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In Dreams Begin Responsibilities



Lynx Canadensis

(Photo courtesy of Maine Field Office,
United States Federal Wildlife Service.)

My tiger tabby cat and I are in the backyard. He is intently focused on a high branch in a large oak tree. When I follow his sight line, a lynx suddenly drops onto my chest. I hold her head in both my hands so we are face to face. I can feel my heart pounding against her powerful furred chest.

I once believed that animals came to us through dreams as spirit guides and helpers.¹ Lately another perspective has emerged. I wonder why should a lynx want to enrich me with her considerable portfolio of powers? Should I privilege myself by thinking this interspecies contact is about me? These days I am convinced that animals sometimes appear in our dreams on behalf of themselves. They arrive with urgent messages and are trying to communicate with us about the state of their kind and the loss and fragmentation of critical habitats.

The lynx jolts me awake. She is vivid in my mind's eye, and I know this lynx is female. Breathless in my bed, I feel the imprint of her weight on my chest. An astonished Thoreau once exclaimed when confronted by a formidable mountain landscape, "Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?" The dream encounter feels acutely personal, embodied and yet full of mystery, a purposeful collision between human and other. Fur to flesh, face to face, heartbeat to heartbeat— instantaneously between her and me a "we" is forged.

I begin a study project: I read about the lynx, its habits and habitat; I cut pictures from my wildlife calendar and paste them in a notebook. *Lynx Canadensis* with tufted ears, facial ruff, and

deep-seeing eyes draws me closer. I especially take notice of her long legs and great, furry paws that let her travel easily through snow. In many native tales these paws are likened to snowshoes. Coincidentally, I learn, her preferred food is snowshoe hare, a creature who also has wide furry snow-traveling paws. Predator and prey share these similarities.

Human knowledge and photographs can only take me so far. I understand that I will never know this creature in her totality; I want to preserve the dream's sense of awe and mystery, but I also want to see a living lynx. Sadly I learn that my chance of viewing this extremely reclusive animal in the wild is nearly impossible. Not only does her secretive nature make her elusive, but as an inhabitant of northern boreal forests, she is at the far southern edge of her range in Maine.²

Through a friend I discover that there is a lynx at Maine State Wildlife Park, a place I have never visited. This facility is a place for wounded, orphaned, or human-dependent animals that cannot live in the wild. A visit would afford me the only chance of seeing a lynx in waking life.

Inside the Wildlife Park, I make my way through rows of neatly aligned picnic tables; the crisp directives of supervising adults punctuate the chatter and squeals of small children on a school outing. The early June morning is mild, trees in full leaf. Following a wide groomed path, I see what appears to be dog kennels with cement floors surrounded by double chain-link fences. I avert my gaze from the pacing bobcats, the fox, the coyote. I have not come here as a curious tourist; I have one purpose: the intimacy of felt connection with the lynx. I am inquisitive, but hopefully not transgressive of her need for privacy. I am aware that the lynx that lives here stands between my dream lynx and a lynx going about her business in the wild.


When I find the caged lynx, she is perched on top of a small round enclosure made of stripped tree logs. A flush, wild, hot, and mammalian, rises up protesting her captivity. The indignity of her situation does not seem to touch her; the human eyes fixed on her do not disturb her composure. Like an ancient monk in a mountain cave, this most secretive, nocturnal hunter with her great front paws folded under, appears to be in a profound meditative state. Is she dreaming? Is she remembering how the pads of her feet moved through the snowy spruce forests, bogs, and fens? Is she searching for the quivering white hare hiding in the blow-down jack pines?

For the Koyukon, Alaskan native Athabaskan speakers, lynx is thought to be among the most powerful animals, even more potent than the wolverine, bear, or wolf. According to anthropologist Richard Nelson, "This animal can afflict a person with a more complete and lasting alienation than any other, as the stories warn." Nelson tells one tale:

In the Distant Time, the bear and lynx were talking. The bear said that when humans began hunting him they would have to treat him right. If he was mistreated by someone, that person would get no bears until he had gray hairs on his head. But the lynx said that people who mistreated him would never get a lynx again in their lives. (1983, 156)

Nature writer Barry Lopez, who lived with native peoples for a time in far northern Alaska, once told me that indigenous peoples consider each animal to be an individual and do not categorize them as a species: even when a herd of caribou passes through their village, they are known as particular individuals.

The sign on the chain-link fence reads, "*Lynx Canadensis*: Female," it does not report her history, her home territory, how and why she arrived at this spot, as some of the other signage posts



do. She shows no obvious indication of past injury. The distance between us feels immeasurable. I cannot reach through two layers of chain link with my bare hands, but I can sing myself into contact, a humming wordless chant that lets her know that I am here because I received the dream.

Within earshot of the lynx, I overhear the woman standing next to me laugh as she tells her friend how she inherited her mother's lynx fur coat. Bushwhacked, I am jerked from one dimension of reality and flung into another. I feel embarrassed for my species, how we all suffer from various forms of alienation: soul-starved and amnesiac, fed on abstractions, wearing empty skins, forgetful of our place as mammals in a shared biome. Through the mediation of a dream, the other-than-human lynx breached the separation, delivering a sharp reminder of our deep connectivity. She will never be revealed in her totality, her profound otherness remains, but I have been touched and tasked to extend my humanity to include her.

