

Jonathan Dixon

The Catamount

When we drove up out of Scoharie County my brother Matthew was not yet three years old and the tudor sedan in which we travelled was itself many times that age. In the region we had abandoned little evidence remained in thought or record of our having lived there. The new land was vast and mountainous. Even in the low cradles between peaks you could feel a spirituality in the way the earth reached up around you that seemed both to contradict the immediacy of the rock and ameliorate the urgency of the horizon. I sat with Matthew in my lap and pointed to features of the climbing landscape and read the writing off the roadsigns and named to him the meanings of those that bore only symbols. In our new house we slept in the room that was a converted porch and I would lie awake at night and listen to my brother's breathing in the dark and wonder what the people were like who lived there before us and why they had left.

On an autumn's night in that first year I woke to hear the lion in the hills north of the house and I knew that he would be coming down onto the thickets in the tall grass to chase the deer in the moonlight. I pulled my jeans off the floor and put on my blue flannel shirt and got my sneakers from the foot of the bed and held them to the light of the window to tell them left from right and pulled them on and got up and went to the door and stepped outside and closed it behind me.

When I passed our parents' window it was open and my father's snoring was sounding clearly in the chilly air. Dead leaves crunched under my sneakers and stalks of unmown grass brushed my ankles and I moved quickly for fear that he would awaken and catch me there. A half hour later I was a mile away crouched in a vein of bracken bordering a dry swale where I could tell the lion had run by the swathe he'd left behind him of churned soil and disturbed leaves.

He was already out in the moonlit meadow and when I ran down the length of the trench and came out below it I could see a dark line of parted grass describing his wake and ahead of it a wispering ripple of movement where his lithe form was plunging still further ahead. I skirted the edge of the field to cut the distance and came around the lip of a small ridge and nearly tumbled down a wash of rocks where the hillside had begun to crumble but managed to stumble jerkily downgrade without falling. I heard the sound of running water and the woods opened up and I found myself tramping along the creek on a narrow strip of rough gravel with the moon behind me. It was very bright there in the open and looking upstream I saw his prey emerge from the treeline and come out onto the rocks by the water.

The doe was scrambling for escape. She reared back at the creek's edge and wheeled round to face me and her almond eyes caught the moonlight from their settings in her pointed skull and I thought that she looked like the ghost of a deer that had wandered back into her former life. She lost her footing and snorted and steadied her gate and lowered herself to bound the breadth of the water when the shadow of the lion sprang from the woods and leapt upon her back.

I watched from behind a fallen tree. My fingers sank into the soft wood. The doe's spine was broken but she was alive and lay there in the water jerking her limbs until the lion righted himself and got over her shuddering form and clenched her slender neck in his jaws. Then he dragged her lifeless body through the water and out of the water and up onto the rocks. He settled down and ripped her hide with his teeth and burrowed his head into her flank on the side of her I couldn't see. Eating. Burying his face in her flesh. Eating and lapping and pausing to rip more of her hide before lowering his gorey head to eat again.

I didn't know what startled him when he lifted his head to stare at me. I could see his eyes in the moonlight just as I had those of the deer and they shut once and flashed open and remained that way. I thought he was gauging the distance between himself and me. Something in me knew

not to run. Then he moved. He got fully erect and shifted his gaze from the place where I was hiding. I remained very still. He stretched his neck and peered forward. Then he flinched and hissed and finally the gunshot tore through the night as if to confirm the reality that he had been hit. He started up with a yowl and turned round with his weight off his wounded foreshoulder and was gone into the woods before the first of the echos had begun ringing among the hills.

There were four of them and they passed on the opposite bank within thirty feet of where I sat hidden. I could see their rifles in the moonlight. I could hear their curses. I thought they would surely see me but they ran so fast and with such focus that had the creek been made of fire they would have crossed it. Then they did. They splashed through it with their guns held aloft. The one carrying the lantern stumbled. The others ran on without the light. The man who had tripped in the water stopped on the bank and set down the lantern and stood hopping on one leg to empty the water from his boot and shouted ahead at his friends and when he had pulled his boot back on took up the lantern and followed after them through the woods. A minute later I heard a second shot to the north and two more in close succession after which the noise diminished and there was only the sound of the creek at my side. When I got back to the house Matthew was awake but I didn't tell him where I'd been nor anything about what I'd seen. I never told anybody. Not even when we drove into Sable Falls the next day and saw the fresh skin of the catamount stretched on the drying rack in the yard of the Silver Whistle Tavern and all the townspeople gathered round to look at it.

The Crossing

by Cormac Mccarthy

When they came south out of Grant County Boyd was not much more than a baby and the newly formed county they'd named Hidalgo was itself little older than the child. In the country they'd quit lay the bones of a sister and the bones of his maternal grandmother. The new country was rich and wild. You could ride clear to Mexico and not strike a crossfence. He carried Boyd before him in the bow of the saddle and named to him features of the landscape and birds and animals in both spanish and english. In the new house they slept in the room off the kitchen and he would lie awake at night and listen to his brother's breathing in the dark and he would whisper half aloud to him as he slept his plans for them and the life they would have.

On a winter's night in that first year he woke to hear wolves in the low hills to the west of the house and he knew that they would be coming out onto the plain in the new snow to run the antelope in the moonlight. He pulled his breeches off the footboard of the bed and got his shirt and his blanketlined duckingcoat and got his boots from under the bed and went out to the kitchen and dressed in the dark by the faint warmth of the stove and held the boots to the windowlight to pair them left and right and pulled them on and rose and went to the kitchen door and stepped out and closed the door behind him.

When he passed the barn the horses whimpered softly to him in the cold. The snow creaked under his boots and his breath smoked in the bluish light. An hour later he was crouched in the snow in the dry creekbed where he knew the wolves had been using by their tracks in the sand of the washes, by their tracks in the snow.

They were already out on the plain and when he crossed the gravel fan where the creek ran south into the valley he could see where they'd crossed before him. He went forward on knees and elbows with his hands pulled back into his sleeves to keep them out of the snow and when he reached the last of the small dark juniper trees where the broad valley ran under the Animas Peaks he crouched quietly to steady his breath and then raised himself slowly and looked out.

They were running on the plain harrying the antelope and the antelope moved like phantoms in the snow and circled and wheeled and the dry powder blew about them in the cold moonlight and their breath smoked palely in the cold as if they burned with some inner fire and the wolves twisted and turned and leapt in a silence such that they seemed of another world entire. They moved down the valley and turned and moved far out on the plain until they were the smallest of figures in that dim whiteness and then they dissappeared.

He was very cold. He waited. It was very still. He could see by his breath how the wind lay and he watched his breath appear and vanish and appear and vanish constantly before him in the cold and he waited a long time. Then he saw them coming. Loping and twisting. Dancing. Tunneling their noses in the snow. Loping and running and rising by twos in a standing dance and running on again.

There were seven of them and they passed within twenty feet of where he lay. He could see their almond eyes in the moonlight. He could hear their breath. He could feel the presence of their knowing that was electric in the air. They bunched and nuzzled and licked one another. Then they stopped. They stood with their ears cocked. Some with one forefoot raised to their chest. They were looking at him. He did not breathe. They did not breathe. They stood. Then they turned and quietly trotted on. When he got back to the house Boyd was awake but he didn't tell him where he'd been nor what he'd seen. He never told anybody.