Animal people

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Animal people

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A LION: A FOREWORD iii  
CHAPTER ONE. THE FURSUIT OF HAPPINESS 1  
CHAPTER TWO. ANIMAL LOVER 19  
CHAPTER THREE. CAPTIVE WILD 37  
CHAPTER FOUR. OVERKILL 53  
CHAPTER FIVE. THE RESURRECTION TRADE 72  
CHAPTER SIX. UNBRIDLED AMBITION 89  
CHAPTER SEVEN. VICIOUS CIRCLE 110  
CHAPTER EIGHT. THE SECRET LIFE OF BONES 134  

ENDNOTES (By Chapter)  
- CHAPTER ONE 148  
- CHAPTER TWO 151  
- CHAPTER THREE 157  
- CHAPTER FOUR 160  
- CHAPTER FIVE 163  
- CHAPTER SIX 165  
- CHAPTER SEVEN 171  
- CHAPTER EIGHT 183
THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A LION: A FOREWORD

Imagine you’re at the zoo, standing in front of an enclosure that contains a magnificent lion. You gaze into his lantern-yellow eyes and he stares back at you. What do you see?

If you’re like most people, your answer may be simply, a lion. You may be humbled in the presence of a powerful predator, despite the supermax security that imprisons him. You might be reminded of famous lions: Born Free, Disney’s The Lion King, Aslan from The Chronicles of Narnia. The sight of a lion might call to mind iconography assigned to lions: the symbolism of lions in heraldry, the attributes of bravery, strength, kingliness, and power.

The people you’ll meet in the following chapters see something else. Something startling, specific, and strange.

The furry fan sees a satisfying alter ego: not just a secret identity, but a super identity. Just as earlier humans adopted animal totems they hoped to emulate, contemporary furry fans take on the identities of anthropomorphic animal characters, hoping to represent or imbue themselves with positive attributes: physical prowess, beauty, charisma. Lions are brave, lordly, powerful, astonishing, and charismatic. Rough tawny fur is a satisfying alternative to vulnerable skin. When the shy systems analyst puts on his lion costume, the world is his savannah, and he is king.

A zoophile looks at a lion, with his rippling muscles and Fabio mane, and thinks that’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. She can’t remember a time when it wasn’t this way. She’s never been into boys...or girls, for that matter. She doesn’t read romance novels or watch pornography. She trawls YouTube for videos of lions mating. She imagines herself beneath the male, his teeth on the nape of her neck. One afternoon, she
discovers to her delight that there are companies selling realistic dildos in the shape of animal penises, including a model called “Leo’s Lance.”

When a taxidermist looks at a lion, she sees what’s under the fur. With a knowledge of anatomy that rivals any surgeon, she is part mortician, part sculptor, and part entrepreneur: she knows how to skin a lion, how to preserve and recreate all of his intimate details: fierce arcs of whiskers, cavernous nostrils, delicate eyelids. The lion reminds her of her obsession: to summon the uncanny illusion of life out of foam and fur, plastic and clay. She longs to mount the lion in an elaborate pose, paused mid-stalk, mid-leap, or mid-sprawl, and keep him that way—forever.

The exotic animal keeper believes a lion’s nature will submit to his nurture. Where others see an apex predator, he sees an enormous, phenomenal house cat. He can buy a bottle-fed lion cub from any number of exotic animal brokers across the nation, and once the animal gets big enough to be dangerous, he might resort to keeping his lion in a horse trailer or boarded-up barn with his neighbors none the wiser. His desire to own a lion—or a wolf, or a cougar, or a python—reflects his need to belong to something wild, and have it belong to him. He wants to steep himself in the lion’s savage beauty, bury his face in his harsh mane, and hear his thundery purr.

A trophy hunter sees a goal. She stares at him with longing. She envisions how much more complete her life will be, once the lion is dead at her feet, especially if he is very large and magnificent. He might even earn her name a place in a record book. She will pay thousands of dollars for the chance to shoot him. But after she fires her rifle, she feels a strange sad hollowness seeping back into her ribcage. When she approaches his still-warm body, she kneels beside him with her face in her hands.
Furry fans and trophy hunters, horse show competitors and dogfighters, exotic pet owners and taxidermists...they all have one thing in common: each belong to a subculture obsessed with animals. These animal people have taken their relationships with animals to the extreme. Animal People is an ethnography of animal-obsessed subcultures: their hidden worlds, their desires, their culture, activities, and gatherings. These essays examine the impacts of these subcultures on individual people and animals as well as the human and animal worlds, exploring how animals function as vehicles for human desires and why humans are drawn to extremes in our relationships with them.

We can recognize subcultures by tightly-focused common interests, unique styles of dress, use of distinct language, and participation in special communities, conventions, or gatherings. The shared interest held by members of a subculture might be fairly common, but people in subcultures participate in those interests to a greater extent than most others. For example, millions of people enjoy Star Trek, but relatively few of them are “Trekkies” who attend Star Trek conventions dressed as their favorite character.

After discovering several fascinating animal subcultures—zoophiles, taxidermists, furry fans, and pit bull advocates—my curiosity about why people respond to animals the way they do brought me to a field of study known as anthrozoology—also known as human-animal studies—the study of human relationships with animals. As a formally recognized discipline, anthrozoology is a relative newcomer, but scholars have been studying the relationships between humans and nonhumans for hundreds of years. The term suggests a neat hybrid of anthropology and zoology, but human-animal studies are remarkably interdisciplinary, drawing from and branching into sciences, arts, humanities, religion, philosophy, ethics, and politics. Among other things,
anthrozoologists study the human-animal bond, the history of domestication, social constructions and representations of animals, the ethics of human exploitation of animals, and the health benefits and detriments associated with keeping animals.

Why do some people want to kill a lion and others want to be a lion? Why do some people want a pet lion and others want to have sex with a lion? What makes people respond to the same animal in such vastly different ways? Sociologists have largely overlooked animal-related subcultures, but there’s a lot to be learned from knowing them. The nine subcultures described in these chapters represent the enormous variety, breadth, and depth of human relationships to animals. They have taken their relationships with animals to the edge.
CHAPTER ONE. THE FURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

A clot of cars forms on Penn Avenue just outside the David L. Lawrence Convention Center in downtown Pittsburgh, but unlike any traffic jam I've ever seen, this one has a weird air of gaiety. The July sun jangles in a brilliant blue sky and glitters off of skyscraper windows. Beneath the sloping white wings of the convention center's twin roofs, cars slow down and faces crane to look.

The green walk sign flashes on at the corner of Penn and 11th Street, and a tiger—actually, a man in a tiger costume—saunters over the crosswalk to the rhythm of honks and cheers. On his tail marches a small menagerie: a woman wearing a pair of feathered wings, two teen girls in cat ears and tails, a man whose jaunty plush fox tail bounces behind him. Wolves, tigers, hawks, dragons, and deer surround the hotel attached to the David L. Lawrence, moving in and out of its revolving doors in packs, flocks, and herds.

At Anthrocon, the world's largest convention for “furry fans,” thousands of people from around the world gather to celebrate and act out their animal alter egos.1

Welcome to the jungle: furry fans pack the lobby of the Westin Convention Center Hotel, standing in small talkative groups, lounging, waiting, coming and going. Most of them wear some form of creaturely accoutrements: hats and headbands with ears, tails safety-pinned to seats of pants, dog collars, gloves with claws and paw pads, wings. About one in six is in full costume. Some species must never go out of style: I see plenty of foxes, wolves, big cats, dragons, and several huskies with curly plush tails.

“The average furry fan is cast from the same mold as the science fiction or sword-and-sorcery fan,” wrote longtime Anthrocon staffer Douglas Muth on the event’s
website. “All of us imagine strange and thrilling worlds and try to picture ourselves living in those worlds.”

Furry fans gravitate to anthropomorphic animals—animals assigned human characteristics such as upright stance, human speech, and clothing. Think Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, Tony the Tiger. The typical furry character has the head and fur (or hide, or scales, or feathers) of an animal but walks upright, talks, wears clothes, often holds down a job, and behaves like a human. Many works starring anthropomorphic animals have achieved smash-hit status and worldwide acclaim: Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, a gripping Holocaust survival narrative—and the only comic to win a Pulitzer Prize—depicts Jews as mice and Nazis as cats. Other beloved anthropomorphic animals include Peter Rabbit, the Thundercats, Disney’s *Robin Hood*, and *The Fantastic Mr. Fox*.

Anthrocon gathers nearly 6,000 furry fans for four days jam-packed with events: an art show, a marketplace, competitions, social events, and instructional panels on topics ranging from costume making to safety while performing to fiction writing to drawing realistic furry characters. Furry fans create and enjoy a staggering variety of media featuring anthropomorphic animals: visual art, music, puppets, role-playing games, comics, graphic novels, and even some erotica. But the fandom’s most famous attractions are the full-body animal costumes called fursuits.

Dissatisfied with the poor quality of mass-produced mascot costumes, furry fans began making their own. The fandom’s fursuit makers elevated the animal costume from hokey to high art: today’s fursuits are elaborate and realistic, custom-made for their wearers, often including fans and cooling systems, animatronics, realistic eyes, noses, and teeth intended for taxidermy, and even built-in lighting effects. Fursuits may cost several thousand dollars and can take over a year to construct from start to finish.
Furry fans immerse themselves in animal identity play by adopting what’s known as a fursona—a furry persona. Creating a fursona involves choosing a species, a nickname, and a personality. The fursona is a furrified version of the self, an avatar used for online self-representation as well as offline fantasy and roleplay. A fursona can exist anywhere on a continuum from an accurate self-representation to pure wish fulfillment fantasy, but most lie in between. Fursonas tend to represent a fan’s ideal self; the furry fan whose fursona is a Dalmatian who’s a firefighter, for example, might be a firefighter in real life or merely someone who admires firefighters and wishes to absorb and portray some of those qualities and positive cachet. Mirroring our own self-identities, the fursona straddles a territory between wishful thinking and reality.

All around me, people in costume embrace one another, perform little skits, and pose for onlookers with cameras. There’s a wolf with airbrushed tribal markings on his face, a snow leopard whose giant plush tail boasts perfect rosettes, and a man in a hawk costume whose faux-feathered wings, when he flexes them, splay and settle back into place just like a real hawk’s feathers.

He spreads his arms, displaying rows of larger-than-life foam feathers, each one painted by hand. I ask him how he got them to fit so perfectly.

“I just took pictures of wings and overlaid them with my own arms,” he says, his voice muffled by his hooked foam beak.

Anthrocon may let tigers and wolves run wild, but it keeps reporters on a tight leash. Members of the media must seek permission to attend the convention, and once on the grounds, media must be escorted at all times by a member of senior staff. Only
journalists who submit to a background check may go unescorted. Escort or not, all members of the press must wear bright green badges.9

This scrutiny sometimes gives outsiders the impression that furry fandom has something to hide, said Anthrocon’s chairman, Samuel Conway, but it’s actually standard procedure for conventions of all kinds to impose limits on media presence.

“We do this to protect the attendees from tabloid journalists who are out to sell a sensational story,” Conway said.10

The media routinely pokes fun at Trekkies and comic book fans, but no kind of fan has suffered more at the keyboards of tabloid journalists than furry fans.11 An episode of CSI: Crime Scene Investigators titled “Fur and Loathing in Las Vegas” depicted furry fans as sex-crazed perverts who wear mascot costumes for orgies facilitated by dousing themselves with “animal musk.”12 A furry side-plot in an episode of the primetime medical drama ER attempted to jam as much titillating furry lingo as possible into two minutes of airtime:

Furry fan: "I'm not into the bad stuff, I'm not a furvert or a plushie."
Nurse: "A what?"
Furry fan: "A furvert is someone who like to have sex in one of these costumes and a plushie is someone who is a little too friendly with stuffed animals."13

But of all the lurid screeds libeling furries, none were so damaging as George Gurley’s March 2001 Vanity Fair article titled “Pleasures of the Fur.”14

“This is no hobby,” Gurley promised. “It’s sex. It’s religion. It’s a way of life.” Gurley described furry fandom as a refuge for socially unskilled sexual fetishists. He drew no distinction between furry fandom and fetishes such as plushophilia, the
practice of masturbating with stuffed animals. His interview with “FoxWolfie Galen,” a furry fan who’s also a plushophile, includes this lurid passage: “I called a taxi and went to the bathroom. When I came back to his lair, FoxWolfie Galen was in a full-body tiger suit. He was gesturing to a rip in the costume, between his legs.”

Furry fans—and even FoxWolfie Galen—responded with outrage.

“I absolutely do not agree with how the Vanity Fair article turned out,” Fox Wolfie Galen said. “There are things in there that I did not say, and many other things that are twisted,” he wrote, “I specifically said that my plushophilia has nothing to do with the furry fandom as practiced by most other people.”

But the damage was done, and furry fans have held journalists suspect ever since.

Conway doesn’t blame furry fans for giving reporters a wide berth; to this day he’s hounded by tabloid media outlets who aggressively try to badger him into saying that the fandom is all about sexual deviance. For some reason, he says, people have a hard time accepting the fact that grown adults are drawn to the fandom just for fun.

In recent years, genuine journalists have produced a more accurate—and rather harmless—portrait of the fandom. Hartford Advocate reporter Jennifer Abel even went undercover to a gathering called FurFright in search of sleaze. She didn’t find it. Her investigation, titled “Hell Hath No Furries,” concluded that the fandom, while quirky, is innocent on the whole: “Children's cartoons, Red Cross fundraisers, team sports and adult content kept discreetly out of sight. How wholesome,” Abel wrote. "May as well have gone to a Catholic school Halloween party.”

Conway has given a talk called “Furries and the Media” at Anthrocon since 2008. When he’s not running the world’s largest furry gathering, Conway is a
chemist—as in, Samuel Conway, Ph.D. His fursona is a cockroach and he goes by the nickname Kagemushi, Japanese for “shadow bug.” Furry fans know him as “Uncle Kage.” He’s instantly recognizable in his trademark white labcoat and constantly chattering earpiece. He’s sunny, bordering on boisterous, even—and immediately likable.

One of the worst things that furry fans can do, Conway says, is bring up negative stereotypes right off the bat. That just cements the wrong ideas ever more firmly into the public imagination.

“Maybe they’ve heard horrible things. Maybe they haven’t,” he says. “But once you open your mouth, they will have.”

Instead, Conway urges furry fans to focus on what the fandom is all about, rather than what it isn’t. He rattles through a list of common questions: “What’s this all about? Art and costuming. What kind of people attend? The same kind of people you meet every day out there on the street.” The big difference, he says, is that furry fans are friendlier, not to mention far more creative.

“There’s more creative energy here at Anthrocon this weekend than in the whole commonwealth of Pennsylvania.”

Unlike fans who congregate around someone else’s original characters—comic book fans or Trekkies, for example—the furry fandom self-generates almost all of the characters and creations beloved by fans. Furry fans create their own characters and make their own art and stories, cooperatively building a world that’s intensely creative and robust, richly textured and original. The fandom supports a number of full time professional
artists and writers. Anyone who thinks the arts are dying ought to visit a furry
convention; furry fans treat artists like rock stars.

At the Anthrocon art show, furry fans stroll through, admiring artwork and
bidding on originals and prints to take home. The convention sets up its art show in
temporary gallery space, four-by-four foot pegboard panels arranged in long rows of
three-sided cubes to maximize the space available. Nearby tables display rows of
sculptures and three-dimensional art.

Furry fans produce artwork in a staggering variety of styles, from cute cartoons to
Japanese manga to ultra-realistic illustrations to comics with a hard military edge. The
quality of the work ranges from amateur to professional, most of it made by artists who
clearly and enviably make at least some of their living doing what they love. In addition
to drawings and paintings of anthropomorphic animals in every conceivable medium,
there are cave paintings done on real pieces of slate, sculptures of cats made from
musical instruments, Japanese glass lanterns with tiger silhouettes, and, done by an
artist whose sense of humor is very much alive and well, a series of extinct animals
drawn on old data cards. Some of these works sell for hundreds and even thousands of
dollars. The record high price for a work of art sold at a furry convention is $10,000.
That prize went to Christy Grandjean, an artist who goes by the nickname Goldenwolf,
for her painting of a wolf man slinking toward the viewer, backlit by a full moon.26

At one corner of the art show, a dreadlocked security volunteer wearing a tiger
tail checks IDs. I flash the badge that verifies that I am over eighteen and he waves me
through to the “adult” section. Suddenly I am surrounded by furry erotica: A minotaur
sports an erection, wolf guys with big dicks strike cheesecake poses, dragons make out
with unicorns. Some of the critters have human penises, others are depicted with
decidedly nonhuman equipment. In paintings and cartoons and even in miniature sculptures, animal-people cuddle, pose, lick, suck, fuck, and fondle.

Many of these pieces deliberately play with stereotypes, winking and nudging at the viewer: In one piece, a lesbian hyena ravishes a big-bosomed zebra chick, in another, huskies engaged in an orgy get tangled up in their harnesses, and in another, a border collie guy gets shagged—doggy style—by an anthropomorphic ram. This erotica is unlike any that I've ever seen before, displaying neither the pathetic seriousness of romance-novel covers, nor the slick, airbrushed, orange-tanned, bottle-blond fakery of porn.

Rows of tables and booths hawking furry wares stuff Anthrocon’s marketplace, the Dealers Den: Colorful sweatshirts with animal ears on the hoods and tails sewn to the backside; comics and graphic novels featuring furry characters; binders full of art prints; collars, leashes, and harnesses; t-shirts, stickers, badges, and buttons; clip-on ears and tails for every conceivable species and color; pewter jewelry in the shape of animal claws; resin replicas of animal skulls; scented soap in fragrances like “werewolf” and “lucky fox.” Fans can spend a few bucks for a pawprint keychain or several hundred dollars for a piece of original art or a handmade leather harness.

In Artists Alley, adjacent to the Dealers Den, artists sit at rows of smaller tables sketching, chatting, or taking quick breaks for a snack. Artists Alley is for artists who don’t want to commit to a dealer’s table, but still wish to sell prints and small art pieces. Most of them will create custom art on the spot. Fans can get a sketch of their fursona—collectors pass their sketchbooks from artist to artist—or a conbadge, a piece of original art measuring three by four inches with a fan’s furry nickname and an image of his or her fursona. Some collectors amass scads of badges.
An artist who calls himself Vet (short for veteran, not veterinarian) sells dramatic black marker sketches for five dollars. His art catches my eye with its loose style and bold lines.

If I were choosing an animal to represent myself for wish fulfillment purposes, there’s no question I’d go with a wolf—a white wolf. I’ve long admired wolves for their simultaneous grace and swagger, not to mention the wolf’s striking gaze. But if I’m honest with myself, I don’t have a wolf’s charisma. I’m more like the coyote, the wolf’s nerdy cousin: small, kind of scruffy, definitely not glamorous, but adaptable and smart.

“What’s your character?” Vet asks. He takes my five, flips open his sketchbook and slides a black felt pen from behind his ear.

“She’s a coyote who looks like me,” I say. I want to see what I’d look like as a coyote. He jots down some notes about my outfit: sunglasses, jeans, leather jacket.

“Should she have head hair?” (Should he add a human hairstyle, he means).

“Sure.”

Humans created the first known work of anthropomorphic art in the world—the Löwenmensch (lion man) statue found in the Stadel-Höhle cave in Germany—about 40,000 years ago. Since then, anthropomorphic animals have figured prominently in our cultures. Rituals—formal and informal—in which humans adopt animal identities or creaturely costumes exist in every part of the world inhabited by humans and have been identified in virtually every culture throughout human history.

Fred Patten, a fandom historian who attended his first sci-fi convention in 1958, and who counts himself among the ten or so original furry fans, said that the modern furry scene dates to 1983, the year artist Steve Gallachi began publishing Albedo
*Anthropomorphics*, an alternative comic featuring anthropomorphic animals as space pilots. Gallachi spent six years illustrating fighter aircraft for the U. S. Air Force. He often drew anthropomorphic animals flying the planes.²⁹

The first furry fans met one another in informal get-togethers at science fiction conventions. As the Internet became more popular and allowed fans to find one another and share furry art and stories, the fandom gained visibility.³⁰ Sixty-five people attended ConFurence Zero, the first furry convention, held in 1989 in Costa Mesa, California.³¹ Anthrocon’s first iteration—Albany Anthrocon in New York—welcomed 500 attendees.³² The convention moved to Philadelphia in 2001 and Pittsburgh in 2006. Attendance at Anthrocon grows by about seventeen percent each year.³³

Furry fans host and attend hundreds of conventions, gatherings, and informal meet-ups every year across North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia.³⁴ The fandom’s largest art website, FurAffinity.net, hosts more than 15 million works of art submitted by nearly 1.2 million active users. Anthropomorphic animal costuming is becoming mainstream: Urban Outfitters sold a white wolf mask for Halloween.³⁵ Spirit Hoods, a line of faux fur hat-and-scarf combinations featuring animal ears, urges shoppers to get in touch with their inner wolves, foxes, and leopards.³⁶ On campus at Iowa State University, I’ve seen several students wearing animal ears.

Still, there persists a belief among some that an adult wouldn’t participate in furry fandom unless he or she was dysfunctional in some way—a loner, sexually deviant, or immature.³⁷ Is a furry fan’s preference for anthropomorphic animals a sign of maladjustment? At the very least, do they suffer from some kind of identity disorder?
Kathleen Gerbasi, an anthrozoologist and social psychologist based in New York, set out to answer that question. In 2008, she contacted Conway and asked for permission to conduct academic study on the furry fandom by surveying fans at Anthrocon. Conway warned her that it might be difficult to wrangle participants. Given the way that furry fans have been burned by the media, he told her, she shouldn’t be surprised if no one exactly leapt to the opportunity to answer probing questions about their mental health.38

Happily, however, furry fans were relieved to be the subject of serious academic study and not media machinations. Thousands of fans have participated in surveys Gerbasi conducts with her research team, the International Anthropomorphic Research Project.39 Gerbasi has conducted research at Anthrocon since 2008. Lately she’s also been researching the community of therianthropes, a somewhat related subculture of people who don’t just take on animal identities for recreation but believe to varying extents that they are nonhuman animals in human bodies.40

It’s easy to see why furry fans opened up to Gerbasi: She’s warm, gracious, immediately friendly, and enthusiastic about the fandom. She’s short, with sandy-colored hair, spectacles, and a voice that sounds a bit like a squeaky hinge. She exudes a friendly energy when she talks, and she struck me as the kind of teacher who racks up enviable ratings on RateMyProfessors.com, a website where students grade their teachers—a suspicion I later confirmed. Her first study set out to investigate the negative stereotypes Gurley made famous in Vanity Fair—that furry fandom is a refuge for sexual deviants who lack social skills and suffer from mental health problems. She anonymously surveyed 217 fans on everything from their sexual preferences to their
mental health status to whether or not they really wanted to become nonhuman animals if they could.\textsuperscript{41}

When Gerbasi’s research team compared responses given by furry fans to those given by a control sample of college students, they found that furry fans were significantly less likely to report relationship problems, anxiety, depression, self-absorption, and self-critical feelings. Their feelings of aloofness and isolation were almost identical to those reported by college students. And furry fans were significantly more likely to report a deep interest in art, seeing beauty in things others might not notice, and a desire to feel “close to the earth.” The team concluded that while some furry fans could exhibit a form of “species identity disorder” that causes feelings of discomfort, the notion that furry fandom primarily attracts the socially isolated or maladjusted simply doesn’t pass muster.\textsuperscript{42}

A 2013 survey led by Courtney Plante—an International Anthropomorphic Research Project psychologist who happens to be a furry himself—offers some insight into fans’ motivations for adopting an animal identity. Fursonas tend to represent fans’ idealized selves—representations that are close to a fan’s actual self, but with positive qualities a fan wishes he or she had more of, such as attractiveness, confidence, or extraversion.\textsuperscript{43} Adopting a fursona allows fans to practice these traits within a safe and supportive community. Fans who practice acting more confident or more outgoing with the help of their fursonas may eventually attain some of those qualities in real life.\textsuperscript{44}

Feminist scholar Debra Ferreday argues that taking on an animal identity—which she calls “nonhuman drag”—is a way to subvert anthropocentrism, the social order placing humans’ needs above animals.\textsuperscript{45} In a study published in the Journal of Marketing Management, scholars Michael J. Healy and Michael B. Beverland postulated
that furry fans adopt animal identities to heal feelings of anomie brought on by postmodern society’s disconnection from the natural world. Not only do animals function as intermediaries between humans and the natural world, we tend to view animals as fundamentally trustworthy: a tiger might eat you, but he can’t lie to you. This goes far beyond the cliché about using a puppy as an icebreaker to get a date. Exposure to animals in image and iconography affects our behavior in profound and surprising ways. Rather than using to the fandom to drop out from reality, furry fans seem to be mobilizing their animal identities for positive and affirmative outcomes.

I’ve decided to be a wolf for my first fursuiting experience. I’ve borrowed the mask of a white female wolf made by Shannon Heartwood of Clockwork Creature Studio. Heartwood’s creations represent the ne plus ultra of animal costumes: her works are in such high demand that she quit her job and now works full-time making animal masks and costumes. Her year-long waiting list opens just a few times per year, and fills with requests within minutes. She makes all of her masks by hand, complete with hand-painted glass eyes, plastic taxidermy jaws, and fur dyed and textured by hand. Heartwood sells her masks for upwards of $1,000 each. Her full-body costumes, each custom-fitted to their users, go for several thousand dollars.

Many of her customers are repeat customers, buying several costumes over a number of years. She’s done some special effects work for films and commercial projects, but most of her sales go to people buying costumes for recreational purposes. I ask her what people desire most when they commission her for costumes. Some people do ask for scary costumes for Halloween, she said, but most of her customers seek a magical combination of charisma, power, awe, and above all, beauty.
“People want beautiful animals,” she says. “Beautiful wolves, beautiful tigers, beautiful foxes.”

With its snow-white fur, high cheekbones, and almond-shaped icy blue eyes, the mask turns me into one sexy, sultry wolf. It fits snugly and comfortably, padded on the inside with fleece, and it is remarkably light, a far cry from huge and gawky mascot heads. I can peer out through the black mesh of the tear ducts, but no one can see in. An elastic band holds the hinged jaw of the mask against my jaw, so that when I open and close my mouth, the mask’s jaw moves up and down, revealing a wolf’s serrated smile.

A very fine line separates the real from the uncanny valley, and this mask straddles that territory: it’s beautiful and unnerving. When I tried it on at home in front of my dog, she bolted from the room, throwing a hard wary look over her shoulder.

