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Town v. Wolf

When I was four years old my grandmother died on the Oregon farm my father grew up on. She was sixty when the pancreatic cancer landed like a witch's curse, turning her skin the papery yellow of a carbon copy receipt and shrinking her body down to bone. After one surgery, she declined treatment, aware it would bring her no more time, only diminishing the days she had left. In two and a half years, she was gone. An anti-nuclear-war activist and progressive organizer, an English teacher, a mother who raised her four young children abroad in India for two years in the mid-1960s while my grandfather worked as a doctor for Peace Corps volunteers. I knew none of those identities. I knew only Grammy.

In the cruel economy of childhood memory, I see her only twice. In one glimpse, she lies on the burgundy sofa in our Portland living room, framed in soft spring light, her arms nearly as thin as mine. In the other, she has health, or the appearance of it. She guides me to a dining table strewn with fire-colored maple leaves, each one flattened after being pressed inside the books that lined their living room walls.

Laying a square of white paper above the leaf, she rubs a crayon over the surface until its outline and veins emerge in color. *Now you try*, Grammy says. Trying to conjure her now—someone who disappeared when I was too young, who I did not have enough time to know—is like gripping that old crayon. The spine of her appears, a frilly outline, but it is a flat approximation of the life that once gusted through her being.

In the years after Grammy's death, Gramps traveled often. He learned German, then Spanish. Always, though, he came back to the farm, walking the dirt road to the sheep barn in his tweed hat and rubber Wellington boots, border collies leaping by his side. I grew up believing that because my father had roots on this farm, the farm had roots within me. Its moss a marrow in my bones. The fifty acres of land were outside Corvallis, hub of Oregon State University, about a two-hour drive from our Portland door. When I thought about being from the Pacific Northwest, I thought of these trees and the sheep that grazed below them, as if I had inherited their legacy the way I had inherited my father's toes.

It was one thing to fantasize about seeing a wolf streak a distant mountainside while I was hiking in eastern Oregon, but to think of one strolling the dirt road toward Gramps's sheep pasture? I couldn't help it. My pulse quickened. Not for my own body, but for the lambs. And not just for them, but for the people whose labor had kept them alive for so many decades. People I loved and didn't want to see hurt, or stressed out, or scared. My young father helping to carry sheep that coyotes had attacked into the garage so that Gramps could try to stitch them up; Grammy in her faded jeans, singing as she refilled their trough; Gramps nudging their woolly rumps with his hand-carved walking stick. Would the return of wolves threaten that herd? My earliest reflexive answer was so strong—surely!—that when I began to peel off the shingles of its

construction, layer after layer of history and narrative appeared. The story of the wolf as threat to farm, family, and small-town American livelihood is, like the story of wolf as threat to girl, stitched into the fabric of national and regional history. Not a decorative stitch, but the very thread of its construction.

Because both my parents left rural homes to launch lives in an urban area, the days we spent between their own parents—at the farm, and at the house my mother's parents had recently built on land a half hour outside Missoula, Montana—gave me a sense of quilted identity. Everyone talked about the cultural divide that jagged through Oregon and the wider West, the headline-grabbing polarization of “us” versus “them,” urban versus rural, but to me it never felt like a gulf, only a ditch to be jumped. When we went to Montana, I dropped the g's from verbs without my even knowing, stepping into the staccato of my cousins' speech. Mostly I felt proud. To have roots outside the city was to belong to something deeper than the cracked streets I biked. My relatives in the country possessed a DIY mentality that was easy to marvel at: deer made into sausages in freezer Ziplocs, giant gardens, neighbors helping neighbors care for sick animals and dig cars out of the snow. This wasn't my life, but it was adjacent to mine, and I could claim its ethos. Hidden beneath my tween sailor stripes and flare jeans and plastic choker necklaces, there was, I sensed, a tiny, plucky homesteader.

