

ASLAN RESURRECTED
Searching for wild panthers in a domesticated word
By Jay Kirk
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The Being that we are asking about is almost like Nothing. —Heidegger

It was only my third day in Ulysses, Pennsylvania, when the one-armed panther hunter and I stepped in out of the abyss to play a game of pool. We'd been searching the hills that morning, like the morning before, for an animal that I had been told all my life did not exist, but then, just before noon, we'd come across a set of its tracks in the snow. At first, standing outside his truck, squinting at the large, long-gaited pug-marks, holding himself with his one arm for warmth, my elderly companion had seemed uncertain. But now, as Roger Cowburn angled his cue, he was more than certain, almost evangelical, acting as if the heating he was going to dole out to me was due punishment for my lack of faith.

The game room in the back of his house was forsaken and stale-smelling like an after-hours club for veterans. The bottles behind the built-in bar looked as musty as the skins and heads and other useless parts of slain animals decorating the walls. Staring at me down the cue stick with a triumphal glow in his keen hunter's eyes, he said that nothing makes his heart gladder than a nonbeliever, like myself, turned believer. He tapped the corner pocket. It's like this one poor man who called him one day out of breath, a guy who confessed that he'd been ridiculing Roger behind his back for years, that he'd never believed, but now he'd seen the truth and, he said, *you can tell me they're pink from now on and I'll believe ya*. Converts always make his day. 'How many people like to admit they're wrong?' he asked me. 'Darn few.' He studied the seven ball sternly and then sank it gently. 'You're darn right.'

In the months since I began looking for the supposedly extinct eastern panther (a.k.a. mountain lion, puma, cougar, ghost cat of America), coming to the conclusion that it is quite possibly the most metaphysical mystery in American natural history, I flown in gut-wrenching pirouettes fifty feet over the Everglades in a falling-apart Cessna piloted by a hungover Frenchman; I have insulted chaplain-faced biologists with badly timed questions about feline electroejaculation; I have been given deep-tissue massage by an employee of the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources—a balding, dentally compromised guy with flaming skulls tattooed on his forearms; I have ducked lightning while tiptoeing through a bear sanctuary; and I have listened to exasperated apparatchiks of the wildlife agencies, who are, frankly, "sick of this crap" about the mythical panthers. I have dwelt in the penetralia of Appalachia with seekers and hard-boiled mountainmen. I have visited sordid animal sanctuaries where mountain lions are caged in cement cells plastered with ads for psychics and divorce lawyers; I've gazed upon the entrails of dead animals; and I've studiously attempted to learn how to discern a tapered coil of fox shit from the blunter robustos left by what I have begun to think of as my *bête noire*. But my pursuit began at a meeting last year, around Roger's kitchen table, with several core

members of a group of self-proclaimed “true believers” called the Eastern Puma Research Network (EPRN).

THE TONE OF THE MEETING IS FURTIVE, AS IF THE CELL HAD EVIDENCE OF A PLOT FOR WORLD DOMINION

The house is freezing cold. Shivering under three layers, I am seated across the kitchen table from a man named Norman Davis, in a big black Russian shapka, and Roger, who holds court from the end. Stitched to the good sleeve of Roger’s bulky parka is the official Eastern Puma Field Research patch, an encircled snarling cat’s head bearing closer resemblance, on first glance, to a saber-toothed tiger than to a mountain lion. The furtive tone of the meeting, as if the cell has in its possession evidence of a plot for world dominion rather than clues to a natural mystery, is made only slightly more tense by the presence of its third member, a mute in tall rubber boots standing just behind me, his thuggish presence unsoftened by a faded sweatshirt blazoned with a sad, green-irised puma under his camouflage jacket.

Scattered before me are the morguish photos of slain woodland creatures and half a dozen paw-print plaster casts. On the table is a can of Zippo lighter fluid, a sputtering police scanner, and a small-caliber pistol half-concealed in a sock. A box of shotgun shells sits on top of the microwave. And looking down on us, caught in a ray of late-afternoon sun, hung above the kitchen table, is a beatific portrait of a panther, framed by heavenly blue, like Jesus Himself.

Roger holds up one of the casts—which resembles, in heft and texture, a large fossilized clam—and traces its lobed heel pad while comparing it with a heavier bear track. This particular cast was made from tracks found near the body of a fawn that Roger’s cousin discovered while plowing a late March snowfall. Roger and his research deputy, Olson, the guy standing over me, had gone to the scene and found the rabbit-faced fawn in the ditch, its abdomen sliced open and its guts strewn on the half-frozen ground. A long bloody trail led from the woods where the deer had been killed and then dragged to the edge of the road. A cursory postmortem revealed that the heart, liver, and lungs of the deer had been eaten—or were, at any rate, missing. It was this unique way in which the prey’s viscera had been dispatched, and the way the remains were then halfheartedly covered with loose dirt, leaves, and debris, that convinced Roger the culprit was in fact *Puma concolor cougar*. “First they pull out the intestines,” Roger pronounces the last syllable so that I can’t help but imagine roopy innards coiled around the tines of a fork. “Now, a bear will just rip one all to pieces. A coyote will hamstring it. But a cat, they’ll break its neck, go for the throat, bleed it out.”

They searched the area and took photographs. While Olson scoured the ground looking for more evidence—he has a talent for nosing out scat—Roger got his detective kit from the truck and set about mixing a batch of plaster. They returned to the site every day, but the carcass remained undisturbed. Perhaps the cat, put off by the human stink of forensic molestation, had abandoned its quarry. By the fourth day still nothing had fed on it, so they conducted a field autopsy by skinning out the carcass and counting the wounds. In

the black-bound photo album tediously documenting each bloody step of their inquest, there is a close-up of a latex-gloved hand tugging back the hide of the fawn with a hand-drawn arrow pointing to a puncture in the exposed crimson under the caption "tooth mark." When they came back on the tenth day they found fresh tracks in the mud, and the deer was not where they'd left it. They searched up and down the road until they found it again, dragged out into a field and almost completely devoured, nothing left but ribs and hoof. Everything about the predation showed signs of a mountain lion, Roger said, right down to the way its spinal cord was severed. Roger knows the behavior of the cat intimately. He has seen kills like this himself several times. And yet the animal he's talking about has been thought extinct now for over a hundred years.

Part 2 ----

The fate of the eastern panther was sealed by the arrival of European settlers. When the superstitious pilgrims first encountered the primordial bestiary of the New World—wolves, bears, and prehistoric serpents among the mangroves—it was the panther that preyed on their worst fears. It was a monster with a "Tail like a Lyon, its Legs like a Bear's... its Claws like an Eagle, its eyes like a Tyger, its countenance... a mixture of every Thing that is Fierce and Savage." Powerful enough to pull down a horse, to leap twenty feet into the branches of a tree with a dog clamped in its jaws, the cat, when hungry enough, could slaughter a flock of sheep in a single night. Its unearthly scream sounded like a woman being murdered; its hide glowed like "fox-fire at night and green lights burned from the eyes"; it stalked children; it was rumored to have a taste for pregnant wives.

With the Inquisition, during which cats were associated with witchcraft, fresh in the pilgrims' minds, the panther was an intolerable demon, a dread symbol of the dark wilderness they had come to tame with the benevolent light of Christianity. So then, after all of the deer and the rabbits and the grouse and the turkeys and the elk had been wiped out by over-hunting and by cutting down the forests to let in all that celestial light, thus forcing the panther to eat the settlers' livestock, it was easy to turn it into a scapegoat. "It is now only" Henry W. Shoemaker lamented in his 1917 treatise *Extinct Pennsylvania Animals*, "that people are beginning to wake up to the fact that the panthers were the victims of a cowardly plot to avert the white hunters' culpability."

Bounties were set, and out of the forests rumbled wagons piled high with slain lions heaped like Persian rugs. The cats were burned and their heads were stacked in the village square like bewitched, outlawed gourds. A trapper could fetch twenty dollars for a scalp, but the animal was so reviled that its pelt was hardly worth nailing to the side of a drafty shithouse. Even some Native Americans loathed the panther, since it was associated with Machtando, the Evil One, and because they believed that the souls of unfaithful wives were reborn as cougars. The wolf was a terrifying fairy tale, but the panther was an inconceivable monster, the most vilified and feared of predators. Once the species was dominant over a range greater than any predator in the New World, from northern Alberta to the tip of Patagonia*; by 1890 the eastern subspecies had evaporated. It was considered officially extinct in New Jersey and Massachusetts by 1800, with the last stragglers killed in 1830 and 1858, respectively. The last slain in Illinois was in 1818. Audubon, who had shot a panther or two himself, declared the animal close to extinction

in the eastern states by 1851. The last bounty paid in Pennsylvania was in 1868, and the last confirmed eastern panther killed in the United States was shot in Barnard, Vermont, on Thanksgiving Day, 1881. Its stuffed corpse was then mounted and paraded from town to town under the billing: "Monster Panther—Don't Fail to See Him—An Object Lesson in Natural History." Thus was the panther banished from the wilderness.

