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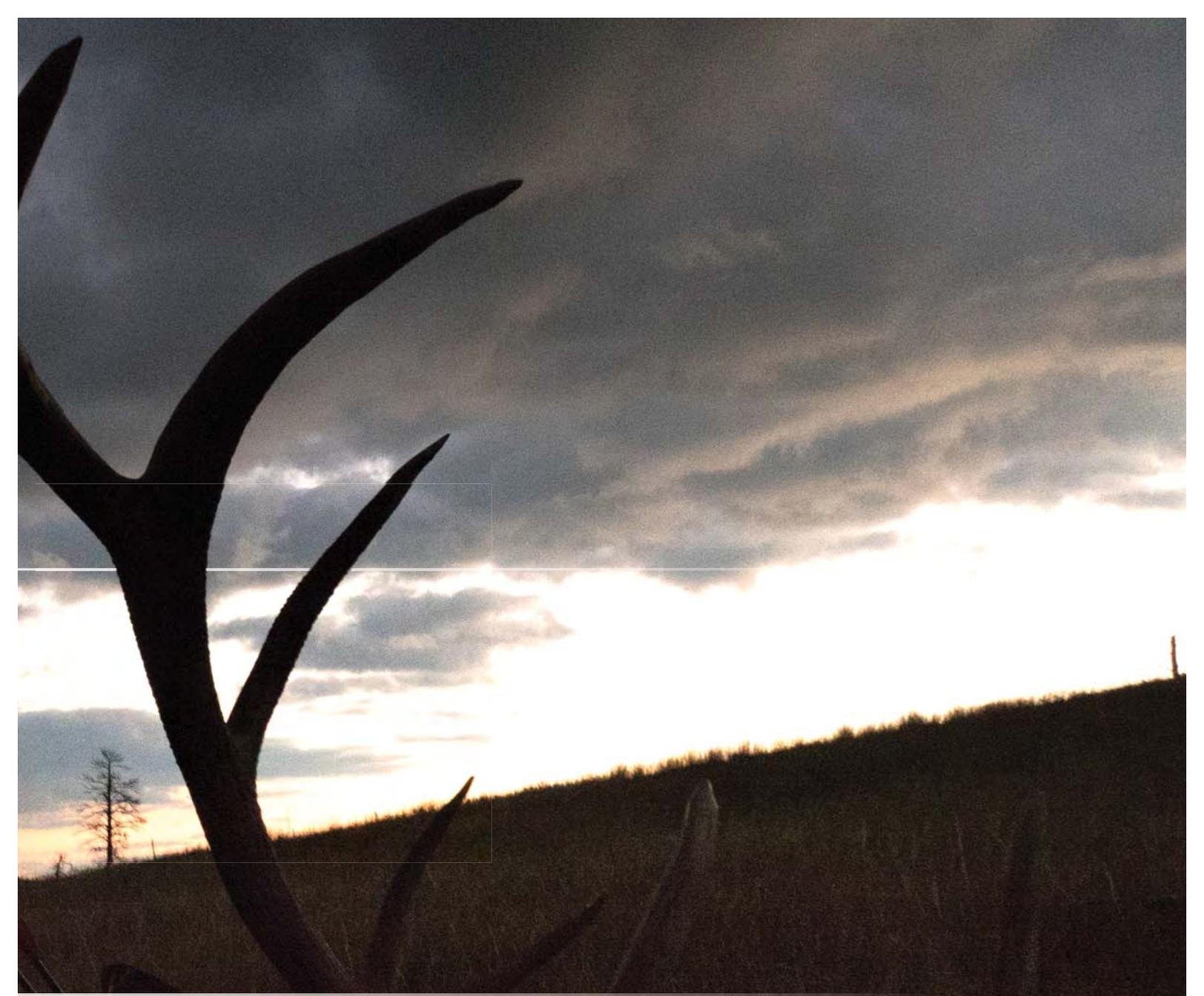
MUSCLE

Turns to Meat

by Allen Morris Jones

*Thoughts on the gifts of fatherhood,
bowhunting, life and death.*

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALLEN MORRIS JONES



Maybe it's my age. Getting older, grumpier, shorter fused. Or maybe it's *the* age. Digitized, cacophonous, confusing. But bowhunting for elk in September has increasingly become my refuge. Rather than a pursuit, it's turned into a flight. The hinge of every annual calendar. The rest of the year I have no problem surrendering to work, phone calls, emails, text messages. But I'll throw elbows to protect those last 10 days in September.

