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Freedom and Wilderness, Wilderness and Freedom

When I lived in Hoboken, just across the lacquered Hudson from Manhattan, we had all the wilderness we needed. There was the waterfront with its decaying piers and abandoned warehouses, the jungle of bars along River Street and Hudson Street, the houseboats, the old ferry slips, the mildew-green cathedral of the Erie-Lackawanna Railway terminal. That was back in 1964–65; then came Urban Renewal, which ruined everything left lovable in Hoboken, New Jersey.

What else was there? I loved the fens, those tawny

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marshes full of waterbirds, mosquitoes, muskrats, and opossums that intervened among the black basaltic rocks between Jersey City and Newark, and somewhere back of Union City on the way to gay, exotic, sausage-packing, garbage-rich Secaucus. I loved also and finally and absolutely, as a writer must love any vision of eschatological ultimates, the view by twilight from the Pulaski Skyway (Stop for Emergency Repairs Only) of the Seventh Circle of Hell. Those melancholy chemical plants, ancient as acid, sick as cyanide, rising beyond the cattails and tules; the gleam of oily waters in the refineries' red glare; the desolation of the endless, incomprehensible uninhabitable (but inhabited) slums of Harrison, Newark, Elizabeth; the haunting and sinister odors on the wind. Rust and iron and sunflowers in the tangled tracks, the great grimy sunsets beyond the saturated sky. . . . It will all be made, someday, a national park of the mind, a rigid celebration of industrialism's finest frenzy.

We tried north too, up once into the Catskills, once again to the fringe of the Adirondacks. All I saw were Private Property Keep Out This Means You signs. I live in a different country now. Those days of longing, that experiment in exile, are all past. The far-ranging cat returns at last to his natural, native habitat. But what wilderness there was in those bitter days I learned to treasure. Foggy nights in greasy Hoboken alleyways kept my soul alert, healthy and aggressive, on edge with delight.

The other kind of wilderness is also useful. I mean now the hardwood forests of upper Appalachia, the overrated mountains of Colorado, the burnt sienna hills of South Dakota, the raw umber of Kansas, the mysterious swamps of Arkansas, the porphyritic mountains of purple Arizona, the mystic desert of my own four-cornered country—this and 347 other good, clean, dangerous places I could name.

Science is not sufficient. "Ecology" is a word I first read in H. G. Wells twenty years ago and I still don't know what it means. Or seriously much care. Nor am I primarily con-

cerned with nature as living museum, the preservation of spontaneous plants and wild animals. The wildest animal I know is you, gentle reader, with this helpless book clutched in your claws. No, there are better reasons for keeping the wild wild, the wilderness open, the trees up and the rivers free, and the canyons uncluttered with dams.

We need wilderness because we are wild animals. Every man needs a place where he can go to go crazy in peace. Every Boy Scout troop deserves a forest to get lost, miserable, and starving in. Even the maddest murderer of the sweetest wife should get a chance for a run to the sanctuary of the hills. If only for the sport of it. For the terror, freedom, and delirium. Because we need brutality and raw adventure, because men and women first learned to love in, under, and all around trees, because we need for every pair of feet and legs about ten leagues of naked nature, crags to leap from, mountains to measure by, deserts to finally die in when the heart fails.

The prisoners in Solzhenitsyn's labor camps looked out on the vast Siberian forests—within those shadowy depths lay the hope of escape, of refuge, of survival, of hope itself—but guns and barbed wire blocked the way. The citizens of our American cities enjoy a high relative degree of political, intellectual, and economic liberty; but if the entire nation is urbanized, industrialized, mechanized, and administered, then our liberties continue only at the sufferance of the technological megamachine that functions both as servant and master, and our freedoms depend on the pleasure of the privileged few who sit at the control consoles of that machine. What makes life in our cities at once still tolerable, exciting, and stimulating is the existence of an alternative option, whether exercised or not, whether even appreciated or not, of a radically different mode of being *out there*, in the forests, on the lakes and rivers, in the deserts, up in the mountains.

Who needs wilderness? Civilization needs wilderness. The idea of wilderness preservation is one of the fruits of civiliza-

tion, like Bach's music, Tolstoy's novels, scientific medicine, novocaine, space travel, free love, the double martini, the secret ballot, the private home and private property, the public park and public property, freedom of travel, the Bill of Rights, peppermint toothpaste, beaches for nude bathing, the right to own and bear arms, the right not to own and bear arms, and a thousand other good things one could name, some of them trivial, most of them essential, all of them vital to that great, bubbling, disorderly, anarchic, unmanageable diversity of opinion, expression, and ways of living which free men and women love, which is their breath of life, and which the authoritarians of church and state and war and sometimes even art despise and always have despised. And feared.

