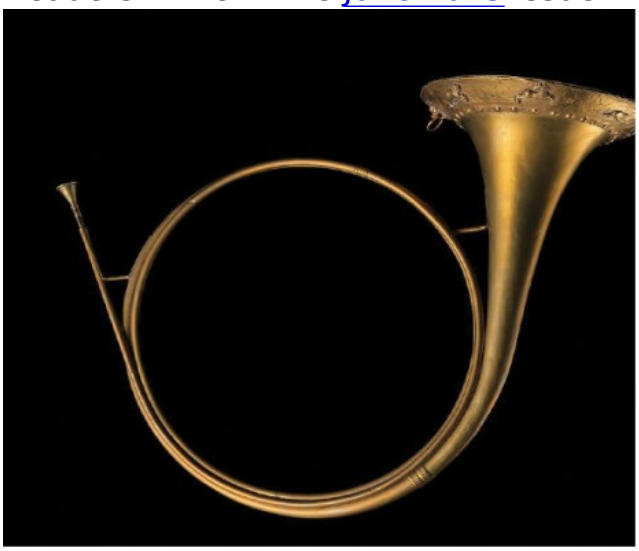
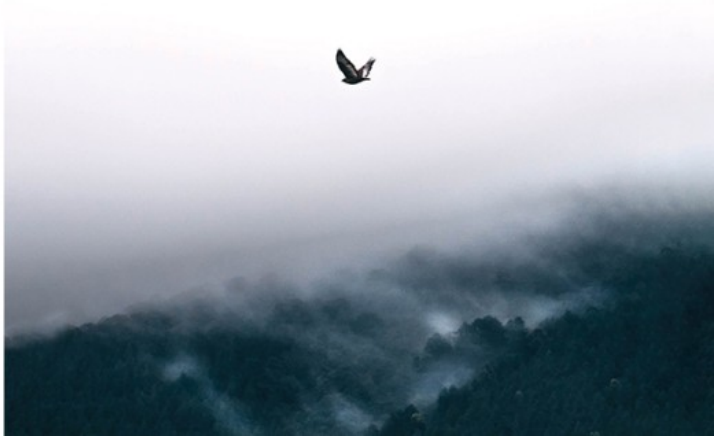
Hunt: Essays by readers

We gave our readers a one-word writing prompt: “Hunt.”

Readers Write in the June 2023 issue





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> *Think of all the dumb things we spend our time doing. Why not take time to be alive in the world and to look and to think of each day as a kind of a treasure hunt? You can be sure that in every day—no matter how humdrum, no matter how dreary, no matter how frightening, let alone how joyous—in every day you can be sure there is buried a treasure.*

—Frederick Buechner at the 1992 Festival of Faith and Writing at Calvin College

The Buechner Narrative Writing Project honors the life and legacy of writer and theologian Frederick Buechner with the aim of nurturing the art of spiritual writing and reflection.

In response to our request for essays on *hunt*, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are *bell* and *stretch*. Read more.

My dad used to take me deer hunting on my grandparents' property in rural Georgia every year around Thanksgiving. Each morning we would wake up before dawn, open the gate behind the house, and begin our trek into the woods.

These trips were unlike anything else. Through crust-filled eyes, I embraced the early morning air and all the outdoors had to offer—the chirping crickets, the tall pines, and the dim moonlight coalesced into a brilliant display of nature's glory. I learned how to walk silently to avoid disturbing the cows in the nearby pasture. I learned how to climb into a tree stand, in the dark, wearing a bulky backpack. And though I never warmed up to the actual hunting part, my growing love of the outdoors taught me something more important: how to hunt for God, or perhaps how God hunts for us.

The notion of hunting for the sacred resonates with many religious folks, yet it runs directly against everything I learned in Sunday school. After all, many people think of the Divine as an encompassing power that is always present. They point to the omnipotent power of the Divine, which ensures anyone who truly seeks transcendence will find it. Many Sunday school teachers, pastors, and theologians I've encountered seem to agree—God doesn't hide. God is always ready to reveal Godself, no matter where we find ourselves. The only requirement is that we open our hearts and minds.