It's not quite 30 years now that I've been hunting one particular corner of Montana's Missouri River Breaks. In 2016, my bull came at the very end of the 10 allotted days. The evening before I was due back in Bozeman, I heard a faint, early afternoon bugle down at the bottom of the next coulee, a mile or so away.

I jogged and slid around the face of a clay hillside, then inched over the top. At the bottom of the coulee, in open grass, a five-point bull grazed alone. Okay, cool. I judged the wind (blowing slightly up from the reservoir) and considered how best to make my approach. Maybe if I backed up and went around behind. But then I heard the same bugle again, and it hadn't come from the five-point.

The small bull shied and trotted up the hill for a few steps.

Behind him, a herd bull emerged from around the slope of the coulee. Six-by-seven, not especially wide but heavy, long points and main beams. He carried his mass throughout the antler. The kind of bull that puts a flutter in your pulse, a tremble in your hands.

The bull of a lifetime. And here I was with a bow in my hands.

Bulls in the Breaks lean toward caution about coming into a bugle. Even naïve raghorns will hang up 100 yards out, then circle for the wind. Sure, they see plenty of pressure, but I think it also has something to do with sightlines and the relative scarcity of timber. In any case, it's almost always more productive to spot and stalk. A herd bull in the Breaks has never come into a bugle for me. Never. Thirty years of trying, and the biggest bulls always stay with their cows, only leaving them to chase away any satellite bull that might be getting too close. They want to see the threat before reacting to it.

I did what I always do—I got in as tight to the herd as I could, then waited. Maybe something good would happen. Call it patience masquerading as laziness, or vice versa.

I lay flat on the face of a hillside, in thick sage, watching the bull nose at his dozen or so cows, periodically lowering his head to threaten the five-point. The smaller bull kept pestering him, coming in obliquely toward the cows before trotting away again. They bugled back and forth.

When it became clear that the elk weren't moving my way, I backed up and came at them again from the opposite side of the same bluff.

This time, there was a bulge in the hillside between me and the elk. They were feeding a couple hundred yards away, just over the rise. It was getting late. I had 20 minutes of legal shooting light. Then 10. The five-point had moved around behind me. The wind had shifted a few degrees and was now directly in my face. Any minute, that smaller bull would catch my scent and, no doubt (Murphy's law) blow right through the herd.

Nothing left to lose, I rose to my knees and pulled my grunt tube around on its strap. I moistened my mouth reed and bugled. Just a brief and shrill, two-toned, smart-Alec challenge. Come kick my ass, was the message.

The herd bull swiveled toward the bugle. And then that quickly, just that easily, he came running straight toward me. Against all odds, he came running.

His path took him out of my sight line, down below the slope of the hill.

I'd had an arrow nocked all evening. And now I stayed on my knees but straightened slightly, lifting my bow. I moved a few awkward feet toward a nearby

ponderosa sapling. I don't ever really expect it to happen. There are 10,000 ways it can go wrong and only one way it can go right.

About 30 yards away, a pair of antlers started growing from the hillside. They pulled the bull up after them.

Twenty yards, then 10. Then five. Then four. Then he stopped. Pointed directly at me. Standing above me.

I was at full draw. In the dim light, he was puzzled, looking around for the five-point. Close enough I could see moisture on his nose. And could feel him tensing up. He was a few seconds away from bolting.

I aimed and steadied my arrow. Percentage-wise, straight on is one of the worst shots you can take in bowhunting. There's just too much bone and too small a window to the chest cavity. The elk is all sternum, shoulders and ribcage. But he was so close. I was certain I could put the arrow where I wanted it.

I released. And with a sense of extraordinary relief, saw my arrow disappear to its fletching through a fist-sized portion of chest just above the sternum.

He bolted and stumbled. And ran toward his cows bleeding from the mouth, from the chest. The cows flushed away. Then he fell and rolled to his feet, and fell again. Then he lay kicking. And then he died.

I stood up from the brush. After a successful bow shot, there's that moment of reentry, an odd, disconcerting tumble back into self-awareness. Here I am. Yes, that was me.

The bull was in his prime. For at least nine years, he'd been living a life that led ultimately to this. A prey species, all his days had been spent anticipating a predator. Reading the wind, flinching at sudden noises, fleeing ranch trucks.

I think about this type of thing probably more than I should.

I watched the bull exhale his final breath and cross the border from living creature to something that would, in its turn, support the life of me and my family. The engine of his life, the unimaginably complex web of electrical impulses, the enzymes and insulin, proteins and bacteria, shutting down, going entirely quiet. Muscle to meat: a transition verging on the mystical. And for me, the predator, the swirling amalgam of pain, regret, exhilaration and beauty that, collectively, comes from killing an animal for sport and sustenance. Nothing much more finally to be said about it all other than to note its existence.

