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The Modern Hunter-Gatherer

By MICHAEL POLLAN

I. A WALK IN THE WOODS

Walking with a loaded rifle in an unfamiliar forest bristling with the signs of your prey is thrilling. It embarrasses me to write that, but it is true. I am not by nature much of a noticer, yet here, now, my attention to everything around me, and deafness to everything else, is complete. Nothing in my experience has prepared me for the quality of this attention. I notice how the day's first breezes comb the needles in the pines, producing a sotto voce whistle and an undulation in the pattern of light and shadow tattooing the tree trunks and the ground. I notice the specific density of the air. But this is not a passive or aesthetic attention; it is a hungry attention, reaching out into its surroundings like fingers, or nerves. My eyes venture deep into thickets my body could never penetrate, picking their way among the tangled branches, sliding over rocks and around stumps to bring back the slenderest hint of movement. In the places too deeply shadowed to admit my eyes, my ears roam at will, returning with the report of a branch cracking at the bottom of a ravine, or the snuffling of a . . . wait: what was that? Just a bird. Everything is amplified. Even my skin is alert, so that when the shadow launched by the sudden ascent of a turkey vulture passes overhead I swear I can feel the temperature momentarily fall. I am the alert man.

Hunting inflects a place powerfully. The ordinary prose of the ground becomes as layered and springy as verse — and as dense with meanings. Notice the freshly rototilled soil at the base of that oak tree? Look how the earth has not yet been crisped by the midday sun; this means wild boar — my quarry — have been rooting here since yesterday afternoon, either overnight or earlier this morning. See that smoothly scooped-out puddle of water? That's a wallow, but notice how the water is perfectly clear: pigs haven't disturbed it yet today. We could wait here for them.

Hunter and quarry maintain different but overlapping maps of the hunting ground, places of refuge and prospect, places of prior encounter. The hunter's aim is to have his map collide with his quarry's map, which, should it happen, will do so at a moment of no one's choosing. For although there's much the hunter can know, about game and about its habitat, in the end he knows nothing about what is going to happen here today, whether the longed-for and dreaded encounter will actually take place and, if it does, how it will end.

Since there's nothing he can do to make the encounter happen, the hunter's energy goes into readying himself for it, and trying, by the sheer force of his attention, to summon the animal into his presence. Searching for his prey, the hunter instinctively becomes more like the animal, straining to make himself less visible, less audible, more exquisitely alert. Predator and prey alike move according to their own maps of this ground, their own forms of attention and their

own systems of instinct, systems that evolved expressly to hasten or avert precisely this encounter...

wait a minute. Did I really write that last paragraph? Without irony? That's embarrassing. Am I actually writing about the hunter's "instinct," suggesting that the hunt represents some sort of primordial encounter between two kinds of animals, one of which is me? This seems a bit much. I recognize this kind of prose: hunter porn. And whenever I've read it in the past, in Hemingway and Ortega y Gasset and all those hard-bitten, big-bearded American wilderness writers who still pine for the Pleistocene, it never failed to roll my eyes. I never could stomach the straight-faced reveling in primitivism, the barely concealed bloodlust, the whole macho conceit that the most authentic encounter with nature is the one that comes through the sight of a gun and ends with a large mammal dead on the ground — a killing that we are given to believe constitutes a gesture of respect. So it is for Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher, who writes in his "Meditations on Hunting" that "the greatest and most moral homage we can pay to certain animals on certain occasions is to kill them..." Please.

And yet here I find myself slipping into the hunter's ecstatic purple, channeling Ortega y Gasset. It may be that we have no better language in which to describe the experience of hunting, so that all of us who would try sooner or later slide into this overheated prose ignorant of irony. Or it could be that hunting is one of those experiences that appear utterly different from the inside than the outside. That this might indeed be the case was forcibly impressed on me after a second outing with my hunting companion and mentor, Angelo Garro, when, after a long and gratifying day in the woods, we stopped at a convenience store for a bottle of water. The two of us were exhausted and filthy, the fronts of our jeans stained dark with blood. We couldn't have smelled terribly fragrant. And under the bright fluorescence of the 7-Eleven, in the mirror behind the cigarette rack behind the cashier, I caught a glimpse of this grungy pair of self-satisfied animal killers and noted the wide berth the other customers in line were only too happy to grant them. Us. It is a wonder that the cashier didn't pre-emptively throw up his hands and offer us the contents of the cash register.

Irony — the outside perspective — easily withers everything about hunting, shrinks it to the proportions of boy's play or atavism. And yet at the same time I found that there is something about the experience of hunting that puts irony itself to rout. In general, experiences that banish irony are much better for living than for writing. But there it is: I enjoyed shooting a pig a whole lot more than I ever thought I should have.

II. A CANNABINOID MOMENT

I had never hunted before, never had the need or the desire or the right kind of dad. One of the world's great indoorsmen, my father looked upon hunting as a human activity that stopped making sense with the invention of the steakhouse. What first got me out there, in the oak chaparral of northern Sonoma County that morning last spring, hoping to shoot a wild pig, was a conceit. I'd gotten it into my head that I wanted to prepare a meal I had hunted, gathered and grown myself. Why? To see if I could do it. I was also curious to experience the food chain — which has grown so long and complex as to no longer even feel anything like a food chain — at its shortest and most elemental. And I had long felt that, as a meat eater, I should, at least once,

take responsibility for the killing that eating meat entails. I wanted, for once in my life, to pay the full karmic price of a meal.

