Terra Amata

The beach cobbles lie there in little unruly heaps. Indeed, nothing seems to indicate any inherent arrangement in the way the stones lean one against another, as if toppled, at odd, apparently haphazard angles. There's nothing whatsoever to tell us that they'd been deliberately laid into place, over four hundred thousand years earlier, by Paleolithic hunters in a pathetic attempt to shield their pit fires against the high prevailing wind overhead. Nothing indicates their veritable nature but the fact that the cobbles themselves—loosely arranged in vague crescents, in curves no more than ten centimeters high and fifty centimeters wide—all face in a north-northwesterly direction. All happen to face, that is, the all-dominant, all-determinant air mass of the mistral.

We look on, amazed. Ours? we might ask ourselves. Really ours, these vestiges? The mark—no matter how makeshift—of some distant predecessor? Living as we do under one wind or another, but in the shelter of heated, heav-

A four-hundred-thousand-year-old windbreak. Photo courtesy Henry de Lumley, Musée de Terra Amata, Nice.

ily insulated houses, we look on, amazed by the fat pebbles in this archeological resuscitation, struck by the enormity of so much scant evidence.

Discovered quite by chance in excavating the foundations for a high-rise apartment house in the suburbs of Nice, the site of Terra Amata has given us a brief but luminous glimpse into a thoroughly obscure period of prehistory.[1] The ancient site lies underneath ten meters of rubble, marine deposit, and aeolian sedimentation. Despite everything we've learned about Terra Amata itself—it was occupied on a seasonal basis by itinerant bands of Acheulian hunters (usually in late spring or early summer, according to pollen analyses

of the subsoil)—we're left with little material evidence regarding the hunters themselves. We have, of course, their artifacts. We even have an area that the archeologists have clearly identified as a worksite, within which the Acheulians would crack open the quartzite beach pebbles and create, with the constituent parts, their implements. But what of the hunters themselves? What of their size and physiognomy, not to mention their rites, their traditions, their *Weltanschauung?* Of these, nothing remains. Nothing but a small patch of barren earth at the very center of the worksite. There, surrounded by broken bits of beach pebble, in an area that the archeologists have described as "sterile," the tool makers must have squatted, chipping away at those round, ungainly volumes. Nowhere, in fact, is their presence at Terra Amata more apparent than in this manifest absence, this tight, earth-beaten patch of pure lacuna.

We're left, as ever, with residue, with the little that remains. In the Lower Paleolithic, this never constitutes more than a few scattered artifacts: traces of *Homo faber*'s attempt to survive an essentially hostile environment. So we return, over and over, to those piled cobbles, those pathetic little windbreaks, no wider than one's spread fingers and not much longer than a forearm. For these, unmistakably, were theirs. Cobble over cobble, these were what the hunters assembled for the sake of protecting the quick little scarves of their fires, the scavenged meats that they cooked, over four hundred thousand years ago, in the scooped hollow of the sand dunes. These were the tiny, fortuitous arrangements they made against the flat, lateral pour of that indomitable air current.

The mistral is still blowing. As we leave the museum in which the excavation has been meticulously preserved, we're struck by a blast of that blue air. Through the streets of Nice, the same wind blows unabated. We watch it catch, now, in the awnings of the outdoor cafes and billow through the taut canvas of the brightly striped beach cabanas. For us, of course, it's no longer an is-

sue. We've long since learned how to shelter ourselves against every natural element; even more, we've learned how to harness those very elements to serve our own, ever-expanding needs. The wind—after how many hundreds of thousands of years?—rarely affects our lives. Like one of our own mass-produced appliances, we too have grown "windproof."

What, though, about those fires, we might ask? Those fires *within?* The subtle little flames each of us covets, not in the scooped hollows of a beach, but in the chambers of the brain or spirit or wherever we'd locate that tiny, flickering, unsubstantial glimmer that we've equated with life itself? The glow, say, of an early intuition? Or the sputtering embers of some still resilient memory? Are these fires any less exposed now than they were then? Any less vulnerable? And those cobbles, *our* cobbles, what we've laid into place along the rim of our consciousness in an unending effort to protect that fire, that glow, those embers: are they, in effect, any less provisional?