**Its omnipresent range not only attests to the cat's ability to adapt to any climate—even, it appears, to the climate of nonexistence—but also suggests how the animal acquired such an absurd catalogue of names: puma, mountain lion, panther, cougar, catamount, painter, purple panther, Ozark howler, red tiger, deer tiger, brown lion, Mexican lion, American lion, mountain screamer, cat-of-the-mountains, Indian devil, etc. No other creature, save perhaps God, has as many names.*

The larger species, *Puma concolor*—a genus of its own—is now officially confined to a few patches of South America, Texas, and fringes of the western United States and Canada; the only known remnant in the East is a generically compromised population of fifty or so cats mucking out an existence in the swamps of southern Florida. It's hard to believe it survived at all, considering the universal vilification. To the famous panther slayer Ben Lilly, "all panthers were dragons." Cougars are still treated as varmint in Texas. Even one early curator at the American Museum of Natural History referred to the panther as that "most insidious and deadly foe of human kind," Thoreau, a lone voice, wrote in his journal, in 1856, that since the panther had been exterminated he felt that he lived in a "tamed and...emasculated country."

One surprising reason hunters detested the animal was for its alleged cowardice. Popular hunting lore had it that you could sneak up on the cat and pull its tail. "When about to be knifed or shot, these animals are known to have looked the hunters in the eyes and shed real tears," Shoemaker wrote. Legendary outdoorsmen like James Capen "Grizzly" Adams had only contempt for the cougar. Teddy Roosevelt, that great preserver of land, also believed the cougar to be a coward, referred to it as a "noxious species," and favored killing it off entirely. And so it went that the policy of zero tolerance continued into the twentieth century, with federal exterminators chasing down the fugitives out West with strychnine-laced horsemeat and catnip-scented traps. These noble killers, early game wardens, employees of the Predator and Rodent Control division of the old U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey—the former name of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the same agency now responsible for protecting the wildlife it once so enthusiastically ushered into obsolescence—continued killing them one by one up until the fifties, when people like Roger Cowburn began to see apparitions of the cat everywhere, like ghosts come back to haunt soldiers.

In the last decade, the number of sightings has increased so much that you might begin to believe the cats are everywhere. They are spotted in the suburbs of Baltimore, in the ghettos of Philadelphia, prowling the woods of Appalachia, and haunting the grounds of nuclear reactors in the South. Lured into cars at rest areas by ham-and-cheese sandwiches, they are seen absconding with dogs in their jaws. They are seen climbing telephone poles. Loping across bike paths. In cemeteries. Napping on church lawns. Chasing dogs in Mississippi. Trapped on the median strip of I-91 outside Boston. A woman in Binghamton, New York, said that a mountain lion showed up in her driveway

and stared down her cat for twenty full minutes. Five teachers and sixty children at an elementary school in Pennsylvania saw a black panther, a mass hallucination that the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources informed them was not a puma but merely "a black collie with mange."* In Oneida, New York, the birds have stopped chirping and there has been an "eerie silence" since its citizens first saw a large female cougar on the prowl. They devour house pets and confound drunks. They give horses heart attacks. They show up in Arkansas on the hoods of cars, on tennis courts. One panther visited an old lady who put supper out on the porch for it every night in winter. When it cut its feet on the ice, she said, the great cat lay still so she could stitch its bleeding paws. In Ohio a mountain lion attacked a man and his dog riding peaceably on their ATM. When the same man shot it, a day later, its "claws were six inches from my barrel." A dairy farmer in Orwell, Vermont, found fifteen of his cattle sliced to ribbons.

**"A local vet said that was ridiculous," says Norman Davis, 'that there are no such things as black collies.' Which is odd, considering that there are no such things as black panthers either, if by panther you mean a mountain lion—Puma concolor—and not a leopard.*

They are everywhere. And lest you think these are merely the Appalachian phantasmagoria of individuals "eating too many squirrel brains and drinking muscadine wine" (as one endangered-species expert put it), know that there is no shortage of credible witnesses. Game wardens in the Smoky Mountain National Park watched a panther for several hours through a telescope. The police are still searching for a pair in Delaware. Animal-control officers, U.S. representatives, and even one former director of the Fish and Wildlife Service have claimed to have seen them. David Mamet saw one in Vermont. Sightings come in from every direction. The believers think they are coming in by train tracks, coming down from Canada, down off the high abandoned logging roads, traveling along the craggy mountain ridges. The cats are coming in through tributaries from the West, migrating from the North, trickling up through the Appalachians, from Florida, from Texas, following their instincts, their internal compasses, coming in the dark, in the fog of morning, so that one begins to imagine that they are convening, a coven of cats, and that they will keep coming until they have flooded the East, that we won't see them until it's too late, until there's no place left to hide.

Part 3 -----

The Game Commission categorically denies they exist," says the man in the shapka. In the next room, the videotape of a tawny nebulous spot that appears to be licking itself in a square of sun-dappled grass, narrated by an astonished hunter and his family, plays over and over. Beside the mustard-upholstered couch is a small table with a deer-leg lamp. On the wall is the mounted head of a cat, its broad paws turned up like coat hooks, with the head dead center, forming a grisly quincunx. The head is so deformed by a bad taxidermy job that it's hard to tell if it's really the beast in question.

"They won't acknowledge nothin'," Roger says.

"There's a big cover-up.

"A helluva cover-up."

Just yesterday Roger got a report about game commissioners showing up at a farmer's out of the blue two days after he'd shot a cougar and deep-sixed it in his back yard; the wardens knew he had it because it'd been implanted with a tracking device and they told him if he didn't hand it over he'd be arrested.

"But yet the biologists say they don't exist?"

"Baloney, that's all."

"Their big song and dance is that any mountain lion that you do possibly see, if it isn't mistaken identity, 'cause usually they'll tell you you saw a fish or you saw a coyote--but if you press it too much, if you describe the animal too closely, they say, well yeah, you probably did see one, but it had to be an escaped pet."

Most people who believe in the eastern cougar think that it somehow, against the odds, managed to evade extinction by holding onto the craggy remote parts of Appalachia and that the wildlife agencies deny its existence only out of ignorance. But to Roger and the other members of the EPRN, the campaign of denial is due to the fact that, quite simply, the government secretly reintroduced the lions.

It began in the early 1950s, around the same time that people out West began seeing UFOs. The government brought them in on boxcars from Texas, put them into large cages on the backs of trucks, and then let them out in the woods. Roger says he knows of a district game protector who set loose six cats into the Pennsylvania Grand Canyon, a dark stretch of forested gorge in the superior vena cava of the Alleghenies. The man is now deceased, but his son, who went along as a ten-year-old and helped his father release the cats, told Roger that his father had "sworn him to secrecy."

"I'll tell you what I think the cover-up is about." Norman raps the table like a nervous stenographer. "The minute they admitted they was here, you know what would happen? The antis would step in just like the people did in California," he says, referring to the ban on hunting mountain lions that conservation and animal-rights groups successfully lobbied for and put into law in 1990. As a result, he says, people are now getting mauled while walking the dog. Two women have been killed jogging. A bird-watcher was eaten alive. "They got an explosion of mountain lions out there right now."

It's true that as humans sprawl farther into cougar territory in the West, attacks are on the rise. Nearly half the attacks on humans in the last hundred years have occurred over the past decade; two recent attacks on children resulted in a \$50 million suit brought by the parents against the state of California for mismanagement of the lion. Just three years ago a man was mauled in a suburb of Denver: with blood trickling down his face, he saw a

vision of Christ that would have made St. Ignatius jealous—St. Ignatius, who eagerly cried out from the Colosseum as the lions approached: "I am the wheat of God. I must be ground by the teeth of the lions into flour!"

