

Appalachia

Volume 70
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2019: Quests That
Wouldn't Let Go*

Article 10

2019

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Recommended Citation

Polley, Benjamin Alva (2019) "The Struggle: An Injured Deer and a Dilemma," *Appalachia*: Vol. 70 : No. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol70/iss1/10>

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The Struggle

An injured deer and a dilemma

Benjamin Alva Polley



NOT LONG AGO, I CLIMBED ABOARD A PLANE IN EL PASO, TEXAS, and headed here to my parents' house in north central Illinois. I needed to go home and deal with the past I had never really relinquished under the guise of a visit for a week during Christmas. Whenever I return, I am struck that a place could shape me yet sidestep feeling like home. My first morning back, I sit with coffee staring out the window at my parents' Norwegian elkhound, Cheyenne. It has become a steadying point for me to take her out to the woods each day of my visits back, to give her a chance to run around free from the godforsaken chain she is on all day.

One day, I load Cheyenne up into the bed of my father's red Chevy S-10 pickup. I drive two miles east along a black ribbon of highway, passing by fresh snow that carpets the furrowed cornfields. I am heading to Snyder's Grove, which is a small wooded nature preserve outside of town. I drive onto the gravel lane leading in, just beyond the gate, and pull over to let Cheyenne jump out of the truck. She races in front of the truck as I maneuver the gear shift into first, then second, and steer the truck deeper into the sanctuary of giant maples, oaks, and orange Osage trees. Animal tracks punctuate the thin veneer of snow. The forest is quiet except for the purring of the truck's engine and the smattering of birdsong. Cheyenne stops, relieves herself, and marks her territory on a large, gnarled, old oak tree lining the edges of the Little Vermilion River. I always like to let her out before our stroll to release some of that pent-up and frustrated energy that chained pets harbor.

I drive around a bend in the road as I watch Cheyenne spook four whitetail does from their daybeds. The deer stand, snort, and stomp their front hooves as the matriarch flags her tail, and they all bound quickly into the copse of deciduous trees lining the edge of the field. They burst forth through the open field. The deer initiate the chase, and Cheyenne, on instinct, follows.

I park the truck and jump out. Numerous times I holler, "Cheyenne! Cheyenne!" and whistle repeatedly. Her domesticity wins out in the end and overpowers her instinctual drive. She runs back to me, panting and out of breath. The domestic sheen and innocence temporarily seem missing from her eyes as a new light of wildness shines through.

We begin our stroll by crossing the creek on a dilapidated wooden bridge constructed of pre-cut lumber. A cleared and mowed trail loops on the north side of the creek. I usually do a figure-eight pattern. Here, most of the trees

In the prairie and woodland of north central Illinois, animals bide and run. MARK SHAWM

are deciduous hardwood and stand stark naked in the winter. The sky is as gray as dry cement.

THIS PARTICULAR WOODLAND AND THE CORRIDOR CREATED BY THE CREEK allow the last remaining wildlife populations to find hidden shelter during the day. Throughout my younger years, I had come here for my own shelter and reprieve. Nothing wears masks here except raccoons. Raccoons sleep in cavities of trees, opossums play dead, foxes dart through the forest: I find camaraderie in it all and loneliness upon my return home. One April, years before, I surprised a doe who was bedded down and reluctant to flee. My old dog, Angie, a mixed breed of Norwegian elkhound and German shepherd, gave chase to the doe, and I walked over to where the deer had lain and found a little spotted fawn still covered in afterbirth. She was tiny, innocent, and fresh to this world. I rounded up the dog and we left immediately, to let the deer family be.

The few remaining woodlands and fewer still tallgrass prairies, such as Nachusa Grasslands, in north central Illinois, and Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, in the northeast, are the last vestiges of what this land used to be. Most of them have been converted to agricultural fields. Illinois, the Prairie State, comprised 60 percent native prairie (22 million acres) in the nineteenth century, according to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. Now in 2017, only 2,500 acres remain.

The French called the rolling plains of grass *prairie*, which means a meadow. Climate, grazing, and fire maintained the prairie's open grassland expanse. Rainfall varies from year to year within a prairie, and this usually causes a drought in midsummer. The landscape was molded slowly over time with its fluctuations. It wasn't forced into an exact system, not boxed in like children put in lines, to walk to desks, to sit still—that is, until deeds, agriculture, and roads came along. Before the prairie landscape was tethered to human designs, the drought came roughly every five years, causing fires to flare across the land, clearing away saplings and other trees from its long grasses. Trees die in drought, but grass goes dormant. These fires don't usually penetrate the underground tangled rhizomes, roots, bulbs, and rootstock that constitute most grasslands but instead clear away the above-ground thatch of dead grasses and saplings, making room for new growth.