The wind today is still blowing, both inside and out. And if, at Terra Amata, we've lingered so long over such seemingly inconsequential artifacts, it's only because we have recognized—in cobble after teetering cobble—the extreme fragility of our own existence, displayed in paradigm. Found, among so much brute material, metaphor befitting our own human condition.

What characterizes humankind is our ability to evoke absent objects;
to *re-present* them mentally.

GEORGES SAUVET, "RHÉTORIQUE DE L'IMAGE PRÉHISTORIQUE,"
IN *PSYCHANALYSE ET PRÉHISTOIRE*

Reading Prehistory

THE SEARCH FOR ANTECEDENTS

In the beginning was the eolith. So, at least, we're told upon opening a dense introductory manual to prehistory. *Eo* for dawn, *lith* for stone: in the beginning, at the outset of humanity, came the eolith, the dawn stone, a heavy pebble that's remarkable for nothing but the apparent absence of any distinguishing characteristics whatsoever. Yet there it is, described, analyzed, even pampered—for all its anonymity—as our very first artifact. Ours, we find ourselves asking once again? Living as we do at the far—the opposite—edge of civilization, we look back and wonder. Ours, those cobbles? Those round, nondescript volumes, scarcely chipped about their contours and subject to endless doubt and speculation by the paleontologists themselves? Yes, we wonder. For, at the very start, nothing can differentiate a pebble naturally fractured by intense thermal change from one deliberately crafted. Yet it's exactly there, at that very point, in that precise instant of deliberation, that that virtual figure, *Homo habilis*, evolves into *Homo faber*, the artisan. It's the inaugural gesture, the first irrefutable mark.

We read on. We're anxious for signs, indications, for some founding echo to our all-too-precarious existence, our so-called being here. Aren't we always, indeed, on the lookout for some kind of substantiating proof? Searching for antecedents as we enter, deeper and deeper, into the obfuscations of our own present? Archeological typology, we quickly learn, allows us to associate an artifact with a particular level of human development: to correlate, say, a chipped pebble with the cubic dimensions of a human brainpan; to affirm that such-and-such had been fashioned by so-and-so. Us, though, we ask ourselves? Really ours, these ancestors? we go on asking, incredulous over so much dubious relic, so much scarcely articulated rock.

Come, now, the first unquestionable "pebble cultures." Comes that of the Oldowan, 1.75 million years ago, with their archaic handaxes chipped in *two* directions. Here, at last, we can begin to recognize a logical design, a pattern, repeating itself in the midst of the mineral: a frequency which constitutes a human signature. In the Quarternary (beginning as much as 2 million years ago, according to certain estimates), the ice cap has come to cover nearly the entire continent of Europe. Adapting to this cataclysm, a new creature evolves. In the celebrated formula coined by Linnaeus, this hominid, "*loquax, bimanum, erectum*," never stops developing as a rational animal. Page after page, millennium after millennium, we follow this creature's catatonically slow evolution as it manifests itself in its lithic industry. A third chip here, a fourth chip there, and the Oldowan handaxe gradually turns into an oval- or pear-shaped tool, roughly worked on two surfaces. Now even an untrained eye can recognize the handicraft involved. One culture succeeds another: the Acheulian, we're told, follows upon the Abbevillian, 1.5 million years ago. And, as it does, the handaxe grows thinner, finer; its pressure-flaked edges become ever more masterful. Archeologists have come to nickname these implements *limandae*

after their svelte, fishlike appearance. Tens of thousand years had to elapse, however, for this evolution to occur. We find ourselves, as ever, confronted with the incommensurable.

Concurrently, we're led through a succession of glacial expansions and interglacial contractions—all, of course, phases of that single, overriding epoch: the Quaternary. These phases have each been given the sharp, Teutonic place names of their alleged points of origin. Mindel, Riss, and Würm, for instance, are all affluents of the Danube. On the other hand, the cultures affected—determined—by these glacial fluctuations have each been named after the archeological sites far to the southwest with which—in terms of cultural evolution—they've been associated. Abbeville, Chelles, Saint Acheul, Le Moustier, La Madeleine are but a few such eponyms. Our familiarity with those places (all in France) or, simply, the lilt of their names brings us no closer, however, to those lost cultures. To the contrary, a kind of desolation increasingly sets in as we read on. A jaw bone, a few teeth, a crushed femur: are these really *our* vestiges? *Our* biological remains?

