Even in the face of necessity, it is always possible that a person who is able to kill may quite spontaneously *choose* not to. Mercy is a fact, what Kant might have called *ein Faktum*. Mercy may even be, as a fact or a feat, the basis for our most human way to be – the pure expression of shame, of being finite.

I am not quite convinced it is possible to show mercy to an animal. Since I do not war against animals or punish them with death, I am not sure what sparing an animal would actually mean. The killing of an animal is either necessary, relative to one of many contexts, or it is the act of the cruel and the

mentally ill. My point is that hunting both involves the killing of a fellow creature and always seems to fall under the shadow of the necessary. The searching out and killing of animals cannot be wanton and still be considered hunting. Hunting always has something to do with the practical, and the practical is generally understood as being governed by necessity. I must see to practical needs. Life depends on it. It is not my fault that life feeds upon itself: both plants and flesh. Birth, nourishment and death. The living die or are killed and consumed, but this does not mean that I *must* end a particular life at a particular moment, much less that I *must* survive.

The relations between killing, death and necessity function within a space cleared by memory. It is as right to remember the dead – to say some words of thanks over a meal or a grave – as it is right to allow the dead to pass into forgetfulness. Forgetfulness governs death, killing and necessity in surprising ways.

8.1

When a person dies, death is often felt in terms of loss, *my* loss. Sometimes the death of the loved one may even show as burden or an inconvenience. Mourning gestures towards acceptance and acceptance arises together with a kind of propensity for forgetfulness. If a particular death results from natural causes, the passing is mourned and the bite death takes from those left behind begins to heal. But if the loved one has been murdered, anger and resentment might foment into a thirst for revenge that may become unquenchable as it gathers every gesture to its cause. If a death is unacceptable, the dead do not rest. They become the undead. In some circumstances and for some people, a death may be impossible to mourn as long as it is unavenged. This opens a great and terrible difficulty. If the killer is sought out and repaid in kind, that act of vengeance, no matter how just or appropriate, nurtures a reciprocal act of revenge.

The bloodfeud (which seems to lie at the origin of *my* world) is something to be feared. Revenge always threatens to reach back into one's kind. Whole families, whole districts might be killed. The missing limbs and the broken organs of the injured, the rights of the living and the dead always add up to the lucid but terrifying formula: death equals death. Nowhere are the relations between death, killing and necessity more explicit than in the workings of the bloodfeud. In the absence of the possibility of punishment, these relations are even starker.

In medieval Iceland, a remarkable culture for many reasons, the kind of central authority that makes punishment possible did not exist. Amongst the independent farmers and chieftains on that island washed by the most distant edge of the Gulf Stream, the bloodfeud was (or was very near) the core of social interaction. The bloodfeud functions within an economics of honor. Just anger was sometimes exchanged for honor either through compensation or revenge. The formal arrangements surrounding compensation – the ceremony of the law – was scripted communication that might take place between conflicted parties. In a community where order was established and secured by the war-making capacity of groups bound by blood relationships, friendship and marriage, anger might at any time break out into violence and violence relax into wanton killing. Considering their propensity for warring against their neighbors, and the obligations of honor, the Icelandic people were surprisingly cautious. Revenge killings were avoided when they could be, but sometimes there was no choice. The wrong suffered at the death of a friend or relative grew so provoking that another killing broke over the heads of the community: revenge is a wind that builds the sea to a height at which it must crumble to the off-rhythms of chaotic constructive interference. That revenge is best served cold means time matters: the longer the fetch the more mighty the crash upon the shore. Within an economy of honor, perhaps reflecting nature, life is subordinated to death and so honor also unknits the very society it otherwise binds

together. What is preserved by honor has the same instability that intrinsically belongs to life.

The dynamics and complications of the bloodfeud are the central subjects treated in some of the earliest prose in the post-ancient west. The oldest extant copies of the Icelandic Sagas are to be found on vellum pages bound in wooden covers. These crude books, soiled and torn, are found in numbers that suggest they were read and read often. Most of the sagas were composed several hundred years after the events they depict. To Iceland came men and women who would not be ruled. The first permanent Norse settler landed there in 870 AD and in his wake followed hundreds and then thousands. Scandinavia, along with the rest of Europe, was slowly coming under the suzerain of kings: the fuglemen of the modern nation state. Not until the shadow of central authority began to creep over the island did the Icelandic writers begin to sing the heroic to sleep.