Tell that to someone with chronic anxiety. Requirements and conditional relationships don't mesh well with us, and I'd wager they aren't that appealing to anyone else either. In this framework, opening ourselves up to God becomes an exercise of dread, making us wonder if our hearts and minds are truly open and

sincere. We oscillate between condemnation of self for failing to have faith and anger at the God who's made themself so hard to find.

Nevertheless, I hunted. I searched under every rock, leaf, and relationship in my life. God's presence wasn't obvious to me, so I decided to employ the tactics I learned while deer hunting with my dad all those years ago.

First off, I made sure to tread carefully. There was too much at stake to risk spooking the sacred. I meticulously monitored each thought that crossed my mind to ensure my attitudes and actions were "holy." Then, I laid out some bait, or good works, to encourage God to draw near. Finally, and most importantly, I called out into the wilderness with earnest prayers.

But at the end of the day, I felt no closer to the one whom I sought. If anything I felt more distant.

Yet while those moments were devastating, I now see these experiences as formative in my understanding of God. I began to catch glimpses of the sacred everywhere. I saw marks of it in the towering trees that surrounded me on our hunting trips. I spotted sparks of the Divine in my relationships. I even caught sight of God in my most anxious moments, where even at my loneliest I felt a pull inside of me to seek love and joy.

This recognition completely transformed the meaning of hunting for me. God, the sacred, or the Divine wasn't so much a thing to be sought but rather that which lured me to seek the good, the beautiful, and the lovely. Much like a deer's instinct to search for food and shelter, so too did I incline to search for fulfillment in this life.

Though I'd like to think my hunt for spiritual meaning is more profound than the deer's pursuit of life's necessities, perhaps what we consider basic needs are another manifestation of something holy. Maybe every living thing—deer, bear, flower, and person—is on the hunt for the Divine. Maybe our continual search for those things that give us life is a sacred act of worship—a holy hunt—whether we realize it or not.

Corey Patterson
Alexandria, VA

My dad liked to hunt. His dad didn’t. In that regard, I am more like my grandfather than my father.

Dad gave me a .410 gauge shotgun when I was ten. We joined other members of the country church where he was pastor in hunting for rabbits and doves. I never liked rabbit hunting, nor did I ever hit one. Their skittishness made me jumpy and nervous. You had to be quick to shoot a rabbit, and I worried I might accidentally shoot another hunter. And when it came to skinning animals or plucking their feathers, digging shot from their bodies, and gutting them, I felt queasy. I didn’t enjoy eating game.

I remember the first time I witnessed the gruesome business of a dead rabbit being skinned. Dad carved a circle of fur and skin around its neck, nailed the two front feet to a plywood board, and pulled the skin down and off of the unfortunate creature. I felt like a guilty bystander. It made me think of Jesus on the cross. My participation continued when I ate the rabbit Mom prepared for dinner. We chewed cautiously, in case there was undiscovered shot in the animal’s flesh.

By the time I was 16, I quit hunting for animals with guns. Now I only hunted for them with my eyes and ears. Before my 18th birthday, during the Vietnam War, I realized I didn’t want to hunt with guns for people either, so I registered as a conscientious objector. Dad told me he thought Granddad would have done the same thing during World War I, if he had known it was an option. I wrote to my draft board that I was willing to serve, but I wasn’t willing to use a weapon in combat.

The day after Pearl Harbor was attacked, Dad had gone to volunteer. His dream as a teenager was to become a pilot, but his color blindness ruled that out. His little sister told me many years later that when Dad was rejected, he came home, threw himself on his bed, and sobbed. Later, he was drafted and became a tail gunner in a B-25. I asked him once if he had ever killed anybody on one of his 42 missions, and he said, “I hope not.” But like the animals we killed with gunshot in their bodies, some shrapnel penetrated his flesh while he was hunting people and they were hunting him.

