

Wilderness, Myth, and American Character

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THERE IS A JOKE AMONG EMPLOYEES OF THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE—many of whom opposed passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act—that prior to 1964 only God could make wilderness but now only the U.S. Congress can. The joke refers to the act's prohibiting release of potential wilderness land to other use or designation until Congress judges its suitability for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. That language has resulted in great fuss and fury over our public lands.

Some 57 million acres in the coterminous United States still await action from Congress on its potential wilderness value. That is considerably more than present officially designated American wilderness—approximately 34 million acres, excluding Alaska.¹ Most of the disputed land lies west of the Mississippi River; in the state of Idaho, for instance, approximately nine million acres awaits release from the language of the 1964 Wilderness Act.

These figures indicate the extent to which wilderness designation is a political hot potato. It is also a philosophical hot potato, replete with paradox. Some philosophers hold the idea of wilderness to be purely an invention of the mind, a time-bound product of humanity's triumph in successfully inhabiting all but the most inhospitable portions of Earth. Others hold it be to something real and palpable: a place corresponding to its Old English etymology—"wildeorness"—that is, a place of wild beasts.

Much of the paradox in conceiving of wilderness stems from the paradox that is human nature. How do we account for ourselves? Are we the dark angels of our various religious conceptions or the natural bodies of Darwinian evolution—bodies that through a fluke of gambling nature happened to stumble upon consciousness? To what extent are our activities and actions "natural"? It matters, you see, for if *Homo sapiens* is, as Jared Diamond argues, simply a third species of chimpanzee,² we have, no matter what we do, wilderness all about us. We are one kind of beast; and so the literal "place of the beasts" contains us and all we have wrought—our art and poetry no less than our skyscrapers and sewage systems.

Most conceptions of wilderness, including most drawn from evolutionary naturalism, draw a sharp distinction between humans and the other "beasts" of nature. This line of thinking resolves one paradox only

¹ John C. Hendee, George C. Stanley, and Robert C. Lucas, *Wilderness Management*, 2nd ed. (Golden, Colo.: North American Press, 1990): 166.

² Humans and chimpanzees share 98.4% of DNA and diverged six to eight million years ago. See Jared Diamond, *The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1992): 21.

to create another. Wilderness lands become, in the language of the Wilderness Act, areas "untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."³ Thanks to the attractions of this idea, our wilderness lands are threatened by the very people who love them most. Some wilderness areas as so popular as sanctuaries from the hazards and trials of urban life that it is now virtually impossible to find solitude—one of the prime values of wilderness recreation. For better or worse the four federal agencies responsible for administering wilderness lands have been forced into "wilderness management"—a paradox if ever there was one. It doesn't take a philosopher to point out that managing something wild risks laying down conditions for its eventual domestication. For instance, winter feeding of elk and deer—a widespread policy of many state wildlife agencies—may over time tame animals whose present attraction is that they are wild. Someday perhaps the sole large mammal on Earth to be genetically wild (that is, whose breeding is left to the spontaneity of nature) will be *Homo sapiens*. Perhaps, though, not even we will remain genetically wild, given our technology and accompanying proclivity to intervene in the human genome.

In mentioning the air of paradox surrounding both the idea of wilderness and the practices of managing and preserving wilderness, I invite you to think of the role of metaphor in giving substance to our various conceptions of wilderness. The phrase *wilderness as* comes naturally to our lips. Among the diverse and contending images of wilderness to be found in the literature are wilderness as a wasteland,⁴

as a gymnasium,⁵ as a playground,⁶ as a prison,⁷ and as a pharmacy.⁸ Specifically, I shall examine the claim that wilderness is a special kind of proving ground, with a special connection to American character and experience. That connection is best expressed by Wallace Stegner:

Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed; if we permit the last virgin forests to be turned into comic books and plastic cigarette cases; if we drive the few remaining members of the wild species

acres will yield the needy and wretched inhabitants as many conveniences of life as ten acres of equally fertile land do in Devonshire where they are well cultivated?" John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 2nd ed., Peter Laslett, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967): 316.