On Saturday night, there’s a waxing moon riding high on the skyline; it’s a perfect night to prowl downtown Pittsburgh as a wolf. I’m joined by my friend Jeremy, a professional photographer who came to shoot the convention. The mask restricts my field of vision, so he’s there to make sure that I don’t run into anything. As soon as I step off of the elevator and into the lobby, I hear, muffled by the fake fur that surrounds my ears, oohs and aahs, murmurs of appreciation, and—how appropriate—a wolf whistle. A few people reach out to touch me. Wary of fingerprints on snow-white fur, I lean away. Jeremy, my bodyguard, asks them not to touch.

We push past the crowds in the lobby, through the big revolving glass door, and into the warm summer-night air in downtown Pittsburgh. I am now in public, downtown in a major city, on a Saturday night, wearing an animal costume. Normally, I hate drawing attention to myself, but almost immediately, something strange and
utterly unexpected overtakes me. I feel brave and daring and giddy. Without thinking about it, I have started to swagger.

Jeremy and I walk near the convention center's fountains, lit up and sparkling with golden light. A pair of twenty-something women wobble up to us in high heels. They are bubbly and talkative, and it's unclear how much of that is personality and how much is alcohol. They have come, one of them explains, to see the convention. Lots of Pittsburghers do, she says. They love to see the costumes, to see this corner of their city, ever so briefly, transformed into a fantasy world.

I'm startled to recognize a touch of envy in her voice. One of the women puts her arm around me and asks her friend to take a photo. *This is so awesome*, she says again and again, *what you guys do is so awesome.*

Halloween is the sixth highest spending holiday in the United States, the only non-gift giving holiday where we spend enough money to rival Christmas, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, and Father's Day. Americans who celebrate the holiday—which is most of them—spend $7.4 billion dollars on candy and decorations and of course, on costumes.50

Theories abound on our fascination with Halloween, mostly to do with the idea that we like to scare ourselves, that we are morbidly obsessed with death. Personally, I love Halloween because it's like a weird portal opens up between our world and an infinite number of alternate universes. For that one night, superheroes, cartoon characters, and samurai warriors can leave their worlds and roam the downtown streets of ours. Yet when I talk to people about what they like most about Halloween, notions of
death or the fun of being scared rarely come up. What I hear more than anything else is how often people wish they could wear a costume at other times of the year.

Taking on an alter ego and wearing a costume is something so dangerous that we have sequestered it into its own special day, restrained and contained to a few hours once per year. We all get one night a year when we’re allowed to put on the costume of our choosing, but I wonder how many of us would like to feel free to play and pretend, as the furry fans do. And I wonder just who’s “pretending” here: are furry fans pretending when they wear a costume, or is pretending what we do when it’s not Halloween?

Navey Baker, a talented high school mascot interviewed on This American Life, said that she’s unable to perform her signature cartwheels and dance moves unless she’s wearing her tiger costume. She’s shy and awkward as Navey, but as the tiger, she’s unstoppable. What’s key, she said, is that when she’s behind the mask, no one knows her, and no one can judge her. Without the paralyzing fear of judgment, she can perform at her full range of motion. Her costume is the medium through which she can access the person she truly is.\textsuperscript{51}

“It’s like Superman”, she said. “I mean, Superman, he's got glasses and a suit and tie. And then all of a sudden, he rips the suit and tie off and he's Superman. Except I put clothes on to become a tiger.”\textsuperscript{52}

\textit{These are some of the nicest people.} If I had a dollar for every time I heard this phrase at Anthrocon, I’d be well on my way to buying one of those fursuits. I met parents whose kids dragged them to Anthrocon who returned a second time and a third because they’d had so much fun. I met a Detroit police officer whose coworkers had no idea what he
was up to. He volunteered to help provide security at the convention—not that he really needed to. I asked him how Anthrocon compares, crime and misbehavior-wise, to other big events he’s worked. Once in a while, he said, someone will have too much to drink at a party and need to go to the emergency room, but that’s about it.

“I’d put Anthrocon up against any gathering of five or six thousand,” he said. “We’d have far fewer problems here.” He paused as if trying to verbalize this in a way that’s not cliché. “You know, these are just some of the nicest people you’ll ever meet.”

I met a cardiovascular surgeon who, instead of buying cars and rounds of golf, spends his considerable income on animal costumes. I met several veterans and active-duty military; furry fandom has a strong military presence, perhaps because veterans, arguably more than anyone else, know the importance of safe refuge and companionship. I met a federal drug enforcement agent who told me what it’s like to be shot at.

“My work is very serious,” he said. “This is a place where I can come be a kid.”

The masks I’ve seen at Anthrocon aren’t the plush fake-fur ones, but the disguises the furry fans will wear when they return to their homes and jobs—the ones we all wear for a world that requires us to be rigidly human.

I try not to be perturbed by the thoughts of people I don’t know who don’t know me. Nonetheless, on any given day, I worry about what others might think of me on a schedule that rivals how often I breathe and blink. I choose outfits based on what I think will make me look acceptable to other people. I apply makeup even though I can't see my own face. I choose my words very, very carefully.
We pour so much time and energy and money into putting on a show for people we don't particularly care about. I often wonder what the world would be like if we allowed ourselves to be ourselves, coming as we are with no fear of reprisal. I can't help but feel as though furry fans have discovered that world.

So did the Pittsburgh cab driver who wrote about furry fans in his blog shortly after Anthrocon: “The Bible talks about a time when all people will get along,” he said. “Looking at the conduct of the furries toward one another and towards myself, I feel that they are a glimpse of what that New World will be.”55
CHAPTER TWO. ANIMAL LOVER

The next time you settle into your seat at a crowded movie theater, ask yourself: How many of the people around you have had sex with animals?

If the theater you’re in holds 300 people, you may be sitting in a room with anywhere between six and twenty-four people who’ve performed sex acts with animals. And chances are, sitting in the seats right next to you are at least one or two people who have had sexual fantasies about animals. Maybe it’s the gray-haired man in front of you, or one of the chatty teen girls behind you. Maybe it’s the person next to you—your date or your best friend. Maybe it’s you.

Like most people, I knew humans had sex with animals once in a while, but these, I thought, were freak occurrences safely confined to the “weird news” corner of the paper. That changed when I found out the man I was dating was a zoophile—a person who’s sexually attracted to animals. Our relationship forced me to confront two realities: Zoophiles are far more common than most people realize, and nothing challenges our ideas about how we should treat animals more than the question of how we should respond to them sexually.

I met the man I'll call “Jacob” at the age of nineteen—my first serious relationship. Jacob was twenty-four, worked a well-paying job in network security, already owned his own home, and was working on a degree in criminal justice. An avid outdoorsman, he enjoyed hiking, camping, and horseback riding. He had long hair and deeply tanned skin from hours spent outdoors. He was smart, funny, and gentle.
And he loved animals. The very first night we met, I told him about how guilty I felt that my dog had been hurt in a car accident. Tears streamed down his face as he recounted the horrible afternoon when he, just learning how to drive, accidentally backed over his border collie. Here at last, I thought, was a kindred spirit. I felt a tremendous magnetic pull to this man who went out of his way to look at animals, to be around them, who, unlike many men, saw no shame in deep concern and love for them.

Alfred Kinsey first studied the prevalence of sex acts with animals 1948. The most shocking thing about having sex with animals, Kinsey discovered, is how common it is. Needless to say, few people who’ve had sex with an animal want to speak openly about what they’ve done, but the limited research that does exist makes it clear that we need to view sex acts with animals not as an occasional freak occurrence but as an experience shared by a significant number of people.

Kinsey determined that approximately eight percent of men and nearly four percent of women engaged sexual contact with an animal at least once in their lives. When he limited his sample to men living in farming communities, the prevalence of engaging in sex with animals rose to nearly fifty percent.

As our population shifted from rural farms to urban centers, our opportunities to live with animals have decreased, and so has the reported incidence of sex acts with animals. Nearly five percent of men and nearly two percent of women reported sexual interactions with animals in 1974. Other studies have found that anywhere between five to fifteen percent of people sexually fantasize about animals. Researchers believe lower rates of sex acts with animals among urban dwellers reflect a decrease in opportunities, not desire.
A 1991 study investigated the prevalence of sex acts and fantasies involving animals among psychiatric patients, psychiatric staff, and medical patients. Researchers found a high rate of sexual interest in animals among psychiatric patients; nearly fifty-five percent reported sex acts or fantasies with animals. Ten percent of medical patients and fifteen percent of psychiatric staff reported sexual acts or fantasies involving animals. In a 2014 study, three percent of women and just over two percent of men reported fantasies of having sex with an animal. And in a 2014 poll of nearly one thousand Reddit users, ten percent of respondents indicated that they were turned on by thoughts of having sex with an animal.

What this adds up to is a fairly safe bet that anywhere between two and eight percent of people have engaged in sex acts with animals at least once in their lives, and may be primarily or exclusively attracted to them, and an even larger number of people have sexual fantasies involving animals. The average person has a social network of about 150 people, so in all likelihood, someone you know—possibly someone close to you—has performed a sex act with an animal. Look around the next time you're at a large gathering of any kind: a big party, a busy shopping mall, a movie theater. Chances are excellent that you are rubbing elbows with zoophiles.

Humans exhibit far more than a passing interest in sex outside our species. Sex acts with animals have existed since the dawn of human history and can be found in every place and culture in the world. Cave paintings dating back to 40,000 years ago indicate that our ancestors enjoyed frequent interspecies intercourse. During spring fertility rites, Babylonians used dogs and horses in orgies lasting seven days and nights. The Egyptians reportedly mastered the dicey enterprise of having sex with
crocodiles. Ancient Romans enjoyed sex acts with animals as a public spectacle at the Coliseum and Circus Maximus. We’ve created mythologies replete with fantastic creatures and legendary figures born of human-animal marriages. Works of art from around the globe include graphic depictions of men and women in sex acts with horses, dogs, donkeys, birds, cattle, goats, and too many other species to list. One particularly striking Japanese block print from 1814, provocatively titled The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife, depicts a woman receiving fellatio from an octopus.

Interspecies sex is also a very real part of our DNA. Homo sapiens routinely mated with Neanderthals until the latter species went extinct approximately 30,000 years ago. And human speciation was a complex, messy affair: there’s good evidence that our ancestors routinely produced hybrid offspring with nonhuman primates over a period as long as 1.2 million years after our species diverged. After that, it’s anyone’s guess how long we had non-fertile liaisons with nonhuman primates. Research has even demonstrated that humans have arousal responses to video footage of animals mating.

“Is there a sexual orientation to non-human animals? Yes,” concluded sexologist Hani Miletski, after she surveyed 93 men and women who reported having sexual relations with animals. Miletski, who began studying sex acts with animals with her dissertation in 1999, is now one of the world’s leading authorities on zoosexuality. She found that zoophilia meets all of the established criteria for sexual orientation—zoophiles bond to animals emotionally as well as fantasize about them sexually. Moreover, they prefer to have sex with animals—none of the zoophiles she surveyed wanted to stop.

Zoophiles have long drawn a distinction between zoophilia and bestiality. Whereas bestiality—sex acts with animals—could include opportunistic, experimental,
or sadistic acts, zoophiles maintain that their relationships with animals include the
same emotional and romantic components felt by human partners. For some
zoophiles, this may not include sex acts. “I consider myself a zoo, but I really don’t have
sex with my dog,” one zoophile told Miletski. “I love him more than anything in the
universe and I consider him to be my lover and we’re companions. I’d do anything in the
world for him.” Many zoophiles think of their animal partners as spouses.

Zoophilia is so taboo that only the tiniest number of zoophiles are out of the
closet, Miletski wrote. She found that when zoophiles discuss their sexual orientations,
it’s usually only to other zoophiles and sometimes to partners or close friends. Nearly all
of them are doing their best to blend in. Most zoophiles live unremarkable lives. They
aren’t the sex addicts, schizophrenics, or creepy, socially isolated perverts that make the
news. They are college professors, veterinary technicians, ranchers, biologists, and
government employees. They aren’t people who can’t have relationships with other
humans. On the contrary, zoophiles can be successfully employed, highly educated,
married-with-children people who are secretly attracted to animals, and may even be
having sex with the neighbor’s horse or the family dog unbeknownst to anyone.

Beginning with chat rooms and message boards such as alt.sex.bestiality, the web
practically revolutionized life for the modern zoophile, allowing “zoos” to meet one
another and make the critical discovery: I am not alone. The website Beastforum.com
has over 1.4 million registered members. Zoophiles have formed groups on Reddit and
Facebook, and no small number of websites advocate for zoophile equality and offer
guides on how to have sex with dogs, horses, and pigs:
“Let him sniff you or lick you... If he shows any interest in sniffing or licking your crotch, spread and encourage him.”

“Most male dogs will spend much more time than a human male, providing you with the most electrifying oral sex. A dog’s tongue is much longer and is able to get to many places that a man can’t or won’t.”

“Lube up and using your fingers, tongue or any other portion of your anatomy that feels good to you both, proceed to pleasure her... move in and out of her with deep, slow strokes...”

At least five different companies manufacture dildos shaped like animal penises. Elypse-Art’s silicone toys modeled after horse and dog penises offer realistic coloration and a glossy 'wet' look. The dog penis models are squeeze-bulb inflatable to mimic the expanding bulbus glandis of the real canine penis. Both the dog and horse models can be made to squirt fluids, mimicking ejaculation. These toys are jaw-droppingly expensive: a premium squirting-inflatable dog dildo will set you back over $200. TSX Toys’ Animal Kingdom line is far more economical, not to mention punny: there’s a $27 dog dildo dubbed “Clifford” and a whale-shaped version known as “Moby's Dick.”

FetishZone sells silicone sheaths modeled after dog penises, meant to be worn over human equipment to give the user the appearance of having a canine-shaped penis. Two other companies, Bad Dragon and Zeta Creations, sell animal dildos exclusively, and shoppers can pick from a menagerie of real and imaginary species in a rainbow of colors, from lion, dolphin, and kangaroo to werewolf, dragon, and gryphon. Zeta Creations also offers pins, stickers, and other paraphernalia with the Greek letter...
zeta (ζ), sometimes used by zoophiles to discreetly identify themselves—not unlike early Christians’ use of the ichthys fish symbol.94

Animal pornography depicts women in sex acts with male dogs and horses, men penetrating female dogs and having anal sex with large male dogs, and sometimes women with goats, geese, and pigs.95 Zoosexuals also seek out videos and images of interspecies sex—cattle and horses, donkeys and ewes, dogs and pigs. On the dark web—secret networks that can only be accessed from the inside—zoosadists trade extreme and illegal pornography such as “crush” films; videos of women crushing live animals to death with stiletto heels.96

How do I know? I looked for it. A cursory search netted me dozens of pay-to-access “beast sex” or “farm sex” pornography websites with names like BeastieGals and ZooTube365, not to mention free access to countless more amateur-made images and videos on message boards such as BeastForum. I encountered men mounted by Rottweilers and German shepherds, women with equine penises in partial stages of penetration, images of fists deep inside horses and cattle. But zoophiles and the more prurient among us don’t need to access pornography websites to see animal sex: Unlike sex acts involving humans, films of animals having sex with one another are deemed appropriate for broadcast on YouTube, where videos of animals mating routinely rack up hundreds of thousands of views.

The vast majority of the images and films I encountered involved dogs and horses. In her essay “When Species Meat: Confronting Bestiality Pornography,” scholar Margaret Grebowicz points out that horses and dogs are species evolved in close proximity to humans, and appear as figures of masculinity throughout our culture—we
even refer to attractive men as *studs*. Grebowicz concludes that “what is eroticized in this imagery is not the power difference between the male viewer and the animal, which may be trained or forced into doing (almost) anything, but something very different: the size and virility of the horse, the eagerness of the dog.”

It’s been almost ten years since the last time I heard from Jacob. I spent so long pretending our relationship didn’t happen that its details are murky. Writing about him feels like dredging up an old shipwreck from the bottom of the ocean, like the remains of a crime still unsolved.

Our relationship was such a major turning point in my life, I’m amazed how close it came to not happening at all. I met Jacob during a visit to California and we hit it off right away, but I had no interest in him as a partner, though I did sense his interest in me. He visited the beach with me and a handful of friends, and as he walked beside me and gathered sand dollars and interesting pieces of driftwood for me to take home, I could tell that he was holding something back, secret and painful.

Shortly after I returned home, Jacob sent me a letter. He knew how stupid this all must sound, he wrote, but I electrified him. I was all he could think about. I understood him like no one else could. If I didn’t feel the same way, he would content himself to be the best friend to me that he could. Never before had I seen someone so honest, and vulnerable, and brave. *I want to be that person who will be there for you, no matter what*, he wrote. *I would be thankful every day that you are in my life.* Something in me tipped on its fulcrum, and I felt myself slip into the field of his gravity.

He lived in southern California, and I was a new student at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks, but we talked almost every day—on the phone, on instant
messenger, on Second Life. He came to visit me five months after we met. He met my mother, and she liked him. He met my pets, and they liked him. We took a trip to the Boundary Waters wilderness in Minnesota—I’ve tried to forget everything else, but I’ve hung onto this as one of the most beautiful experiences of my life—standing together, holding hands at the edge of a lookout at midnight under a jewelry box sky, listening to the lilting voices of wolves and loons filtering across the moon-silvered lakes.

Sometimes we talked about the trackless fears in our lives—his alcoholic father, and how careless I’d been with the people I loved. But our conversations always seemed to orbit around animals—their honesty, their matchless friendship, but especially their beauty. More than once, he said he wanted to trade his human skin for the body of an animal, to think and feel and sense the world like a wolf or a dog. I told him how badly I wanted my own land, with space for several horses and dogs. Is that something you’d like? I asked one warm summer night, sitting on the back porch, cell phone snug against my ear. His reply bounced down from a satellite above: It’s like you read my mind.

Enumclaw, Washington: in the wee hours of the morning on July 2, 2005, a man drives up to the emergency room at the Enumclaw Community Hospital, runs inside, asks for help. His friend lies unconscious in the back seat of the pickup truck. Just after wheeling the unresponsive man into an examining room, doctors discover that he is already dead. When they look for the driver, he is gone, disappeared like a vapor.

It’s now one of the world’s most infamous cases of bestiality: the dead man, 45 year-old Kenneth Pinyan of Seattle, went by the online nickname “Mr. Hands.” Earlier that night, Pinyan had anal sex with a stallion, an act that ruptured his colon, and in the hours since, he slowly bled to death. An engineer at Boeing with a high security
clearance, Pinyan refused to seek medical attention because he feared that being treated at the hospital for such an unusual internal injury would raise suspicion at work. But at five o’clock the next morning, Pinyan realized his life was in danger and asked his friend and fellow zoophile James Tait to drive him to the hospital. Tait dropped him off and fled, but after Pinyan died, police used surveillance camera footage to trace Tait’s truck back to an Arabian horse farm near Enumclaw.99

Among zoophiles, that farm was known as a place to have sex with horses.100 Tait lived and worked at the farm for more than twenty years as a handyman, caring for the animals while the owners were away. Unbeknownst to the couple who owned the farm, Tait used the Internet to invite other zoophiles, including Pinyan, to have sex with the horses. Police found hundreds of hours of video footage of Tait and other men in sex acts with the horses, including the act that killed Pinyan.101

The latter video circulates the Internet as “Two Guys, One Horse.”102 The dark and grainy footage lends penumbra to a haunting scene: Pinyan bends over, encourages the stallion to mount him, and finally, what looks—and ought to be—impossible. Pinyan somehow takes in the stallion’s huge erect penis and groans with pain. Tait’s voice whispers from behind the camera: Too much? Too much? He came.

The documentary film Zoo focused on what came to me known as the “Enumclaw horse sex case.” Zoo, which debuted at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, offered many of the public their first glimpse into the hidden and often closely networked world of zoophiles.103 The event also received extensive coverage by national and international media, gaining an unfathomable level of public attention. Wrote staff columnist Danny Westneat of the Seattle Times, “a case can be made that the articles on horse sex are the most widely read material this paper has published in its 109-year history.”104
With no laws prohibiting sex with animals, Washington had long been a refuge for zoophiles. The court found Tait guilty of criminal trespassing, but could not prosecute him for animal cruelty because investigators found no evidence of injury to the animals. Tait received a $300 fine and one day of community service. Embarrassed legislators moved fast to make bestiality illegal. In Washington state, engaging in sex with animals is now a class C felony. The law also prohibits filming humans in sex contact with animals “either alive or dead.”

Thirty-eight states ban the practice of bestiality, and twelve do not: Alabama, Hawaii, Kentucky, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, Texas, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming have no laws addressing the practice. Bestiality is also legal in Washington, D.C. Most state laws banning bestiality went into effect between 1999 and 2012, as the Internet demonstrated a prevalence of bestiality far greater that most people suspected. Elsewhere in the world, most nations prohibit the practice of bestiality, but zoosexual activity remains legal in Finland, Hungary, and Sweden, among others.

“It's a manufactured taboo,” said Douglas Spink, one of the world’s few outspoken public advocates for zoophilia. Spink rejects what he calls “zoophobic bigotry.” He wants society to decriminalize zoosexuality and recognize it as a legitimate sexual orientation. He prefers the term “heterospecies” rather than zoophile: “I see it as the difference between calling someone a faggot and calling them gay,” he said.

Spink, 44, is tall and pale with buzz-cut hair, pierced ears, and a thick goatee. He holds an MBA from the University of Chicago, lists rock-climbing and base jumping among his hobbies, and professes to have Asperger syndrome. If I saw him on the
street, I’d peg him as an eccentric right away. In the ‘90s, Spink made a fortune buying and selling dot-com companies, but the dot-com bust hit him hard, and by 2002, he owed millions to creditors. He smuggled drugs to repay his debts, and in 2005 he went to prison for smuggling more than 370 pounds of cocaine, worth about $34 million.110

After his release, Spink owned and operated Exitpoint Stallions, a training center for showjumping horses, including the Olympic showjumping stallion Capone I. “We don’t wall off sexual energy in our stallions as something dangerous or inappropriate,” Spink claimed in a brochure for Exitpoint. “There’s a proper time and place for it, and we work towards those sorts of skills rather than fighting un-winnable fights against deeply-rooted instincts.”111 Under the nickname “Fausty” on BeastForum, Spink posted graphic accounts—complete with photos—of the sex acts he performed with horses. At one point, he bragged about his plans to use a Great Dane in sex acts with a mare.

In 2010, Spink made headlines around the world after he was arrested for running an “animal brothel” at a rundown, heavily wooded compound in Whatcom County, Washington near the Canadian border.112 Authorities seized seven large male dogs and four horses, including the valuable jumping stallion, Capone I.113 During the raid, authorities arrested Stephen Clarke, a British citizen who said he traveled to Spink’s property to have sex with animals. Clarke was convicted of animal cruelty and deported back to England. Investigators raided the compound after a public defender tipped authorities off about Spink called incessantly about James Tait, the man who filmed Kenneth Pinyan in the deadly sex act with a stallion. Videos found at Spink’s home showed Clarke having sex with a Great Dane, a mastiff, and a German shepherd. While Clarke was having sex with the dogs, Spink carried on conversations with him about the animals' sexual prowess.114
After serving nearly three years in prison, Spink was arrested again on May 9, 2014 for keeping several large dogs at his household, violating the conditions of his supervised release. Spink continues to advocate for zoophilia: He claims to be building a network he calls DeepJustice, a collective effort to raise legal defense funds for zoophiles and retaliate against “zoophobic bigots” by unearthing the skeletons in the closets of those who report zoosexual activity to the police. He is reportedly involved in the development of CryptoStorm, a darknet service that offers zoophiles a way to traffic in bestiality pornography with complete anonymity.

Animal rights activists remain fiercely divided on the issue of how to respond to zoophilia. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Humane Society of the United States, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals oppose the notion that bestiality is anything but exploitative or abusive. But Peter Singer, author of Animal Liberation and widely considered the father of the modern animal rights movement, argued that bestiality in the context of zoophilic relationships can be enjoyable for humans and nonhumans alike. “Sex with animals does not always involve cruelty,” he wrote in a 2001 essay titled “Heavy Petting:”

Who has not been at a social occasion disrupted by the household dog gripping the legs of a visitor and vigorously rubbing its penis against them? The host usually discourages such activities, but in private not everyone objects to being used by her or his dog in this way, and occasionally mutually satisfying activities may develop.

Criminologist Piers Beirne lambasted the defense of bestiality as a symptom of “pseudo-liberal tolerance fashionable today” and argued that bestiality should be considered interspecies sexual assault. Veterinarians have documented a variety of
injuries as a result of zoosexual activity and point out that guardians of animals injured by bestiality may fail to seek veterinary care for them due to fear of prosecution.\textsuperscript{123}

It’s impossible to escape comparisons of zoophilia and pedophilia. Like children, animals are not capable of fully informed consent to sexual activity, and they cannot speak out about being abused. And like pedophiles, zoophiles insist that animals desire and enjoy sexual contact.\textsuperscript{124} Zoophiles bristle at the comparison between bestiality and the sex abuse of children, contending that unlike children, animals are sexually mature.\textsuperscript{125} Yet in the process of domesticating animals, we’ve bred them to have juvenile characteristics such as infantile physical features and complacent temperaments; biologists call it pedomorphosis. Dogs, in particular, never develop the full behavior range of a mature wolf; they remain perpetually juvenile throughout their lives.\textsuperscript{126}

Researchers also note that animals rarely display sexual interest in humans on their own, and must instead be trained for sex acts with people.\textsuperscript{127} On BeastForum and other zoophile communities, a significant number of conversations revolve around the issue of how to train animals for bestiality. While the training itself may not qualify as coercive, exactly—zoophiles often discuss smearing their genitals with substances to encourage animals to lick them, or use urine from females in estrus or synthetic “estrus” scents to entice male animals to mount them—it’s clear that most animals do not see humans as sex partners unless zoophiles groom them to do so.\textsuperscript{128}

Zoophiles contend that we never seek consent from the billions of animals we eat, experiment on, or shoot for sport, yet the fact that some people eat meat doesn’t give anyone the right to abuse an animal. Zoophiles also argue that animals are perfectly capable of saying no to unwanted sexual advances. “The dog has the ultimate way to say no and that’s with two rows of very sharp teeth,” one zoophile argued.\textsuperscript{129} But researchers
warn that signs of distress in animals can be hard to detect; we misunderstand animals’ intentions on a routine basis.\textsuperscript{130} On BeastForum, I read one account from a zoophile who felt sure that anal sex didn’t bother his dog because the dog yawned throughout the act. In fact, yawning is a sign of stress in dogs. Timothy Treadwell, the “Grizzly Man” who suffered the grisly fate of being eaten by Alaska brown bears, believed with all sincerity that he could “read” the animals he loved and that they wouldn’t hurt him.\textsuperscript{131}

In the context of breeding animals and conducting experiments on them, people perform sex acts far more invasive than much of what I saw in bestiality pornography: Humans put electric probes into the rectums of male animals to force them to ejaculate, stimulate them by hand to collect their semen, and force entire arms into the vaginas of cows and horses for artificial insemination.\textsuperscript{132} Hog breeders use a device called the Reflexator—essentially a porcine vibrator—to masturbate female pigs during artificial insemination, resulting in greater fertility rates.\textsuperscript{133} In her book \textit{The Sexual Politics of Meat}, scholar Carol Adams argued that many of the breeding practices found in industrial animal agriculture qualify as sexual exploitation.\textsuperscript{134}

Humans also make frequent sexual contact with animals in the name of science: There’s no shortage of published research in which experimenters document startling and invasive sex acts on female animals in particular, massaging their clitorises and stimulating their vaginas to study the effects of such treatment on their fertility. Researchers in these experiments have used electrodes, plastic penis simulators, even their own hands. Sometimes the animals react with what could be signs of pleasure, and sometimes they do not. In a 1971 paper titled “Sexual climax in female macaca mulatta,” Frances Burton noted that the reactions of the female rhesus monkeys “ranged from a continuous attempt to get out of the harness and away from the experimenter, to
repeated attempts to attack.” In his master’s thesis titled “Orgasm in female primates,” one researcher spoke graphically about the seemingly pleasurable effects of fingering on female chimpanzees: “On one occasion...this female reached back to grasp the thrusting hand of the experimenter and tried to force it more deeply into her vagina.”

