

two occasions I have heard actors perform this essay from upon a darkened stage. I yearned only for the prop of a bed from a five-star hotel.

Literary essays have always required creative energies. I certainly use all the possibilities of the pen when I write—narrative, poetry, drama. So I really don't distinguish among literary enterprises. My essays are stories. My essays are poems. My essays are dramatic monologues. Even jazz compositions.

I think the new writer should not assume that there are going to be readers of her work. There are many writers of value today who are barely read and may turn to video games for their living. On the other hand, there are writers, in our nonliterate culture, who manage to seduce some portion of the reading world or, at least, Oprah Winfrey. In short, the writer should be strong. But to those who are crazed by the enterprise, and need to write, as they need to pee or eat or sleep, my advice will not console them or help them get published or read.

Killing Wolves

SHERRY SIMPSON

At the Goldstream General Store just down the road from my house, three creamy wolf pelts dangle from the log beam above the dog food section. Their paws brush my cheeks as I walk the

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narrow aisle, the wood floor creaking beneath my feet. My fingers drift across the fur. A single paw covers my entire hand.

When it's cold, as it often is in Fairbanks, I wear a dark blue felt hat trimmed with toffee-colored muskrat, and a down parka thinly ruffed with coyote. The plain animal softness warms and comforts me in the harshness of winter. Sometimes I covet thicker, more beautiful furs—the flaming fox hats and luxurious wolverine ruffs that others wear. I bought a glossy black fox hat in Vladivostok once, but it's too fancy for everyday use. It hangs in my closet and tickles my arms when I reach for my more sensible hats.

Usually I try not to dwell on how these animals died, or who killed them. Even though I was raised in Alaska, I was also raised on Disney, in that fantasy world where creatures sing and talk, foxes and hounds play together, and only mean people kill animals. I cried the first time I saw Bambi's mother die. I was twenty-nine. In the real world, of course, nothing is that simple. I acknowledge my own contradictory notions. I don't hunt, but I enjoy a tender moose roast. I dislike state-sponsored wolf control, but I'm irritated by people from Outside telling Alaskans what to do. I want to wear fur, but I don't want to kill animals for it, least of all the appealing, doggish wolf. Deep in this ambivalence, I recognize a moral blind spot, a deliberate turning away from the way life and death proceed.

I know I will never kill a wolf. Still, I wonder what goes on out there in the wilderness, where wolves kill moose and caribou, and men kill wolves, where something happens that is more cruel and honest and frightening than most of us can bear.

Ben Hopson Jr. stands on the frozen lake thirty miles northeast of Fairbanks and sweeps his hand across the scene. "Pretend

this is a wolf trail," he says, gesturing to a snow-machine track waffling the snow. A Nunamiut Eskimo from Anaktuvuk Pass, he wears snowpants, a wool hat pulled over a baseball cap, and a white anorak ruffed with wolf. His eyeglasses darken as the wan morning light of February seeps through the trees and washes away the blue shadows. In the ten-below chill, our breath frosts.

We shuffle closer, our boots squeaking in the feathery snow, and strain to hear Hopson's soft voice as he points beyond the fringe of black spruce and birch trees. "There's a herd of caribou ten miles that way," he says. Now we're trying to picture the Brooks Range country he knows near his village, where constant wind lathes the snow into a hard crust and the wolves grow long, silky coats.

Just when I think I've fixed the picture—the line of wolves loping against the snow, moving as silently as smoke—Hopson drops a 750 Helfrich trap on the snow. To me, it is a clanking, rusty contraption, a metal puzzle that will somehow resolve into something that can seize a 100-pound wolf by the leg and hold it fast. With his feet, Hopson carefully spreads the square steel jaws apart and sets them into an instrument of kinetic desire that cannot be satisfied until it springs free and claps shut.

We are learning how to catch imaginary wolves, here at Wolf Trapping School. Everyone else is catching them better than I am, because they are trappers and I am not. Going to Wolf Trapping School is like attending graduate school in catching animals, the organizers tell me. A certain level of outdoor skill is presumed here; you cannot simply saunter into the woods and expect to hoodwink the fabled Alaska wolf, a clever and elusive animal with more claim to the territory than we have.

Our instructor, Ben Hopson, learned what he knows from his wife's brother and uncles, and from all his time on his Arctic trapline. As he shows us how to catch phantom wolves with a

blind, or concealed, set, he moves and speaks deliberately, as if first considering every act and word. First, he anchors the trap's chain by freezing it into the snow with steaming hot water poured from a Thermos. Scooping a trap-sized hollow into the trail, he lines the bottom with six-inch lengths of slender willow branch to prevent the trap from freezing to the bed.

With a few hundred caribou nearby, he says, wolves will circuit through his traps once a week, following the same trail, often stepping in their own tracks.

"Sure, it's like going to the store," someone says.

The men laugh. "7-Eleven for caribou," someone says.

Gripping a long knife in his bare hands, Hopson begins paring snow from a rectangular slab until he's shaped a square pane an inch or two thick. Gently, he lays the snow pane across the trap. "A lot of times I have to do this four or five times when the snow conditions are too soft. While I'm shaving these I've had them fall apart right on me," he says with a slow smile, acknowledging all the things that can go wrong. Hopson trims the lid until it drops evenly across the trap, flush with the trail surface. He scrapes his fingers across the snow until the edges blend, then with the knife tip grooves the surface to match the snow-machine track.

Now the trap lies unseen, waiting. Trappers describe the situation like this: Out of 365,000 square miles in Alaska, the wolf must step onto a four-inch circle. I start to understand something about wolves and trappers, the intricacy of effort that leads to their encounters.

As the sun tops the trees and illuminates the snow, Hopson demonstrates other techniques. How to disguise a trap with moss common to his area. Where to set traps around a caribou kill—here he uses a partial carcass to demonstrate. What scent lures to use—"Bear fat. Puppies really like it. You'll have them all lined

up in your traps there." (I blanch until I realize he means full-grown but inexperienced wolves, not little puppies.)

