

Nathaniel Brodie
THIS IS OUR WORLD

photo by Barbara Michelman

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The tracks were pressed so perfectly in mud as to seem intentional, as though the cougar had chosen these two strides to reveal itself, as though it were winking at me.

It was the first of May, and I was counting the trees that winter had felled. Later that week we'd recut the Ken Patrick Trail along the north rim of the Grand Canyon, but right then I had a whole day to walk an easy ten miles. The North Rim still closed for the winter, there was little chance of seeing another human being. I was happy to be alone. The bright, high-altitude sun slanted through the spires of pines, and the first burst of wildflowers—wild candytuft, golden peavine, mariposa lily—caught the light, burning through the darkest patches of forest. Thin drifts of snow remained in the north-facing drainages and deeper tree wells; the trail, yet wet with snowmelt, was stamped with animal tracks: squirrel, coyote, turkey; the tracks glyphs of hunger, whim, instinct, territory. I'd stop from time to time and study the spoor, and so walking and stopping I came across a muddy divot displaying the lion's left forefoot and right hindfoot, the tracks about three inches long by three and a half wide.

I held my hand over them. As though they gave heat.

There is something special in coming across predator tracks—the lion residue not just preserved in mud but hanging in air, cuing some suddenly sensitive psycho-olfactory sense, exciting some long-dormant primal impulses. It is particularly pleasing coming across predator tracks on the Kaibab Plateau, the scene of one of the most storied predator-eradication campaigns in modern history.

In 1906, Teddy Roosevelt established the Grand Canyon Game Preserve, which encompassed much of the Kaibab Plateau. The logic behind a game preserve was simple—set aside a safe haven for game animals so that, free from human hunting, they can reproduce and repopulate other areas, thus ensuring a continual source of wildlife for hunting or tourist viewing. By that time, deforestation and unregulated hunting had severely reduced the populations of every major game species in the United States. Elk, once the most widespread of all North American ungulates, had been extirpated from the eastern United States. Bison, reputedly once the single most numerous species of any large mammal on earth, teetered on the brink of extinction. The endling passenger pigeon, the last of a species that had flown overhead in billion-bird flocks once estimated to be one-mile wide by three-hundred-miles long, would die in captivity within eight years.

And yet, as the logic of the times dictated, protecting game animals in a game preserve necessitated not only the elimination of human hunters but also the elimination of natural predators. So between 1906 and 1923 federal government hunters on the Kaibab Plateau trapped, poisoned, and shot 781 mountain lions, 4,849 coyotes, 554 bobcats, the entire population of 30 wolves, and an unknown number of great horned owls, golden eagles, California condors, badgers, and fox.

A century later, no one knows how many cougar roam the Kaibab Plateau. The Forest Service, based on "harvest" information and observed lion sign, now estimates there to be roughly sixty to eighty cougar on the Kaibab Plateau, a population deemed "healthy and robust" enough to allow hunters to hound, tree, and casually shoot for sport a dozen cougars a year. Mountain lions have probably realized that the National Park's arbitrary boundary forms a safe haven—especially considering how heavily logged and extensively roaded are the adjacent Forest Service lands—and thus may not be accounted for in the Forest Service's "harvest" tallies. But according to the Park Service, "Research has not yet determined the exact number of lions [on the South Rim], nor has it concentrated on other areas of the park." Like the North Rim.

Thus it was a treat to come across cougar sign in a place where they had been systematically slaughtered, to follow the tracks and find a pile of scat. I probed the shit with a stick: it was at least ninety-percent fur. I continued walking, pleased to tread the same trail as had a cougar, to slide under the same deadfalls, to be yelled at by the same Steller's jay. The trail switchbacked down a steep slope,

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crossed a sunlit meadow, and wound up a thickly wooded draw. In the middle of the trail lay an object that my eyes, struggling to readjust to the darkness of the timber, could not quite recognize. A long moment passed before I recognized it as a deer leg.