With its canopy of old-growth Douglas firs strewn in lichen the color of cucumber flesh, and those clusters of Lisa Frank-hued foxgloves, Gramps's farm felt like a sort of paradise. Trees so large they might take six or eight of us finger-to-finger to hug the knobby trunk. The gnarled arms of the white oaks twisting into leafy umbrellas that scattered sunlight into shiny pennies at our feet,

illuminating the oaks' fallen galls, those dusty marbles that popped underfoot but glowed like lanterns when held to the light.

I had always assumed these galls were some kind of fruit or nut, so I was surprised when my father told me they were parasitic growths—the place a gall wasp has laid eggs inside the plant. As the eggs grow, they release chemicals that cause the tree to produce extra tissue, swelling into the protective “gall.” The orbs can be striking ornaments, but even when their presence is harmless to the tree, their beauty is not the miracle I once took them to be. A gall is not a nest born just from labor alone, but from nutrients leached. When did I begin to see in the gall the story of so many American farms? Life is born—family cultivated, beauty sown—but to make room for it, life has been displaced.

Not far from the grove where we scattered Grammy's ashes, a pioneer cemetery hid beneath a plumage of blackberries and encroaching sword ferns. It wasn't much—a small plot of time-rounded grave-stones enclosed by a low-wire fence—but to the child in me, it felt like both an inheritance from, and an invitation to, history. Sometimes Annika and I acted like stewards to its nearly illegible stones, peeling the damp moss from the headstones until our fingers brittled in the cold. Later we learned this was the burial site for nine of the fifteen children born to the farm's first white inhabitant, the daughter of an Oregon Trail pioneer. The oldest gravestone was for a girl who died at fifteen after falling from her horse; the youngest for an infant boy.

Because we could not forget the sight of those stones, we could not stop imagining the heartache of those who once loved the bodies beneath them. The farm was a place of verdant growth, of chicks and lambs and golden plums, and the relentless life was matched only by a drumbeat of death. A channel seemed to run beneath the

gummy red clay soil, bubbling up every now and then to claim the lambs born maimed whose mothers would not feed them, the raccoon whose still-fuzzed skeleton appeared in the clearing one rainy afternoon, a mystery we could not solve. I knew the channel ran through Portland too, claiming birds who had smacked windows and bicyclists hit by cars, but it felt more obvious at the farm, that site of the first grief I knew. Witnessing the “slow transformation of [a] landscape over time” transforms it into what naturalists call “a local patch, glowing with memory and meaning,” as writer Helen Macdonald puts it. So much of the memory I read into the farm was melancholy. Sometimes when I walked the land, my hand jumping from splinters as I brushed the fence Gramps had built with hand-split cedar, I tried to welcome the dead. To find Grammy's dark strawberry hair in the light that buttered the daffodils. To imagine the pioneer children who had once carried water from the stream, laughing and crying until, one day, they stopped.

Psychologist Paul Bloom describes empathy as a beam that illuminates the suffering of some while leaving others cloaked in shadow. I see now that my childhood obsession with imagining the lives of the land's first pioneers was not just curiosity but unintentional erasure. Describing the European vision of the world that my child self had, by osmosis, inherited, James Baldwin wrote that it is “as remarkable for what it pretends to include as for what it remorselessly diminishes, demolishes, or leaves totally out of account.” To lose so many children, so young, was an unfathomable tragedy, but it was not an invisible one. The headstones demanded my remembrance in ways the forest floor could not.

If I thought of the farm “before” that pioneer family, I thought of how dense the Douglas firs would have been without paths cleared to walk between them. An unruly place; a home for wolves and not sheep. Once a cousin and I tried to bushwhack a path up a hill

behind Gramps's house, and a turkey launched herself out of a fern and into our faces, protecting her nest. We turned, screaming, her dinosaur wings and mother's shriek burned into our brains. We had known to be wary of the bull snakes underfoot, but giant birds? I never walked the hill again.