The Gospels tell us that four men who hunted for fish were called by Jesus to hunt for people: instead of using nets, they would catch people with good news. Just about every living thing hunts for something, even if it’s only sunshine, shelter, or water. Humans hunt for food; for schools, colleges, and universities; for jobs and

work; for friends and mates; for homes; for worshiping communities; and for God. All our hunting may be telling us that we are restless, always prowling, always looking. Maybe someday we will find what we think we lack. Or maybe we will realize, before our hunting days end, that we were being patiently and tirelessly hunted ourselves.

Michael Lippard
Franklin, TN

My mother called to me from our apartment window, telling me it was time to put my bicycle away and come inside and take a bath. I opened the back door with the key I wore around my neck. The bathwater was running, and I hurried. When the water reached a precise level, my mother turned the water off, and I sat on the edge of the bathtub and began taking my shoes and socks off. She sat down beside me on the edge of the tub and said, nonchalantly, “Your father died yesterday.”

She used the same tone she might have if she’d said she’d been peeling potatoes or folding laundry. My ten-year-old mind already understood the loyalty she required, so I replied, “I don’t care.”

I waited for her to exit the bathroom so that I could step into the bathtub and disguise my tears. There had been a divorce. Six months earlier we had moved 250 miles away, and I had not seen my father since.

Denial and pretense swept over me. I could not, I would not, believe I’d lost my anchor, my lookalike, my gardening partner, the one who taught me, the one who carried me on his shoulders as we walked through the woods scouting for quail while whistling “bobwhite.” My fifth-grade mind coped by deciding my father’s death was untrue. I would hunt until I found him.

I searched the faces of those I saw at the grocery, crossing the streets, or entering and leaving my school. Looking from my school’s second-floor classroom window, I imagined I saw my father waiting for me outside the schoolyard fence. As I grew older his face began to fade, and so did my hopes. But my hunt did not diminish.

Ten years later, I managed a ride to my dad’s tiny hometown. I remembered enough to wind my way to his childhood home. Unannounced, I knocked on the front door. My startled grandmother began closing it as fast as she’d opened it. “No need for

you to be here," she said. "I buried you when I buried your father." Before I heard the lock snap shut, I pleaded for a picture of my father. Twenty years later a county judge decreed I might have the remaining pictures of him.

In my dreams I relived the fire in which he died. A wise clergyperson offered direction and relief: "Go and find your father's grave. When you do, read the order for burial from your prayer book. Bury him and find peace." I walked cemeteries in and around his hometown. At one cemetery I visited the business office. There, a man wearing a suit and tie, shirt cuffs rolled up to combat the Florida heat, took me under his wing. He asked many questions, which I did my best to answer. Then he began making calls to newspaper offices in nearby cities. I sat listening to his conversations as he gathered information and made notes.

Finally, he put the black telephone down in its cradle, took a breath, looked across the desk, and said, "Here, I believe, is the information you need." He had written the name Roselawn on a piece of paper that he pushed across the desk.

At Roselawn Cemetery, I sat on the ground in front of my father's tombstone. It bore his name and the dates 1918–1951. I opened my prayer book and I read aloud.

My hunt has ended. Now I find my father's face in the lavender blossoms of wild orchid trees, spring's redbuds and early summer zinnias, even the soft muzzle of a neighbor's hunting dog. When a dove lands on the brick patio near our little pond, I remember him. I catch occasional glimpses of my father in my grown children and grandchildren, reinforced by the old photographs of him that hang on my wall. And when I do, I am content.

Jean Dodd
Jacksonville, FL

My dad had gotten me a .22 rifle for Christmas and I'd been hounding him to let me use it. So on a freezing, bright January morning, we bundled up and headed to my Uncle Floyd's farm. Our intention was to hunt rabbits.

It was so early and so cold that neither my uncle nor my cousin Allen came outdoors to greet us. In their pajamas, they waved from a window and watched in slight amusement as we unpacked ourselves and my rifle from the car and headed out into

the fields.

The fields were nothing more than frozen furrows of earth. Rock hard, uneven, and difficult to walk on. There was no growth, not even stubble. And, of course, not a rabbit or any other wildlife in sight. Any animal with a half ounce of sense was cozied up in whatever burrow or nest was appropriate for it.