Yet when the day arrived, part of me did not want to go. The night before, I had anxiety dreams about hunting. In one I was on a bobbing boat trying to aim a rifle at a destroyer that was firing its cannons at me; in the other, the woods were crawling with Angelo's Sicilian relatives, and I couldn't for the life of me remember how my gun worked, whether the safety was on when the little button popped up on the left side of the trigger or the right. I had tried out my rifle only once before taking it to the woods, at a firing range in the Oakland hills, and by the end of the morning my paper target had sustained considerably less damage than my left shoulder, which ached for a full week. I wasn't ready to buy a gun of my own, so Angelo had borrowed a fairly basic pump-action rifle, a .270 Winchester with an old-fashioned sight that I had trouble getting used to. After my session at the range, the first-order worry that I wouldn't have whatever it takes to fire a rifle aimed at an animal was overtaken by a second-order worry that, assuming I did manage to pull the trigger, nothing of consequence would happen to the animal.

Why boar? The animals were introduced to California by the Spanish in the early 1700's and today are regarded as pests in many parts of the state; it seemed to me easier to justify killing an exotic pest than a native species. Though the pigs have been living wild a long time, they are not technically wild or even full-blooded boar; feral pigs would be more accurate. They are also, by reputation, vicious; one of the nicknames the California pig has earned is "dog ripper."

When I asked Angelo why he hunted wild pig, he didn't hesitate (or say word one about the environment); rather, he just kissed the tips of his fingers and said: "Because it is the most delicious meat. And there is nothing that tastes so good as boar prosciutto. You'll see. You shoot a big one, and we'll make some."

On this, my first outing, we were joined by Richard, the property's owner, and Angelo's friend Jean-Pierre, a Frenchman who works as a chef in Berkeley. Jean-Pierre grew up hunting boar with his relatives in Normandy. He had on one of those green felt Alpine fedoras with the feather (a hat he managed to wear without so much as a trace of self-consciousness) and a pair of tall black riding boots. We didn't look much the part of an American hunting party (Angelo had on a pair of flouncy Euro-style black pants), though Richard did have on the full international orange regalia, and I was wearing my brightest orange sweater. We divided into pairs, me with Angelo, and went our separate ways, with a plan to meet back at the cars for lunch around noon.

"You are going to kill your first pig today," Angelo hollered over the roar of the A.T.V. we were riding on. Given the nature of hunting, not to mention me, I understood this as less a prediction than a prayer. After a while we parked the A.T.V. and set out on foot. Angelo gave me a route and a destination — a wallow in a grassy opening at the bottom of a ravine — and told me to find a tree with a good view of it and wait there, perfectly still, for 20 minutes until I heard him whistle. He would make his way toward the same spot from another direction, in the hope of driving some pigs into my field of vision.

When I could hear Angelo's footsteps no longer, my ears and eyes started tuning in — everything. It was as if I'd dialed up the gain on all my senses, or quieted myself to such an

extent that the world itself grew louder and brighter. I quickly learned to filter out the static of birdsong, of which there was plenty at that early hour, and to listen for the frequency of specific sounds — the crack of branches or the snuffling of animals. I found I could see farther into the woods than I ever had before, picking out the tiniest changes in my visual field at an almost inconceivable distance, just so long as those changes involved movement or blackness. The sharpness of focus and depth of field was uncanny, though, being nearsighted, I knew it well from the experience of putting on glasses with a strong new prescription for the first time. "Hunter's eye," Angelo said later when I described the phenomenon; he knew all about it.

I found a shaded spot overlooking the wallow and crouched down in the leaves, steadying my back against the smooth trunk of a madrone. I rested my gun across my thighs and got quiet. The whoosh of air through my nostrils suddenly sounded calamitous, so I began inhaling and exhaling through my mouth, silencing my breath. So much sensory information was coming into my head that it seemed to push out the normal buzz of consciousness. The state felt very much like meditation, though it took no mental effort or exercise to achieve that kind of head-emptying presence. The simple act of looking and listening, tuning my senses to the forest frequencies of Pig, occupied every quadrant of mental space and anchored me to the present. I must have lost track of time, because the 20 minutes flashed by. Ordinarily my body would have rebelled at being asked to hold a crouch this long, but I felt no need to change position or even to shift my weight.

Later it occurred to me that this mental state, which I quite liked, in many ways resembled the one induced by marijuana: the way your senses feel heightened and the mind seems to forget everything outside the scope of its present focus, including physical discomfort and the passing of time. One of the more interesting areas of research in the neurosciences today is the study of the brain's "cannabinoid network," a set of receptors in the nervous system that are activated by a group of unusual compounds called cannabinoids. THC, the active ingredient in marijuana, is one, and the brain produces its own: a neurotransmitter called anandamide. Whether made by the plant or the brain, cannabinoids have the effect of intensifying sensory experience, disabling short-term memory and stimulating appetite. Scientists still aren't certain what the evolutionary utility of such a system might be. Some researchers hypothesize that the cannabinoids, like the opiates, play a role in the brain's pain relief and reward system; others that they help regulate appetite or emotion.

