

Waterman Fund Essay Contest Winner

The Cage Canyon

*"I am holding a piece of the wild in my hands,
and she wants nothing to do with me."*

Jenny Kelly Wagner



Editor's note: The winner of the seventh annual Waterman Fund Essay Contest, which Appalachia sponsors jointly with the Waterman Fund, shows the trade-offs of removing the dangers of wolves from civilization. We have nearly extirpated a wild species from its habitat, leaving a population of wolves that never learned to hunt because they were bred in captivity, a species that has lost its wildness but can never be tamed. Wagner takes readers with her as she, grimy and wary, corrals wild creatures and asks questions we all must ask.

THE FIRST TIME I MEET KIYA, SHE IS CHAINED TO THE PASSENGER seat of a two-door Audi, glaring at me suspiciously with intense yellow eyes. When I approach the car, she cowers in the corner as far as the chain around her neck will allow. If I try to open the door, she might hurt herself struggling against the restraints in her attempt to get away from me, so I don't push my luck. I take a deep breath as the woman who chained Kiya to the seat steps out of the driver-side door.

Kiya is a 2-year-old black wolf. I am a 22-year-old blonde girl with a liberal arts degree who was never even allowed to own a dog as a kid, wearing filthy Carhartt jeans and a week's worth of grime. I live and volunteer at Mission: Wolf, a captive wolf sanctuary overlooking the jagged Sangre de Cristo Mountains in southern Colorado.

I have never seen a wolf in the wild. My ancestors, settlers from Europe, initiated the decline of the North American gray wolf by killing countless bison, elk, moose, and deer. Then, beginning in 1906, the U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey (now the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service) sponsored a nationwide extermination of gray wolves to make grazing land safe for domestic cattle. Until 1965, a wolf carcass could earn you as much as \$50 from the U.S. government. At that time, a gallon of gasoline sold for 35 cents.

I wasn't alive in 1965, but my mother likes to say that our nation figured out a lot of things during the 1960s. As we were coming to terms with the diversity in our own population, the scientific community (and, perhaps more important, the National Park Service) was growing more confident that

Jenny Kelly Wagner "shakes" the paw of Rosie, a wolf who grew up in the Mission: Wolf sanctuary for captive animals in southern Colorado. COURTNEY HOYT

natural ecosystems became more healthy and stable as biodiversity increased. My mother, a stalwart feminist, joined the march on Washington, D.C., for civil rights in the summer of 1963. A year later, President Johnson signed the Wilderness Act. It was ten more years before the Endangered Species Act forbade the hunting of our 300 remaining wolves in northern Minnesota, and more than 30 years before the first wolves were reintroduced in Yellowstone National Park.

Before the government started releasing wolves into Yellowstone's Lamar Valley in 1995, overgrazing herbivores destroyed vegetation in our nation's first national park. Predators were scarce, and the grizzly bear was quickly disappearing from the unbalanced ecosystem. Once wolves returned, the oversized elk populations in the park had something to run from. Their hooves churned the ground loose, aerating the soil. After wolf reintroduction, plant life began to flourish. Young saplings in riverbeds could grow undisturbed by oversized herds of lazy ungulates. At least 50 species of songbirds returned to nest in the mature trees. Beavers built houses with willow branches. The shade from the trees cooled streams and rivers to a healthy temperature for fish, and the elusive grizzly bear started to make a miraculous comeback.

Before the Europeans arrived, half a million wild wolves ranged across almost the entire continental United States. Now, a quarter of a million wolves live here in captivity, and fewer than 10,000 wild wolves roam our small patches of wilderness. Desperate for a connection to the wild, many people buy wild animals and take them home.

As I watch Kiya clawing at the Audi's upholstery, I am less concerned about what wilderness means for me than I am about what it means for her. People call us every week with horror stories of unruly pet wolves. Kiya's story is an all-too-familiar narrative. Sold as a puppy from a breeder in Canada claiming she was 98 percent wolf, 2 percent dog, she was confined to a small apartment in a subdivision outside of Denver, terrified of everyone except the couple that raised her. Kiya bit a young girl who tried to take a shoe away from her.

Kiya's next 45 days must be spent in quarantine at our facility or she will be destroyed.

The first thing we have to do when we receive a phone call from a wolf or wolf-dog owner is take a deep breath. Usually, it's an emergency. *A wolf jumped my 8-foot fence and is running around on the interstate. A wolf attacked my wife's dog over the food bowl. My wolf thinks he is protecting me by growling at*

my partner. My neighbor saw how our wolf carries our 2-year-old around gently by the head, and when he tried to intervene, the wolf got rough.