Zoophiles keep their secrets well, but live in fear of the constant risk of exposure. Their friends, families, and lovers make the discovery in tearful and dramatic confessions or running across a poorly-concealed stash of bestiality porn. Some are actually caught in flagrante with an animal. For most human lovers of zoophiles, the revelation is an instant deal breaker. But some animal-lover-lovers achieve a remarkable acceptance and understanding, like “Isis,” the woman who wrote this message that was posted to the Usenet group alt.sex.bestiality in 1995:

As we grew closer, he revealed other dreams and fantasies he had. Some, like the dream of us being lions and mating together, were wonderful turn-ons for me. I don't judge people's dreams. They can't control what their mind does when they're asleep. Others, like a fantasy of us being horses, struck me as odd, but not totally insane. Even the fact that he wanted to have sex with me on horseback didn't seem too strange to me. Impractical, uncomfortable, yes. Strange, no.

I didn’t catch Jacob in the act with an animal and he didn’t confess to me after I found his stash of bestiality porn. What happened is this: Someone—was it someone close to me? To this day I don’t know—sent me an anonymous private message online. I think you should see this. The message contained links to online postings that Jacob made about bestiality. The posts contained details about him that no random malicious troll could have known, and I recognized the words as his own.
Here’s what I found out: In high school, Jacob had worked for a dog breeder, and sometimes assisted with the breeding. These experiences awakened something in him from which there was no going back. He found it incredibly arousing, holding the female while the male mounted her. Prior to our relationship, he had performed sex acts with male and female dogs. He had “fence-hopped” to be with his neighbors’ horses. He wanted a human partner who would do these things with him. He thought I would be that person. In one post, he described in detail how wanted to hold me while watching me have sex with a dog.

After I found out about these posts, and he learned that I didn’t approve of sex with animals, he disappeared. Just like that. He stopped returning my calls and deleted all of his online accounts. He warned his friends not to talk to me. I can only imagine how terrified he was that this grave miscalculation would cost him his job and possibly even his friends and family. I’ve never seen him or spoken to him since. For a long time, I blamed myself for the whole thing. I felt stupid for getting involved with him, like I should have known somehow. But that’s several versions of me ago.

There is so much about this that I can almost grasp. My friendships with pets and horses have been as meaningful as my relationships with people. And as a wildlife artist, I have long expressed my aesthetic preference for the superior physical beauty of animals. I have been drawn to animals, inexplicably, since before I could read or even talk. It isn’t that big of a leap for me, being attracted to animals. I can almost understand it. Almost.

I was afraid to date anyone for three years after Jacob. The experience left me deeply shaken. Looking back, I can now credit the experience with sparking my interest
in people who take their relationships with animals to the extreme. My encounter with Jacob caused me profound pain, but I probably wouldn't be writing without him.

I met Nick during my final year in college. He attracted me for many of the same reasons I found myself drawn to Jacob—intelligence, dark sense of humor, gentle and even temper. Most of all, I was drawn to the honesty he exuded. Relating to animals comes harder to Nick. He didn’t grow up thinking of animals like I did. He’s developed his sense of animals in since we first began dating, but I can tell it’s still effortful for him. While I have no desire to get back together with Jacob, I admit that sometimes I miss his instant and intuitive knowledge of animals as beings and nations and not objects or elaborate playthings. I often wonder what life would be like if I’d stayed with him, if I’d somehow come to accept zoophilia as a part of my life. There’s a part of me, much bigger than I want to admit, that wonders what if.

Last I checked, Jacob is alive and well, spending most of his time somewhere on the West Coast. He travels frequently and shares photos from his trips on his website: hiking in the high desert, camping under the stars, pack trips with horses. From time to time, unbeknownst to him, I peek in at his life, because each of these photos is a window to the life I might have had. Here he is in the Mojave Desert, wearing sunglasses and a huge smile. An infinite blue sky vaults overhead and an enormous sand dune stretches behind. And beside him there’s a big white dog.
I had the purebred collie I coveted after watching too many episodes of *Lassie* and a real, live horse to ride, but when I was a child I still dreamed of superior pets: a unicorn, a dragon, or a phoenix, but also more possible animals. I wondered what it would be like to have a tiger instead of a house cat. I pretended my dog was a shaggy maned, sharp-eyed wolf. In the books and movies I loved, fantastic wild animals befriended children and protected them, made them a part of something wild, something grand.

Eventually I grew out of this kind of fantasy, but it lives on in others as the desire to own a wild animal. Many people who keep wild animals like wolves seek a contact high, hoping that even if the wolf lives on a chain in the backyard, some of that wildness is still there and might rub off on them. It is the same sort of impulse that motivates a trophy hunter to kill his own African lion; it’s just that exotic pet buyers aren’t looking for a conquest, they’re looking for a friend, a famous and charismatic friend. “Owning” a wolf: it’s the animal equivalent of knowing Bono.

My mother and I were driving west across Nebraska on Interstate 80 in that wind-beaten no-man’s land somewhere between North Platte and the Colorado border. It was one of those slate gray December days and a light snow was falling. Just when the endless furlongs of barbed wire and wind-trampled fields lulled me into dozing off, I saw something that made my mother gasp and almost drive off the road: a dilapidated little fenced-in shed, miles away from any house, in a small yard jury-rigged out of barbed wire. And in that yard, materializing out of the veil of snow, a huge, red-gold Bactrian
camel—the Silk Road kind with two humps and an abundance of shaggy hair—nibbled hay out of a rusted feeder.

Of the two species of camels, Bactrians are by far the rarer. Evolved to withstand high altitudes and cold temperatures, Bactrian camels are native to the steppes of China, Mongolia, and Indonesia. The Bactrian camel might be extinct in the wild. But there he was, alone and thousands of miles away from his native land, gathering snow in the middle of Nebraska.

I thought about that camel for years after I saw him. Only recently has the memory begun to haunt me, surfacing from time to time in disturbing dreams. I used to wonder about where he came from and how he ended up in Nebraska. Now I know.

Most Saturdays, the Kalona Sales Barn in Kalona, Iowa—the heart of Iowa’s Amish country—fills with the sounds of livestock auctions: the nonstop rattle of the auctioneer’s patois, the clopping hooves of Angus heifers and Belgian harness horses, chatter about the prices of hay and corn. But at the Kalona Alternative Bird and Animal Auction, the auctioneer hawks a much stranger menagerie: bison, parrots, raccoons, peacocks, deer, emus, and yes, camels.138

The air inside the auction barn smells like a zoo, thick with dust and the squawking, bleating, and braying of hundreds of animals. Several hundred people crowd wooden bleachers surrounding two auction rings. They’ve come from all over the country for exotic animals to stock their hunting ranches, petting zoos, and living rooms. In the east ring, ranchers bid on large hooved animals like camels, bison, and exotic cattle with huge horns as well as elk, deer, and “shooter” sheep for captive animal shoots. In the west ring, bidders tussle over parrots, peacocks, skunks, raccoons, sugar
gliders, Patagonian cavies, chinchillas, guinea pigs and “skinny pigs,” hairless versions of the guinea pig.

As a place to witness a trade that’s normally clandestine or private, exotic animal auctions represent a unique opportunity to discover what exotic animal buyers want most from their purchases. To drive up the price, auctioneers consistently emphasize an animal’s rarity, individuality, tameness, and ability to perform. Buyers prefer rare or hard-to-find animals over common species, unusually colored animals over common colors, and tame animals over those who are difficult to handle. Animals who can be ridden, talk, sing, or perform tricks bring much higher prices. To demonstrate an animal’s tameness during the bidding process, sellers walk them on leashes, cuddle them, or ride them around the ring. When a canary with a deformed foot comes up for bids, the auctioneer explains that his injury doesn’t detract from his value as a performer: “he still sings good.” Tame, talking parrots command hundreds, but a beautiful red fox—a “breeder” animal, not tame—goes for just fifteen dollars.

Cages—jury-rigged from chicken wire and stacked high with animals—fill the dusty, dimly-lit back rooms of the barn, each bearing paper tags indicating the animal’s breed, auction number, and handwritten notes: hand-reared; bottle-fed; breeder male; exposed to a stud. Each animal must be sold with its cage, so many sellers build their own cages out of whatever is lying around. As I walk up and down the rows of honking geese, the place leaves on me a thin film of dread; it’s bound to turn up in the dreams that startle me awake deep into the night. The rows of cages stuffed with animals remind me of the back-alley animal markets I’ve seen in China: rabbits crammed in cages so tight they can’t move; peacocks poking their heads out of wire cages so narrow they can’t
turn around, long tails sticking out the back, walked on by careless bidders. A big red and white sign says *Absolutely no photography or video cameras allowed*.

Nothing illegal seems to be taking place, but exotic animal buyers are notoriously suspicious of animal rights activists. Rosemary-Claire Collard, a scholar who visited several exotic animal auctions for her doctoral research, remarked that auction attendees met her foreign accent, note-taking, and lack of cowboy boots with open hostility.\(^{140}\) Thus, while I’m here as a researcher, I’ve tried not to dress the part. I’m wearing faded blue jeans, dirty hiking boots, and an oversized t-shirt with wolves printed on it. A look around tells me I made the right call: I see plenty of flannel, denim, and t-shirts printed with exaggeratedly ferocious airbrushed animals, along with several Amish men and their families. The license plates on the trucks and trailers filling the dirt parking lot say Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Kentucky, South Dakota, Arkansas, Illinois.

It’s difficult to describe the people at the Kalona auction without caricaturing them, and it’s dicey to judge them solely by clothing and overheard conversations, but most of the sellers seem to be rural and poor. Animal rights activists decry the dispassionately commercial nature of exotic animal auctions as symptoms of greed and callous disregard for animals, but it occurs to me that breeding and selling animals is one of a few jobs that anyone can do regardless of skills or education level. Though exotic pet buyers come from all socioeconomic levels, the exotic animal trade appears to start—like so many other markets—with people at the very bottom making products to be consumed by those at higher socioeconomic strata.
Zanesville, Ohio: Reporters compared the scene to a wreck of Noah’s ark and published photos filled from frame to frame with huge masses of fur; black, brown, tawny, striped, the bodies of dozens of bears, wolves, lions, cougars, and tigers sinking into the mud. The dead animals lay in wait for the backhoe just out of frame to drop them into a mass grave thirty feet deep and push the dirt over them, marking and obscuring their deaths.141

Terry Thompson, 62, was a former motorcycle shop owner, drag boat racer, gun collector and Vietnam veteran. Over several decades, he built a vast collection of exotic animals on his 73-acre compound in east central Ohio, including eighteen lions, seventeen tigers, eight bears, three cougars, two wolves, a baboon, and a macaque. On October 18, 2011 he threw open the doors to their cages, cut open their wire pens, and shot himself in the head. Fearing attacks on innocent bystanders, police shot and killed the animals within hours of the escape, prompting public outrage. 142

Jack Hanna, one of the world’s best-known zookeepers, defended the decision to kill the animals. Thompson’s compound was far too close to Interstate 70 and nearby homes, he said, and tranquilizer darts don’t work in real life like they do in the movies. Too small a dose has no effect, too large a dose can kill, and the drugs often take more than twenty minutes to take effect. If police had waited until they had enough guns and tranquilizers to stop all of the animals, Hanna said, “we would have seen carnage.”

The Zanesville animal massacre, as it came to be known, made headlines around the globe. The tragedy offered the public a glimpse into the world of privately-owned exotic animals, a world that’s often poorly regulated or not regulated at all. Ohio legislators quickly moved to ban the sale, breeding, or acquisition of exotic animals like elephants, hippos, certain primates, alligators, venomous snakes, bears, and big cats.
The state spent $2.9 million on a containment facility to house seized animals until long-term placements could be found.\textsuperscript{143} To this day, some exotic animal proponents publically claim that animal rights activists murdered Thompson and released his animals to gain the momentum needed to pass “anti-animal” legislation.\textsuperscript{144}

The number of states that allow exotic pet ownership with no license or permits dwindled to just seven in recent years: Alabama, Idaho, Nevada, North Carolina, South Carolina, West Virginia, and Wisconsin require no license or permit whatsoever to keep wild animals.\textsuperscript{145} In Nevada, for example, residents may be required to license their dog, but don’t need tags for their tigers. Other states allow exotic animals deemed dangerous to be kept with permits, or allow some exotic species but forbid the keeping of others. Even in states that regulate exotic animals, oversight is often minimal, allowing animals to be kept in poor or dangerous conditions.\textsuperscript{146}

Auctions like the one I visited in Kalona aren’t the only place to find exotic pets. Exotic animal traders use the Internet and print magazines to buy and sell animals. \textit{Animal Finders Guide}\textsuperscript{147} has been in print for more than thirty years. New issues come out every month, and with its low production values and pulpy paper, it’s a bit like a combination of a farm equipment newsletter and what would happen if zoos found all of their animals in the classifieds:

\textit{Red fox, several colors, hand raised, bottle-fed.}

\textit{Bobcats, Canadian lynx, Siberian lynx, North American porcupines, gray squirrels. Shipping available.}

\textit{White tiger babies available. For sale: American bison. Free to good home: American black bears.}
It’s impossible to know how many Americans own exotic animals as pets, nor what kinds, but experts believe that there are more wild animals in private homes in the U.S. than there are in zoos.\textsuperscript{148} Most exotic pets are small animals who pose little harm to humans; parrots, guinea pigs, tarantulas, or small reptiles. But a startling number of people keep higher risk animals such as wolves, bears, or big cats. There are many more captive tigers owned privately in the state of Texas than there are wild tigers in the entire world. As many as 20,000 big cats may be kept by private owners in the U.S.\textsuperscript{149}

Zuzana Kukol wants to keep it that way. In 2006, Kukol founded REXANO, or Responsible Exotic Animal Ownership, an organization that lobbies against exotic animal bans and certain regulations.\textsuperscript{150} She’s fighting tooth and claw for the right of private owners to keep any type of pet they want, provided they follow public safety laws. Her own menagerie in Pahrump, Nevada includes thirteen wild cats such as lions, tigers, cougars, bobcats, and servals, as well as seventeen wolves and wolfdogs. Kukol and her husband spent tens of thousands of dollars to equip their ten-acre compound with twelve-foot-high fences, water tanks, and climbing structures for the animals.\textsuperscript{151}

In 1986, Kukol fled communist Czechoslovakia as a political refugee. She compares attempts to ban or regulate exotic animals to the authoritarian laws she immigrated to America to escape. “I saw becoming a U.S. citizen and getting exotic pets as a way to escape the dirty politics and live a peaceful life in a free country with my beloved pets,” she said in 2013, testifying against a bill that would impose liability insurance and other restrictions on exotic animal ownership.\textsuperscript{152}

But not everyone who loves animals cares for them responsibly. Authorities in Ohio received dozens of complaints about conditions at Terry Thompson’s compound: lack of food and water, animals caked in their own waste, untreated injuries, big cats in
enclosures without roofs or in lightweight dog kennels. Neighbors made multiple complaints about Thompson’s cattle and horses escaping and searching for food and water. When one of Thompson’s neighbors reported that his horses had escaped, she found them licking raindrops off of her car in a desperate attempt to get water. “They keep them because they are animal lovers,” wrote one of the animal control officers who responded to the complaints.\

If any species illustrates the challenges involved in keeping certain exotic animals, it’s the wolf. Back when I was a kid who dreamed of keeping a wild animal as a pet, I wanted a wolf most of all. Wolves and dogs seem to have the best traits in common: endearing and familiar expressions, a spectacular set of senses, and a social structure similar to humans. Yet the things people sometimes dislike about dogs—dependence, servility, and a certain blunt dimwittedness—aren’t characteristic of wolves. Incredibly beautiful and forceful in their projection, the striking pattern of black hairs on a wolf’s face and body gives them the appearance of wearing make-up and highlights the intensity of their stare. Whereas a dog gazes with soft, fawning, chocolate eyes, a wolf’s eyes are wildness distilled: sulfur-colored, oblique, and assessing, a wolf’s withering gaze can pin a rival down like a butterfly onto corkboard. Compare the wolf’s flourish and elegance with the wayward dopey wiggliness of their stunted descendant; a wolf’s gait is equal parts sashay and swagger. They seem to float over the ground, all effortless leaps and purposeful, elastic strides. A wolf makes an ideal wish-fulfillment fantasy. They are superior versions of our favorite pet.

An old French saying refers to twilight as entre chien et loup—between the dog and the wolf. The phrase refers literally to the time between daylight and darkness
when it becomes difficult to tell dogs from wolves. Wolves and dogs share 99.8 percent of their DNA. They can breed and produce fertile offspring. The dog, our oldest animal friend, the wolf, one of our oldest animal enemies. And between them there’s a shadowy uncertainty, a twilight I’m still trying to figure out.

Wild wolves haven’t roamed the Rocky Mountains in southern Colorado for seventy-five years, but plenty of captive wolves live there today. The Mission: Wolf sanctuary, located in the remote and rugged Sangre de Cristo range near Westcliffe, is home to thirty-five wolves and wolf-dog crosses. The sanctuary, which is nearly always at or over capacity, still receives several desperate calls every week from people who can no longer manage their “pet” wolf. Mission: Wolf has turned down well over 10,000 requests to take unwanted animals since the sanctuary opened 1988. Dozens of similar sanctuaries exist across North America, and every year each one of them receives countless pleas to take in more captive wolves and wolfdogs.

People who adore wolves often know very little about them. That adoration, coupled with the wolf’s superficial similarity to dogs, results in a little-known but booming market for wolves and wolf-dog crosses as pets and performers. The animals range in price from a few hundred to several thousand dollars. Breeders run the gamut from eccentric hobbyists—such as one breeder who crosses wolves with Rottweilers to create “wolf-a-weilers”—to high-end, self-styled lupine connoisseurs offering rare bloodlines or sought-after subspecies. About 15,500 wild wolves live in the contiguous United States, yet experts estimate that there are at least 300,000 and possibly more than one million captive wolves and wolfdogs in the U.S.
Kent Weber founded Mission: Wolf in 1988. He’s tall with long brown hair, a craggy face, and a rugged beard, always wearing an oil-stained cowboy hat and a goldenrod-yellow duster. He never seems to sit still—he’s constantly speeding around on a dirt bike to see that this thing or that thing gets done. But when he’s working with the animals, or with the kids that come to visit, he’s quiet, gentle, slow, and soft-spoken. He never intended for this to be his life. Back in 1984 he rescued a wolfdog who was about to be put to sleep, and because he felt the animal deserved more freedom than the suburb could offer, he bought land in the mountains. And then something startling happened: visitor after visitor after visitor asked if he could take in their animals too, until Weber ended up with 52 wolves.

The animals at Mission: Wolf live in pairs or threes in two or three-acre chain link pens on the side of the mountain. As we walk the dirt paths together and he introduces me to each one, I soon realize that the life of a captive wolf is often tragic and circuitous, fraught with abuse, neglect, irresponsibility, abandonment, and but for a lucky few, an incredibly premature death. Each animal’s story—some are truly heartbreaking—offers an object lesson on the disastrous results of trying to make a pet or a performer out of a wolf. Farah, a sleek black wolf with lantern yellow eyes, was bred for a zoo exhibit but no longer wanted. Soleil, a petite white female, was kept on a chain and savagely beaten by a man who hoped to turn her into the ultimate guard dog. A huge gray wolf named Max had loving and devoted guardians who were forced to give him up after he escaped and killed the neighbor’s dog.

Then there are the dozen or so animals I’m not permitted to approach. Whatever happened to them, it’s left them so deeply scarred that even seeing an unfamiliar person
terrifies them. They’re kept at the very back of the sanctuary, away from the paths, where they can hide amongst the piñon pines and watch with wary eyes.

People who try to tame wolves soon discover that the only tame wolf is a dog. Traits that ensure a wolf’s survival in the wild wreak havoc in the suburbs, evidenced by no shortage of websites and pamphlets and books that offer frank warnings about bringing a wolf into the backyard. Unlike dogs, wolves did not undergo thousands of years of selective breeding for tameness; they are wild at the genetic level. They often cannot be housetrained. Curious and constantly on the move, they explore with their mouths, destroying anything within reach. In the wild, wolves naturally attempt to start their own pack when they reach maturity at two or three years of age. But without the option to disperse as wild wolves do, captive wolves and wolfdogs may challenge their guardian without warning. They destroy property out of boredom, self-mutilate from anxiety, and injure themselves in fervent, repeated efforts to escape.¹⁶²

And they’re dangerous. Due to heterosis—hybrid vigor—wolfdogs are often larger than either parent, sometimes weighing well over one hundred pounds. They are much more robust than dogs, with a biting force that can be three times as strong as a dog’s, and they frequently exhibit the keen, fully-developed predatory behavior of a wolf.¹⁶³

After wolves were declared endangered south of Canada, well-meaning individuals who mistakenly believed that wolves were about to go extinct established captive wolf colonies to preserve the species. Ironically, these colonies were a major source of the wolves now sold in the exotic animal trade. Other captive wolf bloodlines originated from wolves bred on fur farms and private zoos.¹⁶⁴ A few breeders even sell pure wolves
to the public falsely labeled as dogs or wolfdogs, since laws against keeping wolves do not regulate wolf-dog crosses. That’s how one Washington state dog lover ended up with Apollo, a wolf who now lives at the sanctuary. As a puppy too young to wean, Apollo was given away on Craigslist as a husky mix.\textsuperscript{165}

However, the majority of animals said to be “part wolf” may have no wolf ancestry at all. Weber says that most supposed wolfdogs are probably wolfish-looking dogs bred by people who exploit the wolf’s catchy image to sell overpriced mutts to unsuspecting buyers. Beyond the obvious ethical problem of defrauding those who buy these animals, this deception has another dark side: when people misrepresent dogs as being part wolf, they may unwittingly seal the animal’s doom. Animal control services are often legally obligated to euthanize dogs suspected of having wolf ancestry—even in cases where the only evidence is hearsay.

Frustrated owners sometimes abandon captive wolves and wolfdogs in the hopes that the animal will survive in the wild. When this happens, the animal usually dies, but sometimes they live long enough to pose a threat to wild wolves. Escaped or abandoned wolves and wolfdogs sometimes prey on livestock and pets. Wild wolves are nearly always blamed for these attacks. Given the extraordinarily high proportion of captive wolves and wolfdogs to wild wolves in the United States, it seems likely that many other attacks on livestock, supposedly the work of wild wolves, were carried out by captive wolves or wolfdogs.\textsuperscript{166}

Some people who acquire a wolf or wolfdog were simply trying to rescue an animal in need and didn’t realize what they were getting into. The reasons most people give for wanting a “pet” wolf seem to fall into two categories: Some view owning a wolf as the ultimate demonstration of masculine power and aggression, but for most of them,
the urge to own a wolf is part of a hard-to-nail-down desire to possess and participate in something wild, and the urge to have a positive personal relationship with everything this animal represents. 167

In 1984, Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson identified what he called the “innate tendency” for humans to “focus on life and lifelike processes”—a phenomenon he termed biophilia. 168 The drive to affiliate with other forms of life, Wilson argued, is inborn and manifests in human aesthetics, cultures, and environments as a desire to be near other species. “The biophilic tendency,” he wrote, “unfolds in the predictable fantasies and responses of individuals from early childhood onward.” 169

As humans continue to grow in number, the concept of “wild” is one that exists increasingly without a corresponding physical representation. Wilson argued that people who are deprived of natural environments seek out alternative means of satisfying the biophilic urge, such as bringing plants into urban centers. 170 Keeping pets, biologist Stephen Kellert argued, is another way humans bring emissaries of the natural world right into urban backyards and living rooms. 171 Yet domestic animals are in many ways ill-suited for the job of satisfying a desire for wildness. Scholar Paul Shepard argued that domesticated animals fail to satisfy the biophilic urge because in domesticating animals like dogs, humans have colonized them, turning them into “lumpish hand-licker-biters” who have been “shorn of what was subtle, complex, and unique in the wild ancestor.” 172

The seemingly contradictory facts that Terry Thompson and other exotic animal keepers have professed love their animals yet subjected them to abuse, neglect, or substandard conditions makes sense when an attraction to exotic animals is considered
an expression of biophilia: scholars Aaron Katcher and Gregory Wilkins argued that even actions that seem driven by cruelty—for example, children who seek out birds to throw stones at them—are, in reality, expressions of “alternative and learned means of dealing with an innate attraction to animals.”

Out of thousands of available stock photographs of wolves, one exemplified the essence of *Canis lupus* so perfectly that the image appeared widely in posters and magazines, including the *Smithsonian*. In that photograph, a female wolf wearing a luxurious silver pelt and a light dusting of snow stands regally alert, her golden eyes peering into the distance over the viewer’s left shoulder. The backdrop of snow-covered pines suggests this image is a lucky souvenir from the wilderness, but this wolf was born in captivity and destined to become a model from day one. She was bred to star in a film about wolves but no longer wanted when the project was scrapped. She lived for fourteen years at Mission: Wolf. Now she exists nowhere but a photograph. It is appropriate that her image is so often used to represent her species. Her self-possession and dignity defies the superficiality of the staged wilderness scene, her life at once famous and unknown.