Later I learn that the lynx in this park has been mated with another captive and that her two kittens will also spend their entire life in another wildlife park. I worry about the deracinating effects of life in a pen. If the lynx's wild essence is so diluted and weakened by captivity won't we suffer, as the Koyukon say, from the lynx's curse: complete and lasting alienation? I write a letter of complaint on behalf of her. No one responds. She is called an "ambassador of her species." No one has bothered to consider the lynx and what she might want. So now, like a palimpsest, there are four lynx: the dreamtime one, the captive, the one in the wild, and the one who speaks herself through native myth-tellers.

The trip to see the captive lynx does not end my inquiry. Those snowshoe paws send me on my first winter-camping snowshoe trip led by two Maine Wilderness Guides. Their knowledge, skillfulness, and deep appreciation of traditional native ways come from living and traveling in Labrador where they apprentice themselves to native peoples.

In early February, our small band of eight travel on Pine Stream, a flowage that runs between Moosehead Lake and Chesuncook Lake. The frozen stream serves as a flat winter highway. The guides teach us the benefits of using traditional equipment as opposed to ubiquitous garish high-tech gear. I feel the utility and beauty of my white canvas anorak with braided trim; it shields me from the wind and lets my body breathe. The traditional, wooden, gut-strung snowshoes awaken my indigenous soul. They please me aesthetically and are as efficient as lynx paws for traversing deep snow without sinking. The snowshoes leave a beautiful overlapping pattern on the snow, one that feels ancient, delicate, and natural.

Winter camping is not a lightweight endeavor. With wide leather tumpline straps that cross the chest, we are hitched to traditional narrow wooden toboggans loaded with tents, sheet metal stoves and pipes, food for a week, and personal gear. The slow pace of snowshoeing and pulling requires muscles and breath; the effort keeps me warm, a light sweater under the anorak is sufficient even in below zero weather.

In the late afternoon we pull our toboggans onto the snowpack and unload. We stake out space for two tents, dig a square pit at each entrance for the wood-burning stoves, form raised sleeping platforms, and pitch tightly woven Egyptian cotton tents. Fresh pine boughs are placed in the pit and the tent instantly fills with their aromatic fragrance. Tarps, sleeping pads, and sleeping bags are rolled out on the platform; a fire is lit in the woodstove; mukluks are hung up on the center tent line; and we have a tidy, warm, and cozy home.

In one of the warm tents where food is made, we relax in long underwear and tell stories. I begin to glimmer how early native people must have lived during the winter, how survival is in direct relationship to the amount of good food available, how fat is the best insulator against cold, how a well-told story feeds the spirit. As expected I have dreams on this trip. But the theme surprises me.

I am with my mother. She is very old, wrapped up in a sheet. She is clearly dying. I am caressing her, pouring love into her from every cell in my body. I am telling her how much I love her, how happy I am to be loving her in this way. How glad I am we have this time at the end to express all this love, something I could never do before.

How strange it is to have this dream. My mother has been dead for years. Is it my personal mother? Yes, I think, it is my personal mother, but there is this, too. In the lynx dream, my domesticated tabby cat mediated my connection with the lynx; his sightline directed mine. In this dream, my personal mother, the woman who gave me life, mediates my relationship with the greater maternal surround. Fragile. Threatened. Endangered. In need of protection. My dream assignment is a call to reverence all life as well as the planet on which we reside, never forgetting the ineluctable ties that bind us together.

The poet and linguist, Robert Bringhurst, writes,

Each of us tells stories and each of us *is* a story. Not just each of us humans, but each of us creatures—spruce trees and toads and timber wolves and dog salmon. We all tell stories to ourselves and to each other—within the tribe, within the species, and way beyond its bounds. (2006, 167)

And I would add that sometimes, through dreams or deep listening, if we are lucky, we are able to hear those other-than-human stories.

ENDNOTES

1. The writer Delmore Schwarz snatched this title for his 1937 short story from the Irish poet W. B. Yeats' 1914 volume of poems *Responsibilities*, which has an epigraph "In dreams begin responsibility." Like the Raven, I am attracted to shiny objects, so I, too, have picked this phrase to brighten my nest of words, believing that all memorable lines remain fresh and meaningful, no matter the times or the context.
2. Beauty is dangerous. Bearers of coveted fur (lynx pelts paid a bounty of \$15), lynx nearly disappeared from Maine altogether. With endangered species protection, their population currently runs between 800 to 1000. Leg traps set in the northern forest do not discriminate; they are ignorant of the Endangered Species Act; and lynx are vulnerable to them.

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PATRICIA REIS, MA, MFA, is the author of three books and numerous articles, reviews, and essays. She co-edited, with Nancy Cater, *Women's Voices in Spring: A Journal of Archetype and Culture* (Fall 2014), an issue that includes an in-depth interview with naturalist and writer Terry Tempest Williams. She has a BA in English Literature from the University of Wisconsin, Madison; an MFA in Sculpture from UCLA; and an MA in Counseling Psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute. Her memoir, *(UN)COMMON WOMEN: A Midlife Chronicle*, is forthcoming in Fall 2016. *Correspondence*: www.patriciareis.net.