

Wildish:  
Animals, Kinship, and My Search for Wild in a Humble Landscape  
A nonfiction book-in-progress

**Introduction: Learning a New Language**

“The more coherent one becomes within oneself as a creature, the more fully one enters into the communion of all creatures.”

—*Wendell Berry*

When I was twenty-five, I went to live alone in a cabin in the woods. I went to learn another language.

The cabin was a simple log structure that sat on the edge of a pond. It had a roofline that sagged like a swayback horse, a jaunty stovepipe. It had no electricity, no running water, which helped to remove layers between me and this other world that I was hoping to commune with—this small clearing in the woods. I wanted to know the way it weathered the seasons, the pitch black night. I went to understand the liquid yips and howls of coyotes, the sound of their camaraderie slipping down the hills and bouncing off the pond’s surface. I wanted to study the call and response of barred owl song, the way a hemlock forest smells after a hard rain, the feeling of floating in a canoe in the middle of the pond with not a single other (human) soul in sight. I went for quiet and to be alone, two ways of being that had claimed me and infused themselves as part of my identity, whether I liked it or not. Some people thought that I went to find myself. That’s how our contemporary narrative would have it, right? Women go do things out of the ordinary to find themselves, as though any kind of journey is an act of self-realization. Not me. I went to the cabin to lose myself.

I moved to the cabin in the height of a New England autumn. The glory of the foliage was mostly lost down amongst the conifers where I lived, but not so the deep cornflower blue of a September sky, of perfectly crisp mornings, of afternoons still warm enough for swimming in the nearby river, of air that smelled of migrations, of seeking home, of settling in. Then suddenly, the air turned and the river was too cold and one morning in November I woke up to the winter's first real snowfall blanketing the landscape. I felt it as soon as I awoke. There was the obvious blanket of white that seemed to light up the cabin through the large picture window. And when I opened the door, the air was thick, sounds muted, everything soft and blunted by the snow. It was the same world, but different. And then, all around me, were the coyote tracks.

On the cabin's snowy stoop that morning, I sat reading the story the animals had left. They'd been writing it all along, of course, but I hadn't been able to see it, let alone decipher its meaning. It was like I'd received a secret message written in milk and I was holding it over the candle flame to reveal the words. Their feet pressed down where my own had hundreds of times before; not only did the coyotes and I share the woods, we shared the same ways of traveling through them. They'd followed the path of least resistance from the cabin's access road, past my door, and up the hill behind the cabin into the hemlocks and red pines. I put on my boots and started following them. What had, before the snow, appeared as simply the chaotic growth of a forest now revealed itself as a matrix of trails. The forest had new meaning. I felt like I'd cracked the code.

That night, I lighted my woodstove and read by candlelight and snuggled with my cat Paula who, with her bad limp, preferred the bed to the outdoors. I felt comforted knowing the coyotes, whose chorus was a near nightly occurrence, would make a trek down through the trees and pick their way along the cabin's edge a mere two feet from where I slept on the other side of the logs.

I lay awake after blowing out the candles, letting my eyes accustom to the dark, wishing I could hear their soft feet padding through the snow, or hear a loud breath, or get a whiff of their wild coats—something to make us even closer than we were. *If there were no logs I could reach out and touch them*, I thought.

That winter, I entered into what philosopher and ecologist David Abram would call, “the flesh of language,” the “reciprocal exchange between the living body and the animate world that surrounds it.” In his book, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, about how acquiring written language precipitated humanity’s disconnect from the rest of the natural world, Abram writes: “Writing, like human language, is engendered not only within the human community but between the human community and the animate landscape, born of the interplay and contact between the human and the more-than-human world.” Our first language, he asserts, were our footprints in the mud, our handprints upon the cave walls, and it was no different than the “sinuous calligraphy of rivers winding across the land” or the “cursive script” of swooping birds. Now we read printed words he writes, “as tribal hunters once read the tracks of deer, moose, and bear printed in the soil of the forest floor.”

