

THE HUNTING DISCUSSION

Making Game: An Essay on Hunting, Familiar Things, and the Strange Sense of Being Who One Is. Peter L. Atkinson, AU Press, 2009

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Countless are the poems, novels and memoirs which focus on the question of what it means to be midway in life's journey. Numerous are the books and essays written over the last 20 years to defend the blood sport of hunting and explain why some intelligent women and men still find exceptional value in it. Singular, though, is the book which takes on both projects simultaneously and handles each with a measure of success. That book is *Making Game: An Essay on Hunting, Familiar Things, and the Strange Sense of Being Who One Is*, by Peter L. Atkinson. Running 155 pages, it's a bold narrative and philosophical ramble through subjects ranging from hunting, to the natures of consciousness and erotic desire, to ancient literature and philosophy, to the meaning of parenthood and family. *Making Game* is a good book overall, perplexing at times, but quite rewarding at others. Knowing Atkinson's take on hunting is a first step toward knowing the book as a whole, so it's with hunting that this review will begin.

When Yale forester Robert Kellert first studied hunters' motives some 30 years ago, he found that almost half hunted mainly for food, and a slightly smaller percentage hunted mainly for trophies. The remaining few hunted because they wanted to participate in a natural process, to step into an ecosystem by filling a predator's niche. Kellert called this last group "naturalistic" or "nature" hunters. I haven't seen an update of Kellert's study, but I do know that there are more naturalistic hunters now than there were 30 years ago, and that they're a very dedicated group. In *Making Game* Atkinson presents himself credibly as a naturalistic hunter. When he writes about training dogs to hunt upland birds, or about tracking elk across a mountainside, he provides a moment-by-moment sense of what it is like to be focused fully on a dog's way of getting around in the world:

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 by the wind and on backing air do not exist to me. The dogs relate themselves to their surroundings in ways that are only imaginable to me. The organization of the scent-world is as mutable as the drifting the swirling of the air—movements that make what is far near and what near sometimes vanish altogether.

Or an elk's way:

The ground was patchy with snow where I had first seen the cow. I found her impression. All around her were the tracks of the rest of the herd grazing through the light snow. Many of these marks looked like comets with long tails. Elk graze with their noses to the ground, and also they do not pick up their feet much at all. Not only do they leave tracks of their noses sliding across the ground, they tend to set a hoof and then, as they move on from that spot, lightly drag that same hoof across the ground before picking it up.... When elk trot they are reasonably clean stepping. When elk run their tracks get deeper and wider. Running, the cloven hooves of these large and powerful ruminants splay as they hit the ground. When they pick up their feet again, the hooves contract, grab and so toss chunks of snow or mud in their wake. I find the tracks of running elk in groups of four at least fifteen feet apart, sometimes further.

By the time Atkinson gets a good shot at whatever he's hunting, he's typically spent some hours, worked hard, and engaged the complexities of the space where his quarry lives. His shots are taken without excitement and are sometimes followed by regret. I get the impression that he doesn't miss.

Atkinson is not much interested in the easier justifications of hunting. "Hunting is never a harmless walk in the woods," he writes, and "I need to be as careful as I possibly can not to celebrate any mindless killing or violence merely for the sake of unification." Accordingly, he labels as decadent any hunting where quarry is too readily available. And he goes further, pointing out that even when the odds favor the animal, there's no ethical sanction for contemporary hunting, since the quarry isn't killed to preserve innocent life. That being acknowledged, the values involved in hunting become clearer:

When I was young, I certainly felt that if I ate meat it was better to kill the animal myself than to foist the task onto someone else. It seemed more ethical to do one's own dirty work. I am not as convinced by this point of view now. If killing animals is an ethical problem, how did I imagine I would be escape responsibility by killing them myself? It may be more honorable to kill your own food, enemies, etc., but it is not more ethical.

Atkinson's distinction between ethics and honor makes sense. When a naturalistic hunter says there's a wrong way and a right way to hunt, what she or he means, more precisely, is that there's a dishonorable way and an honorable way. Honorable hunting is done in a manner that honors the lives of animals taken. Atkinson draws a careful comparison between rituals used by tribal hunters to appease the protective spirit of an animal killed, and the modern codes of clean kill and full use. Each, he says, is a means of demonstrating that the life of animal killed is valued, and of moving beyond

the fact of its death.

Because making a clean kill and full use of the animal requires proficiency as well as dedication, the honorific and physical aspects of the sport are deeply intermixed, and the ante is always high. For the naturalistic hunter, uncertainty about how much skill and effort will be required to honor the life of a given animal, is probably as big a factor as uncertainty as whether the animal will be seen at all. But there is upside as well. Whereas the successful meat hunter has steaks to share, the successful naturalistic hunter can share steaks and a story as well, and the honor done to the animal may reflect back on him or her. Atkinson retells one such story, which he heard out west:

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. 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 the bull. Moose hunting in that part of the state is very physical and bow hunting is always a challenge, but that is 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 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 of 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.

The literal weight of the post-hunt is a stark contrast to the lighter sense of focus and flow that characterizes Atkinson's descriptions of working with dogs and tracking game. The post-hunt is no less important to him, though. He believes that in working to transform the raw into the cooked, a hunter works free of the emotional weight of having made the kill.

