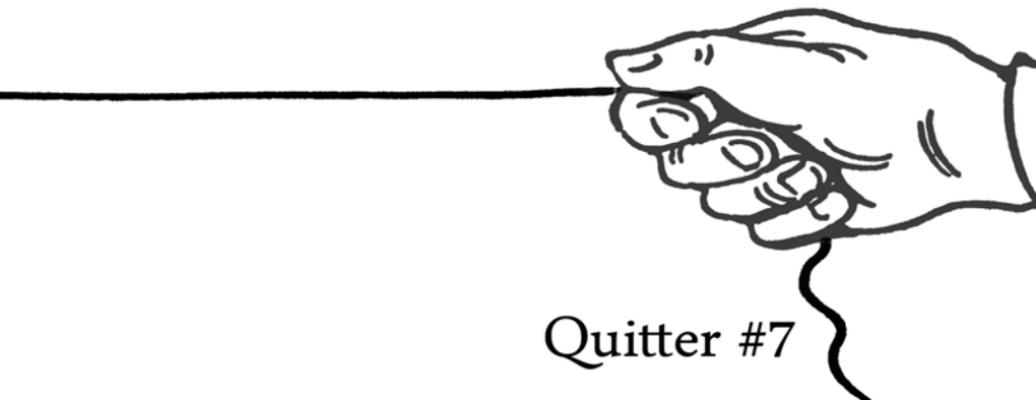


I wish I could say that
it was surreal the first time
I butchered an animal.



Quitter #7

It was not; it was rote, mechanical, genetic, practical. A rabbit wedged in the crotch of a tree branch, my five fingers prehensile around a knife, pulling the innards out slowly, rather unsure yet determined. I made no prehistoric grunts, just internal nods at the recognition of biology, that we beings are surely all built the same way, one long branching tube from mouth to asshole providing the physical and chemical mechanics of life; the chicken the same as the ox only smaller, the ape the same as the roach but larger.

It was early Winter. I was panting from running and following the screaming beagles as they chased on the dispersing scent of the rabbit. The dogs howled as they ran on and on, continuously circling away from me then toward me, a sloppy swing of quick cuts and almost undetectable

stops, their cold galloping feet tracing lines in the snow throughout the low forest. I fired once at the rabbit as it crossed to my side, bird-shot screeching from the gun barrel and through some brambles. The ear ringing mark of a single shotgun shell echoed among the striped maples and red oaks, long cleared of leaves. I ejected the shell from the gun and took in the sweet metallic whisper of it. I was ten years old, sniffing from the cold air cracking my mouth and nostrils, looking quietly at a lump of brownish gray fur that no longer moved. My step-father stood over me pointing and pushing instructions on me.

The fur of the rabbit came off quickly, small fibers of connective tissue making a wet noise not unlike the crinkling cellophane of a return envelope. I cut small rings around each foot, first through the fur and then through the joints joining the bones, snapping each paw off and letting them dangle like grapes on a vine. The final cut severed the head from the body. All but the meat was left in a pile on the ground, the heat of the guts melting a small riddle of ridges in the snow allowing the heap to sink at different speeds to the frozen earth below. The guts and tiny head—with its dark, half closed eyes—looked like a mask resting on pink and brown snakes, unmoving as the curtain dropped on a macabre play performed for the crows.

I didn't say any prayers at the butchering. I didn't offer any thanks to the rabbit. I didn't think I needed to, really. It was just a rabbit, simply a rabbit, only a rabbit, as I was told by my stepfather that it was just and simply and only a rabbit. I would come to realize, far in the future and away from this gray forest, that he was always incapable of sympathy or thinking beyond his own skull.

He was a crowing man, given to expanding himself into where he never was, claiming credit for things he barely

understood. He was also a cruel man, a barbarian in a yawning sense of the word, ready to raise his voice and hands against anyone smaller or weaker than himself. This is the same man who kicked my brother in the stomach for forgetting to flush the toilet; the same man who threw me up the set of concrete steps outside our home for raking the leaves incorrectly; the same man who left bruises the size of oranges just below my mother's elbows from where he would grab her and force her to listen to every. last. word.

At dinner, my mother would ruin the rabbit. She would bake it in cheap, overly sweet tomato sauce. There was always too much onion. The result was an acidic, chewy meat served without additions – no potatoes, no bread and certainly no rice. There would be periodic murmured exclamations around the table as someone would bite into a pellet from the killing shell.

The only talking came from the tiny speaker of the thirteen inch television perched on the kitchen counter. The television was always on at dinner, providing context and detail of a world outside the door of our double wide. It was on that television that I followed the Reagan presidency, learned of school closings due to snow and heard that Stevie Ray Vaughan had died in a helicopter accident.

