

To Kill the Wild

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Now he was there waiting with the others, and he had wanted to be for as long as he could remember; he had always imagined what it would be like there with them. Everything was the way he had imagined it would be, but there had been no killing yet. He had kept after his father to take him and finally his father had begun to listen, finally took him seriously, finally took him along, this time, this morning. It had been so close to his dreams of the way men should live—close to the wild, from the wild, honoring the wild. It fitted a whole for him, watching the men and the older boys coming back from a hunt, dirty and glorified, with a stiff deer on a pole, or dragging a bear, the blood all black-red by then, all of them smelling of the beast they had displaced, of sweat and gun powder, and sometimes of whiskey.

Better these heroes than the heroes in books, is what the boy thought; they were part of the wild, wilder even than the stiff creatures they brought back, covered with mystery and the wild. The distant, fleeting hides of the now calm beasts now close enough to be touched, to be cold. Only a while before the wild was with its own and now his father and the others had chipped off some of it and brought it back to see, to make a feast: more than food, less than a tribute.

Now a crumbling dream, a reality come close, the hunt seemed to honor the wild, to come to it and know it, even love it. But only as memories of their lives, the beasts chosen and brought back were too stiff, too dead to more than remind, were not close enough to the wild the way it was. The boy had only a notion, though, of the death that was between the way it was and what it had become. And the rank, sweet venison and the bear-meat stew, and all the high talk with it, the telling and re-telling about who shot and how it happened, about who missed and why, about the wild in fable, about the way it had been, these tastes and tributes offered one reality and hid another. And now the boy was there in the wild and would have a choice.

Behind them the pitch-smell from the paper-pines was the only reminder of those orderly groves, the houses, the short dock into the wide slough where the swamp began. The boy had wanted to come, was glad to be there, but he was tight all over, colder than it was cold, more nervous than excited, and his father's gun was heavy and strange. The true-forest was all new to him; the paper-pines were the children's forest; here the trees were taller, the animals everywhere wild, the thickets scratched, the trees were down across the ground

rotting, but none cut down. The only harvest here was from old age or familiar rots.

His father took the rifle from him; the dogs had changed their call; they had turned, were turning something, were coming closer. Knowing the voice of each dog and what it was saying, the men smiled and nodded, crouched, and waited—the boy with them, behind them. They waited, listening to the dogs' rapture. The men were tense but casual, proving to each other that they were men still, even in the face of the hunt, even in the face of what was happening. The boy was hot now, especially his face; his imagination was betraying him, was making him ashamed. The dogs were coming on fast, their calls filled all the silence that had seemed so dreadful before, filled the open fear with an equally awful suspense. Calling high, their passion complete, the dogs came on—and something had to be running before them—and the sound made the boy feel as though his skin were going to fall from his bones, and his bones collapse right there. He would have done anything to make the calling stop.

His eyes hurt from watching the sounds come closer, the dogs seemed inside his head, wanting to split it, wanting to spill his sudden, hot, unendurable, undefinable lust; to open his skull and mix his brains with the sound, the mystery, the tall holy trees, the unholy coming on, the generations of rot, the wild itself. They heard it crashing down the brush before they saw it; his father had won the toss for the first shot. Then it was clear before them, coming on faster than his eye could follow it, leaping and turning when it saw them there waiting for it, a great stag with antlers like a rack of church candles.

His father stood up, aimed, and fired; the rifle-crack split all the other sounds, ended the silence on the edge, killed the stag; it fell sprawling, its legs awkward dying, its neck broken and back. And the dogs were right behind, skidding up and over the carcass, nipping at its thighs and ears, beyond reason with the end of the hunt, stopped calling to snarl and whine and yap. The men ran up to the carcass, kicked the dogs out of the way, and one—not his father—slit its throat and let the blood empty from its veins with the last pumping of its dying heart. His father cupped his hands in the fountain of blood, sipped some and smacked his lips, and grinning offered some to the boy. The boy waited. Another hunter slit open the stag, steaming in the cold, and let the entrails fall and mix with the earth, cut out the liver, and threw it to the dogs.

The boy waited; he could not move. He had seen his father and the men kick the dogs away and he waited to see if anyone or anything would come and kick the men away. They seemed worse than the dogs because they did not have to wait for a master to give them their share or tell them what to do or where to go; and there was nothing that could make them wait, make them stop, make them choose one way over any other. The dogs rolled and fought over the liver, the men laughed and relaxed, the blood stopped pumping, someone was cutting a pole to carry it back—and that was all there was to it, nothing else happened.