The experience of hunting suggests another explanation. Could it be that the cannabinoid network is precisely the sort of adaptation that natural selection would favor in the evolution of a creature who survives by hunting? A brain chemical that sharpens the senses, narrows your mental focus, allows you to forget everything extraneous to the task at hand (including physical discomfort and the passage of time) and makes you hungry would seem to be the perfect pharmacological tool for Man the Hunter. All at once it provides the motive, the reward and the optimal mind-set for hunting. I would not be the least bit surprised to discover that what I was feeling in the woods that morning, crouching against a tree, avidly surveying that forest grove, was a tide of anandamide washing over my brain.

But whether I was actually having a cannabinoid moment or not, in the minutes before Angelo's whistle pierced my vigil I did feel as if I had somehow entered nature through a new door. For

once I was not a spectator but a full participant in the life of the forest. Later, when I reread Ortega y Gasset's description of the experience, I decided maybe he wasn't so crazy after all, not even when he asserted that hunting offers us our last best chance to leave behind history and return to the state of nature, if only for a time — for what he called a "vacation from the human condition."

Ortega believed that in hunting we returned to nature because hunting is the "generic" way of being human and because the animal we are stalking summons the animal still in us. This is atavism pure and simple — the recovery of an earlier mode of being human — and that for Ortega is the supreme, and the exclusive, value of hunting. For perhaps his most outrageous claim is that the hunt is the only such return available to us — we can't ever, as he points out, go back to being Christian in the manner of St. Augustine, say, because once history begins, it is irreversible. So how is it we can still go back to being Paleolithic? Because our identity as hunters is literally prehistoric — is in fact inscribed by evolution in the architecture of our bodies and brains. Much that surrounds hunting is completely artificial, Ortega freely admitted, yet the experience itself, the encounter of predator and prey, is no fiction. (Just ask the animals.) Even though the hunt takes place during a brief "vacation" from modern life, what occurs in the space of this electrifying parenthesis will ever and always be, in a word Ortega never shrinks from using, "authentic."

III. READY. OR NOT.

As I said, all this seemed much less crazy to me after I'd been in the woods that first morning with my gun, long before I even had occasion to fire it. I'm chagrined to report that the occasion never presented itself during that first hunting trip — or rather, when it did present itself I was in no position to do anything about it. I know, I've been talking here like Mister Big Game Hunter, comparing notes on the experience with the likes of Señor Ortega y Gasset, but I returned from the woods that day not only empty-handed, which in hunting is entirely forgivable, but also what is not, having failed as a hunter because I was not ready.

I blame this, at least partly, on lunch.

By the end of the morning, one animal had been shot, a small boar, taken by Jean-Pierre. On our way back up to the ridge in the A.T.V., Angelo and I picked it up. Not a whole lot bigger than a beagle, it had a florid blotch erupting from the side of its bristly black head. Angelo hung it by its ankles from the limb of a tree near the cars; he planned to dress it after lunch.

Being Europeans, as well as accomplished cooks, Angelo and Jean-Pierre take lunch very seriously, even when out in the woods some distance from civilization. "So I brought with me a few little things to nibble on," Jean-Pierre mumbled. "Me, too," chimed Angelo. And out of their packs came course after course of the most astonishing picnic, which they proceeded to lay out on the hood of Angelo's S.U.V.: a terrine of lobster and halibut en geleé, salami and prosciutto and mortadella, Angelo's homemade pâté of boar and home-cured olives, cornichons, chicken salad, a generous selection of cheeses and breads, fresh strawberries and pastries, silverware and napkins and, naturally, a bottle each of red and white wine.

It was a delicious lunch, but arguably it took off some of my hunter's edge. One of the easier questions on my state hunter-education course exam went something like this: "Hunting after drinking alcohol is an acceptable practice, true or false." Not that I was intoxicated, but I was feeling notably loquacious and relaxed when Richard and I set off to look for another pig after lunch, while Angelo dressed Jean-Pierre's pig and Jean-Pierre enjoyed a postprandial nap in the grass. Our rifles slung over our shoulders, we strolled down a shady trail toward a spot where Richard had once had some luck, all the while getting acquainted and chatting about one thing or another.

We were thoroughly absorbed in conversation when I happened to glance up ahead and saw directly in front of us, not 30 yards away, several large black shapes swimming in the shadows. There they were, four big pigs milling beneath an oak tree, their attention fixed on the acorns littering the path that connected us. Incredibly, they gave no sign they'd spotted us or heard our yammering.

I grabbed Richard by the shoulder, put my finger to my lips and pointed ahead. He stopped. "It's your shot," he whispered. "Go ahead. Take it." It is the custom when hunting with companions that the first shot belongs to the person who spotted the animal, perhaps in recognition of the fact that skill in hunting is as much about finding the game as killing it. In fact in many hunter-gatherer societies, rights to the meat go not just to the hunter who killed the animal but to the hunter who spotted it as well. These pigs were mine.