The best-known photographer of wild wolves is Jim Brandenburg, whose photographs of wolves have appeared in National Geographic. His most iconic photograph depicts an Arctic wolf caught in graceful mid-leap from ice floe to ice floe. His fans are often shocked to learn that this legendary photographer of wolves has only a handful of good photographs of them, all the result of a few brief and fortunate encounters among countless hours spent in the forest. These lucky meetings with wild wolves could never satisfy the public demand for wolf imagery, so an entirely new
industry sprung up to churn out the wildlife scenes that appear in movies, TV shows, and on calendars, posters, mugs, and anything else that can be adorned with the image of a wolf. The fact that many of these items are sold as fundraisers by wildlife protection organizations hides a disturbing truth: Nearly all of these images depict captive wolves bred and kept for the purpose of commercial photography.¹⁷⁵

Commercial wildlife photography enterprises often masquerade as wildlife sanctuaries and educational exhibits. Appropriating the language used by non-profit sanctuaries, they ask for volunteers and donations and sometimes offer “educational tours” to the public. They sell private tours to professional photographers looking for marketable shots of wolves. One facility’s two-hour photo session costs $300. Another charges $500 for a half-day session. It is unclear just how many commercial wildlife photography facilities exist in North America, but a cursory search reveals dozens of venues charging hundreds or even thousands of dollars to photograph wolves and other wild predators.

Some of these facilities are operated by people who seem to love animals and take the time to learn as much as possible about the wild animals in their care, some cut corners to beef up their bottom lines. Triple D Game Farm in Montana, for example, keeps its wolves in indoor enclosures it calls “condos” when the animals aren’t being used.¹⁷⁶ This is a sociable animal that can travel forty miles in one day. A few wildlife photography parks, such as Bear Country USA in South Dakota, have been caught slaughtering and selling their unwanted animals for traditional medicine and the exotic meat trade.¹⁷⁷ “Surplus” wolves are sold to fur buyers and taxidermists for their hides. They are sold to wolfdog breeders and even members of the public as exotic pets. A
handful of these animals – the exceptionally lucky ones—end up at sanctuaries. What happens to the rest of them is unknown.\textsuperscript{178}

I met the wolf named Magpie on my first visit to Mission: Wolf more than ten years ago, though I have no delusions that she’ll remember me. She’s met over one hundred thousand people across the country and played in both the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean. Weber calls her an ambassador wolf. She travels the country in a retrofitted Greyhound bus, teaching people on the east coast and Pacific Northwest about wolves; why they belong in the wild and why they don’t make good pets. “People have to touch something in order for it to become real to them,” Weber says. “I can talk until I’m blue in the face, and it’ll go in one ear and out the other But once you’re in there with a wolf, there’s no way you could miss that message.”

He’s right. Her head is as big as a basketball. Her paws are the same size as my hands. When she approaches me, I make gentle eye contact, stroke the underside of her neck, allow her to lick face, my nose, my mouth. Wolves greet one another face to face with a steady gaze. The first time I met her, Magpie was a dark bluish black. Now she’s frosty white. Her eyes are the same, though—amber, piercing, lit with an inner light absent from the eyes of dogs. The Bella Coola told of a medicine man who tried to turn all of the animals into humans and succeeded changing only the eyes of the wolf. The poet Ted Hughes compared the wolf’s eyes to gunsights. I’m seeing myself in the sights of her eyes. I’m inhaling a sweet wind from her nostrils. She smells like dirt, like rain.
CHAPTER FOUR. OVERKILL

“Like children they cry, “I won, I won!”

—Alice Fulton, “Trophies”

The United States was once a nation of hunters, but contemporary attitudes toward hunting complex and often uneasy. About eighty percent of Americans are unopposed to legal, regulated hunting but fewer than seven percent are hunters. Many receive their introductions to hunting from the likes of Elmer Fudd, Bambi, or Richard Connell’s The Most Dangerous Game. Films, books, and television shows stereotype hunters as foolish backwoods rednecks and power-tripping machos, sometimes fabulously wealthy and often morally bankrupt. And we’ve all seen permutations of the “reformed hunter,” a sympathetic character whose decision not to kill an animal affirms a capacity for mercy and kindheartedness.

When I met my partner Nick, I was surprised to learn that he went hunting. He’s from Drayton, North Dakota, a small town near the Canadian border, and he hunted deer because his family hunted deer. That’s what they’ve always done, and that’s that. But he’s not much like them. Introverted and sensitive, he was the first in his family to go to college. He prefers gentle humor and curiosity to the rowdy one-upmanship and ribbing between his uncles and cousins. Still, he told me, there were things he enjoyed about hunting. “It’s a chance to slow down and think,” he said. But it was hard to imagine him killing anything.

Killing—that’s the unavoidable problem with hunting. Hunters make it easy to forget that animals die for this pursuit. Hunters and departments of fish and wildlife have evicted kill from their vocabularies, replaced by euphemisms like harvest and take.
Harvest, a deliberate agricultural reference, implies reaping an earned bounty, seeds sown and the field tended. Perhaps not inappropriate, since many hunters do work to preserve wild animals, even if that is just so that some of them can be killed later. As selfish as it is, there’s a kind of stewardship involved. Take is worse, suggesting a permitted removal or prior ownership, as though hunters were merely retrieving something that was theirs to begin with: the game of give and take. Take begs a familiar question: if they have to take something, why don’t they just take a picture?

By hunters’ own admission, killing is an important part of the experience. “Death is a sign of reality in hunting,” wrote philosopher José Ortega y Gasset in Meditations on Hunting: “One does not hunt in order to kill; on the contrary, one kills in order to have hunted.” In the ecofeminist critique of hunting, the kill is a sexual climax.

Those who hunt for trophies, in particular, turn animals into objects. Sociologists Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald examined hundreds of photos in fourteen popular hunting magazines, taking note of recurrent themes in the photos of hunters posing with the animals they killed. Kalof and Fitzgerald tested the assertion in trophy hunters’ discourse that the killing and display of trophies testifies to a hunter’s love and respect for the beauty of animals. “Instead of love and respect for nature and individual animals,” they concluded, “we found extreme objectification of animal bodies, with severed deer heads and cut-off antlers representative examples of the contradiction in the love-of-nature hunting stereotype.”

Although many hunters hope to shoot a large magnificent animal on their annual hunting trips, very few will do so. The motivations people give for going hunting exist on a continuum between product and process, with most hunters far more process-oriented
in their approach: Surveys commissioned by departments of natural resources and hunters' organizations consistently show that the majority of American hunters go afield primarily for reasons other than taking home a trophy: obtaining natural and local food, carrying on a traditional lifestyle, an opportunity to bond with family, participation in wildlife management, and the chance to enjoy the outdoors. Perhaps paradoxically, many hunters cite the chance to observe nature up close as one of their primary motivations. For many hunters, the greatest appeal of a day's hunting lies in its focused austerity and solitude; most hunters I've spoken to enjoy hunting whether or not they kill an animal. A saying I've seen often on hunters' message boards, t-shirts, and bumper stickers: A bad day in the woods beats a good day at the office.

As an artifact of an era when skills and trades were passed from parents to children, hunting remains one of the few recognizable rites of passage that remain in our society. A predilection for hunting might well be embedded in our genes, since enjoying the process of hunting would have bestowed a clear evolutionary advantage to any early human. A person who liked hunting enough to become diligent and skilled and who stayed on the hunt despite boredom, tiredness, or inclement weather had a better chance of feeding themselves and their offspring. Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson argued that humans have an innate drive to surround themselves with life and affiliate with other species, an urge he called biophilia. If biophilia exists, hunting is as straightforward as any expression of this urge.

The last time he went hunting, Nick confided to me that he'd rather spend the day with his most recent used bookstore purchase, Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow. Even his choice of rifle reflects his nerdiness: a 1944 Mosin-Nagant M44, Russia's military
issue during World War II. He bought it because it had history. I don’t particularly like
guns; it seems absurd to get sentimental over a tool of killing. Yet the night before the
first time we went hunting together, I found myself admiring the rifle as he cleaned it,
the chestnut stock polished by decades of use, the bolt action’s rich dark patina. He
handled the gun with modest pride and self-possession, his big, smooth hands gentle in
all they do. It was hard, like I said, to imagine him killing anything.

That first time we went hunting together, I was twenty-four years old. It was
November, in North Dakota, so already the winds blew brutally cold and snow covered
the ground. Vast soybean fields surrounded the land Nick’s family hunted on, but
several acres were set aside for hunting. Tracks pockmarked the brilliant white snow in
all directions—deer, but also coyotes, foxes, rabbits, raccoons, small rodents, and birds.
As we entered this seldom-walked oasis it occurred to me that hunting is one of the few
human activities that requires nature and wildlife to take place.

Nick and I were the kids of the group; the other hunters in his family were all in their
fifties. Some environmentalists celebrate fewer hunters as a sign of growing respect for
wildlife, but perhaps they should worry: Hunting is not only a source of funding for
wildlife conservation, it is also a source of potential allies: Researchers cite early and
frequent exposure to nature as the most critical influence on whether or not a person
will develop a vested interest in the natural world.¹⁸⁷

Hunting is a vehicle into nature for people who might otherwise have none. Some
hunters may or may not eventually acquire distaste for hunting, but the importance of
early exposure to the natural world is the same. “When people who love nature argue for
the end of hunting and fishing, without suggesting options equal to or surpassing the
importance of those experiences to children, they should be careful what they wish for,” wrote Richard Louv in *Last Child in the Woods*, “remove hunting and fishing from human activity, and we lose many of the voters and organizations that now work against the destruction of woods, fields, and watersheds.” Louv argued that hunting also teaches comfort and skill with the proximity of nature and wildlife. Fear of wildlife—biophobia—causes people to stay away from and lose interest in nature.188

Hunters are some of the oldest environmentalists, and one of the nation’s largest constituencies working to protect wildlife habitat. In 1937, hunters successfully lobbied Congress to enact the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act to place an eleven percent tax on the sale of all hunting equipment. This self-imposed tax is used exclusively to establish, restore and protect wildlife habitats. The Pittman-Robertson tax generates over $700 million each year.189 On March 16 of 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act, which requires an annual stamp purchase by all hunters over the age of sixteen. Wildlife artists create the stamps on behalf of the program for the US Postal Service; the stamps depict waterfowl artwork chosen through an annual contest. Ninety-eight percent of all funds generated by the sale of Duck Stamps go toward the purchase or lease of wetland habitat for the National Wildlife Refuge system. In addition to waterfowl, about one third of the nation's endangered species seek food and shelter in areas protected using Duck Stamp funds.190

Hunters conserve millions of acres of wildlife habitat. The state of Iowa alone boasts 360,000 acres of public land managed by hunting and fishing revenue.191 The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation conserves over six million acres.192 Waterfowl conservation organization Ducks Unlimited has put more than thirteen million acres into permanent conservation easements.193 Environmentalists who oppose hunting have
criticized these efforts as being motivated by selfishness. The argument goes that hunters only conserve wildlife so they can kill it later, but wildlife habitat is disappearing far faster than it can be saved. Conservation programs, even self-interested ones, buy time for imperiled wildlife.

Modern hunters also face criticism for using powerful weaponry and unfair advantages like scent lures, blinds, and scopes. Many a hunter has laid down their rifle in favor of the “fairer” bow. But bow hunting is notoriously messy, and the killing slow, particularly for big game. Hunting guides advise bow hunters to wait anywhere from thirty minutes to ten hours after the shot before attempting to track a wounded animal because even heart and lung shots can take a half hour or more to kill a deer.¹⁹⁴

Shots from a high-powered rifle can kill animals almost instantly, and animals hunted over scents and bait will often hold still long enough for a mortal shot. Lynn Rogers, bear researcher and founder of the North American Bear Center, defended the use of bait to hunt bears because the practice not only allows hunters a better chance at a fast kill, but also reduces the overall number of animals killed during a hunting season, since fewer animals die from bad shots, unfound and unrecorded.¹⁹⁵ Curiously, critics of hunting over bait or with the use of powerful weapons voice these objections on behalf of animals, but they do so from a human perspective of fairness, one that does not account for an animal’s point of view.

Trophy hunters, too, argue that their pastime helps to conserve wildlife. Animal rights activists respond with lists of hunting and poaching campaigns of the past that nearly doomed animals like the gray wolf, the bison, and tiger. The reality of trophy hunting’s success as a tool of conservation has been mixed: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, for
the first time in history, is planning to list the African lion as an endangered species—a move which could ban American hunters from importing lion trophies—citing overzealous hunting as the primary reason for the big cat's precipitous decline.\textsuperscript{196} Trophy hunting outfitters are urging clients to kill the animals while they’re still available to kill: \textit{the time to book your South Africa Free-Range Lion Hunt is NOW while you still can!}\textsuperscript{197}

After Kenya banned trophy hunting in 1977, big game numbers dropped by 70% or more.\textsuperscript{198} More than thirty years after the ban took effect, wildlife populations in some areas have yet to recover. When big game preserves were no longer viable due to the ban, the landowners sold their properties or converted them into farms. In his book \textit{Game Changer: Animal Rights and the Fate of Africa's Wildlife}, Glen Martin blames animal rights activists for spearheading the short-sighted bans on hunting that led to the decline of wildlife species in Africa.\textsuperscript{199} Merritt Clifton, animal rights writer and founding editor of \textit{Animals 24-7} points instead to indigenous groups who wanted to boot the “great white hunter” from their country. “Animal advocacy groups have had precious little to do with the hunting bans,” Clifton told me. Rather, these hunting bans “came about in fulfillment of a twenty-some year-old ambition of Kenyan nationalists to end colonial domination. The role of the Great White Hunter relative to black bearers was seen as emblematic of the colonial relationship.”\textsuperscript{200}

The trophy hunter’s urge to kill the very biggest and finest animals is the very opposite of the logic found in evolution, where the fittest and strongest animals are least likely to die. Bighorn sheep hunters covet large and fully curled horns; the wild sheep’s namesake horns are now the equivalent of a big bullseye. Big-horned bighorns may no longer live long enough to breed, so biologists have noted that the sheep are sporting
more modest headgear these days. In Africa, where elephants are poached for their tusks, biologists have noted a sharp increase in the percentage of elephants without any tusks at all. The increased likelihood of being passed up by a hunter trumps any advantage horns, tusks, or antlers might have conferred. Hunters who seek the biggest, healthiest, and most impressive animals function as a kind of backwards evolution, selecting against the genetics that build big bodies and impressive horns.

Some trophy hunters have mobilized economic theory to argue that hunting will never pressure desirable animals into rarity; as animals become rarer, so the argument goes, the privilege of hunting them becomes more and more expensive, until not even a vast purchasing power can buy it. But researchers have found that rarity itself makes the animal more desirable for collectors and leads them to value killing strong, impressive animals even more, a phenomenon biologist Franck Courchamp calls the anthropogenic Allee effect: “The human predisposition to place exaggerated value on rarity fuels disproportionate exploitation of rare species, rendering them even rarer and thus more desirable, ultimately leading them into an extinction vortex,” he concluded.

Aside from a quick lunch break in a café stuffed full of other hunters downing frosty mugs and swapping stories, I spent the whole day in the woods with Nick and his family. We’d seen a few deer, but no one had fired his rifle. We drove to half a dozen acreages and at each new place, we tried the same routine: one or two men waited with their rifles at the edge of the woods where soybeans met the trees, and the rest of us formed a line, walking side by side, to push any deer in the woods toward the men with guns. Every deer we’d seen so far was female. Each time we startled a deer, my heart raced, but then someone shouted doe! and the men at the far edge of the woods lowered their rifles.
By late evening, a full yellow moon hung in the purple sky. There was only a half hour or so of daylight left and it was Nick’s turn to shoot. He and his brother waited where the trees thinned out into the stubbly snow-covered field. The rest of us formed a line and pushed toward them, through thickets and paths dotted with coyote tracks. Where the woods deepened, obscured by tall trees, a swift brown shape flashed in my peripheral vision. I heard the crash of branches. A shot rang out. It was Nick, the thunderous crack of the Mosin. As we emerged into the field, I saw Nick standing over the body of a buck, a big deer with a modest set of antlers. He shot the deer through the ribcage just above and behind the elbow. I knew he wouldn’t have taken a shot unless he was sure of his aim. I didn’t see the buck die, but I imagined the death; blood filling his lungs, open mouth, white halo around dark deep eyes.

The guys didn’t whoop or yeehaw or anything like I expected. Maybe they were on their best behavior for me, but as we gathered around the body of the deer, what I sensed is difficult to put into words, except to say that it felt complicated and subdued.

“Nice shot,” said Nick’s dad.

Nick used a knife to slice a line from the deer's tail to his sternum, opening his body like a purse. He severed membranes and the windpipe, releasing the organs from their moorings so they could be dragged out in one pile. Nick and his dad lifted the deer by his front legs and the antlered head swung. The organs splashed out into a red heap, steaming in the still November air.

For years, the number of hunters declined steeply: more than a million fewer in 1997 compared to the previous decade.204 Interestingly, women were largely responsible for keeping hunting alive—the number of female hunters doubled during the 1990s to 2.6 million even as the number of male hunters fell sharply.205 Recent surveys indicate
that hunter numbers are growing once again as people who are interested in local foods and free-range meat take up rifles for the first time.\textsuperscript{206}

Nick’s honesty drew me close to him to begin with, and so too I am compelled by the act of hunting—or at least, fair chase hunting—for its honesty. I could never celebrate killing, but there’s something about this that I can respect. This is honest meat, and honesty was never more needed: Cartoons of happy chickens are used unflinchingly to sell pieces of dead chickens. It’s perfectly legal to feed cattle remains to chickens and feed chicken litter to cattle. Every November, a turkey is “pardoned” in a twisted Thanksgiving publicity stunt. The corporate farm industry deals with undercover investigations not by improving their animal-handling practices, but by lobbying legislators to punish the whistleblowers. The bodies of animals are bought cheaply, allowed to go bad, and thrown out by the ton. Amid all this, hunters have taken responsibility for their food from beginning to end. In some ways, a hunt is a rejection of what has been forced on us for so long we don’t know what’s real anymore.

Imagine a white-tailed deer, his head sagging under the weight of a massive and sprawling set of antlers. Nearly three feet wide and sprouting dozens of points like an overgrown bush, it’s the kind of rack that could shatter world records. But even though this deer has a freakishly huge set of antlers, his rack will never be eligible for the record books because he lives in a pen, on a farm that breeds big bucks for captive deer shoots.

The slender does in the adjacent pens pace nervously as though they know what’s coming. A man levels a rifle, aims, fires. A wisp of smoke hangs in the air.

A pink-tufted tranquilizer dart bobs in the buck’s haunch. He scrambles, veers, nearly collides with the wire mesh fence. His eyes roll, showing white, and he begins to
pant. The buck drops to his knees. His head, dragged downward by its cumbersome crown, is on the ground soon after.

Two men rush into the deer pen. One prods the downed deer with his foot to make sure he's unconscious, while the other blindfolds the buck with a towel. Together they wrestle his body into a canvas wheelbarrow and roll him into a nearby outbuilding. Once inside, he’s placed belly side up on a table and fitted with a plastic mask that pumps anesthetic gas to keep him unconscious.

The technician pulls the buck's tongue out of his mouth and attaches a metal clip, then inserts a probe into the deer's rectum. The clip and the probe are wired to a machine called an electroejaculator, which looks a little bit like a car battery. The technician turns a dial and the deer's hind legs shake, his dick gets hard, and he ejaculates. Once collected, the buck’s semen is portioned out into plastic tubes. Each one is worth more than a respectable used car. His semen is used to create deer with tremendous antlers that would never be found in nature. Most of his offspring will be sold to stock hunting preserves as “shooter bucks.” A lucky few may grow antlers big enough to become “breeder bucks.”

Breeding trophy deer for captive animal hunting operations is now a billion-dollar industry. Modern trophy deer farms use breeding techniques borrowed from the commercial cattle and horse breeding industries: synthetic hormones, special feeds, artificial insemination. Notorious trophy bucks with massive racks can be worth one million dollars or more. They have carefully documented pedigrees and race horse names like “X Factor,” “Ballistic,” and “Federal Express.” Captive trophy deer farms sell straws of semen from “breeder bucks” and chances to kill “shooter bucks” to the tune of twenty, thirty, forty thousand dollars each. Often, these antlers are so freakishly huge
that the deer who grow them cannot hold up their own heads. X-Factor, once touted as the world’s biggest deer, had a rack measuring 580 inches according to the Boone and Crockett antler scoring formula—nearly twice the size of the world record wild whitetail.208

In less than forty years, deer breeding—which started as a backyard hobby—ballooned into an industry that operates primarily to give wealthy and busy clients the opportunity to kill trophy-sized animals with enormous antlers. The captive deer breeding industry comprises at least 10,000 farms and hunting preserves in the U.S. and Canada. Over half of the states that permit the hunting of captive wild animals have few or no regulations regarding how captive wild animals are killed; humane slaughter laws govern the killing of livestock, and hunting wild animals is regulated by fish and wildlife regulations, but anything goes on some hunting ranches.209

In 2014, the Indianapolis Star conducted the first comprehensive investigation into the trophy deer industry; a team of three investigative journalists submitted public records requests to all fifty states and the federal government, examined a mountain of peer-reviewed research, and conducted more than one hundred interviews with biologists, wildlife officials, deer breeders, and trophy hunters. “The industry costs taxpayers millions of dollars, compromises long-standing wildlife laws, endangers wild deer, and undermines the government’s multibillion-dollar effort to protect livestock and the food supply,” concluded the investigative journalists.210

The investigation revealed compelling evidence that the trophy deer breeding industry sped up the spread of chronic wasting disease; a disease, similar to mad cow, which is always lethal to deer. Chronic wasting disease is now found in twenty-two states, and its spread coincides with the rapid growth of the trophy deer industry: in half
of the states where chronic wasting disease is now found, the first outbreaks appeared on captive deer breeding operations.\textsuperscript{211} Wealthy hunters don’t need to travel to Africa to shoot exotic big game animals. Hunting preserves in the U.S. offer the chance to shoot a dizzying array of species, including fallow deer, antelope, zebras, and even exotic breeds of domestic goats. Most are bred specifically to be killed, but in some cases, game farms purchase their animals from exotic animal auctions and even zoos.\textsuperscript{212} Now more than ever, the process of booking a trophy hunt is akin to shopping for a new car; clients can even choose the animal they wish to shoot from among photos on a hunting ranch’s website.

In the world of hunting, there is no bigger controversy than that surrounding the ethics of killing animals raised in captivity for what some decry as “canned shoots.” Some taxidermists (many of whom are also hunters) won’t even accept captive trophy deer into their shops. A number of hunter organizations oppose captive wildlife hunting operations as cruel, potentially dangerous to local wildlife populations, and an affront to the heritage and practice of “fair chase” hunting. Peter Flack, a legendary trophy hunter with 53 years of experience, condemned the practice as “shopping and shooting.”\textsuperscript{213}

The practice of trophy hunting originated as a way for humans to demonstrate their power over large, dangerous animals such as lions and elephants.\textsuperscript{214} But now that trophy hunters, with their high-powered rifles, can easily subdue even the largest and fiercest animals, trophy hunters’ focus has shifted away from dangerous animals and onto rare animals.\textsuperscript{215} Several game preserves in Africa specialize in breeding mutant versions of popular big game animals, such as white lions or the so-called “golden wildebeest,” a reddish version of the typically bluish-black antelope. Booking a trophy golden
wildebeest hunt costs $50,000, one hundred times as much as a hunt for a wildebeest of a typical color.\textsuperscript{216}

Like the wealthy “great white hunters” on safaris of the past, today’s trophy hunters are corporate types, people who can afford to spend tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars to kill a single animal. And the bigger and rarer and more beautiful an animal is, the more a trophy hunter wants to kill him.

Whereas the average American deer hunter can outfit him- or herself for under one thousand dollars (including license and fees as well as gun and ammunition, orange vest, game calls, coat, and boots), trophy hunts are well out of the range of most people. Hunts for certain exotic species sell for upwards of twenty, thirty, or forty thousand dollars. An African lion hunt starts at $35,000. For upwards of $55,000, power brokers can bag a bull elephant.

Charging such high prices puts trophy outfitters into something of a pickle: Hunters want to feel that their experience is real, that their hunt has not been staged, but at those prices, outfitters must practically guarantee that their client will take home the trophy they want. This pressure has led outfitters to undertake unscrupulous methods to tilt the odds in their favor.\textsuperscript{217} Trophy deer ranches use bait stations to concentrate animals and employ networks of motion-activated cameras to monitor the locations of trophy deer. On African big game safaris, trophy outfitters pay bush plane pilots to herd animals into the path of a waiting hunter.

Nonetheless, the myth of an even playing field is attractive to hunters. Hunting guides market the animals as \textit{dangerous game}, though few hunters in recent memory have been harmed by their quarry. One website warns potential customers to \textit{use only premium quality ammunition, because your life could depend on it}. 
Photographer David Chancellor spent several months photographing trophy hunters in the United States and abroad. Though the traditional image of the trophy hunter is that of a man, his book *Hunters* features several images of women. One particularly striking photograph depicts a young woman on a horse with a shot antelope keeled across her lap. In another image, bears and wild cats with frozen plastic snarls surround a demure Texan woman as she poses for the photo in her trophy room.218

At times it’s hard to distinguish between the lingo traded among trophy hunters and that of, say, baseball card collectors. Trophy hunters dream of killing the “Big Five” of African wildlife (lion, leopard, elephant, Cape buffalo, and rhinoceros) and the “Grand Slam” of North American sheep (Rocky Mountain bighorn, Dall, desert bighorn, stone). Egged on by outfitters to add certain species to their collections, trophy hunters spend thousands of dollars per hunt to have their quarry preserved by taxidermists and displayed in elaborate game rooms. Just as birders have a “life list” of bird species they have seen or hope to see: trophy hunters keep lists of animals they most want to kill. “Harvesting is how they refer to hunting” Chancellor says, “They’ve already gone for the big five, and now they want every spiral horned antelope...and they spend a considerable amount of time and money going after that.”219

Chancellor noted differences in how men and women approach animals right after killing them: “When they approach a kill, most guys high five or have a cigar,” he said. “Women will, almost without exception, sit by the animal, touch the animal. Some say a prayer. Some cry. Some walk with their head in their hands.”220
Peter Flack was on to something when he compared trophy hunting and shopping. Though wild animals are not products in a store, the advent of the Internet, along with intense desire to obtain rare and unique trophies at any cost, has made the experience of trophy hunting akin to choosing a product from a catalog of options.

