

Maverick

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Note to the Reader

One of nine children, I competed for whatever was on the table. Meat was my family's fuel: consumed thoroughly and greedily, we sucked marrow from the same bones we used for soup stock the following day.

I'm in the third generation of butchers in my family. As a family, we slaughtered and butchered most of the meat we ate ourselves. While this was not without conflict it seemed that once animal flesh was cooked, we were absolved of the pain caused in preparing it.

When I turned eight years old, I helped my brothers run a trap line, and continued until I left home at age eighteen. By age twelve, I passed firearm safety training and hunted whitetail deer to keep the freezer full. My father's rule was you shoot it, you eat it. I was taught that killing for meat shouldn't be taken lightly; ultimately, however, I had a God-given right to take it. Raised with the conservative religious view that humans are the pinnacle of God's creation, it made sense to gather what animals "gave" us.

It took me decades to understand how my earliest relationships with animals shaped me, how the trajectory of my life—from trapper to horse trainer to goatherd to rancher—was influenced by my understanding of the worth of animal bodies. Only after a physical separation from a way of life

dependent on animal bodies was I able to question a lifetime of participation in that paradigm. The following essays question my childhood dogma and follow my personal evolution based on experiences between animals and myself.



Gingersnaps

The sun in Grandma's kitchen always looks brighter than it really is because she paints her cabinets in weird colors and this time they are lemony yellow. The little plants she starts from cuttings line the windowsill above the sink, most of them sending tiny roots down into the bottoms of cut-off dish soap bottles full of water. A speckled brown ceramic toad sits in the middle of them, his back cut out to hold a sponge.

But it's the gingersnaps, Grandma's kind, that have drawn me to the kitchen, walking the worn-out linoleum to the sewing basket to find the

scissors, helping her cut a brown paper bag down the sides. I spread it out as Grandma's short body dips and lifts two pans from the oven, one for each hand, with potholders made from old blue jeans. She turns the oven off, then takes the red-handled spatula and slips the cookies from the sheets. I count fourteen in all, enough for everyone to have two apiece. But Grandma is distracted, her usual smile gone, and when I ask please may I, almost tasting the chewy dark cookie in my mouth, she says no, to get my younger sister and my older brother and follow her out to the barn instead.

It's cool and dim and Grandma works quickly once we're inside. The nest of still-blind kittens is near the mouth of the hayloft, and she climbs up the ladder and buries the four kittens in her coat. When she's back on the ground, she peels their stickery claws away and drops them on the

concrete floor. They start crying. Three gray tigers, and one black and white spotted one. Grandma tells us that we can have two cookies apiece if we each take care of a kitten. She pushes a five-gallon bucket half full of water toward us with her overshoe, saying something about having too many—she says a bad word—cats, anyway.

I think about those cookies, each one bigger than my seven-year old hand, the tops cracked in jagged lines and sparkling with white sugar crystals. And two of them. I like to eat the crisp edges first before biting the soft middle. I suck on those mouthfuls and a wonderful oily, fatty, molassesey stuff comes out and lights up my tongue. And if I hurry, they will be still be warm.

My siblings edge toward the door. Maybe because I've already taken lives, it's easier for me. Maybe

I need to keep proving how tough I am. Maybe I'm just able enough to block this memory out, like lots of the others, and never remember it. Now, I'm the only one who can prove myself. I choose one of the tiger kittens and it feels as heavy as a State Fair bratwurst. I twist its neck just as Grandma twists the spotted kitten's and then it's done. She drops the last two kittens into the bucket, and tiny bubbles, like the ones in soda pop, rise to the surface. My brother and sister leave, crying. My Grandma puts her arm around my shoulders and we walk to the house. I can pick out two of the cookies, possibly getting the biggest ones, and I get a glass of the Tang she keeps mixed up in the fridge.

The Tang goes down in a hurry. It's too cold to drink so fast, but the headache it gives me takes my mind off the kitten. I take my cookies into the

yard, where I hope I don't run into anyone else,
and I choose a spot where I can't see the barn. The
porch by the woodshed seems like a good place,
under the bug light I like to watch at night. But
the first bite of my gingersnap seems drier than I
remember, and suddenly I'm too full.