But on we trudged. I complained and Dad encouraged. Well, more cajoled than encouraged. The cold was piercing as the unfettered wind swept over the fields and straight through us. It stung my eyes and burned my cheeks.

After about an hour of fruitless hunting, along with being cold I needed to pee. Grudgingly, dad rerouted us toward the house, not once spotting anything worth taking a shot at, and I rushed into the bathroom. I took my time, letting the warmth of the house seep into my frozen body.

Outside again, Uncle Floyd and Allen, now fully roused and dressed, were chatting with my dad. When I joined them Dad handed me my rifle. There was a sick sow that didn’t look to recover from whatever ailed it, and Uncle Floyd was thinking I could cap it in the head and put it out of its misery, getting a chance to actually shoot my new gun.

It was not something I wanted to do. I said Allen could do it and handed him my rifle, and he headed into the barn. There was a crack, crack as he shot the sow twice, then came out and handed my rifle back. “Nice gun,” he said.

I never really got a chance to use my rifle after that. Dad never had time to take me hunting again and wouldn’t let me go alone to the nearby Boy Scout rifle range. Nor would he let me go with one of my friends. The rifle sat idle, locked in his gun rack.

Just before I headed to college, I gave the gun to Allen without telling my dad. It was my gun, after all, so I didn’t think I needed his permission. But when he found out, my dad seemed truly hurt and disappointed. I knew the feeling. We never spoke of the gun again after that.

That day we went to my uncle’s farm, I’m sure my dad was hunting for a moment of bonding with his son more than he was hunting rabbits. I enjoyed target shooting; had he propped some cans on a fence or found some targets to tack up that I could shoot at, the day would have been complete for me. But he had a model in his head,

likely from his own dad and his childhood in Kentucky, that a new gun was to be broken in on the hunt. It was a model that didn’t fit. On that bitter cold January day, both our hearts were broken.

The best part of the day was going home together to a warm dinner and post-holiday TV shows with Mom and Sis. One thing we never had to go hunting for was love. It was never hidden, even if it was sometimes clumsily given.

Stephen R. Clark
Lansdale, PA

For some Alaskans, a successful moose hunt, with its potential for 500 pounds of food, is the difference between feast and famine. Alaskans and nonresidents together harvest 6,000 to 8,000 moose each year, or 3.5 million pounds of usable meat. Killing a moose out of season can lead to jail time.

At my first pastoral assignment in Alaska, I found myself distributing the meat from moose killed on the highways. It was quite a sight to have state employees placing a moose on top of my car so I could give it to families who had not had a successful hunt that year. What are luggage racks for?

On my first and only bear hunt, I spent several days in terror in an area far from human habitation, but all we found was the skull of a bear that had clearly died of old age, based on the condition of the teeth. My hunting partner was very disappointed not to harvest a bear. I was thrilled that we had not encountered any. I cherished the skull for a few years, then gave it to a dentist friend who had a collection of animal skulls.

Once, while on a moose hunt, my hunting partner scared up a gigantic brown bear that ran by me in a clearing without seeing me. I was so proud of myself for being silent and not firing my gun like a rookie. One does not shoot brown bears without a permit or a backup plan. I had neither. I just enjoyed the majestic animal as it ran by me, grateful that it was not aware of my presence in its domain.

Over the years, I took part in successful hunts for moose and caribou, but the best experience was near Nome, where I purchased three reindeer “on the hoof” and then had to go find them somewhere in the tundra. When I was successful, my

spouse butchered them on the kitchen table, following the charts in a cookbook.

For a period of time, I was involved in ministry to 2,000 people on St. Lawrence Island who were known as Siberian Yupik. Contact was made in the 19th century by whalers from New England. Sadly, imported diseases devastated the inhabitants of the island. The elders were able to share what life was like prior to contact with missionaries in the early 20th century. It was inspiring to learn of the patterns of ancient hunters who knew nothing of the Middle Eastern religions. There was a culture of harvesting bowhead whales, walrus, and seals for food and materials for clothing. Elders told me that hunters were grateful for successful hunts. There were rituals and prayers to express gratitude to the spirit of the animals who had given their lives to sustain the people. When missionaries came, they provided some new words to describe the experience. But God was there before the missionaries arrived.