My mind lingers on the trap cloaked beneath the snow. When the session ends for lunch, Hopson presses his foot carefully against the surface and then slides it back quickly. The trap erupts from below with a metallic gulp, spraying bits of snow and moss into the air.

There have always been trappers in Alaska, beginning with the Natives who caught furbearers for clothing, meat, and a score of vital needs. In the old days, Inupiat Eskimos wrapped fat around sharpened and bent pieces of whalebone; when the bait thawed in the wolf's stomach, the bone sprang open and pierced the animal's gut. Once whites moved into the country, wolves were generally considered vermin that ate up all the game that men desired. Trappers were often solitary men like old Oscar Vogel, who guided and trapped in the Talkeetna Mountains for decades and wrote things like, "Time and suffering mean nothing to wolves," and "Intelligence and compassion go hand in hand, and wolves are without compassion," never recognizing his own lack of compassion for a fellow predator.

Beginning in the 1920s, the Territory of Alaska paid a bounty on wolves, first ten dollars, then fifteen, then twenty. Trapping wasn't the only way to kill a wolf. Some bounty hunters poisoned them. Others bludgeoned pups in dens. Somehow, despite episodic pogroms—airial wolf shooting, state-sponsored predator control—the wolves survived. Today, biologists guess that between 6,000 and 7,000 wolves exist in Alaska, swallowed up somewhere between the mountainous southern coasts and the tundra plains of the North Slope.

Hardly ever does anyone see a living wolf in the wild. I have

a friend who grew up in Ruby, a Native village on the Yukon River. He trapped marten and other animals to put himself through college, though, as he says, it's a helluva way to make a living, relying on what rich women in Paris and New York feel like wearing that year. One winter he called to tell me something about wolves. He'd been sleeping in his trapline cabin when a stirring outside awakened him. Peering through the single small window, he saw a pack of wolves slipping through the trees and circling the cabin before they disappeared again. From his mystified but pleased tone, he could have been telling me about a dream he'd had, a dream that might signify nothing, or everything.

The unknowable wolf hunts along the edge of our vision, never allowing a clear view of itself. Imagination, fear, and longing fulfill what experience cannot. And so a wolf is no longer just a wolf. It's a vicious, wasteful predator. Or it's the poster child of the charismatic mammals, the creature that stands for all that's noble, wild, and free. A wolf is social, family-oriented, intelligent, and communicative—like humans. A wolf kills because it can, for the sheer pleasure of it—like humans. It's either-or, the sacred or the profane. Inevitably, the wolf becomes a distorted reflection of the human psyche, a heavy burden for one species to carry. We can hardly bear the burden of being human ourselves.

In Alaska, people are always fighting about wolves, and I knew the trappers wouldn't be happy when I asked to attend their school and write a newspaper story about it. Pete Buist, the head of the Alaska Trappers Association, is deeply suspicious of reporters, mostly because he regards the Anchorage newspaper that hired me as a stronghold of liberal greenies who have never

written one true word about trapping. But the trappers understand how bad they'll look if they refuse, and so they agree with false cheer. Nevertheless, when Buist addresses the gathered students before we begin, he warns them that I am present with a photographer. "I have no reason to distrust Sherry Simpson," he announces loudly in his blustering voice. "But don't feel you have to talk to her if you don't want to." I try to look trustworthy and sympathetic, even though I know and they know they probably won't like what I write.

Luckily, trapping interests all kinds of Alaskans, most of them individualists who don't care about party lines. They want to look good in the newspaper, but more than that, they want to be understood. Nearly three-quarters hail from south-central Alaska. Among them are weekend trappers from Anchorage and Fairbanks, bush trappers from Coldfoot, Bettles, and Nabesna, a chiropractor and a commercial pilot, a father and son, middle-aged and young men. Trappers are mostly just guys, guys who hunt and fish and like doing what they want when they want.

My group includes Mike Johnson, a friendly fellow who traps alone along the southern edge of the Brooks Range. He figures if he learns one trick that catches him one wolf, the \$125 fee will be worth it. Jim Farrell, a lean, bearded guy with a Western drawl, comes right out and announces he's a novice at wolf trapping, though until he moved to Wasilla a couple of years ago he trapped coyotes as part of Wyoming's predator-control program. Phil Rogers of North Pole is burly and talkative; he traps marten, wolverine, wolf, and other furbearers to earn money in the winter. A Delta River man, he hardly says anything, not even his name, but he pays close attention to the instructors and lets me drive his snow machine. He wears a beaver hat the same coppery shade as his mustache; I never see his hair because he never takes off his hat. Two young Norwegian exchange students from the

University of Alaska came because they're just interested in trapping, or so they say. They scribble notes and snap photographs and speak to each other in low voices, and some of the hard-core trappers regard this warily, as if the handsome youths might actually be animal rights infiltrators.

It's hard to imagine the mountain men of yore registering for seminars in killing and skinning. When I signed up, organizer Steve Potter told me that for many years wolf trapping in Alaska waned as trappers concentrated on easier, more lucrative furbearers such as marten and lynx. The body of lore gathered by old-time wolfers began fading away, like many skills of northern living. But in recent years, interest has grown as pelt prices began to improve and wolf populations increased. The Alaska Trappers Association founded the wolf trapping school to encourage new trappers and teach them the right way to go about it. In most parts of the country, people want to preserve wolves. In Alaska, some believe in preserving wolf trappers.

It's not an easy life. Fur prices and market demands can be fickle. The weather can work against you. Animal populations fluctuate. The European Union threatens to ban imports of fur caught in leghold traps. Trappers don't get rich. And people who regard wolves as symbols of the wild don't appreciate seeing their symbols shot, trapped, and strangled in snares. Against all this, the trapper struggles to hold on to something that seems almost as elusive as the wolves they pursue: the chance to make a life out of wilderness.