The permissive society? What else? I love America because it is a confused, chaotic mess—and I hope we can keep it this way for at least another thousand years. The permissive society is the free society, the open society. Who gave us permission to live this way? Nobody did. *We* did. And that's the way it should be—only more so. The best cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy.

The boundary around a wilderness area may well be an artificial, self-imposed, sophisticated construction, but once inside that line you discover the artificiality beginning to drop away; and the deeper you go, the longer you stay, the more interesting things get—sometimes fatally interesting. And that too is what we want: Wilderness is and should be a place where, as in Central Park, New York City, you have a fair chance of being mugged and bugged by a shaggy fellow in a fur coat—one of Pooh Bear's big brothers. To be alive is to take risks; to be always safe and secure is death.

Enough of these banalities—no less true anyhow—which most of us embrace. But before getting into the practical applications of this theme, I want to revive one more argument for the preservation of wilderness, one seldom heard but always present, in my own mind at least, and that is the political argument.

Democracy has always been a rare and fragile institution in human history. Never was it more in danger than now, in the dying decades of this most dangerous of centuries. Within the past few years alone we have seen two more relatively open societies succumb to dictatorship and police rule—Chile and India. In all of Asia there is not a single free country except Israel—which, as the Arabs say, is really a transplanted piece of Europe. In Africa, obviously going the way of Latin America, there are none. Half of Europe stagmates under one-man or one-party domination. Only Western Europe and Britain, Australia and New Zealand, perhaps Japan, and North America can still be called more or less free, open, democratic societies.

As I see it, our own nation is not free from the danger of dictatorship. And I refer to internal as well as external threats to our liberties. As social conflict tends to become more severe in this country—and it will unless we strive for social justice—there will inevitably be a tendency on the part of the authoritarian element—always present in our history—to suppress individual freedoms, to utilize the refined techniques of police surveillance (not excluding torture, of course) in order to preserve—not wilderness!—but the status quo, the privileged positions of those who now so largely control the economic and governmental institutions of the United States.

If this fantasy should become reality—and fantasies becoming realities are the story of the twentieth century—then some of us may need what little wilderness remains as a place of refuge, as a hideout, as a base from which to carry on guerrilla warfare against the totalitarianism of my nightmares. I hope it does not happen; I believe we will prevent it from happening; but if it should, then I, for one, intend to light out at once for the nearest national forest, where I've been hiding cases of peanut butter, home-brew, ammunition, and C-rations for the last ten years. I haven't the slightest doubt that the FBI, the NSA, the CIA, and the local cops have dossiers on me a yard thick. If they didn't, I'd be in-

sulted. Could I survive in the wilderness? I don't know—but I do know I could never survive in prison.

Could we as a people survive without wilderness? To consider that question we might look at the history of modern Europe, and of other places. As the Europeans filled up their small continent, the more lively among them spread out over the entire planet, seeking fortune, empire, a new world, a new chance—but seeking most of all, I believe, for adventure, for the opportunity of self-testing. Those nations that were confined by geography, bottled up, tended to find their outlet for surplus energy through war on their neighbors; the Germans provide the best example of this thesis. Nations with plenty of room for expansion, such as the Russians, tended to be less aggressive toward their neighbors.

In Asia we can see the same human necessities at work in somewhat different forms. Japan might be likened to Germany; a small nation with a large, ever-growing, vigorous, and intelligent population. Confined by the sea, their open spaces long ago occupied and domesticated, the Japanese like the Germans turned to war upon their neighbors, particularly China, Korea, and Oriental Russia; and when that was not enough to fully engage their surplus energies, they became an oceanic power, which soon brought them into conflict with two other oceanic powers—Britain and the United States. Defeated in war, the Japanese turned their undefeated energies into industry and commerce, becoming a world power through trade. But that kind of adventure is satisfactory for only a small part of the population; and when the newly prosperous Japanese middle class becomes bored with tourism, we shall probably see some kind of civil war or revolution in Japan—perhaps within the next twenty years.

Something of that sort may be said to have already happened in China. Powerless to wage war upon their neighbors, the Chinese waged war upon themselves, class against class, the result a triumphant revolution and the construc-

tion of a human society that may well become, unfortunately, the working model for all. I mean the thoroughly organized society, where all individual freedom is submerged to the needs of the social organism.

