

Natural History

by David Ackley

Three deer have come out in the open to feed in alfalfa along the pasture woods, across acres of new-mown ground from the boy at the barn window. The cuttings are stubbled and strewn with yellowish chaff. Heat waves rise like spirits under a white mid-day sun. The deer are the color of dead leaves on the green. Barbed wire mostly keeps the cows out of the clover, but can't hold the deer. It doesn't matter. If cows get in the hayfields, Grandpa takes after them swinging a pitchfork handle, swearing in English tailed with the old country: *Goddamshi Sonuvabichtu!* But he doesn't mind the deer. When the hunters come in the fall with their high-powered rifles he runs them off. He never says he likes the deer, but he lets them be. His land, he ain't required to say if or why.

Woodchucks a different matter. Grandpa reasonably hates a woodchuck. If a milk cow steps in one of their holes and snaps a shin, that's it for your milker, a bullet in the ear for a mercy death and dumped into a seven foot pit by the front-loader that had dug it beside where she lay bawling.

The boy liked the fields better with the grass tall and the wind carving long arcs in the golden tips. Deep among the stalks, the woodchucks fattened up until the busy teeth of the mower laid the hay down in lapped bands to be gathered and piled in the barn. Afterwards, the boy, his uncle and Grandpa harvest the chucks nosing glumly through the stubble, picking them off from the barn window with twenty-twos. The rifle is steady in the old man's hands. Grandpa was in the Russian army in the Great War, she'd told him once. Five of his own lifetimes ago. He imagines the whitehaired, overalled farmer a young man in a foreign uniform and pointed helmet, holding a bolt action rifle, waiting for other men to show their heads. Like the boy and his uncle wait in the old blue Plymouth for the one that ducked into its hole when it saw them bearing down through the cuttings. A few yards from the hole his uncle shuts off

the engine and they sit with barrels out the windows. It must be that a woodchuck always has to have another look. Soon, a brown head grizzled with white pokes up, one brown eye on the thing too hugely there to believe as the black eyeholes of the bores stare back. It sits up tall on its hind legs to take in all of whatever this is, big and bluer than the sky, death's own taxicab parked on its doorstep. They pull at the same time. Get out and stand over it, his uncle toeing skin loose as a hand-down coat before tipping it with his boot into the dark hole it had dug to live in as lesson or warning. "Killed his self," the uncle says, turning away, not seeing the boy flinch. Or maybe not caring. Another lesson.

Down there in the dark it would become what he once saw in a low hollow, a thick, twitching white pelt over the small mammal consumed with avid tremor and the seethe of small chewing. Such as Grandpa might have seen on the battlefield, best kept below ground.

A year from his last life, life now is the farm, with his Grandpa and young uncle. Herding cows up from the pasture for the sundown milking. Haying. Cleaning gutters. Feeding a scoop of grain to each cow each evening, with their dark, bottomless eyes, lowing and banging their horns against the stall. What do they see when he comes? Him? Or a scoop of grain? All winter long they were pinned by the neck in their stanchions, able only to stand or lie, dropping their great thumping weight on the hard oak floor to rest, standing to shit, piss, be milked and fed. He pulls their long teats like soft fingers, hissing milk into the pail between his knees, ducking the slap of a shit-soaked tail, cautious that the cleft hooves loaded with all their weight miss his feet. "Easy, Boss," patting the warm hide. The first time they were let out in the spring, they thrashed and bucked, swollen bags flopping, wild and free. Remembering maybe another life when they were the deer.

His, before, feels like it was lived by someone else. Things left from it buzz around, at the edge of his attention, his mind like a loose screen door about to bang open and let them in. Captain

Blood, the Crow brave and Deerslayer, his allies, his other selves, close ranks to hold them off.

Grandpa has gone out to the second barn to tend his heifers and bull calf. The only life visible now the distant deer, the blue swallows that nest in the loft and fly in and out through the missing panes above the barn door, looping low over the stubbled fields to pick off bugs, the cattle in their pasture. Not far from the deer, Belle, the lead cow, threads the piebald ribbon of the herd through maple and oak. Their hides flicker lighter or darker in the shade. He marks their course in case they stall and need to be chased up for the evening milking.