Smart wolves and smart trappers share certain traits. Both must be exceptionally cautious and alert to the world around them. To outsmart the other, each relies on natural attributes—the wolf its superior sense of smell, the trapper his opposable thumbs and large brain. Technology is not enough to catch wolves. Instinct is not enough to evade trappers. Among wolves

and trappers alike, the most successful individuals learn from their mistakes. But as instructor Jim Masek reminds us, wolves risk far more than people do.

"Humans—we take lots of lessons to learn things," he says, unloading his trapping gear from his snow machine. "Wolves, it's life or death for them. If they don't learn it once, it'll be something that kills them."

Masek, thirty-nine, is not much interested in educating wolves. Long acknowledged as an expert trapper, he earned legendary status among his fellows in February 1994 by capturing a dozen wolves in one set of snares and traps on the Minto Flats near Fairbanks. This act prompted the editor of the *Alaska Trapper* to suggest establishing a new unit of measure: a "Masek" of wolves. I remember feeling dismay and anger when I studied the newspaper photograph of Masek kneeling within a semicircle of dead wolves laid out like trout. It seemed so excessive and unnecessary. The article included Masek's account of how he lured the pack toward a booby-trapped moose kill. The young, inexperienced wolves stepped into traps first; the others panicked, bolting away from the scene and into other snares. Masek figured eventually he'd catch the few who escaped, since they were deprived of their leaders.

Now that I see his boyishly rosy cheeks, blue eyes, and straw-blond hair, Masek seems less like a bloodthirsty killer and more like what he is, a country boy who hails from Nebraska and South Dakota. His face, other trappers joke, is probably enshrined in wolf dens throughout Minto Flats. Masek is consumed by the hard work, the contest of wits, the outdoor life. This is a man who buys snare cable in 10,000-foot rolls, who owns a hundred wolf traps, who learned the feeding call of ravens so he can locate wolf kills. He lives alone out on Minto Flats, northwest of Fairbanks, in a log cabin he built on the Chatanika

River. In winter, he rides his snow machine thirty miles to the nearest road, and then drives another twenty miles to reach Fairbanks. In summer, he works for a big construction company, but you can see that the trapline embraces his true existence.

On this snow-bright afternoon along the icebound Chena River, we double up on snow machines and skim along the river for a mile or so before stopping here. Sundogs hover in the hazy sky above us. Spruce and birch trees crowd the riverbanks, some of them tipping gradually into the river. Once we left the road, we entered a largely unpeopled wilderness that stretches east for thousands of miles to the other side of the continent. The keen air reddens our cheeks and noses, and we try not to step off the hard-packed snow-machine trail into deep snow, where we'll flounder and sink.

A successful trapper not only understands wolf behavior but uses the wolf's own nature against it. Anything unnatural troubles a wolf, and trappers take advantage of this to manipulate or distract the animals. A trapper, for example, might hang a ribbon of surveyor's flagging to scare a wolf off the trail and into a trap or snare. A wolf's tendency to step over a twig planted in the trail can direct its foot into a trap.

Masek chose this place because wolves tend to relax a bit when they can see clearly around them. As he unloads his gear from his snow-machine sled, he compresses some of what he's learned in two decades of trapping into a few hours. Lesson No. 1: The slightest sign of anything unnatural can spook a wolf, especially the reek of humans. Wolves have, as one biologist describes it, "a big honking nose and they really know how to use it."

So don't spit, don't smoke, don't pee on the trail, Masek says. Keep clothing, gear, and equipment scrupulously free of disturbing scents. Use only clean, dry cotton work gloves. Prepare

snares and traps by washing them in solvent or boiling them in water fragrant with local plants. Dye them black with logwood crystals to eliminate a distracting shine. Hang them outdoors away from human smells. Try not to contaminate them with sweat, fuel, and other scents while handling them. Make yourself null, a sensory void in the olfactory landscape.

Setting a trap in exactly the same spot where a wolf will step is a more challenging problem. Fortunately for trappers, wolves and other animals prefer trotting dead center along the trail of snow-machine tread. Human tracks, however, worry them, and snowshoe prints simply scare them off. (The trappers speculate about this more than once: Some lingering smell? An inbred association between snowshoes and traplines?) In the field, Masek works off the back of his snow-machine sled, standing on a rectangle of plywood to avoid disturbing the trail.

Masek holds up a trap, a No. 9 Manning that costs about a hundred dollars. The offset jaws spread into a nine-inch circle. When the jaws clamp shut, a three-eighths-inch gap remains between the steel arcs. The mechanism acts like a handcuff by grasping a knob above the foot rather than pinching the toes or cutting into the paw, causing less damage and pain to the wolf.

In his shop, Masek modifies his traps in various ways. He laminates an extra layer of steel along the jaws to strengthen and spread the holding surface, which is easier on the animal's leg. He also bolsters various parts so that wolves can't destroy them. "I've got traps that are almost mangled, with the pan crushed down, the trigger dog bent, tooth marks in the steel," he says. "Wolves have tremendous force in their jaws so they can crush moose bones."

Trappers are always fooling with gear, trying to build a better mousetrap, so to speak. Masek's been inventing. He holds up what he jokingly calls a "bedpan," a round section of galvanized

stovepipe that has been modified into a pan that can hold a No. 9 trap. The pan works like a cookie cutter in the snow, outlining the trap bed. The trap fits inside the pan, and Masek inserts the device into a small white garbage bag to prevent snow from clogging the jaws. He settles the pan into the trail bed and lightly brushes snow over the plastic cover with a small hand broom. "Usually you want to be able to see a gray shadow," he says, straightening to study the way the trap barely darkens the snow.

The pan allows a snow machine to drive across the trap without triggering it or pushing snow into the jaws. The trap lies concealed beneath the snow-machine track, with no visible sign to any wolf that lopes down the path. "Out on an open trail, they're bobbing around, enjoying the view, looking for a moose, and they'll step right into it and, poof, get nailed," Masek says.