⁵ "A wilderness that can be entered only by a few of the most physically fit will act as an incentive to myriads more to improve their physical condition." Garrett Hardin "The Economics of Wilderness," *Natural History*, 78, 6 (June-July, 1969): 26.

⁶ Marvin Henberg, "Wilderness as Playground," *Environmental Ethics*, 6 (Fall 1984): 251-63.

⁷ Thomas H. Birch, "The Incarceration of Wilderness: Wilderness Areas as Prisons," *Environmental Ethics*, 12 (Spring 1990): 3-26.

⁸ "In the United States a quarter of all prescriptions dispensed by pharmacies are substances extracted from plants.... Yet these materials are only a tiny fraction of the multitude available. Fewer than 3 percent of the flowering plants of the world ... have been examined for alkaloids, and then in limited and haphazard fashion." E.O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life* (Boston: Belknap Press, 1992): 283-4.

³ Public Law 88-577, Section 2 (c).

⁴ "For I aske whether in the wild woods and uncultivated wast of America left to Nature...a thousand

into zoos or to extinction; if we pollute the last clear air and dirty the last clean streams and push our paved roads through the last of the silence, so that never again will Americans be free in their own country from the noise, the exhausts, the stinks of human and automotive waste.... We need wilderness preserved—as much of it as is still left, and as many kinds—because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed.⁹

The Character Thesis

Like most claims related to wilderness, this one generates its share of controversy. Supporters of what I shall henceforth call the *character thesis* point to the pride we in the United States take in our wilderness heritage. They point to our leadership in conservation and preservation—our historic firsts in establishing the National Park System and, later, the National Wilderness Preservation System. They point to the spread of the wilderness idea to countries ranging from New Zealand to Zimbabwe. Finally, they find in contemporary wilderness experience manifold echoes of good character—honesty, self-reliance, and simplification of wants, to name but a few.

Critics of connecting the wilderness idea to our national character point, first, to the historical relativism of our relationship to untamed nature. Less than a century and a half before Stegner waxed eloquent on the importance of wilderness to the American character, Alexis de Tocqueville told a different story:

... in Europe people talk a great deal about the wilds of America,

but the Americans themselves never think about them; they are insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature and they may be said not to perceive the mighty forests that surround them till they fall beneath the hatchet.¹⁰

In the final analysis, though, historical differences between contemporary Americans and their ancestors need not trouble defenders of the character thesis. National character, like individual character, takes on the craggy lines of wisdom because of rather than in spite of turmoil and reversal of fortune. Ideals shift—that which is lost (or nearly so) gets appreciated when we no longer have it: innocence for one, wilderness for another. In addition, de Tocqueville's remarks are generalized and composite; could he, for instance, have had the privilege of meeting Virginia's William Byrd II nearly one hundred years earlier, he would have found a man in whom wilderness sensibility was highly developed.¹¹ The reversal in American appreciation of wilderness, a story so ably told by historian Roderick Nash,¹² was not created *ex nihilo*. It had seeds, most dying on the hard granitic soil of public indifference, but a few nurtured against extinction until a field could be cultivated for them.

A second and more intractable problem for the character thesis lies in its ethnic exclusivity. Exactly *whose* character was formed by the "challenge" of wilderness? Not Native Americans—to them, according

¹⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, J.P. Mayer, ed., George Lawrence, trans. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960): 335.

¹¹ For an account of Byrd's fondness for wild nature, see Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982): 51-53.