Several theories of consumer behavior could help to explain what has been, to me anyway, long inexplicable. In *Culture and Consumption*, scholar Grant McCracken described a phenomenon he called displaced meaning—the tendency for people to anticipate and purchase objects not out of a desire for the item itself, but to gain access to meanings the object symbolizes—in this way, he argued, objects can serve as a “refuge for personal ideals.” By keeping lists of animals they plan to hunt, trophy hunters are engaging in a form of displaced meaning. They anticipate how their next trophy will enhance their lives, and there is always a new kill to look forward to. In this way, he wrote, “goods serve as bridges when they are not yet owned but merely coveted.”

McCracken also argued that very wealthy people face a dilemma when they are able to purchase everything they want. Longed-for objects, suddenly within reach, lose their displaced meaning. “When anything can be bought on a whim,” he argued, “there can be no location in space or time that can be used as a refuge for personal ideals.” There is a solution, however, and that is to seek what is rare, because when an item is rare, not even a vast amount of money will reliably bring that object within reach. Rare items must be sought out and won away from other collectors. Just as the wealthy art collector can look forward to the day when she has every painting by her favorite artist in her collection, the sheer number of available trophy species—in rare colors and certain subspecies—offers the wealthy hunter an infinite way to keep anticipating.
Marketing psychology scholars Mousumi Bose, Alvin Burns, and Judith Folse described a phenomenon they called “acquisitive buying,” a pattern of consumption that drives some individuals to methodically purchase several seemingly undifferentiated items (the example the authors gave is fifty pairs of shoes). In the mind of the acquisitive buyer, “these items are minutely differentiated and enrich the inventory, and there is logical justification that every purchase enhances his or her preparedness for anticipated specific product use occasions.”

It isn’t enough for some trophy hunters to kill one or two species of spiral-horned antelope. Some want to kill one or more of each of Africa’s spiral-horned antelope, or even different varieties of the same species.

What most impresses me about trophy hunters is how so many of them genuinely love animals. They know a great deal about them and speak in tones of reverent awe when describing their beauty. Most trophy hunters have a favorite animal. It's just that it’s often the same species they most want to hunt.

Yet there is something that I understand about this to a degree that makes me uncomfortable. One of my favorite spring rituals is to look for the cast-off antlers that deer shed every winter. Even though it is considerably harder to find small antlers from yearling bucks, and thus a much greater testament to my skill, I cannot deny the matchless thrill of finding a large and magnificent antler. Whatever this impulse is—this impulse that drives people to breed and spend and cheat in search of the biggest and the best—there is something of it in me as well.

I went hunting with Nick for a few more winters, but he hasn’t hunted since he moved to Iowa, away from his family, and I don’t think he’ll ever hunt again. He enjoys the outdoors in his kayak and the only shots he takes these days are from behind a big lens.
Yet his rifle still leans in one corner of the closet. I have yet to shoot it and I don’t know if I ever will. The first time I held the rifle, I was surprised at how heavy and cold it was. It opened my eyes to something terrifying: his capacity to kill. Or rather, the capacity of even good people to do violence. This is where I remember something fundamental: there is some terribleness in good people. There is some unavoidable terribleness in the world. The people most likely to lose control of it are the people who consciously choose to ignore it, or pretend they don’t have any.

I learned this when I killed my first animal.

I was seven years old. Our house on the edge of town sat just across the road from a vast nature park, an alluring tangle of pine scrub and winding trails. From my bedroom window I watched foxes and mule deer in the park for hours, but my mother wouldn’t allow me to go there on my own.

When the weather turned cold, a handful of mice infiltrated our cellar, attracted by warmth and an easy meal. Like the magnetic, forbidden park, these dark and glossy invaders represented a jagged border, a fascinating intersection of our tidy, efficient household with something untamed and off-limits. Setting mousetraps was not a chore but an adult privilege, one that afforded access to the hidden world of mice. A novel I was reading at the time featured a particularly lyrical description of running a muskrat trapline. That was all the incentive I needed to play “trapper.” I stole two mousetraps and set them in our garage.

The next morning I woke when the sky was still a bruised blue-black color to check the traps. The first was empty, still exactly as I had set it, but there was a small dark shape in the other. I picked up trap to study my handiwork. It was the closest I’d ever been to a mouse. The dead mouse was a dark and shiny treasure. I felt
accomplished, even though I didn't know what to do next. I hadn't thought that far through it. Just then, my mother's silhouette appeared in the doorway. She saw me holding the trap with the dead mouse. It was too late to hide it. I expected her to be angry but she was quiet. Worried. Tired. Sad.

She called the mousetraps in the cellar a “necessary evil,” the first time I’d ever heard of such a thing as necessary evil. Mice in the house put us at risk of disease, she explained. We had the right to protect our food and health from them. But this mouse had not transgressed, and hers was a life that wasn’t mine to take. Until then I had not considered the connections of this mouse to the rest of the world. Maybe she had babies that would starve because she wasn’t there to feed them, or she could have been food for an owl instead of a wasted lump in our garbage can.

The mouse was so tiny, lighter than the trap itself. I felt ridiculously massive at that moment, suddenly aware of the dangerous and unwieldy power I held. The mouse had once been a she—her tiny pink nipples faintly visible through the velvety gray fur of her belly—but in my hand she became an it, a gross outline of what was once vibrant and living. Eyes that once shone brightly like black glass beads were coated with a dull bluish sheen and one of them bulged out of the delicate skull from being strangled.

That was my first taste of this dangerousness running loose in the world—not a black-masked villainous evil, but real everyday velvety temptations, the potential for dark and seductive impulses that live within all of us.
CHAPTER FIVE. THE RESURRECTION TRADE

The Denver Museum of Nature and Science features one of the best taxidermy displays in the nation. These dioramas are the very same ones my mother, as a little girl, gazed upon when she visited the museum for elementary school field trips. When I stroll through these venerable, dimly-lit halls, she is the younger person. It’s as though I could be traveling back in time: these little girls with their faces pressed so close to the glass, gazing onto recreated wildlife scenes—any one of them could be my mother.

Maybe that’s because the animals themselves are forever locked in time. Here, a bull elk lifts his antlers in a graceful but incomplete gesture. Two arctic wolves size up a musk ox in a permanent standoff. Near them, a multicolored pack of glassed-in gray wolves stares into indefinite distance suggested by a mural of snowy foothills. Creatures that died decades ago infinitely re-enact imagined moments of their lives, as if permitted by the same slip of space-time that might allow me to see my mother’s childhood self.

The legendary Jonas brothers (Coloman, John, and Guy, not Paul, Joseph, and Nicholas) oversaw the creation of some of these mounts. In 1908, they launched the nation’s first large-scale taxidermy supply business in Denver. The Jonas firm also contributed mounts to the nation’s mecca of taxidermy, the American Museum of Natural History in New York.226 The rooftop of the Jonas building at 10th and Broadway still bears its grandiose 1920s-era neon sign, and imposing sculptures of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep and owls still adorn its lofty corners. The building was home, for a time, to a nightclub called The Serengeti.

Denver is home to another legend in taxidermy, the Buckhorn Exchange restaurant. The Buckhorn opened its doors in 1893 and it has hosted the likes of
Theodore Roosevelt, Roy Rogers, and Charlton Heston. Tourists flock to the Buckhorn for Rocky Mountain oysters and elk sausage, bison burgers and ostrich steak. They dine in the company of a menagerie of faded, yellowed taxidermy mounts crowding the walls. It’s hard not to imagine the animals as another set of employees, their departed bodies on the other side of the wall; here, a bored zebra resting a hoof, there, a coyote stifling a yawn, and when the show is over, they divide their tips and go home.

These are the two faces of taxidermy: austere nostalgia, vulgar kitsch. Taxidermy, the unlikeliest art form, seems increasingly out of place in a society ever more inclined to treat animals as friends and family and not objects and curiosities. Which is why it’s so surprising that taxidermy is hipper than ever: American taxidermy associations boast more members than ever before and a growing number of curious artistic types are taking taxidermy classes and building their own collections of mounted animals.

But in a world facing its sixth great extinction, how will taxidermy survive?

The first mounted animal that I can remember was a great horned owl at my elementary school. The owl perched in the headmaster’s office on a twist of driftwood, locked away behind a glass case. I visited the office many times just to look at the owl. Taxidermy allowed me to get closer to this owl than any living owl would have permitted. It fascinated, repulsed, and fascinated me again.

In high school, just when I was in the midst of a phase of papering the bulletin boards with PETA anti-fur flyers, I took a biology class taught by a taxidermist. Effigies of birds, foxes, and fish filled his classroom. I couldn’t then understand what would make someone love animals in this way, to prefer their empty exteriors propped up with
wire and foam. Still, I found myself hanging around after class to stare at the mounts, so close I could see myself in their glass eyes. I loved wild animals and wanted to be close to them. Here was a way of making a wild animal hold still, forever. Yet a wild animal stilled in this way loses a crucial part of her identity.

My best friends and I made frequent summer trips to the lake country near Park Rapids, Minnesota. Our route took us through Bagley, home of the Bagley Wildlife Museum—the largest little museum in the northwest!—on Highway 2. It had been long ago been boarded up, the fate of its taxidermy collection uncertain, but its faded sign still boasted over 750 specimens: Hind Foot of World’s Smallest Deer, Bone Sex Organs from Animals, 8 legged Pig, Born on a farm near Bagley.²²⁹ My English professor, who grew up in nearby Clearbook (population 518), rolls her eyes when she tells me about visiting for her school’s annual field trip: We just had to see the two-headed snake.

This nation has gone through its own phases of loving and hating taxidermy. Prior to the 1800s, taxidermy was mostly unheard of: the crude mounts of the time didn’t last more than a few years before insects destroyed them.²³⁰ Vast improvements in techniques and technology during the mid-19th century enabled taxidermists to create durable and increasingly realistic facsimiles of animals. As a signifier of worldliness, education, and prestige, taxidermy came into vogue; so much so that it was common for people to have their own pets mounted and put on display. Adventurers collected and preserved specimens from all over the globe, and natural historians relied on these specimens to build their knowledge of the natural world.²³¹

Like many things that enjoy almost universal popularity, taxidermy eventually fell hard out of favor. In the 1930s, mail-order courses of dubious quality urged the
public to learn to mount birds and animals, promising big fun, big money. The grotesque mounts cranked out by home-schooled amateurs gave all of taxidermy a bad name. The practice plunged abruptly from high culture to low, and there it remained.\textsuperscript{232}

Until now. If you think of taxidermy as a dying profession pursued by an ever-shrinking cadre of isolated weirdoes, think again: taxidermy is cool, maybe almost as cool as it was during the 19th century. Taxidermy associations boast more members than ever before. Art world rock stars like Damien Hirst feature taxidermy in their sold-out shows.\textsuperscript{233} Historically, the only books on taxidermy were how-to manuals. Now there are least five books in print on taxidermy as a cultural phenomenon. Taxidermy even got its own reality TV shows, Mounted in Alaska on the History Channel and American Stuffers on Animal Planet. Cultural commentators have attributed taxidermy’s resurgence in part to a fascination with all things 19\textsuperscript{th} century, and to the emergence of an authentic, lived-in aesthetic called “shabby chic.” On the Taxidermy.net message boards, full-time professional taxidermists lament the proliferation of teens, mostly young women, who use platforms like Tumblr and Deviantart.com to show off their collections of pelts and mounts.

No doubt taxidermy owes its rebirth to the fact that it’s much easier to do: The earliest mounts were made using the articulated skulls and skeletons of actual animals, upon which taxidermists molded wire, clay, and excelsior to create a body. This time-consuming process had to be repeated for each new mount.\textsuperscript{234} But since the 1970s, taxidermists have used prefabricated polyurethane foam forms, doing away with the need to sculpt their own animal bodies. An unlimited number of forms can be cast from a single sculpture. Today’s taxidermists have access to premade plastic noses, pre-set eyes, and forms that come with jawsets—mouths—pre-installed, eliminating much of the
painstaking detail work that once separated dedicated artists from crude hobbyists. As one taxidermist told me with more than a hint of annoyance, they’re trying to make it so that anyone can do it.

I think of Duluth, Minnesota as “little Seattle:” It’s hilly, artsy, often gray and wet, besieged by seagulls. A port city on the banks of Lake Superior, Duluth is strangely maritime: a horn sounds often as ships signal to cross under the city’s landmark aerial lift bridge, one of only a few still operating in the nation. The Superior National Forest, Minnesota’s famed North Woods, surrounds the city to the north and west. The city itself boasts a vibrant arts scene and abundant urban wildlife, not to mention a strong hunting tradition. Maybe there’s no better place in the nation to be a taxidermist.

I’m here to see a friend who moved here to start her taxidermy business. She grew up near Moorhead, Minnesota and graduated with a bachelor of fine arts in sculpture from Minnesota State University. Shortly after she completed an internship at the Smithsonian, her mother died suddenly of cancer: one afternoon she felt numb in her back, and a few days later she was dead. Tumors had attacked her spine and nervous system so aggressively and so secretly that there was nothing to be done. I helped my friend clean out her mother’s house, a task she otherwise would have performed alone. Half-completed crossword puzzles, partly used containers of food, a load of laundry in the dryer—everywhere there were reminders of interrupted life.

That marked the beginning of trouble for my friend: she became depressed, began to drink and talk of suicide, and I feared for her life. One stormy evening, she asked me to come take her gun because she was afraid she might use it on herself.
I’m intrigued by her choice of career partly because she’s a lifelong animal lover, and it’s baffling, how someone who loves animals can stand working with dead ones—but also because taxidermy seems to be the ladder she climbed out of a darkness that would have consumed her. Here she is, still shy and self-doubting, but building her own business in what is still a man’s domain. She is tough and determined in a way I hope to learn from.

Jaime, I’ll call her, is pretty, though she doesn’t think of herself that way. She’s finely built, serious, and quiet, her small hands exacting and rigorous in all she does. Besides operating her own taxidermy studio, she works part time making gut strings—the old fashioned way, using real guts—for violins.

Her shop’s in an older part of town—across the street, I note with a little humor—from a store selling hunting rifles. Tall windows facing the street display deer heads mounted in coy look-at-me attitudes, whitened deer skulls attached to varnished wood plaques, and antlers mounted on suede. She takes orders at a desk up front and keeps a shelf nearby stocked with a product to clean and deodorize mounts. In a thick three-ring binder, she keeps a careful record of the origin of all of the animals she works on; numerous state and federal wildlife laws govern the practice of taxidermy, and the state Department of Natural Resources inspects taxidermists on a regular basis.

Behind the door to the back of the shop, there’s a room for every stage of the process. She receives animals in the alley, brings them through the back door, and skins them on a table in the basement. There’s a room for storing the yellow polyurethane forms, called manikins, upon which she mounts the tanned skins. Dozens of animal bodies—mostly deer from the shoulders forward, but also coyotes, bobcats, and foxes—crane their necks up from the ground and stare with empty eye sockets. There’s a
mounting room, with a semicircle of half-completed mounts holding a silent conference. Shelves and drawers line one side of the wall, full of fake animal parts and pieces: bobcat noses, deer teeth, wolf eyes, coyote ears, fox tongues. There’s a drying room for finished mounts and a room to photograph mounts for her website. There’s even a small room for storing the fake rocks, fake grass, fake leaves and branches used to create—rather, recreate—the “habitat” surrounding the mounted animal. “I have plants in stock that are native to Minnesota,” she says.

Jaime has mastered a diverse set of skills not often acquired in today’s world where the ultra-specialist is king: she is a mortician, an upholsterer, a sculptor, a painter, an anatomist, a zoologist, a natural historian, an entrepreneur. She knows how to recreate, in obsessively precise detail, the muscles that attach a coyote’s ear to its skull. She knows that a deer with hair of a certain length was killed in December and should not, therefore, be depicted with green plants. And though all white-tailed deer pretty much look the same to me, she can distinguish big-bodied deer from Minnesota from their slenderer cousins that live in Texas. She knows how to get blood out of white fur, how to patch up exit wounds, and how to save a hide that has started to “slip.” And she must do all of this without offending the neighbors with suspicious smells.

Taxidermy supply catalogs reveal just how elaborate and obsessive taxidermy can be. The McKenzie Taxidermy Supply company’s catalog is over an inch thick and weighs in at a hefty four pounds of glossy pages crammed with strange inventory. Within its pages are all the parts and gadgets and doodads and chemicals necessary to obsessively recreate the bodies and habitats of thousands of species: Polyurethane manikins in a variety of sizes and poses, for species from aoudad sheep to zebras; plastic
zebra hooves (*cast from actual zebra hooves*), a full set of reproduction grizzly bear claws (*amazingly realistic!*); reproduction horns and antlers from record-breaking mule deer, Siberian ibex, and Dall sheep; artificial duck weed (*1600 seeds to a packet*) for water scenes; glass eyes with a built-in tapetum lucidum that glows like those of the proverbial deer in the headlights; the Dan-D-Noser, a tool for accurately recreating the bumpy texture of a deer’s nose; fake moss, fake aspen, fake rocks, fake wood; freeze-dried deer feet for gun racks; Timber Wolf brand hand cleaner (removes fishy odor!); a collection of metal instruments that would be equally at home in a torture chamber: fleshing wheels, scalpels, tail strippers, ear openers, brain hooks; tanning solutions, blood removers, skull bleaches, Stop-Rot, and an assortment of other chemicals that would probably give the good folks at the EPA an aneurysm; a substance called Jaw Juice, used to recreate saliva; and Eyez-Brite, an aqueous fluid that, when dripped onto glass eyes, gives the mount’s unblinking stare a realistic “wet” look.

A doe—a deer, a female mule deer—rests on the steel skinning table in the basement. Actually, it’s not the whole deer, just what taxidermists call the *cape*—the skin from the shoulders forward, plus the skull with the skin and flesh of the head and face still attached, ears, eyes, tongue, and all. This is how taxidermists prefer to receive deer for mounting—the easy gutting and skinning work already done by the customer, the detail work around the eyes, ears, and mouth left to a professional. The quality of a mount depends first and foremost on how carefully the animal was skinned; bad customer skinning jobs are the bane of any taxidermist’s existence.

This cape came from a mule deer from Washington state. Found in western North America, mule deer are larger than whitetail deer, with characteristic wide,
branching antlers and large dark eyes. Their namesake ears, big as a mule’s, work like satellite dishes to gather and amplify even the faintest sounds.

Skinning is a race against time: Jaime must meticulously remove in one piece all of the delicate skin from the deer’s eyelids, ears, nose, and mouth, but if she takes too long, the condition of the deer will begin to go south, as they say. The animal has to be thawed enough to be skinned but must remain cool enough not to spoil; if the hide gets too warm, the hair will “slip” and the hide will be ruined. Jaime dons a pair of gloves and begins slicing at the deer’s nose and mouth with a scalpel, freeing it gradually from the animal’s skull. As the nose and then the face flops loose, the deer begins to lose her character. A thin ooze of blood seeps toward the edge of the table and a humid, meaty smell fills the air. An hour and a half later, Jaime finishes. The bloody skin looks like roadkill. Somehow she will turn this mess into a final product that looks clean, sleek, and most importantly, alive.

Performing taxidermy well requires an intimate knowledge of animals that can only come from rigorous—nay, obsessive—scholarship of their bodies and habits. As I watch Jaime work on a white-tailed deer mount, she’s constantly stopping to refer to pictures of deer and casts of deer ears, eyes, and noses. Binders and books stuffed with photos of animals cram her shelves. As I sit surrounded by photos of deer and casts of deer, parts of deer real and fake, deer noses, deer antlers, and yellow foam poured into deer shapes, it occurs to me: this is a way to spend your entire workday surrounded by animals. This is a profession for someone who loves animals.

It’s true that taxidermists perform brutal work, often with unflinching dispassion. On Taxidermy.net, the world’s largest online community, taxidermists hold unvarnished
conversations on bloody fur and wounded animals, rotting skulls and skinned carcasses:

“Any good ideas about getting bloodstains out of hair on sheep hides?”

“When he was brought in I didn’t realize his left eye was gone. Only after caping him out I called the customer back to let him know that his deer was missing an eye…”

“I’m cleaning a stillborn goat skeleton and accidentally washed a metacarpal down the sink. Would anyone be willing to send me a set of baby goat legs?”

But the ambition of taxidermy has nothing to do with brutality. Taxidermy’s project is aesthetic. Its aim is not to destroy, but to preserve.

The urge to create this kind of obsessive reproduction is a uniquely American impulse, wrote scholar Umberto Eco in his book Travels in Hyperreality. He referred to this impulse as “reconstructive neurosis.” Americans, he argued, simply don’t have as strong a sense of history as Europeans, and so we’re forever trying to anchor ourselves to a vivid sense of history, and of reality. “The American imagination demands the real thing,” he wrote, “and to attain it must fabricate the absolute fake.”

American taxidermists played a leading role in developing the taxidermy diorama as an educational institution; American museums are home to the best and most detailed dioramas in the world. The technological advances in technique pioneered by Carl Akeley—widely considered the father of American taxidermy—gave us the real thing we demanded, and secured taxidermy’s place in the natural history museum. In addition to satisfying Americans’ need for immersive recreations, dioramas offered several advantages over live zoological exhibits: they didn’t need to be fed, for one, and
unlike zoo animals, mounted animals could be counted on to hold still and strike engaging poses guaranteed to bring paying crowds.

The United States is also the birthplace of modern taxidermy competition.

As an art form, taxidermy is ideally suited to competition: unlike other forms of art, where quality is subjective, taxidermists have a real live standard to measure up to. Forming a professional association and holding a competition promised to help taxidermists elevate their work from boorish craft to fine art by proving that taxidermy could be both scientifically accurate and aesthetically pleasing. The Society of American Taxidermists hosted its first taxidermy competition in 1880. William T. Hornaday won with *A Fight in the Tree-Tops*, a depiction—lurid by today’s standards—of two male orangutans battling over a female; one ape biting a finger off of his opponent whose face contorted with pain. 245

But taxidermists, notoriously solitary and reluctant to divulge their proprietary methods, proved difficult to organize. The Society of American Taxidermists dissolved just three years later after its first exhibition. 246 In 1976, the newly formed National Taxidermists Association decided to host its first competition in Denver, and the first World Taxidermy Championships took place in 1994. 247 Ever since, taxidermists have been duking out over who can fabricate the better fake.

The World Taxidermy and Fish Carving Championship gathers taxidermists from around the globe for competition that’s as stiff as a stuffed trout: teams of judges examine each mount with dental mirrors and penlights. They determine scores using an exhaustive checklist of competition criteria. The checklist for mammals includes 139 criteria including correct coloration on the interior of the nose, accurate inner ear anatomy, and correctness of the anus and sex organs. 248
Back in Jaime’s studio, I observe firsthand an example of reconstructive neurosis: She’s putting the finishing touches on a white-tailed deer with a huge rack of antlers. When I make an admiring comment about how real he looks, Jaime sighs and rattles through a list of things—imperceptible to me—that are wrong with him. *His eyelids aren’t smooth enough. There’s a little wrinkle on his face right here. There’s too much white hair showing in this nostril.*

I look closer, peering right up the buck’s nose, but still I don’t see.

Moscow Hide and Fur, “the west’s largest fur house” in Moscow, Idaho sells an astonishing array of hides, pelts, bones, beads, sage bundles, and leather to taxidermists and crafters, artists and artisans, American Indians needing supplies for traditional regalia and teachers looking for deer bones and snake skins for biology classrooms. The company’s website—which hasn’t been redesigned since the ‘90s—proffers llama skulls and raccoon tails, shed antlers and abalone shells, dried pheasant feet and hand-dyed faux eagle feathers.249

In a section marked “tanned furs,” I seek out my unofficial spirit animal, the coyote, on the vague notion that I’ll have a better chance of recreating an animal with whom I identify. I order the cheapest one, an ordinary-colored, slightly damaged skin of a coyote’s head and shoulders, a bargain at $29.99. The tanned skin is soft and supple. It arrives in a box stamped *wildlife.*

The coyote mounting kit from Van Dykes Taxidermy ($58.25) comes with everything else I need: foam manikin, hide paste, glass eyes, Critter Clay, and instructions. After soaking the skin in salt water to soften it, I’ve ended up with a wet, floppy affair that smells like wet dog. Not a good omen. Right away I face a conundrum:
am I supposed to depict the coyote as an individual or simply as an archetype, a member of a species? Is this the metaphysical Coyote with a capital C, or should I try to imagine and recreate the life of this particular coyote? I decide to go with the latter, only I know nothing of this coyote’s life, except that it’s larger than average and so it—he—was probably male. While taxidermy’s first priority is accuracy, it also allows us to interpret and edit animals as we please. I decide to attempt a masculine bearing and a sly expression. A coy ‘yote.

You won’t know how little you know about an animal until you try to mount one. The skin doesn’t fit quite right. It’s too loose in some places and too tight in others, so I have to shave down some areas and build others up with clay. The fur keeps getting tangled in the thread I use to sew up the back, resulting in a bunched, visible seam. How far should the eyes protrude from the orbits? How does Jaime do this? A depressing realization occurs to me: I am a shitty taxidermist.

My finished coyote falls far short of World Taxidermy Championship standards. Cockeyed and coiffed like a show dog, it would never fool a real coyote. Reassuringly comical, it wouldn’t be out of place on the wall of a barbecue joint. It isn’t a heroic attempt at resurrection made all the sadder by the utter permanence of death. It gives the uncanny valley a wide berth. It reminds me of nothing.

I think I like it better that way.

The altimeter on my car’s GPS unit reads over 10,000 feet as I climb Highway 50 west through Colorado into the Rocky Mountains, and the twinge in my sinus is all the proof I need that I’ve been out of my home state too long. I’m weirdly self-conscious of it, as though people will see me rubbing my temple and instantly recognize me as a flatlander.
It’s a blustery grey day in mid-March, which is antler season in the Gunnison Basin. The region’s elk have shed their crowns and antler hunters on foot and ATVs have taken to the southern slopes of the snowy foothills to look for the cast-off antlers, which can be worth a hundred or more dollars for a single shed and several hundred dollars for a big matched pair. Some hunters amass pickup truck beds full of antlers. People turn them into pens, craft them into chandeliers, or sell them for ten dollars a pound to the Traders Rendezvous in Gunnison, which bills itself as “Colorado’s largest antler shop.” That’s no small thing in a state boasting a population of 300,000 elk, the nation’s largest.