I shed my camouflage coat and laid down my bow, my binoculars. I opened my knife and bent to his stomach. The heavy, black hair along the seam of his paunch. I pulled the skin taut, and made the first small cut.

Things have changed for me since I became

a father. My wife and I had our little boy in 2010, when I was 40 years old. And I've come to feel there's something unique about first-time, late-life parenthood—how it colors everything. Maybe the same could be said for having children at any age (no way, of course, for me to know), but when it happens late, you're ambushed by the bald miracle of it. You've been living your life. You know your trajectory. You can see how things are mostly going to go. But then, yeah. Boom. Everything.

The first time our boy saw a gut pile, he recoiled, then cried. But then, not finding an equivalent reaction from me, not receiving the consoling hug he expected, he cautiously went back to the carcass. You can learn a lot about the human animal by watching a four-year-old. That first blush of disgust turned clinical. The boy squatted a few feet away and tilted his head, tried to look past the deflated rib cage and into the body cavity. Maybe he found a stick and poked at the intestines, the liver.

This year, at Thanksgiving, his grandmother asked us to all go around the table and say what we were thankful for. The boy said, "I'm grateful Dadda killed a bull." This was, no doubt, a little bit of playing to the crowd, but I think there was some truth to it, too. He likes elk meat, and now he had it.

There's beauty in meat. I want my son to be aware of the movement of energy mouth to mouth, the taste and chew and swallow, the sprinkle of salt and rub of garlic, the final frying pan sputter of well-grained tenderloin. I want him to pay attention to grocery-store, plastic-wrapped T-bones, and how the convenience of them disguises the pain inherent to the world. Excess can lead to disregard. I don't want him to forget that our lives are (always!) lived through the grace of other lives.

Most years, we process our elk as a family. I find a sense of virtue in it. Not to go all self-righteous, but it's a way for us all to become familiar with the animals we just killed. A way of assuming responsibility. I know how heavy the hindquarters are as I lift them onto a hook and the way the skin pulls away from the meat, released by broad sweeps of the knife. "He's fat, man. Look at all that fat." It's important, this kind of knowledge. Not only to assume the moral burden but to know precisely how far back the shoulders jut and just where the rib cage ends.

Tending to our own meat is an opportunity. It's when we come together. A ritual as old as the human species itself. My wife or sister-in-law might run the vacuum sealer or feed strips of meat into the grinder while my dad or my brother or I pull meat off the bone. There's camaraderie and a sense of sharing a common cause, a soundtrack made up of knives slapping against ceramic sticks. Last year, my son was assigned the job of holding plastic burger bags up to the mouth of the meat grinder. These bags fill quickly,

and you have to have some agility, passing one full bag along then quickly putting the next one in place. He was initially reluctant, but by the end, enthusiastic.

"Maybe next time you can let Mom try the burger station," I said.

"Sure," he said. "But I'm the expert."

The first meal after a day of processing feels momentous. These are the most likely looking filets, the ones that won't make it to the freezer. Bellwethers for the year of eating ahead. Will the meat be gamey or sweet? If you're of a certain inclination, the meal also serves as a kind of memento mori. Not very long ago, this bull was bugling, running, feeding. Keep that in mind. Then pop the burners to life. Maybe it's the lack of marbling, but elk meat goes from medium rare to overcooked faster than beef. You have to be careful. Eventually, though, you cut into the first slice and, if you've done your job, it's a little pink in the middle. And you bring it to your mouth. You chew, and swallow. And consider what a gift it is. The whole thing, start to finish. A gift.

The essential question, to my mind: Is it better to live in ignorance or awareness? Is it better to know how it feels to kill the animal you're eating or to put the big questions aside, going about your day unbothered by the nettlesome unanswerables?

In the end, hunting doesn't need our approval. It's simply the terms of the deal, the pre-existing condition. The act of harvesting your own meat is, to my mind, the ebullient embracing of that condition, the pursuit of that which modernity otherwise seems determined to deny us. Life! Death! And everything in between. A seed of mystery buried under a puzzle, wrapped in a conundrum. Most of all, however, it's a gift. Remember to say thank you.



Allen Morris Jones lives with his family in Bozeman, Montana, where he writes and edits. He's the author of Last Year's River, A Bloom of Bones, and A Quiet Place of Violence: Hunting and Ethics in the Missouri River Breaks.