Though he has this urge to perform great feats, the results are usually paltry. The truth is he's no good at most of the things other kids can do, good only at hunting and the games he invents, stories or plays of Captain Blood, high on the yardarm of the big pine tree, coursing over the bounding main to rescue the fair lady Ann from the clutches of doom. Or the lone Crow brave, hidden in a rank, fresh buffalo hide, stalking the herd over the open plain. At least, in his year on the farm, he's turned into a pretty good shot with the little Winchester twenty-two pump. He's killed rabbit, wood-chuck, even a pheasant. Doing it well, he wishes he liked it better. He sometimes wants to take it back, to return the tenant of the small house gone slack in his hands.

Once, his shot missed a red fox which slipped away in the woods. His uncle ran a trap line and could have sold the pelt to Joe, the Algonquin breed who lived in a shanty ripe with salted hides curing on stretchers along the smoke-blackened walls. But he was glad he'd missed once he came on her furball kits, too young to fend for themselves, tumbling and playbiting at the mouth of their den. He'd watched them play for a while, then moved on so as not to drive her off for good. In his mind, he saw her trotting up, slumping in the den to let them suck and fall asleep against her warmth. He has the hunter's eye but not the heart. He hears his uncle—if he knew: Jesus! Toughen up!

The deer have come deeper into the field, opening space between them and the cool shade of the pasture.

He'd left his young uncle at the kitchen table—only three years beyond him, but older yet in experience and knowing, shirtless, sun darkened, with his wrestler's shoulders, and fierce blue eyes glaring at nothing, drinking coffee, thinking about girls or fighting or whatever he thinks about. Play some catch? Nope. Want to go up the big pine tree? He grunts, kid stuff. Even though they'd once done it gloriously together, his uncle leaving him behind to scale higher still to the very top and stand on a fragile branch holding the now slender trunk by one hand as it whipped in a gusting wind: He, the real, true Captain Blood, who I will follow to the farthest shore. Not this day, though, midnight tomcatting having left him slumped over his coffee and short with his answers.

The boy has yet to see a deer up close. Not alive out in the open like this, anyway. Once in a museum she took him to, there was a life-size buck hiding in a bush next to an Indian camp where a woman with a baby on her back bent over a fire next to the teepee and the brave working on his bow. A deer wouldn't be that close. It was all behind glass, still and unreal, glass-eyed and unseeing. Real deer like birds jitterly flush at nothing. Smells of danger. Sounds you can't hear. They have to live ready to jump. All year round, the quiet is blasted by gunshots. Every pickup holds lever actions, pump guns, lovers of venison. Even the dogs are hunters in their spare time: He has seen a buck in a snowfall ahead of a pack of mongrel farm dogs fade into the whiteness. Chin on arms he watches. Starting them in the woods his breath would catch at the shapes they sketched on the air.

Before long, the day will be mowed into the past, and he will have done nothing to save it from joining all the other days of milking and lazing and dreaming he's now forgotten. Across the plains, the Crow brave moves only when the buffalo graze and freezes when they lift their heads. The skill was in stillness, soft movements, blending in. Is this something he's good at? In school he sits near the back and practises the inner quiet that will make him invisible. Hide him from

having to answer with clogged mumbles and hot face. “ Louder, Stevie, so we can all hear.” His voice fades to a choked whisper, his ears buzz.

He has a vaguely forming idea that he'd like to come to the deer unarmed, just to see how close he could get. Would he test himself, their sharp senses, or something between him and them? He doesn't know yet but anyway goes out of the dusty shade of the barn between twin silos filled with the fermenting silage that smells like bourbon whiskey and into a fierce blast of sunlight, needing to move.