Here we're at the mercy of not only the archeologists, but a whole army of specialists, each qualified in some particular area of prehistoric research. The paleogeologists, readers of rock and rubble, can determine exactly how and when a particular cobble, for example, took on the shape that it did. By its striations alone, these specialists can tell us whether the cobble in question has been exposed to sea, wind, fire, glacial pressures, or solar heat. Equally as well, they can interpret river deposits, analyze loess—a volatile, wind-driven sediment—or the solifluction effect on any particular gravel bed. As we read on, though, we seem to be going further and further astray in our search for antecedents, for traces of some human determinant with which we might, even tenuously, identify. And although we've just been informed that a strict cor-

relation exists between, say, sea levels, glacial relics, and human artifacts, we feel, if anything, more removed than ever from any brief, albeit ephemeral, instance of self-recognition.

The paleobotanists, curiously enough, lead us even further astray. Prying fossilized pollen loose from the same stratigraphic layers as those in which worked tools or human bones have been identified, they relate one form of extinct life to another. More desolate yet, we listen as they tell us, for example, how deposits of a certain microscopic marine creature—the radiolarian—accumulating at a rate of one centimeter per millennium, constitute a perfect means of determining a particular moment in human evolution. The moment can be "located," we're told, in relation to the level of alluvial accretion in which it occurs.

Where are we though, we're forced to ask ourselves? Reading as diligently as we can, chapter after chapter, glaciation after glaciation, don't we run the risk of falling half-consciously into the chasms of prehistory itself? Slipping between two pages into some dismal abyss? Finding ourselves smothered by so many concretized blankets of sediment, glacial debris, stalactitic drippings? There's little, indeed, to retain us. In default of that founding echo, there's little to reassure us that *here*, in fact, is still *here*. The discovery of a skull—irrefutable evidence, we're told, of a new level in evolutionary development—does little to allay our anxieties. No, we could go on falling, readily enough, through so many pages of so-called substantiating evidence, conclusive fact. Quite clearly, the arrival of *Homo neanderthalensis* does nothing to help. With their low foreheads, massive, overwhelming brow ridges, and stunted chins, they bear, indeed, scarcely any resemblance to us whatsoever. And even if the archeologists are quick to praise the considerable technological advances made by this predecessor, it's virtually impossible—in an age of genetic research

and interplanetary exploration—to appreciate those advances to their fullest. These hominids—born, we're told, in the relatively temperate climate of the third interglacial period, rife with elephant, rhinoceros, and hyena—came to acclimate themselves to the gradual arrival of the last glaciation. Driven by severe cold into caverns, they adapted their lithic industry accordingly. If the aboriginal handaxe (beginning with the eolith and culminating in the elegance of the Acheulian *limanda*) had been perfectly suited for the nomadic life of small hordes in relatively warm open country, flake tools—flint knives with finely retouched edges—came into use now for skinning and preparing game in far colder climates. As ever, a fresh set of material circumstances elicited a fresh technology. Rather than working a rough block of flint into a corelike implement, the Neanderthal could turn the residual flake—the waste product itself—into a ready-made tool of its own. This discovery, we're told, was nothing short of revolutionary.

We read on. We go on looking, as we've always looked, not so much for them as for ourselves, our own, obscure traces. Reading books, visiting museums, or simply stopping short before the vast, gold umbrella of some chestnut tree in mid-autumn, aren't we always, in a sense, looking for ourselves? A lonely species by nature, made even more so today by the loss of any commonly shared vision—any collectively accepted referent—we wander through galleries, archival tumuli, and archeological vestige, hoping to discover, at any given instant, the key, the tiny, metallic glint in the midst of our own shadows. Call it, if you will, the breath at the very heart of our own empty mirror.