The global village and the technological termitorium. More nightmares! I do not believe that human beings would or could long tolerate such a world. The human animal is almost infinitely adaptable—but there must be limits to our adaptability, limits beyond which, if we can survive them at all, we would survive only by sacrificing those qualities that distinguish the human from that possible cousin of the future: the two-legged, flesh-skinned robot, his head, her head, its head wired by telepathic radio to a universal central control system.

One more example: What happened to India when its space was filled, its wilderness destroyed? Something curiously different from events in Europe, China, or Japan; unable to expand outward in physical space, unable or unwilling (so far) to seek solutions through civil war and revolution, the genius of India—its most subtle and sensitive minds—sought escape from unbearable reality by rocket flights of thought into the inner space of the soul, into a mysticism so deep and profound that a whole nation, a whole people, have been paralyzed for a thousand years by awe and adoration.

Now we see something similar happening in our own country. A tiny minority, the technological elite, blast off for the moon, continuing the traditional European drive for the conquest of physical space. But a far greater number, lacking the privileges and luck and abilities of the Glenns and the Armstrongs and their comrades, have attempted to imitate the way of India: When reality becomes intolerable, when the fantasies of nightmare become everyday experience, then deny that reality, obliterate it, and escape, escape, escape, through drugs, through trance and enchantment, through magic and madness, or through study and dis-

cipline. By whatever means, in some cases by *any* means, escape this crazy, unbearable, absurd playpen of the senses—this gross 3-D, grade-B, X-rated, porno flick thrust upon us by CBS News, *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, and the *Sierra Club Bulletin*—seeking refuge in a nicer universe just next door, around some corner of the mind and nervous system, deep in the coolest cells of the brain. If all is illusion then nothing matters, or matters much; and if nothing matters then peace, of a sort, is possible, striving becomes foolish, and we can finally relax, at last, into that bliss which passeth understanding, content as pigs on a warm manure pile. Until the man comes with the knife, to carry the analogy to its conclusion, until pig-sticking time rolls around again and the fires are lit under the scalding tubs.

You begin to see the outline of my obsessions. Every train of thought seems to lead to some concentration camp of nightmare. But I believe there are alternatives to the world of nightmare. I believe that there are better ways to live than the traditional European-American drive for power, conquest, domination; better ways than the horrifying busyness of the Japanese; better ways than the totalitarian communes of the Chinese; better ways than the passive pipe dreams of Hindu India, that sickliest of all nations.

I believe we can find models for a better way both in the past and the present. Imperfect models, to be sure, each with its grievous faults, but better all the same than most of what passes for necessity in the modern world. I allude to the independent city-states of classical Greece; to the free cities of medieval Europe; to the small towns of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America; to the tribal life of the American Plains Indians; to the ancient Chinese villages recalled by Lao-tse in his book, *The Way*.

I believe it is possible to find and live a balanced way of life somewhere halfway between all-out industrialism on the one hand and a make-believe pastoral idyll on the other. I

believe it possible to live an intelligent life in our cities—if we make them fit to live in—if we stop this trend toward joining city unto city until half the nation and half the planet becomes one smog-shrouded, desperate and sweating, insane and explosive urbanized concentration camp.

According to my basic thesis, if it's sound, we can avoid the disasters of war, the nightmare of the police state and totalitarianism, the drive to expand and conquer, if we return to this middle way and learn to live for a while, say at least a thousand years or so, just for the hell of it, just for the fi of it, in some sort of steady-state economy, some sort of free democratic, wide-open society.

As we return to a happier equilibrium between industrialism and a rural-agrarian way of life, we will of course also encourage a gradual reduction of the human population of these states to something closer to the optimum: perhaps half the present number. This would be accomplished by humane social policies, naturally, by economic and taxation incentives encouraging birth control, the single-child family, the unmarried state, the community family. Much preferable to war, disease, revolution, nuclear poisoning, etc., as population control devices.

What has all this fantasizing to do with wilderness and freedom? We can have wilderness without freedom; we can have wilderness without human life at all; but we cannot have freedom without wilderness, we cannot have freedom without leagues of open space beyond the cities, where boys and girls, men and women, can live at least part of their lives under no control but their own desires and abilities, free from any and all direct administration by their fellow men. "A world without wilderness is a cage," as Dave Brower says.