He is brown after standing atop the swaying loads of hay he drew underfoot with his fork fed by the loader in one long gold tongue from rows he'd turned with tractor and hay rake. Now brown after being burnt and peeled and darkened, his skin is armored to the blazing heat. He'd come here sniffing, pale and weak. Tender white rabbit. The dust under his toughened soles now pleasantly hot and soft, fine from wheels going to and from the fields over these sixty years. Now all tractors, trucks, hayloaders but in the beginning, rakes, harrows and wagons pulled by big farm horses. She'd ticked off their names for him on her thin white fingers: Bud, Clarence. Pausing to breathe. OneEye. He slams that door shut.

The curve of the road hides him from the deer along a wooded low spot where the well that fed water to house and barns had been dug over a spring. Dropping into the deep shade down to the well is like entering a cave with blind worms and moles and woodchucks feeling their way along in the dark. Black mud squishes between his toes while he moves aside the wooden lid and dips the tin cup full and drinks. The water is cold as ice melt and tastes of iron. He pours another cup over his head and rubs it through his hair. The cold pulls the skin of his scalp tight. Back in the hard light, blue-fringed sunfish swim lazily across his vision. Dust cakes the wet black mud on his feet and then comes off a little with each step, the coarse rubbing pleasant to feel. In breaks of the foliage he can make out the deer more clearly, a doe and two fawns coming into their growth. He stops along the bushes that have hid him. The doe

lifts her nose higher and gives a little hop. That is me she smells, this person watching her. At this distance they still seem like toys, pieces in his game. He instructs them to ignore him. They drop their heads to feed.

A shallow gully runs away from them between mown ground and the tangled alfalfa they graze. It would be the longer way, but if he takes it, the whisper of breeze will carry his scent away from them. At the far end, when he turns toward them, it will put the pasture woods behind him and they might not pick him out from the backdrop of trees. He's not sure, but thinks deer are keener to movement than shape. He drops to his bare belly and slides across prickly stubs of cut hay. On hands and knees crawls along the gully's sandy bed until he meets a spoked wheel of silk sewn from bank to bank. Sunlight glistens on the yellow spider tensed in the web's bullseye. He could easily sweep this small monster from his path but is sworn not to take life without just cause. He crawls up the bank and around. The fair young girl in the tower smiles. Where the cleft deepens he stands and walks in a stoop, brushing through milkweed whose white feathered parachutes drift lazily to ground in the still air of the gully. He steps carefully over a sandhill and a file of red and black ants toting a dead comrade toward a small hole in crumbled ground. In the ant fortress they will fire ant volleys and play taps on a tiny ant bugle and fold the ant flag for the mother of his aphids.

The heat smears across his naked shoulders. Salt stings his eyes. At the far end, one bank of the gully folded toward the pasture fence and when he reaches it, he sneaks his head up for a peek. It would be funny if they'd run off while he'd been blindly circling. Circling nothing. But the three graze quietly just where he'd left them. His heart thumps. He wiggles under the barbed wire around the prison camp. A tine scores his back. A little blood and stinging. The wound to bear under the very noses of the vicious guards and cold-blooded commandant. Cool green shade flickers around him like water. He wants to pause and rest but his quest tugs him on. He makes his way through brush and trees until he can turn toward them with the

woods at his back and slides again under the fence into the alfalfa. Rises to his feet slow, slow as a plant growing and begins his stalk.

Everything not in his field of vision fades away, the world narrowed to what belongs to the quest, time linked to his stops and starts, now quick, now labored, now stayed mid-step. The stealthy Crow brave, alone with his prey. Clover blossoms pluck between his toes. He shivers at the thought of the black snake he once stepped on, thick and charged under his bare foot. Goddamn! Didn't he jump! Honey smell of clover blossoms and fat bumble-bees circling his knees with a low rumble. They won't sting. If they do he can stand it can stand anything now. While the deer feed he slides forward one foot, then the other, not taking his eyes off them. Blue deep of the sky the high white sun hot on his neck the breeze that comes and goes shivering the leaves along the fence. The deer look up at him. He might be a tree that had grown in the field. How long had it been there? If they looked up and it was already there then it had always been there. Nothing to be scared of. It is there. It doesn't move. It is a tree. Their heads go back down. They have forgotten the tree. Each time they look up it will be the same new puzzle. What is it? Does it move?

