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The best hunters are never in competition with their environments; tribal hunters are the primal posers in the brush, and tricksters the overtures in their stories. The hunter and the trickster would laud the hunted, pretend, and mock the sacred, but never minister the cold trinities, monomercies, and resurrections.

The mythic and moral heart of the hunter is wasted in competition with other hunters; the instincts of the tribal hunter are measured best when he is not with others in the woods. Together, hunters depend upon each other for their identities; alone, the hunter must trust his own survival instincts with birds and animals, and move with the natural energies of the woodland, trees, and water.

I pretended to be a tribal hunter, but my survival identities were urban. I ate squirrels and other wild game; the animals were never wasted, but my time in the cities did not depend upon the hunt. The death of an animal was remote; the separation, and then a sudden adventure, seldom a sacred chase in wild weather. I hunted ducks, pheasant, and the smaller animals, but never moose, deer, or bear.

I walked into the woods alone, found a place in the sun, and rested against an oak tree. The animals and birds sensed my presence and waited in silence for me to pass. My energies were mechanical from the cities; my breath had been over concrete, and my hands on gun oil. My rifle was cold. The oak leaves rattled on the breeze. The squirrels waited in the distance, a natural escape distance; they sensed my intentions. I had come from the cities to kill them with my rifle, to breathe concrete into their souls, to eat their bitter thighs.

I fell asleep against the tree; later, the environment seemed closer to me, as in a dream. I awakened with a new sense of sound and motion; birds were singing, and squirrels were eating and running between the trees near me. I pretended to run with them: we were the hunted and the hunters.

I raised my rifle, took aim, and fired at a large red squirrel running across an oak bough. He fell to the ground near the trunk of the tree, bounced once, and started to climb the tree again. The bullet had passed through his shoulder and shattered the bone. His right front leg and paw dangled from torn flesh. He dropped to the ground and tried to climb the tree again, and again. I understood his instinct to escape; in a dream we reached up with our right paw, shattered and blood soaked, but it was not there to hold us to the tree.

The squirrel fell down again and watched me with his dark eyes; I watched him and he watched me that autumn. Blood spread down his body. He tried to climb the tree again, and again, to escape from me, to escape from my dream, the city in me; my breath, weapons, cold hands, haunted him at the end.

He had been a wise survivor, a curious red rodent, but then he scolded and dared to come closer to a sleeping hunter. That he dared was the mortal ruin of the squirrel, not his curiosities. He knew when and how to hide from most hunters, their harsh voices were burned in the memories of his animal tribe. I was alone, and said nothing. My presence was masked by sleep; my movements were not the same as those hunters in competition, their shouts, and sudden silence, their marches over the oak leaves. I had never learned the language of the squirrels, or the stories of their brutal death at the hands of urban hunters. That red squirrel dared me to hunt him; his dare was a response to my silence, as he would respond to the songs of a tribal hunter.

The best urban hunters learned never to let a wounded animal suffer, as if the hunter were bound to a moral code of the state ministrants; the animals we wounded must be put

out of their miseries, our miseries. The Boy Scouts of America, and waltonians, members of the Izaak Walton League of America, taught me monomercies and the coup de grâce.

"Hunting disturbs moralists because it enjoins men to be joyful in killing," wrote Paul Shepard in *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game*. "Men with only hand weapons do not need to invent stern codes to insure that hunting is a challenge rather than an amusement. The hunter's confrontation of the enigmas of death and animal life inspire attitudes of honor and awe expressed in ceremonial address."

I fired one shot at his head when the squirrel tried to climb the tree again, to put him out of his miseries. The bullet tore the flesh and fur away from the top of his skull. He dropped to the ground and turned on the oak leaves. He looked at me. I watched his dark eyes; he was close to death, he wanted to live. I fired a second time at his head. The bullet tore his lower jaw away, his teeth were exposed. He watched me and then moved in the leaves toward the tree. Blood bubbled from his nostrils when he breathed. I fired twice more, the bullets shattered his forehead and burst through his left eye. He held to the base of the tree, his last paw weakened, and he watched me with one eye. His breath was slower, slower, more blood in his nostrils, in his mouth. In his last eye he wanted to live, to run free, not to dare me, to hide from me. I kneeled beside the squirrel, my face close to his blood-soaked head, my eye close to his eye, and asked him to forgive me. I begged him to forgive me before he died. I looked around at the trees. My breath was sudden, short. I remembered the moment, nothing more; my hands were strange, alone, distant, isolated in the environment.

The blood bubbled from his nose; the bubbles were smaller, smaller, and then disappeared. I moved closer to his eye once more and pleaded in tears, please forgive me. Please live once more. I begged that squirrel to live again, to come alive once more.

He blinked at me. His eye was still alive. Did that blink of his eye mean that he had forgiven me? I moaned close to him

in the leaves, please forgive me. At last, my piteous moans were silent. No birds were in the trees; the leaves were silent. The squirrel blinked once more, but he would not breathe. I moved closer to him, stretched out on the ground next to him, and ran my hand down his back. The blood was warm, my hand was warmed with his blood. I cried beside him, and watched him die, his breath was gone; his life passed through me in his last eye. I owe so much to that red squirrel who dared me to hunt him in the oaks, who died in me. I sang a death song, a song in a low voice without words until dark that autumn.

The hunter "returns to the natural state, becomes one with the animal, and is freed from the burden of the existential split," wrote Erich Fromm in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. "Of at least equal importance for the passionate hunter is an entirely different motivation, that of enjoyment in his skill. It is amazing how many modern authors neglect this element of skill in hunting, and focus their attention on the act of killing. After all, hunting requires a combination of many skills and wide knowledge beyond that of handling a weapon."

I sold my rifle and never hunted to kill animals or birds again. The violent death of a wild animal caused by my weapon was a separation from the natural world, not a reunion. I would defend squirrels and comfort them in death; that would be the natural human response. I would not shoot an animal again unless my life depended on the hunt.