¹² *Ibid.*

⁹ Wallace Stegner, "The Wilderness Idea," in David Brower, ed., *Wilderness: America's Living Heritage* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1961): 97.

to Standing Bear, an Oglala Sioux, the land of North America was never wild in conception, but rather tame.¹³ Not to African-Americans, enslaved first on plantations of the New World and later confined, many of them, to urban ghettos—"city wildernesses" in the parlance of Robert A. Woods' turn-of-the-century book, *The City Wilderness*.¹⁴ Not to Polly Beamis, a young woman kidnapped in her native China and carried off to Oregon Territory. Her character was formed by fending off lustful drunks in saloons, where she served as hostess and eventually purchased her way to freedom by surreptitiously sweeping and collecting gold dust from the floors.¹⁵

For all these and other diverse peoples of America, wilderness land as conceived in the mainstream preservation movement played little role in shaping character. Few people actually experienced the frontier, whose "closing" Frederick Jackson Turner built into a powerful metaphor for America's first inward glance—our first hint that we might have to re-invent ourselves by, among other things, protecting wildlands and wildlife. Fewer people still—at least to a school of revisionist American historians currently challenging the Turner thesis—have reason to care about the frontier, its wilderness edge, or its supposed vanishing.¹⁶ According to some of

the revisionists, the idea that wilderness was an especially strong force in shaping the American character is a myth in an uncomplimentary sense—"myth" as in a false and possibly misleading tale.¹⁷

If the ethnocentrism of the character thesis is one problem, its vagueness as to the virtues engendered by wilderness experience is another. Theodore Roosevelt, for instance, thought of the wilds as a proving ground for virility, male camaraderie, and the honing of a warrior caste.¹⁸ These perceptions are less than palatable in these decades of deep ecology and ecofeminism.

Fundamentally, then, the character thesis is in serious philosophical trouble. The main difficulty lies in selective readings both of character and of wild nature. Human character runs the gamut from the virtuous to the vicious, with numerous shades of each. What is more, some of our favored virtues are possibly inconsistent with each other. As Isaiah Berlin observes, the honor of

(Lawrence, Kan.: University of Kansas Press, 1991).

¹⁷ "The imagined West is a mythic West. In its everyday colloquial sense, myth means falsehood.... Myths are a deeply encoded set of metaphors that may contain all the 'lessons we have learned from our history, and all of the essential elements of our world view.' Myths give meaning to the world. In this sense a myth about the West is a story that explains who westerners—and who Americans—are and how they should act." Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A History of the American West* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991): 615.

¹⁸ "Hardy sports of the field offer the best possible training for war." Theodore Roosevelt, *The Wilderness Hunter* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1900): 272.

¹³ Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933): 38.

¹⁴ Robert A. Woods, *The City Wilderness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1898).

¹⁵ See Ruthanne Lum McCunn, *Thousand Pieces of Gold* (Boston: Beacon Press: 1988).

¹⁶ See for instance Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History*

Achilles cannot be harmonized with the mercy of Christ. These two species of virtue are incommensurable, as only disturbing figures like Machiavelli and Nietzsche have dared to proclaim.¹⁹ When our own dark image is glimpsed darkly in the supposed mirror of wild nature, the difficulty is compounded. Wild nature may be, with Tennyson, "red in tooth and claw" or, with Annie Dillard, gentle as a spring day on Tinker Creek—an epitome of harmony and symbiosis. We search in wildness for what we want and, unsurprisingly, find it exactly as it "ought" to have been.

Yet for all its deficiencies—its cultural exclusivity, its vagueness as to what constitutes a virtue, and its tendency to shape wild nature after its own favored image—there remains something to be said for the character thesis. It has a ring that many Americans harken to; a ring, if not of truth, at least of innocently faithful self-conception. Conceive of the point this way: Suppose the liberty bell were to be rung, and we as a people were to hear it. Thanks to the bell's famous crack, the sound would not be faithful to its original—its "true" sound if you will. But would that matter? Would it even be relevant to the spirit the bell represents? We have, of course, many detractors of the ideal of liberty represented by the bell, and many of their criticisms are apt, pointed. Freedom has not been equally extended to all within the fabric of our nation, and that is a criticism whose measure we must take. It is not to be ignored, but neither is it to be made into the whole story. Let us ask the critic this: With what would you rather take your chances—a political system whose ideal is sounded by the cracked knell of the liberty bell, or a political system with no such

symbol? I, for one, fervently believe in the positive power of ideals. Their appeal is non-rational, even ritualistic; but as an aspirant to philosophy, I have concluded that concepts alone mainly divide rather than unite human beings. We need symbols and their emotive associations. Among those symbols we need most is wilderness.