If people knew, there'd be a panic, Norman says. That's why the government doesn't want it to get out. To counter this information blackout, the EPRN does its best to educate the public so that people will take the imminent threat of this predator seriously. When you write to the EPRN for information, they send a "fact sheet" crammed with survival tips. Do not turn your back to the cat. Stay calm. Do not try to run. Never scream. Maintain eye contact. Never mind that the last known attack in the eastern United States was in 1844, when a doctor was killed by a panther as he made his way through one of the winter mountain passes in this very county

Part 4 -----

Roger is packing a .357 the morning he takes me up to see where his cousin found the massacred fawn. It is so cold that he still has blue flecks of shampoo in his hair from when the pipes froze on him mid-shower. If you were a secret government agent tracking cougars via satellite, looking down on Roger and me listening to Tony Bennett, and you waited until night, which would only make sense (cougars are nocturnal), you would see that where we are, in Potter County, falls within one of the darkest spots in the eastern United States- But in freezing day-light, on this narrow glaring road, where the snow is plowed into fjords taller than the roof of our Blazer, the intensity of the cold and the brightness of the snow turn everything ultra vivid: a pink house with a battered Santa Claus waving from the roof; a crowd of cows standing around a steaming water trough, hock deep in shit-stained snow; the Second Amendment Task Force Charter Founder pin glinting in Roger's NRA cap.

DO NOT TURN YOUR BACK ON THE CAT. STAY CALM. DO NOT TRY TO RUN. MAINTAIN EYE CONTACT. NEVER SCREAM

In these few hundred square miles there are more sightings than anywhere else in the eastern United States, even more than are reported in southern Florida, where the animal still officially exists. (Although the Florida panther population dwindles at 60 to 80 individuals, according to EPRN figures there is a thriving population of at least 1,500 cats, alive and well, in the East overall.) As we skirt a steep hollow rimmed with trees the color of frozen mud, an icy stream moving sluggishly below, Roger points out where he found his last set of tracks, a few weeks ago. The cat had come to the edge of the woods and then jumped—thirty feet—to the embankment on the other side, thirty feet of air from a stationary position being nothing for a cougar. Roger followed the tracks all the way down into the ravine and then back up into the pines on the other side. No one saw the cat, but from the lengthy stride he could tell it was damn big.

Roger was bear hunting with some buddies in Canada the first time he saw a panther. That was thirty-two years ago, in 1972, the year before Nixon signed the Endangered Species Act into law. It was gigantic and dappled by the early morning sunlight.

Chocolate brown, sleek and brawny; the muscles of the fabled beast literally *rippled*. It was the most beautiful thing Roger had ever seen in his life. The cat was crouched in the middle of the road, staring down the car. He whispered to the friend sitting beside him in the front seat, *Boy, that's a beautiful cat, you know? It'd be a shame to kill it.* But he also thought how impressive it would look stuffed and mounted in his game room, maybe propped up on the hearth overlooking the pool table, but by the time his finger had found the will to pull the trigger the decision to feel bad about something for the rest of his life was taken away from him. The cat was gone.

THE MAN IN THE ORANGE CAP LOOKED INTO THE CAMERA AND SAID THAT HE'D PERSONALLY SHOT THE CAT

Still, he would not fully accept his true calling until one day fourteen years ago, when he went into the trading post for the paper and saw one of the photocopied wanted posters on the tack-board beside the ads for firewood, chain-saw repair, and lost dogs. It was a picture of a cougar with a phone number to report sightings. He called the number when he got home and spoke to a man, a guy in Baltimore, it tuned out, who spoke with the crinkly tenor of a buckshot beer can. His name was John Lutz. Lutz was a city guy, a cryptozoologist who, after seeing a black panther himself, had given up UFOs, spontaneous human combustion, and even Bigfoot to form the Eastern Puma Research Network.

Roger was happy to tell this guy Lutz about the sighting he had, some twenty years earlier, but Lutz said it would be better for them to speak in person. Roger was surprised when the guy actually showed up at his door a couple of days later with his wife. They had driven all the way from Baltimore, through a snowstorm. They sat at Roger's kitchen table, and Lutz showed him diagrams that looked like star maps of where cougars had appeared in the East, constellations of hundreds, thousands, of visions, the same impossible vision Roger himself had experienced. For hours Lutz filled him in about how the cougar was really here, despite official denials, and how the "presumed extinct" status was a cover-up for a more nefarious and massive government conspiracy to secretly reintroduce the predator to control the deer. There was pressure from the timber industry, on account of the legions of hark-hungry ungulates killing the trees, but also partly, maybe, as a concession to the auto insurance lobby, since deer were costing so much on the roads. He told Roger that they had received reports of cats being dropped by parachutes into forests from government helicopters in the dead of night. He warned him that being a field agent for the EPRN could be dangerous work. Some in the organization packed heat. One investigator had even vanished into thin air while looking into a spate of sightings in West Virginia, where they believed the Navy had planted several cats, fitted with radio collars, in order to monitor them via satellite. Shortly after their man—a naval intelligence officer, as it happened, or, at any rate, a guy who worked at the Naval Research Laboratory—had gone in to check it out, several black helicopters were seen circling the property, and then they never saw him again. It was possible, even likely, Lutz thought, that the Navy had used them in this particular case. A regime of ridicule kept people from openly talking. Well, yeah, Roger said, sure, he'd pretty much figured that out already on his own, or something like it. He knew the Game Commission was no

more trustworthy than the KGB. But the truth was, he hadn't put all the pieces together, and this guy Lutz had really opened his eyes.*

**It's funny the way memes travel over history. Lutz, a true believer, did not know it but the organization he was forming was in the tradition of a group formed in the 1930s by a Congregationalist preacher from Chester, Vermont, called the Irrepressible and Uncompromising Order of Pantherites. The creed of this quasi-cult, over which the reverend was elected president, or Grand Puma, and which included a treasurer, or Grand Catamount Keeper of the Catnip, was to likewise prove the existence of the eastern panther. To muster their zeal for the incorporeal beasts, they sang hymns composed specially about Puma concolor, under the direction of an officer known as the Grand Caterwauler. There is also a good chance, however, that the holy relic of their faith, a track of the sacred animal discovered by the good reverend on a hike, not unlike Joseph Smith stumbling over the golden tablets, was fraudulent. Still, at least a hundred people of "similar conviction" came to the reverend's meeting in 1934 to be ordained into the fold as "pantherites," where they gazed on the holy relic and listened wistfully to testimonials from those who had beheld the panther itself.*

It was shortly after Roger was appointed chief EPRN researcher for Pennsylvania that he found a black box on his front steps. It was a plain, unmarked videotape with a yellow Post-it note that said, simply, "Killed in Milport, PA." When he took the tape inside and put it in his VCR, he found himself looking at footage of a guy in a dirty orange hunting cap standing over a dead mountain lion. The man in the orange cap looked straight into the camera and said that he'd personally shot the cat and that if he saw any more he was going to shoot them too because they were killing deer in his favorite hunting spot. Royally creeped out, Roger got a magnifying glass and, with the tape on pause, examined the swollen pixels until he could make out a sign in the background that said Big Five camp. He talked to Lutz, and although they were worried about being set up by the feds, Roger drove on over to Milport to take a look-see himself. He found the camp, with the help of a couple he found stuck in a mudhole, sitting in a gray Buick listening to the radio, all four wheels stuck up to the wells. Roger searched the grounds until he was able to determine exactly where the video had been filmed. Roger conferred with a friend in the Game Commission, who wanted nothing to do with it but suggested that Roger contact Fish and Wildlife special investigator Kelvin Smith. The investigator was eager to see the tape and wanted Roger to send it right away. He told him not to spare a moment. The sooner they could prosecute the poachers, the better. So Roger immediately put the tape in the mail, without making a copy for himself. He regrets it to this day.

If he had been more familiar with the mystery, he would have known that evidence vanished. Specimens vaporized from DNA labs. Things were lost in the bureaucratic shuffle. Carcasses were whisked away in the middle of the night. Paperwork was destroyed. Photographs wound up missing. Road kills disappeared, witnesses were harassed, cameras were confiscated. After several months without hearing back, he was about to go get the tape back himself when he saw on the news that this same agent Smith had been arrested. The FBI had raided his sheep farm in Perry County and dragged his pond for assault rifles and explosives, and then Smith— his real name was Abdul

Muhaimin—was arraigned for training terrorists linked to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Muhaimin had apparently purchased assault rifles and other equipment using his federal wildlife officer discount.

