Wolf Hunt

Steve Dudas

The Keweenaw claws its way out of the Upper Peninsula's northern coast and into a cold Lake Superior. The hills in the woods are steep, and the trees lift their roots out of the ground in hooks and loops, and make crude staircases up each hill face. I was fifteen years old and very thin during summer camp in the forests away from the Michigan Tech campus. And the days were long for me, and my boots were heavy with mud, collecting ferns and brambles with each step. Pulling each other uphill, bracing each other downhill, we moved in human chains between peaks and valleys. I don't know how the wolves climb the earth there, but we followed them this way for days .....

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.....*Since I was seven years old, I've had a fascination with wolves. My bedroom was always decked out with wolf models and statues, posters, and collages of National Geographic photos. On my bookshelf were at least ten or twelve books about wolves, their behavior, and their environments. Three of these are by Dr. David Mech, my hero for a number of years*.....
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.....The man who led us through the woods was named Ben. Thirty-something with a close-shaved head, he had lost the front four teeth of his upper jaw (from a hockey accident, we figured). And while the rest of us carefully pushed the brush aside and gingerly unwound the vines from our bodies as we climbed, he shattered his way through the branches with a machete, his thick bare arms and neck covered in rows of thin scratches. And while we scanned the horizon for swift, gray movement, Ben would kneel at intervals to read the signatures of phantoms in the snapped twigs and upturned soil of the woods.....

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.....*I would spend hours reading the books, sometimes simply looking at the photographs of wolves hunting and research teams tranquilizing and examining the animals. In the backyard, I would pretend our jungle gym was a helicopter and lean over the railing of the slide tower with my squirt gun, select a specimen from the imaginary pack racing across the plains below me, take careful aim, and fire a dart into the left haunch. A perfect hit*.....

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.....Ben made a living out of finding. Made the actions seem so simple: walk and walk and roll some dirt between fingers or thumb a bruised fern or pinky-test the temperature of a turd on a trail. And from this, supposedly, wolves appeared.....

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.....Wolf crap, or "scat," is particularly telling of a wolf's recent behavior. The temperature, consistency, and shreds of undigested bone and fur create a kind of map. Because wolves use their mouths to interact with the world, bits of where they've been show up in their shit. I read that in one of Dr. Mech's books.....
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....At the top of a hill, twelve teenagers try to catch their breaths and sip from their canteens to the subtle *beep-ding-beep* of Ben's radio box. He nods, counting the seconds between beeps as he walks around us in a slow circle with the antenna held over his head like a shaman's wand. The gaps between the sounds are getting shorter now, and Ben tells us that a wolf he collared in the spring must be within three miles or so. There's a den over the next ridge, he tells us. Perhaps the wolf is using it.....
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.....*Dr. Mech talks about wolf dens in* The Wolf: The Ecology and Behavior of an Endangered Species. *Mother wolves try to make dens out of naturally existing shelters. Rocky caves, thickets of vegetation, abandoned fox and badger burrows. Wolves are resourceful animals. They use what the woods provide*.....
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