Enough fur had been gnawed off to expose the still-articulated femur, tibia, and fibula. A tuft of fur remained where bone met hoof. Moving slowly uptrail, I came across another leg, similarly ravaged, then the rest of the kill: the spinal column, the scattered ribs, the halved lower jaw. In a hollow off the side of the trail lay the deer's dichotomous antlers, still attached to a large portion of skull. I picked them up. Maggots burst like a broken pustule from the brain cavity.

I gagged, dropped the antlers, and looked around nervously. The drainage was choked with downed trees and hemmed by steep slopes rimmed by outcroppings of Kaibab limestone. Earlier in the day I had taken my knife out of my pocket and replaced it with my binoculars; I took the knife back out. The rational part of my brain suspected that the cougar wasn't still around—the scat was days old, the kill well worked over. But it didn't require much imagination to envision the lion watching me from a dark hollow. The quick stab of fear I'd felt at the maggots was a primordial feeling, one of the root human feelings, a feeling now as rare as a cougar sighting. It was a fear that may have helped me if I'd actually come face-to-face with a cougar, an occasion I have fiercely longed for.

I have no doubt that I have been in the presence of mountain lions, that they have seen me and that I'd have seen them were I only to have looked in the right place at the right instant; if, rather than being "lost" in thought, I had been present in the way that fear makes me present, heightens my senses; in the way it made me hike the rest of the trail with my head up, looking not at the ground or the façade of surrounding trees, but through the trees, deep into the shadows of the woods. There: a gnarled, anthropomorphic aspen snag. There: the flit and parabolic swoop of a jay. Here: the dry butterscotch scent of a yellow pine and the giving crunch of its litter underfoot.

And the fear was more than a reminder to be attentive to the world around me: it was a reminder that our particular species of hominid is neither the center of that world nor ever apart from that world. It was a healthy, humbling reminder that, to a number of non-human animals, our brilliant, dominant species remains nothing more than meat.

The inherent indifference and austere conditions of the Grand Canyon kept me humble, true, but not in as visceral a manner as the thought of a 130-pound cat bursting from a bush and crushing my windpipe. And not just cougar: in autumn, the South Rim's thousand-pound bull elk swell with testosterone to the point they'll stand in the middle of the road and stare down passing cars with bloodshot eyes and open mouths, almost hallucinating with anger. Once, at my trailer on the South Rim, I watched a rutting bull antler the absolute hell out of what looked to me like a rather unoffending metal trashcan. I was amused at the time, but biking back to my trailer that night I could hear the clack of antlers and moan of bulls battling in the roadside meadows and feared that in the dark an elk would mistake me for a charging rival.

My fear, in this specific instance, was rooted in an indelible moment that occurred when I was sixteen, working on a ranch bordering Idaho's Sawtooth Mountains. Wandering through the sagebrush hills, I spied an elk herd grazing a meadow. I slipped from tree to tree up to the meadow's edge, then inch by inch moved into the grass, barely breathing, hoping—what? To slap an elk ass? To stand amidst them as Elk-Man? I don't know what I was thinking. It didn't matter. Ten paces into the meadow a six-point bull elk emerged from the aspen grove on the far side, snorting and tossing his head, his eyes stripping my soul. Fear ran down through me. I whispered prayers to gods I don't believe in and inched slowly backwards, ever calculating the distance between the bull elk, me, and the closest tree capable of bearing my weight. Just as I reached the first pine the bull swung its massive neck to the west and bugled and as one the twenty or so cows streamed past him. Once the last of his harem had passed, the bull, without deigning a last look, followed, his chin up, his antlers pointed back at me like raised middle fingers.

Contrary to what one might expect from living so long in one of the biggest national parks in one of the more remote sections of the world, I never had a similar, direct, slowed moment of interspecies communication in the Grand Canyon.

Oh, there were times, even times of fear, but most of my animal encounters in the canyon lacked that wild edge, the animals both boring and bored by acculturation. There was the old ram calmly chewing cud in the middle of Bright Angel Trail, crowds backed up on either side, afraid to pass. There were the wild turkeys, gorged on Cheetos and territorial hormones, which attacked tourists and mule trains down at Phantom Ranch. The coyote gagging on roadkilled carrion, the rattlesnake with its head crushed by a rock, the condors tagged like retail products. The time my friend felled a dead aspen whose rot-hollowed core hosted a squirrel's nest made of fiberglass insulation. The feral "beefalo"—bison brought down from Yellowstone to be bred with cattle in the House Rock Valley—now grazing the delicate meadows of the North Rim.