I see the preservation of wilderness as one sector of the front in the war against the encroaching industrial state. Every square mile of range and desert saved from the strip miners, every river saved from the dam builders, every forest saved from the loggers, every swamp saved from the

land speculators means another square mile saved for the play of human freedom.

All this may seem utopian, impossibly idealistic. No matter. There comes a point at every crisis in human affairs when the ideal must become the real—or nothing. It is my contention that if we wish to save what is good in our lives and give our children a taste of a good life, we must bring a halt to the ever-expanding economy and put the growth maniacs under medical care.

Let me tell you a story.

A couple of years ago I had a job. I worked for an outfit called Defenders of Fur Bearers (now known as Defenders of Wildlife). I was caretaker and head janitor of a 70,000-acre wildlife refuge in the vicinity of Aravaipa Canyon in southern Arizona. The Whittell Wildlife Preserve, as we called it, was a refuge for mountain lion, javelina, a few black bear, maybe a wolf or two, a herd of whitetail deer, and me, to name the principal fur bearers.

I was walking along Aravaipa Creek one afternoon when I noticed fresh mountain lion tracks leading ahead of me. Big tracks, the biggest lion tracks I've seen anywhere. Now I've lived most of my life in the Southwest, but I am sorry to admit that I had never seen a mountain lion in the wild. Naturally I was eager to get a glimpse of this one.

It was getting late in the day, the sun already down beyond the canyon wall, so I hurried along, hoping I might catch up to the lion and get one good look at him before I had to turn back and head home. But no matter how fast I walked and then jogged along, I couldn't seem to get any closer; those big tracks kept leading ahead of me, looking not five minutes old, but always disappearing around the next turn in the canyon.

Twilight settled in, visibility getting poor. I realized I'd have to call it quits. I stopped for a while, staring upstream into the gloom of the canyon. I could see the buzzards settling down for the evening in their favorite dead cot-

tonwood. I heard the poor-wills and the spotted toads beginning to sing, but of that mountain lion I could neither hear nor see any living trace.

I turned around and started home. I'd walked maybe a mile when I thought I heard something odd behind me. I stopped and looked back—nothing; nothing but the canyon, the running water, the trees, the rocks, the willow thickets. I went on and soon I heard that noise again—the sound of footsteps.

I stopped. The noise stopped. Feeling a bit uncomfortable now—it was getting dark—with all the ancient superstitions of the night starting to crawl from the crannies of my soul, I looked back again.

And this time I saw him. About fifty yards behind me, poised on a sand bar, one front paw still lifted and waiting, stood this big cat, looking straight at me. I could see the gleam of the twilight in his eyes. I was startled as always by how small a cougar's head seems but how long and lean and powerful the body really is. To me, at that moment, he looked like the biggest cat in the world. He looked dangerous. Now I know very well that mountain lions are supposed almost never to attack human beings. I knew there was nothing to fear—but I couldn't help thinking maybe this lion is different from the others. Maybe he knows we're in a wildlife preserve, where lions can get away with anything. I was not unarmed; I had my Swiss army knife in my pocket with the built-in can opener, the corkscrew, the two-inch folding blade, the screwdriver. Rationally there was nothing to fear; all the same I felt fear.

And something else too: I felt what I always feel when I meet a large animal face to face in the wild: I felt a kind of affection and the crazy desire to communicate, to make some kind of emotional, even physical contact with the animal. After we'd stared at each other for maybe five seconds—it seemed at the time like five minutes—I held out one hand and took a step toward the big cat and said some-

thing ridiculous like, "Here, kitty, kitty." The cat paused there on three legs, one paw up as if he wanted to shake hands. But he didn't respond to my advance.

I took a second step toward the lion. Again the lion remained still, not moving a muscle, not blinking an eye. And I stopped and thought again and this time I understood that however the big cat might secretly feel, I myself was not yet quite ready to shake hands with a mountain lion. Maybe someday. But not yet. I retreated.

I turned and walked homeward again, pausing every few steps to look back over my shoulder. The cat had lowered his front paw but did not follow me. The last I saw of him, from the next bend of the canyon, he was still in the same place, watching me go. I hurried on through the evening, stopping now and then to look and listen, but if that cat followed me any further I could detect no sight or sound of it.

I haven't seen a mountain lion since that evening, but the experience remains shining in my memory. I want my children to have the opportunity for that kind of experience. I want my friends to have it. I want even our enemies to have it—they need it most. And someday, possibly, one of our children's children will discover how to get close enough to that mountain lion to shake paws with it, to embrace and caress it, maybe even teach it something, and to learn what the lion has to teach us.