Neck Bones

A hand-strung series of chicken neck bones dangles from my neck. They are gold colored, spray-painted by my grandmother, a Christmas gift I am enamored with. They look like the spine of a snake, the triangle shaped vertebrae-like beads everyone is using to make lanyards. How many chickens, I wonder, to make this necklace?

I wear it over my sweatshirt. I wear it over my ruffled dresses to church. I don't want to take it off at night. I feel like I have real jewelry. I feel special.

I start putting the bones in my mouth. I start chewing, gnawing off the paint in small scrapes like a rodent. I try to hide it. I eat lots of things that aren't food: Vaseline, chapstick, toothpaste, fertilizer. I consume the wax and oil from a candle making kit and see double, retching in pain. Yes, I am hungry, but most of all in my heart. There is something dark and terrible about being alive, even as a seven-year-old, and already I want to try something, anything, to alter my experience.

The necklace begins to look shabby. The ends of the vertebrae gnawed by my teeth, the flakes of gold paint swallowed up. I am scolded. I am told to stop it, stop chewing on that pretty necklace from your grandma, you'll ruin it, don't do that. I know they're right, but I can't stop. One day, the necklace is gone. It has been thrown away. I am not worthy to wear it.



Charles Brown

Years later when my own neck bones are x-rayed, screwed together, scrutinized, I will recall those tiny vertebrae. Are they still somewhere inside me, I will wonder? Have I become them?

The Grey Fox

I am eight years old and staring into the snarling face of an adult grey fox.

The early autumn sunlight slips through goldenrod and field sorrel and reed canary grass. When I face west, the tips of the fox's guard hairs glow like needles of light. Behind me, my brothers argue over who should kill it.

I know that it's the largest and most valuable catch on our trapline. Thirty-five dollars is a sum I cannot even comprehend. Money is something there is never enough of at home. I think of how

proud my parents will be, my mother especially. Her father, our whip-thin English grandfather, is the man who taught me everything I know about trapping. It's part of my heritage, tracking in snow and mud and dust; crouching to find bits of fur and hair; looking for scrapes and scratch marks on trees; poking through animal scat.

The grey fox is caught by his left front leg, the dull steel jaws closed just above his paw. His ears lie back against his head, and his black lips curl back, revealing bone-white teeth. He seems to sink back into his skin. I know he is afraid, and that he will hold his ground tenaciously if I come closer. I am shaking, with excitement, and with dread. Beneath my polyester-blend sweatshirt, my heart beats fast, and somewhere beneath that, a hot twist churns. I sense I will once again have to be the killer, to put this animal out of its misery.

It has somehow become my responsibility to shoulder violence.

My older brother hands me the axe. The handle is a piece of pine scavenged from the family sawmill. The splinters snag on my bare hands. The head is ancient, a steel relic with one blunt side. It is our only weapon, besides the pocket knives we all carry. Our father will not yet let us carry the .22 rifle, although we have all shot it. Ten. When we are ten years old. My brother will be ten next January. It will make this process so much easier.

I hate what I'm doing as I do it, but even more I hate to see the pure panic in the hazel eyes. The fox flattens itself beside a small willow, the glossy branches blood red in the setting sun. I step forward and bring the butt of the axe down until he stops twitching. My brother springs forward to



Anne-Cécile

remove the fox from the foot trap. We are lucky; we checked our trapline every day, and the fox hadn't reached the kind of desperation that would make him gnaw off his own paw to break free.

The weight of his limp body. We all argue to carry it across the marsh and through the stubbled hayfields and home. A scrappy crew of three, my brothers and I, triumphant. What I try not to see is the blood trickling from the fox's nose and mouth. I pet the smooth coat and the slickness and density of his rich winter fur is pure money. It has taken so much work to get here: saving up our change to buy used traps, gathering smelly fish and rotten meat for bait, spending hours tracking and looking for animal sign, making countless sets, sifting leaves and dirt over the deadly pan of the trap, hiding it, waiting for just this result.