We turn backward because there's nowhere else, finally, to look. Nowhere else to search for our own specific, instigating moment but through the caverns and peat bogs of a prehistory that continually escapes us. We go on, wading through the millennia, inspecting the scant evidence, hoping that a collar-

bone here, a chipped flint there, might give us some small inkling. We've been forewarned, however, that human evolution is rarely explicit. If indeed we can trace the immeasurably slow technological progress that so many unearthed artifacts attest to, we're still left with little or no idea of our predecessors as living entities. Even their skeletal remains are few and fragmentary throughout the early Paleolithic and most of the middle Paleolithic: throughout, that is, ninety-nine percent of human evolution. We have to wait until the very end of this seemingly interminable period—until the closure, that is, of the Mousterian, in about 32,000 B.C.—before we encounter the first full, fossilized skeletons. Are we, we might ask ourselves, turning necroscopic in our search for antecedents? More drawn, say, to the tibiae than the possible reconstitution of gesture, movement, reflection? No, quite the contrary. For we can only begin to reconstitute the veritable life of these predecessors when we're allowed to examine not the bones alone, but the manner in which they'd been prepared for ritual inhumation. The skeleton of a man, for instance, buried in a small rock shelter at La Chapelle-aux-Saints, his head facing east in a half-circle of stones, a bison's hoof for *viaticum* lying alongside, tells us more about our own hidden identity than any number of axes, blades, or scrapers. For here, at long last, we can begin to enter prehistoric thought itself. The bones, ironically, bring us closer now to the animate, the cognitive. In a distinct acceleration of human development that has both puzzled and fascinated prehistorians, we're given, quite suddenly, a wealth of evidence. We have, for example, the Moustier skeleton buried in a fetal position, its head resting for the past thirty-four thousand years in the fold of its right arm. Or we'll read of another skeleton: that of a nine year old discovered in southern Uzbekistan, his grave encircled with the horns of Siberian mountain goats. The skull of this child, significantly, shows the first unmistakable traits of a new level

in human evolution, of a new creature: *Homo sapiens sapiens*. We're at the dawn, now, of the late Paleolithic. More meaningfully, we're at the very point of encountering a hominid we can not only clearly identify but acknowledge. We're on the verge of self-recognition.

The late Paleolithic, we're told, began abruptly with extensive human migrations out of the Middle East (alleged birthplace of the *Homo sapiens sapiens* or Cro-Magnon), accompanied by critical advances in cultural development. Emerging as they did in the last pulsations of the final glaciation (about 36,000 years ago in France), these new, rapidly evolving societies carved the antlers of their favored game, the reindeer, into beautifully tooled pins, chisels, and hunting points with finely cleaved bases. Across the hard tundra, they hunted mammoth and the woolly rhinoceros, capturing their quarry in pitfalls or, where the ground was too frozen, erecting elaborate overhead fall traps to snare those ungainly mammals. But, far more than by any technological achievement, these Aurignacians—as they came to be called—distinguished themselves pictorially. For the first time societies began painting and carving, representing in images what had gone, until then, undepicted. The earliest cave paintings date from this period: their bold outlines—silhouettes, really—were executed by torch-light in red ochre and black oxide of manganese, or carved, scratched, incised into the rock partitions themselves. Portrayed in profile and in all their vernal innocence, horse and bison, ibex and antelope seem to gaze across thirty thousand years of elapsed time with a purity of line that astonishes us today.

Is it "art," then, in its very first manifestations, that we so readily associate with? Is it the power of representation that furnishes us—at long last—with that founding echo, that establishing fact? With the flush of self-recognition? Let's indeed look closer. What, exactly, has found expression in these earliest

graphic gestures? Is it the huge underbelly of the bison itself? Its gait, its carriage, the way its head seems buried in the massive heft of its shoulders?

No, we might readily respond at this point, it's none of these. The mammal, despite its figuration, hasn't been portrayed or replicated as much as conjured—graphically summoned—as a metaphysical entity. It's not, indeed, a representation we're admiring here, but an invocation: not a beast that's been depicted, but a *wish*. We might well imagine that the artists themselves, confronting the immense emptiness of the tundra in relation to their own dire circumstances, didn't paint what they saw but what they needed: the inherent power they might magically appropriate from those migratory game species that, otherwise, lay well beyond their reach.

In short, we're in the presence of an articulated absence, or, more exactly, of an interval that seems to span the space between the manifest and the imagined, to oscillate between the *here* and the *there*, the *now* and the ever-imminent *then*. Between, that is, desire and gratification, supplication and response. Does anything more fully characterize our own true nature? Our spatial dimension? We are creatures, indeed, of interval, of innate longing. Locked into an ongoing instant of continuous projection, we, as *Homo projectivis* (if such a neologism can be permitted), finally come, now, to the point where we can claim ourselves. After so many pages of text, covering so many ill-defined millennia of human development, we begin, at long last, to recognize ourselves in these first invocations. Page after page, illustration after illustration, we become, ironically enough, visible to ourselves in the same instant that we acknowledge those who depicted—for the first time, in still-hesitant outlines—the invisible. As we do, our mirror, quite suddenly, comes to fill.