One little problem. I had neglected to pump my rifle before we set out on the trail. There was no bullet in the chamber, and to pump my gun now would almost surely alert the pigs to our presence. I could take the chance, but to do so probably meant the pigs would be on the run by the time I was ready to shoot. I explained all this in a whisper to Richard, whose own gun, a fancy new Finnish bolt-action job, could be cocked with little more than a click of the little bolt. I gave him my shot.

Richard got down on one knee and slowly raised his rifle to his shoulder. I braced for the explosion, preparing to pump my gun the moment it came; perhaps I could still get off a shot at one of the others. Richard took his time, aiming carefully, waiting for one of the animals to turn and offer its flank. The pigs had their heads down, eating acorns, utterly oblivious to our presence. Then the woods exploded. I saw a pig stagger and fall back against the embankment, then struggle drunkenly to its feet. I pumped my rifle but it was already too late: the other pigs were gone. Richard fired again at the wounded pig, and it crumpled.

The pig, a sow weighing perhaps a hundred pounds, was too heavy to carry, so we took turns dragging it by its rear leg up the path back toward the cars. Angelo trotted over to see the animal, excited and impressed and eager to hear our story. It's curious how the hunting story takes shape in the moments after the shot, as you work through the chaotic simultaneity of that lightning, elusive moment, trying to tease out of the adrenaline fog something linear and comprehensible. Even though we'd witnessed the event together, Richard and I had taken turns carefully telling each other the story on the long march back, rehearsing our lack of readiness, reviewing the reasons Richard had taken the shot instead of me, trying to nail down the precise distance and number of pigs involved, carefully unpacking the moment and turning our shaky recollections

into a consensus of fact — a hunting story. As I watched Angelo drink in our hunting story, I could see the disappointment bloom on his face. It had been my shot, my pig, but I hadn't taken it.

"You weren't ready," Angelo said, levelly. "In hunting you always need to be ready. So, O.K., you learned something today. Next time you will be ready, and you will take your shot." He was trying hard not to sound like the disappointed father; even so, I couldn't help feeling like the disappointing son.

So what had really happened? I hadn't been ready to shoot. But why? The practical reasons were clear; surely it had made more sense to give my shot to Richard than to risk losing the animal. It was because of my unselfish decision that we now had this pig. Yet maybe there was some deeper sense in which I hadn't been ready; maybe my failure to have a bullet in the chamber reflected some unconscious reluctance about doing what I was asking myself to do. The fact is I'd blown it, and I wasn't sure how deep I should go in search of an explanation. And yet I had been, and still was, determined to shoot a pig — I had a meal to cook, for one thing, but I was also genuinely hungry for the experience, to learn whatever it had to teach me. So I spent the rest of the afternoon hunting intently alone, walking the ridge, raking the shadows for signs of pig, looking and listening as hard as I could to will another pig out of the woods. When Angelo announced it was time to go home, I felt deflated.

Jean-Pierre generously offered to give me some cuts of his pig. Since I needed the meat for my meal, I was grateful for his offer, yet I understood that to accept it underscored my inferior status in our little society of hunters. To the successful hunter goes the privilege of giving away the spoils, and I'd read a lot in the anthropological literature suggesting just how important that privilege was. The sheer nutritional density of meat has always made it a precious form of social currency among hunter-gatherers. Since the successful hunter often ends up with more meat than he or his family can eat before it spoils, it makes good sense for him to, in effect, bank the surplus in the bodies of other people, trading meat for obligations and future favors. Chimps will do the same thing. Not to say that Jean-Pierre was lording it over me or demanding anything in return; he wasn't. But that didn't change the fact that here I stood, on the vaguely pathetic receiving end of the alpha hunter's meat gift. I thanked Jean-Pierre for the gift.

in the days after, I wasn't sure whether I needed to go hunting again. I had my meat. And I had been hunting: I felt as if I had a good idea what it was all about, or nearly all about — the hunter's way of being in nature, and the way of the pigs. I'd spotted the prey and witnessed the kill. I had a pretty good story too. And yet everyone to whom I told it managed to remind me how unsatisfactory the ending was. You mean you never even fired your gun? I'd violated the Chekhovian dramatic rule: having introduced a loaded gun in Act One, the curtain can't come down until it is fired. I might miss, but the gun had to be fired. That at least seemed to be the narrative imperative.

And then of course there was Señor Ortega y Gasset, who was not about to accept me into the fellowship of hunters until I'd actually killed an animal. Mere spectatorship, or "platonic" analogues of hunting such as photography or bird-watching, don't cut it for him. Although Ortega says one does not hunt in order to kill, he also says that one must kill in order to have

hunted. Why? For authenticity's sake. If my venture was about taking ultimate responsibility for the animals I eat, their deaths included, well, I hadn't done that yet, had I?

I e-mailed Angelo and asked him to let me know the next time he planned to go hunting. He wrote back saying he would give me 48 hours notice, to get ready.