In the excitement of returning home, we pose with the fox laid out in front of us in the front yard so our mother can photograph our achievement.

Scrapple

This is what a pig's head smells like when it's boiling in a pot of water: wet dog, cloves, sweetness, earth. Pig blood is a light white-grey when it cooks in water; clods of it ride the roil like tiny bobbing boats. The snout sticks up as if the nostrils are still seeking air.

Less than an hour ago this pig was alive. He was strung up by the hind feet and hung in the huge ash tree with the base bigger than three hula hoops. His throat was slit with a knife my grandfather sharpened on his razor strop. The squealing chased me indoors, the cries losing power as the blood left the body, drizzling scarlet

into a yellow five-gallon bucket on a blue tarp beneath. It would be used for blood sausage.

The hog's head is lifted from its steamy bath and placed in a large aluminum pan to cool. His eyelashes look nearly human, translucent blond hairs sketching the eyelids. The ears stick up stiffly like bat wings, and the long hairs and dirt and oil make me queasy. I would rather watch my grandmother do this, cut and pluck the meat from the pig's skull, then think of the way she cleans out his intestines with lye to hold the blood sausage.

Cooked flesh leaves his head like a time warp video, a skull emerging with teeth and angles. The lower jaw is separated from the upper one to access the tongue and the cheek meat. The brain

will be used, the snout. The dogs, grandfather's coon hounds, get the bones.

My father's father, my other grandfather, is a butcher. We take the head meat to his shop, and this grandfather mixes in oatmeal and spices and packs it into loaf pans. In the refrigerator, the collagen in the pig's head binds the ingredients together. We freeze the loaves, wrapping them in white butcher paper and using a black grease marker to mark them as "Scrapple." In the winter, after the squeals and the cooked brain and the eyelashes have fled my child-mind, I look forward to eating it. Sliced thin and pan fried, the outside crisps beautifully, while the inner meat is soft and mealy. Sandwiched between my mother's homemade bread, it brings comfort as the snowflakes fall outside. It's almost as if what I'm eating had never been alive.

Rosie

*W*ithin days of my tenth birthday, a heifer calf is born at my grandparents' farm. We dress up warmly and load up into our giant old Ford passenger van to drive the snowy mile to meet her.

This little Hereford looks just like the rest of the newborn calves, nestled in honey colored oat straw with their bright white faces peering into the frosty March air. Rosie's the first calf for the red heifer who birthed her, and the cow is nervous. We set up a special pen for Rosie and her mother, and wait to see if they'll bond.

After a day it becomes clear that Rosie is not like her newborn neighbors: she can't walk. My parents rig up splints for her hind legs so she can stand. She needs a lot of special care, and I do anything to get close to her, to curl my fingers into the slick rufous whorls on her back, feel her sandpapery tongue seeking out the skin of my hand to suckle.

Since she will never be able to keep up with her mother and the rest of the herd, my grandfather sets up a place for her in the basement of the hay barn. The old dairy is full of cobwebs, and light struggles to filter through the dusty window glass. It is cozy and quiet but I feel sorry that she doesn't have anyone of her kind near her. Then one day while doing chores, my father sees Rosie walk headfirst into a post. It's taken us this long to notice, but our Rosie is blind.

Bottle feeding Rosie is something I fight my visiting city cousins over that summer. After they're gone, I ride my bike to the farm. She stands outside in the sunshine and I guide her back into the barn with a twine halter for her dinner. I use the same curry combs my mother used on her show cattle as a teenager, and I spend hours brushing out Rosie's beautiful coat. Her tail is as glossy and fine as corn silk.

When the weather turns colder, I navigate the icy concrete steps to the barn basement, carrying two five-gallon buckets of water down at a time to fill her water trough. It brings me great joy to keep her home spotless, and the sweet herbaceous scent of cow manure doesn't bother me in the least. I keep her floor so full of soft oat straw that I'm admonished to be thriftier, but when I snuggle

up to her when she's asleep it's magical and I know I won't listen.