Stegner's words thus emphasize that, culturally rather than ethnically or personally, to be American is to conceive of ourselves as a wilderness people. The flaws in this thesis are both as prominent and as irrelevant as the crack in the liberty bell. I challenge you to read the political history of passage of the Wilderness Act and see in it anything but a robust populism stirred from the depths of our national self-conception.²⁰ Sometimes, thankfully, our ideals—erroneous and unflattering as they may appear under some lights—stir us to prefer the social good to the getting and spending by which we lay waste our individual powers. Since we must believe something about ourselves, I submit that belief in ourselves as a people shaped by wilderness is productive of greater good than of evil. In this light the character thesis becomes a different kind of myth—not a false and misleading tale, but a symbolic means of uniting us in celebration of something larger than ourselves.

My defense of this thesis, however, is fideistic rather than rationalistic. Reason alone is incompetent to penetrate and sufficiently articulate the mysteries of wild nature. Reason inevitably concocts its arguments with judicious concern for the other side. For every Wallace Stegner lamenting the production of plastic cigarette cases, we have a

¹⁹ Isaiah Berlin, "The Originality of Machiavelli" in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: Viking Press, 1980): 25-79.

²⁰ See Michael Frome, *Battle for the Wilderness* (Boulder, Colo.: Praeger Publishers, 1974) and Craig W. Allin, *The Politics of Wilderness Preservation* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982).

Martin Krieger making the case for plastic trees.²¹ In such instances, reason carries us into the realm of computer-generated virtual realities to ask, "Why not extinguish the real thing so long as the wilderness experience can be provided in surrogate form?" Quickly forgotten when reason has its generalizing, abstracting say is the joy of particularity—a dimension of experience open only to the "inherent imbecility of feeling," in George Eliot's phrase.²² It is the joy of knowing a specific place or person as opposed to grasping a generalized category or purpose.

Here is Rockbridge County native and wilderness philosopher, Holmes Rolston, III, on the importance of particularity:

Wildness is nature in what philosophers call idiographic form. Each wilderness is one of a kind, so we give it a proper names—the Rawahs, the Dismal Swamp. We climb Mount Ida or canoe on the Congaree River. Even when exploring some nameless canyon or camping at a spring, one experiences a concrete locus never duplicated in idiosyncratic detail. In culture, there is but one Virginia and each Virginian has a proper name. The human differences include conscious self-

affirmations and heritages for which nature provides little precedent. But nature first is never twice the same. Always in the understory there are distinctive landscape features—the Shenandoah Valley or the Chesapeake Bay—with which the Virginians interact, each with a unique genetic set. Before culture emerges, nature is already endlessly variable. This feature is crucial to what we mean by wildness.²³

Thanks to its endless variability, the best way of capturing the particularity of wilderness lands is through narrative. As Rolston observes, "There is no narrative in biology text, but a trip into wildness is always a story."²⁴ Each parcel in the National Wilderness Preservation System features stories with multiple plots and restless casts of plant, animal, and human characters wandering through a unique geography. The drama lies in the pure contingency of relations. Wilderness understanding depends on emotional singularity and kinesthetic presence more than on abstract generalization. It has more the imprint of natural history than of molecular biology. Please do not misunderstand: We need molecular biology too, for among other things it allows us to test the contingent relations described in wild nature, just as it does similar work in paleontology to test the integrity of claims in natural history. But the history itself—for instance, the evolutionary mixing some 70 million years ago of fauna from North and South American known to paleontologists as the Great American Interchange—cannot be replicated. We trace it in the fossil record, speculating about

²¹ Martin Krieger, "What's Wrong with Plastic Trees?" *Science*, 179 (1973): 446-54.