"Damn federal wildlife agent was a terrorist! What do you make of that?"

Like so much other evidence, the tape was never seen again. Terrorism notwithstanding, this uncanny elusiveness of evidence—the troubling tendency of hair, blood, and scat to vanish when handed over for official scrutiny—only reaffirms Roger's conviction that the panther is at the center of a huge and ominous conspiracy, as if the wilderness itself were under the control of some malign and experimental force.

Part 5-----

AS we crest onto a highland meadow, Roger slows to point off into the woods where his cousin found the mutilated fawn. He creeps along, his nose pressed to the window, fogging the glass, and he calls what he sees with the bored recitation of an eye exam. "Deer tracks, deer tracks, deer tracks, deer tracks. More deer tracks. Squirrel tracks. Turkey tracks. Deer tracks. Jeepers!" He brakes and then underhands the truck into reverse, hits the gas, and steers us backward.

He idles, staring at the snowbank, until the smell of exhaust seeps into the cab. The Tony Bennett tape flips. I hear a dog barking in the cold. Finally, he mumbles, "H'mm, h'mm, h'mm."

I ask what he sees.

"H'mmm."

What is that? I ask.

"There's a possibility that might be a cat track right there. I can't tell for sure."

He drives forward another inch, squinting at the blinding snow. His head bobs back. "Ho ho ho ho, ho ho ho ho."

"Get out of here," I say.

"I think it is, I think it is." He reaches through the wheel and yanks the truck into park and then wrestles a glove on with his teeth. Outside, the air is so frigid it feels as if my nose is being pried off my face. We stand over the curious tracks in a nimbus of chugging gray exhaust.

"Well, you know it's not a bear track, because a bear doesn't walk like that. There's only one animal that runs like that."

I say I don't know that.

He sternly cuts me off: "It's a cat track!"

I ask him what else it could be.

"Nothin'," he says. He hugs himself and wobbles his knees. His ears are crimson. "It can't be a bear. The bear's in hibernation. You see the distance between the tracks? Where he was lopin'?" Roger bends over and sketches four circles beside the mysterious holes with his thumb, a quick diagram of how the cat's foot falls, forepaw to hind paw, pattern close together. There's a yard of untrod snow between each impression. "When a cat's lopin', you'll see a track here, and right in front of it you'll see another track. You can always tell. See how big those tracks are? There's only one animal that makes tracks like that."

We are still in the valley of Roger's ancestors. Arctic fields drift by lopsided arid shimmering blue-pink in the early setting sun. Roger says he just can't believe how political the whole panther thing can get. They have to be paranoid enough about stings and conspiracies and covert reintroductions, but, believe it or not, there are divisions within their own ranks. Saboteurs. He is speaking of the most prominent name in the whole quixotic world of the eastern panther puzzle, a coal miner in West Virginia named Todd Lester. Todd Lester, once one of them, is now the victim of a plot by scientists and the antis and the skeptics. Lester was one of their finest. John Lutz taught him everything he knows. But then, disillusioned, misguided, the young coal miner broke off to start his own separate organization to search for the eastern panther. And in no time, he had a board of directors with several scientists who've infiltrated his group, and Roger fears they will quash the faith of the true believers.

He tells me this as we idle at the bottom of a hill by a pile of bleached boards poking through the snow. A trickle of bone-white snow whistles silently off a dune-shaped drift. The scrap pile is the remains of his family's farm, land now subdivided and sold off. It makes Roger sad to think how this place that he had so many fond childhood memories of, like knocking potato beetles into a pan of kerosene with a stick, has changed. The same place where he stayed up late listening to his great-grandmother's stories about the panthers—it's hard to believe—now belongs to August Kreis, the minister of information and propaganda for Aryan Nations. When they sold, nobody imagined that the neo-Nazi party forced into bankruptcy and chased out of their former home in Idaho, would designate Potter County as a potential new headquarters. By way of announcing themselves to the neighborhood, Kreis invited over five hundred skinheads to his land for a white-supremacist music fest featuring Brutal Attack. Police helicopters filled the sky. The cattle were restless for days.

Roger has a weary look that seems to say, well, if you can believe something like this can happen—Nazis occupying the hill you and your brother used to sled as children, the local game warden training Islamist terrorists—the idea that the government might be releasing lethal predators into the woods doesn't seem so farfetched, does it now?

Listening to this tale, I feel the familiar sense of gradual catastrophe that always comes over me at dusk, mute so now with the flurrying dark ticking silently against the reflection of my face, and I wonder, Why is it so easy for me, a grown man, to still believe in monsters? Why so much instinctual fear? Are these visions of panthers only collective hallucinations? Did we kill off all of our predators just as we killed off our own instincts in order to become what we are today: bland, over-affluent prey?

Part 6 -----

In the pine needles at Todd Lester's feet is a handheld GPS device. While we wait for it to plot our location in the universe (atop a mountain in West Virginia, in early May), Todd stands half sleeping, leaning against a tree, gazing off into the woods. He is normally asleep at this time, with the shades pulled. He has to take melatonin to straighten out his head. "If a cougar wanted to jump me now I don't expect I could put up much of a fight." He wears a camouflage jacket and a thin, trim mustache that accentuates the boyishness a life of coal mining on the graveyard shift has yet to rob from his face. A hat pushed back on his head says EASTERN COUGAR in fat, flamy letters.

We are tying infrared cameras to trees, the same type used by voyeuristic hunters to spy on unsuspecting prey. Each camera is chained and double-padlocked, because bears will tear them apart. When the thunderclouds that have been gathering all morning rumble overhead, there's the sudden smell of ozone and raw earth. Coming to, Todd snatches up the GPS, and as I quickly kneel in front of the camera to display the whiteboard scrawled with our coordinates, I'm momentarily blinded by the flash. As I hurriedly follow after my camouflage-clad guide, a ghost impression of woods swarming on my retinas, he flits in and out of view, half visible in the eye-tricking forest. Before we get back to the truck, it is pouring rain.

While we sit out the downpour, Todd records the GPS coordinates in his damp little notebook. Each is five square miles; with eighteen cameras per grid, he has only 80,000 or so acres to go. Then he pops a Mountain Dew and, clutching it loosely on his knee, nods off for a spell. Todd worked a full shift in the coal mine two nights ago before driving here yesterday morning so that we could break down the first grid of cameras, set up a month earlier when the snow was still "axle high to a Ferris wheel," as he says, and then, after ten hours running around the woods, he was up past midnight in his motel room, tinkering with each camera, changing batteries, rewinding film, setting timers, eating cold pizza, and cleaning mud off the wires until all eighteen were laid out on the floor around his bed like readied bombs. Then, lying in the dark, he worried the way he will when he's five miles underground, obsessing about his next cougar expedition, trying to plan for what might go wrong, praying that enough things that could go wrong will go right just long enough to give him the chance to prove what he knows is real. I myself, as usual, dreamed about bears.

Because I have this recurring dream in which I'm running away from a bear, in a similar setting to the bear sanctuary where Todd and I are now tramping, it's hard for me not to feel paranoid and fateful, like the character in one of those magic-realist stories who

suddenly turns the page to find himself reading a description of the very room in which he sits, in the very same chair, his finger lightly underscoring the sentence that will reveal to him the plot turn in which his consciousness and eternity intersect. In fact, I found myself with that very book in my lap one day shortly before coming here. A cheap, yellowed copy of C. G. Jung's *Man and His Symbols*, opened at random to discover everything that was wrong with me:

The familiar dream in which the dreamer is pursued by an animal nearly always indicates that an instinct has been split off from the consciousness and ought to be (or is trying to be) readmitted and reintegrated into life. The more dangerous the behavior of the animal in the dream, the more unconscious is the primitive and instinctual soul of the dreamer, and the more imperative is its integration into his life if some irreparable evil is to be forestalled.

A friend of mine who's familiar enough with my tendency toward cosmic paranoia was sadistic enough to call me the night before I drove down to West Virginia to read something he'd found in a book called *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, about how bears faced by Christian martyrs in the Colosseum were the most ruthless of all the *bestia*, since, unlike the lion, which slew its victims with one swift merciful bite, the bear inflicted the slowest and most terrifying death, ham-stringing and then eating its prey alive, indifferent to the wails of mortal pain that must have so titillated the Roman bystanders, etc. What my friend doesn't know is that in a demented way, part of me finds the idea of being ushered out of this world by a wild animal strangely appealing. To have one's worst fear finally realized: it must be a great relief.