The First Hunters and the Last

It's where the fields began to narrow on either side of a tight, rock-bound canyon that I'd find them. Arrowheads, javelin points—they'd lie scattered over the otherwise empty ground (especially after the winter rains) in a perfectly random manner. They couldn't, therefore, be associated with some prehistoric site, couldn't be considered, say, the emanations of some clearly delineated Neolithic settlement. No, given the absence of any other form of artifact (particularly ceramic) and the variable distance between one hunting implement and another, their presence—archeologically speaking—could only be qualified as "eccentric." But was it, in actual fact? Couldn't some relationship be established between the implements themselves and the gully just beyond? Couldn't something be learned from the fact that the frequency of my "finds" would increase in a clear, if sporadic, manner as I approached the canyon itself?

Here, I'd learned to read landscape as never before. Learned to interpret, as

a text of sorts, the muffled dialectic that exists, occasionally, between a specific place and its history: between a patch of earth, say, and whatever vestige it happens to exude of some past human culture. Here that vestige proved to be immensely eloquent. Judging by the artifacts themselves, I was dealing with a period of time that ran from the late Magdalenian, clear through the Neolithic to the very edge of the Bronze Age. In other words, I was dealing with the material evidence of hunting societies that spanned a period of no less than eight millennia, beginning with a moment twelve thousand years earlier.

Why here, though? I'd answer my question soon enough, for the response was all too evident. "Here," I came to realize, was a naturally endowed wedge for capturing game: a narrow, narrowing, funnel-shaped passage for running them down, cornering them within that tight limestone corridor. For a distance of at least a hundred meters it offered no shelter, no trees, no escape path whatsoever. Over the millennia, it had provided hunters, clearly enough, with an ideal ground for bringing their quarry to bay.

Twelve thousand years. The mind either balks at the immensity of such a figure or grows giddy contemplating the abstract expanse of so much elapsed time. There's nothing abstract, however, about the artifact itself: it might be a long, slender arrowhead in the form of a willow leaf lying in the palm of one's hand. Almost as long as the palm is wide, it's every bit as tactile, tangible as one's own pocket knife or fountain pen. Twelve thousand years suddenly seems to contract, to conflate into a single, glistening instrument. Like a lost word, a hieroglyph from some distant language, the artifact demands careful scrutiny, not just mere curiosity. It wants to be read.

Here, in brief, is a summary description of a few such artifacts from this location. I've chosen them for their value as specimens—as typological archetypes—and arranged them in chronological order. This order in no way

reflects the material circumstances in which I found them, spread out over several hectares of ground and covering a period in my own life of over fifteen years. It simply represents a sampling of the times I'd go out "silexing"—as I came to call it—after a day's work as a writer, and find myself, once again, scanning the empty expanses before me, scouring the ground for a second set of stray vocables, lost nominals.

A SHOULDERED, LAUREL-LEAF POINT *(POINTE À CRAN)* PRESSURE-FLAKED OVER BOTH SURFACES.

The "shouldering"—the tapering of the flange for the sake of its hafting—almost invariably indicates the Magdalenian. Most likely, too, this particular piece had been mounted on the tip of some long, slender javelin or lance rather than on the shaft of an arrow, for bow and arrow appear at a somewhat later date. We're still in the late Paleolithic, in the twilight of the last glaciation. Itinerant hunters, traveling in small, compact groups, supplementing their game foods with roots, wild honey, acorns, and larvae, still employ propulsors for sending their harpoons and assagais—heavy implements—flying though air. They still employ javelin points such as this one as they move—as if in symbiosis—in the wet tracks of the very last retreating reindeer.

A TRANSVERSE, TRAPEZOIDAL ARROWHEAD OF TINY, MICROLITHIC DIMENSIONS.