In the back of my mind I know not to get too attached; she is a beef animal and since she's deformed and blind, she is ultimately destined for the freezer. But I cannot help but dream of having Rosie for my very own: I want to keep our connection for years to come.

Her feed rations grow until finally, in late Fall, she disappears.

This Christmas is one of the last when each of my father's three brothers make the family trek to the farm. The tree sags with candy canes and handmade decorations. Three tables are pushed end to end, from the dining room into the living

room, to make space for oodles of cousins. The roast beef is a personal favorite, and I have a large helping. The warm fat puddles around the tender meat, and I eat with relish. Out of the cacophony of child voices and adult voices and clittering forks, I freeze as my grandfather mentions her name.

Tallow cools on my fork, clings to the roof of my mouth like treason.

I haven't yet found a way
To dig you from the earth
Tug remaining flesh from bone
Bone from earth
Or earth from sod
Tuck it underneath my shirt
Closest to my heart.

Trixie

*T*rixie is unusual from the get-go, even for a cat. She makes her way from a nearby farm to our place by hitching a ride under the hood of my father's truck. We children take turns claiming new pets; Trixie is instantly named by my mother and bequeathed to my younger sister, Brenda.

Scrappy and petite, Trixie never gets what I consider full-sized, but that doesn't stop her from anything. She's an impressive hunter, keeping the mice population down around the house, and she terrorizes Brenda at night by pouncing from the bedroom doorway onto her face.

Trixie ends up pregnant a few months later. It isn't hard to tell that her lean body is growing, and I and my siblings are ecstatic. Right now, our entire household is teeming with new life. A high school friend of my mother's procures wild animals for film and photo shoots, and after promises of hundreds of dollars—unimaginable amounts of money to us kids— Mother consents to letting us raise a plethora of baby creatures, among them several litters of Arctic foxes.

The foxes are small as newborn kittens when they arrive. Now fifteen years old, I have cared for so many creatures—human and otherwise—that I set my alarm and get up every three or four hours to feed them and massage their bellies. While the other animals in our care thrive, pinworms decimate nearly half of the fox kits before the infestation is diagnosed. Then a respiratory

condition threatens the survivors. Finally, most of them pull through, and we thaw out hunks of pureed mink food for them to gnaw as they gain their strength.

One day my mother pulls a small white kit from his cage. His fur is stained with urine and his eyes are crusted shut. I know that he is dying. From a photographer's viewpoint he isn't going to be worth much; true Arctic foxes are born grey and change color with the seasons.

I ask if I can try something. Cradling his featherweight body between my palms, I walk to the old school bus where I do my home schooling and slip the tiny fox in with Trixie's litter.

Amigo is barely larger than the kittens. He latches on to Trixie's nipple and drinks. She licks



Amalysa

his eyes clean, fluffs his matted coat. I watch as his body plumps with health. His eyes open, one eye brown, the other blue. When Amigo outgrows his adoptive mother, I switch him to a baby bottle of Esbilac and nurse him in my arms. He sleeps in my bed, and nestles a pink nose into my neck.

I marvel at each movement of his body.

The Steer

I am not built for holding back the red steer's head so that my husband can saw off the tips of his horns. But I help anyway, pulling a rope through the slats of the horse trailer, where the steer is tied, holding steady until knots take the place of my fists. With his head tied to the side, the steer might thrash and bellow, but he is not as able to hook one of our bodies.

A horn saw looks harmless. It is two small metal hand grips spanned by a thin wire of cable. Sawn back and forth, this garrote has the power to decapitate (like in *The Godfather*), or to saw

off the horns of an animal, which is what we are preparing to do. This steer is years past the lifespan of his contemporaries; he is four or five years old, a holdover from the previous ranch owner, and he's been living in the Gila Wilderness for most of his life. He is fat and sleek now, but a few days in the corral will make him drop weight: he has never in his life eaten hay.

We are tipping his horns so he'll be worth more at the auction. Wild cattle with horns are a feedlot's worst nightmare, and as I put my fingers in the steer's nostrils and pinch down, the slick wetness makes it hard to grip. I dig in my nails; I have formed the human version of a bull ring, and have hold of one of the steer's most sensitive parts.

