

HUNTING AND THE ANIMAL

I have grown up in a community of wild-lovers my whole life. I had blood, gorgeously, on my hands and a wide sky above me before I could ever understand what these things would mean to me. In every way that I can remember, it seems like I was born with the feelings that wildness inspired. So as I've aged, I've chased it. My dream is always to drench in it; to maximize the larger-than-self sense of honorary blending into the essential forces of unstoppable, complicated life. Hunting. It is humble and grandiose at the same time, and it is natural.

When I was a teenager, I chased this to Tanzania where I worked as an apprentice in man-abandoned landscapes that demanded huge acceptance, to the extent that trackers and guides and a white boy alike would lose themselves, happily, in the seas of wild grass and curling forests. The only control we even pretended to want was over our own survival—a truck, our supplies, a little tent camp at the end of a long, handmade road. That was vulnerable, by the standards of man, and it felt wonderful.

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JACK EVANS

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Photos Courtesy of Author

EMBRACE

We who hunt, in any self-reliant capacity, know this different sensation. And it's true that much of this ritual lifeway depends on the killing, taking of something sacred—animal soul. Whether an animal is taken or not, the intention to bare ourselves to the possibility and explore something as timeless as death genuinely fascinates us. And the lessons learned along the way, following that voluntary path, invigorate us slowly with what can only be love. We get a love for all the beauty of nature that begets animals like us, and as humans and hunters, we take our right to embrace the most complete flows of it. We stay uncomfortably outside, exposed, enjoying all the elements and meditating on sameness—seeking to relate to animals by studying them to a moment of confrontation. Sometimes we are friends, sometimes we become predators. And for lack of a better language, we could call all the life we've witnessed and breathed in the result of magic—or God.

Or, one by one, we could all tell our true stories as a way to keep knowing and sharing what we've seen. But we haven't been, because it is hard to explain and share these concentrated days of life.

Hunting is but one way to seek to know the world, but its intensity and biggest lessons come from an apparent paradox: we are coming to love and understand animals by killing them. At first thought, this

The Boone and Crockett Club prides itself on being thought leaders and we have an intelligent and mature readership that should be able to relate to what is, at its core, one man's honest and open coming-to-terms with being a hunter.

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As a lifelong hunter, Jack's values have always been profoundly shaped by experiences in the natural world. His reverence for animals has been cultivated personally in mountains from Tennessee to Alaska to Montana. Jack's background in conservation lies in five years of part-time work in the Tanzanian and Zambian bush. Training as an apprentice professional hunter has immersed him in the real issues of public land management in wildly diverse natural and political environments. As well, he has combined his passions for the outdoors with those for literature, and has been writing hunting and travel articles from the age of 12. As the Director of Publications for Bear Trust International, he works to encourage understandings of human-bear encounters through literary and photographic inspirations. Currently, he lives in Edinburgh and is pursuing his second masters degree in anthropology remotely through the University of Cape Town. His research focuses on how human-animal relationships are navigated through hunting as an immersive multispecies experience in which lives are, naturally, at stake.

cannot be called acceptable. But when I was hunting as a child, at the age of 9, there was no adequate thought to it. I remember killing a javelina on the descending, crumbled banks of a Texas canyon. I remember the beauty of its group rustling around on the cliff ledges, and the out-of-time stillness of the moment of meeting as I lay in the dirt with a rifle resting on my father's pack. I remember the hugeness, the scope, of the dying old beast that I approached after boring a hole in its heart. I will always remember appreciation beyond words. And I've since then sought to cultivate it. More hunting.

It would take a few years for me to start to really think about it. The obvious question collected slowly as I got older. What is right about killing? It's something that (almost) every part of our culture tells us is wrong. Most of the voices around my life were, are, appalled. By the time I was 18, sitting on the back of a Land Cruiser or hauling through hot miombo forests on foot, helping safari clients to confrontations of their own, I had enough outer perspective and intellectual concern for all this to really trouble me. It did for years, and I turned it over in my mind in the near-endless hours on the seat of that rumbling truck that we made our living on. In my other societies I blundered and stymied myself in conversations about the hunting urge. I tried and failed to explain myself. But I kept doing it—returning to Africa and other wildernesses, unsettled, undecided, but unable to close my heart to that gain of appreciation that I felt with every steep immersion into the death-present animal reality.

By the time I was 22, I was realizing this: when I took myself to the woods, opened my senses to the flourishing morass of an ecosystem in the same way that my deer, my sable, my bear would, and approached its own lived world in immersion until I knew it, found it, and confronted it—killed it—I would not feel wrong. I would feel a wellspring of strange and possibly ancient emotions. Growth, exhilaration, awe, mystique—consummated relatedness to another kind of spirit than I. I would feel humbled and strengthened at once, but most intensely I would feel learned and connected by that process of turning all attention outside of the self which the hunt always entails. Surely, I would have thoughts of sadness too. What if this dead buffalo had friends? What if he was deeply loved by another that will miss him to the end of her knowing days? Most of all, where has he gone? Is death to be feared as I sometimes did as a child? And what if he is gone to an abyss—not just changed out of this body in spirit form, but destroyed?

I was sad like I might be for a human companion lost; I was projecting. And then this sadness, coming amidst all the other wild, undeniable emotions would soon pass. I would go hunting again, more in love with the world than ever before. I began to wonder if there was something inherently wrong with me.

