

Death in the Hills

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I relax on a sandy spot by the river's edge. I feel the paleness of the afternoon August light. I swim gently in the pools. Yet my mind complicates as I wonder, how is it possible to unite life with death when we experience the former but only see evidence of the latter? We see people die of old age, cancer, AIDS, in battle, through suicide, people we love, people we don't know. How many people die each year? We have squashed bugs as kids, and still slap mosquitoes as adults. Most of us eat dead meat: fish, chicken, cow, pig. Slaughterhouses hide the hideous images. Cows strung by their hind feet, throats slit, bled to death.

Hannah Arendt concludes her 1958 treatise *The Human Condition* by saying that there's life, affirm it. A simple line of thought after many hundreds of pages of not-so-simple ideas.

In Freud's early theorizing, there was the sexual instinct, and aggression was subsumed under that. In his middle period, aggression stood alongside of sexuality as the dominant instincts in man. In his third period, sexuality was viewed as derivative of a life instinct, and aggression derivative of a death instinct. Life and Death. After more than 50 years of theorizing, it got simple for Freud, too.

I'm slowly reclaiming my shed after a winter's absence. I built it around a decade ago, a small pole structure with a hefty workbench and many shelves. Early this summer, as I was picking up a gas can on the perimeter of the shed, I noticed yellow jackets flying around me. Then I was stung on my right hand. I got out fast. I saw a swarm around the spot where I had been. I had apparently stepped on the entrance to a ground nest underneath the oak round on which I stored the gas can. I don't do so good with stings. This one swelled up my hand, wrist, and arm about half again the size of the original. The swelling eased a bit by the fourth day, which saw me back at the shed before sunrise fortified with a hornet-killing spray. With my foot I knocked over the oak round, took three steps back, and sprayed their nest fast and long. Yellow jackets kept moving and I kept spraying. I went

through a lot of poison; my arm must have still been aching from that sting. Later my 11-year daughter Zoe and I inspected the nest. It was about a foot deep, filled with larvae and dead yellow jackets. A few days later I used fire tongs to pick up a can that was filled with another nest, and I dunked it quick into a bucket of water and let it rest like that for a day. Dead wasps floated to the surface. I could now be in the shed without immediate danger of being stung.

Next up was to do something about the mess that the rats have been making. So yesterday afternoon I set a rat trap on the workbench in my shed. Set it with a peanut. This morning there was one dead rat. I let it go nearby. Just looked at it this afternoon. About a dozen wasps are gnawing at the dead rat's eyeballs and nostrils. Not the prettiest sight. But what is pretty? Is pretty only associated with life? Ugly associated with death? Or is that the dichotomy that sets life apart from death, and so situates it apart from the whole, fragmented, where fear can work? Next morning, the rat is gone. It was there in the moonlight the night before.

My wife Batya, daughter, and I share this land with 12 other families, and we live here when we can, which is usually during the summer months and sometimes longer. It's 670 acres of meadows and forests in Northern California, off the grid, an hour up a dirt road from the nearest small town. The hills here are steep, although some of our land forms a plateau before it too drops to the river below.

It was still hot last September, and I headed to the river most afternoons. Each time there I saw the same cow in the same area of scattered meadows and shrub brush. When I approached close to her, she hardly acknowledged my presence. She just kind of stood there, and on occasion swished her tail. Sometimes she put her head down and munched. Flies landed, most notably around her eyes. Quite frankly she seemed like one of the dumbest animals I'd ever seen. Paul Shepard has written biting words about domestic animals. In *Coming home to the Pleistocene*, for example, Shepard (1998) writes that the "the consequences for the captive and domesticated animals [in comparison to wild animals] were reduction in size, piebald color, shorter faces with smaller and fewer teeth, diminished horns, weak muscle ridges, and less genetic variability. Poor joint definition, late fusion of the limb bone epiphyses with the diaphyses, hair changes, greater fat accumulation, smaller brains, simplified behavior patterns, extended immaturity, and more pathology are a few of the defects of domestic animals" (p. 84). Yep. And to me cows seem like some of the dumbest of the domestic. It's like they were made to eat, poop, breed, and get fat to be killed. Hot dogs. Hamburger. Dog food. I remember an afternoon that I had spent hiking in these hills with Jack Turner, shortly after the publication of *The Abstract Wild*. As the thunder clouds came in, he talked to me of "self-willed" land as a way to understand the autonomy of wildness. There was little "self-willed" in that cow. She hardly made a choice. She just stood there in the heat. Not at all like the deer or birds or turtles. Even the frogs and wasps are totally, marvelously vibrant compared to that cow. A domestic animal, not even for companionship but slaughter. Turner also spoke to

me of anger, that perhaps it's not such a bad thing, he said, it's part of being wild. I disagreed. But those days with that cow, I felt some of that Turner anger.

