

Isolation and Community in Wilderness

For two years, my life was split in two: one half lived in the Jemez Mountains of New Mexico and the other in Lubbock, Texas. Dichotomy would be a good word for it, shifting back and forth from woods to university, from miles of mountains to studio apartments, from isolation to community. It was constant movement, dashing from pole to pole, with little time to process. Constant culture shock was another thing. It is jarring to go from shielding a camp stove boiling ramen from gusts of wind and snow to deciding which food blogger's veggie lasagna wrap recipe to add to the grocery list when my wife and I went shopping.

I was in the Jemez Mountains researching elk habitat selection. Details and jargon aside, my work consisted of chasing elk all over creation, in a truck and on foot. When I found them sleeping on some shady ridge, foraging in the meadows, or splashing in the creeks, I found somewhere I could hide and sit and watch them. I watched them until a hailstorm came to blow me off the mountain, until I fell asleep, or until they scented me and took off. I also kept track of our GPS- and VHF-collared elk, listening for the trilling of a mortality signal from the radio telemetry receiver strapped to my belt or propped up in the truck's cup holder. If I heard the signal, I would hunt down the elk's carcass and determine if a mountain lion had ripped out its stomach or if it had just tripped and broken its neck in a stony ravine. I was their stalker and coroner. Suffice to say they did not appreciate my company.

I drove the four hundred and ten miles from the Jemez back to Lubbock for the final time in August 2014. It only took two trips to bring the luggage up to our apartment, but the unpacking took some time—especially the clothes. I sorted the stained, torn field clothes from the passable ones, throwing the former out and the latter into the hamper. They moldered for a week before I finally carried them to the laundromat. The laundromat we use is the same as any

other, with off-white tiled floors, aisles of quaking washers, and crusty folding tables. But as I sat on a plastic chair in that laundromat, watching the dryer swirling my Carhart pants and grayish t-shirts, I listened to a lady telling a man about how Jesus saved her family from debt. That was my first realization I was not alone anymore.

Reality set in quickly from there. Foraging bouts at dawn and finding elk bedsites at midday no longer dictated my schedule. Morning coffee and leftovers at lunch break took their place. I could talk to other people besides myself. I would be lying if I said it was not wonderful to have something other than the telemetry receiver and my own voice to listen to.

Still, nostalgia set in pretty quickly as well. I would think of how the aspen would sigh and sway with the wind and how their leaves would quaver between green and gold as I stood in line at the supermarket. While my car idled at a stoplight, I recalled driving under snow-tinged pines on deserted and buckling two-lane roads. A brown creeper chirruping and spiraling up a spruce would come to mind as I typed away in my concrete-floored, fluorescent lit office. It's not hard to think of better places to be than behind a desk and a too-slow computer.

But then I recalled all the silent times in my truck at two in the morning as frost began to cover the inside of the windshield and clouds covered the moon. Lying in my bed at home, I would think of all the nights alone, trying to sleep in an old adobe Forest Service bunkhouse that I was almost positive was haunted. Walking on sidewalks, watching kids chase each other with tricycles, I would think of the weeks I had walked through burnt forests of matchstick snags and black ash without talking to anyone. I did not know loneliness until those times. And experiencing the juxtaposition of isolation and community made me realize that lonely wilderness is not always Shangri-La for the human soul.

I wonder how blasphemous that statement would seem to other wilderness lovers. It sounds dirty to me too, but the truth of the sentiment is not simply a cliché. John Donne's "no man is an island" line may have best expressed it. People are social animals, and we need the sound of familiar voices. Yet many of us crave the remoteness wilderness provides as well. This paradox is not new to humanity. But, while bouncing between an apartment and the wary stares of elk, I had plenty of time to mull it over.

When I was not watching elk chew their cud or entering data on my laptop, I read. In the bunkhouse, I used a dining room chair as a bed stand and as a place to stack my books. Every night, I would strap a headlamp on my forehead, slide into my sleeping bag, and work farther and farther down the stack. Eventually, I arrived at a collection of short stories called *The Hermit's Story* by Rick Bass. It contains several stories about people living in far-flung areas and their deep encounters with wilderness.

I could not help but compare the characters' experiences with my own feelings of remoteness. But as I compared myself to these characters, I noticed a difference in their experiences and mine. While their stories tell of living in and experiencing wilderness, their stories center on their interactions with other human beings in the wilderness.