Iceland began and grew as an informal confederation of family groups. Most seemed to be from Norway but all of Scandinavia seems to have been represented. All economic needs were provided by the homestead. Public life happened in the local and regular assemblies. There were thirteen of these local meetings. After 930, the Althing was established. There all of Iceland gathered before the law rock in the proximity of which matters of theft, marriage, disputes arising from trespass and killings were worked out. The law rock was nowhere near a town, and what happened there was just as far from modern conceptions of justice.

The Icelandic assembly was nothing like the Greek *agora*. There was nothing like a *polis* within the compass of Icelandic life. The Norsemen, who emigrated from what is now Scandinavia, were more 'primitive,' more magical, more savagely autonomous, and more free to act than the citizens of sixth century Athens. These Viking persons had a manner more like the Mycenaean assembly on the beach outside Troy, where the scepter of the king was passed along with the right to speak.

Technicalities in judicial procedures mattered a great deal to the course of a suit, but violence could strike at any time. The suit itself, a complex weave of custom claim and counter claim, seemed sometimes to be like a play that distracted the players, otherwise dressed for war. The lawgiver – and there seems to have been eighteen of them from 930 until 1122 – was always held in high esteem. The authority of the lawgiver in every saga I have read was unchallenged. The executive power needed to enforce the lawgiver's rulings was the unquestioned prerogative of the injured party.

Medieval Iceland functioned not *under* but *with* the law. Despite its importance, the law was not served. Honor was served. Honor is always the *telos* of good action in the heroic society. In particular, honor was due the clever and well-constructed suit before the law. Experts in law gave concinnity to the relations between men but did not determine these relations. The law was *the form* of public discourse in a landscape so thoroughly dominated by the domestic that there was not a village on the island until sometime after 1285. Legal exercise helped soften and lengthen the muscles of violence grown hard and brittle between neighbors. At the very least, the social ceremonies and refinements of legal procedure took time. Honor demanded that suits be argued and rulings enforced. Often honor could not be met with a property settlement and demanded that men be killed. Honor was not only an end but also the name of the force at the center of a world that always seemed about ready to fly apart under the centrifugal acceleration of the bloodfeud.

At the law rock, justice was not handed down as much as a kind of transformation was performed. By speech and then by various acts of reconciliation, the circumstances of the killing were rendered in the most conciliatory terms possible. Only the feelings of the injured party limited the stretch and effort made towards blamelessness. It is dangerous to make light of a dangerous man's loss. The rendering of the facts in

a lawsuit was prologue and prologue to forgetting the incident altogether. If we forget the damage done us, tranquility in the social order might naturally be restored. It is *practical* to forget the charged and messy business of a killing, and Icelanders may have been more practically concerned than we that balance be maintained or obtained in a world beset by spirits and strong warlike men.

But forestalling wrath is neither easy nor certain. When I forget my anger, it is mostly because my attention has been diverted into some other course. The very volatility of anger sometimes allows it to effervesce into the unconscious and the unacceptable is allowed to lighten. I lighten. But forgetting is an impossible *telos*. There is no conscious and transitive act of forgetfulness. Instead, I find that I have followed my breath or the beating of my heart until forgetting befalls me. Just as much good can come from a repentant sinner, sin is never the proper *telos* of any action. Forgetfulness belongs to the mystery of the world and is not mine to command.

Awarding compensation for killings seems to have existed among the Greeks as well as the Norse. Telamon Aias called this compensation a *blood price* when he told Odysseus and Phoinix in Achilles' shelter that Achilles was too hard, his anger so dark that it had shadowed what the friendship of his companions was like – what companionship felt like. It seems still to be the case that, for fighting men, nothing is as important or feels as good as the friendship and love of the friend who fights alongside. Aias urged Achilles to take the prizes he had been offered by Agamemnon, not because of the honor these prizes would bestow upon Achilles, as Odysseus had argued, but that the prizes should be taken for the sake of softening him. Aias said that sometimes a man whose brother has been killed by another is softened if he accepts the blood price from his brother's killer, as if being softened would be good for Achilles. Aias, unlike Odysseus or Phoinix, does not seem as interested in what would be good for the Greeks.