A month ago, as I was crossing that same area by the river, I came across some rib bones. A few weeks later Zoe, Batya and I look for more. In one spot we find the skull, in another the lower jaw bones. We put them together and it's clear it's a cow. Most likely "my" cow, that cow that was just standing and looking so dumb was probably at the end of her life, and old age and sickness had simply taken hold. I should have honored her instead of cussed. We find several leg bones. We fit them together and marvel at how easily they swivel in one direction, and lock hard in the upright position. Zoe thinks of her biology teacher in her sixth grade class last year, Rosetta Lee, the one who re-inspired her with a love of invention, biology, and science. Zoe says that Rosetta would also be the sort of person to enjoy a skeleton. We find many parts of the spine. Another day we find another leg section, lots of ribs, tailbone, and other bones that we're not quite sure about. We collect them together and then arrange them on the ground and the cow's image takes form, quite powerfully with the full head, eye sockets, jaw, spine, ribs, and legs. Even dead domestic animals can hold sway in human consciousness. Another day finds us at the same spot with my backpack. We load it full with the bones, overflowing, and huff it up to our cabin, and box them up. Zoe writes a letter and addresses the box: To Rosetta Lee.

On a few occasions over this last year, Zoe and I have spoken about where my ashes should be scattered after I die. There is some lightness to our banter. After all, I'm healthy and in my 40s. But we also know we're serious. Zoe says that she would like some ashes here on our land. Also perhaps at the river. I say that I would like some ashes in two places in the Yolla Bolly Wilderness, which lies 20 miles east. I ask her to promise me that she would take some of my ashes to both places. I say it doesn't have to be soon after my death, though it could be. Could be anytime. Whenever she was ready. One spot she has heard me speak of before. It's in the heart of the wilderness, a lush meadow, some 200 yards in diameter, tucked into a mountain basin, just below tree line. A spring starts a little above, a creek runs below. On my second trip into the Yolla Bolly, as an adolescent, I was on horseback, on Val. It was summer and as usual, dry. I carried a small sleeping bag, some food, a pot, a little horseshoeing gear, a pouch of oats for Val—all in a duffle lashed behind me on the saddle. Without a pack horse, and traveling light, you could really move on horseback. Lots of trotting, lots of territory. In the Yolla Bolly in summer, there's not much to eat, even if you're a horse. So five days out, late afternoon, dusty, tired, and hot and concerned about Val, I saw its fresh water and tall grasses; it was one of those sights of a lifetime. Later, a campfire by the creek. As night came on, I watched Val graze in the meadow. Over the years, I've been back now and again, once in winter, always with wonderment, but not too often, for this spot, any spot, can't provide solace on demand. I was in last month. That day, an 11-hour hike: the last three hours lost deep down in a ravine as I had tried to cross-country to that meadow and missed; I finally clawed my way onto a ridge top, eventually got my bearings, and made it by nightfall, in time for a small

fire and dinner. At six in the morning I started walking around the meadow, almost prayerful, thinking of my ashes here, content. I would like them somewhere toward the center of the meadow, I thought. I must remember to tell Zoe when I get home. I circle around, eat a few handfuls of what I have, and head out. No need to overstay my visit. Two days later, bushwhacking down a lower section of a river, I arrive at the second place where I would like my ashes scattered, what I've called Bat's pool. Batya and I found it together during our early years. We've been back a handful of times, several with Zoe. Yes, I would like my ashes at these two spots, and I would like Zoe to bring them. I want her to travel this landscape, to feel its presence, to feel my soul speak to her through these mountains, its waters, a transition time, a letting go, embracing. I'll miss her.

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