

In Pursuit

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Pre-encounter

O elusive one, o ultimate wildness, I must have proof of this magic, I must witness you: the forest breathing, alive, flicking its tail.

Since 1992 I have lived in Clayoquot Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island, Canada, a place of rare, ancient temperate rainforests. Wolves and black bears are at home in this habitat, which happens also to be one of the most cougar-populated ecosystems in the world. Yet chance sightings of the great cat are extremely rare.

The forests here contain immense western red cedars, some believed to be as old as 2,000 years, alongside sitka spruce and hemlock just as wise. Heavy clumps and mattresses of moss grow on strong branches. In the dark and tangled understorey of broad-leaved evergreen salal, huckleberry, thorny salmonberry, and myriad ferns, young softwood saplings cannibalise their rotting fallen forebears. The carbon sink that is the Canadian temperate rainforest supports countless weird and wonderful species of plants, insects, and fungi – many as yet undiscovered – as well as charismatic mega-fauna like cougars.

This magnificent predator is so elusive that any sight of one is likely to be on the animal's terms – and likely the last thing you will ever see. I once asked a native man from the Tla-o-qui-aht nation why there are almost no representations of cougars created by his people's artists. He told me that to even speak of the cougar is taboo. It is the most serious danger of the land. I began to sense that catching sight of one and living to remember it would be miraculous. Gary Thorp, in his work *Caught in Fading Light*, expressed a similar sentiment about cougars when he wrote that 'Some of us admire the skill of a creature in travelling unseen and in living among human residents undetected' (13). These silent predators blend in with their surroundings and are masters at legerdemain, so that seeing them is indeed catching them, if only for a moment. Magic intrigues.

But it was neither magic nor the taming of capture that I sought. Like Thorp, safely sighting a cougar became a new goal for me. I cherished my feeling of closeness to the forest, wrote poetry about moving slowly and deliberately as banana slugs in narrow moist corners, comforted by an autumn day's dark. I longed for secrets this place might willingly share with me, pieces of its deepest, most true wildness. To witness the forest breathing, alive, flicking its tail.

Some people said I might as well be asking to see a Sasquatch. And I was *asking* to see a cougar: making a request, not a demand. Yet I wasn't thinking about this on my way to a children's camp behind Catface Mountain.

The year was 1996, still summer, a mere two weeks after I had firmly made my resolution. Catface is named for its two peaks resembling a cat's ears, which are currently under threat by copper mining. Catface's southern beach supports a few off-grid cabins but no village. All of it – slope, sand, rocky shoreline – is dominated by rainforest.

The volunteer-run camp was held behind the mountain at Whitepine Cove, an uninhabited traditional territory (called IR for Indian Reserve on official maps) across Herbert Inlet and Calmus Passage from the native village of Ahousat. A well-meaning local wanted to mimic those popular Rediscovery camps of the times, whose mandate was to engage youth by drawing 'on the teachings of Indigenous peoples and the wisdom of the Elders, with a philosophy of love and respect for each other and the earth' (Home, par. 1) Disembarking from the delivery boat, I could see how informal, even disorganised, this imitation camp was.

Children ran free, unwatched. A litter of refuse and toys lay scattered across the grass and sand; remains of food and dirty dishes sat unattended. Unburied human scat decorated the high-tide line, and the privy was a rank hole in the ground, with a bag of lime next to it, at the forest's edge.

Fortunately, there were other, better scents in the air as well. Well away from the dung, Tla-o-qui-aht Billie Martin was making chowder with clams he had dug from the sand ten minutes ago. I soon worried that bears would be attracted by our smorgasbord of ripe aromas. Indeed, glancing up from the hunk of bannock I was frying, I noticed one on the other side of the bay, looking our way and sniffing the air with its black snout. Luckily, as someone shook out a roll of tarp, the bear fled the unfamiliar sound.

Encounter

O surprising one, both longed for and unexpected, the imagined has been delivered even to the shaky ground where I stand.

At 4:00 p.m. I headed for the privy, preparing to hold my breath. Before turning the last corner into the trees, I paused and called out, 'Anybody using the toilet?' And around the corner came a cougar.

We both stopped. I know it's a cliché, but my world shuddered into slow motion. Shadows flickered across the tan-coloured body; the tail twitched; the head looked away and back. The eyes remained obscured in the shade. The creature hesitated . . . turned . . . vanished.

A period of slow disbelief ensued. Was there a dog in camp I hadn't noticed all day? I had to know. Children's lives were suddenly at stake. So I sprinted after the animal.

Behind the privy it stood, flanked by salmonberry bushes, salal, young alders and one scruffy yew. Its back to me, the cat-face turned again, eyes still in shadow. If my own eyes doubted, my ears confirmed the truth. The cougar meowed sweetly once, and vanished again.

I stood there vibrating in shock at the sound, my ears and feet humming. What to do now? Where would it go next? With its mild, innocent call tingling in my eardrums, I forced myself into further action.