Sometimes, something goes wrong. The wolf plants a foot on the trap, takes a few steps, and then the trap fires. "You've just educated one wolf," Masek says flatly.

A trap can be used as a kind of trigger for snaring a pack. The first wolf along the trail steps into a leghold trap, causing the others to explode off the trail and bolt through the trees, where a score or more of wire snares fill most of the gaps and openings. Masek shows us how to hang the handmade snares by wrapping the stiff end of the holding wire around a sturdy small tree. Each snare falls open about knee high above the snow, opening into a 72-inch loop. From a few feet away, we can't even see the snares dangling among the branches. The idea is that as the wolf's head enters the snare, its forward motion slips the loop closed. A small locking device prevents the snare from reopening. When it works right, the wolf's struggle pulls the loop tighter, and the animal dies quickly from suffocation as its trachea collapses.

Everything doesn't always work right, though. Sometimes a snowfall will raise the snowpack so that the snares no longer

hang 18 inches above the ground. Instead of naturally thrusting their heads through the loops, the wolves charge through them or step into them and become entangled. Sometimes wolves snared by the leg chew off their own limbs.

Masek knows many other ruses. He points out a piece of driftwood that would make a natural scent post, a place where wolves might stop and mark their territory. At such a spot he would set a trap beneath a paw print and then re-create the track. He's studied the way male dogs lift their legs—where they stand, how high they spray. He takes out a duct-tape-wrapped bottle of dog urine and splashes it like canine graffiti into the snow, where it will attract the attention of passing wolves. Friends gather chunks of frozen urine from their dog yard; Masek warms it in the field by storing the bottle next to his snow-machine manifold.

He also saves wolf urine from the trail, sometimes distracting and exciting one pack by marking their urine posts with scent from a different pack. Sometimes, if he catches an alpha female, he uses her urine to confuse her puppies; they sniff around, thinking she's nearby, and often blunder into traps.

This wrenching picture makes me imagine that when one wolf is caught, the others stick around, trying to figure out what's happening. Sometimes they do, Masek says, and sometimes they don't. "If an adult gets caught they may mill around. Half the time if it's a puppy, they might not even look back. If you get the adult, you may have caught the killer, the breeder, the smart one. Clip him and the rest have to work harder to live," he says.

Someone asks what happens when the trapper returns to his line and finds a wolf waiting in a trap. "Some adults might howl and snap and lunge at you," Masek says, his face revealing nothing. "A puppy tends to cower. It won't make eye contact with you."

I make myself think about this scene. I wonder what it's like to shoot a wolf that is looking at you with its amber eyes, rage or fear in its heart. But I don't ask. It seems too personal, something between trappers and wolves. Part of me recoils from knowing, too, as if the explicit knowledge of death will make it my fault as well.

Because I don't know wolves, I first think the black animal lying on the floor of the meeting hall that night is a sleeping dog. A large sleeping dog. I realize my mistake when I see its leaden stillness.

Fairbanks trappers Greg and Mike Chapin discovered the wolf this morning in one of their blind-set traps on the Chena River. A pair of wolves had followed the trail on and off for about four miles. They stepped over two traps before this wolf planted its foot into the third one, a No. 9 Manning leghold. For perhaps thirty-six hours, it waited in the trap before the brothers arrived. Greg Chapin killed it by shooting once with his .22-caliber rifle crosswise through its chest. "It stood about three seconds and fell over," he says.

The wolf is a young female, a yearling or a two-year-old. About the size of a German shepherd, she weighs 65 or 70 pounds. Ripples of silver highlight her black fur. She's still slightly warm. Greg, thirty-one, holds up a broad front paw, the one caught in the leghold, and says, largely for my benefit, "Not a broken tendon. The skin's not broken, nothing."

The woodstove warms the room, and the trappers chat and joke while Greg begins skinning the wolf as it lies on a table. He's a beefy man with receding red hair that makes him look like a tonsured monk. He handles the wolf straightforwardly, not as if it were something revered or reviled but simply a dead animal.

Every winter he and his brother run their eleven-mile trapline along the upper reaches of the Chena River; they've taken as few as four wolves and as many as fourteen in a season.

"I always start with the mouth," he says, picking up a small, wickedly sharp knife and making short slicing strokes around the wolf's black lips. He peels back the snout; as soon as the nose flops loose, the animal loses some part of its wolf identity. I see the trappers looking at me sideways; they're wondering if I might start crying, or run outside, or throw up. But I can be as detached as they are, and so I simply sit taking notes, and soon they forget I'm there.

Chapin slits the hide from the paws up along the wrist, then breaks the joint at all four paws. A few men step forward to help him hoist the animal by its rear leg from a gambrel so that it hangs head down, blood pooling on the floor beneath it. After a while, Chapin stuffs a wad of newspaper in its mouth to slow the blood.

Slowly he works off the hide, exposing the blue-red flesh and sinew, the stretch and compression of muscle and tendon. A wolf's thick fur sheathes the sleek architecture of something meant to run, to kill, to survive.

The talk turns to the uncanny nature of wolf senses. Chapin recalls a wolf he caught three months ago that was moving about a hundred yards in front of the pack. From the tracks, he saw that after the lead wolf was trapped, the others stopped, left the trail, and headed into the brush. A couple of weeks later, three wolves that he believes belonged to a different pack traveled down the same trail. When they arrived at the spot where the first group departed, they also suddenly stopped and abandoned the trail, as if they knew something dangerous and disturbing awaited them. "So in their standing and dancing around, they communicated something," Chapin says of the original pack.

The trappers spend a lot of time this weekend exchanging similar wolf lore, mulling over what it all means. Ben Hopson leaves skinned wolf carcasses near his traps to attract other wolves. Mike Johnson says such carcasses spook wolves in his part of the Brooks Range. Some believe that wolves notice stepping sticks placed in trails as clearly as if they were little signs that announce "Trap Ahead." Others are convinced they work. Different wolf packs learn different things; the experiences of their leaders shape the group intelligence. This is how the trappers learn, too, by sharing knowledge difficult to come by.