The Traders Rendezvous on Tomichi Avenue is covered in antlers, and outside is a wooden wagon piled high with weathered, chalky antlers: whitetail and mule deer, moose and caribou, but mostly elk. Inside, every square inch of available space, including the ceiling and much of the floor, is stocked with preserved animal parts: antlers, skulls, hides, mounted heads, and full body mounts. One of the back rooms is dedicated solely to exotic African mounts. There are far too many mounts for the available wall space, and as a result, piles of disembodied deer heads stare blankly up at the ceiling, as a steady stream of customers strolls through, admires, and talks shop as if there is nothing, at all, strange about any of this.

The taxidermy mounts call for exaggeratedly expensive sums: $799 for an impala head, $8,000 for a rather shabby looking African lion. While I can understand why a trophy hunter would want to have their quarry mounted, I find myself wondering who would drop this kind of scratch on an animal they didn’t shoot. The son of the shop owner is managing the place on this day. He’s good-looking, in a kind of nondescript, all-American kind of way, and humors me while I ask him a dozen stupid questions.
The Traders Rendezvous sells different things to different people, he says. Hunters buy t-shirts. Tourists buy single shed antlers to go on the mantle, antler whistles and keychains, and antlers cut into dog chew toys. Furniture makers buy antlers by the pound to create chandeliers and lamps and bases for tables. But the shop sells most of its taxidermy mounts to the wealthy people who keep summer lodges in ersatz mountain resorts. They buy mounts to give their cabins a rustic feeling. They are buying recreations of animals they didn’t shoot in order to give their cabins an ambiance it doesn’t have.

In Colorado, it is also legal to pick up the skulls of winter-killed elk. After the rutting season, bull elk have depleted their energy and many of them don’t survive the harsh mountain winters. Their skulls and bones litter the foothills. An entire wall of the Traders Rendezvous is dedicated to bouquets of elk skulls. It’s tricky to untangle their antlers and get the one you want. I’ve chosen a skull with a gracefully swooping rack of antlers which has set me back about $300. After some Tetris-style rearrangements, I succeed in wrestling the huge elk skull into the back of my Subaru.

As I drive home with the antlers slicing across the receding mountains in my rearview, I am conscious of the line I have drawn. I would never dream of displaying a mounted elk head in my home. But there is something about a skull that I have somehow deemed permissible—despite the fact, or maybe because of it, that there are no glass eyes upon which to drop Eyez-Brite onto for a ‘wet” look, no plastic teeth airbrushed to yellowy cud-chewing perfection. In a skull’s blank orbits is an absence that is conscious and self-referential.
Taxidermy faces an uncertain future. Technology makes taxidermy ever easier to do, helping to ensure its survival in a world where few people have time to learn rigorous and difficult trades. Soon, glass eyes with a built-in reflective tapetum lucidum won’t be enough—our reconstructive neurosis will demand blinking eyes. Eyes that swivel in their sockets. Maybe even eyes that cry. Taxidermy will approach the real as a line on a graph approaches its limit, getting ever closer but never quite arriving. And as more and more of us live in apartments without so much as a potted plant on a fire escape, we will demand recreations of nature to satisfy our longing for the real thing.

Yet our impoverished natural world and its imminent sixth great extinction mean that there will be fewer wild animals to employ in this purpose. We’ve already closed the curtain on thylacines, Carolina parakeets, and Yangtze river dolphins. Amur leopards, mountain gorillas, and countless more uncharismatic and unloved and undiscovered species wait in the wings to take their final bows. Some level of extinction is always present—biologists call this “background” extinction. Our present rate of extinction is one thousand times that of the expected background rate. Scientists project that the future extinction rate will reach ten thousand times the normal rate.

When I ask Jaime what drew her to taxidermy, I expected she’d tell me that her chosen career combines her love of animals and sculpture, and that is indeed one of her motivations. But her primary motivation is to preserve animals before extinction and climate change wipe them out. She believes the sixth extinction is inevitable—a fate that I, frankly, have a hard time seeing a way out of. If we’re ever able to resurrect species such as the thylacine or passenger pigeon, it will only be because a taxidermist preserved the DNA in its hair and skin. We’re losing our animals, but by subscribing to
what Eco called the “philosophy of immortality by duplication,” we have found a way to ease the loss.

Throughout my visit, Jaime reminded me with great sadness that climate change has put Minnesota’s moose on track for extinction in the state by the year 2025.\textsuperscript{253} The Department of Natural Resources has poured millions into investigating reasons for the decline of Minnesota’s most iconic animal with no recourse but to hold grim press conferences to tell us in quiet, stunned voices what we already knew: The moose are dying. Say your goodbyes.

Jaime has given us something real—an answer, no matter how unsatisfying—to take with us into the sixth extinction, but I will be at a loss for words. Thirty-five years from now, when I am my mother’s age, and I’m at the Denver Museum of Natural History, what will I tell those little girls—those girls with their faces pressed to the glass, gazing in on effigies of arctic wolves and polar bears, asking why we preserved them—why didn’t we save them?
CHAPTER SIX. UNBRIDLED AMBITION

When I was twelve years old, my mother fulfilled the dream I shared with millions of young girls by buying me a horse, a shining black Morgan named Penny. She inhabits virtually all of my happiest memories: after school I rode her bareback through lawn sprinklers and under apple trees. I woke up early on weekends and we rode through misty morning woods among deer and wild turkeys. I fed her carrots, kissed the velvet of her muzzle, inhaled her sweet breath.

Those who have never had a horse often think that a horse must be sort of like a really big dog: they’re tame, intelligent, and beautiful; natural companions with distinct personalities. Some even like to be hugged and cuddled. But anyone who’s been injured by a horse knows this, too: these animals weigh one thousand pounds. They can kill with one blow of a hoof. Yet horses almost always choose not to hurt us. They even allow us, far weaker creatures, to ride on their backs.

Skilled and sensitive riders who understand what a privilege this is can cultivate beautiful partnerships with their horses, communicating almost imperceptibly with gentle signals. I often rode Penny with no saddle and no bridle, nothing more than a handful of mane to guide her. She took such good care of me: she picked her way around branches and other obstacles that could have hurt me. Playful and persnickety, she never took it too far with spirited bucking or other hijinks. Whenever we stayed out too late, she found our way home in the dark.

I showed Penny in 4-H events and at the state fair, mostly the kind of shows where everyone got a ribbon. We never placed very high in any show: girls with far costlier horses usually won. Still, I looked forward to the anachronistic rituals of
preparation: scrubbing Penny’s saddle and bridle with leather soap, washing and combing her until she gleamed ebony, beautiful as the moon over water.

I dreamed urgently of rising in the horse show world, and I’m embarrassed to admit my third-grade fantasies of becoming an Olympic rider. But as I grew older, the more I learned about the dark and hidden things that happened to horses at shows, the less I wanted to be there. For a long time, I thought everyone who had horses loved them for the same reasons I do: their beauty and grace, paradoxical strength and gentleness. But as competition stiffens in the horse show world, that world becomes ever more populated with people who regard horses as paychecks and bragging rights, treat them as objets d’art, who deliberately breed horses with detrimental defects, who torture them with painful devices and training techniques. All of this goes on in the name of winning. Perhaps many if not most of these people once loved horses as I do, but at some point, it wasn’t about the animal anymore. Maybe it never was.

America is a horse-crazy nation: the United States harbors more horses than anywhere else in the world and cultivates a correspondingly outsized equestrian culture. The American horse population stands at nearly ten million out of a global horse population of about 58 million. In 1915, the nation’s horse population peaked at about 26.5 million and dove into decline as autos and mechanized labor replaced horses in cities and farms. The 1950s marked the low point in horse numbers. For a time, it looked like horses might disappear from our land as surely as the bison. But in the 1950s and 1960s, Americans embraced horse ownership again—this time for romance and recreation—and the horse population began to grow. During this time, Americans, and particularly American children, rediscovered horses in films and television Westerns,
adventure books, comics, parades, fairs, summer camps, and circuses. America’s horse population has grown steadily during the past fifty years.  

Whether or not they own horses, Americans treasure and consume horses as a symbol of freedom, strength, nobility, and independence. Closely and invariably associated with a natural or pastoral landscape, horses routinely advertise highly image-dependent brands such as Wrangler jeans and Chevrolet trucks, as well as a host of other products including anti-allergy medications, Rolex watches, Budweiser beer, and vacation destinations across the United States. Such ads nearly always depict horses moving through a generous expanse of beautiful fields, rangeland, or beaches.

A number of explanations exist for our love affair with the horse: the horse’s beauty and sex appeal, their lingering power as symbols of wealth and status, and the prominence of the horse in cowboy iconography. Though the exact reason behind our fascination with horses is up for debate, we have a very good idea of when it started. Equestrian historian Margaret Cabell Self wrote that the modern romance of the horse began in March 1942, after horses became obsolete for both labor and war: “At the same time, a curious thing occurred,” she wrote. “Almost simultaneously and practically throughout the country, children of all ages suddenly discovered the romance and fascination of the horse.”

In her critical examination of contemporary horse culture, *Dark Horses and Black Beauties*, Melissa Holbrook Pierson suggested that “a simultaneous deconsecration of the horse from the church of the economy” and the battlefield had to take place before horses could be associated with romantic and recreational consumption: “The beginning of the “love” era of the horse (as opposed to the pragmatic one, which has lasted for millennia)...happens to be when the United States cavalry was
disbanded, and around the time when civilians became eligible to ride on the international jumping team.”

Three decades earlier, 1920 marked the first time that over fifty percent of the American population lived in cities instead of farms. In the late 1950s, the growing conservation-environmental movement demonstrated that America’s open spaces, as well as its farmscapes, were in accelerating danger of disappearance.

At the same time, the advent of materials such as plastic quickly and dramatically altered our landscape. We needed a way of hanging on. America’s horse population has grown despite—and arguably, because of—the shrinkage of undeveloped and pastoral landscapes. We adopted a love of horses to help us hang onto pleasurable and comforting fantasies about the pastoral countryside and the untamed west—the spaces associated with horses – even as those spaces disappeared. Lamenting that the United States loses undeveloped land at a rate of over two acres every minute (or over one million acres per year), Pierson concluded: “We are hemorrhaging open space, but we have figured out a way to ease the loss. Symbols, unlike land, fit into shopping carts.”

Horse shows surprise some visitors with their atmosphere of antiquity: though show horses are groomed with modern salon products, fed carefully formulated supplements, and hauled to the show in streamlined trailers, their performances exude a retrogressive tenor: Hunt seat riders still wear the tall boots, black coats, and velvet helmets of the hunt field. Western riders arrive decked out in cowboy hats and boots. Pierson describes even a small horse show as “genteel, it’s own bubble-world of complex rules and historically engraved ethics.” In *Flight Without Wings*, a guide to showing Arabian horses, Patti Schofler offers this description:
Decorations turn barns into towns: one decorated as a Texas saloon, another as a Bedouin tent. Still others set up welcoming living rooms behind grassy lawns. Horses led by cowboys, by hunt riders, by Bedouins, by men in suits, by grooms in golf carts steadily flow past. All around horses jump, spin, chase cows, and pull carts. They remind spectators of England, ancient Arabia, the Old West, or the fox hunt.  

At a horse show, horses are consumed as a symbol of disappeared and idealized histories remembered with an inexact nostalgia. Within specific equestrian disciplines, the rituals of the horse’s performance, the attire of horse and rider, and even the bodies of the horses themselves are highly colonized, designed to evoke a comfortably revised version of history and its corresponding landscape.

The bodies of horses, colonized by selective breeding, training techniques, and grooming practices, make an ideal medium through which to access a fantasy. The desire to play-act idealized versions of history is most evident in the disciplines of Arabian horse showing, western riding, and saddle seat riding. The bodies of the horses used in these disciplines are appointed and modified to represent the revised histories and idealized environments of the antebellum plantation, the American West, and exotic Arabia. In each case, participants gravitate to ideas about place and time that are far different than what actually existed. So fervently do participants desire this fantasy that they go to dramatic—and sometimes abusive—lengths to achieve it.

The Scottsdale Arabian Horse Show in Arizona—the world’s largest—brings about 2,400 horses from around the world. The show, which takes place in February at the massive WestWorld equestrian complex in Scottsdale, lasts for ten days.  

Pop music pulses from the speakers as polished Arabian horses parade around the ring in a series of classes—specific contests—from morning until night in three
different arenas. The horses fly around the arena at a high-stepping trot for park pleasure classes, leap a series of fences for jumping competitions, and pull light carriages for driving classes. In western riding events, they maneuver cattle and perform tight spins and breathtaking sliding stops. In halter classes—essentially equine beauty pageants—horses trot around with heads and tails held aloft and eyes showing white, half-controlled on disconcertingly thin lead lines by men and women in crisp attire.\(^\text{264}\)

The Arabian horse is one of the world’s most recognizable breeds: lithe bodies, tails carried high like pennants, effeminate dished faces, dark and lustrous eyes. The horses at Scottsdale are some of the finest in the world, in that they are extremes of the extreme: their movements impossibly airy and ethereal, their legs unnervingly dainty, silky tails reaching the ground. They are groomed as if they were models in a pin-up photo shoot: their legs and faces closely shaved, hooves sanded and polished to a high gloss, and the skin around the horse's eyes and nostrils oiled to make them appear larger and shinier.\(^\text{265}\) Their tails drag the ground, despite the real danger of the horse tripping over their extravagant tresses. Even the insides of the horses’ ears are shaved to remove “unsightly” hair, though this hair serves the important function of protecting the horse's inner ear from sand and insects.\(^\text{266}\) All of this gives the animals a lurid look, like equine porn stars.\(^\text{267}\)

Underlying these practices, Pierson said, is “a self-loathing for the way things are, and the belief that human intervention is required for...everything that doesn't have anything...to do with the human.” She went on to describe the experience of attending an English pleasure class for Arabian horses at Madison Square Gardens:

> These animals are the equine equivalent of the anorexic girl who starves herself in order to replicate the kind of fashion-model ideal that could never exist in the real world, but that is derived from artistic
romanticizations of nature going back to Beardsley. They are horses made to move in a way that imitates only the hyperbolic horse of legend—fiery, barely of this earth. If the tail doesn’t assume the aspect of the wind-whipped stallion out on the steppes, why then break and reset it so it does...The sight appalls me when it is supposed to entrance me with its grace.268

When I see the Arabian native costume class, two reactions tug me in opposite directions: mild annoyance and envy, the stronger of the two being envy, because it looks deliriously fun. Middle eastern music blares over the loudspeaker as the horses fly around the ring at a gallop, wearing colorful tasseled costumes meant to resemble traditional Bedouin garb. The glitzy custom-made costumes—which I can’t help thinking of as equine bling—can cost several thousand dollars each. The horses wear tasseled breastcollars and saddle covers made from shimmery synthetic fabrics in bright colors: red, teal, cerulean, purple, gold. The riders wear turbans, capes, and veils decorated with rhinestones and gold or silver piping. The audience whoops, the horses shimmer and scintillate, their manes and tails cascading silver, gold, fluid black smoke.

This display calls up stereotyped images of Saudi Arabia: desert raids, silk roads, camel caravans. Needless to say, the costumes bear little resemblance to actual Bedouin clothing and saddles. At Scottsdale, after the announcer explains the historic basis for such a display, she admits we’ve added a little Hollywood and Las Vegas.

Among Arabian fanciers, the word exotic defines an elusive ideal, synonymous with a horse’s quality and beauty. Exotic peppers websites, magazines, and flyers that advertise and sell Arabian horses: exotically beautiful and correct; extreme refinement and exotic type; one of the most exotic Arabian mares of all time. The romantic exotic aura of Egyptian-bred Arabians makes this bloodline prized above all others.
In the early 1980s, celebrities and investors flocked to the exoticism surrounding Arabian horses, prizing them as “living art” and trading them like fine art. Prices for Arabian horses ballooned into tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands. Director Mike Nichols imported several Arabians from Poland and resold them for record-setting prices. He compared their appreciation in value to that of French impressionist paintings. But horses had certain advantages over paintings: “Paintings don’t get sick and die. You don’t have to feed paintings,” he said. “But paintings don’t have children.”

President Reagan’s capital gains tax incentives, coupled with the desire for exciting investments, inadvertantly turned the Arabian horse breeding business into a massive tax shelter and speculative bubble. Reagan himself owned Arabian horses. Bob Hope and other big-name entertainers headlined Arabian horse auctions. Celebrities like Wayne Newton and Shirley Maclaine bought horses. Bigwigs and power brokers arrived in private jets, wearing minks and jewels. The horses, sometimes heavily pregnant or very young, were besieged on stage with bright spotlights, loud music, and fog machines. Even the sawdust footing of the auction arena was often dyed red or green. Auction parties lasted from morning until the next morning. At the height of Arabian fever, Lasma Arabians gave away a brand new Cadillac to the highest bidder at its auctions. Some horses sold for over one million dollars to people who never intended to ride them. The record high price for a mare was over 2.5 million dollars, a beautiful animal named NH Love Potion who turned out to be infertile.

When the Tax Reform Act of 1986 ended the loopholes for horse breeders, the Arabian horse market collapsed overnight. Thousands of horses became—in the eyes of
investors, anyway—worthless. Breeders shipped them to slaughter by the truckload. Others were left to starve in their fields.¹⁷⁴

At the 2013 Scottsdale senior stallion championships, the horses—the handful remaining after several grueling elimination rounds—are announced by name and led into the show ring one by one like princesses at a ball. A person stationed just outside the gate waves a plastic flag attached to a long whip to agitate the animals as they enter the ring. The horses race in with heads and tails up, their rolling eyes flashing white. Wearing only dainty halters and thin leads, the horses appear almost out of control. The first horse to enter the arena nearly flips over backward, while another drags his handler, legs scrambling, to get away from the flag-waver. The audience screams and whoops as each handler parades his horse before the judges, then cues the horse to pose in a stretched-out attitude meant to accentuate the breed’s long, arched necks. Judges hurry from horse to horse, jotting notes and leaning to whisper to one another.

When the announcer reads the results, one handler breaks from the line-up and runs his horse around for a victory lap to deafening cheers. It’s Pogrom, a horse handled by trainer David Boggs. The bay stallion looks about ready to jump out of his own thin skin. Boggs—like the other trainers—wields a thin whip in one hand and the horse’s lead in the other.

David Boggs, the world’s most successful Arabian horse marketer, is “kingpin” of the Arabian horse world but virtually unknown to those outside that world. But most Americans have heard of Michael Brown, who flunked out as head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency in the wake of the Hurricane Katrina disaster in 2005. After Brown resigned from FEMA following his poor handling of the hurricane and its
aftermath, the press revealed that Brown had departed from his previous job under contentious circumstances: As Judges and Stewards Commissioner of the International Arabian Horse Association, Brown made waves when he accused the number one Arabian horse trainer in the world of mistreating the horses in his care.275

Boggs denied the charges against him and sued Brown for defamation, but an investigation by the IAHA’s Ethical Practice Review Board revealed “a preponderance of evidence” that Boggs did indeed have illicit cosmetic surgeries performed on horses in his care: “throat lift” surgery to make their necks appear thinner, liposuction to give their rumps a flatter look, and tattooing—performed by a local tattoo artist named “Spider”—to “correct” mottled pigmentation of the horses’ eyelids. Investigators furthermore found that Boggs altered veterinary records to conceal the surgeries. “David C. Boggs has, therefore, mistreated Arabian horses,” concluded the IAHA ruling, “mistreatment is evidenced by the unnecessary pain or suffering of said horses.”276

Following the verdict, Boggs was suspended from the Arabian Horse Association for five years beginning in 1999 and placed on probation for an additional five years.277 During his suspension, he took his horses to South America and showed them there.278

Boggs continues to generate controversy. At the 2009 Scottsdale show, the Senior Stallion Championship class came to a halt for about ten minutes while judges examined a suspicious welt on Magnum Psyche, the stallion shown by Boggs. Boggs argued that the horse had run into the gate just prior to entering the arena, but one of the three judges wanted to disqualify the horse: to him, the welt on the stallion’s shoulder looked like a whip mark. That judge was overruled and Magnum Psyche took the championship.279 In 2011, Boggs was fined $2,000 after showing a horse named LD
Pistol who had been “gingered,” a painful illicit practice in which a trainer applies gingerroot to the horse’s rectum to make him hold his tail high.\textsuperscript{280}

“In the old days, you could hit your horse in the ring,” said Arabian horse trainer Donald Webb, “It was amazing to see in a class of twenty, someone would smack their horse and at the sound of the whip, ten horses would drop to their knees.”\textsuperscript{281}

The Arabian Horse Association claims that these horses are prized for their intelligence and gentle disposition and bred for severe climate and harsh conditions,\textsuperscript{282} yet the training and grooming regimens for Arabian horses often demonstrate little concern for the horse’s welfare or the practicality demanded by a harsh desert environment. The lingering question I have after seeing these horses oiled and shaved like equine strippers isn’t why someone would treat them this way. The \textit{why} is obvious: It’s fun to win. Successful show horses can make lots of money for their owners and trainers. And the horses—especially to an untrained eye—are utterly fantastic to behold. They do indeed transport their beholders to far-off lands, even if those ideas are themselves a fantasy. What I have trouble understanding is how anyone can enjoy such a sight when they know what scaffolding holds it up. The artificiality of the display ought to undermine itself, yet somehow, the curtain does not fall.

Kids Classic Style is one of the most unbelievable horses I’ve ever seen. The golden quarter horse stallion with black mane and tail bulges with muscle like a Belgian blue bull.\textsuperscript{283} If I were feeling charitable, I’d say he was the Mr. Olympia of horses, but I’m not feeling charitable, so I’ll say this: he looks like an overstuffed couch. His shoulders remind me of a football player’s padding. His forearms are twice the size of my thighs. His neck is a tree trunk. His butt cheeks have butt cheeks. His expression is hard to
read, his face pushed into a perpetually sleepy attitude by the ripples of muscle surrounding his eyes and ears, his forehead, and even his jowls.

Straws of the stud’s frozen semen for artificial insemination cost as much as five grand each. Which is surprisingly high considering he’s passed a serious and incurable disease onto half of his offspring.284

The symptoms of equine hyperkalemic periodic paralysis—HYPP—can exist on a continuum anywhere from annoyance to death sentence. The disease often manifests as a subtle flickering ripple along the muscles of an affected horse’s rump or shoulder, as though a pebble were tossed into a still pond. The muscles of the face, limbs, or windpipe may twitch or spasm. The horse may be unable to chew or swallow. Tremors, muscle weakness, and paralysis may last a few minutes or several hours. The horse may even collapse, unable to move, for several minutes to an hour or more. These attacks typically strike throughout the horse’s lifetime, although some affected horses can go years between episodes. Attacks usually resolve spontaneously, but affected horses may also collapse with little warning. When paralysis affects the muscles involved in breathing or heart function, horses can die from the disease.285 Horses who collapse without warning can injure or kill their riders or handlers.

HYPP occurs exclusively in quarter horses and stock breeds that outcross with quarter horses, such as Appaloosas, paints, and Aztecas. The disease traces back to Impressive, a stallion born in 1969.286 Impressive was indeed impressive: He was the 1974 world champion quarter horse stallion, and with his heavily muscled conformation, he took the quarter horse world by storm. He was so in demand as a breeding animal that his stud fee soared to $25,000. And he sired a lot of foals – at least 2,250, to be exact, many of whom passed on the disease to their offspring.287
HYPP is a dominant trait: any animal who carries just one copy of the gene—like Kids Classic Style—will pass it on to his offspring fifty percent of the time. The probability of inheriting HYPP can be worked out on a simple Punnett square: a normal, unaffected horse has no copies of the gene and cannot pass it onto his offspring. If he’s heterozygous—carrying one copy of the gene—half of his offspring will inherit it. A horse homozygous for HYPP, with two copies of the gene, passes it on to his offspring every time. And when two horses who each have one copy of the gene mate, they’ll produce a normal horse only one out of four times.

Researchers positively linked the genetic disease to Impressive in 1992, causing a sensation in the quarter horse world: Impressive had thousands of living offspring. But then, something strange happened: rather than aggressively culling affected animals, breeders noticed that Impressive descendants were winning in the show ring in a big way. They dominated in halter classes, a beauty competition where the horse isn’t ridden, but judged solely on his conformation. Halter horses are—or rather, they are supposed to be—ideal physical representatives of their breeds. In the same year that researchers made the connection between HYPP and Impressive, thirteen of the top fifteen halter horses had Impressive in their pedigrees.

In 1994, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania gave breeders tools to eliminate HYPP once and for all by developing a test one hundred percent effective at identifying or ruling out the disease. Equine geneticists warned that refusing to breed affected horses was the only way to eliminate the disease, and that HYPP could be eliminated in one generation if breeders would just test their animals and resolve not to intentionally produce more diseased animals.
But the American Quarter Horse Association has done little to discourage the breeding of affected horses. The association didn’t bar the breeding and registry of severely affected homozygous carriers until 2007, more than a decade after an infallible genetic test was available. Horses that carry the disease, like Kids Classic Style, are still eligible to register and reproduce. American quarter horse judges continue to reward affected horses at the highest levels of competition. Horses with HYPP are consistently held up as the very best examples of their breed: Of fifteen world champion stallions that won open halter competitions in the past five years, more than half were affected by HYPP. As of 2008, Impressive had over 355,000 registered descendants.

That’s especially troubling, since the primary purpose of a horse show is to identify and celebrate the very best animals for breeding purposes. A former world champion halter stallion himself, Kids Classic Style produced at least 627 registered foals (if each foal cost the $5,000 stud fee advertised by Scheckel Paint and Quarter Horses, that’s over $3.1 million). Because HYPP-affected horses keep winning championships, breeders are tempted to gamble.

If Arabians are the supermodels and pin-ups of the horse world, then halter quarter horses are the bodybuilders. Their extreme physique might impress those who like their horses to resemble beef cattle. But just as real athletes don’t look like Mr. Olympia, heavily muscled quarter horses don’t look like the tough, compact quarter horses working ranches or winning rodeo events. Their bodies aren’t suited to perform the functions their breed is famous for. They are meant to represent the “ideal” specimen of the breed, yet the ideal specimens of this breed and those able to perform ranch and rodeo work are completely divergent even to an untrained eye.
Kids Classic Style stood for stud at Iowa State University’s Lloyd Veterinary Medical Center in Ames.\textsuperscript{297} In December 2012, he was euthanized at sixteen years of age after a rear ligament injury that failed to respond to rehabilitation.\textsuperscript{298} It seems likely to me that his injury was caused or aggravated by his overmuscled frame, which was several hundred pounds heavier than an average horse of his height. Iowa State University is still offering his frozen semen for $2,500 a dose.\textsuperscript{299} Iowa State has as recently as 2014 sold animals known to carry this disease.\textsuperscript{300}

In 2007, animal protection advocates succeeded in lobbying Congress to end federal inspections for horse meat—effectively closing all American horse slaughter plants—with emotionally loaded campaigns\textsuperscript{301} that emphasized horses’ roles as symbols, companions, and fellow builders of Western civilization, clearly a revised history in its depiction of horses as partners, not servants. In truth, western civilization has largely come about at the horse's subjugation and abuse. Nonetheless, based on the “partnership” narrative, horses have recently been designated as a companion animal—an animal that should enjoy the same status as dogs and cats—by major animal protection organizations.