The years before white men forced themselves across America are often colloquially thought of as "pure" nature, the paradigm of "wilderness." But the Americas, of course, were already home to millions of human inhabitants working the land. By the time Christopher Columbus arrived, ten percent of the land was already settled or being intensively farmed, a reality that colonizers often failed to recognize—not just because settlements looked different than they did in Europe, but because they did not imagine Indigenous inhabitants were capable of such management. Gramps's farm is located on the unceded territory of the semi-nomadic Kalapuya people, "almost a pre-agricultural society," according to regional tribal scholar Henry Zenk. The Kalapuya slash-burned forest to create open pasture, creating habitat for elk and deer as well as for plants like camas and hazelnuts, which they ground and pressed into cakes for the winter. It seems plausible many of the area's sunny meadows, like Gramps's sheep pastures, were not cleared by industrious pioneers, but by those whose land they stole.

"[T]he 'end times' arrived for millions in the Western Hemisphere with the arrival of Columbus and countless species and ecosystems were condemned to make way for the 'progress' enjoyed by the Global North," writes Eddie Yuen in *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth*. Throughout the Americas, 90 percent of the pre-Columbian inhabitants died before 1600, a number totaling some 56 million people. The Kalapuya population is estimated to have numbered 15,000 before contact with white explorers, traders, and missionaries, but by 1849, only 600-some peo-

ple remained alive. One estimate is that only ten percent of inhabitants along the whole Pacific coast and Columbia River survived the spread of disease. Grief alone may not change an ecosystem, but such death can. As human populations diminished, forests spread, their greenery inhaling enough carbon dioxide to lower the Earth's temperature by 0.15 degrees Celsius. "In many places, it was this apocalyptic aftermath of the plagues that got codified as the 'natural' state," writes Oregon journalist Emma Marris in *Wild Souls: Freedom and Flourishing in the Non-Human World*. What settlers viewed as "wilderness" was not a landscape *before* human influence, but after it.

Visit someplace you have "roots" and it is easy to encounter the landscape as strata of story. At the top is the pulp of your own sense-memories and lived experiences. As a fraction of the whole, this is deceptively small; like the crust of the earth, perhaps only one percent. Beneath it are those tectonic plates of ancestral gossip and anecdote, the fossilized lore of family arrival. At the center is the mantle of the past. Though this bedrock is the majority of total volume, it is too often seen only in glimpses, if at all. "To not remember is perhaps not to feel touched by events that don't interfere with your livelihood," wrote Claudia Rankine. In a country built on colonization, resource extraction, and exploitative capitalism, unearthing the core means confronting the stories of those—person, plant, and animal—who were forced out.

What, it seems worth asking, is a wolf? The Oglala believe all animals are members of their own nations, with wolves thus deserving of "recognition as nations with full rights to live and move," beings who are "relatives" and "equals" to humans. To the Cherokee, a wolf is a watchdog and hunter for Kan'ati, the power spirit of game animals and insects. To the Pueblo, a wolf is a gift sent by their

creator, a magical spirit often represented as female with an ability to heal and instill courage, to know the night around her as easily as she knows her own bones. "In our astronomy / the Great Wolf / lived in sky, / It was . . . the mother of all women, / and howled her daughters names / into the winds of night," writes Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan in her poem "The Fallen."

To Swedish botanist and zoologist Carl Linnaeus, in 1758, the wolf was a creature to classify beside coyotes and jackals under the Latin genus *Canis*, for "dog." While *Canis lupus* were wolves, *Canis familiaris* were our pets. Linnaeus's main distinction was that the wolf was the one with the tail turned up at its end, like a comma flipped on its back. In recent years, after finding genetic differences between dogs and wolves to be negligible, scientists renamed dogs *Canis lupus familiaris*. The wolf in our family. Despite the challenge of biologically parsing wolves and dogs, mainstream Western views continue to champion the divide, persecuting one to the edge of extinction while the other becomes "man's best friend."