"Another thing I know is that it's a lot easier to catch wolves in a bar than it is out on a river," Chapin says, and others laugh knowingly.

Somebody asks Chapin about the fur's value. He studies the black hide, silver gleaming in it like light upon water, and says, "I wouldn't sell it for less than two hundred and probably two and a half." When Fairbanks fur buyer Dean Wilson eyeballs it the next day, he pegs it at \$300; it would be worth more if the neck pile was deeper.

Chapin takes care with skinning because the demand for taxidermy mounts creates much of the wolf market. For some, the fur is not enough to evoke the wolf; it must be draped over a form and posed realistically with cold marbles for eyes. People also covet wolves as wall hangings and especially as trim for parkas, mitts, and other winter garments. Nearly three-quarters of wolf sales remain within Alaska, where it is not considered shameful but practical to wear animal fur.

Several factors determine the value of a wolf pelt, most importantly size and color. Taxidermists love an Alaska wolf that's seven feet long or more, Wilson says; it just sounds good. This particular wolf stretches to about seven feet, four inches. Color matters, too. Of all the wolf shades—gray, blue, red, white,

black—white is the rarest. Also important are the fur's depth and texture, particularly to parka makers. They want a ruff thick enough to swallow a prodding finger up to the second knuckle.

Chapin shares a cleaning tip with his fellow trappers. "When you got grays with a brown cast, wash 'em. Take 'em to a laundromat. It's amazing how much of that is dirt."

"What happens if you do that and they catch you?" someone calls out.

"They ask you not to come back," Chapin answers, his grin hinting at personal experience in this breach of etiquette.

Conversations eddy as the hide slacks off the wolf. A raw, meaty smell and the hot stove make the room close and stuffy. The trappers stand around talking guy talk with their hands shoved deep in their pockets, their hats tipped back on their heads. They jaw about the merits of various snow machines, the trapper's iron dog. They compare the amount of fur in their parts of the country.

"Here's a trivia question," Chapin announces. "How many toenails are there on an entire wolf?"

People shout out guesses. Eleven. Fourteen. Twenty. Never counted 'em.

The answer is eighteen. "Sixteen and two dewclaw nails," says Masek, who leans against the wall with arms crossed. Masek knows everything there is to know about wolves, it seems.

"How do you turn a fox into a wolf?" a trapper yells. "Marry her!" Gusts of laughter.

"Instead of a No. 9, it was a wedding ring, eh?" someone says. Guy talk.

"How many trappers does it take to make popcorn?" No answer. "Three—one to hold the pan and two to shake the stove!"

Chapin finishes unpeeling the wolf, stripping it to a lean,

whippet-like shape. The hide remains intact through the belly and chest. He pushes the wolf's ears inside out with the blunt end of a broomstick so they will dry into their alert shape. Then he pulls the hide through itself, until the meaty side faces outward. Now comes the most tedious task of all, fleshing the hide. Chapin drapes the fur over a fleshing beam, a hinged log attached to a stand. The butt of the beam rests against Chapin's leg as he scrapes away gobbets of meat with long knife strokes, trying to avoid nicking the pelt.

"You got to be really careful on the belly," he warns. "The skin is really tender on the belly."

The wolf's paws rest on the table behind him, the long, elegant bones ruddy with blood. Each foot is worth \$1.50; the penis bone brings another buck and a half. Indians use them to make breastplates that sell for \$10,000. An intact wolf skull brings \$25, more for a large one. Scent glands from the feet, ears, tail, and anus, and such organs as the bladder, brains, and gallbladder are saved to age in a jar and use later as lure. Lure, I hear someone explain to the Norwegian students, is like "perfume on a woman"; the scent intrigues and draws wolves to trap sets.

The young black she-wolf has been transformed into an assemblage of products and possibilities: ornaments and fur, essences and emblems. She has literally been dismantled, and even examining her piece by bloody piece, I feel no closer to understanding the enigma of wolves. Something tightens in me when I think of her terrible beauty, the lovely sharpness of her teeth, the predatory brilliance of her gaze. But that is only what I see. The trappers see a pelt, a paycheck, a trickster outwitted by a human. We're the ones who write the stories, and so what else can a wolf be except a symbol for everything good and bad about us, everything we want, everything we've lost?

Nearly three hours after beginning, Chapin makes his last

fleshing strokes. He slips the hide, still inside out, over a stretching plank shaped like a surfboard. The hide needs to dry for a day or so before it's ready to be tanned commercially. "Come in with three or four of these, you'll be up all night," Chapin says, wiping his forehead with the back of his gory hand. To earn his \$300, he's spent perhaps thirty hours checking the trap, killing the wolf, and skinning the hide. It's not just the money he's after, he says. But when he tries to explain, all he can do is telegraph clichés: "The challenge. Being outdoors. The wilderness."

That night, most of us sleep in the same room, spreading our sleeping bags across couches and mattresses thrown on the floor. Here's another thing about trappers: they snore. The room seems to swell and toss on the waves of their long, shuddering breaths, the snores of the innocent, of men at peace with themselves. Someone talks to himself in the urgent dialect of sleep.

In the corner, the wolf hide dries, shaped more rigidly than the wolf itself ever was. Sleep comes to me slowly in the hot, noisy room. I see the wolf running in a black ripple through the snow. I see the lustrous pelt hanging on my wall, where I can touch the shining fur every day. I could climb into it, peer through the eyeholes, wear the wolf's face like a mask. Embraced in a wolf skin, I could run for miles through the forest, searching for the smell of living blood. But I would wear death, too. I would look out into the world through the eyes of death.