The length and depth of the hunting discussion beg the question of how the rest of *Making Game* is related to it. Unlike many books which focus on a sport or avocation and a phase of life, *Making Game* doesn't answer that question explicitly. Instead the connections are implicit, and they seem to exist on several levels. There are thematic connections to discussions of

loss, mitigation, and honor, for instance, and some compelling connections to discussions of various ways in which human beings experience time. On the other hand, there are whole sections of the book that bear no thematic relationship to hunting at all. Since Atkinson's chapters are untitled and most of his themes recur in various chapters, it's reasonable to assume that some sort of organic relationship is intended; my guess is that discussion of hunting, most of which is centered just after the middle of the book, is meant to refine or reconfigure certain themes, the way key episodes would in a novel.

There's a degree to which this set-up works, and a degree to which it doesn't. On one hand, it is heartening to note the difference between the way certain subjects are treated early in the book and near its conclusion. In chapter two, for instance, Atkinson describes erotic love as a force unto itself, mostly missing the importance of context as a means of understanding and valuing it. In chapter nine, which follows the main hunting discussions, Atkinson writes about erotic love in the context of a first marriage; the difference is startling, and all to the good. On the other hand, this is a pretty rarified kind of coherence. Readers are left to ponder the question of why the discussion of hunting works this way, and each reader's overall assessment of *Making Game* will likely depend, in part, on the answer she or he comes up with. I see Atkinson's discussion of hunting as the clear articulation of a complex path into life (as distinct from a "way of life"). It's an articulation which, in and of itself, makes the rest of life clearer. To acknowledge this achievement and effect, though, isn't the same thing as saying that *Making Game* is structured clearly.

Among the literary gifts that don't require a fully worked-out structure in order to shine, is the gift of capturing a moment. Atkinson has this, and he exercises it in his narratives about "the strange sense of being who one is." For Atkinson this strange sense is one life's most compelling surprises, both for how it arises and the place it holds in recollection. The first experience came when Atkinson was 10 years old and living with his family in what had been the caretaker's house of a ramshackle Long Island estate. He describes the setting and its history in detail, and notes that "In the early sixties, just as this part of the world was starting to get expensive again, there was still a lot open space in which children could play." Then he tells the story of a moment:

Some of the neighboring kids were there. We were involved in a military game that included a lot of running around the house. I was in the process of ambushing a group of my friends and playmates with a wooden machine gun, which I had made in the basement from scraps of wood, bits of hose and the

like. Quite in the middle of everything, or perhaps equivalently, out of nowhere, I was met by the odd experience of being who I was. I abruptly encountered myself as I was; a feeling of contingency anchored to a sense of having to be was upon me. I had shown up from nowhere as the one who was involved in what was going on and, just as I became interested in this strange feeling and without transition, I continued to machine-gun my little friends running madly on the lawn. The uncanny sense of myself being vanished the moment I reached for it. The whole thing was everywhere, and then nowhere at all.

Atkinson recounts a half dozen or so such moments. Most, but not all occur when he's fishing or hunting, and they seem to emerge from intervals of intense concentration combined with physical activity. The sense of personal being arises as if from nowhere and quickly fades, even as concentration holds and the physical action flows forward. In one of his short narratives, Atkinson describes the whole experience as being "drenched in the real."

Atkinson's presentation of the strange sense is no-frills and straightforward, and it includes an insistence that it has changed his whole outlook on life. He writes that when he looks back on his uncanny moments, "I remember myself as emerging from a certain mode of not being there and so as something other or something more than a past that is failing into a future." He also describes the experience as stumbling "upon what feels like the truth." The uplift seems to come from partly from evanescence and partly from context. Atkinson's sense of personal being has the momentary quality of Bede's sparrow, the analogical bird that flew out of winter darkness, through an open window and into the light of 8th century dining hall, and then back out into darkness again. But for Atkinson, what lies beyond the windows isn't the darkness of uncertainty that Bede described; instead it's a world of darkness and light intermixed, a world awaiting engagement.

I like Atkinson's insistence on the value of his uncanny moments, and I also like his qualified statement of what that value is. In the context of autobiography, his moments provide the same kind of uplift William Wordsworth imputed to "spots of time," i.e. each person's momentary imaginative encounters with nature over the years. Wordsworth saw these as a basis for the rest of one's imaginative life, not its full realization, and that's how Atkinson's uncanny moments seem to serve in *Making Game* as well. There's no doubt that "contingency anchored in a sense of having to be" can be experienced in other, larger contexts, including the context of a compelling vocation and the context of definitive action taken when the going is tough. *Making Game* doesn't deal with these alternatives in so many words, but it's clear that Atkinson understands the issue. He never supposes that hunting, per se, is a vocation or that its actions are definitive. Instead, in a neat

and surprising turn, he describes the actions of parenthood as having that potential. To welcome new life, he writes, is to enact the law of hospitality, “an irrational law, to be sure, but more original than justice.”

Making Game is Atkinson’s first book. If the sections on hunting were excerpted, they would be strong enough to warrant inclusion in a “best writing on the sport” anthology, such as David Petersen’s fine collection, *A Hunter’s Heart*. Atkinson’s best writing that isn’t about hunting or the strange sense of being who one is, is about marriage and family. This shows that he has range, and it also suggests that a good bit of his strength is in applying novel ideas in traditional contexts. A serious reader of Greek literature, Atkinson has an Achilles’-shield understanding of imagination as a mirror in a battle. No doubt all writers need to break from custom—defy expectation—at times, and it seems to me that writers with Atkinson’s cast of imagination may need to do that even more than most. Perhaps some particular need for definitive action is embedded in their aesthetic. I think of *Aubudon: A Vision*, Robert Penn Warren’s break-away work about an artist who hunted birds, and wonder what Atkinson will be up to next.