CHAPTER TWO

Deep Violence

1. The Clock of the Past

WHERE DID JERUSALEM and all that it implies come from? In order to grasp the full significance of the holy city, and of the rituals that sanctify it to this day, as well as of the conflicts that desecrate it, the question must be pushed back. Where did religion come from? How did it sponsor violence? Who were our ancestors? And what about them prepared the way for us? As it happened, Jerusalem was close to the center of the region in which humans as we know ourselves today came into being. What makes Jerusalem a generating center of heat can be understood as predating Jerusalem, so we must begin our meditation with a kind of detour in time, to grasp more fully how our city came to be what and where it is.

Every human act has its beginning in the acts of those who lived long before us. This is true of war. It is true of religion. Can we tell time on the clock of our deep past? Was violence there at the start? When began the cult of sacrifice? When did human beings become the creatures who so oppose violence they will commit violence to stop it? Who is the God who requires such worship? Let's try to imagine, in other words, the mix of shed blood and sacred ritual at the earliest stages of human existence.[1]

Thirteen billion years ago, the hypothesis declares, all mass was concentrated into a single point, far smaller than the dot at the end of this sentence. Apart from that primeval atom, there was nothing. Then it exploded, the creation of matter and energy, hot, dark radiation moving away from what was all at once a center—an expansion of the universe that continues to this day, with all that exists still rushing away from the alpha void toward an omega void, which may amount to the same thing. So began what we think of as time and space.

Thirteen billion years ago is a mark on the human calendar. Yet the number eludes us. According to scientists at the Smithsonian Institution, the simple act of counting to thirteen billion would take the average human, counting in English, nearly 400 years.[2] Thirteen billion years of black holes, antimatter, light, velocity, force fields, liquids, gases, particles, gravity, hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, supernovas, nebulae, galaxies, stars, and planets. Four billion years ago (to which it would take 120 years to count), this process, like a potter throwing clay, threw Earth, which in turn threw earth, air, fire, water, ice, stone, soil, vegetation, fish, animals—and consciousness.

When, five to six million years ago (it would take only two months to count that high), drought replaced rain in what is now East Africa, the lakes dried up, the jungle gave way to grassy savannah, and the progenitors of present-day humans began to come into being. They learned to walk upright, to use a thumb. Over the generations, they shed much of their bodily hair, the better to dispose of heat through pores in their skin, which equipped them for sudden bursts of energy and effort, to flee or chase other creatures. Because they lost heat by expelling water from their bodies, they had to drink more than other animals. Oases became centers. They learned that melons store water. They seized every opportunity to pick and eat berries, nuts, and fruits. Soon they knew to return to abundant sources. Like all animals that are opportunistic vegetarians (for example, chimpanzees), they were competitive, did not share their spoils.

Then they began to systematically search out such foods, and went from being finders to gatherers. Instead of eating at once and alone, they carried the melons, berries, nuts, and fruits back to camps in vessels made, say, of woven leaves. They began, sporadically, to eat with others who gathered berries and nuts. When they came upon fresh carcasses of animals, they feasted. All they knew was that the meat satisfied a certain appetite. By eating this concentrated protein they could consume less bulk to achieve that satisfaction, which meant, eventually, they could spend less time in quest of food. Instead of waiting to come upon a carcass, they began to go after living animals and kill them. Because of their relatively smaller size and slower speed compared to prey, such pursuit and attack required cooperation. They grew in speed

and strength. As they ran, their posture became more upright. Progenitors became ancestors.

Having cooperated, the members of the killing party, according to some anthropological speculations, would share in the relief, the ecstasy, of the kill. Their solidarity could be so powerful that it took on a significance of its own—an unseen and greater presence. The clan itself became totemic, and the practices of hunting, killing, and eating became set. Thus began what we call tradition. The vanquished prey could seem to have had magical powers, which (this, too, is speculation) one acquired by eating it. The hunters passed the meat around in a meal that reinforced their kinship. Pieces of meat took on value, a first currency. In these ways, the ancestors developed skills of collaboration, planning, and communication. They formed the habit of sharing. They learned to control desire, to put off its fulfillment. They developed patience. Thus began what we call culture. They went from being scavengers to being hunters.

Nearly three million years ago (you could count that high in only a month), in what is now Kenya, one of the ancestors sharpened a stone into a tool for use in digging up roots or slicing meat from the bones of animals. The paleoanthropologist Louis Leakey found the sharpened stone in the Olduvai Gorge in the mid-twentieth century. For one million years (eleven days of counting), so the archeological record says, such tools were hardly improved upon. The ancestors became proficient at killing animals, even mammoth ones. Yet in larger ways their lives of gathering and hunting changed very little over a long period—although the range of their searching changed enormously. Dependent on meat, they had to move when the migrating herds of animals moved. The ancestors spread out from Africa, going across the land bridge of the Arabian Peninsula into Asia and Europe. To eat, they traveled. If they did not travel, they would die of hunger. Eventually, their kind had moved across ice floes, rivers, seas, mountains, and deserts, to be found in every part of the planet. They killed and ate gazelle, antelope, mammoth, boar, seals, fish, birds, and bears. In the cold places and times, they wore the animals' skins. If there were no caves, they built shelters out of skins, leaves, trees, even ice.