Sam starts to saw, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. There is a rigidity and urgency in his posture. This is still dangerous work. A fine white dust sifts into the air. There is the smell of burning hair. The steer thrashes, bellowing. I am jerked around. The first severed tip falls to the ground, where one of the dogs will snatch it up later. The creamy white of the horn stump seeps and blood sprays as the arteries beat. I try not to look into the dark cavity that leads to his brain. The rain of blood is like an Old Testament plague. Speckles of blood dry on my forearms.

There is one more to go.

Dear Coconut

*Y*ou made me feel safer than I have ever felt in my life. I couldn't have dreamed that a cow elk would be my best walking companion, but you were. I loved it when you'd come out of nowhere, silent, and surprise me. Fall into step and walk right behind me. You literally had my back. On the half a million acres you had to choose from, you chose where I lived, and decided to live there too.

I was not always thrilled about this. Our ways of being in the world did not mix well, because I had expectations of how my life should look, and you

promptly and literally shat on them. There was a pile of your droppings and urine so close to our camper that it grossed me out. You rubbed your face on the satellite dish that gave Sam and I our only access to the outside world, and you would destroy anything to get at food. You and the dogs drove me crazy sometimes, playing, feinting, worrying me about a real fight breaking out and ending badly. But it never did. Actually, when I took the dogs walking, you still wanted to come along, and it swelled my heart immensely to see predator and prey walking beside me in harmony.

You were both a total goofball and majestic. Remember that one winter when we had freezing rain? Your eyelashes, your long ear hairs, your coat was covered in tiny icicles. You practically jingled when you walked. I was depressed, and

tired of the cold, of broken heaters and early calves and bickering. I remember making it to the first cattle guard and feeling triumphant, picking up the swollen yellow berries of last year's nightshade poking up through the snow. The dogs were feisty. I laughed. I needed to laugh.

I started running again and we both worked on cardio. I thought it was funny how out of shape you were but that wasn't very nice. It was a confidence booster for me that I was in the lead. You probably did that intentionally, knowing I needed to excel.

We shared a love of tortilla chips. Of wandering in the setting sun under the shadow of Pajarita Mountain and drawing out the long summer days before a late dinner. You would be bummed to

know that I rarely go for walks anymore. Without you, without my dogs, even the horses sometimes falling in behind us, I have lost context and desire to do so. You would have zero tolerance for that outlook, I'm sure. Rain, snow, heat. We were in it together. Trotting after me, horseback, when I fixed fence— chewing your cud outside my camper window. I felt safer having you around than I did having a revolver. There were a few times when I knew I wasn't safe, when someone passed on the rural road and stopped too long, when a white car ended up sixteen miles off the highway and was "lost." The man driving creeped me out. You stood instantly on guard when he parked. I felt your strength and loyalty and I knew you were watching over.

When a bullet grazed your shoulder during elk season I was angered. What idiot couldn't tell that you had been bottle fed as a calf? You had no fear of humans, vehicles, or headlights. I wanted to protect you. I felt helpless. You traveled places I didn't know about, and hunters were everywhere on the reservation. Our walks helped us both heal. Your shoulder drained pus; my heart leaked sadness. I'm sure you had a small scar under the skin when it healed, but your coat grew back and your limp disappeared and we both got lucky.

I didn't know—and I can't know if you didn't either—that the day after Thanksgiving four years ago, would be the last holiday for both of us on the ranch. Because the hoar frost was so beautiful, I have photos of you that morning. Gorgeous in your fall coat, aloof and beautiful,



standing by the cholla where the cactus wren
nested.

That was last day I saw you. I can still feel the
silky hair on your forehead, the thick, hollow
guard hairs that kept you warm at -15. I can hear
the way your hooves clicked on hard ground. I
didn't know how amazing it was to have you in my
life. I mean, I knew it was unusual, and my ego
got wrapped into having a tame elk around. But
what I call "elk" was just a body for your spirit.
We were our own herd of two. Thank you for this. I
hope that when you disappeared it was because you
wanted to expand your family, and not because
someone wanted your body. You were too big for
that. Always too big for that.