Within three paragraphs of the first story "The Hermit's Story," Bass creates an isolated and inhospitable setting by describing an ice storm and subsequent power outage in a northern Montana hamlet, and then immediately creates a feeling of warmth and community by describing a group of friends meeting for Thanksgiving. After supper, the characters all quiet down to listen to Ann, the main character, recount an otherworldly wilderness experience. Ann tells how she and the man she was hunting quail with, Gray Owl, become lost in a blizzard on the Canadian prairie. As they attempt to find their vehicle, they come across a frozen marsh, and Gray Owl

accidentally breaks the ice and disappears under it. Sorry for Gray Owl, but knowing that she must either retrieve the supply pack he was carrying or freeze to death, Ann checks the ice where he sank. Instead of icy water, she finds Gray Owl alive and standing on dry earth in a cavern-like space under the sheet of ice. Ann and Gray Owl survive the blizzard together by traveling under the frozen marsh. After Ann concludes her story, the other characters are amazed, wondering at the beauty of the wilderness experience Ann and Gray Owl shared.

The prospect of dying in a blizzard seems daunting, but Ann does not convey fear or desperation. Instead, she describes a calm, almost miraculous experience, one nearly unique for humans. Perhaps she possessed enough hardiness to bear her up, allowing her take in the beauty, strangeness, and danger as matters of course. People like that may exist. I used to think I was one of those people. But learning loneliness for myself, I now believe at least a part of Ann's fortitude stemmed from the company of Gray Owl, a companion she could share the adversity with.

Like Ann, I had many wonderful experiences in the wilderness of the Jemez: standing in falling snow on a mountainside, hiding behind a gnarled old spruce, watching a herd of elk sleep for hours and hours; coming upon a bear ripping into an elk calf while I could still hear the rest of the elk herd screaming and scattering just over the ridge; sleeping in the mulch and roots under a Doug fir during a hail and lightning storm. I treasure those times in my heart, and I always will. But unlike Ann's adventure with Gray Owl, I did not share those times with anyone. So while those times remain starkly beautiful in my mind, in a way they also seem less than they could be. I had no Gray Owl to see the dead calf with me. Under the Doug fir as the storm rolled in and the smell of hail and rain on the wet mulch filled me, there was no one beside me with whom I could share a glance and simply say "this is good." Comparing my being alone with

Ann's companionship with Gray Owl, it really does seem that not having the affirmation of another's presence loosened my connection with the wilderness.

Another tale in *The Hermit's Story*, "Swans," makes me think about connections between people, and between people and the wilderness. Again Bass sets the tale in some distant woods in Montana and only introduces three characters—the unnamed narrator and his two closest neighbors, a married couple named Amy and Billy. Out there, miles of woods and lakes and deer insulate them from the rest of humanity. But what caught my attention was the road that cut through the wilderness, connecting the narrator's and the couple's cabins. Most of the story takes place on the road, as the narrator drives back to his cabin and meets Billy on the road, or as Billy pulls up the narrator's drive to visit, or as the narrator passes Amy's and Billy's cabin in his truck and smells Amy baking bread or hears her playing the piano. While the narrator obviously did not build a cabin in the woods for the social opportunities, it seems the fleeting moments of connection with Amy and Billy on the road, in the midst of the wilderness, represent a lifeline for the narrator. He admits in the beginning of the story that he never got to know Amy and Billy well, even being their nearest neighbor. But out of all the admirable things in the wide woods, he describes the relationship between Billy and Amy and the connection he has with them as "the gentle stuff" that he "hold[s] in awe" and "likes to watch."

I used to meet a guy on the road, too. I'll call him Gene. He lived in the hamlet of Jemez Springs, a few miles from the bunkhouse. I met Gene at a Sunday potluck at the little Presbyterian church in Jemez Springs. While in line for the fruit salad, we chatted about my work, and he told me about his former lives as an ex-Presbyterian minister, ex-farmer, ex-truck driver, and ex-illegal immigrant advocate. He immediately invited me to his and his wife's home that evening for quinoa and lentils. After that I saw him on the highway all the time. He pedaled

around on an old mountain bike he found in a dumpster, yelling at cars going more than twenty-five. He smiled when he yelled, though.

When I saw him on the road, I would pull over. He would coast over to my window, and we would visit. During one such visit last summer, he invited me on a hike. He said he knew a historic trail the Spanish monks used to get up San Juan Mesa, and he was inviting lots of people from Jemez Springs. It would be a leisurely hike, probably would be finished by noon. I was not sure I wanted to go because I was behind on some data entry, but I also wanted to be around people for more than five minutes. So I said I would come.