Part 7 -----

WHEN IT STARTS MISTING, Todd puts the truck in drive, and we begin scouting for locations. The best spots to plant a camera, the best places to capture a glimpse of the spectral cat, fall along the natural highways of the forest, the labyrinthine passageways cut through the wilderness by the countless foot falls of unseen animals. These invisible trails emerge for his eyes effortlessly. The GPS rattling on the dashboard tells us that we're at 4,137 feet, high on an ancient overgrown logging road in an area simply called the Back Country. In three hours we've set up only two cameras, but a half hour later he's yet to see a tree or trail that offers any promise. At this rate I fear we'll be here overnight. Finally he turns down a steep, descending skid road that hasn't been used in at least a decade. We inch down through a jungle of slick ferns, juddering, as if being let down slowly on a winch. I cannot help noticing that Todd's knuckles are white, when he says, as if to himself, "You'd be sittin' here till the Fourth of July and still see nobody if you broke down up here." The sound of evergreen saplings rasping against the undercarriage only partly camouflages the loud pops each time the tires go over a downed limb. The road finally gives out, repossessed by the forest. With no other choice but to search on foot, we gather the gear out of the back of the truck.

On the tailgate, where somebody else might have stuck a Jesus fish, is an anatomically correct paw print, the regal seal of the puma. We each take a camera, and with bungee

ords around our necks and heavy chains looped through our belts, we wade downhill through the trees, clanging like ghosts or two escapees from a chain gang. Todd moves ahead swinging his camera like a camouflage lunchbox. When we turn a bend and I can no longer see the truck, we step off the toad, down an embankment, into the perpetual dusk of the deep forest.

We come to a stream, and Todd hops across the slippery rocks, as agile as a cat himself. On the other side we scurry up a muddy hill studded with tiny purple flowers, grabbing roots, and down into a briar-tangled hollow, and then up again through a jungle of rhododendron. Out of breath, we stop to inspect a pile of scat, which he pokes with a stick, pointing out the embedded bits of mouse vertebrae.

"See how it's got them constrictions in it? Kind of weathered out?" He gives a defeated little nod. "Probably can't get no DNA out of it."

From there, we pick up a game trail, which we follow till it feeds into a photogenic hub of interconnected animal paths with good light. A thrush skirls glassily in the canopy overhead, its song everywhere and nowhere at once. Todd gives me his bowie knife to

WE INCH DOWN THROUGH A JUNGLE OF SLICK FERNS, JUDDERING, AS IF BEING LET SLOWLY DOWN ON A WINCH

cut down half a dozen or so ill-placed saplings that, along with other brush and dead branches, he makes into a pile, which we drag into a barricade he hopes will funnel passing wildlife toward the eye of the camera. After he picks a tree with the best vantage and secures the camera with a bungee cord, he stacks a couple of flat rocks underneath. "Afraid this one won't do too hot," he says, wedging a half-rotten stick near at hand behind the camera. This frustration perplexes me, not just because we've already traveled nearly an hour away from the truck but because we have passed what I would bet were at least a hundred perfectly decent places. The pressure to get it right—to put a camera where it will reap the desired image, the unlikely image, the impossible image—was not so intense before he began flirting with legitimacy.

It was shortly after he broke off from Lutz and formed his own group, the Eastern Cougar Foundation, that this shy but charismatic Quixote began to attract the eco-intelligentsia. First came the nature writer. Then the biologist who, thirty years earlier, had shown

IF IT WERE YOUR SOUL THAT HAD FLED TO THE MOUNTAINS, YOU TOO WOULD HUNT AFTER IT LIKE AHAB GONE MAD

that the eastern coyote had indeed made a successful comeback despite similar official denials. Then the renowned tracker. Then the jaguar expert. Then the geneticist. And then, almost by magic, the wildlife biologist, David Maehr, the former head of the Florida Panther Project, under the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission, a man hailed for doing more to save the East's last known relict of the cougar than any other single

human. Before he knew it, Todd had a board of directors, a grant for cameras, and an insider's access to the land.

It's hard to determine the motives of the various regulating agencies whose blessing he needed to conduct his camera survey, but for some of Todd's scientific advisers, who all strongly believe that the eastern wilderness is a grievous place without native predators like the wolf and the mountain lion, it may have more to do with laying the groundwork for reintroduction than with a genuine belief that Todd will find anything already living there.

Their first political action was a gambit on the radical notion that a real live mountain lion deserved as much protection as an extinct mountain lion. As it stands, out of an alleged thirty-two subspecies, only two subspecies—the inbred Florida panther, and, due to a fluke of logic that nobody is able to explain, the eastern cougar--were granted protection in 1973 when the Endangered Species Act was signed into law. And so, in the extremely rare instance when a mountain lion is caught moseying around the eastern woods, it inevitably turns out to be an escaped captive from a South American or western subspecies, none of which are protected. The best bet for securing protection for any mountain lion in the eastern United States, regardless of its origins (migrant, circus fugitive, or whatever), would be to petition the Department of the Interior to grant a "Similarity of Appearances" clause, which the Eastern Cougar Foundation did in 2000. If granted, this petition would give the puma universal protection across its genus. Once the cat had the government's unconditional protection it would have the chance to repopulate unhindered, and measures for recovery could be put into place without undue violence. But soon after the ECF's petition was sent to Washington, Bruce Babbitt, secretary of the interior under Clinton, rejected it, saying that the government could not consider such a clause until there was adequate proof of a breeding, self-perpetuating non-ethereal population. And so Todd continues to look.

Once camera #19 is chained and padlocked and the toggles and timers and whatnot are set, he walks off into the woods until he's just out of sight. And then, looking pale and entranced, he comes back as a passably deranged sleepless animal, a half-devoted impression of something that walks on all four limbs, stooped low, arms dangling, moving slowly back and forth across the camera's purview like a burglar trying to foil a trip wire, with a little nod each time the laser tags his arm and triggers a flash, until he's sure the camera will snare any thing that enters its ambit.*

It was not far from here, eighteen years ago, that Todd had his own vision of the panther. It was the one and only time the coal miner ever laid eyes on the fabular beast. When he reported it to the Department of Natural Resources, they treated him as if he'd spotted a UFO. They told him he'd probably seen a dog. But that's the thing: He'd been looking for a dog. One of his redbone coonhounds had gone stray at dusk, and he had dog on his mind, was intently focused on dog, on the essence and expectation of dog, but here was something crouched before him with kohlr-traced eyes and a long willowy tail that evoked nothing in the way of dog so much as a frequency completely and unequivocally cat. Then, with the cat, a part of what the coal miner knew to be his soul broke off and

vanished. If it were your soul that had fled to the mountains, you too would spend every spare hour of your life hunting after it like Ahab gone mad. You would not want to hear that the animal has been extinct for a hundred years. And neither, probably, would you find much consolation in the notion that your "instinct's perception of itself," as Jung wrote, burrowed deep in the unconscious, may have emerged from its lightless den in the archetypal guise of a lion, all the more powerful for being *invisible*.

**When he collects the pictures a month later, in addition to several dozen pictures of me holding the rain-speckled whiteboard, like the guy on a film shoot with the slate clapper, the cameras we set up today will have harvested 110 deer, 11 black bears, 2 coyotes, 2 raccoons, 1 grouse, 1 black dog. and one unknown animal. A month after that a very angry bear will destroy five of the cameras and make off with #14, never to be seen again. The only evidence of the culprit will be an out-of-focus close-up of two beady eyes, and then, in the next frame, a dead man's view of sky, partly visible through an oculus in the treetops.*

Part 8 -----

ALTHOUGH TODD doesn't believe in Lutz's crazy conspiracy theories anymore, he does believe that you can't ignore the ample evidence of cover-ups. He is still perturbed by the mystery of what happened to a female cougar captured by authorities in nearby Pocahontas County in 1976. It caused such a stir that a mob showed up to see the cat, with many in the crowd hollering for it be killed then and there. The towns-people were already riled because, only two days before, a farmer taken by surprise while tinkering on his truck-he'd looked up in time to see the animal jump the fence with one of his lambs in its jaws-had shot a male lion, which was supposedly an escaped pet. To complicate matters, the female turned out to be pregnant, which not only bolstered suspicions that it was the mate of the slain male but strongly suggested the presence of a breeding population, which meant the intervention of the Fish and Wildlife Service, the federal agency responsible for enforcing the Endangered Species Act. Nobody knew what to do with the cat. The West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, which was holding the animal, kept telling the feds to come get "your" cat. The feds told the state to rerelease it into the woods, but the state balked, saying that it would only be shot if it were set loose back in the vicinity. Finally they decided to set the mountain lion loose in the "extremely wild" Back Country of the Monongahela, which is where Todd and I are now. But then, at the last minute, Maurice Hornocker, a renowned expert on mountain lions, stepped in and determined-reportedly over the telephone-that the cat was tame and should not be released, since tame mountain lions were "dangerous when turned loose in the wild because they home in on small children."

