



Ten Denali Days

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The Man Who Swam with Beavers
Beluga Days: Tracking the endangered white whale.
Rock, Water, Wild: An Alaskan Life
Early Warming: Crisis and Response in the Climate-Changed North

She teaches part-time at the Kachemak Bay Branch of Kenai Peninsula College and in the low-residency graduate writing program at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

Denali Artist-in-Residence Program
Artists spend ten days at the historic East Fork Cabin exploring the park. From their experiences, they create an art piece that is then donated to the park collection.

www.nps.gov/dena/historyculture/arts-program.htm

Denali National Park and Preserve
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"Ten Denali Days" is a donated product of the Denali Artist-in-Residence program and does not reflect the opinion of the National Park Service.

What a gift, to have ten days at the East Fork Cabin and to be able to explore the park at will. I most appreciated having access to other people (scientists, rangers, wildlife technicians) working in the park, from whom I could learn. In the evenings, I read through the library of Denali-related books and made copious notes.

My writing background is in prose, and I completed both an essay and a short story based on my experiences. The quiet time and sparks of awareness also seemed to support a poetic approach, and so I wrote some of the first poems of my life. The experience, overall, was a creative opening for me--not just to a fresh and dramatic natural world but to new ways of seeing and thinking.

The East Fork Cabin

Previous guests complained
in the cabin logbook
of creaking window shutters.
They wanted a wild quiet.

One hour in, Ken has tied back
the shutters against any pummel
of wind, fashioned a quick release
for each time we leave
on a berry pick or hike.

Each time we leave the cabin
we lock the prickly shutters
shielded with nails against
those bears that would covet
our meatloaf and potatoes.

Each time we return we tie them back.
The windows open to purple mountains
cushioned in clouds, a magpie weighting
a willow branch, fat-tailed coyotes, dark.

Nights, I lie awake and listen:
 light rain tapping
 construction and supply trucks on the road
 my ticking clock
 and some small creature gnawing wood
in the spaces between Ken's thunderous snores.

The Ranger Knows Scat

She pulls it apart with the tip of her trekking pole:
lynx. The constrictions, the blunt-end pieces.
Weathered to chalky white, fur and bone,
a tooth like a tiny arrowhead.

Hare pellets all through the brush,
round as bearings, plenteous as pennies.

The caribou's is dark and shiny, loose
and squashed. *A wet diet.*

Contrast the moose—nuggets large and shapely
as foiled Easter chocolates, dry and light as lint.
*Some people gather these, sanitize them in ovens,
make earrings and swizzle sticks to sell to tourists.*

The feather-footed ptarmigan that warms in winter
under snow: its pale and wormish cylinders poked
now into sawdust, remnants of buds and seeds.

Here's a fresh, giant pile of red soapberries, skins barely
broken, blueberries bleeding among them into a perfect
magenta mash. *Bears have inefficient digestive systems.*
And here, not a pile but dribs and drabs: grizzly in a
hurry.

The fox's, familiar as a small dog's, with twisted,
hairy ends, a wisp of feather. And the wolf's: solid
and dark with meat, again tips tapered into tails. Here
the paw print, here the drizzled, peed-upon sand.

Everywhere, the unlucky hares' feet.
*None of them—lynx, wolf, fox, golden
eagle—will eat those boney ends.*

Wags, the Captive Wolf

“The wolf pup removed from the East Fork den on May 15, 1940, was taken for the purpose of checking on the development of the pups at the den and familiarizing myself with wolf character.”

- Adolph Murie, *The Wolves of Mount McKinley*, 1944

Don't you love the passive tense? (Mistakes were made?)

The wolf pup was removed, was taken, was studied.

She was a dark furry female; she was a week old or less.

We called her Wags.

Adolph Murie, rightly esteemed for his pioneering field research, established the wolf's essential role in natural ecosystems and turned back his era's wolf eradication programs.

Murie also kept a pet wolf.

She was called Wags.

May 1940. Fresh snow at the cabin.

The tracks led, the man followed.

The bluff, the river view, the tracked and trammed snow.

The den. The black wolf backing off, barking. The other,

the female, scrambling from the den, rushing into brush, down a ravine. Howling.

. . . the soft whimpering of the pups.

It seemed I had already intruded too far. . .

As I could not make matters much worse . . .

Murie wormed his way into the burrow, counted six squirming

pups. He cradled an armload, pulled them to light: research.