IV. MY PIG

Word came about a month later, on a May Friday, that we were to meet at a gas station in Petaluma the following Monday morning, 6 a.m. sharp. This time it would be just the two of us.

We spent the first part of the morning doing the circuit of Angelo's customary spots, patrolling first the ridge in the A.T.V. and then moving down into the lower forest on foot. The entire day, I kept a round in my chamber. We staked out a wallow deep in the woods and then a trampled clearing of ferns on the near side of the hill that abuts the road, but saw no signs of boar.

A little after 9 in the morning, we were walking together down a logging road cut into a steep hillside when we were stopped in our tracks by a grunt so loud and deep and guttural that it seemed to be coming from the bowels of the earth. A very big pig was very close by. But where? What direction to look? The sound had no address; this was the grunt of the ground itself, omnipresent, more audible to my torso than to my ears. We crouched down low, making ourselves as inconspicuous as possible, and I listened as hard as I've ever listened for anything before, listened the way you listen when you hear a strange sound in the night.

I needn't have strained so, because the next sound we heard was nearly as loud as the first: the sharp, clean crack of a branch, coming from above us to our right, where the thickly oaked hillside climbed to a crest. A stream ran down the hillside and crossed the path in front of us about 30 yards ahead. With my eyes I followed the silvery line of the stream up through the woods to the crest, and that's when I saw it: a rounded black form, a negative of sunrise, coming over the top of the hill. Then another black sun, and another, a total of five or six, I couldn't be sure, popping over the crest in a line like a string of huge black pearls.

I touched Angelo on the shoulder and pointed toward the pigs. What should I do? This time my gun was pumped of course, and now, for the first time, I took off the safety. Should I shoot? No, you wait, Angelo said. See — they're coming down the hill now. I followed the pigs with the barrel of my gun, trying to get one of them in my sight. My finger rested lightly on the trigger, and it took all the self-restraint I could summon not to squeeze, but I didn't have a clear shot — too many trees stood between us. Take your time, Angelo whispered, they will come to us. And so they did, following the stream bed down to the road directly in front of us, moving toward us in an excruciatingly slow parade. I have no idea how long it took the pigs to pick their way down the steep hill, whether it was minutes or just seconds. At last the first animal, a big black one, stepped out into the clearing of the dirt road, followed by another that was just as big but much lighter in color. The second pig presented its flank. Now! Angelo whispered. This is your shot!

I could sense Angelo a step or two behind me, preparing to take his shot the second I took mine. We were both down on one knee. I braced the rifle against my shoulder and lined up my sight. I

felt calmer and clearer than I expected to; at least when I looked down the barrel of the rifle it didn't appear to be wagging uncontrollably. I took aim at the shoulder of the grayish pig, aligning the sight's two parts — its U and I — with the top of the animal's front leg. I held my breath, resisted a sudden urge to clamp my eyes shut and gently squeezed.

The crystal stillness of the scene and the moment in time now exploded into a thousand shards of sense. The pigs erupted in panic, moving every which way at once like black bumper cars, and then the *blam!* of Angelo's shot directly behind made me jump. One pig was down; another seemed to stagger. I pumped my gun to fire again but the adrenaline was surging now and I was shaking so violently my finger accidentally pressed the trigger before I could lower my gun; the shot went wild, skying far over the heads of the rioting pigs. Something like the fog of war now descended on the scene, and I'm uncertain exactly what happened next, but I believe Angelo fired a second time. I collected myself just enough to pump and fire one more poorly aimed round before the pigs dispersed, most of them tumbling down the steep embankment to our left.

We ran forward to the downed animal, a very large grayish sow beached on her side across the dirt road; a glossy marble of blood bubbled directly beneath her ear. The pig thrashed briefly, trying to lift her head, then gave it up. Death was quickly overtaking her, and I was grateful she wouldn't need a second shot.

Angelo clapped me on the back and congratulated me extravagantly. "Your first pig! Look at the size of it. And with a perfect shot, right in the head. You did it!" Did I do it? Was that really my shot? I thought my first shot had dropped the pig, but already that moment was blurred irretrievably, and when I saw what a clean shot it was, I suddenly had my doubts. Yet Angelo was adamant — he had fired at a different pig, a black one. "No, this is your pig, Michael, you killed it, there's no doubt in my mind." Our hunting story was taking form, the fluid confusion of the moment rapidly hardening into something sturdier and sharper than it really was. "What a great shot," Angelo continued. "You got yourself a big one. That's some very nice prosciutti!"

Meat I was not yet quite ready to see. What I saw was a dead wild animal, its head lying on the dirt in a widening circle of blood. I knelt down and pressed the palm of my hand against the pig's belly above the nipples and felt beneath the dusty, bristly skin her warmth, but no heartbeat. My emotions were as surging and confused as the knot of panicked pigs had been on this spot just a moment before. The first to surface was this powerful upwelling of pride — that I had actually done this thing I'd set out to do, had successfully shot a pig. I felt a flood of relief too, that the deed was done, thank God, and didn't need to be done again. And then there was this wholly unexpected wash of gratitude. But for what exactly, or to whom? For my good fortune, I guess, and to Angelo, of course, but also to this animal, for stepping unbidden over the crest of that hill, out of the wild and into my sight, to become what Angelo kept calling her: your pig. More than the product of any labor of mine (save receptiveness), the animal was a gift — from whom or what I couldn't say, but gratitude seemed in order, and gratitude is what I felt.

