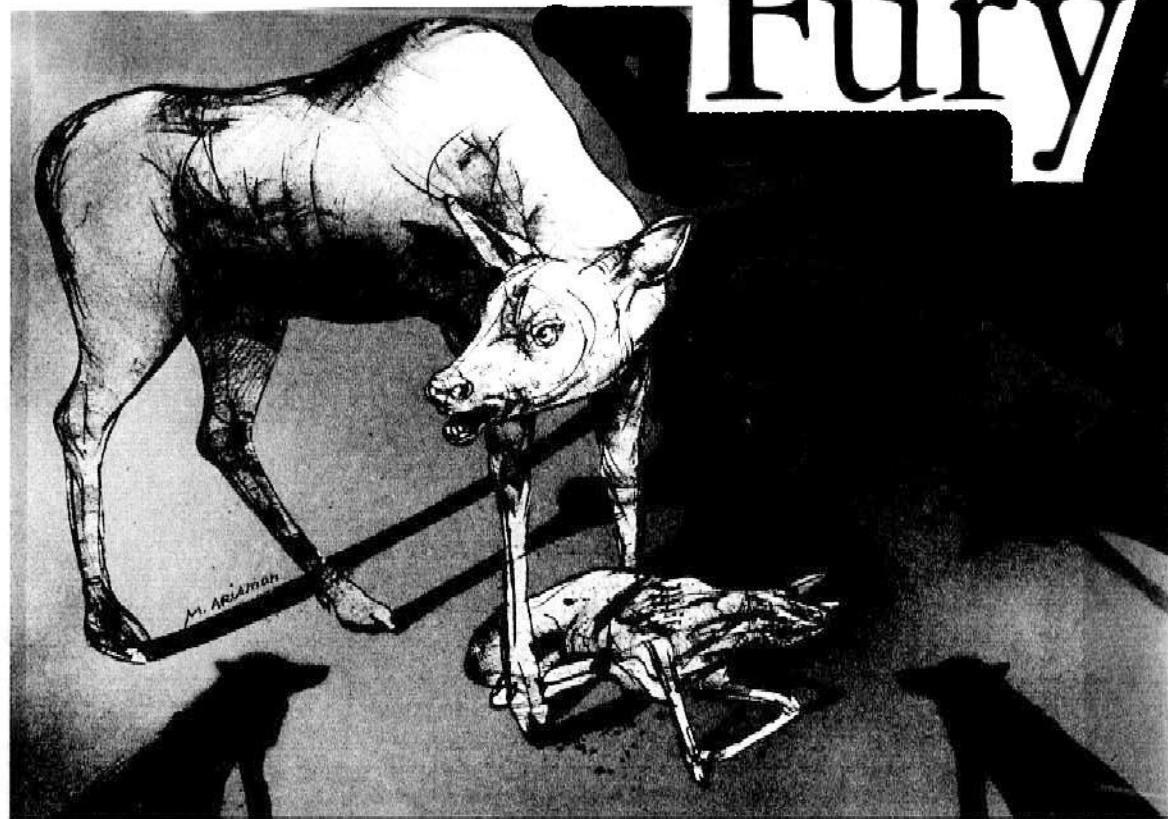


# A Mother's Fury



MARSHALL ARISMAN

By Richard Selzer

**S**HORTLY AFTER my retirement from a career in surgery, I was invited to teach at a school for naturalists at Yellowstone National Park. Let it be said that I know nothing of the wilderness, that my feet have rarely left pavement, that I am afraid of snakes. Nevertheless, at the appointed date, there I was in Mammoth Hot Springs, Wyo., to "reinterpret" the wilderness as though it were a human body. It is just another piece of cheek

*Richard Selzer is the author of "Confessions of a Knife."*

to which surgeons are prone.

At 8 A.M., Jim Halfpenny, a research fellow, appears at the lodge. We set out across the park. He is 38, weathered, with hooded eyes and straight, black, shiny hair that he combs forward into broad sideburns. I think he must be an Indian. No, he says, the name is English. As in ha'penny. He is no taller than I — five feet, eight inches — perhaps even shorter, but gives the appearance of stature. Reliability makes one taller. Walking ahead of me, his compact, solid body gives off a dry odor, like that of mice. No, something wilder. This is a body that has scrambled over rocks, bushwacked, forded streams and, over its lifetime, taken on the look and smell, doubtless the

feel, of rock, forest, river, animal. He seems made of bark and leaf and oiled fur.

Today we will study tracks and scat. "Fox," says Jim as he points to prints in the earth. "Four toes with nails. The palm pad a single lobe. A looper." We walk on.

"Bear. No space between the toes. They're all cramped in. Hind foot looks human. A heel slows you down. Got to go up and down on it." He demonstrates.

"A hopper. Indistinct. They're light on their feet. He's running away from something."

Just so does Jim Halfpenny gather evidence, populating the empty wilderness with invisible creatures, divining presences. Each

time we pause at a mound of stool, he makes a diagnosis.

"Rabbit. It's dry and round."

"Porcupine . . . a long pellet with a hook at the end."

"White in it? The bear's been eating bone."

"Blue? He's been at the berries." He bends to sniff. "Smells nice and sweet."

"Cat covers it up. Coyote wants you to see it."

About feces, Jim is as clinical as a gastroenterologist.

"The diameter of scat is controlled by the circumference of the anus." He says this without the least irony, then kneels to pick something up.

"Lady-slipper," he says, and holds up a yellow flower.

We have been trekking for several hours when, by a hand held out, palm directed backward, one finger shushing, I am commanded to halt and be still. Jim points to a gentle slope of grassland from which we are separated by a body of water.