²² "... emotion, I fear, is obstinately irrational: it insists on caring for individuals; it absolutely refuses to adopt a quantitative view of human anguish, and to admit that thirteen happy lives are a set-off against twelve miserable lives, which leaves a clear balance of satisfaction. This is the inherent imbecility of feeling, and one must be a great philosopher to have got quite clear of all that...." George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985): 301.

²³ Holmes Rolston III, "Values Gone Wild" in *Philosophy Gone Wild* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books: 1986): 137-8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

cause and effect, but our understanding is always in the form of a story, a narrative. (Note, I do not say *only* a story, for rousing tales need no apology so long as the teller's imagination is checked by integrity and concern for truth.) Narratives of natural history abound in re-constructed details of climate, predation, birth and rearing of young, migration, cataclysm, evolutionary branching, and extinction. As a complement, narratives of wilderness offer up miniature slices within the grander narratives of natural history.

Introducing "The Frank"

Let me therefore observe the particularity of wilderness by introducing you to the Frank Church River of No Return area in my adopted home of Idaho. Begin with the name and its particularity. Frank Church, a distinguished U.S. Senator from Idaho, was senate floor manager of the 1964 Wilderness Act. "River of No Return" is the name applied to Idaho's Salmon River. The name dates to the Lewis and Clark expedition when William Clark, searching for a water passage to the Pacific, followed the river into one of its spectacular canyons and pronounced its steep cliffs and fierce rapids to be impassable either by boat or on horseback.²⁵

²⁵ Clark's journal entry for September 2, 1805, tells of the dangers of riding horses in the Salmon River canyon after all thought of traveling by canoe has been abandoned: "... proceeded on thro' thickets ... over rocky hill Sides where our horses were in [per]petual danger of Slipping to their certain destruction & up & Down Steep hills, where Several horses fell, Some turned over, and others slipped down Steep hill Sides, one horse Crippled & 2 gave out." See *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*, Bernard DeVoto, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952): 232.

Continue to the particularity of the area. "The Frank," as it is called by its partisans, is the largest official wilderness area outside Alaska—over 2.3 million acres. Located in central Idaho, it is contiguous with two other wilderness areas, the 200,000-acre Gospel Hump, and the 1.1-million-acre Selway-Bitterroot. Many of the surrounding lands are *de facto* wilderness, awaiting Congressional determination of their status. Sheer size gives the River of No Return area outstanding wilderness qualities of remoteness, isolation, and an ecosystem that is as undisturbed as can be found in the continental United States. In fact, some ecologists and wildlife biologists regard the Frank and its environs as unique for containing wholly within its borders both the summer and winter ranges of all its large mammals. Even Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks do not qualify on this score, for many elk winter outside their borders. Nor do the huge Alaska wilderness areas qualify, given the tremendous thousand-mile-and-more migrations of the Arctic caribou.

Following procedures outlined in the Wilderness Act, the Frank was created by a Central Idaho Wilderness Act passed by Congress in 1980. Certain special conditions apply, creating special peculiarities of management. For example, though banned in most wilderness areas outside Alaska, planes may fly into the Frank, using any of eighteen primitive airstrips. Power boats, also generally banned from wilderness, are allowed on the Main Salmon River, which forms the 86-mile-long northern boundary. The more pristine Middle Fork of the Salmon—105 miles through the heart of the wilderness—allows only rafts, canoes, and kayaks. There are many small inholdings of private land—most of them along the two rivers and in the larger creek drainages. Finally, there is a special mining reserve where in a national emergency

extraction of cobalt, a strategic mineral, may be authorized.