We met in the morning under a gazebo in Jemez Springs's plaza mayor. The only people who showed up were Gene, his wife Marie, and Rachel, a lady I knew from the Forest Service. Fewer than he had hoped, but Gene was not deterred.

He led us out the plaza's parking lot and across the highway to a dry creek bed. The creek bed ran through the Jemez State Monument—a historic park featuring the grass-covered ruin of a Spanish mission. At the creek's bank, Gene huddled us up and whispered instructions. To get to the trail he said, we had to get past the monument. But the monument employees would charge us five whole dollars each to go through their property. The creek bed was on the monument's property, but with the deeply incised banks and all the alders and cottonwoods crowding around it, we would have enough cover to drop into the creek bed and sneak past.

So that's what we did. We slid down into the creek bed and carefully navigated through boulders and patches of moist, red clay-silt. Everything seemed to be going well until Marie informed us that she had prickly pear spines dug into her butt. Gene asked Rachel, who had just met them, to help Marie dig the spines out of her bare buttocks. He reassured her saying, "Don't worry, we've all seen butts before." I am not sure how Rachel felt about that, but she consented.

All I did was lend my multi-tool pliers for the job. There were lots of moans and intakes of breath, and soon Marie said she was just too full of spines to continue the hike. She insisted we go on without her, though, so she turned back and Gene led on. And although I did not know Rachel well, as we resumed following Gene up the shady creek bed, we looked at each other and both asked with our eyes, “What the hell just happened?”

I suppose an elk might have found the hike leisurely, but most people would not. Gene lost the trail, and we backtracked to find it; and then he lost it again. As we gained elevation, pinyon-juniper woodland gave way to Ponderosas. We began to have to scramble up the slope, digging into the pumice and pine needles with our toes and fingers. We grabbed roots when we could. We shouted to the person behind us to look out when we dislodged rocks with our scabbling, sending them tumbling and somersaulting downhill.

When we crested the mesa, we crawled to the nearest fallen log and collapsed against it. We sopped sweat from our eyebrows with t-shirt sleeves, guzzled from a water bottle Gene brought (which turned out to contain watery, reddish beet juice from borsht Marie made the night before), and blinkingly peered around. The panorama before us was stunning—the valley below and mesa opposite framed by the thick forest of Ponderosas surrounding us. But before I could take it in, I saw a western tanager. I pointed it out, breathlessly, to Gene and Rachel as I groped in my pack for binoculars. We passed the binoculars around once, silently. We passed them again. Then we just sat, looking at the bird, listening to it. It paid us no mind, intent as it was on singing, casting its sweet mating invitation off the mesa’s rim and down to the valley.

There is not much point in describing a western tanager. Males have yellow breasts, black wings with two white wingbars, and red-orange heads. They are bigger than sparrows, but smaller than thrushes. Their beaks are thickish. When males sing, they chirrup five or six times

with pauses in between. The one we watched looked and sounded like every other male western tanager, perfect, like a black-red coal in the center of a fire. And when it decided its song was finished, it looked around a bit and flew up into the canopy.

Rachel and Gene and I kept looking at the spot the tanager had occupied. After some time, we turned to each other and smiled. I think we all commented on how beautiful the tanager was, but that did not matter. Our shared brush with wilderness mattered: the bird, the trees, and us.

This story was just a day out of the weeks and months I spent in the Jemez. But nearly every moment of it remains clear in my mind. I do not doubt this is because not only did Gene and Rachel and I share that affirming look that said “this is good,” but also I could call Gene or Rachel up right now to reminisce and laugh about it. In that moment and even now, a connection exists between us and the wilderness. We were isolated and yet had community. The moment became ours, and we could truly treasure it up in our hearts.

At the end of “The Hermit’s Story,” Ann tells her listeners that her story took place many years ago, and that Gray Owl has been dead a long time. One of her listeners wonders if she “holds...the memory of that one day and night—especially as she is now the sole possessor—as tightly and securely as one might clench some bright small gem in one’s fist.” Reading this alone in the Jemez bunkhouse, I thought Bass was saying Ann’s hardiness and self-confidence alone buoyed her through that trial. But now that I am back amongst the throngs, I think what Bass is really saying is no matter how sturdy one’s soul and how great one’s love of wilderness and isolation may be, humans will always feel the need for communal experiences. We will always need to share our stories and tell them over and over. It is as natural as the wilderness that we hold dear.