His father kept calling him over to see the carcass, firmly calling now. The boy vomited where he stood, spoiling himself and falling to his knees with retching, with loathing. Stag, place, men, dogs—all had been diminished with

what had happened. There would be no balancing it out either, no appeal, nothing. And it was not for food, he knew that, because they had a store and they had all the money they needed to eat—even enough to buy guns and rifles. They hunted to kill, to kill the wild. By killing it, they exchanged places with it for a while. But it was less and they were less and the boy saw the sum was less, that the world was always less than it had been. But hunting was what the men and the boys did; it was what everyone did—and there was no stopping it and no escaping either.

The men had laughed, his father not so easily as the others. He cleaned himself up, thinking that what he had wanted to do was cry, but that he had vomited instead. The men were kind, would be kind this once. They told him that some of the best hunters did the same thing on their first time out, that it sometimes happens that boys raised by women do bring some of the woman along with them on their first hunt. His father told him that it would not happen again, meaning that it had better not happen again, but the boy knew it would—and he might cry too—if he hunted again; and when that happened he would not be permitted to go again, not with them truly again in anything they did, that he would be strange and incomplete to them and to himself: more than a boy—a boy tested and found faulty, and less than a man—a boy who had tried to become a man but failed.

He avoided the next hunt, any hunt; he took up trapping in the swamp, keeping busy with school and trapping, too busy to hunt. There was enough excitement in the swamp for anyone, man or boy; it was penance for his flaw, the danger of the swamp, the cold early trip each morning to run his traps. He took his shot gun for effect, an old gun his father had given him to bring him around, to get him wanting to hunt. But the boy would not hunt, not even ducks and geese, not even rabbits and squirrels. He took his gun so that some might think he was hunting too. He had some time before they would decide about him.

He read a lot and started getting good grades, never missed a day of school; his father was pleased, but not proud, and his mother seemed too proud, too loving suddenly. After awhile his father stopped saying that the boy had gotten off on the wrong foot, that he was a little too young for his first hunt, that it was natural for men to kill things, that if they did not kill, the farmers would be ruined and the game starve because there would be too many for the forage, that the wild things had to be hunted for their own good. His father stopped making excuses, stopped talking about hunting altogether, stopped asking him to go along when he went hunting. Hunting was what everyone did, but the boy trapped—and the muskrats were always dead by the time he took them out of the traps.

The men and the older boys worked at the mill and spent all the rest of their time hunting, taking the younger boys along to learn, talking about old hunts, planning new ones. Hunting was what they did, what everyone did, what everyone talked about—even the women talked about how well their sons shot, how well their husbands stalked. Every male with one, and that was everyone, carried a rifle or a shot gun with them whenever they went outside, even for a

few minutes. They shot at anything that moved, small game, birds to test their aim, mud hens indifferently, frogs leaping, mice out of their holes on the run, hawks coming in curiously for more than they had bargained, fish on the surface of the slough after bugs, the bugs themselves, even bitter blue dragon flies (which miraculously flew right through the haze of shot unmolested). But when they went hunting they meant to kill a deer or a bear, sometimes a boar—as ugly as half a dozen domesticated swine, or ducks and geese from punts decked out as blinds and blinds timbered and chalked, but still oozing. All winter, spring and fall, they hunted, and they dreaded the summer, because then there was no hunting, nothing moved in the heat; it was too hot to stalk and too hot to wait; they hated the summers; there was no hunting then, and hunting was all there was.

The boy stayed away from the true forest and the paper-pines, stayed away from the scene of his disgrace, turned to the swamp, to knowing the swamp for a kind of self-respect—grudgingly it was said that he knew the swamp better than most men. The other children went into it only as far as the end of the nearest cypress grove, where they could climb the last tall one and still see the dock on the far side of the slough, the houses, and the neat blue haze of the paper-pines, smooth and even across the top like a giant's lawn.

He did not hunt there, but he trapped muskrats all winter and in the summer fished for catfish and gar, and all year he stayed out in the swamp away from people and hunting, watching the wild, watching the places and faces of it change, coming to know when the changes were going to occur, when a canal would soon become a mudhole and why, when a tree was going to lose its grip on a dissolving bank and fall across to another bank to catch slow, drowned up-rooted plants and form a natural dam—and that the muskrats would go there and claim it, come from miles around and busy themselves improving on nature, waiting for the tree to fall. He waited with them; he knew these things well and that was something.