Lest you are tempted to accept the view perpetuated by foes of wilderness designation that wilderness areas "lock up" the land so it receives no use, let me provide you with some facts to the contrary. In 1992, over 20,000 people rafted the combined Middle Fork and Main Salmon Rivers. Thousands more traveled the Main Salmon in their jet boats, craft powerful enough to ply the rapids of the river. Registered backcountry users, traveling by foot or pack animal (llamas are now common), numbered over 10,000 people, while in the months of September and October alone—hunting season—there were some 9,000 airplane passengers.²⁶

The periphery of the wilderness is growing rapidly, with thousands of people moving each year into the Treasure and Magic Valleys of Idaho and the Bitterroot Valley of Montana. Many of these people are attracted precisely because of the proximity of the Frank and other wilderness lands. Indeed, a recent national survey shows that migration into counties containing wilderness land is heavily influenced by environmental quality and opportunities for outdoor recreation. Among recent immigrants, the proximity of wilderness was cited as a special amenity by 72% of the respondents. In contrast, only 55% of longtime residents cited proximity to wilderness as a special amenity.²⁷ Presuming that the new arrivals act on

their expressed preferences, wilderness lands will be more and more heavily used as in-migration continues. All of these particularities create management headaches for the Forest Service. The wilderness portion of the agency's budget is minuscule. For instance, the North Fork Ranger District, responsible for management of one fifth of the Frank, has a total wilderness budget, including overhead, of only \$100,000.²⁸ Even this paltry sum is considerably larger than the wilderness budget for the other four ranger districts with responsibility in the Frank, for the North Fork district patrols the Main Salmon River, where most of the human impact is concentrated.

Somehow, despite pressure from those of us who love it too well and from others who abuse it by poaching or by littering, the Frank remains a truly magnificent political achievement. It remains so, because as a place it is exactly that—magnificent. Seeking inspiration, I spent a week in the heart of the wilderness in mid-February of 1993. The trip gave me a story and a summation all in one.

An American Serengeti

I was headquartered on Big Creek, at a former outfitter's ranch now maintained by the University of Idaho as a Wilderness Research Center. My companions were two wildlife biologists—Jim Peek and Torstein Storras, able guides with trained eyes.

In mid-winter most of the large ungulates—elk, mule deer, and bighorn sheep—are concentrated in the drainages. In six days, we saw over one hundred elk and one hundred bighorn sheep. We also spotted sixty or so mule deer. The animals graze in large numbers on the grassy, south-facing slopes, which are largely without snow even in a hard winter like that of 1993. The

²⁶ Figures from Rogers Thomas, District Ranger, North Fork Ranger District, during presentation to Edwin Krumpke's "Wilderness Management" class, University of Idaho, February 9, 1993.

²⁷ See Gundars Rudzitis and Harley E. Johansen, "How Important is Wilderness? Results from a United States Survey," *Environmental Management*, 15 (1991): 227-233.

²⁸ Figure from Rogers Thomas.

north slopes, by contrast, are thickly forested in Ponderosa pine and buried under two or more feet of snow. The contrast between south-facing and north-facing slopes is exotic and decisive: A south slope is a skyward-tilting Serengeti, rich with life and motion; a north slope is a Black Forest primeval, emptied of the ungulates and hence seemingly as frozen in time as in temperature.

The predators know this division well, and among the sheep and elk and deer tracks are tracks of cougars, bobcats, and coyotes. (The bears, of course, are hibernating.) Each day's outing proved a lesson in predation: A goshawk, for instance, left the feathers of a rough grouse or chukker partridge for us to examine nearly every morning. So too for the cougars: We found numerous kill sites, some new and some old; some with the bones still intact; some with bones scattered by coyotes. In one case we came on fresh cougar tracks leading away from the carcass of an elk calf, still warm to the touch. The calf, its thick neck snapped and lying on its haunch, had been eviscerated. Only a small portion along its spine had been eaten. We guessed the cougar had been scared off from its feeding by our approach, and though we scanned for an hour with our binoculars in the craggy rocks of the canyon, we never spotted it. I'm sure the cougar could see us, but was not about to return the favor.