"That's where the letters end," Todd says, referring to a batch he received through a FOIA request. We have stopped in the middle of a stream congested with bright green moss-covered boulders to regard a waterfall. "The DNR said they destroyed all the paperwork." He does not take their word for it that the cat died in captivity. Nor does he rule out that it was a relict of the eastern subspecies. If tests on the male showed it was an escaped pet, how come they didn't keep the documentation? If the female cat died in captivity, he

thinks, given the regulations of such animals, there should be, at the very least, a record of what happened to the kittens. What happened to the kittens? "I won't say cover-up, but it's shady. And the female, if they did turn her loose ..." He looks around, as if the offspring of such an animal could now be just out of sight, just off-camera, in the brush behind us.*

** Adding to this mystery, the skull of the male was sent to the Fish and Wildlife Service laboratory at the National Museum of Natural History for final analysis. Yet, according to Alfred Gardner, curator of North American mammals at the National Museum, who was able to tell me from personal experience that cougar meat was "assuredly quite tasty," they were never able to ascertain the subspecies since the specimen in question had mysteriously vanished the very weekend it appeared at the lab.*

Meanwhile, as authorities in Pocahontas County fought over what to do with their cougar, down in North Carolina environmentalists were testing the boundaries of the newly minted Endangered Species Act. They were threatening to sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, along with the U.S. Forest Service, unless they halted timber extraction in Nantahala National Forest on the grounds that numerous (though, naturally, unconfirmed) mountain lions had been reported. A brilliant ploy: if the habitat rights of the snail darter could quash a hundred-million-dollar dam, legal protection of the cougar—an umbrella species with a range of 150 square miles—could thwart mining, road construction, logging, and commercial development, plus protect the habitats of thousands of smaller species otherwise destined for the river of extinction. The lion, whether real or not, had become to many eyes the savior returned from the wilderness. Aslan resurrected.

Part 9 -----

"SEE THIS CLIFF?" Todd says, pointing directly over our heads. "This is a good place for a cougar to ambush something below." He sighs, disgusted with the poor choice of location for the next camera, as if there were not enough wilderness. Who knows which way the panther will travel? Who knows how poor the odds are that this tree-accessorized with a mechanical eye—will be the one out of ten billion? If he had his way he would go by instinct. He would set up cameras wherever it felt right instead of worrying about following the established grids and stuff like that put in place by the advisers. He tries not to worry about his patrons losing faith if after a few months, or a year, he has still produced no evidence. But mainly, I suspect, he can't choose a location because in each choice, in each camera, in each dull snapshot of a deer or a fox, lies the potential for failure.

He already fears that he's lost the geneticist.

That will be disappointing, of course, not just because it means no longer having access to cheap DNA tests but also because it was such a coup to get Melanie Culver on their board of directors in the first place. Culver is the scientist who upset the applecart of taxonomy by declaring, after a four-year study of cougar DNA, that instead of the

previously believed thirty-two distinct subspecies there were only six: five indigenous to South and Central America, and only one north of Nicaragua. Meaning, of course, then, that all pumas in North America—*Puma concolor hippokstes*, *P.c. oregonensis*, *P.c. browni*, *P.c. azteca*, *P.c. Stanley ana*, *P.c. vancouverensis*, *P.c. californica*, *P.c. olympus*, etc., even the inbred, one-balled murmur-hearted *P.c. coryi* down in Florida—belong to a single subspecies. That they are, in fact, all the same animal. And if you want to look at it this way, you could say they are now all eastern panthers. If taxonomy is the science of what we name ourselves, then this would be the mountain lion's greatest identity crisis. But for the ECF it is the best news they've ever heard: political salvation in the slime of a petri dish. In effect, Culver's study has handed them the genetic version of a similarity of appearances clause, and, with time, it will no doubt significantly alter the legal future of cougars in the East. But until then, in woods blurred by verging nightfall, there will be men tying cameras to trees.

Part 10 -----

PENNSYLVANIA WILDLIFE CONSERVATION OFFICER William Williams says lately there's been a lot of beaver problems. Bears are also a major pain in his neck. With the drought, there were no blueberries, the nut harvest was not so hot, so you had a lot of trash cans raided. A lot of nuisance calls. Just yesterday he had to respond to a call from a woman who'd been assaulted by a woodchuck. And then, this morning, with me tagging along, he went directly from baiting a beaver trap out to some lake cabins where a 600-pound black bear had been seen cavorting in somebody's hot tub. There, he checked the trap, set a few days earlier: a length of culvert with a trail of doughnuts leading up to the guillotine door. Wildlife, it seems, is a nuisance, but easy to fool. The next call brought us here, where, just in front of American Legion Post 452, with a giant white early-model cruise missile parked on the front lawn, he snaps on latex gloves to deal with the broken deer lying on the shoulder. It is mysteriously unscathed, except for one upturned ear, like a purse filled with blood that flickers obscenely in the truck's flashing yellow light. With a clang, Williams drops the deer rack, a mesh metal gurney hinged to the rear of his Dakota, and he drags the buck by one stiff leg, leaving a trail of gore, and heaves it onto the platform, all without getting a spot on his creased khaki shirt.

Back in his truck, rolling down one of the finest paved roads in Sullivan County, Pennsylvania, he picks up where he left off. "There's an element out there who thinks there's a--I guess you would call it a conspiracy. That there's some sort of cover-up by the state wildlife agencies to convince people there aren't mountain lions here when there are. It's totally wrong. There's nothing to hide. There really isn't." he says that if the Game Commission had reintroduced mountain lions, they would not have done it covertly; they'd be patting themselves on the back. "We've introduced a number of species back into the state: fishers, the otter, bald eagle, osprey, peregrine falcon—and, if you go back to the turn of the century, there were practically no deer left in the state. They actually brought them in on boxcars from Michigan."

WCO Williams has somewhat raw features, lashless eyes, and a head shaved like a Marine's. He is a law-enforcement officer, not a dogcatcher. "Game warden," he

admonishes me, is a term as dead as the notion that wildlife, that great welfare state, might get by on its own without the protection of men with guns. Which explains why his truck is crammed with firepower. He's got a pistol strapped to his hip, and strapped overhead is a 12-gauge shotgun-a weapon, he said, mostly for human control: poachers and perps like the hick assholes who insist on bringing machine guns to deer camp. Rattling in his coin nook are a handful of spare cartridges. The scope-mounted .22 on the back seat is for "dispatching" animals. The other rifle, a tranquilizer gun, is for giving them bad dreams.

"We have over a million hunters in the woods every fall. No one's either accidentally or on purpose shot one. A lot of highways through the state, and there hasn't been any roadkills of mountain lions. Mountain lions have to die somewhere. How about a skull? Certainly bones would be hard evidence. You know? They don't hibernate, so how about a snowfall with a good set of tracks? And I guess if you look at the broader picture-and this isn't just Pennsylvania-how about a population in Maine? or Vermont? Someplace. West Virginia? Nowhere in the East. They don't float above the ground. They leave tracks. They have to die sometime. They have to have young. They're not Dracula, so I imagine they show up on film." he ticks off the same exasperated litany of reasons that I have heard, with varying degrees of rancor, from countless state wildlife agencies regarding the eastern panther's great implausibility. "It's just not true. We don't have a population of cougars. They're not here. But if people want to believe it, they're gonna believe it."

He makes a right onto an indistinguishable dirt road-you wouldn't notice it unless you were looking-and we bump along through the woods until we come to a bosky clearing of giant ferns that feather past as high as the bottom of our windows, filling the forest air with a celery, happy light. In my side mirror I can see the buck's hooves, crossed like a ballerina's, bouncing along.