But cougars, cougars cannot be made boring, or fat, or tainted by previous contact. They cannot be controlled except by being killed. Which is, of course, why they are killed, and so too why I loved them, and so wanted to see one, on its own terms. The only time I have seen one was in the Klamath Mountains of Oregon, when I came clattering around a dirtroad bend in my jalopy and saw a tawny backend slink quickly into the downslope brush. Quickly, so quickly it could, in fact, have not been a cougar at all, and despite what I swear were the distinctive scratching-at-the-road motions of a panicked feline, it may have only been my desperate want that made me make a cat out of an ungulate ass. Regardless, if it was a cougar, it was a split-second sight of a creature consumed by fear, not exactly what I have in mind when I long to fill, as D.H. Lawrence put it, the "gap in the world, the missing white frost-face of that slim yellow mountain lion!"

And yet the cougar's fear was fitting, too. At one point both cougar and canyon embodied the sublime; both emanated power, silence, beauty, both had the ability to induce awe, astonishment, and reverence as easily as they did the shock and ecstasy of terror, horror, passion. Though both canyon and cougar still retain these traits, their power, in a remarkably short time, has become debased, diminished. They have become capable of being overwhelmed; they have become overwhelmed.

The Grand Canyon is an integral component of American mythology—a vast, titanic and wholly unique landscape; a tabula rasa that embodies the dramatic natural and human histories of the West. I bought into that myth for a while, bought the narrative the park sells so well: the canyon's exposed earth as unspoiled as the day the first human looked across it. Many of us did. When Ray, barely eighteen, came to work on the Grand Canyon trail crew right after a conservation corps summer in the Yosemite backcountry, he was thrown in with Jim—a wry Chicago realist—and Wayne—a libertarian Christian who believed that humans aren't mammals but divine creatures. Looking out across the great expanse of naked rock, Ray casually mentioned something about places like Yosemite or the canyon being the real world, and everything outside of them as elaborately constructed fallacies.

"Bullshit," said Jim, without looking up from his work.

Ray stared at him, stunned.

"The world on the rim is the real world," said Jim.

"Yeah, the canyon is the fucking bubble," I said.

"But, but..." Ray stammered.

"No. They're right," said Wayne, cutting him off, and so another debate began, this one noteworthy largely in that it may have been the only time that Jim, Wayne, and I had ever agreed.

It's not that we didn't sympathize or even largely agree with Ray. (Much of our dismissal owed simply to an unspoken but principled refusal to tolerate a kid who hadn't yet been annealed by the canyon coming in and telling us what the real world was, especially with such conviction.) Yet all three of us would have agreed that when juxtaposed against the canyon's bare rock, the youngest sedimentary layer of which having been deposited roughly 25 million years before the dinosaurs existed, the world on the rim was indeed an assuredly temporary artifice. Television, pop culture, political soundbites, financial derivatives—none of this was of substance. As Ed Abbey wrote: "Beyond the wall of the unreal city there is another world awaiting for you. It is the old true world of the deserts, the mountains, the forests." This sentiment is what brought me—and the others—to the desert in the first place. But at the same time, it's an argument that veers awfully close to sanctimonious bullshit. (It's also disingenuous, at least coming from Abbey, who would have been horrified if people en masse were able to surmount the various economic, social, and logistical barriers that impede them from invading his "old true world"). Abbey's city, or the "surface world," as we called the world not within the canyon, is real. It is the only world most people know, the only one most take seriously. Further, there is a great deal of similarity—indeed, they are like two sides of the same coin—in the regard for nature in terms of "old true worlds" (or, say, in the beautiful vistas portrayed by Sierra Club calendars), and in the regard for wolves and cougars as craven and bloodthirsty killers. Neither of these polarities are complete: both tend to ignore or reduce innumerable historic and ecological complexities in favor of simplistic, self-serving narratives. And finally, the deserts and mountains and forests of the world have been so altered by the forces of the surface world that, in many cases, they can no longer be considered apart or "beyond."