Eighty percent of Americans oppose the reopening of horse slaughter plants.\textsuperscript{302} A number of celebrities and other notable people—including oil tycoon T. Boone Pickens, the Nakota Sioux nation, actor William Shatner, and country-western performers Bonnie Raitt, Shania Twain, and Kenny Chesney—voiced opposition to the reopening of horse slaughter plants in the west, largely on the grounds that slaughtering American horses for consumption by foreigners perverts the horse as a symbol of western heritage.\textsuperscript{303}
The American Quarter Horse Association is one of the nation’s most vocal proponents of reopening horse slaughter plants stateside. That seems strange, given the fact that about 70 percent of slaughter-bound horses are quarter horses. The AQHA makes money on every new horse bred and registered with the association. This business model relies on producing horses, regardless of the state of the economy, and whether or not the market can absorb them. It’s unclear how many slaughter-bound quarter horses are unmarketable due to being affected by HYPP, but undoubtedly many are. As one piece of evidence, take the following promise made by Scheckel Paint and Quarter Horses regarding Kids Classic Style: “If your 2011 foal [cannot be registered] due to HYPP restrictions by AQHA you will be entitled to a rebreed.” Clearly, affected foals are mere collateral in the quest for a marketable horse.

When I Am Jose enters the show ring, the audience leaps to their feet in an explosion of applause. In 2014, the handsome black stallion became the back-to-back world grand champion Tennessee walking horse at the Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration in Shelbyville, a feat that hasn’t happened since 1956. The stallion charges around the ring at a flying trot, his forelegs striking out like a dancer in a kick line, his hind legs reaching so far under him it almost looks like he’s sitting. His mane flings back and forth, his head bobbing so hard I can almost hear his teeth rattle. His rider and trainer, Casey Wright, hunches forward, clinging to the horse’s mane as though he’s about to slide down the horse’s back and off his rump. The jaunty, cheerful notes of a calliope bounce over the speaker, competing with the announcer. “Lookie there now,” he says in a thick Tennessee drawl, “this is the foremost example of our breed right now.”
Tennessee walkers descend directly from the smooth-gaited, elegant horses preferred by Southern plantation owners to patrol their grounds. Among today’s pleasure riders, they’re prized for their effortless, distance-destroying gaits and kind, willing dispositions.\textsuperscript{308}

They’re also prized for a performance known as the “big lick,” an exaggerated trot where the horse lashes up and out with his forelegs, reaching far under his body with his hind legs.\textsuperscript{309} The big lick is a variation on a type of English riding known as saddle seat, where Tennessee walking horses, American saddlebreds, and other gaited breeds show off high-stepping, flashy movements. Saddle seat riding is meant to hearken back to the antebellum South during a time when people conducted these ostentatious displays of wealth and status without shame.\textsuperscript{310}

Plantation iconography figures into these events with surprising prominence: show announcers proudly remind the audience that the Tennessee walking horse was developed so that plantation owners could enjoy a smooth and flashy ride as they surveyed their property. It’s meant to call back bygone days of grandeur and glory with any mention of slavery conspicuously absent and given a wide berth. The plantation, scholar Jessica Adams noted, exists in the public imagination as a “site from which issues of slavery, if not racism, have been largely excised.”\textsuperscript{311} Tennessee walking horse breeders invoke plantation iconography to deepen the sense of nostalgia surrounding their horses: \textit{Plantations, magnolias, mint juleps, and fine Tennessee Walking Horses: all the sweet things of the South are epitomized in Generator's Charmer}. These and other florid descriptions of the plantation, wrote Adams, “construct their appeal through an evocation of a genteel pastoral existence that they suggest has disappeared elsewhere, and is available now only through the medium of these great houses.”\textsuperscript{312}
Keen observers might notice that big lick classes seem much shorter than classes at other horse show events. That’s because the horses performing the big lick are almost certainly in excruciating pain.

Tennessee walking horse trainers striving for the big lick use thick plastic pads—called stacks—to exaggerate the horse’s gait. The stacks, nailed to the underside of the horse’s hooves, can be up to four inches high. Some trainers drive additional nails into the stacks to illegally increase their weight. One radiograph of a horse’s hoof with stacks attached shows dozens of nails embedded in the stack. Stacks force horses to place all of their weight on their toes. It’s impossible to know how badly these devices hurt and aggravate the horse, but they must be causing some significant level of discomfort, otherwise the stacks wouldn’t so drastically modify the horse’s natural way of going. When I see a horse wearing stacks, I’m reminded of a viral video I’ve seen, of men wearing stiletto heels for the first time: This is the worst. This is pain city.

Some big lick trainers—evidence points to the majority of trainers—go a step further by “soring” their horses, slathering mustard oil, diesel fuel, and other caustic substances onto the horse’s legs, which are then wrapped in plastic to cook the chemicals into the skin. Sore to the touch, trainers then outfit the horse with chains that strike and irritate their sore legs with every step.

The Horse Protection Act of 1970 outlawed soring, but the practice remains widespread in the Tennessee walking horse industry. As a result of these crackdowns, trainers have concocted several ways to evade the law: Some trainers apply a topical anesthetic timed to wear off just before the show. Some simply beat their horses to condition the animals not to respond to the painful touch. A hidden camera
investigation by the Humane Society of the United States revealed one prominent trainer, Jackie McConnell, punishing horses with boards and cattle prods to train them not to flinch. He and his staff beat horses who were in so much pain that they were unable to stand.  

“I think I always knew it was wrong, but because of many factors, I lied to myself,” said John Haffner, a veterinarian who used to sore horses until he became disgusted with the practice. His testimony offers a rare glimpse into how someone who loves horses rationalizes their abuse: “Horse shows are fun, the big lick is exciting, I was making a lot of money working with the horses, I liked the people, it couldn’t be all that bad because so many people that loved their horses were doing it kept me willingly blinded to the harm that was being done in the name of showing horses.”

Haffner was testifying in support of the Prevent All Soring Tactics Act, a bill that would ban stacks and other “action devices” entirely. The Tennessee Walking Horse Breeders and Exhibitors Association has lobbied fiercely against any strengthening of the Horse Protection Act. The horses love what they do, they insist.

I launched an exhaustive search for video footage of Tennessee walkers performing the big lick without stacks or other devices, yet I was unable to find even one example. Haffner went on the record to say that achieving the big lick is impossible without inflicting pain on horses.

Soring horses has been illegal for over forty years, yet more than 50 percent of horses at the 2014 Celebration tested by the USDA showed signs of soring. I Am Jose has no soring violations on his record, but his trainer Casey Wright received six Horse Protection Act violation citations in three years including horses that tested sore as well
as those which had foreign substances applied to their legs. Charlie Green, named 2014 Trainer of the Year at the Celebration, had 13 violations on record.

“He’s just a natural,” Wright crowed to *The Tennessean* after I Am Jose’s second championship win. How ironic: a natural who’s not allowed to be natural.

Each July, the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington hosts a horse show of a different color. Rather than sitting in bleachers, the audience is permitted to walk up and down among the rows of horses. Except spectators aren’t allowed to touch, and one has to be careful to avoid knocking the horses off of their tables. These aren’t real horses, of course, but models, the same plastic horses I collected and played with as a child. A model horse show is a real show for fake horses, one of dozens held across the country every year.

In the 1950s, companies such as Breyer began manufacturing realistic plastic horses, coinciding with the nation’s discovery of horses as romance objects. Model horses quickly became collectible, and today the toys are even more popular with adults than children. Model horse shows began popping up in the 1990s, with competition as serious as any real horse show. The Breyer company hosts the world’s largest model horse show, Breyerfest, at the Kentucky Horse Park.

Breyer model horses cost between $15 and $40 dollars each, with limited edition or custom models commanding hundreds or even a few thousand dollars apiece, thus costing several times more than some real horses. Model horses are judged on their collectability—their rarity and condition—as well as “performance” classes where the goal is to create a miniature equestrian scene that is as realistic as possible. They can be
shown in mid-leap over a miniature jump. They can be shown working model cattle. They can be shown in miniature Arabian costumes with tiny tassels.\textsuperscript{332}

The process of creating a custom model could be as simple as a new paint job, all the way up to a labor-intensive process of drastically altering the horse from its original form—adjusting the pose after softening the plastic with a heat gun, sanding, sculpting, airbrushing, fine detail work. Model horses can be mutilated and modified to any heart’s content.\textsuperscript{333} Melissa Holbrook Pierson wrote that model horses are “horses for people who can’t have horses.”\textsuperscript{334} I respectfully disagree: these are horses for people who want to treat horses like things.
CHAPTER SEVEN. VICIOUS CIRCLE

When I was seven years old, my family moved next door to a yard containing a pit bull dog, a jaunty black-and-white animal with a patch over one eye. My mother warned me to stay away from him.

“He's a pit bull,” she said. “When they bite, they don't let go.”

Little did she know that I had already played with the dog on several occasions. Her warnings made the pit bull and his unthreatening behavior even more compelling. I couldn't resist secret opportunities to watch him in his yard and test his reaction to me. On lonely late afternoons after school, I crouched in the beat-up grass next to the fence and sneaked glimpses of his wagging tail and thick, muscled body. I fed him leftovers from my lunch box. I stuck my fingers through to touch the dog's blocky muzzle and withdrew them, wet and shining from his tongue.

I lost count of how many times I petted and played with him in the two years we lived at that house, but the pit bull never once showed a hint of aggression, his winsome behavior totally out of step with what my mother told me about him. It was impossible for me to believe this dog could be dangerous. It was seductive, being won over with affection by this supposedly vicious dog.

Darla Napora may have had the same kind of childhood experience with pit bulls that I did. She was an outspoken defender of pit bulls and a member of Bay Area Dog Lovers Responsible About Pit Bulls (BAD RAP). On August 12 of 2011, Napora stayed busy at her Pacifica, California home, decorating its new nursery; she was thirty-two years old and pregnant with her first baby.
Her husband came home from lunch to find her dead in a pool of blood, her throat torn open and her body shredded.\textsuperscript{337} The couple’s male pit bull Gunner stood over her, covered in blood.\textsuperscript{338} He attacked Napora while she was alone, but she was an able-bodied woman; the attack must have lasted several minutes. I can imagine the dog’s sudden assault on her only for a moment—her shock, her desperate struggle—before my mind veers sharply away.

Donna Reynolds, BAD RAP’s executive director, declined interviews and speculated at length about what happened in the organization’s blog: \textit{Was there a physical abnormality such as a brain tumor in the dog? A pregnancy related fainting spell?}\textsuperscript{339} On the pay-per-clicks news outlet Examiner.com, one pit bull supporter speculated that Napora fell from a ladder and the dog had simply been trying to “help” her by biting her.\textsuperscript{340} Three days after Napora’s death, the San Mateo County coroner delivered autopsy results: Napora suffered no trauma other than dog bites. Her wounds perfectly matched the jaws of her pit bull, who bit her \textit{dozens} of times.\textsuperscript{341}

“She really believed in these dogs,” said her father, Doug Robinson, “and that they just needed a break, and yet that ended her life.”\textsuperscript{342} Robinson condemned pit bull supporters who, he said, were trying to “explain away the simple fact that her pit bull killed her.”\textsuperscript{343} Napora’s husband Greg issued a public statement in defense of pit bulls. Then he buried his wife with Gunner’s ashes.\textsuperscript{344}

Pit bull defenders have fought hard to rebrand the pit bull as “America's dog,” a safe, friendly, trustworthy family pet with a noble history and a sweet temperament. Yet pit bulls reign supreme as the breed of choice in the brutal world of dogfighting. Dogfighters prize pit bulls for the very same traits their defenders deny: an eagerness for battle, an unrelenting ferocity, an unstoppable attack.
Dogs of velvet and steel—that’s how author and dogfighting enthusiast Bob Stevens described pit bulls. Lean and muscular, with deep chest, smooth, short coat, and whip-thin, often-wagging tails, pit bulls are consummate athletes. A pit bull’s square, bricklike head wears a perpetual smile, lips stretching wide over substantial jaw muscles. They come in all colors and a range of sizes, from the smallest variety known as the Staffordshire bull terrier to a newly recognized variety called the American bully, which is heavily muscled and can weigh well over one hundred pounds. The United Kennel Club recognizes the original variety, the American pit bull terrier, and the American Kennel Club registers its equivalent, the American Staffordshire terrier. Kennel clubs recognize these varieties as separate breeds, but any distinction between them is up for debate: the Staffordshire terriers and the American bully descend solely from American pit bull terriers. A close relative of the pit bull is the heavier American bulldog, which until recently was known as the American pit bulldog.

Pit bulls injure more Americans than any other kind of dog and they kill more Americans than all other dogs combined. A 2009 review of children presenting for plastic surgery for dog bites at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia from 2001 to 2005 found that pit bulls accounted for over half of the injuries. A 2010 review of dog attacks on guide dogs and their handlers in the U.K. found that in attacks where guide dogs were injured by other dogs, the most common aggressors were bull breeds and the majority of injuries to people occurred in attacks involving bull breeds. In a 2011 review of children presenting for dog bite injuries at a level-I trauma center, surgeons found more severe injuries in attacks by pit bulls and Rottweilers. A 2011 study by University of Texas trauma surgeons found that attacks by pit bulls are associated with
higher morbidity rates, higher hospital charges, and a higher risk of death than attacks by other breeds of dogs. “Strict regulation of pit bulls,” the researchers concluded, “may substantially reduce the U.S. mortality rates related to dog bites.”

In a June 6, 2014 editorial to the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, David Billmire, director of Craniofacial and Pediatric Plastic Surgery at the Cincinnati Children’s Hospital, likened pit bulls to loaded guns. “I can categorically tell you that the problems associated with dog bites are indeed breed-specific,” he said:

> When I started my career, the most common dog-bite injuries were from German shepherds and occasionally retrievers. These injuries were almost always provoked... and in almost every instance, the dog reacted with a single snap and release. Starting about 25 years ago, my colleagues and I started to see disturbingly different types of injuries. Instead of a warning bite, we saw wounds where the flesh was torn from the victim. There were multiple bite wounds...the attacks were generally unprovoked, persistent and often involved more than one dog. In every instance the dog involved was a pit bull or a pit bull mix.

The percentage of pit bulls in the pet population rose from less than one percent in the 1980s to between six and seven percent today. The overall rates of serious dog bite injuries and the percentage of severe and deadly attacks involving pit bulls have also increased. In 2010, the United States Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality reported that the number of dog bite injury hospitalizations rose eighty-six percent over a sixteen year period from 1993 to 2008, a jump the agency said could not be explained by increases in the human or dog population. “It’s really kind of frightening, and unfortunately, we’re at a loss to explain it,” said Anne Elixhauser, a senior research scientist with the agency. “It’s a pretty hefty increase.”

The Insurance Information Institute reported that insurance payouts for dog bite injury claims increased fifty-one percent between 2003 and 2012, far outpacing
inflation.\(^{360}\) Most major insurers refuse to insure pit bulls at any premium.\(^{361}\) The nation’s largest insurer, State Farm, is an exception; the company even praised a pit bull therapy dog in its Good Neighbors campaign.\(^{362}\) Other insurers without breed restrictions have changed their policies. Farmers, for example, recently dropped coverage for pit bulls in California.\(^{363}\)

Compared to many large breeds—a Rottweiler, say, or a Newfoundland—the average pit bull is not particularly intimidating. Most weigh between forty and sixty pounds, slightly smaller than a Labrador. How is it, then, that pit bulls are consistently implicated in so many severe and deadly dog attacks? Veterinarian David Grant put it bluntly in the British journal *Veterinary Record*: “This breed has an intensity and duration of attack not seen in other dogs. This leads to severe injuries and, in some cases, death of the victim...This trait has been created by cruel individuals who want animals that are ‘game’ for dog fighting.”\(^{364}\)

The dog pit is sixteen feet square with low walls of plywood and a floor of carpet scraps, smeared with old rust-colored stains. Inside the old barn, about two hundred people surround the pit on cobbled-together bleachers. An indescribable stew of smells soak the air—wet dogs, blood, beer, smoke, sweat. Fights can go on for more than two hours, and the fight will end only if one of the pit bulls refuses to continue. The dogs will fight to the death if neither dog will yield. The crowd whoops and cheers, calling out bets and settling drug deals. The dogs, however, battle in remarkable silence: they collide with soft thuds, nails scraping the floor, wounds opening wetly into their shining coats.\(^{365}\)
This is a glimpse into the world undercover animal cruelty investigator Briar Storms found when she infiltrated the secretive subculture of dogfighters. Working with Humane Society of the United States senior law enforcement specialist Eric Sakach, Storms performed undercover investigations for nineteen years beginning in 1977, bringing the arrests of more than 500 dogfighting and cockfighting suspects. She spent countless hours among dogfighters ranging from hobbyists to professionals, witnessing fights that sometimes lasted close to three hours.

“The dogs want to be there and love to fight,” Storms said. “They have been selectively bred for over 200 years to do, or want to do, nothing else.”

Humans have bred dogs to attack bulls, bears, and other animals for entertainment since ancient history. When the Cruelty to Animals Act of 1835 banned bull- and bear-baiting in England, blood sport enthusiasts turned to dogfighting, which was far easier to conceal. The early bulldogs, accustomed to hanging onto a bull by his nose, tended to simply grip a mouthful of the other dog’s skin and hang on. In search of faster-paced and bloodier fights, dogfighters crossed the punishing bulldogs—which looked far more like today’s pit bulls than today’s bulldog—with terriers. The pit and bull terriers combined the tenacity and power of the bulldogs with the superior speed and aggression of the terriers, resulting in the ultimate fighting dog. Two hundred years later, while many other dogs’ days have come and gone, pit bulls have never been surpassed as the breed of choice for dogfights.

Dogfighting enjoys worldwide popularity, but only in Western-style dogfights do combatants routinely fight to the point of serious injury and death. Other forms of dogfighting, such as those historically popular in Asia and Eastern Europe, display far more refinement: in Eastern-style dogfights, dogs wrestle and intimidate instead of
waging brutal all-out attacks. The large mastiffs rarely kill their opponents. The dogs win by wrestling and pinning their opponent, and the fight stops immediately when one of the dogs submits.373

Western-style dogfighting, exported to the United States in the early 1800s, favors explosively aggressive dogs who won’t give up even when they’re dying. Above all else, dogfighters prize “gameness,” a dog’s willingness to continue fighting despite serious injury, fear, or exhaustion.374 Dogmen—professional dogfighters—say that an ideal pit bull will continue fighting “with two broken legs.”375 The most sought-after pit bulls are those who won't stop fighting even when they are dying. These dogs are said to be “dead game.”376

Gameness overrides the dog’s most basic instincts of self-preservation and sociability. Dogs are not naturally combative; conflicts between dogs rarely end in serious injury because dogs evolved an elaborate system of social gestures specifically to avoid real violence.377 Even wolves, who must earn their living by killing, back down most of the time when their prey stands its ground.378 Randall Lockwood, senior vice president for forensic sciences and anti-cruelty projects for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, referred to fighting pit bulls as “canine psychopaths” and their sustained attacks “a perversion of everything a normal dog should do.”379

Some U.S. states outlawed dogfighting as early as the 1860s, yet it continued to flourish throughout the 20th century.380 The practice wasn’t illegal in all fifty states until 1976. It wasn’t a felony in all fifty states until 2008, less than a year after the Michael Vick case gave the public their first glimpse into the shocking prevalence of dogfighting.381
Pit bull supporters claim that pit bulls enjoyed wide popularity and gentle reputations until sensational reporting in the 1980s ruined the breed’s image, yet this appears to be a revised history. Primary sources written prior to the 1980s contain little evidence that pit bulls were prized as pets or were very popular for any purpose other than dogfighting. Classified listings in *The Dog Fancier* magazine, for example, invariably advertised pit bulls as fighting dogs throughout the early 1900s.

Joseph Colby, one of the nation’s most famous breeders of fighting pit bulls, remarked that from the time pit bulls were imported into the U.S., they were closely associated with prize-fighters and saloon-keepers who bred the dogs for pit fighting. “The general public is under the assumption that this breed is carnivorous, vicious, and...would devour a human being,” he wrote in 1936. Colby noted that while pit bulls could seem friendly with people and especially children, “these traits can be shown with all sincerity on the part of the dog, and a few minutes later, set down against another dog, he will fight with the cunning instinct of a wild animal with intent to kill.”

The dogfighting industry, now worth half a billion dollars, is widespread and believed to be growing in the United States. The Humane Society of the United States estimates that approximately 40,000 people take part in professional dogfighting, using some 250,000 dogs, with an estimated 100,000 additional participants at the hobbyist and street levels.

Aided by the Internet, Western-style dogfighting became an international phenomenon, overtaking the arguably gentler Eastern-style forms of dogfighting worldwide. Formerly restricted to underground print publications, dogfighters now frequent secretive online discussion forums and advertise fighting dogs for breeding and sale using euphemistic language: *bred to old-school standards; this cross has stood*
the test of time; showing the true traits of the pit bull terrier. Dogfighters broadcast fights online and stage off-shore betting. Prizes for top-level fights can exceed $100,000 and prices for fighting dogs and their stud services can soar into the thousands. No barrier exists to stop these dogs from leaking into the pet population. In fact, since the Michael Vick case, the HSUS, ASPCA, Best Friends Animal Society, and other organizations have promoted supposedly “rehabilitated” fighting dogs as pets.

In my sophomore year of college, I took a job at the largest boarding and training kennel in town, a facility that also sheltered animals for adoption. For nearly four years, I got to know hundreds and hundreds of dogs of every kind, learned their names and their personalities. It wasn’t long before I had a list of favorites, a roster that included a couple of pit bulls. There was Turbo, a copper-colored female whose ecstatic wagging tail banged my thigh whenever I reached down to pet her, and Jamie, a pit bull puppy who won me over with big hazel eyes and gentle tugs at my shoelaces.

It’s easy to see why pit bull supporters want the public to ignore the headlines and statistics in favor of getting to know a friendly pit bull. They chase balls and lean close for hugs. They are exuberant, clownish, and genuinely likeable. I felt perfectly safe interacting with these dogs almost all of the time. But when it came to how they behaved at their worst moments, pit bulls stood out in disturbing and undeniable ways.

Most dogs prefer to avoid conflicts whenever possible. Witnessing two dogs in the middle of a snarling, bristling argument looks intimidating, but these are ritualized displays intended to prevent genuine violence. While threats, scuffles, and confrontations happened every day with the dogs I cared for, these arguments rarely
caused injuries. I myself was bitten only three times, and only once sought medical
attention for a bite. That's an average of less than one bite per year despite the hundreds
of hours I put in with hundreds of dogs. In many ways, my experience shows how
remarkably safe dogs are.

Simple distraction techniques nearly always stopped a fight: banging steel bowls,
a blast from an air horn, or in some cases, dumping a bucket of cold water over the dogs'
heads. The dogs often seemed grateful that I had stepped in to stop the fight. But as I
became more and more experienced with the dogs, I noticed that combats involving pit
bulls were a different story. Instead of a loud argument where the dogs made little
contact with their teeth, pit bulls often seized the other dog's neck or head, hung on, and
shook violently. It could happen in an instant and often it seemed as though pit bulls
gave no clear warning. These episodes looked less like arguments and more like
predatory attacks. Even more startling, pit bulls often hung onto their opponents with
astonishing calm and confidence, complete with wagging tail and an untroubled
expression, a perfunctory and businesslike attitude. Pit bulls seemed immune to my
routine methods to end a fight. Often, a pit bull's assault on another dog ended only
after I used physical force.

In response to severe and deadly attacks by pit bulls, several jurisdictions have enacted
restrictions or bans on them. Known as breed-specific legislation, or BSL, these laws
may require pit bulls to be contained, muzzled, insured, or sterilized. Breed-specific
laws may impose strict liability on guardians of pit bulls, holding them automatically
liable for any injury the dog causes. Breed-specific laws may ban pit bulls entirely.
Laws that target dogs based on breed or type are difficult to apply fairly, especially for dogs of unknown or mixed breeds. Breed-based laws may place restrictions on dogs who aren’t dangerous—the majority of pit bulls are never involved in any reported attacks—but the biggest challenge facing lawmakers is that determining a dog’s breed often involves subjective judgment. Breed is not a scientific term: it refers to a group of animals whose ancestry is known and who “breed true,” producing offspring with consistent and predictable appearance and temperament. But “breeding true” is subjective, and whether or not pit bulls can be identified visually is a matter of some debate. DNA test studies conducted in 2009 and 2013 found that observers wrongly identified mixed breed dogs a majority of the time, but a 2014 DNA test study funded by the ASPCA found that ninety-six percent of ninety-one shelter dogs visually classified as pit bulls or pit bull mixes were indeed pit bulls or pit bull mixes.

As of 2014, 860 U.S. cities and municipalities report some form of breed-specific legislation. Appellate courts generally find breed-specific laws to be constitutional, and these laws have survived challenges all the way up to the Supreme Court. Breed-specific laws typically “grandfather” (exempt) existing pit bulls, forbidding only the breeding and importation of new pit bulls, but a pit bull guardian who moves to an area with a pit bull ban may be forced to give up the dog or live outside the city limits. Many people simply object to the government telling them what they can and cannot own.

Citing the complexity involved in determining a dog’s breed with certainty, the Centers for Disease Control hasn’t tracked dog bites by breed since 1998. Since that time, 265 Americans have been killed by pit bulls, said Colleen Lynn, a dog attack victim who founded DogsBite.org, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to educate the
public about dangerous dogs, which the organization says are “primarily pit bull-type
dogs.” Together with other pit bull attack survivors and bereaved family members,
Lynn is urging the CDC to resume including breed in its dog attack data. “We live and
die in public health based on how good our data is,” she said, quoting CDC director
Thomas Friedan.

Pit bull advocates want to do away with breed-specific laws in favor of “breed-
neutral” laws that punish those whose dogs show dangerous behavior. The problem with
breed-neutral laws, Lynn says, is that by definition these laws do address dangerous
dogs until after a dog has already shown dangerous behavior, and by then it may be too
late: the dog’s “first bite” might be deadly.