The silence around the table was built by my stepfather. If he wasn't talking then there is no way you were. And that was the end of it. There was never any discussion about what was learned in school or how work went or what we might do over the weekend. There was nothing to indicate an existence as a family beyond all of us sitting around a table wishing we never brought this rabbit home.

NOVEMBER

I grew up knowing that come November there would be a deer hanging somewhere in the front yard, probably by the antlers or the neck and probably from the branch of a tree. Or maybe hanging out of the bed of the pickup truck. Or from a rafter in the dirt floor garage.

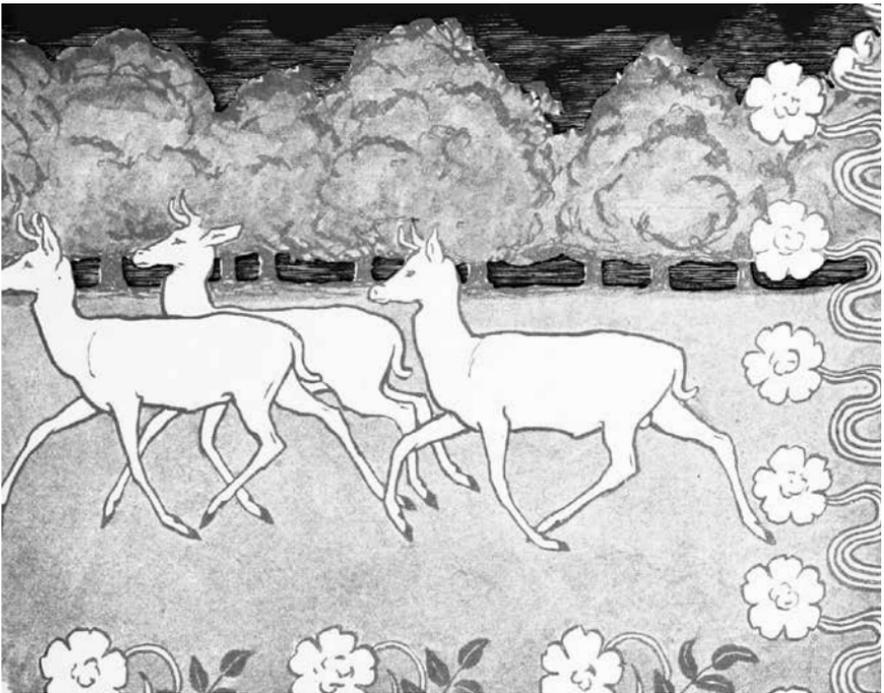
I knew that the stories of how that “*big buck*” came to be dead would be floating around the house until they could be recited, with all the groan inducing embellishments, by people in the house who could say nothing in return. This was my stepfather’s personal mythology, another way to blanket us with his control. I could probably dig deep enough to remember one or two of those stories, but who gives a shit really?

My maternal grandfather also told stories, the ones that I have not forgotten on purpose, the ones about how the deer tricked him or showed him up or maybe never even existed. The stories always began with my grandfather sitting on a stump, watching his breath leave his face and disperse. There would be a cracking sound, a stick snapping close by. He would stop breathing, close his eyes, crank all possible processing power to his ears. He would triangulate, check his heartbeat and turn his head only to see nothing but the cold of a Fall morning staring back at him. He would smile at us, the story clearly ending there. He could provide lessons without lecturing, saying “*you will be fooled, but don’t take it personally*”.

He never gave in to my stepfather’s superficial glory of shooting something in the face; when a deer was in the

freezer before December my grandfather seemed satisfied with the knowledge that, with the deer's help, he and his family would have food for the winter. He didn't amuse in the winners and losers of what most sane people would see as a wholly lopsided conflict heavily subsidized by civilization and its tools—a heavily armed human against an unprepared, unwilling and unaware opponent.

My grandfather's task was brutal regardless, but maybe less so as there were no mounted heads on the walls of his home like there were in our home. The need for those stuffed and preserved reminders is something that I couldn't explain back then, but know now is an indication of small mindedness, a dedication to the outward projection of dominance when you know that you are inescapably weak inside. You are a collector with no sense of how to interact with the



dead or the living, both phases of life simply reminders of inadequacy, weak interpersonal skills and low self-esteem. If you have a deer head or a stuffed fish on your wall, go look at it and ask yourself what reminder it serves that could not otherwise be captured by a photograph or poem. Is it there to show your friends and family what a fucking hero you are?

When I was twenty, I volunteered twice to travel with a New York DEC deer ager on their rounds. For fourteen hours we visited deer processing places as well as any house that had a deer hanging in the front yard. My job was to write while the ager examined teeth and called out the ages of each dead deer.