In Japan, traditional taxonomies once classified animals based on their relationship to human needs, organizing them by assumed medical and culinary properties. Wolves, unlike "mountain dogs," were edible, argued taxonomist Hitomi Hitsudai in 1695; though the meat was "tough" it would make its eater "courageous." These canines were further sorted by emotional and social context. There were different words for wolves, for mountain dogs, for honorable dogs, for wild dogs, for bad dogs. Unlike in historic Europe, where dogs might be groomed for royalty, dogs here were left to run and beg for food in the streets, blurring the distinction between domestic dog and wild wolf. The same canine could be a dog in the street and a wolf in the woods. Both canines lived at the fringe of human life, and because traditional livelihoods did not depend on livestock but on hunting and the production of grain, the wolf-dog was the one

who protected their fields. Eighteenth-century Japanese geographer Furokawa Koshōkan explained that when the people of one village in northeast Japan spotted a wolf in the wild, it was common to say, "O lord wolf, what do you say? How about chasing the deer from our fields?" The predator was someone to be thanked.

Wolf as savior, wolf as mother, wolf as predator, wolf in brain. "If the definition of a dog is simply a wolf that lives with humans, we have a conundrum, because different cultures define their canid companions according to their own experiences, and the question becomes, who gets to make this distinction?" write Fogg and Pierotti in *The First Domestication*. They argue that the boundary between wolf and dog has been porous for the last 40,000 years, when coevolutionary relationships between Indigenous peoples and dogs likely began. In *The Lost Wolves of Japan*, historian and philosopher Brett Walker's chronicle of shifting Japanese perspectives around the predator, he argues that the distinction between the two canines did not calcify until cattle farming ramped up around the mid-twentieth century. That's when the Japanese government began importing wolf-killing techniques from the American west; the "father of Hokkaido agriculture," Walker notes, was an Ohio rancher who introduced strychnine to poison the region's wolves. The main thing that had changed about Japan's wolves was the economic world they existed in. Capitalism, among other things, had made the wolf a wolf.

Just as I cannot see this wolf without seeing the girl the fairy tales say he is chasing, so I cannot see the wolf without seeing the town—my town—that marked him as evil, chased him away.

One morning in the soggy winter between 1852 and 1853, Mr. James Ingram, a settler who lived with his family in the Willamette Valley not far from where I grew up, found that wolves had attacked

his ox. The animal's ear was gone, and its insides were splayed, but its heart still pulsed. Ingram shot the ox, then dressed its corpse in poison. Strychnine is white, odorless, granular, somewhere between cane and powdered sugar. Within 10 to 120 minutes of first bite, the wolves that ate it would be seizing, their limbs and torsos locked into rigid sawhorse stance, followed by respiratory paralysis and asphyxiation. If the animals were lucky, death would come quickly, in one to two hours. If they were unlucky—if the dosage was small, or unevenly chewed across the pack—it could take up to two days.

The wolves did not return to feed on Ingram's ox for two months. It seems impossible other scavengers would not have fed on it, also that he would have recognized *those* specific wolves' return, but James Richey, the man who records the story some thirty years later, is sure of it. These are "monster wolves," he writes, and his account has the silvery sheen of a dragon slaying, of man-versus-nature at its most mythical. The "beasts" acted "crazed" after ingesting the poison, approaching Ingram's house "as if to hunt him who gave them the fatal poison." They made "night hideous" with "dying groans and howlings," footprints a frenzied music in the snow. Writhing with pain, the animals rolled against the front door. Their bodies slammed against the cold wood until, with a heave and a creak, the door fell open. The wolves were in no condition to attack. Whatever their jaundiced eyes saw, it didn't hold them, and the animals turned from the doorstep. When Ingram found them the next morning, they had made it less than a quarter mile from his house, their bodies crumpled shadows in the snow.