A black crow beats across the blue calling car car while a little bird dives at it driving it off that had tried to take her eggs. He is caught with one foot up and has to balance on the other while they stare stupidly, their ears stuck out to the sides. He thinks they know something's there, but it tricks their eyes, like a heat wave, both seen through and botheringly seen. This is a new kind of game for him, where his opponent isn't made up but real and alive, with the pleasure of the hunt and not the sadness of killing. The pleasure lies light and chill in his stomach, lighter than air, as if he could float up out of himself. From far above, the boy in the middle and the three deer at the end would be four specks, one nearing the others across the green, from three and one into four.

Closer. Their hides the color of dried leaves in the dust, the fawns' white-spotted, on long spindly legs, knobs of bone showing under tight skin. They graze behind, slanting their ears back. But the

mother's ears turn separately on her skull, pointing here and there as she feeds. She has the face of a large goat, a neck long enough to reach the grass without bending her forelegs, high shoulders, a knobby ridge that curves down then up to the muscled rear haunches, around which her tail flicks at stinging flies. Carrying the two babies has swayed her back. The hair has pale thinned patches. Her knees are worn to the cracked, scabby skin. He urges himself closer, avid to know more.

Duke barks on the next farm over. The deer listen to that side. If a hunter with one bullet and you saw a dog running a deer, which would you shoot? The barking stops and their heads drop. He tries to go quicker and freeze just before she looks up. He seems to be on a track through her mind, one she doesn't know is there. Her hide shivers and flies whirl out from her side. She rolls her upper lip to crop. This close she is heavy and tired and as earthbound as a cow. Not as he'd expected with the lightness of their movement. Her hard life chased and running. She raises her head with both ears cupped toward him. I am not here. No one is here. She drops her head again. She has a long, pointed slab of a tongue like a cow's that twists into the clover and pulls it between her square yellow teeth. He moves three steps then two quicker now. The ending seems near but he still can't see it. If he gets close enough to touch, then what?

The doe's head snaps up. She stretches her face toward him and takes his scent into her. In her plum-dark eyes swim a pair of small shirtless boys, white-haired and tanned. He is twice-born from the transparent air. For a fleet moment he feels what together courses through them invisibly, like the wind that bends the grass. But behind his floating reflections the dark bulbs swim deep back into a darkness. She is big and close and when she stretches to smell him she is too big and too close with a flooding life of her own that scares him. His helpless hand moves. Scuts raised white, they loop and touch, loop and touch and are over the fence and gone. He is there with her in the light springing through the trees feeling how she runs.

The sound claps and is gone, sudden, dire, final. Knowledge rushes in on the smell of burnt powder. A twelve gauge. Time bumps ahead and recoils at once, thrusts him toward the fence, dragging his resistant self. This is what has been left out: His uncle at the kitchen window will have seen him walking through the fields and gone into the barn to watch for a while more, figuring. Moving through the woods at a dog's lope, shotgun hanging in his left hand, he will have taken the short side of the pasture along the creek to wait inside the fence where he knows the deer will break.

Under the trees, his kneeling uncle has already turned the doe on her back with hind legs splayed on either side of his hips and drawn a long maroon stripe in the pale belly. She just now looking at the boy from deep in her own hidden life now this thing. This meat. That the life flies out of something so big so quick. His uncle has brought empty feed sacks. The fawns—yes, them too—flown on a sure and treacherous way that ends in the yelps of slobbering hounds. Hand over hand, his uncle hauls out of her wet pink ropes. The filled sacks will be sunk in the creek until nightfall. When milking is done and Grandpa has gone to bed, his uncle will retrieve them and take her hide and meat to the Indian who will buy the lot to sell to whoever he sells to. Good going, Stevie, don't tell Pa, his uncle says, grinning up at him over his knifework. The boy sickly knows he has brought this on. The buzzing outside rises to a shrill insistent whine. His forces have fallen, the door will bang open and all let swarm. From now on he can leave nothing out.

end