In winter the flat, frozen surface of the upper Chena River becomes a boulevard for wildlife, where tracks inscribe the snow in a calligraphy of motion. Everything is going somewhere. I ride behind trapper Phil Rogers on his Tabasco-red snow machine, clinging to his stout midriff. The long ivory hairs of his wolf ruff tickle my nose as I press my face against his back. Rogers shouts

out track identifications as we skim across the snow: Moose. Marten. Fox. Wolf.

The wolf tracks emerge from the forest and dip onto the river, gradually curving across the channel. The trail arrows toward a downed spruce tree jutting across the river. Yellow snow around the tree indicates the wolves' interest; they've made it into a scent post. Several hundred yards later, the tracks separate around an overflow spot on the river, revealing three animals, probably young ones by the print size. Fur between their footpads dragged as they walked, grooving the snow between tracks. The tracks seem so clear that I exclaim about their freshness, but Rogers points out the hoarfrost blurring the outlines.

"The wolf makes his living with his feet," is how state biologist Mark McNay had described it the night before. Packs travel continuously as they search for game, often using the same routes year after year as they cover distances that average 600 to 700 square miles. "To do that they really got to pick 'em up and put 'em down," McNay told us. Jim Masek once trapped a mangy wolf on the Minto Flats that had been radio-collared on the Kenai Peninsula, a good 500 miles by air to the south.

We follow the wolf tracks as if they were a story, and not far up the river, we come upon the climax. All that remains of the moose calf are scattered bits of fur and bone, and a jagged ridge of ribs. Ravens, foxes, and other animals trampled the snow, sharing the bounty. The experienced trappers speculate about where the cow's carcass lies—perhaps off the river, in the forest.

"You hear a lot about wolves killing the old, sick, weak, and young, and there's some truth to that," McNay explained. "A better and more accurate view is that wolves prey on vulnerable animals, old, young, middle-aged. . . . Any animals can be vulnerable if the wolves catch them in the right situation. Generally wolves don't." Winter is all about vulnerability; in the deep

Interior snows, moose find it difficult to move about on their willowy legs.

After hearing McNay's talk, I find it easier to imagine what happened here on the river. Killing is usually an exhausting, bloody business for the wolf and the moose. Generally, only the most experienced animals in the pack attack first, searching for a hold on the rump or nose, wearing away the moose's strength until they can force it down and feast on all the rich, nourishing blood and meat. Usually the prey of wolves do not perish from anything as merciful as a crushed trachea; most die from shock and blood loss. More than one trapper remarks on the gruesome and often lengthy death of moose and caribou, but McNay pointed out the enormous size difference between a 100-pound wolf and a 1,000-pound moose. "I don't want to give the impression that wolves are somehow ruthless, abnormally aggressive killers," he said. "That's the only way they can kill. If you had to kill a moose with your mouth, you'd do it, too."

The wolf does not automatically prevail, either. Moose can charge, fling off a wolf that's hanging by its jaws, kick viciously. Wolf autopsies commonly show fractured ribs, cracked skulls, even broken and rehealed legs. A moose can even throw jabs like a boxer, McNay noted, adding that he once saw a moose cold-cock another moose. "But that's another story," he said.

Trappers don't always find kills so well devoured as this calf. "This is responsible in part for the idea that wolves are killing and 'wasting' meat," McNay told us. "In many cases they kill, eat, and then travel and come back." But the trappers do not seem entirely convinced that wolves subscribe to a philosophy of "waste not, want not." During the weekend, I hear these characterizations, which I suspect are really justifications:

"When you see these wolves cruising down a river running, you realize they're nothing but a stomach and a set of jaws."

"I've seen moose with their guts pulled out, and nothing eaten."

"Wolves are the biggest killers of wolves. It's not uncommon that they eat each other in traps. You can come back and find only the head."

"Last winter there was a tendency to kill for the fun of it. That's what they are—a killing machine."

Now that this moose is dead, it represents a natural bait site for wolves, which tend to return again and again to kills, even if only to chew nostalgically on a few bones. The trappers discuss where they would place their snares, the proper arrangement of traps. A raven flies overhead, and a veteran trapper from Tok turns his head to follow the black motion, his eyes as quick as a marten's. "If we could follow that raven, we'd find that cow," he says mostly to himself. There are things about this killing place that I don't see, signs I can't decipher.

We return the way we came as the milky winter sky dims and the forest darkens around us. I try to identify the tracks we cross by their gait and size. The wolf trail, I see, makes the steadiest, deepest path through the snow. Wolves don't wander like dogs. They know where they're going. Sometime soon, they'll be back; they are always circling their world with their feet.

All weekend, I puzzle over Mike Johnson, the Brooks Range trapper, who wears a T-shirt portraying an Alaska wolf, the kind of romanticized shirt a tourist might buy. At first I wonder if the shirt is some kind of joke, like the T-shirts sold by the Alaska Trappers Association that say "PETA: People for the Eating of Tasty Animals." This is a poke at the animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. I wonder if Johnson is

indulging in irony, wearing that shirt blazing with the silvery face of a wolf.

He answers my questions openly, with none of the shyness you might expect from a man who's just emerged from a winter in his cabin on the Arctic Circle, along the flanks of the Brooks Range. He resembles a jovial Mennonite with his mustache-less beard and his wide, toothy smile. Unlike many trappers, Johnson works alone, living on his trapline five months out of the year. To do that, a person must not mind his own company, nor the constant presence of winter. "I tell myself jokes out loud," Johnson confides.

Johnson, fifty-four, came to Alaska in 1971 coveting the same things most Alaskans desire—wilder country, a different kind of life. Eight years ago, after his marriage dissolved, he bought his trapline and moved north to live the way he had always wanted. In the summers, he runs halibut charter boats out of Homer.