Two days later—weather crisp, cold, and beautifully clear—we set off for the juncture of Big Creek with the Middle Fork. Walking this day was a treat, for the crusted snow held without our sinking too deeply into it. We passed our usual complement of elk and bighorn sheep, watched a golden eagle rise from its nest in one of the side canyons, and admired some 3,000-year-old pictographs left on the canyon walls by ancient hunters. We then entered a steep and narrow canyon much like

the one, twelve miles west, where we had found the fresh elk carcass. Ideal cougar terrain: ample concealment, narrow passages to confine the prey, and high rocky walls for hurtling down unseen and unsuspected. At a bend in the trail, we encountered another fresh cougar print, smaller than the earlier one; probably a female. Our excitement rose: Perhaps we would find another fresh kill.

Around the bend lay a scene of carnage beyond anything we had anticipated. We first encountered an eight-foot diameter dish of blood, glistening red against the white of the snow. The bloody patch lay at the edge of a precipice marked with bloody striations indicating the path of a body fallen forty feet down into the creek. We gaped in awe, peering over the precipice. Then we walked ten feet farther, only to find a second bloody, dished-out area in the snow. Like the first, this one was eight feet in diameter; also like the first, it offered clear evidence of a body's plunging off the precipice onto the snow at creek's edge. Growing out from the walls of the precipice was a small mountain mahogany bush. Its tough bark was shredded, torn away, leaving its blond wood exposed and covered in blood.

There were cougar tracks all around, but we were too excited initially to measure or sort them out. Seeking the carcass of whatever had been killed, we circumvented the precipice to search beneath it at water's edge. Nothing, no carcass. Puzzled, we inspected the tracks. Two bloody sets of cougar prints moved up the slope, side by side, separated by perhaps three feet. Another set meandered off through the brush, finally rejoining the main trail. When we reached the trail, we were astonished to confront bloody cougar tracks—all pointing toward us—for as far as we could see. Not just a few spots or flecks of blood, but great smears of it.

We returned to the two patches of blood above the precipice. With no carcass to be found, we looked for hair: Perhaps the cougar had attacked a bull elk, weighing upward of twelve hundred pounds, and been gored. But there was no elk hair. No deer hair, no wool from the bighorns. Only cat hair, great tufts of it.

Heading downstream, we followed the cat prints. From time to time the prints widened, showing where a cougar had clawed the snow, apparently in agony. We paced on, eyes fixed on the trail: red on white, red on white, red on white. We walked for twenty minutes, a full mile. "We've got to find something soon," Torstein muttered, "one animal *can't* have lost this much blood!"

At long last we came to another bloody depression, long and narrow, the imprint of a wounded cougar lying in the snow. On the slope ten feet above was another such outline. Here was the initial site of the conflict...or at least, that is what we thought until our eyes went up. Up, up, up, high along the snow-covered rocks, the canyon so steep and narrow as to banish the winter sun even at mid-day. What we saw was a dished-out slide, as bloody as the tracks we had followed, created by an animal's four-hundred foot plunge down the slope.

As we scrambled up the pitch, Jim reported flecks of blood splattered on the snow five meters from the slide. We came to the end of the blood and continued climbing, following the depression scooped out by the falling body. It went on, bloodless, for another hundred feet. There, immediately below where the canyon rose high enough for the sun to melt the snow, we found the fresh prints of a large cougar. The animal had walked in a traverse of the slope, then suddenly bounded for fifty yards before crashing down uncontrollably.