The canyon, for its part, is inextricably bound to the surface world; it is permeated with humanity's historic and current presence. This permeation, this presence, has had, and still has, its effects, and not just with animals accustomed to humans. There's the dam, releasing the silt-strained waters of the Colorado in accordance with Phoenix's use of air-conditioners. There's the air pollution: whereas at one time one could stand on the North Rim and look across seventy miles at individual trees on San

Francisco Mountain, the nearby Navajo Generating Station now disperses so much particulate matter over the region, that, in conjunction with natural dust and smog blown in from Los Angeles and Phoenix and, as recent evidence suggests, China, on most days the peaks are only a hazy pyramid. There's light pollution: while the Grand Canyon region is still one of the most and last starbright places on the continent, its night sky is increasingly washed out by the city lights of Phoenix, two-hundred and twenty miles away. So much other evidence of our inescapable presence: the roads and trails; the fire-suppressed forests; the petroglyphs and potsherds, dendroglyphs and miner's trash; the mines leaching minerals into the river; the helicopter-spewed fire-retardant leaching off the rim to stain the fulvous Kaibab red; the fact that, as the author Craig Childs pointed out, even much of the water emanating from of the canyon's springs is irradiated, hot with tritium from decades of nearby nuclear weapons testing.

This is our world: where even in a National Park the skein of our presence is laid as thick as the desert vegetation. A world in which nature no longer has a monopoly on the sublime, where the canyon is less relevant to our daily lives, less impressive, in a way, than what Leo Marx dubbed the "technological sublime": the dam plugging the Colorado, the knowledge that the weight of the impounded water behind such dams has shifted the way the world spins on its axis. The dominant catalyst for indescribable awe tinged by terror is neither canyon nor cougar but the sheer quantity of pavement laid across the desert basin of Los Angeles, the beauty within the swoops of its freeways.

This is far more terrifying to me than the fear of a cat in the woods. A cat I could flee from or fight. At least try. If I had encountered that lion that day in the woods, I like to think that my fear would have been instinctive, open, even enlightening. It would have been far less pernicious than my fears of the violence that humans so readily inflict upon other humans, and far more honest, even reassuring, than my intellectual fears of ocean acidification, or antibiotic-resistant "superbugs," or any of the other forms of slow violence that we have wrought on the world.

In *The Thunder Tree: Lessons from an Urban Wildland*, Robert Michael Pyle writes: "If we are to forge new links to the land, we must resist the extinction of experience." This comes in the context of his greater discussion about "the state of personal alienation from nature in which many people live," in which he argues, in a clear rebuttal to Abbey's "unreal city" that "[w]e must save not only the wilderness but the vacant lots, the ditches as well as the canyonlands, and the woodlots along with the old growth."

The extinction of experience is why, I think, I was attempting to infiltrate that elk herd at the idiot and wonderful age of sixteen: being raised in Los Angeles, I had never before been blessed with such an opportunity. The extinction of experience is why I left Los Angeles, seeking to live in the last places that offered such experiences. And yet even in these last places, even in so many of our National Parks, we come face to face with this lack, this negative feedback loop: I can't help but think that if we had more face-to-face experiences with cougars and wolves and grizzlies we might be less afraid of their presence—or future presence—in our midst.

Or maybe not. The renewal of experience could easily have the opposite effect, providing the old forms for our now general fears to re-inhabit. Numerous studies have shown that people are evolutionarily hardwired to fear snakes and spiders, even if they have had little or no contact with them. This could certainly be true of lion and wolf as well. If the wolf's tooth "whittled so fine/the fleet limbs of the antelope," as Robinson Jeffers put it, it also shaped my mind to start at shadows and my hands to grasp for knives. Certainly more experiences with mountain lions would likely lead to more attacks on humans, and thus rekindle and renew the urge to exterminate and eradicate. If I (and D.H. Lawrence, he-of-the "how easily we might spare a million or two humans/ and never miss them" lines) may consider the occasional cougar attack a small price to pay for a more genuine and balanced coexistence, I'd obviously be rather upset were my young daughter to be carried off and consumed by a large cat. From a distance, often an urban distance, it's easy to speak blithely of re-stitching our frayed relationships to the non-human world, to speak positively of abstractions like keystone predators and trophic cascades and ecological communities. Yet picking through the rent and rotting flesh of a deer carcass, it's far more difficult to ignore the potential for the sudden and striking violence that we fear from these creatures.