The smallest was placed in his packsack *for closer acquaintance.*

The other two were returned.

Wags was taken to live with Adolph's family (wife, little girl, baby).

At the cabin she was given evaporated milk from a nipple. She was

played with, was fed ground squirrels, was whistled for (and she came.)

She was petted by strangers. Her every act was recorded: *howled*

for the first time on June 10.

Most of the time, she was chained near the cabin door. The other wolves came around, stood in shadows, left reluctantly with backwards glance. Wags was heard whining, was seen leaping against the end of her chain. *If the pup had been loose it surely would have gone off with the band.*

The Murie family moved on, and Wags was taken to park headquarters. Was kept sometimes on a wire, was kept othertimes in a kennel. Once, when she escaped, she ran off with the park superintendant's door mat. She actively, perhaps even with intention, stole the mat.

The Story You Tell

You feed me pancakes
in their many-berried splendor
and tell me again how it happened.

You, splayed on the hillside
in bright orange shirt,
the small tundra blues plinking

and plunking as they drop
into your can. The bitter soapberries,
so many of them, the blues

so much harder to find. Buses
pass on the road, and one stops.
Those flashes of light, crazy

tourists with cameras. They
photograph everything: look,
fat man picking berries.

Your hands cup that wealth,
the silky fruit skins. You breathe
the spiced air from the plants

crushed beneath you. A luscious
fine day in the warmth of the sun,
and dreams in your head of a pie.

And then someone yells.
You hear only one word,
and it sounds like it might be

bear.

You complain to me now
about the ranger's report,
four pages you had to fill out.

He was a nice man who said to you
then that when you yelled back
the two frolicking cubs

turned away. The sow rolled over
with feet flung in the air, and he knew
then that you'd be all right.

That's the story you tell,
and here are the berries you picked.
Now you ask me to make you a

pie.

Animal Communication

Buses on the string of road squeeze past one another, slow as any beasts of burden pausing in the dust. Their drivers raise hands. Thumbs to sides of head and fingers splayed: moose antlers, moose, *watch for moose ahead*. Thumb to nose, fingers forward, now it's *caribou coming up*. The finger circling beside the head—not crazy but curly sheep horn.

One driver cups his hands into a cone ahead of his nose. Another reads, *snout of fox* (probably red, maybe cross.) A hand's up, like a peace or victory sign but three-fingered, the letter W, *wolf*. The same hand, this time five fingers spread and curled as claws. Everybody wants bears—grizzlies and their fattened cubs.

Two hands again, in front of teathy face. Thumbs together, forefingers together, between them the shape of a diamond. This is a viewfinder, this is a view. This is the message: *The Mountain is out*.

And so I walk

beside the braided river, climb the bluff with fistholds
of root, wind my way through willows trimmed
knee-high by winter's hungry hares. Ridge, fox burrow,
scatter of bones and rain. A point of land, then, and the long view
up the river valley, its gray and braided course, two tiny caribou
standing still. Someone told me: archeological sites and wolf dens
are often found together, both species full of watch.

I wander there, amongst bent grass and yellowing leaves,
the big quiet that's only a rattle of wind. I've misjudged distance,
the curve of land; there's another and another point beyond.
The clouds are piling, pressing like wool over the mountains.

Shall I go on, alone and far from camp on twisty ground?

I stand a long time, staring across the distance,
matching terrain to the photo I know, black arrow
pointing, the famous wolf den. The year nineteen forty,
the man Adolph Murie, the study that changed
what we think about wolves. The old den's still there
(this I've been told), shadowed by willows, littered with quills.
I've learned other learning: fifty-nine wolves in Denali
last spring, the packs (twelve), the ranges (overlapping),
the pups of May, the prey, the causes of death. Descendants
of the famous pack still work the valley,
still move among dens,
still chase after caribou and take down the weak.
They still travel in winter outside the park and,
still, when they do, are hunted and trapped.

And still, they *are*.

Murie learned, and this we know: wolf packs are *dynamic*.
Who's to say the pack's not back—just yesterday, just today?
Why not a dark wolf digging, leggy pups in a heap of yawns,
one with sore feet nosing a bone? Why shouldn't they all—
generations past, now living, soon dead, whimpering
into next spring's birth—familiar their ground?
Why shouldn't they dance in wind and waving grass,
beyond our sight and what we think we know,
beyond even our killing (or too-loving) instincts?