It is a mistake to think of compensation as a medium of exchange. In compensating someone, honor was given. What is essential is transformation. Honor is the gatekeeper of violence. Compensation was more like a drug or a spell for lightening anger and hate, for melting obdurate memories. As if drawn from the Lethe, such payments were tonics to forgetfulness.

8.2

The condemned is marched behind a firing squad to the wall. He is offered a blindfold. Witnesses are assembled. A blank cartridge is issued at random to a single member of the firing squad. What happened? The guilty one has disappeared into a corpse that is quickly hidden in the ground. There is no one against whom vengeance can be taken. The cycle of revenge is broken. Indeed, the anonymity of the executioner is maintained in our most advanced execution apparatus: the double starters on lethal-injection contraptions. It does not matter that we all know who the executioner is, because in public, at the block, wielding his axes and his knives amidst the screams of anguish the guilty make in atonement for the violence done in this world, covered in the blood of the condemned, the executioner pulls a black hood over his face. He is suddenly the public at large. The public. The state executes the guilty in public not merely to ensure that the execution takes place, that the condemned has indeed been wiped from the face of the earth, that he has gotten what he deserves and that we may sleep more soundly in our beds than before. But the execution is done in public also to make it clear to everyone that no one in particular has done the killing. Since we shall never sort out who precisely did the killing, the death of the condemned might as well be forgotten. The criminal is put to death *before* the public and *by* no one in an effort to purify the execution. Every killing must be purified.

Purification is an effort to channel violence to the ground. The purified act of violence is more easily forgotten. Though vestiges of honor and its modes of being may still be found here and there in the consumer world, the economy of honor is no longer functional. The government of the modern nation-state has a monopoly on all formal political power including and especially lawful violence. What keeps me from the capriciousness of a nearly omnipotent government is law and the general respect we have for it. To the extent that I – along with every other citizen who make up *We, the People* – legitimize the acts of the government, I do not live under a person or even an office, but under the law itself. In my country, it is the law that is most properly served: as beautiful as she is blind. Today we speak of crime in terms of victims and perpetrators. Revenge and punishment have been conflated with a third: the pragmatic business of getting the killer behind bars or under the ground. The criminal, once convicted, disappears into the bowels of the criminal justice system, condemned to a secular hell. In the modern world, the kith and kin of the one damaged by a crime must overcome their loss in privacy. They commiserate within a circle or they go to church, find support groups or make appointments with a therapist. Some speak of the execution of the condemned as bringing closure. But there is no closure for the loss of those closest to the crime because there is no honor gained in destroying the criminal and wiping him or her from view. There is no end to their loss. In the nation state, the cycle of violence is short-circuited, but the burden of the violence is borne by the victims as it has always been. What is new is that the kith and kin of the injured party are now included amongst the victims of the crime. A faceless state whisks the guilty one beyond the reach of private retribution in order that the rest of us may forget the crime as quickly as possible. But we have already forgotten. Society never has a stake. Instead, all victims are sacrificed and the rest of us insist, as we should, that justice has been done.

In the ancient world, adherence to the proper form of a sacrifice was called piety. Religious piety, which sought divine justice through proper religious rites, namely, the sacrifice, has been usurped by a new kind of piety: obedience to the law. In the modern world, purification of violence happens, to the extent that it ever does, in seeking justice. We do not sacrifice our victim to a god. We offer him up to a transcendent notion of justice. We do so as convinced of our obligation as the ancients were convinced of theirs to slaughter an ox. Justice, like the gods themselves, takes many forms: some grand and some mean.

All actions have consequences. Good actions have good consequences. Bad actions have bad consequences. The law, codes and rules cannot save us, for they are themselves medications for the treatment of anger roused by loss and death. The gods will always kill Patroklos. Even in the modern world, honor, which has transmogrified into respect for the law, is at the basis of our social economy and remains as parasitic on loss and death as honor ever was. Nothing I have said here exhausts what is meant by justice.