But that's the point. Even if the fear persists, even as the fear persists, we can learn from it. Accepting fear is not about ignoring it, and certainly not about eradicating the external trigger, but by coming face to face with it, by addressing the internal source: in this case our ancient insecurities, the relic terrors of beasts beyond the reach of the cave's firelight. It is remarkable to think of how many of our current ecological calamities arose—and are sustained—not simply through ignorance or anthropocentric worldviews, but through our attempts to overcome our ancestral fears. So too is it interesting to consider the possibility, as Gary Snyder posited, that "Ignorance and hostility toward wild nature set us up for objectifying and exploiting fellow humans." If this is true, we can gain some solace in the Jeffers line, "Old violence is not too old to beget new values"—it may be that by replacing these anachronistic fears and hostilities with new, ecologically-based values and ethics, as well as humility, acceptance, courage, discipline, my daughter's grandchildren may still live with cougar and wolf and bear and elk. It may be that they will be kinder to one another.

I realize that most people would not embrace even the ecological violence of the cougar kill with the same edged joy I experienced that day. But I know that I'm not entirely alone. After all, and somewhat ironically, the Grand Canyon Game Preserve, and the subsequent eradication of predators to protect game species, was created in large part because, as Daniel Justin Herman points out in *Hunting and the American Imagination*, upper- and middle-class New Englanders who considered themselves "sportsman" were looking back "on the exploits of real men like Daniel Boone, and fictional hunter-heroes like Natty Bumppo, with a nostalgic longing to recapture for themselves the spirit of independent, self-reliant manhood they sadly lacked in their own urban, industrial lives." A century after these sportsman decided to protect game animals by killing predators, I was following in their atavistic footsteps, longing for the old days when one could wander across the Kaibab Plateau and come face to face with wolves and bear and cougar. I suspect that this longing underlies why so many millions of people a year visit National Parks and wildlands; I know that Ray, Jim, and Wayne felt the same way, no matter what we felt constituted the "real world."

Those days may come again; I may yet have the chance to walk through a re-wilded Plateau. In October of 2014—years after my encounter with the cougar kill—a female grey wolf was spotted on the Kaibab Plateau, having traveled at least 450 miles from her home in the northern Rocky Mountains. She was the first wolf on the Plateau since the 1940s, when the government destroyed the local population. Still, her visit may be a one-time occurrence: if the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—the modern-day iteration of the same agency that helped systematically exterminate wolves from the lower 48 states—removes Endangered Species Act protection for all wolves, there is little chance that wolves will be able to recolonize the areas they once roamed, even prime habitat like the Kaibab Plateau.

In his essay about the extinction of experience Pyle says, "We must become believers in the world." The world as it is, for human, wolf, and cougar. As much as I agree with this, it's difficult. Sad. I once heard a mule-wrangler leading her tourist-wards down the North Kaibab Trail say: "Teddy Roosevelt had to come and kill all the wolves and cougar on the North Rim because they were killing our deer." Our deer. Three months after the itinerant wolf graced the Kaibab Plateau she was shot dead in Utah by a man intending to collect the \$50 that Utah pays per coyote pelt. This is the world we must believe in. That day I came across the cougar kill I finished my hike at a parking lot crowded with Park Service law enforcement. They were uniformed, mostly men, with an undercurrent of aggression, a hint of provocation, emanating from the way they gathered around their vehicles. They had just finished up firearm training, and the parking lot was littered with empty shell casings. I skirted through the woods to avoid them, feeling more vulnerable than I had all day.