"It just amazes me that people would dedicate their lives to searching for something that doesn't exist." he adjusts the rattling CB. "People get a thought in their mind that there's a particular animal out there, and by God, in their mind that's what they're looking at. I mean, you talk to these Area 51 people-now I'm not comparing these people who think they saw a mountain lion to them exactly, but I think maybe there's an element out there that go to that extreme." he whistles through his teeth. he tells me how two years ago he was manning a booth at a local bow festival when a man approached him to report that he knew what the Game Commission was up to because his brother personally knew the pilot who'd flown the helicopter that had lowered several mountain lions onto the game lands. Amused, he thrums his fingers on the steering wheel. "Maybe they kicked them out of the helicopter. Cats always land on their feet, right?"

Just ahead, leaves explode in a plume of confetti when a giant black bird drops heavily out of a tree, gaining altitude belatedly; another twelve or thirteen of its comrades, wicked black beasts with wingspans as wide as the truck, burst up out of the ferns. When Williams stops at a pit surrounded by snow fence, the last few bold turkey vultures join the roost of ghouls regarding us from the branches overhead.

"This is what I call the bird feeder," he says. "The boneyard. You may want to stay inside, it's a little smelly out there." But I get out and stand by the edge of the pit, without offering to help with the deer. Its eyes are still vivid green. The ground is covered with bird shit, and the stink is unbearable, but maybe less so than the unnatural image of so much jumbled death: rib cages and skulls picked clean and nondescript mammalia all dissolving into the same colorless gray mush. When he tosses the deer on top of the heap its tenacious vibrancy-its life hues-glow stubbornly against the utter monochrome of death.

By mid-afternoon, we're trundling through Game Lands #13-50,000 acres of happy hunting grounds. He's telling me he gets probably twenty cougar sightings a year, and how, when he first started at the Game Commission, he was more inclined to investigate, whereas today he's not going to give it much priority. Ninety percent of the time, he says, they happen to people in cars at dusk. A fulvous, long-tailed blur crossing the road. A slinking specter in the fading light.

Then, struck with a fresh idea, he says that if there's anyone out there more apt to see a mountain lion than himself, it's gonna be the Food and Cover guys. They're out here every day. Unlike him, the Food and Cover guys-the division of the Game Commission responsible for keeping the resident game species (and thereby hunters) fat and happy-spend most of their time on foot. They plant clover for rabbits and fruit and nut trees for bears, and they cut browse for deer and maintain roads and stuff like that. A mile later, he turns down a drive that ends at a giant shed, where there's a bulldozer parked cockeyed on a hill of gravel, a few big trucks, and some muddy farm equipment. We're greeted by the maintenance supervisor and two other men loading bags of seed onto a tractor. Williams tells them that I'm doing a story about the sightings, and he smiles to let them know that he thinks it's pucky, but within five minutes, without the faintest hint of irony, all three Food and Cover guys avow their belief that mountain lions, without doubt, exist in these woods. all three have a mountain-lion story. One knows of a horse killed. The youngest guy, wearing an oil-stained shirt, saw a lion with a cub not a week ago. And the supervisor, with twenty-seven years in the Game Commission, told us that the winter before, while cutting browse for deer, he'd seen five-inch pugmarks in the snow; the way they skittered and darted and jumped under and over fallen logs looked to him like a cat tracking mice. "I know they're here," he said. Williams stands mute, with his hand resting on the butt of his pistol.

Back in the truck, heading out of the game lands, the radio muttering like a voice trying to reach us from deep space, WCO William Williams gradually emerges from his baffled silence to regroup the argument. He exhales quickly.

What he will concede, as will his superiors, is that there very well could be a few escaped or released mountain lions running around in the woods. "People do own mountain lions. They own panthers and tigers and lions and everything else." Strangely enough, the Game Commission is the agency that sells these exotic pet permits in the first place and that enforces the regulations under which mountain lions, tigers, cheetahs, leopards,

emus, prairie dogs, eagles, muntjacs, coyotes, coatimundi, lynx, bobcats, monkeys, macaws, camels, buffalo, lemurs, kangaroos, yaks and coyotes, zebras, giraffes, alpacas, elephants, wolves, servals, and bears may be kept. It is not hard to imagine how, on occasion, the difficulties of keeping a 200-pound carnivore might lead to an owner "accidentally" leaving the gate open one night. Wildlife agents say that this explains the few non-hallucinatory sightings: escapees from roadside petting zoos, exotic pets on the lam. It is also suspected that ecowarriors of the Earth Liberation Front ilk may have set some of the animals free to help reintroduce a critical species to the eastern woods. Given the ease with which one can buy a cougar in, say, Florida, it isn't hard to imagine an idealistic young man in Texas and an EarthFirst! shirt trundling down a dirt road in a pickup with a mysteriously canvas-cloaked crate. Ted Turner, the green-spirited media mogul, was fined \$1,500 in 1988 for releasing cougars onto his Florida plantation. The cougar also is reputed to be a favored pet among strippers and drug dealers. Such are the unlikely allies of this charismatic megafauna.

"I can't tell you that there's not a tiger running around out here. What I'm saying is, as far as any sort of reproducing mountain lions-it's not happening." As for the escapees, Williams says, captive-bred animals are ill equipped to survive in the wild. "If that's not taught, you know, in the wild state, the chances of survival aren't very good." His eyes flicker over the passing woods. "Maybe instinct isn't enough."

Part 11 -----

ON ANOTHER MOUNTAIN, this time in Kentucky, in the dead heat of July, I watch a bear slip into unconsciousness. I sit on a fallen log a short distance away, not really giving a shit, smoking a cigarette in the hope that it will drive away the biting midges. This is the only place where I could arrange to meet Dave Maehr, the erstwhile Florida panther expert, now professor of conservation biology at the University of Kentucky, where he is immersed (with an environmental writing class in tow) in a bear study for the state. As with mountain lions, bears were pushed out of Kentucky by 1850, but their recent homecoming is a phenomenon that shows there is indeed vacancy for large predators in the East. The undergrads, with their enthusiasm and open notebooks, make me feel fraudulent and auraless for not being able to get past the disappointing realness of the moment: the disappointing realness of the bear. In part, I chalk up the diminished grandeur of the bear's nature to the boxy radio collar around its neck, the long red-and-white streamers in its ears, the green ink still foaming from a fresh tattoo stamped inside its lip, and the purple bandanna blindfold.

The students diligently observe every detail of the sleeping bear, stroking its bristly fur, inhaling its rooty musk, bravely touching the pads of its massive paws, its claws, crouching down to observe it from every possible creative angle, noting the way it drools, the way the dirt skitters beneath its nostrils, making deft little sketches in the margins of their well-bound notebooks. They ask good questions. One cute nineteen-year-old in a pink coral necklace-a wad of chewing tobacco tucked ironically in her cheek-wants to know the dimension of the bear's testicles. (The biologist crouched down with calipers

tells her: 8 x 4.5 cm.) The kinder students swat at insects hovering over its wounds, bite marks dealt out by more dominant bears. Our bear, #15, is at the bottom of the totem pole, one of Maehr's aides says. I throw out that perhaps running around the forest with bicycle streamers in its ears might affect the status of the animal. To which the biologist counters that the accessories only enhance its status in the eyes of its peers, and I can't quite remember if it was before or after we stopped laughing at this little joke that he spread open its legs to show us all the bear's "penis bone," only to discover the vindictive bite marks and the nasty, raw gash in its groin. Using the same viselike instrument and bottle of green ink used to tattoo the bear's lip, they put another tattoo in its crotch. Since bears have been found with their heads lopped off-by poachers, maybe, harvesting gallbladders for the black-market trade in Asian aphrodisiacs-a mere tattoo in the mouth is no longer adequate. Then, once #15 is branded, the biologist lifts its tail and thrusts a thermometer into my hand so that I might have the honor of inserting it up the bear's rectum.

In a camo jacket, with cropped gray hair and rugged blue eyes, standing off to the side with a boot propped on a half-rotten log, Maehr has the face and air of a colonel supervising triage. The dart gun lies at his feet near a pile of moldering doughnuts and an empty vial of tranquilizer, which says, in small print, DOGS AND CATS ONLY.