8.3

I was deer hunting in a section of the Pine Barrens of Long Island I did not recognize. The trees were weirdly large and far apart. A few days before I had read that it was a common practice among the Indians in South Carolina to burn the undergrowth in spring and fall to keep the forest clear and the canopy high – a practice particularly beneficial to deer hunters. It was moments before dawn. As I moved through the thick and ruddy boles, I made out the rough shape of another hunter two, perhaps three hundred yards away. Now the sun was up. He was moving deftly tree to tree and his shape splintered in the spangled depth of the wood. I tried to glimpse his face. Even with the shadow breaking up his outline,

with the trees as open as they were, my inability to see his face made no sense to me. I crept closer. He turned his face toward me. It was blank and without feature. My anxiety grew. Quite all at once, I realized the hunter was my maternal grandfather and he was there to shoot my aunt. I woke with a start and threw the malicious elf from my chest.

My maternal great-grandfather was a devout Quaker. Born in the 1820s, he was sixty years old when my grandmother, his only child, was born. In the photographs I have seen of him, he is formal, stiff and stern. After my grandmother eloped, she never saw her family again. She is not named in the will of either parent. I do not know whether she broke contact with her family or they disowned her. My mother said her mother never spoke of it and never complained. My father examined the wills. Even in the midst of the poverty they went through in the 1930s, my mother has told me that her mother shared what she had from her garden with any who made it to her kitchen door.

I do not know what my maternal grandfather looks like. He died ten years before I was born. No one had ever described him to me and I am reasonably sure that no photograph of him exists. My mother met her father twice. The first time when she was not quite two. The second time she saw him, was for a hour or so just before her mother died. She was eleven. What I do know is that my grandfather had been a farmhand on one of my great-grandfather's farms. I know a maternal uncle bequeathed my grandmother a farm and my grandfather is said to have wasted the inheritance on various failed business schemes. My mother was the last of six children. I know my grandfather left his wife when she was several months pregnant with my mother. I don't know why. My aunt told me he was a drunk and he died in prison. I have also heard that no matter how desperate my grandmother's situation became bringing up her children alone in the throes of

the Great Depression, she never spoke harshly of her husband. All agree that her devotion to her husband never wavered.

It is my impression that my grandmother's devotion to my grandfather disturbed all who knew her. When I was younger I imagined it was because they were uncomfortable at her weakness. It is odd, but for all I do know about my family, I do not know whether my maternal grandmother was weak or strong, whether her story is the unwinding of a broken spirit or the telling of quiet strength that was utterly misunderstood by those around her. I have imagined my grandmother both ways. Now I try to feel the weight of what it means that the impenetrability of the past has blocked me from her nature while nevertheless realizing that this ambiguity is precisely her legacy to me.

In November of 1933, the mid-island pine forest beckoned to my aunt with soft ground and crisp air. In tow behind her big sister, my mother had been out for a walk in the woods just west of Riverhead. A rifle discharged. My aunt fell to the ground. She had been accidentally shot in the hip. The bullet penetrated an inch or so above the spot where the top of my mother's head had been resting against her sister's thigh. Being four at the time, my mother could not have possibly known how close she had come to being killed. She does remember that the hunter had had too much to drink. She has told the story more than once.

As far as my mother was concerned, firearms had no reasonable purpose. I suspect that her objections were not so much judgments that originated with her as an orphaned disposition, an inheritance from a Quaker mother for whom she had ambiguous feelings. Or perhaps this explanation for her opposition to guns came from my father? Many of my mother's psychological motivations and foibles came to my attention through my father. In either case, it does seem that the more woolly my feelings are about my parents, the more difficult it is to read the map that shows me the way to the beginning of so many

of my own attitudes, opinions and values. As I have become a parent myself, I have grown to suspect that the commandment to honor one's parents might have more to do with keeping me clear about the nature of my inheritance than meeting any need my parents might have had for a child's honor. But when I was nine years old, I was not concerned with honoring my parents. All I wanted was a shotgun.

8.4

Maryland is hot in summer. My brother and I spent half the day in the water and the rest of the day on it. We caught sunfish, perch – both yellow and white – and rockfish when we were lucky. I have it in my head that 'rockfish' is the local name for immature striped bass, but I am not sure if this is something I remember or something I made up. In that first summer at the farm, we learned how to fish by trying hard. We used bread as bait, bent safety pins for hooks and did not catch much. Later we got some help and some hooks from the men who lived up the cove; we learned how to put a minnow on a hook so that its tail would move naturally as it was reeled in. My mother bought us rods and reels. At some point we came by a minnow trap as well. I remember putting out the trap on the log where we tied up our little motorboat in front of the house. I was nine and my brother seven.