Ziska

I fall for her owner first, with his troubled eyes, dark complexion, and handsome, anguished face. He is suffering a pain I can understand: divorce. I am the wife that left another marriage. I tell him the first night we make tacos in a home stripped bare by her leaving. You won't like me, I say. I left someone, like your wife did.

Oddly, we work. He brings his son and his dog to pick me up after work one day. Ziska is a heeler cross, fond of the salt water and a fiend for fetch. Born a few feet from his head on a sailboat, it is immediately clear to me that Ziska is here on earth

to protect her man. Not from outside danger, but from himself.

We play in the freezing water: six-year-old boy, dog, man, and me. It's an evening full of life. I haven't realized how much I have missed my ranch dogs until she plops in my lap on the way home, salty and covered with sand.

He tells me she never does that.

Our relationship undergoes many transformations, amendments, fits-and-starts. Sometimes, I watch Ziska when the man takes a job as a long-haul trucker. I like to take her to the boatyard so she can visit her old haunts. Like me, her man has plucked his life from one way of being and traded it for another. I know it's excruciating, disconcerting, unsettling.

Ziska lets me cry with her. She lays on the sand beside me. She lets me run through the mud flats of the low tide and throw a slimy stick for her for hours. She talks. She doesn't like to leave the beach early. She has impeccable manners and never needs a leash. Mostly, this dog allows me to mourn my own—to feel the absence of four distinct creatures that were inextricable from my life for a decade: Belle, a gift to my husband before we married; Fe, her deaf half-sister; Luna, whom I bonded with over her broken leg as a pup; and Eva, whom I napped with every chance I had.

They are stripped from my life, one of the bargaining chips of something ripped apart. I weep into Ziska's coat, cuddle her in bed when I stay over. I bring her on gardening jobs, and we walk miles of beach together. She too, is caught

in a human mess. Ziska loves the woman who left,
and the child who goes between her and the man
she loves with fierce loyalty.

Hungry for her comfort, I stop trying so hard.
She shows me I can love at a distance. My dogs
were never really mine anyway. They can't be
owned. Love crosses state lines and paperwork. I
close my eyes and tell my dogs how much I miss
them. How I worry about them working too hard,
or growing old.

I can feel my heart healing as I allow rage and
grief to come.

The Crow

I am sitting in front of my laptop, pecking out an incredibly personal essay. I'm afraid to write it, so it's not coming easily. I'm up and down to make coffee, tea, drink water, eat toast, swap out my slippers, get the mail, prop the door open for some fresh air. I have a pot of pinto beans cooking on the stove and I fuss over getting the temperature right. Anything other than spilling my guts to the universe.

Radical change is difficult to convey, especially to the people who know me best. But the truth is they've known one iteration of me, and for my

personal evolution to continue, I need to follow my own inner knowing. I know this, but speaking it out loud, writing it in a public, visible way, means I am willing to accept the reactions of an audience. I am a witness to my own experience, and right now I feel a little like I'm on trial.

I hear scratchy footsteps, something hopping. I get up and poke my head out of the kitchen. There, standing on the rug, is a young crow. He hops toward me, squalling. I hear hunger in his voice. He ends up smack in the middle of the kitchen floor, imploring me for FOOD NOW. I hesitate. Feeding a wild animal goes against what I would usually do, but this feels different. I scoop out some of the cooked pinto beans and pinch them between my fingers. I'm scared of getting bit, so I drop them as he reaches. He pecks at the floor, making throaty calls.

Up bobs his head, his voice shrill and urgent. I sense no malice, and feed him from finger tips. His swallows are huge. He eats ravenously. Outside, I do not hear any other crows. I wonder where he came from.

When I turn to get more beans, he flaps away, fluttering drunkenly onto the dining room table. He perches directly on my keyboard. In this instant he shows me unmistakably that there is a hunger for the words I'm about to share, and I need to share my truth boldly.

I scoop him from the table and take him outside. He returns one last time for a few more beans, then glides over the backyard fence and disappears.



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