The one emotion I expected to feel but did not, inexplicably, was remorse, or even ambivalence. All that would come later, but now, I'm slightly embarrassed to admit, I felt absolutely terrific — unambiguously happy. Angelo wanted to take my picture, so he posed me behind my pig, one hand cradling the rifle across my chest, the other resting on the animal. I couldn't decide whether

to smile or to compose a more somber expression. I opted for the latter, but I couldn't quite manage to untie the knot of my smile. Nor did I register, yet anyway, the slightest disgust at the creeping stain of the animal's blood on the ground, the stain that I remembered Ortega calling a "degradation." I was still too excited, too interested in this most improbable drama in which I had somehow found myself, playing the hero's part.

V. MAKING MEAT

The sense of elation didn't last. Less than an hour later, back up on the ridge, I found myself in a much less heroic position, embracing the pig's hanging carcass from behind to steady it so Angelo could reach in and pull out its viscera. I was playing the nurse now, passing him tools and holding the patient still. Using a block and tackle and a stainless-steel hanger with two hooks, we'd managed to raise and hang the pig by its rear ankles from the limb of an oak tree. A scale attached to the rig gave the weight of the animal: 190 pounds. The pig weighed exactly as much as I did.

Angelo worked with a small cigar clamped between his teeth; the smoke discouraged the flies and yellow jackets, which had taken an avid interest in the dead animal. There were also a pair of turkey vultures circling high overhead, patiently waiting for us to finish. Whatever parts of this pig we didn't take, the local fauna were preparing to set upon and consume, weaving this bonanza of fat and protein back into the fabric of the land. Using a short knife, Angelo made a shallow incision the length of the animal's belly, moving very slowly so as not to pierce any internal organs.

Angelo talked while he worked, mostly, if you can believe it, about food: prosciutto, pâté, ventricina, sausages. The pig was splayed open now, all its internal organs glistening in their place like one of those cutaway anatomy dolls from biology: the bluish links of intestine coiled beneath the stout muscle of heart, beribboned with its map of veins; the spongy pink pair of lungs like outspread wings behind; and below, the sleek chocolate slab of liver. The pig's internal organs, in their proportions and arrangement and colors, were indistinguishable from human organs.

I held the cavity open while Angelo reached in to pull out the mass of organs, saving only the liver, which had a jagged tear across it. The bullet had apparently crossed the rib cage diagonally from upper left to lower right, tearing through a lobe of the liver. But Angelo thought the liver was salvageable ("for a nice pâté"), so we dropped it into a Ziploc bag. Then he reached in and pulled gently and the rest of the organs tumbled out onto the ground in a heap, up from which rose a stench so awful it made me gag. This was not just the stink of pig wastes but those comparatively benign smells compounded by an odor so wretched and ancient that death alone could release it. I felt a wave of nausea begin to build in my gut. The clinical disinterest with which I had approached the whole process of cleaning my pig collapsed all at once: this was disgusting.

Since it was my plan to serve and eat this animal, the revulsion at its sight and smell that now consumed me was discouraging, to say the least. That plan was no longer just a conceit, either, since the moment I killed this pig I felt it descend on me with the weight of a moral obligation.

And yet at the moment the prospect of sitting down to a meal of this animal was unthinkable. Pâté? Prosciutto? Ventricina? Just then I could have made myself vomit simply by picturing myself putting a fork to a bite of this pig. How was I ever going to get past this? And what was this attack of revulsion all about, anyway?

Disgust, I understood, is one of the tools humans have evolved to navigate the omnivore's dilemma — the elemental question of what we should and should not eat. The emotion alerts us to things we should not ingest, like rotten meat or feces. And surely that protective reflex figured in what I was feeling as I beheld these viscera, which no doubt did contain microbes that could sicken me. Our sense of disgust, as Steven Pinker has written, is "intuitive microbiology."

But there had to be more to it than that, and later, when I did some reading on disgust, I acquired a better idea what else might underlie my revulsion. Paul Rozin, a cultural psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, points out that many of the things that disgust people do come from animals — bodily fluids and secretions, decaying flesh, corpses. Beyond the sanitary reasons for avoiding certain parts and products of animals, these things disgust us, Rozin suggests, because they confront us with the reality of our own animal nature. So much of the human project is concerned with distinguishing ourselves from beasts that we seem strenuously to avoid things that remind us that we are beasts, too — animals that urinate, defecate, copulate, bleed, die, stink and decompose. Rozin tells a story about Cotton Mather, who confided to his journal the powerful revulsion he felt at finding himself urinating alongside a dog. Mather turned his self-disgust into a resolution of self-transcendence: "Yet I will be a more noble creature; at the very time when my natural necessities debase me into the condition of the beast, my spirit shall (I say at that very time!) rise and soar. . . ."