Lewis and Clark's expedition killed thirty-six wolves on their overland journey, but none were west of Montana. Lewis wrote that wolves were "not abundant" near the Pacific, "because there is but little game on which for them to subsist," likely due in part to the

hunting pressures of various tribes. Still, the wolf as threat, at least rhetorically, persisted. In 1812, one man reported traveling through the Oregon territory, lost and starving, when a wolf ran before him and paused some twenty feet away. His account of the incident was frenzied—"I redoubled my cries, until I had almost lost the power of utterance"—but the wolf never attacked, only watched him silently then trotted away. In 1841, another settler described wolves as "very numerous in this country and exceedingly troublesome." By the time wagons of white faces began settling in the Willamette Valley, run-ins between predators and livestock had increased. Unlike early Texas and Colorado ranchers who raised herds of longhorn cattle—bullish and aggressive, with horns extending eight feet tip-to-tip—pioneers entering Oregon brought quieter, short-horned cows. These were bred for higher milk and beef yields, but floundered in the face of predators when let loose on the open range; one 1860s-era rancher called them "as helpless as most duchesses would be if left on a desert island." Though previous attempts at organizing a provisional government had splintered in the face of factionalism between the French Canadian fur-trading Catholics and the English pioneer Methodists, wolves provided a common enemy.

Two meetings in early 1843 were called to discuss the problem of predators threatening livestock. Though bears and mountain lions were included in the agenda, the gatherings are now referred to exclusively as the "wolf meetings." They were held in Champoeg, a town about thirty miles outside Portland. A mural in our capitol's House of Representatives chamber honors these historic meetings. In the foreground, men in tall boots take off their top hats and set aside polished rifles to shake hands with one another. Beyond them, in green pastureland punctuated by furrows of stumped trees, a crowd pumps both fists and guns in the air. "We deem it expedient

for this community to take immediate measures for the destruction of all wolves, bears, and [mountain lions], and such other animals as are known to be destructive . . ." read an accompanying report.

These meetings catalyzed an executive committee to collect the territory's first local tax, which in turn created a bounty on dead predators. Put another way: my home state's first law was to incentivize wolf killing. Delegates set the bounty at 50 cents for a small wolf, \$1.50 for a lynx, \$2 for a bear, \$3 for a large wolf, and \$5 for a mountain lion, with Native Americans receiving half the payment of their white counterparts. By today's currency rate, a large wolf would be worth just under \$100 to a white hunter. To get paid, you had to bring in a skin with the ears still attached. The bounty system exemplified what the slow-forming administration could do for its citizens, and in May, a majority of Oregon's settlers voted to approve the creation of a formal government. Hegel wrote that a threat of death has often been used to keep citizens in line; as Claudia Rankine later added, the minute one stops fearing death is the minute they stop being controlled by civil institutions. With the animal predator cast as a specter of death, central government in Oregon could take root. "The situation was wholly unlike that pertaining to the early occupancy of any other portion of our entire country," wrote Oregon's governor T. T. Geer in 1901, likening it to "a well-prepared romance." I can only imagine he meant, *Slay the beasts, take the virgin land*.

Was the story of wolves knocking open Ingram's door true? In the end, as with early moments in any dramatic "romance," the facts matter less than how they are remembered. Ingram's story entered the current of frontier history: that this is what it was like to be a man among the beasts. The teeth at your doorstep, even as you had the upper hand. A page later, the same account mentions Ingram guarding his home against "marauding Indians." His stoop, it seems, is perpetually under threat. The phrase "keep the wolf at the door"

has its roots in the peasant poverty of medieval England. If you were hungry, the wolf was said to be at your door—hungry, implicitly, for you. In this light, the wolf was the arrival of starvation, of hunger taken to its highest pitch. To see the wolf walk over your doorsill was not to see yourself as a passive victim, but as someone who had already failed to enforce a boundary. Someone unable to provide for, and protect, their family.

In his novel *Mating*, Norman Rush describes the concept of a "lore package" as that narrative shield we carry for safety, to make sense of the world. By choosing to believe that lions are "torpid during the day," Rush's narrator buys herself a break from fear. When I read this, I underlined it: I liked the idea of limiting lore to a package. Our arms can only carry so much. When I am camping, I need to believe the tent is my safe zone. When I am road tripping, that space becomes the car. My lore package is that I will be safe in those thin walls, that things like hail and snakes will obey the boundary I have made. The idea that wolves could open Ingram's door was the idea that wilderness could breach the walls of so-called civilization. Not only did it threaten family, it threatened the lattice of control settlers had created. "Killing wolves, of course, was a sign of progress . . . such work implied extending the bounds of civilized space," wrote environmental historian William Robbins in *Landscapes of Promise: The Oregon Story, 1800–1940*.