The coyotes were not my prey, but I felt a deep significance by the marks they left. A mere presence in the snow was a form of communication, the tracks a way to give witness to what was all around me when I wasn’t looking. As my time in the cabin continued, I learned to interpret other trails, too—the lines of bobcat tracks over fallen logs, the favorite perch of the resident great horned owl on a branch jutting out over the pond, the scrape in the mud where the algae-covered snapper dislodged herself from the murk in spring and hauled herself ashore to wrestle with the soil in order to deposit her eggs, the regurgitated bundle of crawdad parts bobbing in a shallow stream and the great blue heron tracks leading away.

Animals, I'd always felt, changed me in some fundamental way. Before the cabin, I'd experienced animals in the West during my time in college: once, in the field for an ecology class, I'd happened upon a single elk leg tangled in strands of barbed wire, the grassy remains of stomach ruminant spread out on the ground nearby, and I could piece together the story of the mountain lion who'd chased it down, who'd torn it open after the fatal tangle with the fence. I'd watched long-tailed jaegers, stalled in the air over the Alaskan tundra, beating their wings against the Arctic wind to remain at a hovering standstill. There was the language of the cow I used to milk on a little farm, the sway of her udder and flare of her nostrils on brisk mornings as I walked her from the pasture to the barn. There had been many childhood afternoons filled with the mysterious creaks and clicks of horse bones as I crouched in a paddock watching the animals shift their weight as they grazed their way across the field. I was always touched when one of the horses would pause and reach out to nibble the hem of my shirt with its remarkable velvet lips, as though it was saying, *I see you over there*, even as its liquid brown eyes simultaneously scanned the horizon for threats, reminding me that horses will always be prey at heart. And before that, there had been a childhood cat who'd taught me what lurked just beyond the borders of our backyard. Once, he emerged from a meadow and deposited a star-nosed mole on the back stoop, a creature I would never have been able to conjure up on my own. Later, after he'd had his fill, I'd lean down to examine the kidney-bean like organs of the rodent's eviscerated remains. What worlds existed within this one, like nesting dolls.

What each animal gave me, from my house cat to the cabin coyotes, was its *umwelt*, its world of experience. That was the thrill of animals—knowing other ways of existing in the environment I was in, that other creatures could travel through the same plot of land as me and emerge with a different story. They changed my perception of the world; they gave me a new way

of seeing, and therefore a new way of being. I wanted to be a part of their world; not in a fantastical kind of way, but in a very real, very *human* kind of way. I wanted to go back to how it once was, when we still spoke the language of the animate world.

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I lived in the cabin for almost two years exactly. I left only twice for any extended period of time, both times to travel in South America. The first winter, I battled existential questions about what I was doing with my life. As a depressive, I feared such solitude during the long, dark New England winter. I traveled to the Peruvian Amazon where I tried my hand at being a biologist for real. For a few months in early 2006 I volunteered as a field assistant on a macaw research project at an ecolodge seven hours upriver from any sort of civilization.

Early one morning, alone on an island in a slow muddy river where I sat counting birds, I watched a jaguar trot through the grass and pause several feet in front of me. The jaguar had a round head and round ears and round eyes. That is the first thing I remember about it: roundness. Softness. Silence, as it froze, only its head visible above the tall grass, maybe twelve feet from where I half-crouched out of my researcher's chair, taking me in. Serene, as it turned and trotted back exactly the way it had come, from the south, grass tips nodding to reveal its trajectory. If it'd been almost any other animal, this would have hardly been as noteworthy. But it wasn't any other animal. It was a jaguar, the ostentatious orange and black spectacle that evoked passion and fear from eager ecotourists who flocked here, some year after year, with the singular desire of seeing a jaguar. I was not expecting soft, silent, and serene. But that's what I got. That was how this jaguar spoke.