Exactly why we would strive so hard to distance ourselves from our animality is a large question, but surely the human fear of death figures in the answer. What we see animals do an awful lot of is die, very often at our hands. Animals resist dying, but, having no conception of death, they don't give it nearly as much thought as we do. And one of the main thoughts about it we think is, will my own death be like this animal's or not? The belief, or hope, that human death is somehow different from animal death is precious to us — but unprovable. Whether it is or is not is one of the questions I suspect we're trying to answer whenever we look into the eyes of an animal.

From the moment I laid eyes on my animal straight through to the moment Angelo sawed off her head, her eyes remained tightly shut beneath her disconcerting eyelashes, yet everything else about the episode asked me to confront these kinds of questions. What disgusted me about "cleaning" the animal was just how messy — in every sense of the word — the process really was, how it forced me to look at and smell and touch and even to taste the death, at my hands, of a creature my size that, on the inside at least, had all the same parts and probably looked very much like me. The line between human and animal I could discern here, gazing into that carcass, was nowhere near sharp. Cannibalism is one of the things that most deeply disgusts us, and while this isn't by any reasonable definition that, you could forgive the mind for being fooled into reacting as if it were — in disgust.

In this, I decided, was one of the signal virtues of hunting: it puts large questions about who we and the animals are, and the nature of our respective deaths, squarely before the hunter, and

while I'm sure there are many hunters who manage to avoid their gaze, that must take some doing.

so we are left standing there in the woods with our uneasiness and our disgust, and disgust's boon companion, shame. I did not register any such emotion in the moments after shooting my pig, but eventually it dawned, or fell on me, like a great and unexpected weight. It happened late that evening, when, back at home, I opened my e-mail and saw that Angelo had sent me some digital pictures, under the subject heading "Look the great hunter!" I was eager to open them, excited to show my family my pig, since it hadn't come home with me but was hanging in Angelo's walk-in cooler.

The image that appeared on my computer screen hit me like an unexpected blow to the body. A hunter in an orange sweater was kneeling on the ground behind a pig the side of whose head has erupted in blood that is spreading like a river delta toward the bottom of the frame. The hunter's rifle is angled just so across his chest; clearly he is observing some hoary convention of the hunter's trophy portrait. One proprietary hand rests on the dead animal's broad flank. The man is looking into the camera with an expression of unbounded pride, wearing an ear-to-ear grin that might have been winning, if perhaps incomprehensible, had the bloodied carcass sprawled beneath him been cropped out of the frame. But the bloodied carcass was right there, front and center, and it rendered that grin — there's no other word for it — obscene. I felt as if I had stumbled on some stranger's pornography. I hurried my mouse to the corner of the image and clicked, closing it as quickly as I could. No one should ever see this.

What could I possibly have been thinking? What was the man in that picture feeling? I can't for the life of me explain what could have inspired such a mad grin, it seemed so distant and alien from me now. If I didn't know better, I would have said that the man in the picture was drunk. And perhaps he was, seized in the throes of some sort of Dionysian intoxication, the bloodlust that Ortega says will sometimes overtake the successful hunter. And what was I so damned proud of, anyway? I'd killed a pig with a gun, big deal.

Like the image of the two filthy hunters I'd caught in the convenience-store mirror earlier that afternoon, Angelo's digital photo had shown me the hunt, and the hunter, from the outside, subjecting it to a merciless gaze that hunting can't withstand, at least not in the 21st century. Yet I'm not prepared to say that that gaze offers the more truthful view of the matter. Angelo's picture resembles in certain respects the trophy photos sent home by soldiers, who shock their brides and mothers with images of themselves grinning astride the corpses of the enemy dead. They are entitled to their pride; killing is precisely what we've asked them to do, so why do we have so much trouble looking at the pictures?

I've looked at Angelo's pictures again, trying to figure out why they should have shamed me so. I realize it isn't the killing it records that I felt ashamed of, not exactly, but the manifest joy I seemed to be feeling about what I'd done. This for many people is what is most offensive about hunting — to some, disgusting: that it encourages, or allows, us not only to kill but also to take a certain pleasure in killing. It's not as if the rest of us don't countenance the killing of tens of millions of animals every year. Yet for some reason we feel more comfortable with the mechanical killing practiced, out of view and without emotion, by industrial agriculture.

Perhaps there is a more generous light in which to view the hunter's joy. Perhaps it is the joy of a creature succeeding at something he has discovered his nature has superbly equipped him to do, an action that is less a perversion of that nature, his "creaturely character," than a fulfillment of it. But what of the animal in the picture? Well, the animal, too, has had the chance to fulfill its wild nature, has lived, and arguably even died, in a manner consistent with its creaturely character. Hers is, by the standards of animal death, a good one. But could I really say that yet? What if it turned out I couldn't eat this meat? Her death then will have been pointless, a waste. I realized then that the drama of the hunt doesn't end until the animal arrives at the table.