"I don't know anybody who works harder than trappers for the money," Johnson says. Trappers are people who cannot stand idleness, he tells me, and I can see this in him. This afternoon he explained to his colleagues how he survives on the trapline alone. He showed off the come-along winch he added to his snow machine to hitch it out of bad spots, the complicated engine modifications, the hip boots he fashioned out of giant inner tubes so he won't freeze his feet in overflow. He painted his ax and the butt of his rifle fluorescent orange so he can find them against the snow. To lose them would be disastrous.

This winter, Mike Johnson is going broke. He can't find enough marten, the trapper's bread-and-butter fur. He sold one snow machine to make payments on the other. Johnson relates all this in the same cheerful tone he uses when he talks about

why he loves trapping: "It's the attraction of the wild. It's the lifestyle. The challenge of doing what I'm doing." The same words we all use, but he's the one curled in the dark bosom of the Brooks Range in January. When he visits his family in Indiana, they talk mostly about the price of corn, which is a foreign tongue he used to know, and he looks out the window and thinks about coming home.

Thinking about the T-shirt, I ask him what he thinks about wolves.

"All the things you hear are probably true, good and bad," he says, and then he considers. "I love wolves. It would be a sad day if there were not wolves in this country." He lowers his voice a little, as if he's telling a secret. "I'd rather have too many than not enough, to tell you the truth. I want there always to be wolves. Always, always."

If trappers do not regard the wolf as a symbol of wilderness, perhaps it's because people who spend so much time working in the wilderness don't need symbols. Steve Potter is a large, good-natured man who can hardly find the words to describe the way he feels sometimes out there in the woods, under the innocent sky. He struggles to tell me the feeling that took him once as he watched a flock of snowy ptarmigan sweep across the black-green expanse of forest. After tangling himself in awkward words and long pauses, he finally gives up. You had to be there, is all he can say. But I know what he means. Being there means seeing all of it—what's beautiful and impossible to express, what's painful and hard to watch.

Trappers believe that if anyone understands nature, it's them, not the city folks who hang photographs of wolves on their cramped city walls and listen to recordings of wolf howls to drown out the sound of traffic and other kinds of emptiness. Greg Chapin rejects as well-meaning but misguided the notion that

animals can and should die painlessly. "It would be neat if you could get the fur and let wolves go—like sheep," he says. "But we can't." If the wolf is just another animal out there trying to hustle up a living, well, then, so is the trapper. "I would never kill the last wolf. I don't hate wolves," he says. "But [trapping] is no more cruel, no less cruel than anything that happens in nature. It's no less natural than the wolf killing the moose. The wolf kills the moose to eat it, and I kill the wolf."

I envy his certainty; everything has its place in the world, including him. Anyone who hunts or traps must come to some similar reconciliation. Alaska's Native cultures encompass a complicated relationship with the animals they kill, because their own survival—spiritual and physical—depends on a respectful attitude toward their fellow creatures. Most trappers employ less formal and articulate relationships, but what seems like callousness is often, I believe, something closer to affection. In the *Alaska Trapper* magazine, a young man writes of a lonely winter working his trapline on the Black River, two hundred miles northwest of Fairbanks and as far from anywhere as you'll find. For months a lone gray wolf shadowed his cabin. "It was just he and I here on the Black, and I felt an affinity growing between us," the trapper wrote. In January, the trapper discovered his "befriended wolf" in a No. 9: "Soon he was sharing a ride in my sled with a marten. Now I was alone on the Black." As I read this account I wonder which seems worse, to kill an animal you feel a kinship with, or to kill an animal you feel nothing for?

I worry over this problem during the weekend, returning to it again and again, the way wolves return to a killing place. First I think of animals I ate during the weekend that I didn't kill: Moose. Black bear. Cow. Pig. Northern pike. I didn't even say grace beforehand. Even as a vegetarian, I could shed the conceit of guilt only if I didn't know that my mere presence in Alaska

requires space, habitat, resources that animals depend on. And if I didn't wear fur, I would wear manufactured gear: petroleum-based, nonrecyclable, nonrenewable garments. A trapper tells me, "Fur is organic. It doesn't ruin one thing in the woods to use it." Except the animal itself, of course.

Eventually I ask Steve Potter, in a circuitous and abstract way, about killing wolves. He explains without hedging, as if this is something he's thought about a lot. After all, he's been trapping since he was a kid, and now he's teaching his own eleven-year-old son to catch marten and beaver. "The way I feel is, there's no difference between a wolf and a mouse," he says. "They're each a life, and you can't take any life lightly. When you come on an animal alive, you want to dispatch it as quickly as you can."

It sounds right that a person shouldn't distinguish between the value of a mouse and the value of a wolf. Still, I can't shake the sense that killing a wolf is different somehow. Does the wolf recognize impending death, having delivered it so often?

Delicately, I ask again, this time a coworker who traps recreationally. Once, Norm says, looking away, he found a wolf alive in a trap. But he didn't have a gun to kill it. So he attached a Conibear trap used for killing wolverines to a stick and poked the contraption at the wolf. The wolf snapped at the trap and the trap snapped back, catching the wolf's jaw and immobilizing it. Then Norm smashed the wolf's skull with a stick, shattering the ridge above its eye and killing it instantly. "It was a messy death," he says, regret shading his voice. "It was beneath its dignity."

Norm's story makes me feel a little weak inside, because he's saying wolves do require a separate honor. It's true that I can also think of worse fates for an animal. Zoos, for example, and the way all wild animals go blank in cages, as if some part of them is not there. Neglected dogs chained in suburban yards. Cats abandoned to pounds. A thousand kinds of death await animals, none

easy. It's the deliberateness of killing an animal, whether for food or for fur, that seems like a barbaric throwback, something humans used to do until we evolved into the kind of creature that doesn't need to kill to survive. Yet anyone who eats a Big Mac or an Easter lamb or a slab of salmon prepared by a fancy chef has simply delegated the killing to others. We want to believe a wolf has more intrinsic value than a chicken raised in an industrial coop. A wolf means more to us because we've made it something more; we believe it lives the life we want to live. But most wolves perish no more nobly than chickens. Biologist David Mech has said that a wolf usually dies in one of two ways: it starves to death, or another wolf eats it.