The swamp began east of the village and did not end until it mixed with the sea, and it went farther north and south than anyone had ever cared to follow it. The children were told that if they ever got lost in the swamp, they should keep heading away from the falling sun, toward the sea and the safe path of the beach (fishermen, the Coast Guard patrols). But even there where it ended for sure in the sea, the swamp was not easy, not friendly; there were many places where it mingled with the sea in stagnant tidewaters, where it was too wet to walk but not deep enough to float a punt.

The swamp was as wild a place as there was, as wild as anyone cared for anyplace to be. It was easier to get lost there than in the true forest beyond the paper-pines, and there were as many dangers—more perhaps: floating islands that seemed secure but would dissolve with the weight of a person, with the weight of a child, leaving the careless trespasser over his head in shifting mud—worse than quick-sand. Some wild pigs lived on the dry bars and some mossy old bears hid in the thickets of islands molding. The swamp was always changing, digging its own way back through its own muck, claiming the forests, retreating into sinks, swallowing new ground whole, to the point of flooding the paper-

pinus until the mill had had to build high banks for protection, but in a year the banks were grown over and in a few years the rotting generations of green would dent the banks and in a few years those dents would weaken what was left after mice tunneling and snakes burrowing, chasing the mice.

The swamp was always changing, growing here, dying there, changing. A wild place, untouched and untouchable, a refuge and a prison where straight canals led nowhere and sloughs strange and fecund lived alone and liked it, where snakes—harmless water snakes as big as the trunks of the paper-pines and cotton-mouths just as big and deadly—were always agitated, falling from arcane nests into a boat, spitting, sipping the blind air with their fine, angry tongues, too lively, wrapping around the tip of a paddle or crawling up the shank of a pole resting too long. And muskrats sat on the half-submerged banks and gnashed their teeth at passersby.

And again the boy was wrapped in its mystery, coasting over the sloughs, across the thin grass—cold, in pockets the mud was crystalized in thin ice. He had to hurry and run his traps before the school bus came. Because he did not hunt, his father and mother warned him each morning to watch for the hunters in the swamp; it was the duck and goose season and there would be tourists in the swamp, getting lost, shooting at anything that moved. He was careful to keep his head down and to listen for the echoing shotgun blasts, the shouts, the hunters returning with their limits but still wanting to kill, shooting at sparrows and shadows, shooting at anything, the sun behind the clouds. He had seen them lumbering out of their boats purified with killing, with their red hats and red faces, holding their birds by the necks like bloody scalps.

But the tourists came mainly on weekends, down from Raleigh and Durham and over from Elizabeth City. Some of the men from the village went out before they went to work at the mill, especially if they worked a late shift. They were not so dangerous, but he watched for them anyway. He poled his punt out into the greying morning getting warm doing it; it was cold and the sky was pink around the edges like it might snow.

There was only enough light to see dim outlines in shadow, enough light for the boy to see his trap stakes, by the time he would get to them. He went well past the big cypress groves, out into a vast flat area of tall grass pock-marked with a thousand unmarked lakes tied together with thin bands of water, shifting canals, and billowing sloughs. He could hear muskrats and otters slapping the mud banks, splashing warnings and insults, as he moved between them, them evading him easily; he could not see them. The swamp-life was already awake all around, had long been tense with anticipation of the full morning, with the completion of the grey beginning. The boy sensed this pressure, the tension of the impending morning, poled faster, finally saw his warm breath steaming a path in front of the smooth, hidden water. He was hungry and sleepy. He would soon be eating egg sandwiches and drinking hot chocolate in the school bus, way in the back, snug in the corner, surrounded by his classmates, their sour smells and quick laughter.

He stopped to inspect the new sun cheerfully. Light enough now he

drew in each trap, inspected it, reset it if it had been sprung, placed it carefully in a likely place—a bank with black-marble droppings, roots chewed bare, a path etched on the shallow bottom, where the muskrats traveling often had worn it clear. The water was cold. In one trap he found a paw; the muskrat had been caught but had freed itself by chewing off its own paw. He relocated the trap so that the next time it was tripped, its weight would drown its catch, drown it before it could chew its way out. Nothing this morning but the paw with its long nails and its black blood stump. He wrapped it in a handkerchief and put it in his pocket—to frighten the girls at school.