Especially important when the climate became cold was fire. They knew fire from nature, as when lightning struck dry grass, igniting it. And then, at first only by carrying a smoldering brand back to camp,

they began to control fire. In colder climes and times, they used fire for warmth. Cooked meat required smaller teeth and jaws, and over many generations their faces changed. Ultimately, fire would be the tool with which they extracted metals from ores, leading to copper, bronze, and, much later, steel—each offering an ever sharper edge. A better weapon. But in a far more immediate way, fire transformed experience. It is easy to imagine how, at created hearths and in caves, fire gave them lives at night. Not only light and warmth, but a way to ward off predators. The ability to communicate in the hunt, with hand signs and grunts, became a capacity for gesture and language. The images they carried in their heads prompted them to attempt expression, rendering those interior images with their hands, faces, and sounds from deep in their throats. Sitting near the warmth and safety of the fire, they spoke. They spoke of what the hunt had made them feel.

Modern people must beware of projecting contemporary sensibilities back into the minds of primitives, about whom we can know very little. Yet at some point they were not so primitive as to be indifferent to the emotional consequences of having killed other living creatures. Understanding themselves as observers of death, as perpetrators of death, and as eventual victims of it, they found themselves in the middle of death. This was a species-altering experience, and it has never left us. Having learned to carry water, food, and fire, our forebears also found a way, through the vessel of language, to carry such experience, all experience, which is a matter of interiority. Sharing food, they could now share consciousness—memory as well as worry.

Differentiation by sex took hold. The work of females was to bear children and care for them near the place of fire. The work of males was to chase, stalk, trap, and jump on animals with their flint blades, to throw sharpened sticks and pointed stones at them, to bring meat back to the camp. Archeological evidence suggests that the earliest hunters moved in bands consisting of only two or three dozen people—too small to maintain the right balance between numbers of males and females. According to the laws of statistics, it requires several hundred members living in a group to do that. Groups shy of that balance may have engaged in the deliberate slaying of infants to maintain the crucial gender ratio. If so, complications of that necessity may, unconsciously or not, have led small bands of hunters to combine with other bands, achieving that multihundred critical mass that enabled a natural bal-

ance between male and female offspring. Here began the tribe. This adaptation to multiplicity of social units—what we call networks today—would forever set humans apart from other creatures.

Evidence abounds that the deaths of band members and tribal relatives were not confronted indifferently. When one of the group stopped breathing, companions put stones on his or her body so that hyenas would not scavenge it. They pictured their own bodies laid out like that. It seemed to them that the dead ones still had power. The placing of stones became important, and across generations they found certain ways to do it. Large piles of stones took on meaning, and then monolithic stones took on majesty, perhaps because they seemed immutable, invulnerable to the terrifying change implied by death. Before such stones, with movement and sound, they performed what we might call rituals.

2. Mark Makers

Human beings sixty thousand years ago were, physically and mentally, approximately what we are. We are so close to them in time that we could count to sixty thousand in half a day. Even that impulse—to mark off time with enumeration, beginning with the fingers on two hands—is a defining characteristic. *Homo erectus* had become *Homo sapiens.* But more than that. *Homo sapiens,* knowing that he knows, had become *Homo sapiens sapiens.* Consciousness of past, present, and future defines consciousness of the unchanging self that is, through time, aware of its own awareness. "The ability to be occupied with the future," Søren Kierkegaard wrote, "is a sign of the nobility of human beings; the struggle with the future is the most ennobling."[3]

But to struggle with the future is to struggle with the self, which, while somehow unchanging, continually comes into existence. Because, unlike the apparently immutable monolithic stone, the self is forever unfinished, and the conscious human is burdened with, not mere fear as Kierkegaard insists, but with what he called angst. Fear is the dread of a known threat. Angst is the dread of the forever unknown, which is essential to becoming. The future does not *hold* danger; the future *is* danger. Because humans, in their very self-awareness in time—the source of human nobility—are forever unable to be at peace with themselves, they cannot be at peace with one another. Here, perhaps, is the source of human shame.[4]

Animals live in the eternal present. Humans live in the eternal coming-into-being. There is the difference that matters, the source of human restlessness. Angst, not fear. The question is constant: Is this all there is? But the question is its own answer. It is not a question based merely on impulses toward acquisition, as if human awareness could be reduced to mere consumption. It is, rather, a question rooted in the inevitable incompleteness of experience, a being that is always becoming. What we call intellect is compelled to record that incompleteness in its two dimensions, time and space. Time is measured against the past and future—memory and anticipation. Space is measured against the surrounding horizon, whether closed, as in a room, or open, as at sea. So intellect compulsively takes note of time, if only by scratching out a calendar on the bark of a tree or the wall of a cave—or on the pages you hold in your hand, for that is what I have been doing. And intellect takes note of space by creating representations—images, the work of imagination—of what space holds.