Someone from up the cove must have taught us how to set a crab line. We used twine suspended between empty Clorox bottles that were themselves anchored to the estuary floor with rocks made fast to elaborate webs of knotted string. The water in Cedar Cove was slightly brackish. We had a store-bought net. I was disappointed recently to discover that my brother does not remember our crabbing expeditions – he was quite young or maybe I was the only one who actually did any crabbing. I don't recall. What I do remember is I liked going after crab. I could get a half bushel or so of blue claws

in one long morning – more than enough for a big meal. Crabbing involved catching fish for bait, getting up before dawn, setting out the line from the boat with a flashlight. And after all that work, I would have blue crab, the centerpiece of Eastern Shore cuisine.

Mother would fix crab dinner with coleslaw and pan-fried potatoes. But I soon discovered my mother preferred that I or anyone else put the crabs in the steamer. She was squeamish about touching them, but mostly she hated putting the living crabs into the hot steam. I was a little uneasy about steaming the crabs as well, but not so much that I was willing to acknowledge my discomfort publicly. I was her little hero tossing the crabs into the top of the steamer, but, attracting as little attention as possible, I always found a way to turn my attention from the noisy struggle that took place under the flecked enamel lid. A few minutes later, the crab got dumped from the steamer onto sheets of newspaper spread over the kitchen table. Sticky fingers, a pile of shell and slop, my parents drank beer and we drank water or Coke.

8.5

We had two goose blinds on the property and I desperately wanted to go goose hunting. We were down there most weekends. I remember hearing the Colonel blast away early in the morning. An hour before dawn he would climb into his flat-nosed punt and put out decoys. After each flight and the roar of the gun, his brown Chesapeake retriever swam out from the blind on the point and hauled back the big geese. Sometimes the dog took the birds by the neck, at other times a wing: he would drag them from the water up to the blind. There were thousands of geese on the bay in those days.

I hoped the Colonel would teach me to hunt. He had the place next to ours out on the point that defined the mouth of Lovely Cove. What I remember most about his house was

that it was big and came equipped with a paneled library. Against one wall was a long gun case with several sliding glass doors. I was immediately absorbed by the row of smoothbore guns and rifles.

I tried hunting geese with target arrows and a bow. At nine, the difference between play and what is serious is still somewhat blurred. When I pointed the metal capped ends of my target arrows at a flight of geese coming in high over the field, a shot that was not nearly impossible but completely impossible, I would, at the last moment, point the arrow away from the formation as I let the arrow fly on the off chance I might hit one. My mother caught me at this from the kitchen window that overlooked the field sloping away towards the water. Though I desperately wanted to hunt those birds, the idea of an arrow-skewered goose flapping about on the ground was more than I was prepared to consider. I had no idea what to do with the bird if I did manage to kill it.

8.6

After suffering a long debilitating illness, my mother died. Because she had lost her own mother when she was only eleven, it seemed right that she be buried near her. The graveyard was old and full, so we made arrangements to put my mother's ashes in her mother's lap under three feet of earth. My grandmother lies next to her mother – from whom she had been estranged only in life – and my maternal great-grandfather lies elsewhere. I have no information about any of these earlier arrangements.

My brothers and I buried our mother in Burlington County, New Jersey seven years ago and I have not been back. I live in California. Neither have I returned to my paternal grandfather's grave in Seattle where his wife, my paternal grandmother, is in an urn next to his. I am telling you this because there is a graveyard attached to a small country meetinghouse in Burlington

County in which four generations of my line worshiped. Now they are in the yard buried side by side.

Eight or nine years ago, on my last visit there, I noticed that the meetinghouse had been sold to a young couple. The yearly meeting must have let it go for lack of attendance. Children's toys were scattered about the iron-fenced graveyard that was serving as a back yard. Some of the stones were toppled. The graveyard was at that time still the property of the yearly meeting. I don't know how to feel about the overrun graveyard or the preservation of my family's dead. I have kept my father's ashes in a file cabinet for the last nine years. The family is so itinerate these days, I have considered making a portable mausoleum in which I might keep his remains and to which my ashes might later be added. I don't want to scatter him. I still do not know what to make of the past and am not sure I want simply to scatter it or him into forgetfulness.