I might have missed this artifact altogether (and how many others, quite similar) if I hadn't seen its likeness illustrated in archeological manuals or displayed behind dusty glass showcases in local museums. These first true arrowheads are, in fact, remarkably inconspicuous. Not only small and relatively asym-

metrical, they were executed with a total disregard for appearance. In short, they don't "look like" arrowheads. Nonetheless, these tiny armatures (weighing two grams on the average), mounted on die-straight branches of hazelwood and shot from the earliest sprung bows, could slice air at the rate of thirty meters a second. They'd tear—rather than pierce—the flesh of their prey; as such, they've come to be classified as trenchant or sectional weapons. Who, in fact, crafted these curious, trapezoidal shapes? We learn that they belonged to a people—an entire civilization—caught in a slow but inexorable process of transformation. Moving from a nomadic existence to the first, archaic forms of a sedentary culture, these people, who emerged in the Mesolithic (9000–6000 B.C.), enjoyed the outset of a temperate climate not altogether different from today's. Simultaneously, they saw the arrival of a flora and fauna that would have remained to this day, had we not over the past thousand years disrupted our ecosystem to the extent that we have.

AN EXCEPTIONALLY LONG, ALMOND-SHAPED ARROWHEAD, PERFECTLY BISYMMETRICAL, SHOWING TRACES OF THE ORIGINAL RESIN WITH WHICH IT WAS LIGATED.

We've clearly entered, with this armature, the Neolithic, and so moved from the trenchant to the penetrant. As to the arrowhead's exceptional length, this can be related, readily enough, to the site itself. If, in the surrounding hills, I found arrowheads that never measured more than three or four centimeters, here I found points of the exact same facture that were nearly twice that length. The difference in dimension could only be attributed to their essential difference in function. If, in the hills, rabbit, hare, fox, and game birds were the traditional quarry, here in this natural limestone passage it was boar, wild oxen, and deer—driven down from the heights—that were tracked and cornered.

In both cases, the length of the point was perfectly commensurate with the weight—the bulk—of the game pursued.

Curiously enough, we've entered, with these beautiful armatures, a period in which the hunt no longer constituted a primary source of sustenance. Having come to settle in small agrarian communities, Neolithic people would depend increasingly on the harvest of their own crops and on domesticated cattle. According to osteological analyses, the bone remainders of wild animals would usually account, now, for less than ten percent of the total faunal deposits. One can only imagine, however, that game remained (as it does today), if not a necessity, a prized delicacy of the very first order.

AN ARROWHEAD IN RIPPLING, HONEY-BROWN, ZONED SILEX, BARBED AND TANGED TO A PROFILE THAT'S OFTEN COMPARED TO THAT OF A CHRISTMAS TREE.

With implements such as these, we've reached the apogee of flint making. At this level of technical proficiency, we know that "the end is near," as one archeologist has put it.[1] Perfection, after all, can only edge toward its own exhaustion. Soon, very soon, the last moments of the Neolithic (labeled, rather misleadingly, as the Chalcolithic: 2500–2300 B.C.) would produce the first trickle of a new, imported weaponry, pounded out of a hitherto unknown substance: bronze. Soon, the stone mallet and amorphous flint core would be supplanted by hammer and anvil; the open-air industry of knapping would give way to the smoke of so many blazing forges.

If I never found bronze arrowheads myself, it was due to both their extreme rarity and my own mischance. I'd simply never been lucky enough. On the other hand, I'd managed to collect a considerable amount of flaked prehistoric

hunting tools within a clearly delineated area. That area, I should add, didn't include the limestone passageway where the arrowhead would have been recuperated from the viscera of the felled animal; they were found, rather, on either side of that deadly passage. There, on either side, the point might have easily gone astray or been dragged into the surrounding undergrowth by a wounded mammal seeking shelter.

Words, I called them. In my own need to read landscape—cultural landscape—as text, I'd sought out whatever vocables, mute ideograms, I could find. But was my analogy justified? Wasn't an arrowhead, within that irreparably lost grammar, less like a word than an instance of punctuation, most particularly that of the hyphen? A hyphen that had miraculously survived each of the two terms it had once united: the hunter, that is, and the hunted? Wasn't I holding, in the palm of my hand, a handsomely pressure-flaked connective between two dissolved signifiers? Two totally divorced entities?