If all of this is true of us, it was equally true of our ancestors from a certain point forward. Making marks on surfaces—expression—was a way of interpreting what was happening to them and of giving meaning to experience through abstract representation. Interpretation was endlessly reinterpreted. This quest for meaning became the human mode of making peace—peace above all within the self, and peace, in the second place, among the group. That humans never fully succeed in making such peace means we never stop trying, which is why our marks, once we learned to make them, will define us forever.

Most of the marks made by ancestors—on trees, for example, or on the rocky faces of cliffs—were exposed to the elements and were lost, but marks made on the protected walls of caves have survived, what we call primitive cave paintings. Created by the light of torches, or perhaps of lamps that burned animal fat, the marks on cave walls were made with pigments, derived, say, from clay or berries, and rubbed onto the stone surface with mats of moss. Bits of charcoal were used, and so were liquid paints delicately blown through tubes made of hollowed-out bones. The most famous cave paintings were found in a cavernous underground network in Lascaux, France, in 1940. Cave paintings have been discovered elsewhere in Europe, as well as in Africa, Australia,

and Southeast Asia. Radiocarbon dating was discovered in 1949, leading to a fuller understanding of the places the cave painters occupied in the past. The oldest, in Chauvet, France, discovered in 1994, date to about 32,000 BCE, before the end of the Ice Age, when caves were refuges from the cold.

Generally, the cave paintings show realistic portraits of large animals—bulls, horses, stags, lions, rhinoceroses. The artists were technically accomplished, capable of rendering depth and perspective, and they left behind hundreds of what we know to call works of art. Picasso, viewing the pictures in Lascaux and speaking of his own artistic tradition, said, "We have discovered nothing."

The oldest examples of cave paintings, like those at Lascaux and Chauvet, are striking for showing only animals. Plants are not rendered, and human figures are rare. The nearly exclusive subjects of the painters, that is, were the objects that they and their fellow hunters were killing. Humans had by then universally evolved to live by committing systematic acts of violence against creatures whom they would have recognized—breathing, bleeding, struggling to survive—as somehow kindred. No one can say what was in the minds of the cave painters, but the evidence of their exquisite marks suggests an interior struggle with the very idea of the hunt. Every animal portrayed on every wall of every cave so far uncovered was a victim—a creature who, at the end of the hunt, would bleed as the hunters bled, would breathe as the hunters breathed, until at last it bled and breathed no more. These hunters were predators, yes. But they were more than that.

To paint was, at the very minimum, to honor what was painted. Such lovingly rendered figures—it may not be too much to deduce—express the complicated emotion of regret at what the hunting life required. We will consider why it may be inappropriate to regard the cave paintings as religious, but they were surely spiritual—concerned, that is, with a reality as certain as it was unseen. All painting, after all, attempts to render visually what is forever invisible. After the fact of the mortal confrontation of the kill, perhaps the images of living animals—and it is living animals that overwhelmingly appear in cave paintings—were meant to restore the creatures to life, the life, at the very least, of memory. Life, not death, was the preoccupation of those images. Remembrance, humans had already learned, is the way to what we would call redemption.

Or was it the future that was the point? Perhaps by painting bulls

and bears and horses, the cave artists sought to exert control over them, a magical effort to defeat the prey ahead of time. The caves may have been sites of observances we would call ritualistic, if not religious. Perhaps the painters were shamans, whose task would have been to perform actions that might influence nature, influence ahead of time the outcome of the coming hunt. Less mystically, perhaps the artists, in creating realistic portraits of the threatening enemy, were providing their band members with a way of conquering their own inevitable terror by giving the hunters a glimpse of the mortal contest ahead. Or the caves may have been centers of initiation, where young males were brought into the clan of aggression. If so, what the artist rendered was the dangerous future itself, to brace those who had yet to experience the trials of the hunt, or to reassure those who had. Through this "forward-looking imagination . . . the painter had frozen the moment of fear, and the hunter entered it through the painting, as if through an air-lock," the mathematician and naturalist Jacob Bronowski wrote. The cave paintings were "a peep hole into the future."[5]

We should not imagine that these creations were merely utilitarian, as if the cave painters did not also (*Homo ludens*) engage in art for art's sake. But whatever such activity meant to the painters, we know from beholding their work that they found images in their minds, turned them this way and that, and propelled them through their art out into the common realm, where others could match them with images drawn of their own interiority. What the cave painters did is the exact equivalent of what every serious artist—from novelist to moviemaker—does today. And for the same complex of reasons.

The carbon-dating scientists, to repeat, conclude that some of the Chauvet paintings are 32,000 years old, while others in the same region are younger by thousands of years—and yet the newer cave paintings are more or less the same as the far older ones. This is a revelation "of Paleolithic artists transmitting their techniques from generation to generation for twenty-five millennia with almost no innovation or revolt."[6] This discovery has led some scientists to conclude that the culture of the era was profoundly conservative, and perhaps for that reason satisfying. Little change over such a long period (consider, by contrast, how much the techniques of art have changed in just the last millennium, and how those developments reflected numerous cultural revolutions) suggests a kind of paradise of satisfaction with the way things were. Was that the paradise we lost?