That's all I want, really, in coming this way: to get close
enough to imagine that.

Wilderness Experience

On the cabin porch, in comfy plastic armchair,
I savor my bowl of cherries bought at Safeway
and come from who-knows-where in industrial-ag
America. I suck every bit of fruit off every single pit.

The resident ground squirrel at my feet
assaults me with his—maybe her—tough-guy
chirps and accusing eyes. Someone before me,
some scoffer of park rules, has fed the little bugger.

Clouds of bus-dust rise over the road. The buses
big with tourists grind by, one after another.
They never slow past the smashed hare
and the skanky ravens come to pick it over.

Hikers' cries float from the
brushy side of the riverbed:

Hey bear!

Hey bear!

Hey!

Overnight, the willows growing in a line up the ridge
have turned from green to candle-flame yellow.
They glow and tremble against the broken-cloud
sky and care nothing about what any of us want.

Park Road at Night, Mid-August

On the drive back from
Kantishna, every stunted
tree appears to me
as moose antlers lifting
from the tundra, every
rock dropped ages ago
by a slow-moving glacier
as browsing lump of bear.
I keep wanting to point—
oh, and, *look*—and I keep
drawing back, ridiculous
in my passenger-seat
imagining. Now a pond
and a pair of swans truly,
so blinding in their brilliance
I can't begin to speak.
Their necks are white snakes
charmed from black water.
Snowshoe hares with signal-red
eyes are everywhere leaping,
now freezing in the glare
of our dust-dimmed lights.
The far mountains shape-shift
into blocks of fading color,
angular as fish fins.
The valley below
and the river of bends:
more pattern of line,
bands both bruised-blue and pale.
I'm seeing a painting
I'd just been admiring;
what I thought was abstract
has become quite exact.
We slip around corners
in the dust of our making,
shadow-cliff on one side
and abyss to the other.
We dodge fallen rock
that lies in our path,
illusions of fur
and of dragging away.
Another sharp corner,

the beaming of light,
and open before us
a scene as in clouds.
Full frontal sheep, so
wooly and white, each one
bedded down at the edge
of the road and turned
precisely to face us
with blinking soft eyes.
We're stopped in the car
in the dark in our breaths,
soundlessly counting
nine rams. They're all of them
males with big curls to their horns,
looking coifed like the women
of old Mormon sect.
The lights of our beast
are cruel to their knees,
folded under and knobby
and threadbare in places.
A nose here and there
shows the bulge of a vein
and the bite of a fly.
But all of them, there
by the road in the night,
are as solid as snow banks
and placid as cud-chewing cows.
We seek in the dark
for the light in the life,
then plow on to the end
of our road, the cabin
at midnight, the candle
awaiting my match.

Four Denali Haiku

Feather stuck to glass,
whipped by the wind to caress
a passing storm cloud.

Yellowed willow leaves
etched by deadly leaf miners.
More from climate change.

Magpie on the wing
flying exactly nowhere:
held in place by wind.

Three-toed dinosaurs
left tracks in Cretaceous rock—
their coprolites too.

At the Q and A

“In the presence of extraordinary actuality, consciousness takes the place of imagination.” --Wallace Stevens

I said something about the inadequacy of language for speaking of Nature. Sure, it’s an amazing experience to be in Denali National Park. The mountains are majestic, the views are awe-inspiring, the wildlife is—what? Pretty darn great. How do you be a writer in such a place? I can’t use any of those words. I won’t write *sacred*, *magnificent*, *grand* or *grandeur*. I won’t write of noble beasts with fire in their eyes. The language is trivial. It’s been done. I’ll cut off my hands before I’ll pen *holy*. No, I don’t deny the truth of what we find and feel in wild places. That’s where clichés come from. They’re so true they get said again and again, until they’re like drool. Please spare me from *hearts that soar with eagles*.

So the man asked the question—or made the suggestion. Why not invent new words to capture all that freshly? The look of the dawn and the smell of the aster, why can’t they be rendered in words that are coined? What words would I make for the view up the valley, the mountain appearing from clouds? I stood on the stage and my mind filled with pictures—that valley, that mountain, the colors of green. The pictures came from neurons and synapses snapping, a part of my brain that lived before language and knows what it loves without having to speak. I stood before people who were grateful in Nature, who didn’t need to debate their expressions of joy, and I was stupid before them.