I was dealing, after all, with a period of time in which game was plentiful and human population slight. It was, in Marshall Sahlins's words, an age of abundance, that of an "original affluent society."[2] Never again would nature be so bountiful; never again would earth supply humankind with such a seemingly inexhaustible storehouse of meat, fish, wild fruits. The image of Eden—ecologically speaking—was far more than allegorical. The woods abounded with rabbit, roe, red deer, and boar, and in the foliage overhead shuttled snipe, woodcock, partridge, and dove. Yes, an Eden of sorts that existed—as Edens always do—in an immensely delicate, infinitely precarious balance between giver and given, provider and provided.

Today, it's difficult to believe that such a balance ever existed. As I'd take the path down to that prehistoric hunting ground, especially in winter when the fields had just been plowed and were already sprouting with fresh artifacts,

I would hear hunters—the very last hunters—crying out to their dogs. And I'd hear the dogs, too, their goat bells tinkling down out of the hills as they sniffed the wet grasses before them.

"*Cerca, cerca,*" I'd hear. "Keep looking," the hunters would cry out in Provençal as, from time to time, they came into sight, empty leather pouches slapping flatly against their flanks. "*Cerca, chin,*" they'd cry out as they followed the edges, now, of those freshly plowed fields, the blue barrels of their shotguns glinting metallic over one shoulder or lying prone in the crook of their forearms. It was, of course, a vacuous enactment, an empty ritual. For there is nothing left now to hunt. On the hunters' part, it has become, each autumn, nothing more than a ceremony that each performs, driven, no doubt, by some deep, vestigial instinct. Call it, if you like, a genetic tick arising out of some immemorial codification. For not only has the country been hunted out, the massive—abusive—use of insecticides has so totally upset the ecological balance that the remaining fauna has either fled or perished. This particular Eden has turned into a gameless wasteland.

Occasionally, of course, one might still hear of some passing *gibier.* Last winter, for instance, a boar was downed in these very same fields. Its innards, apparently, still contained traces of the rice it had last fed on, escaping—far below—the flooded estuary of the Rhone. But even then, as one hunter remarked, its hide was a good deal "pinker than black." Like most game today, it had been domestically bred. One might make the same observation in regard to the rare partridge, pheasant, or hare. Freshly released from the wire-webbed cage of some breeder, it no longer possesses the natural instincts—or savor—of its species. It makes for easy prey and yields little more than its own somewhat tasteless flesh. As for the wild rabbits, they're afflicted, more often than not, with myxomatosis, and they die from something far worse than

buckshot. The hunter today roams through woods and along the edge of fields that have long since relinquished all claim to natural habitat. Even the trees seem little more, now, than decorous props for an irrepressible, all-invasive technology.

I'm not suggesting that one need return to the Neolithic to rediscover some kind of natural equilibrium, for game in Provence remained relatively abundant until quite recently. I only wish to invoke a golden age in which wildlife was bountiful, and nature—a nature not only respected but venerated—provided for every basic human necessity. It was a time in which societies, living in relatively small numbers, enjoyed a perfect surfeit of sustenance; a time in which humankind—*unhampered by humankind*—knew plenitude.

"*Cerca, cerca.*" As I would scour the surface for artifacts, searching for traces of those first hunters, I would hear, in the distance, the petulant little cries of the very last. Hear the goat bells of their dogs as they rushed this way, then that, flaring out over the broken ground in search of some last surviving spoor. "Keep looking," the hunters would cry out. "*Cerca lou lapin*," they'd call, entreating as they did, in that nearly extinct idiom of theirs, the very last escaping game. By eleven each morning, I knew, their hunting satchels would already be jammed with simples, wild chicory, *salades de champs*. And, at noon sharp, they would unload their shotguns—more out of outrage than cruelty—on anything that moved: crow, magpie, squirrel. Look—but for what? There was virtually nothing left, now, to look for.

If I'd come to read the aboriginal arrowhead not as a word but as a kind of hyphen drawn between two discrete quantities—between society and nature, the bestowed and the bestower—the connective itself implied agreement, reciprocity, trust. It implied a contract of sorts in which a lesser entity (ourselves) was granted permission to subsist upon the bounty of a greater entity (nature).

As a contract, alas, it has long since been broken. Subtle, immensely delicate, and perfectly determinant, it has left nothing today but scattered artifacts. Left nothing but those narrow, pressure-flaked flint weapons that once sliced air at thirty meters per second, conflating—as they did—the two indispensable terms of our very existence. Reciprocal signifiers—it's not altogether certain that we can survive without them.