The wooden marker names it "Floating Island Lake." A misnomer, as there is no island, floating or anchored, and the "lake" is no more than 50 yards across and a like number in length. I should think it more a pond than a lake. The countryside of Yellowstone is anything but modest.

Directly across the water, arranged in classic pose: an elk, her calf, and three coyotes; two with black-tipped tails, black again across the shoulders. The tail of the third coyote has been stripped so that it is little more than bone and ligament, no fur. For a long time, the animals stand immobile as though waiting to begin the performance of a play. All at once, they are touched into motion. One of the coyotes makes a low slink toward the calf. The elk dashes to drive it off. As she does, the coyote with the stripped tail lunges, upending the calf. We see four small hooves waving, an impossibly twisted neck, then nothing but a rumpled brown blanket on the grass. The elk charges the killer. Too late. And stands guard over the body of the calf.

For the next two hours, she will career back and forth, first in one direction, then in another, as the coyotes feint and dodge. They are low and silver; I can see through them. Only their jaws are substantial. They give her no rest, take turns inviting her gallop, swerving out of reach of her hooves just in time. All this while, the calf shows not the least sign of life. From time to time, the elk bends to sniff the carcass, even gives it a healing lick. But then she must return to fend them off. Clearly, the calf is dead. But she will not let them have it. Again and again,

she interposes herself between fangs and calf, rearing, prancing.

But now her mouth is open, her tongue hangs out, light flakes from her heaving flanks. She is afire. Her eyes, too, burn with a preternatural glare, like those of a war horse in the clamor of battle. She tires. But she will not let them have it! Now and then, in the very heat of the fight, she bends to rip a mouthful of grass and chew, so strong is the habit of grazing. That is, after all, her work. But the body of the calf is her passion. Has she not yet accepted the fact of death? Or does she act out of some maternal frenzy? Whatever, the coyotes are of equal resolve. They will have that calf. And their effort is shared; they are three. The battle is fought in absolute silence. None of them cry out, growl; nothing, only the thudding of her pistons on the ground. The tawny coat of the elk is repeated in the golden grass that bends and straightens in the wind as though the earth itself were panting. In the foothills, the sagebrush, frothing. At our feet, the cool unblinking heartless gaze of the lake.

Now the battle enters a second phase. Somehow the coyotes know she has reached her limit. Twice, the skinny-tailed one holds a thigh in his jaw. Twice the elk repels, dislodges. As though a bugle has sounded, one of the tricksters darts toward the calf, asking for pursuit. The elk obliges, and as she does, the other two seize the carcass and drag it to within a few feet of a solitary aspen tree in the center of the clearing. There they relinquish it. But now there are four against her: the three coyotes and the tree, about which she cannot circle and turn with their agility. Round and round the aspen, first in one direction, then the other, she runs, flailing.

"Look at that," says Jim. "Ring-around-the-rosy." The sound of human speech is shocking.

The coyotes grow bolder; there are whole moments when one has its snout buried in the crumpled brown thing. A great red rip appears in the flank of the carcass. One by one, the coyotes dip their muzzles in it, lifting them like Russian flags. And still the mother tries. One coyote turns to nip at her heels, but she is fearless and fights on. A pair of ravens, like black rags, shakes into the low branches of the aspen and settles there, lengthening the odds against her. But this elk says, "NO!" And, all but spent, continues to pound the air, the ground,

with all her might, wheeling into the saliva that hangs from her lip. Once more she achieves the body of the calf, gives it an exploratory nudge, bends to nuzzle with the ferocity of resuscitation. I wish for her arms, fists, talons. Oh, I think, had she fists

and talons, she would keep them from it. I want her to keep them from it. It is not any longer the matter of a calf, which I understand is dead. It is she. I am caught up in her mad purpose.

Then, all at once, as if a signal has been given, a handkerchief thrown, she knows. And, high, nude, sleek, she steps away to the edge of the clearing. The coyotes barge in. In a moment they are deep imbrued in gore. Their tails twitch, their soft growls of pleasure come across the water. From where she stands apart, the elk turns to cast a single lingering backward glance, then slips into the forest. The last of her is her bright rump, like a small sun. In the tree, the ravens wait their turn. Jim is silent, satisfied. He turns to see that I am full of her defeat.

"You're wrong," he says. "It was beautiful. All energy and grace. To choose sides would be to stop all nature in its tracks. A calf dies, three coyotes live another day. There is no good, no bad."

"Yes," I say. "I see." But I do not see. Is pity a less natural emotion than lust? Or hunger? Save us all from the "mercy" of the disinterested, the fair, to whom it is all the same — elk or coyote. The heart knows better.

It is the next day, and I return alone to Floating Island Lake. It is calm and quiet. Two scaup sit up to their gunwales in the water. A coot preens his wingpits with a white bill. Then, well-scratched, he quivers once and flatfoots from a reed jam into the water with the softest, wettest noise. On the opposite bank, where only yesterday gods did battle, it is convalescent, empty. Or more than empty; a vacancy hovers there, crowded with ghosts. Look! A lone elk and three transparent coyotes, one with his tail unsleeved, circling, darting in. Now the others turn. Each move begets a responding move. See that fellow hanging fast to the carcass until he is almost beneath her hooves. How she slathers. In the lake, the scaup rattle their wings, a bullfrog booms, and the yellow-headed blackbird shrieks his personal complaint.

It is more than two years since these events. Reading this memoir now, I think back, not to that time but to a time before that, when I sat with a woman in the solarium of a pediatric intensive care unit trying to tell her that her child had just died. I remember how, wide-eyed and perfectly still, she took the struck blow — her disbelief; then, her spasms of rage. How I fought to withstand them. At last, there came the caving in, the crumbling. ■