He had to keep moving or he would miss the school bus, and he had a perfect record of no absences. Small notice, the diploma saying so with his excellent report card, but it was something definite. Some of the children thought he was a teacher's pet, but the diploma and the good grades were better than nothing. He returned the way he had come, poling hard, deciding to take a short cut across a shallow grass-racked bar where he would have to pole hard to get across. He needed the familiar challenge, and he would save five minutes. He was slow this morning; the cold made him clumsy.

He saw the grey form twice before realizing what it was, or even that it was anything unusual. At a distance it seemed only an unlikely blending of grass and brush, a blending that resembled a large goose, large enough to be an old gander. But the boy dismissed it as impossible; they are never alone, unless wounded or crippled—and then they hide. Some crippled geese had been known to evade men and dogs determined to have them by diving to the bottom of a deep hole and holding on with their bills to roots and water-grass, until they drowned; they left the men and dogs waiting for nothing. The wild things spoke, the boy knew, with their bodies, with man-foreign decisions, with improbable acts.

Then it moved its neck, an awkward jerk, as though its neck were too long, its head too heavy, like a juggler balancing a heavy ball on top of a band of straw. But the boy thought it was the wind building, gusting, or perhaps a rabbit jumping a log, searching the dampness for tender mushrooms. Finally, he saw the bird; it swam out into full view and retreated to the open water, watching the boy over its shoulder, honking, paddling, swaying around tufts of grass, and then it was lost again behind a stand of tall grass close to the water. Its honking was as suicidal as holding to the bottom and drowning.

The boy followed; he had never been so close to anything wild, when it was alive, still untouched by terror and death, still whole and still connected to the wild, the wild itself, not dominated by men, not a piece chipped from the wild, torn away, but the wild as it is to the wild. Not as he had seen it before, the buck turned graceless, ducks and geese and other birds folded up in flight, only alive as silhouettes, alive only in that instant as they dove to meet the haze of shot. And retrieved, back in the blind for inspection, their eyes were open and blind, the wild already gone, like their souls, their bodies bitten by shot and mouthed by the spit of dogs. Somewhere between their descent and their repose, something more than life lost—to be finally on strings, like common meat, like cheap sausage.

Now he would have a chance to penetrate the mystery, to touch the wild in some way while it was still wild, to know the wild, touch it, perhaps tame it. He rejected that thought; taming killed the wild as sure as shot. Perhaps he would come back to this place again, to this place of the gander, and get to know it, make it understand that he loved the wild, that he would not harm it, that he was not like the others.

The grass bent under the bow of his punt and there it was again, paddling away, its webbed feet large and yellow under the water, making eddies behind it. Death would make it much smaller than it was then, there in front of him, bouyant and fine, each pin feather living, each line and curve of its back alive—the black wing markings, the white on its head, the great glistening black eye in the black down, the cascades of grey on its sides, like a series of line squalls in an autumn storm, the down at the water-line smoothed back against its wake, and just above from waves it made beads of water, glistening and falling away free.

The boy memorized every line, every movement; he wanted the whole and each detail as part of his hope to know the wild, to capture the beast with his mind, with his mind's eye, with his soul if he could. In some part, in some combination of parts, in some vision of the whole, the wild lived and would be revealed to him if he persisted. He was drunk with its holiness, with the eucharist of his eyes and the wild, with his opportunity to know it finally, completely.

But its eyes, if he had seen them as they were, if he had been able to see them as they were, demanding only that what transpired between them fit a familiar pattern, a pattern of escape or attack, an automatic pattern of the wild, perhaps the wild itself, this demand—profound in its ignorance of the possibilities of the boy's quest. Fear so profound, that it was fearless, an incomprehension so demanding that it seemed a species of wisdom, with a simplicity that confined it well within an apprehension of the boy as predator, with a limited preview too close to instinct to see the boy's hope, or his love.

Like the wild, the gander was prepared then—and had been all its life for all the possibilities between life and death, but only these extremes, to accept without conflict a fragile joy, an exuberance in being one moment followed the next by mutilation and annihilation. Its eyes, chemically similar, were no more or less expressionless or awesome than the swamp water over which it moved, but drops come up to and past the threshold of life, not far enough, though, to see the boy's heart, not far enough to open the wild for the boy. The beginnings of life lived in the awareness of its eyes, seeing much and feeling little, seldom amazed, frightened often, curious only when prodded by the bizarre, never bemused, ready to return to the swamp water at any moment, neither gladly nor sadly.