Take the animal to the vet yourself and pay to have it euthanized, we tell people on the phone, because that is what will happen if you set it free or take it to a shelter. Be responsible. Make it quick and clean.

My job isn't always as grim as it sounds. In summer, I meet hundreds of kids from all over the country. My favorite groups are the inner-city kids who come up with a Denver nonprofit to camp next to our parking lot. They wear sweatshirts and baggy jeans instead of Gore-Tex shells. Most of them have never seen the stars. It takes them some time to get used to the silence, but after a week of sleeping outside, the kids learn to sit calmly and listen. I wonder if a week is enough. I wonder what the world would be like if adults all learned to sit calmly and listen.

Most of the meat we feed the wolves arrives in the form of donated livestock, animals at neighboring ranches that have reached the end of their quality of life. Our neighbors call us when they have a horse or cow go down,* and we bring it to the sanctuary to process and feed to the wolves. Often, I find myself teaching anatomy lessons to curious visitors. I'm not a biologist. I yawned in the back of my high school science class, daydreaming and skipping my homework until the glorious day we finally got to dissect a fetal pig.

But a week ago, I found myself holding a large, bloody cow pancreas aloft in front of a pack of fascinated 13-year-old Girl Scouts as they helped me prepare food for the wolves at our sanctuary. Humans are driven by a need for direct experience. Our souls crave what is raw and real, even if we have convinced ourselves we can opt out of all that nasty survival stuff. Instead, we watch, on the Discovery Channel, every other species worry about the circle of life.

We depend on wild plants and animals for our survival, and yet we do our best to cover up all evidence of our participation in the cycles of our natural world. My food has been deboned, pre-washed, and no longer resembles anything that 13-year-old girls think is cool. My drinking water comes from a pipe diverting Rocky Mountain snowmelt, via the Arkansas River, that used to flow all the way to Mexico. We are just as disconnected from soybeans as we are from cows, so do the moral implications change if I eat a steak or a piece of tofu? I want to hold the hatchet that beheads my chicken dinner.

* Died in the night or been recommended for euthanizing or shooting.

I want to hear the snap of spinach stems severed by my own pair of scissors. I want to reconnect.

I want to feel a connection to nature, but the 20-foot-long chain connecting me to a black wolf named Kiya is not what I had in mind. I am holding a piece of the wild in my hands, and she wants nothing to do with me. As I begin to walk across the flat dirt parking lot, Kiya takes off running and almost pulls me off my feet. I direct her in circles, which she runs relentlessly around me. Kiya has no desire to come closer to me. I give her all the slack I can on the chain. At a 15-foot distance from me, she visibly relaxes. Finally, almost enough space. For wolves and other wild animals, how we manage the world's wild places could mean the difference between life in the wild and only existing in cages.

The wilderness is shrinking. I might never see the remaining pockets of untouched land, but their ecological value is inestimable. Much of our oxygen comes from places that we will never visit: huge swathes of forest in North America and Siberia, the incredibly biologically diverse Amazon Rainforest, and cold oceans rich with phytoplankton and seaweed. Our fates closely entwine with the rest of the Earth, but humans live a disconnected existence. We surf the Internet instead of talking to each other. We pave the space between our feet and the ground so that we can drive past everything without having to feel the chilly air or listen to the birds or greet our neighbors. By insulating ourselves from the outdoors, we have created a cage for ourselves that is warm, comfortable, and lonely as hell.

By now I have known Kiya for three years, and she still doesn't want to hang out with me. All she wants from me is the whole leg of road-killed deer I'm carrying down the hill in a plastic bucket. Unable to build an appropriate fence, the woman driving the Audi had no choice but to ask us to take her wolf in permanently. She'd visited Kiya once, but the wolf spiraled into disappointment after she'd left.

Kiya now lives in a three-acre pen with two other canines. I feed her, and that's the reason she can never learn to survive in the wild. Because she was born in captivity (to a breeder in Canada), she never can return to the wild because she does not fear humans and she thinks humans are the source of all of her food.

At night, I fall asleep to the howling of Kiya and 35 other wolves imprisoned for their own good inside fences up and down the canyon. Like Kiya, they do not know how to find their own food and cannot survive in the wild. I

wonder if I'm very different. Outside the fences, a pack of wild coyotes yips in reply. The sound curbs my loneliness. Somewhere north of here, out of earshot from any human, a wild wolf is howling.

References

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