Feeling expansive, and feeling sadness evaporate after an act of bloodletting seemed from any philosophical perspective like a dangerous kind of insanity. In my work, I began sharing my troubles with fellow guides and clients. Each had their own explanations for hunting. Many delivered the familiar tirades of hunting as a form of wildlife management—a fundraising tool, a culling operation. Indeed, what kept me comfortable with my job, even as the troubles spun in my head, was the inarguable benefit our industry brought to the landscape. We converted foreign dollars into anti-poaching projects.

We managed colossal acreages of wild land with a professional and wholehearted concern for the ecosystem. Our footprint amounted to a handful of mature, male animals killed each year (with the meat returning to a grateful community) plus fuel for the Land Cruiser and the space for our tents. But safari hunting is at best a strange, modern economic institution adapted around keeping wilderness conserved in an age of normalized overconsumption. I still wasn't getting personal answers to my questions. And I was now assisting in more killing than I could even process.

After five seasons of training for a job as a guide, I left the industry entirely. With thanks to my colleagues that I had shared the dirt, the sun, the danger and the long days with, and to those clients that did hunt humbly and helped to educate me, I realized that I had to change the course of my journey in the wildernesses. I kept hunting, but less often, and only ever alone.

It was a few months later, while alone for four days in Montana's Bridger Range, when I collected my reflections. The change of course in my life had been tumultuous, and the shock of reaching an unclosed end to my questions was what had turned me to the hills with rifle and pack. Black bear season was open, but I was mostly just out there to think. I thought about grizzlies killing their rivals' cubs. I thought about leopards dragging down impala. I thought about wolves killing their own. And I thought about the lioness I had met in my last season of work in Zambia. We were rumbling lazily along a bush road that led to a great river, and when we exited the forests that faced it there was wide, dry pan that spread before us. At the back lay seven lions. Six were young, one was a mother. She presided with a bloody jaw over a flensed and spilled buffalo carcass. She sat tall, and left her mouth gaping, breathing heavily, as I had over a bear when I was 21, and the javelina when I was 9. She was breathing in and out an occurrence of exchange that could split open the world; one that shows an inside, an opposite, to existence. And in her million-year-old and time-ignorant mind, I could almost imagine what she was seeing. Life by death and presence invigorated by the fulfillment of a primordial purpose. It was generative. And the pride on her face was extra-intense, even disturbing. But she was realizing her life and the buffalo's as they were meant to be, and I thought: nobody should stop her.

I walked out of the Bridgers knowing that there was no absolute right or wrong to such moments. While our species' striving for moral order is entirely just, valuable and important, animal life cannot be judged the same way we judge our own. When hunting, for us, is becoming animal, it occurs in a realm where death has a different consequence. Feelings of pain and loss are surely experienced by most other species, but fear is brief and from what I have seen out in the wild, I no longer believe that death is an end. It is a transfer, or a change in material being, and it serves a purpose of connection. If it didn't, it wouldn't be a part of life.

While I can't claim to understand any meaning of life, I do believe in exploring all parts of it that occur before us. Hunting is a search outside of our preconceptions. When it's done fairly, and the hunter is mentally and physically exposed to as much of the world as the hunted, it can broaden the knowledge of existence. I am beginning to understand why we do it. We must continue to explore it.



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In my lifetime around campfires, I have heard abstracted, functional arguments that justify why we hunt. Most painfully, I've heard hunters attack their critics' "emotional arguments" against the practice. Yet life itself is an emotional experience, and hunting is the keenest, most exposed dive into some of the most powerful forces we will ever know—love, growth and death. There is huge societal pressure on all of us to abandon this way of life and "modernize," or detach from our exploration of nature and ourselves. I accept that pressure, apply it to my own decisions, and yet in my heart I still believe in some kind of animal right to equal myself to other species and attach to their plane of existence in which lives are, naturally, at stake. Hunting is difficult to explain, because people will only truly believe in what they have experienced. That is why I'm telling this story.

It is often a struggle to bring an emotional awareness into this pursuit. It's harder still to discuss it. For me, writing and speaking is the way. If not for a world of criticism angled against hunters, I would have never developed my sensitivity to what occurs in the mountains, in the woods, and inside of me. And for every few frustrating conversations I've had with hunters who defend, rather than explore their way of relating to animals, I have found great mentors and friends who do consider the felt importance of the act of killing and this

paradoxical-but-true embrace of nature. It is our duty to ourselves to deepen this introspection, as a community and along with our fellow humans, of any opinion. When we are justifying, or arguing defensively about hunting, it could only mean that there is some part of the way we enact it that is wrong. We owe it to animals we love to find and correct that, and to only take up the kind of chase that is fair, felt, humble and deeply honorary.

I still believe that we have a right, as animals ourselves, to immerse in the wilderness in the way that other species live—killing, eating, communicating and becoming together. The constant lesson growing in the consciousness of any true hunter as he or she evolves is that we are not so different from other species, and this is what expands us as individuals. It is why we should continue this curious, ancient practice insofar as we are learning from it. Hunting is not about destruction. It is about generation. An animal killed in a process of effortful relating is not a sacred thing taken, but rather a sacred moment created—the deepening of a relationship with other beings. From animals, we can learn and adopt perspectives on existence that do not rest on human assumptions and dogma, but rather explore the gorgeous reality of life and the unapologetic exchanges within it that we are not meant to fear, but bravely and faithfully embrace. ■



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