Post-encounter

O silent one, o ghostly danger, though you are nowhere to be seen, I feel you, I know you now to be everywhere.

Hurrying back to camp, I yelled ‘Cougar! Cougar!’ Everyone stared, but there was no panic. One girl mock-screamed; a few of the kids laughed. Another adult volunteer ran down to the privy and returned breathless with confirmation: she had seen the tawny rear end and tail of the cat slipping into the bush.

We rounded everybody up and moved all the tents into a tight circle. I don’t remember if we were unable to reach Ahousesat by radio or if no boats were available; in any case, we could not leave until the following day. I lay in my tent that night, astonished, my mind looping through known facts versus new data. A ferocious wild beast, *meow?* They are known to scream, hiss, growl, utter bloodcurdling mating calls, emit a ‘silent snarl’, even whistle and chuckle. I knew it was extremely fortunate that the cougar had met me rather than a small child. Had I experienced a *friendly* cougar encounter?

We packed up next morning in time for our scheduled Ahousesat boat and departed. The cove slowly withdrew from sight.

In town, it was frustrating to see doubt and outright disbelief on people’s faces when I told them a cougar meowed at me. When I telephoned my urbanite sister, however, she believed me immediately. ‘I’ve seen lots of wildlife documentaries,’ she said. ‘Mother cougars meow to their young, so why not?’

Then I called local conservation officer Bob Hansen. He explained that young cougars are known for their curiosity, and learn through trial and error. Sometimes they are looking for their mothers, who abandon them abruptly after up to eighteen months together. Subadults have

been known to follow people for several kilometres. Perhaps ‘my’ cougar had been inexperienced, testing the context of our meeting, assessing the situation this way: ‘Are you prey? Why aren’t you cowering or running? I’m confused. I think I’ll go now...’ The meow *had* felt like a question.

I wished I had seen its eyes. We were right there, cat-face to human-face; had I in fact seen them and somehow blocked the memory? The cat may have preferred to keep its highly sensitive pupils shaded. What also continues to haunt me after all these years is that this predator, friendly as it seemed, was in front of me with no warning. Its feet made no sound: not in approach, not in retreat.

The cougar had moved like a ghost, had come out of nowhere: a forest, which to me used to be everywhere, home, a place where I went to be alone and comforted ‘in narrow moist corners’. I had lived many years in a log cabin, hunted wild mushrooms in the forest outside my door, wrote a book of poems about being healed by forests; I had even been arrested trying to protect forests from clearcut logging. But post-cougar poems were sobered by the green wall of wildness I look at from my floathouse surrounded by water – a moat protecting me from the forest. I am no longer comfortable venturing ashore, much less hiking into the trees. Not alone, anyway. I found myself writing:

Do not allow your kayak to drift
 close to shore
 ...
 A cougar could drop
 from the wall and pin you,
 your paddle spinning away like
 an ungainly oak seed,
 sink fangs into your neck
 drag you over the shredding rocks
 force you through the wall
 into darkness.

On a July morning in 2010, I was sitting on my creekside deck at low tide. Just as I was thinking of heading inside to escape the brisk wind, three wolves – two grey, one black – emerged from the trees, trekked past (pointedly ignoring me) along the rocks, and re-entered the forest.

That familiar stunned sensation returned, abruptly. Yes, I always knew forests were mega-fauna territory, yet when the cougar, and fourteen years later, the wolves, materialised I was shocked. How I once felt about the forest is forever changed; there is fear now. Through the porous wall of wildness I could become prey, so I keep within my solid walls of shelter. Though I will always fight for the forest, I am not ready for that form of belonging: death, which makes equals of all in nature, the brilliant humans sustenance for centipedes. Wild predators and people belong together in death, belong *to* death, that last wall. Killed by a cougar ... an honourable way to go. A fair and natural way to go.

I made a pact with fate, was granted my wish and shaken by my own fragility. Facing the friendly beast was, in fact, facing death. No wonder people are afraid of the forest, that the first settlers, fighting for survival, made it their first priority to tame the wild. Today I know I could find happiness, even bliss, in passing through the green wall regularly and often, to a place that can teach profound humility. But I also sympathise with the view that some places should be left to their non-human inhabitants. To belong does not necessarily mean to be safe; every non-human being knows this.

This past autumn I saw a cougar bounding away from the car I was riding in. Rather than fresh encounters, now all I request is courage. And I wonder. What did our meeting mean to the cougar? Did the animal carry me as a lifelong memory? Me, in pursuit, held in the mind of a great wild cat, deep in the rainforest.

Now all I hunt is the peace
 that is lost to me,
 and I cannot blame you
 who offered yourself—
 innocence, might, and grace—
 to something unbelievably fragile, tame.

*Contains excerpts of poetry first published in Lowther (2010) and Lowther (1999).
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