Before settlers rolled their wagons in, wild grazing animals such as buffalo, deer, elk, and rabbits covered the prairie. These creatures increased the growth

of prairies by adding nitrogen to the soil through urine and feces and creating open areas for plants that like to have the soil dug up. The decomposition of all this plant material has led to some of the most fertile land in the world. More than a century and a half ago, settlers transformed these prairies into farmland. Where the land wasn't natural prairie or good for agriculture, woodlands were allowed to reside, and some of these woodlands remain where towns, cities, and developers haven't decimated them yet. Snyder's Grove is one such area.

I STROLL ALONG THE CREEK, AND CHEYENNE FOLLOWS HER NOSE wherever it leads her. Even if I stop, breathe in the air, and listen to the water as it rolls over logs or ripples over slight rapids, the mile-long stroll feels too short. We cross the bridge back over to the parking lot. I climb inside the truck and start the engine. On the way out, I let Cheyenne run next to the truck again.

Cheyenne startles one of the same does. At first, the doe easily outruns the dog. But, on closer observation, I notice the front right leg of the deer is dangling, tethering and hanging on by some arteries, cartilage, and flesh. The deer runs 50 yards ahead, stops, and snorts, but once Cheyenne crosses an unseen line of invading the deer's space, the deer catches its breath, stomps, flags its tail, and takes off again. I let off the brakes, idle a ways, stop, park, and jump out of the truck.

I holler, "Cheyenne, Cheyenne, get back here!" I whistle and start to lose my cool. Now, I love my parents, but the dog has no training. She is completely ignoring me. I can't blame her. That chain awaits her at home to tether her down.

This time she gives chase and gets within 25 yards before the deer runs again, out of the nature preserve. I jump back in the truck and head out after them. I drive east down Highway 52, pull into a field entrance, and park the truck again. I head out through the furrowed field after the dog, hollering and yelling dozens more times, to no avail.

Cheyenne keeps narrowing the gap until she is within 10 feet of the deer, and the doe is completely out of breath. I notice the deer is also wheezing. Cheyenne barks at its hooves but doesn't remember through her long history of domestication what to do besides chase it until the trainer gets there.

I see the deer is exhausted, and Cheyenne is wasting the animal's vital energy. Eventually, I cross over into the deer's space, and the deer hobbles

about 30 yards away from me. It stops, glances with disdain more than fear now at the barking dog, then stares in my direction as I approach. I get within 10 yards before the deer takes off again. It runs just 25 yards, then stops and wheezes heavily. Again, I get within 10 yards before it bolts again. Each time the distance it runs is less.

This time as I approach, my old sense of place within these woods overlaps my ability to feel a sense of purpose and moral steadiness in this moment. It is my fault that my parents' dog is extinguishing the last vital energy of this injured creature. *What is the most compassionate thing I can do? Once I get Cheyenne, should I just hike away and let nature run its course? Or am I and my decisions also part of nature? Should I leave this creature for the coyotes to kill and let crows, foxes, vultures, insects, and time pick away at it?* Feeling more of the woods than of the town code of ethics, I shift away from such a passive approach.

I HAVE TO PUT THIS ANIMAL OUT OF ITS MISERY. I HAVE NO KNIFE ON me, so I search the ground for branches to use as clubs, or rocks or other tools to help me—nothing. All the branches I pick up crumble in my hands. The dog chases the animal within a couple of feet of me, and this image pops into my head to tackle it. *No way, I think. The beast would slice and cut me up. The creature doesn't want to die, or does it?* I shake off the predatory temptation to jump on its back.

Cheyenne chases it down into a ravine with a frozen creek, thick with trees. The timber jam bars the way. At this point, the animal is practically walking dead. I stand about 10 feet above the creature. Adrenaline seeps from the adrenal glands in my kidneys, pumps into my bloodstream, floods my arteries, and cascades to my brain and my heart. My pupils dilate, and my muscles respond. Instincts kick in. My eyes scan the frozen creek bed for rocks. I crawl down to the creek and kick a softball-sized rock loose. I palm the cold, hard stone. Cheyenne continues to bark at this animal that is six times her size. I climb back up on the bank. I wait until the dog is out of the way. I wind up like the pitcher/outfielder that I used to be and launch the rock right at the creature's head. *THUMP!!*

The animal's legs slide out from under it as it collapses and falls back against the bank. I hesitatingly crawl down the bank and walk up to the unconscious creature. Its breath is minimal when I wrap my palms around

and grip the beast's tawny-gray furry neck. I squeeze as tight as I can, holding my hands there for what felt like minutes and choke it as hard as I can. I am nearly crying at the feel of its rough hair and sinewed muscles in my hands as the lights in its eyes go out.