To have control is to create and enforce expectations for acceptable behavior. It depends on sorting, and on labels. The dog let into the house; the wolf kept out. Walker chalks Japan's vernacular distinction between "mountain dogs" and "wolves" up to "some last-ditch effort to distinguish humans, the creators of artifice, from the rest of the natural world." But how different are we? A body can be porous. Many Indigenous cultures see the spirit world and the natural world as so interconnected that a body might move between

them, the way a candle can slip back and forth between liquid and wax, the self able to move between human and animal forms. You might see a wolf and know it to be your sister.

The wolf is central to the creation story of the Kalapuya, on whose homeland the "wolf meetings" unspooled. Tribal elder Esther Stutzman has shared the story publicly, describing a world once made entirely of stone. One day, the top of a mountain came to life to reveal earth's first woman, Le-lu, with two babies by her side. As she walked down the stone mountain, grass and rivers appeared. At its base, Le-lu met Mother Wolf, who offered to watch her children while she explored the world. Le-lu felt a bit afraid, but she wove a pack basket and strapped the babies to the wolf's back, weaving a thick band around their foreheads so they would not fall out. She was gone a long time, but she returned to find her babies safe. As she unstrapped them from the basket on Mother Wolf's back, she noticed her children's heads had been flattened from the band. "From now on our people will flatten the foreheads of their babies in honor of Mother Wolf, who took such good care of my babies," Le-lu said, in Stutzman's words. This Kalapuya story emerged from the same ecosystem as that wolf-killing "creation story" of Oregon's statehood, the same landscape as the fern-dense, mossy forest of my grandfather's farm. Both stories hinge on an interaction between local humans and wolves, but their outcomes could not be more different.

Colonization not only dampened such modes of Indigenous knowledge, it attacked them, displacing and killing the people who spoke them. Until the 1978 passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, it was against the law for Indigenous peoples to share stories or songs. "They are intrinsic to cultural sovereignty," writes U.S. poet laureate and Muscogee Nation member Joy Harjo. "To write or create as a Native person was essentially illegal." A decade after the "wolf meetings," the Kalapuya and other area tribes

were made to cede the entire Willamette River drainage area to white settlers; relocated to the Grand Ronde Reservation in the Coast Range, tribal members were pressured to take up farming. Barred from U.S. citizenship, they could not step off the reservation without a pass. "This country is not good now," said John Hudson, a Kalapuya member thought to be the last known speaker of the language. "Long, long ago it was good country."

In the settlers' wake, and with the nuance of Indigenous wolf stories essentially silenced, the stark binaries of Christianity prevailed. Wolves, mentioned thirteen times in the Bible, appear primarily as a metaphor for greedy destruction, a foil to triangulate one's own "good" identity off. "Binary oppositions, oversimplified as they are, leave no room for individual distinctions and complexity," wrote Ruby Hamad. "The existence of a binary means that one pole in the structure is always going to dominate."

For as long as white people have been coming to America, they have been kindling the story of their own belonging, erasing the stories of early inhabitants, in part by conflating them with animals. One piece of seventeenth-century legislation in Massachusetts said that "[w]hoever shall shoot off a gun on any unnecessary occasion, or at any game except an Indian or a wolf, shall forfeit 5 shillings for every shot." As if shooting a wolf or a Native meant nothing at all.

The work of statehood is at first the work of boundary creation. Not just erecting a border but policing it, deciding: Who do you let in? Who do you push out? If I once thought these questions were posed in one way about humans and another about animals, the wolf has shown me otherwise. Often, it is only by anthropomorphizing animals and animalizing humans that the fictions that necessitate human borders can be propped up at all.