So which view of me-the-hunter is the right one, the shame of the photograph or the joy of the man in it, the outside gaze or the inside one? The moralist is eager to decide this question once and for all, to join Cotton Mather in his noble quest for transcendence. The hunter — or at least the grown-up hunter, the uneasy hunter — recognizes the truth disclosed in both views, which is why his joy is tempered by shame, his appetite shadowed by disgust.

The fact that you cannot come out of hunting feeling unambiguously good about it is perhaps what should commend the practice to us. You certainly don't come out of it eager to protest your innocence. If I've learned anything about hunting and eating meat, it's that it's even messier than the moralist thinks. Having killed a pig and looked at myself in that picture and now looking forward (if that's the word) to eating that pig, I have to say there is a part of me that envies the moral clarity of the vegetarian, the blamelessness of the tofu eater. Yet part of me pities him too. Dreams of innocence are just that; they usually depend on a denial of reality that can be its own form of hubris. Ortega suggests that there is an immorality in failing to look clearly at reality, or in believing the force of human will can somehow overcome it. "The preoccupation with what should be is estimable only when the respect for what is has been exhausted."

"What is." I suppose that this as much as anything else, as much as a pig or a meal, is what I was really hunting for, and what I returned from my hunt with a slightly clearer sense of. "What is" is not an answer to anything, exactly; it doesn't tell you what to do or even what to think. Yet respect for what is does point us in a direction. That direction just happens to be the direction from which we came — that place and time, I mean, where humans looked at the animals they killed, regarded them with reverence and never ate them except with gratitude.

VI. THE PERFECT MEAL

Two weeks later, I prepared my first-person feast: a meal I had hunted, gathered and grown myself. The menu featured braised leg of boar; morels I'd gathered in the Sierras; greens and fava beans from my garden; bread baked from, O.K., store-bought flour, but leavened with wild yeasts I'd gathered from the air outside my house; and a galette made from Bing cherries I'd foraged from a neighborhood tree. My guests included Angelo and Richard and a handful of other new friends who'd taught me about hunting and gathering food. The meal was, among other things, my way of saying thanks. And not just to them.

Any dinner party is a little nervous-making, and I was more nervous about this one than most. Would this rather haphazard assortment of people gel? Would the meal be edible? I'd never cooked any of these dishes; how would they taste? And, guests aside, would the hunter be able to

enjoy eating the animal he'd shot? Trimming and larding the leg of boar that morning, I wasn't so sure.

Cooking is a wondrous process, truly, and that Saturday, spent entirely in the kitchen, I appreciated its magic in a way I never quite had before. It was a day of transformations, as one after another of the raw stuffs of nature — chunks of animal; piles of wild fungi; the leaves, pods and fruits of plants; and piles of pulverized grain — took on whole new forms. Bread dough magically rose and crisped; desiccated mushrooms came back to fleshy life; the leaves of herbs from the garden inflected whatever they touched; animal flesh browned and caramelized, turning into meat. All the various techniques humans have devised for transforming the raw into the cooked — nature into culture — do a lot more for us than make food tastier and easier to digest; they interpose a welcome distance too. It might be enough for other species that their food be good to eat, but for us, as Claude Lévi-Strauss famously put it, food has to be "good to think" as well; the alchemies of the kitchen help get us there, by giving new, more human forms and flavors to the plants and fungi and animals we bring out of nature. The long, civilizing braise is a particularly effective one, rendering the meat bloodless and fork tender. It was when I pulled the leg of boar from the oven to check if it was done, and a deep, woodsy-winey aroma filled the kitchen, that I felt my appetite begin to recover.

There comes a moment in the course of a dinner party when, with any luck, you realize everything's going to be O.K. The food and the company having sailed past the shoals of awkwardness and disaster, the host can allow himself at last to slip into the warm currents of the evening and actually begin to enjoy himself. For me that moment came just around the time that the platter of wild pig made its second circuit of the table and found many eager takers. The meat was delicious, with a nutty sweetness that tasted nothing like store-bought pork; the sauce I'd reduced from the braising liquid was almost joltingly rich and earthy, powerfully reminiscent of the forest. I was enjoying myself now, and that's when I realized that this was, at least for me, the perfect meal, though it took me a while to figure out exactly what that meant.

Was the perfect meal the one you made all by yourself? Not necessarily; it had taken many hands to bring this one to the table. The fact that nearly all those hands were at the table was the more rare and important thing, that and the fact that every story about the food on the table could be told in the first person. I prized too the almost perfect transparency of this meal, the brevity and simplicity of the chain that linked it to the natural world. Scarcely an ingredient in it had ever worn a label or bar code or price tag, and yet I knew almost everything there was to know about its provenance and price. I knew and could picture the very oaks that had nourished the pig that was nourishing us. I knew the true cost of this food, the precise sacrifice of time and energy and life it had entailed.

So perhaps that's what the perfect meal is: one that's been fully paid for, that leaves no debts outstanding. This is almost impossible ever to do, which is why, real as it was, there was nothing very realistic about this meal. Yet as a sometimes thing, as a kind of ritual, a meal that is eaten in full consciousness of what it took to make is worth preparing every now and again, if only as a

way to remind us of the true cost of our food, and that, no matter what we eat, we eat by the grace not of industry but of nature.

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