While his aides work over the bear and collect their data, he fidgets calmly with a stick and talks to me about the other, less visible animal. For the most part, he chalks up the sightings to folklore. "It's like people in southern England who believe in the Beast of Bodmin Moor and the Surrey Puma," he says. "There hasn't been a large carnivore in southern England since lynxes and wolves were eradicated five hundred years ago." As the most prominent scientist on the Eastern Cougar Foundation's board of directors, Maehr does not for a second think eastern mountain lions survived the nineteenth-century persecution, and he says the idea of a government conspiracy is ludicrous. But, on the other hand, like a lot of deep ecology thinkers, he would desperately like to bring them back.

"There's plenty people out there who say why would we want to bring something back that we fought so hard to get rid of in the first place?" He speaks quietly so as not to wake the bear. "There's a high anxiety associated with big furry things with sharp teeth. No doubt about it." But to Maehr and other biocentrists, the risk of cougar attacks on humans is infinitesimal compared with the ways in which its restoration would redeem the East's moribund ecosystem. The reintroduction of the mountain lion would "dramatically" improve the landscape itself. This was seen in Yellowstone, where the reintroduction of wolves had a direct and salutary effect on vital flora such as aspen and willow, two key tree species for songbirds, decimated by elk until wolf packs redistributed the herds. "There are species in the tropics that are dropping out because all the seeds are being eaten by things like agoutis and capybaras and tapirs and stuff like that. These are places that are absent jaguar. They're absent mountain lion." And nature has become too complacent, he thinks, because it has lost that tension between predator and prey.

He is not alone in his idealism. In fact, putting meat eaters back in the forest is a central

doctrine of the Wildlands Project-one of the fifty conservation groups that endorsed the ECF's similarity-of-appearance petition-a Utopian blueprint hailed by Paul Ehrlich as "the only realistic strategy for ending the extinction crisis." The plan, to link and "rewild" vast but fragmented stretches of wilderness areas into natural corridors (at the expense of a few interstates and suburban populations), would better facilitate movement among large carnivores across the landscape, permitting the game of evolution to flourish free of human intervention. Reed Noss, the chief scientist of the Wildlands Project, told me that the cougar, specifically, will be the "key focal species for the rewilding of the entire Atlantic megalinkage."

"It'd be very, very exciting to put some evolutionary forces back in the landscape," Maehr whispers. Even though he is enthused by the apparent phenomenon over the past ten years of mountain lions migrating from the West, it will be a long time, he says, if ever, before they make it this far on their own. The obstacles are nearly insurmountable. The only way a recovery effort will go forward is if something big enough--like the sudden and miraculous appearance of a breeding population--happens to force the hand of the wildlife agencies. "Once they were confronted with the reality of them being there," he says, "I think they would have no choice but to manage it responsibly."

As former research supervisor of the Florida Panther Project, he knows a thing or two about the disharmony between biology and government. He proved not only that the Florida panther wasn't, as many had alleged, on the verge of extinction but that there was a larger population than formerly believed. His drive to make more and more daring captures, however, earned him a reputation as a cowboy who sometimes risked the lives of the cats he was trying to save, and his self-confessed tendency to butt heads with the other agency officials led to his abrupt resignation in 1994. He twiddles his stick and looks down at the bear; it languidly probes the ground with its bright green tongue. He's sure some of his former colleagues look at his association with the ECF and think he's gone off the deep end. "Yeah, Maehr, he's become a real wacko now." He shrugs. "My credibility is shot with a lot of people anyway."

He stops briefly to ask, "What's the latest prognosis on Boo-boo?"

A few of the students are having their picture taken with the bear, holding up its heavy, sagging head for the flash. The staff are arguing about antibiotics.

"If we really wanted to pull it off, we could do it," Maehr says. "We'd find the people who would sell us the animals underhanded, and put 'em in crates, and drive them right across the state line. It'd be really easy. I mean, how many vehicles get pulled over just to see what's in the back of the truck? We're fortunately not yet at that police state that it looks like we're heading toward more and more every day. But, yeah, I think it's doable." He twirls his stick off into the brush and contemplates his own hypothetical stealth for a moment. "Morally, would it be a bad thing? No. Legally bad? Yeah. Morally, maybe bad if the lion runs out and kills somebody." Whether or not human casualties would be worth a healthy ecosystem, he says, is a tricky semantic question. "Would I turn myself in after it happened if I was the one to do it? I don't know. I'm not willing to risk that

myself. But there are other people independent enough that even if they got caught they could withstand the jail time and the fine that'd be levied on them, and they'd be viewed as a hero by a lot of people."*

** Even if Maehr, in the end, is not willing to risk jail for the sake of biodiversity, the subversive writings of his friend Dave Foreman, the father of EarthFirst! (and co-founder of the Wildlands Project), may have already inspired releases. Roger Cowburn related one incident when he'd been contacted by a young ecowarrior with plans to set a mountain lion free in the East. At first, the relationship was purely informational. But then, after the ecowarrior was robbed in a nightclub, he called back asking for money. Sometime after Roger turned him in, the man called John Lutz, threatening to set a mountain lion loose unless he gave him money. Lutz told the man to "stick it!" (In a related note, one Sunday afternoon shortly after my visit to Kentucky, while visiting a cougar sanctuary, standing close enough to an eight-foot-long, 200-pound male that I could feel its purr rumbling in my sternum, I found myself nearly talked into becoming an accomplice to a release. Persuasive are the great cat lovers.)*

However noble Maehr views the restoration of large carnivores, he has no plans to do it himself (at least, none that he will admit). But the more he speaks, the more I understand that the question is not whether the panther is already here but how soon can we put it back. And not only that, but why, in this declawed world, where deer have become less paranoid, does it seem that we steadily grow more paranoid? The reason, he says, echoing the words of the philosopher Paul Shepard, is that despite our tall glass buildings and our ability to subjugate other creatures, we are still wild animals ourselves.

"We've become domestic but not domesticated," he says, toeing a semi-glazed doughnut. The faint drone of insects is lulling. "We still have all the wild emotions and the hormonal responses-jealousy, raging emotions-that we would have if we were living in Africa in the Pleistocene. But, like deer, I think the loss of certain senses-like when you're out in the open you're probably always looking over your shoulder waiting for some pack of hyenas to come eat your ass-those things have diminished in us. But that doesn't make us unwild. It's because you're a wild animal and you've been put into a situation that your species didn't evolve to handle. We get overloaded. We're responding to these stimuli." He gestures as if it is all filtering down on us through the trees. "We've been hammered into this very unnatural setting where we can't control ourselves anymore. Somebody walking to work with an automatic weapon killing people: what's the selective advantage to that?" The bear is chasing something in its sleep, weakly kicking a hind leg. "And we choose to buy into the technology, into the comfort and calories, the entertainments that go with that. And that increases our dysfunction. It increases our pathology. There are times I feel anxious, I don't know what the fuck I'm even anxious about. I think we're living in a society, in a time, when we've made everything so artificial that we've become crazy."

Since I grew up in the country, in mountains like these, as an adolescent blessed with a wilderness of privacy in which to escape and think my dark poet-stoner thoughts, I have proceeded under the pastoral fantasy that if things turned out badly enough in real life, I

could always just strike out into the woods, build a shelter, and live out my days as a happy savage. There, in the sacrosanct wilderness, my pure and incorruptible true nature, that original primal thing, whatever it is, my undeviated will, my inner *wildor*, my instinctual self, would remain intact. It is only now that my mistake occurs to me, as I look at the idiotic bear, blindfolded, ears beribboned and tongue and crotch painted like a circus animal that's been hazed in its stupor by the monkeys. An odd welcome home for a beast that is, until the return of the Machtando, interregnum king of our forest. Lear playing the fool.

My mistake was to believe in wilderness in the first place. The instinctual self stands no more chance in these fairy-tale woods where the few curious animals that aren't already dead or on the fast track to extinction-or getting by on clover planted by friendly Food and Cover guys-live out an existence under surveillance, on camera, wired for sound, tracked by plane, auscultated weekly, mined for data, and for all I know probed remotely from outer space. It is not only that the eastern panther may exist solely in our minds. The truth is, there is no wilderness; wilderness itself is extinct.

It is no more real than those archetypal bears chasing us down in our dreams, visions of a species that has disowned its wild nature, that has, in essence, merely surrendered to a life of captivity. Trapped, our instincts in the dark, banished to a life lived underground, we nourish ourselves with visions of a paradise lost that brought into daylight would crumble. But perhaps if we *unbanish* the monsters, we might, one day, restore our own lost wild selves.

USING THE SAME VISELIKE INSTRUMENT, THEY PUT ANOTHER TATTOO IN THE BEAR'S CROTCH

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