My heart pounds like a jackhammer.

I realize at some point in those minutes that I am simultaneously helping her die less painfully while also choking out the past that tethers my own sense of not being allowed to be fully, ruggedly, and evolutionarily human. The deer is still, and the woods are more still than they'll probably ever be again for me.

I grab Cheyenne and pick her up. She weighs about 35 pounds, and I carry her the mile back to the truck. I can't let her go because I know she doesn't want to come with me. Her evolutionary instincts of being a wolf tell her no. Her training within the ancient breed of elkhound tells her no. Mine say, let's go!

I reverse the truck out of the field entrance and race toward town. My heart is leaping out of my chest. My palms sweat, and my arms shake as I grip the wheel. I drive back into town. I pull into the garage. I put the dog back on the chain and head inside. My father, 73 at the time, is napping upstairs.

One of my older brothers, Daniel, is home for the weekend from Chicago. He takes one look at me and asks, "What happened?" I proceed to tell him, and he says, "You savage!"

I yell up to my father and explain what happened. "Call the state of Illinois to see if they will mail you deer tags." Then he says the deer probably died adjacent to the nature preserve. "I suppose that is the rendering works property next to Snyder's Grove."

"Do you have any experience cutting up deer?" I half-ask. I knew that back in his day he only hunted ducks, pheasants, rabbits, and squirrels.

"Not much," he responds.

"Hello, is this the rendering works?" I ask.

"Yes," the man on the other end says.

I fill him in on the story and ask, "May I have permission to get the deer?"

The man hesitates for a while and seems caught off guard by the question. "I guess."

I hang up the phone. I felt like I was talking to the gatekeeper who hands out permission to be oneself and be fully human, as if I need permission. My adrenaline smolders.

I decide to call a few friends who hunt. None of them pick up.

As I am about to head out the door, my friends Dan and Jeff show up unexpectedly. I clue them in and see if they will help me carry the deer and load it.

We drive out there in separate vehicles. We hike down into the draw, pick the doe up, and carry her like pallbearers. We lug her to the truck and lay her into the bed. We drive to the house of Jeff's boss, who hangs the deer on a hook and cuts her body up. He notices that several of her ribs were splintered, severed, and broken and says, "Looks like a vehicle got the deer first."

ILLINOIS' DEER POPULATION IS CURRENTLY 750,000 TO 800,000. Hunters harvest more than 155,000 deer annually. Each year, there are more than 15,000 automobile collisions involving deer. According to a State Farm study, car collisions with deer dramatically increase during mating season, which occurs from October to December. Deer are more active and willing to migrate farther and more frequently during this time of the year as they forgo caution at traffic crossings, having only one thing on their minds.

U.S. deer populations have exploded during the last century, numbering significantly more than 30 million as of 2015. Some areas have more than 100 deer per square mile. In the 1800s and by the 1920s, deer were practically extinct in many colonial states. Now that deer have become habituated to our gardens, our well-manicured lawns with our ornamentals and lack of predators around, their numbers have skyrocketed, which has led to more collisions.

THE DAY AFTER I HELD THE DEER'S LIFE IN MY HANDS, I WATCH ONE of my best friends, Brad, cut up the meat delicately into usable portions. I give some meat to Brad for helping and the rest to my family. Two days later, I jump back on a plane to finish seasonal backcountry trail work in Big Bend National Park, in Texas.

I never did taste the meat, but I tasted the dormant wildness within all of us. I had to kill the half-dead beast within me to get the domesticity out of my own eyes. I had to cut away the parts that were mangled and left nonfunctional by society, so that I could offer up the good and nourishing parts that I had left after that. Cheyenne and her chain, that doe left with not enough prairie or preserve to shelter her, a rock, and two bare hands. The

struggle wasn't between the three of us; the struggle is how humans relate to ourselves and to the landscape and how much tinkering we should be allowed to do.

BENJAMIN ALVA POLLEY lives in Whitefish, Montana, and worked for more than a decade as trail worker, fire lookout, wildlife observer, and ranger for the National Park Service, mostly in Glacier National Park. His work has appeared in *Esquire*, *Sierra*, *Bugle*, *Canoe & Kayak*, *Lake Superior Magazine*, *Earth Island Journal*, and many other publications. He is one of the associate editors of the *Whitefish Review* and is currently writing a book about the sense of place that will include this essay.