John J. Shaffer
Auburn, WA

The Old Testament tells us that Nimrod and Esau were great hunters. To have such a reputation was a high honor indeed. It meant that you could provide not only for your own family but also for the larger community of which you were a part. In those days people hunted for anything that could provide them with physical sustenance and rejoiced in its finding. Today, some of us who are fortunate enough to have the wherewithal to provide for our nutritional requirements still hunt. But today, perhaps more than for anything else, many of us hunt for meaning.

William Faulkner reckons that God created the kind of world God would have wanted to live in—the ground to walk on, the big woods, the trees and water, and the game to live in it. José Ortega y Gasset writes that hunting submerges man deliberately in a formidable mystery and therefore contains something of a religious rite in which homage is paid to what is divine and transcendent.

Like Henry David Thoreau, I go to the woods so that I too may live deliberately. With John Madson, I do not hunt for the joy of taking but for the joy of living, for the inexpressible pleasure of mingling my life, however briefly, with that of the unspoiled natural world and the wild creatures residing there that I so respect, admire, and value. I want to see the silent ethereal snowfall settling upon the earth

as though once again attempting to purify it. I want to endure the cold and savage winds of winter storms and in so doing admire yet again the endurance of flora and fauna. I want to watch the first trickles of spring snowmelt recharge the streams and rivers, to witness new buds burst into leaf and flower.

With Rachel Carson, I want no silent springs. I want to hear the first avian arrivals fill the air with song. I want to celebrate the lushness of summer when all the world's natural richness is spread before us. I want to witness the autumn woods in riotous color with every hue of nature's palette, and be present when the leaves fall to earth like so much confetti.

With Gordon MacQuarrie, I want to see the cleaving flight of feathered migrators splitting the wind and to behold the suddenly tightening grip of winter on the lakes and marshes once again. I want to experience the heart-stopping flush of a ruffed grouse. I want to hear the twitter and witness the corkscrew liftoff of a woodcock, that petite little upland shorebird I affectionately call a timberdoodle. I want to see the no-holds-barred launch of a rooster pheasant with the sun reflecting off his iridescent coat of many colors and hear him curse me like the miniature dinosaur that he is.

I want to be present when the dainty whitetail doe steps from cover, followed by the rut-crazed, thick-necked, hard-antlered buck, at once so preoccupied with procreation and yet so hypervigilant. When it's spring once more, I want to be seated beneath a broad oak tree listening to the 'oble'oble'oble of a wily tom turkey in his roost tree, the whoop-whoop-whoop-plunk as he flies down to join his harem, and the gossipy yelps of his hens as they lead him on. And surrounding it all I want to note the beautiful little songbirds accompanying me.

I want to sit down, on occasion, to a sacramental meal of wild game and give thanks for this bounty, while telling the tale of how it came to be and viewing a picture or two of the magnificent bird or animal it once was. The entire cycle thrills me, enriches me, and fills me with awe at the gifts I have been given. As John Muir points out, everybody needs beauty, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike.

So too I hunt for the ways and means of preserving these gifts, of alleviating the scourge of climate change, of preserving imperiled species, and of convincing friends and neighbors and those in power of the necessity of doing so. From Genesis

on we have been called to be stewards of all creation, and only in doing so do we preserve our own home in the cosmos.

And whether in the glorious vistas outdoors or in the silence of my room or church, I hunt to hear that still, small voice which too often is drowned out in the noise and bustle of our everyday lives. I want to say, “Here I am, Lord,” and so recalibrate my inner compass, rededicate myself to my purpose, and sense the communion with God that restores my soul.

Finally, when the end of my days draws near, when I can no longer go afield under my own agency, when the last of my beloved canine companions is no longer happily bounding by my side, I want to withdraw bit by bit from the riches within my memory bank and relive these experiences again and again, knowing through them that I have, indeed, truly lived, and then, once again, give thanks.

Herb Evert
Cottage Grove, WI