During an excited lunch on the steep walls of the canyon, we pieced together what had happened.²⁹ One male cougar, lurking in the rocks above snowline, had pounced on another—the one traversing the slope. They slid down together, biting and clawing for the first hundred feet, at which point one of them sank tooth or claw into an artery of the other. The bleeding began, dyeing the snow and spurting the blood five meters downwind. They crashed into the bottom of the canyon. The wounded cougar lay below; the

²⁹ By stretching credulity to the breaking point, the evidence is consistent with another explanation—namely, that a single cougar had been shot from the air by an unscrupulous hunter. Though this possibility cannot be disproven, it depends on highly improbable circumstances that raise many unanswered questions. The attack would have had to occur in daylight, and we had neither seen nor heard aircraft in the area for days. To shoot a cougar moving at full speed from a fixed-wing craft would be a surpassing accomplishment, and use of a helicopter at such a remote site is unlikely. Also, if the cougar had been shot, why had it not bled for the first hundred feet of its slide down the slope? In addition, its later behavior seems very unlike that of a wounded animal. Why did it stay out in the open rather than flee for cover? Why did it shred the mahogany bush? Why did it thrash around in two different spots, leaving bloody, eight-foot diameter scoops in the snow? Why did it fall, not once or twice, but *three* times down the precipice into the creek? Why, on its second climb back up the precipice, did it follow its previous tracks at a consistent intervening space of three feet? Why, on what would have been its third climb up the precipice, did it suddenly stop bleeding and pace—apparently undisturbed—from the scene?

other, its belly matted with blood from its rival, lay ten feet above. They hissed and snarled, but kept their distance. The wounded male finally fled upstream along the trail. The competitor followed. They battled once again at the precipice, both falling onto the shore below. They paced uphill alongside each other, snarling but keeping apart. One of them shredded the mahogany bush, perhaps seeking to intimidate the other. Again they fought, creating the second dish of blood. Again both fell, this time into the creek. Only one of them, as the tracks clearly showed, got out. The other—dazed, perhaps already dead from lack of blood—slid under the ice to await the spring thaw. The victor returned to the scene of the two battles above the precipice, then headed upslope. Its bloody tracks could be followed, but the blood thinned out; the trail reached the rocks, where we could follow flecks of blood for a short distance. Then nothing.

At the time I witnessed this scene, I was one of only four people within a fifty-mile radius. Surrounding us, then, in each of the hundreds of other creek drainages, were the tracks, the evidence, the leavings, from thousands of similar stories. All of them were gone with the thaw, as was the cougar carcass in Big Creek, washed into the Middle Fork by April torrents. But what is magnificent and enduring is the wilderness itself, complete with the ennobling thought that somewhere in this great continent of ours, nature can still be so prodigal as to waste the life of a lithe, fierce, full-grown cougar.

Still, we must guard against generalizing too readily. Fights among

cougars are far from an everyday affair. Males use bluff, scent markings, and intimidation to establish their territories and avoid encounters. Even when they do fight, the results are seldom fatal. Nature, though, is a gambler, a lover of chance and contingency; a sucker for particularity. She even loves a good joke—one in tune with American character, myth, and experience. The carnage we witnessed took place on February 14—and so, though lacking guns and gangsters, constituted a St. Valentine's Day Massacre.

Love of narrative for its own sake may be exclusively a human trait. But our characters are drawn from life, and animals are unequivocally the favorite characters of our young. (Imagine for a moment, children's literature without animals.) Will we have wild animals for our story lines of the future? Not unless we protect their habitat and their freedom.

Wilderness, then, is less about the mythic American character than about characters who live their natural lives apart from us. Stories such as I have just told, on an errand outside the wilderness, are scripted by powers larger than human. Nature and narrative fit hand in glove. If we will let nature abide wildly in some few remaining portions of Earth, we will be immeasurably richer for it. We will not only secure a future for coming generations, we will secure stories for them—stories of wonder, of kinship with other living beings, and of richness and fecundity from a prodigal source. Only if we succeed in preserving wilderness lands will these stories have a moral dimension, for only then will they tell of our humility and self-restraint rather than of our craving for excess.