I think it was during this time that I became permanently desensitized to the sights and smells of dead non-human animals. At each processor were dozens of barrels and drums and tarps full of various parts; piles of legs next to buckets of guts and tails; lines of deer carcasses waiting to be disassembled by hacksaws, band saws and reciprocating saws, mostly frozen in rigor mortis or by the depth of cold in the evening air. Steam escaped from some of the recent arrivals, a sign that they were less than an hour dead.

There can be nothing more brutal or common or necessary than taking a life in order to eat and sustain a body. Non-human animals do it without question, without any perceptible remorse or hesitation. What makes our actions so much different?

We pull carrots from the soil, ending their run with gravity, ending their gathering of sugar and all the processes that made them a living thing. They may not scream or run or struggle much, but a carrot is a living thing nonetheless and we must kill it in order to eat it.

Eating a carrot is nothing like eating an animal, which is why many choose not to eat the latter at all. I respect that

choice; it was a choice that I had once made as well. As with eating it, killing a carrot is nothing like killing an animal. Animals articulate their disappointment in our choice to kill them in blood gurgles, screams and the twitches of ending nerve impulses. We destroy them in order that we can live; we destroy them for other reasons as well, reasons that have no bearing on survival. If you do not believe that then you deny that your meal had any previous life beyond its packaging. I apologize, but I can't let you do that.

JULY

My father taught me how to swim by lobbing me into the middle of a pool. He would throw me; I would splash in, quickly return to the surface and begin to flail around. Between spitting and gasping I would reach for the side of the pool, basically learning to swim by lunging in the direction of the closest solid object. When I reached an edge, my father would lift me out of the water by the arms, my smooth torso brushing against the hair of his shirtless chest. I would get a whiff of his breath—a punch of pilsner, a pinch of bourbon—just before he threw me back in. Splash in, return to the surface, and seek stability; life lessons roiling and foaming in 22,000 gallons of chlorine and algacide.

This process continued, on and on as other children played in the water and their mothers lay on the deck on their bellies, their bikini tops untied, canned beers sweating beside their browning shoulders. No matter which side of the pool I would reach, my father would be there to pluck me from the water and toss me back out to the middle. Sometimes he would pause to jump in the pool himself, get

his cut-off jean shorts soaked and later ask the sun to dry them as he went back to educating his child.

Of course nothing bad was going to happen to me. I was bounded by giggling adults and larger children, all well aware of the lesson I was receiving. This is the way my father learned. (*I was told that my paternal grandfather learned by falling into an open well.*) This method was apparently the only proper way for a boy my age to “understand” the nature of swimming and its physics, a way for me to conquer the water for myself and take it as dominion. I can imagine my grandfather speaking of dominion as he repeatedly tossed my father into a pond from the edges of a boat dock. Dominion then may have been in a different context, a context of control over the minds and actions of your child, rather than that of a global lesson about viscosity and drag.

I imagine that the fear my father had once clenched in his stomach had grown old and rusty if not nostalgic, a flowered, withered and decomposed bit of experience with no current equivalent in his life. His father was dead. He no longer sought out the weaknesses in their relationship or thought that his swimming education was anything more than playful fun. It was most likely an abusive lesson just as mine was, if only temporary instead of some other long-term sorts of abuses. I guess it would be much as the childhood pain of slamming your hand in a car door tends to fully dissipate by the age of twenty.

A few years after my lessons, it was time for my brother to learn. By this time I was able to participate in the instruction, but the most I could do was laugh at how foolish he looked, how his small, bright hands slapped the water all around him, the splashes jostling various inflated pool toys around on tiny bubbly waves. Gone were my own thoughts on how much pain I felt from gulping water, how embar-

rassed I felt for crying and screaming, how much revenge I craved as my cold-blooded brain switched on. My brother was helpless just like I was, his face contorted into a weird crying smirk.

When we were kids, all my friends and I knew when my brother had to take a shit. He got that same skewered smirk on his face, crossing his legs at his feet, arms limp at his sides as if he were sleeping upright. He would stand in that position until the waves of peristalsis ceased for a bit and he could comfortably throw the baseball or go hiking or whatever it was we were doing at the time. My brother always denied the reasons for the time-outs and glossy eyes. But we could all take one look and know that gravity was working on his colon, the waste in his system burrowing to freedom.

When he was nineteen, my brother jumped from the roof of a four story building, breaking most of the breakable parts of his body. His bones shattered into multiple pieces, nerve endings and memories erased forever. He had shit himself, but he was salvageable. He found out that you cannot learn how to fly the same way you learn how to swim.

A person is not like a twig or an egg shell. We mostly have the ability to mend and accept that mending in a permanent way. Sometimes the need for mending is mental and hidden from the people who fix these things. In those cases we jump. In those cases we need to jump, to hide ourselves in the quickly approaching pavement, become a part of its blackness, its impervious memory.