It did not fly. The boy thought it must have a broken wing, but even with a broken wing it would have tried to fly. Starvation was not likely, either, in such abundance; not wounded either where it could be seen. But there it was, unlikely and real. That improbability shared was as close as they would come together, the flying thing that would not fly, the killing thing that would not kill.

As he had wanted it so often, there was the wild close enough to touch

—if he got only a little closer. His heart beat hotly inside his chest, rapping strange and urgent codes against his ribs. He wanted to possess this fine, wild thing, to own it as God owned it, to consume it if he could not recreate it, the wild. He would cure it, feed it, care for it, protect it; he scanned the brightening horizon for eagles and hawks. He told himself these lies, because mostly he wanted it, wanted to have what it had, wanted the great bird in some way he had never wanted anything, wanted with such longing and such passion that the wanting blocked out everything behind and beyond it, blocked out the causes and the effects of wanting, left only enough room for a wanting that neither comprehended itself, nor could be satisfied. He wanted to discover and possess its secret, the reason it was there, the reason it was alive, why it was at all; why not something else, some other beast, some other boy, some other bird? why its eyes were at the same time foreign and familiar, sighted but as blind as the sky that also effortlessly seemed to see and do and be.

Confused and weak, the gander let itself be trapped by the boy's persistence. They had to find a conclusion forged between them that would be comprehensible to both, or at least equally incomprehensible. At the end of a banked slough, too steep on either side for the weakened bird to climb out, although it tried, the boy caught up with the gander. It turned and faced the boy coming on, looming large enough to fill its horizon, to block out all the sky before it and therefore all the sky there was.

Fear took over. Its great chest heaved; its honking grew into aggressive displays of wings beating and its neck arching; it beat the water to froth with its wings. The boy stayed back, knowing that its hard beak could cut him badly, waited for a thought, for an opportunity to come closer. He made a line by tying together several of his trap lines, made a loop, and planned to edge the bird into position with his pole and slip the loop over its neck. The gander saw the pole coming and its eyes glazed in fury; its wild was challenged, existence as it knew existence was in jeopardy, a ritual was called for. With a burst of sound and struggle, beating the water, it rose upon on its wings whipping the air, its yellow webs walking on the water back and forth in place, holding its ground, its neck arched horribly, its yellow tongue pointed and fierce like a snake striking and striking and again striking. Startled, the boy fell back nearly losing his pole, almost falling into the swamp. It was close enough now for him to feel its fear, to feel the wild's anger, to think about the school bus waiting, close enough to wonder if he would get home all right. But its arched neck collapsed, its wings dropped open dully and flat into the water, and its head—the eyes already fogging, splashed into the water and sank slowly.

The boy poled over to it, carefully lifting its head out of the water; it was dead. Chipped off and left behind, this death; the wild was not there, was somewhere else again. There was nothing to do now, but lift it into the punt and head back. The chase and the stalk again, and ending in death again. He poled back slowly, fighting tears, failing—and feeling the warm saltiness burn his cold cheeks, trying to accept without the grace of comprehension.

Before he saw the landing, he heard the school bus moving off, its engines coughing in the cold. There was no reason to hurry; he felt the cold move

in behind the heat of his shame. The gander lay in the bottom of the punt, growing stiff, a trickle of blood coming from its bill and staining its chest, freezing black. He had his kill.

Perhaps the gander would have died anyway; it was not normal for it to be alone like that and so weak. The boy searched it for a wound, inspected under the down the dark skin. There was no wound or injury; the skin was not broken. Perhaps blood poisoning; sometimes they fed where old shot had been fired, perhaps near a blind that was fired from often, and he had heard that when they accidentally ate the lead shot, it eventually killed them. He slit open the bird's gullet, but found nothing, no shot, some wild rice partially digested. Perhaps it had died of old age, of old age hurried on by their encounter.

At the landing, he was greeted by some men, friends of his father, late-shift workers at the mill, late for the morning's shooting, but still curious about the boy and the big gander. They congratulated the boy, the prodigal son; now recognizable as one of their own, his father's son.

"Nice bird you got there, boy. Where'd you get him?"

"By my trap line . . ."

"Why'd you open it up like that?"

"Well, to see what it had been feeding on . . ."

"So you can hunt by the feed . . .?"

"Something like that. . . ."

"Right smart trick."

The others nodded. He was becoming his father's son.

"Say, boy, you want to come along with us . . .?"

"We got a new blind all salted down . . .?"

"And the school bus left already . . .?"

"Sure, why not."