Still, some would argue, people have no place within these events; what happens in nature is none of our business. I used to feel this way myself, that the mere presence of a human in the wilderness was enough to taint it forever. That a wolf would kill a wolf seemed acceptable because it was "natural"; that a man would kill a wolf, unforgivable. I've used the same tone other nature lovers do as they talk about "the natural circle of life" in hushed and reverent tones, as if it were a church we could never attend but only stand outside, listening to the godly and mysterious harmonies issuing from within. The circles of life and death wheel about each other in great concentric spirals. Humans, like wolves, have never been anything else but killers.

When trapping school is over and the trappers have all returned to town or to their traplines, I cross the frozen lake just past nightfall and wait by the narrow road for my ride home. The temperature floats into the thirties, and the air seems impossibly warm, comforting. Behind thin clouds, the moon blurs.

I think about wolves. In these two days of talking about

trapping, the only thing missing was the wolf itself. I have seen the deliberate pace of its tracks, the scattered remains of its meals, the stripped cipher of its carcass. Harder to picture is the elusive, living creature, the shape of its eyes, the heat of its breath, the way its tail plumes behind as it runs.

I've seen a wolf only once, during a fall drive through Denali National Park. The wolf was the color of a clouded sky. A radio collar ringed its neck, a constant insult to its supple motion. The wolf padded steadily down the middle of the road, as if it had a long way to walk. People yanked their cars to the roadside to let the animal pass and then hung their heads from windows, following with their eyes. A man standing outside his car closed the door against himself, like a shield.

We all looked hungrily at the wolf, because not often will a wolf pass a few feet away from you without intervening bars or fences. My first thought—what a big dog—evaporated the moment I glimpsed its eyes—not the color, which I don't remember, but the inner, private light. The wolf glanced neither right nor left, but only ahead, as if none of us were there. Down the road it walked for miles, and we all looked and looked.

Not far from where I wait this night, wolf tracks course down the frozen Chena River. Somewhere out there, wolves lope through the dark, or sleep, or kill. Somewhere out there, a wolf waits in a trap, anchored to approaching death. The wolf is a predator. The wolf is prey.

All those who care about nature fashion a private covenant with it. Some people love wilderness best from a distance; it's the easiest way, this unconditional love. Totems of wildness substitute for wildness itself. Put a poster of a wolf on the wall and admire it like a movie star, like someone you wish you were. Whatever happens in the wild happens without you, because you are not part of it.

Some people draw near to wilderness, into a harder but truer place. They kill animals to eat them or wear them or sell them, never looking away from what they are about to do. By acknowledging the death that arrives through their own hands, surely they secretly wonder if they can't somehow master the way death will come to them.

And some people, like me, want to look. We want so much to belong to nature, to be kin to every part of its difficult beauty, but in the end, we turn away. All we can do is follow the tracks, knowing that someday, the wolf will circle around to us.

SHERRY SIMPSON ON "Killing Wolves"

A wolf pelt hangs on my wall at home. The fur is black and silky, tinged with silver. Sometimes I bury my face in it, trying to smell something of the wild animal it once was.

This is the very wolf described in this essay, the one we watched being skinned at Wolf Trapping School. The trappers tried to give me the pelt after my piece was published. "It wasn't complimentary, but it was fair," one man said. Of course, I bought the wolf instead. I wanted to avoid the conflict of interest but not the conflicting emotions the pelt still represents: regret, respect, fear, longing.

Writing this essay changed the way I thought about wolves, trapping, our ideas of nature, and even death. It also changed the way I think about writing creative nonfiction. Like many writers, I didn't know what I thought before I started writing. I recognize now that the process of "essaying" began long before I sat at the computer. The most important part of the process turned out to be listening to the trappers, not only to record quotes and details but to work hard at understanding their ideas and their passions. The

reporting and writing forced me to resist easy conclusions and flat judgments. I had to interrogate myself—what do I believe, and why do I believe it? Above all, I had to reconcile myself to the tangle of complexity that is life itself.

Wolves are the subject of much journalism, particularly in Alaska, but creative nonfiction offered me a way to deal with many related ideas: what people mean by “wilderness” and “nature,” what we’re willing to face, what we look away from. Because I could report on my own reactions and emotions without allowing them to dominate the essay’s intentions, I could be honest and reflective in a way that straight journalism doesn’t usually allow. My ideal reader for this piece is someone who disagrees with the trappers and with me. I hope very much that the style and the approach convince readers to finish the piece and perhaps even reconsider their own notions.

Probably I would never trap a wolf or even buy a wolf pelt as a decoration. I wanted the wolf pelt because it reminds me that the world is exciting, painful, beautiful, and difficult—just like writing.

Being Brians

BRIAN DOYLE

“ ”

There are 215 Brian Doyles in the United States, according to a World Wide Web site called “Switchboard” (www2.switchboard.com), which shows telephone numbers and addresses in America.

We live in forty states; more of us live in New York than in any other state. Several of us live on streets named for women (Laura, Cecelia, Chris, Nicole, Jean, Joyce). A startling number of us live on streets and in towns named for flora (Apple, Ash, Bay, Berry, Chestnut, Hickory, Maple, Oak, Palm, Poinsettia, Sandlewood,

BRIAN DOYLE is the editor of *Portland Magazine* at the University of Portland, in Oregon—twice named the best university magazine in America. He is the author of four essay collections, most recently *Leaping: Revelations & Epiphanies*, and the editor of *God Is Love*, a collection of the best spiritual essays from *Portland Magazine*. Doyle’s own essays have appeared in the *American Scholar*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s*, *Orion*, *Commonweal*, and the *Georgia Review*, among other periodicals, and in the *Best American Essays* anthologies of 1998, 1999, and 2003. He is a contributing essayist for *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne, Australia.