Scant research exists on the long-term outcomes of pit bull restrictions. The only
two peer-reviewed independent long-term studies conducted on breed-specific laws
both supported restrictions on pit bulls, citing “significant” decreases in dog bite injury
hospitalizations.

Malathi Raghavan, epidemiologist and Assistant Director of
Education and Research for the American Veterinary Medical Association, said
that while breed-specific laws aren’t likely to prevent all or even most dog bites, these laws
can play an important role in reducing serious injuries. When given a choice at the
polls—which has happened only twice, in Miami-Dade, Florida in 2012 and Aurora,
Colorado in 2014—voters supported pit bull restrictions by a landslide margin of two
to one.

Breed-specific laws may be good for pit bulls, too. In Aurora, Colorado, city
officials observed a ninety-three percent drop in euthanasia of unwanted pit bulls since
the law took effect. Denver’s overall rate of shelter dog euthanasia plunged by seventy-
seven percent after the city banned pit bulls in 1989. Prior to San Francisco’s passage
of a 2005 law making sterilization mandatory for pit bulls, the dogs made up forty to sixty percent of dogs in shelters and seventy percent of the animals on the dangerous dogs list. The San Francisco SPCA, which initially campaigned against the law, later credited it with a twenty-four percent drop in pit bull euthanasia.

Lobbying on behalf of pit bulls is now a multimillion-dollar industry. The sheer scope of these efforts can be hard to believe. Several national nonprofits and corporations and dozens of smaller regional organizations exist to lobby for pit bulls. Collectively, they wield considerable political clout: pit bull lobbyists have succeeded in passing statewide prohibitions against breed-specific laws in nineteen states.

Pit bull advocates aren’t just interested in doing away with breed-specific laws; many wish to do away with the very idea that pit bulls are higher-risk dogs, said Barbara Kay, a Canadian journalist who’s written about the pit bull advocacy movement for the National Post and the Huffington Post: “This is the first time in the history of human-animal relations that a movement has formed, not to promote the well-known virtues of a beloved breed, but to promote denial of a beloved breed’s well-known vices.”

A central claim among those who defend pit bulls is that the media actively or passively suppresses the reporting of severe dog attacks that don’t involve pit bulls, yet no peer-reviewed research indicates that this is true. If anything, Kay wrote, the media seems to be biased in favor of pit bulls: “The few articles or columns about pit bulls I saw in the newspapers that I read regularly seemed to be skewed to defence of pit bulls,” Kay wrote. “When pit bull depredations turned up in news items, there was a tendency to downplay or sometimes even suppress the culprit’s breed.”
The New York Times, the New Yorker, Forbes, TIME magazine, National Geographic magazine, Salon and Esquire (among many other major outlets) have recently run stories on “the softer side of pit bulls.” At the Tattered Cover bookstore in Denver (where pit bulls have been banned since 1989), I counted six books in the “in defense of pit bulls” genre, with several more parroting unattributed pit bull lobby talking points as fact: for example, the widespread idea that pit bulls were historically known as “nanny dogs.” The earliest reference to pit bulls as “nanny dogs” was when a pit bull advocate created the myth in 1971. Genuine primary sources referring to pit bulls as “nanny dogs” have never surfaced. And then there’s the assertion that pit bulls outperform collies, golden retrievers, and other famously gentle breeds on the American Temperament Test. Researchers have found that such temperament tests are extraordinarily poor at predicting or ruling out aggression.

There’ve been at least three documentaries and two cable TV shows dedicated to “soft” portrayals of pit bulls, not to mention numerous books with syrupy titles like I’m a Good Dog: America’s Most Beautiful (and Misunderstood) Pet. Animal rights news outlet The Dodo runs effusive pit bull puff pieces on a near-daily basis. The Huffington Post even has a section devoted to pit bulls (HuffPost Pitbulls—the “I” in pit bull dotted with an adorable pawprint) full of photo slideshows with titles like “8 reasons pit bulls are better than most people” and “pit bulls in pajamas aim to warm people up to the breed.” In 2014, 21 bereaved family members of pit bull attack victims and more than 50 pit bull attack survivors and their families sent an open letter to founding editor Arianna Huffington, urging the Huffington Post to adopt a more objective stance toward reporting on pit bulls. The Huffington Post has neither publically acknowledged nor responded to this letter.
If journalists seem reluctant to delve into the pit bull issue past a superficial level, it’s hard to blame them. As a conservative columnist who’s written more than her fair share of contentious editorials, Barbara Kay admits that she sets herself up for spirited responses from her readers. Yet she said nothing compares to the vitriol she received after criticizing the pit bull lobby: “I was stunned to receive hate mail in quantities and of a virulence I had never known before,” she wrote.

After he covered the fatal pit bull attack on Nicholas Faibish for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, C. W. Nevius commented on the torrent of angry responses he received from pit bull supporters. “What is striking is the familiarity the respondents have with the process,” he wrote. “They have their arguments laid out, ready to go. Many of them make the same points, almost verbatim. By the time I’d received more than 600 responses to my column, it was clear I was the target of a standard tactic: If someone criticizes pit bulls, mobilize and bury the critic in a flood of responses.”

Pit bull defenders lit into the *Denver Post* for running an ad purchased by a pit bull attack victim in support of keeping Aurora’s pit bull law. They hounded celebrities Kelly Ripa and Dr. Laura for making disparaging remarks about pit bulls, and McDonalds for an ad campaign suggesting that petting a stray pit bull is more dangerous than eating Chicken McBites. They attacked Walgreens for selling Pit Bull brand self-defense spray and retail giant Petsmart for not allowing pit bulls in dog daycare. After former Dutch SPCA cruelty investigator Alexandra Semyonova spoke out against what she felt were unacceptable risks associated with pit bulls, she faced a
coordinated harassment campaign so vicious that the Dutch minister of justice said it had elements of organized crime.440

Kay, who’s faced a more or less constant backlash from pit bull supporters since she began writing about pit bulls, argued that “the sealed world in which pit bull activists immerse themselves reinforces an already cultish fervour, and provides staging grounds for “mobbing” of dissidents who dare to flout the reigning canine correctness around the pit bull’s alleged victimhood.”441

For an annual outdoor art contest called ArtPrize, artist Joan Marie Kowal of Wyoming, Michigan created “Out of the Blue,” a memorial to each American killed by dogs in 2014. The exhibit wasn’t intended to pick on pit bulls—Kowal’s exhibit simply memorialized all deadly dog attack victims within a certain time period. But the majority of deaths involved pit bulls, and pit bull defenders were upset that someone pointed that out. That’s why a small cadre of pit bull supporters showed up to protest the exhibit, blocking the public’s access to it with their pit bulls.442

Coincident with the emergence of the pit bull advocacy movement, the number of pit bulls killed in shelters has swollen to unbelievable heights. The rate of pit bull euthanasia in shelters doubled and tripled even as overall euthanasia numbers have plummeted. Today, approximately forty to eighty percent of dogs in animal shelters are pit bulls. U.S. shelters euthanize an estimated 800,000 to 1.2 million pit bulls per year, about one third to one half of the total number of dogs euthanized in shelters, and more dogs than the American Kennel Club registers every year.443

Pit bull advocates blame this crisis on the belief that pit bulls are dangerous.444 Eliminate that belief, and the pit bull euthanasia crisis will end because more people will
adopt pit bulls. But presumably, no one who believes pit bulls are dangerous breeds them or wants breeding to go on unrestricted. “Surplus” pit bulls come from somewhere: they’re produced by people who want to sell pit bulls, aided by those who wish to strengthen the market for pit bulls and remove obstacles (such as spay and neuter laws) that impede pit bull breeding. Aggressive campaigns to market pit bulls as family pets are the smoking gun.

Consider one recent attempt to market pit bulls to children: Novelist Douglas Anthony Cooper used Kickstarter to raise over $62,000 to self-publish *Galunker*, an illustrated children’s book about a fictional former fighting pit bull Cooper described as “about as dangerous as a marshmallow.” The *Huffington Post* serialized the book with an article titled “Children Need Pit Bulls.” Need.445

“We know that children pester their parents to get them pets of the type featured in books they have read. This is not always a good thing,” Cooper wrote, “but it will be a good thing here, if Galunker induces families to adopt so-called pit bulls from shelters.”446

Yet those who work with pit bulls are among the first to argue that the dogs often aren’t suitable for novice pet owners: they tend to be incredibly strong, high-energy dogs. They can be destructive, easily excited, and prone to aggression, especially toward other dogs: “It is typical for this breed to fight with another dog over what seems like nothing,” warns Tia Torres, star of *Pit Bulls and Parolees* and founder of Villalobos Rescue Center, the nation’s largest pit bull shelter. Diane Jessup, a noted breeder and historian of pit bull terriers and author of *The Working Pit Bull*, says it’s irresponsible to market pit bulls to novice owners. “It's not sensible to get an animal bred for bringing a
2,000-pound bull to its knees and say I'm going to treat this like a soft-mouth Labrador," said Jessup, "It's a capable animal, and it's got to be treated as such."447

Too much good publicity tends to be disastrous for any breed: it's what the Disney films did for Dalmatians448 and Taco Bell did for Chihuahuas.449 Yet while these were fleeting cultural blips, the aggressive promotion of pit bulls as pets has lasted for years with no sign of slowing down. It's a vicious circle: As more pit bulls enter shelters, humane societies must make even greater efforts to market them as pets. Florid descriptions of pit bulls as “the sweetest dogs in the world” encourage people to breed them and acquire them without knowing what they’re getting into. Mounting pressure to find homes for the glut of pit bulls leads some shelters to misrepresent their canine inventory: one U.K. study found that forty-one percent of animal shelter workers would knowingly mislabel a pit bull as another breed in order to help sell the dog.450

Back in 1987, pit bull breeder and dogfighting enthusiast Jeff Hughey told readers of underground dogfighting publication American Game Dog Times that only an aggressive public relations campaign could save the pit bull.451 That public relations campaign has been a success story beyond anyone’s wildest dreams: the pit bull is now one of the most common kinds of dog in the U.S.452 Undoubtedly, the American Game Dog Times reader who published a response to Hughey’s editorial as “Bluesbreaker” would look upon this situation with deep chagrin: “Pit bulls are bred for one purpose only, and that is to cross a pit enough times to make another [pit bull] not want to,” he wrote. “I have had them scream at just a few weeks old for a fight.”453

The pit bull lobby accomplished this feat with tight organization and slick public relations with a soupçon of subterfuge. Take the “National Canine Research Council,” an
entity deliberately crafted to look and sound like a respectable government institution.\textsuperscript{454} In reality, the National Canine Research Council is a subsidiary of Animal Farm Foundation, an organization whose mission statement is “securing equal treatment and opportunity for pit bull dogs.”\textsuperscript{455} The NCRC is a think tank for pit bulls. One pamphlet that purports to be law enforcement training material repeatedly warns police and first responders not to describe or identify an attacking dog’s breed to the media (lest a pit bull attack be reported by the media as a pit bull attack).\textsuperscript{456}

Animal Farm Foundation also offers thousands of dollars in financial incentives in exchange for promises of positive pit bull publicity. Its website explicitly states an expectation that funding recipients will “promote [pit bulls] in a positive light” without making them seem different from other dogs, creating a clear conflict of interest.\textsuperscript{457} The Animals and Society Institute has received grants totaling several thousand dollars from Animal Farm Foundation, possibly for the privilege of allowing Animal Farm Foundation (“securing equal treatment... for pit bulls”) to influence ASI’s policy paper on dog bites and dangerous dog legislation.\textsuperscript{458}

Pit bull lobbyists have hired some of the biggest public relations guns around. Best Friends Animal Society paid self-styled “guerilla economists” John Dunham & Associates to size up the costs associated with breed-specific legislation.\textsuperscript{459} Dunham was a senior economist for tobacco giant Philip Morris, and his company’s other clientele include the Cigar Association of America and the National Chicken Council. “\textit{We’re an economic consulting firm that supports lobbyists},” the company posted to its Twitter account, “\textit{Want a legislator to listen? Tell them how much its [sic] gonna cost.”}\textsuperscript{460}

Best Friends also hired master political manipulator Luntz Global to help devise marketing strategies for pit bulls.\textsuperscript{461} Luntz Global, the “expert wordsmiths” who turned
global warming into the happier-sounding “climate change” and “estate tax” into “death tax,” earned the dubious distinction of a Politifact.com “Lie of the Year” after reframing healthcare reform as a “government takeover.” The company promises to woo to any cause with the help of “winning language.” Among Luntz Global’s recommendations for marketing pit bulls: don’t show images of pit bulls with anything in their mouths resembling human limbs.

Not all pit bull advocates toe the “all dogs created equal” line: some pit bull organizations warn that pit bulls should not be treated like other dogs. Pit Bull Rescue Central and many other organizations recommend that all pit bull owners carry a break stick, which is literally a tool used to pry open a pit bull’s jaws during an attack where the dog won’t let go. The widespread recommendation of these tools seems to be a phenomenon exclusive to pit bulls.

Then there’s “crate and rotate,” a widely-recommended management strategy for keeping a pit bull from hurting the other animals he or she lives with. In the “crate and rotate” household, animals are kept separated in crates and “rotated” through the house one at a time. One pit bull advocate described her home’s elaborate setup this way: “They have extra tall metal gates that are permanently and securely attached to the door frames of their rooms,” she wrote. “Whenever I am unable to supervise my dogs, whether I am leaving the house or just taking a shower, the boys go into their rooms with their gates closed.” The ASPCA’s guide to caring for pit bulls in animal shelters urges staff to always work in pairs around pit bulls and to install panic buttons in areas housing pit bulls.
Pit bull defenders often equate “breedism” to racism. This can mean attempts to co-opt the language of the civil rights movement, such as Best Friends Animal Society’s campaign to reframe breed-specific legislation as “breed discriminatory legislation.”

More disturbing are the direct comparisons between restricting pit bulls and the very real suffering of people subjected first to abduction and enslavement followed by decades of ongoing oppression. “The opposition to pit bulls might not be racist,” wrote journalist Tom Junod for *Esquire*, “it does, however, employ racist thinking.” Pit bull defenders even attempted to stage a “Million Pibble March” on Washington.

Comparing people of color to animals is nothing new, but this may be the first time it’s occurring in the context of elevating the animals.

Curiously, these comparisons occur alongside attempts to scapegoat people of color for attacks by pit bulls. Pit bull advocates often blame pit bull problems on “thugs” and “gangsters,” terms whose implicit racial coding need not be dwelt upon.

Animal Farm Foundation’s Majority Project encourages construction managers, teachers, and grandmas to send in photos with their pit bulls for what comes across as an effort to prove that suburb-dwelling white people like pit bulls too. If that’s too subtle, there’s a t-shirt that says “pit bulls are for hugs, not thugs” and a Facebook page urging readers to “euthanize a gangster, not a pit bull.”

The problem with equating “breedism” to racism (aside from the fact that it’s wrong to liken black people to dogs) is that humans weren’t carefully and deliberately bred to display certain specific behaviors. Border collies, pointers, greyhounds, and pit bulls were. One may as well decry the “racism” in using huskies and not basset hounds to run the Iditarod. The very idea of “pure breeding” is rooted in eugenic thought.
I’m sitting across from my friend Abby at the local pizza parlor. She’s showing me photos of her dog Beau, a fawn colored pit bull mix. He’s handsome, with a huge square head and black fur around his blocky muzzle, but his deep brown eyes have a haunting quality. When Abby talks about him, there’s a touch of sadness in her voice, because these pictures are the only place he exists anymore: here’s Beau diving for a ball in Saylorville Lake, Beau at the state park, Beau curled up on the couch. Beau turned Abby into a pit bull fan. He also broke her heart.

Abby adopted Beau from the local animal shelter when he was about a year old. The shelter described him as a boxer mix, but when she took Beau to the vet, the doctor took one look at the dog and remarked *that’s a pit bull*. Scars covered Beau’s underside. Whether he had been used in dogfighting or he was just a dog who’d been in a fight, Abby never found out. He formed an especially close bond with Abby’s other dog, an Australian shepherd mix named Avo. In half of the pictures she shows me, Beau’s cuddled up close with Avo, as if to make sure as much of his body as possible touches his friend, his expression is one of unfathomable need.

Whatever happened to Beau in the short time he’d been on this earth left him profoundly damaged. He suffered severe separation anxiety and couldn’t be left alone, otherwise he tore apart his crate and destroyed the apartment. He was terrified of riding in the car. “Everything about him was a challenge,” she said.

Last Christmas, Abby and her boyfriend brought Beau to visit their family. They had just finished opening presents; Abby, her boyfriend, and Beau were curled up on the couch together. Just then, Abby’s three year-old cousin walked past them and Beau suddenly lunged out and bit his face. Abby thinks he was startled; he let go right away, but her little cousin needed several stitches near his eyebrow.
It was the second time in six months that Beau had bitten or tried to bite someone, and Abby knew what she had to do. Their families had small children, and many other small children lived in their apartment building. It would have been impossible to keep Beau away from children. As she’s telling me this, I’m in awe of her bravery in making this decision, because I’m not sure I could have faced it.

At the vet’s office, Beau was so frantic that it took two doses of sedative to calm him. An hour later, the drugs finally took effect, and the vet invited Abby in to say goodbye to Beau, who was wrapped in a blanket. As the doctor injected a fatal dose of anesthesia, Beau arched his back and cried out. Abby called it a scream. For the first time in our conversation, her voice cracks as she describes the sound that haunts her.

“I’ve seen a lot of dogs die,” she says after a long silence. “They were old and sick. Beau wasn’t old and sick. It wasn’t right.”

Abby says it’s irresponsible to tout pit bulls as “nanny dogs” and perfect pets for inexperienced people. But she didn’t know she had adopted a pit bull when she got Beau, and because of that, the breed restrictions imposed by her landlord and her insurance company felt deeply unfair to her. She wants to see the same laws apply to all dogs. I’m not sure I agree with her—because I’m honestly not sure what the right answers are—but we both know they aren’t simple.

Thinking back to my childhood memories of the neighbor’s pit bull, it was impossible for me to believe that this dog could be dangerous. After all, he was so nice to me. I saw only my personal experience, and it was true because I wanted it to be.

I suspect that some pit bull advocates experience to a greater extent what psychologists call the illusion of control: the tendency for people to overestimate the
degree to which they and their actions are responsible for their fate. Hence the myth, popular among pit bull defenders, that a dog’s behavior lies all in how they’re raised.

Then there’s our timeless adoration for the villain figure with a heart of gold, which seems to me related in some way to the broken impulse that causes people to stay in abusive relationships: *he’s not like that most of the time.* This connection occurred to me after reading one pit bull guardian’s account of how her pit bull had broken her arm. She swore over and over again that she loved him and it wasn’t his fault.

Pit bull defenders may see the way we celebrate—rightfully—our civil rights heroes and may long to be recognized for a superior sense of ethics, to be at the forefront of the next great cause. Gravitating to the stigmatized figure of the pit bull may be a way for white middle-class Americans (some who undoubtedly have fantasies of persecution) to participate in conversations about oppression in a way that doesn’t make them feel guilty. It’s an opportunity to try on the role of the oppressed and escape, temporarily, the feelings of guilt and responsibility that come with being a privileged member of the dominant group. Yet unlike a person of color, a pit bull advocate can drop the role of minority whenever it becomes inconvenient: he can leave his pit bull at home or evade breed restrictions by labeling the dog—as many do—as a “Labrador mix.”

But then there are people like Abby, who had no desire to have a dog in this fight. They simply acquired their pets and, having made that pact, feel obliged to do right by the animals they love.

There is no more compelling figure than one who has been misunderstood. For this reason, I believe the pit bull debate will begin to end precisely when pit bulls are no longer clothed in this artificial and irresistible glamour.
In polite company, Nick and I say that we had dinner and went to a movie. Here’s the real story: Our first date was a day spent digging up dead sheep. One of my professors raised wool and mutton on her hobby farm. One April afternoon, she showed us where the skeletons lay half-buried near a stand of pine and birch. Love bloomed in the pasture of dead sheep as we searched through dry leaves and soft black soil to lift buried skulls into daylight. We drove home with a carful of skulls: a ram with proudly curled horns, an old ewe with worn teeth, small and translucent skulls of lambs. Since then, Nick has surprised me with many gifts, but the ones I treasure most are the offerings of bone: a bison skull from the North Dakota badlands, a single vertebra veiled with delicate webs of lichen, and from a recent deer season, the skull of a buck bearing a strong and graceful crown of antlers.

Having a mate who romances me with dead animals is a fitting culmination for my lifelong obsession with bones. As a child, I collected almost everything I found in the wild: rocks, seashells, pinecones, feathers, bones. Almost nothing remains of these early collections, and I have no desire to start them up again. As an adult, I have little use for rocks or pinecones.

Yet my attraction to bones lives on.

I found my first bones when I was seven years old, on a school field trip through a desert in central Utah. I was drawn to those bright white and weathered shapes scattered among sage and redrock. By the end of the hike I carried an armful of bones: several vertebra, a pelvis, a long and polished rib. I held them even though my
classmates teased me. I tried to take them home, but my teacher forbade the keeping of bones. Forced to abandon my treasures, I temporarily forgot their magnetism.

While exploring an empty field in my junior year of high school, I found an old horse skull whose monumental austerity and weathered beauty exhumed my buried love. I took it home and began collecting skulls in earnest: a deer skull at a yard sale, raccoon bones, a cat skeleton. I trawled woods, deeryards, railroad tracks, fields. Friends offered bones they found and suggested places where I could find more. I once drove for four hours to retrieve the skeleton of a moose. Killed by a car, the moose decomposed in a farmer’s field, where scavengers and weather left nothing of him but clean white bones. The farmer, amused at the sight of me gathering what was garbage to him, invited me to his farm’s boneyard, where I found cow skulls, goat skulls, a zoo of bones. I filled my car with them. My menagerie boasted the bones of about twenty different species.

My parents tolerated my collection, so long as the bones stayed in my bedroom. My father even gave me a glass display case for them, one that once held my grandmother’s crystal and porcelain. At first I was secretive about my collection, even though society permits a few eccentricities to all artists. As an artist, I could dismiss my collection as a necessary anatomical reference for painting and drawing animals. But to my delight, I’ve found that most people are receptive to the concept of collecting bones as objects to be appreciated. Nearly everyone interprets this attraction for what it is: an extension of my love of the animals that possessed the bones before me. Some shy away at first, but they come back, and they want to know more. We are all fascinated by what’s underneath.
The imaginative leap from bone collection to death obsession, to ghoulish serial killer appetites or black nail polish, is instant and inevitable. This association is both inaccurate and ineffably sad: my love of bones is about life and living processes. As forms in constant play with function, bones are incomparably beautiful. Clean bones are the pure flat whiteness of an eggshell. They glow with reflected light. An ungulate's skull must house the animal's large and wary eyes and allow its inhabitant to see danger over the tall grass, thus the long and fine skulls of antelope, horses, and deer. A carnivore's skull is an entirely different aesthetic, all direct stares and flesh-slicing power. Anyone who has ever wondered what it would be like for fine machines to come alive must look no further than the horse's skeleton: generous ribcage to house the engine of heart and lungs, lithe and flexible spine, balanced articulation of head and neck. A horse's galloping thousand pounds are supported by four fragile bones you could fit your hand around.

One and a half million years ago, our ancestors collected bones out of pure necessity and shaped them into tools and weapons. Then we discovered the artistic possibilities for carving bones and began turning them into adornments, sculptures, and musical instruments.\textsuperscript{473} In the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, natural historians amassed vast collections of bones. Until the advent of DNA testing, scientists classified species based on skeletal structure.

Collecting skulls thrives as a hobby. Bone collectors are taxidermists, artists, zoologists, and naturalists. I've met several other skull enthusiasts, most of whom are men, but the hobby seems to be growing fastest among young women. Natural history stores have found a small but eager market for display cases, skeleton preparation manuals, and field guides to bones.
Bone collectors tell macabre inside jokes: You know you’re a skull collector when you brake for roadkill, when you have more dead pets than live ones, when you keep the taxidermist on speed dial. One t-shirt I’ve seen features an illustration of a leg bone and reads, “I found this humerus.”

Skull collectors can shop for bones online from a staggering number of suppliers. Bone dealers range from taxidermists who sell animal skulls on eBay to companies dedicated to skulls and skeletons alone. Jay Villemarette founded Skulls Unlimited, International in 1986. Villemarette traces his fascination with bones to finding a dog skull as a young boy. While working part-time as an auto body technician, Villemarette cleaned skulls in his kitchen, starting with a one-page price list.474

Skulls Unlimited is the world’s leading supplier of real bone specimens, and has been profiled by National Geographic, Ripley’s Believe It or Not, and the Discovery Channel. Based in Oklahoma City, Skulls Unlimited cleans bones to top standards using carrion beetles and a proprietary whitening technique. The company sells about 25,000 specimens every year to museums, universities, and collectors who want the best.475 A top-quality horse skull costs $375. A lion’s skeleton sells for $6,500. A random dog skull—“teaching quality”—is a bargain at $65, but if you need a specific breed—say, an English Bulldog or a Great Dane—be prepared to pay upwards of $200.

Collectors can acquire the skulls of highly endangered species, or even extinct animals like the thylacine and cave bear. Two major companies, Bone Clones and Skullduggery, manufacture replica skulls cast from real specimens. Skullduggery manufactures skulls in a sturdy plaster-like compound that captures the tiniest of details, resulting in an accurate casting for artists and anatomists. Bone Clones casts skulls in resin that approximates the look, weight, and feel of real bone, and each skull is
detailed and finished by hand. The skulls and skeletons of well over 500 different species are available as replicas, each one cast from real bones.476

Some replicas cost far more than their real-life counterparts. A genuine coyote skull can be had for about $20, but the Bone Clones replica costs $72. For collectors seeking an uncommon species, the replicas can be a real bargain. A Bone Clones lion skull costs $295. A real lion skull can cost double that price or more. For extinct or endangered species like the thylacine ($160), giant panda ($270), and bottlenose dolphin ($375), the replica is all that’s available.

My collection of skulls now includes over eighty species, from the common and easy to find skulls of deer and coyotes to rarities such as a Russian wolfhound, a Belgian draft horse, and a musk ox. Each one of my skulls is cleaned and whitened, prepared like museum specimens. Most of them dwell in the big display case I built for them. Skulls with antlers and horns hang on the wall, and those too heavy or large for shelves or hanging rest on the floor under my windows.

And yes, there are skeletons in my closet.

Skulls and bones sprawl throughout my bedroom, living room, and art studio, yet my collection pales in comparison to many other hoards. Charles Craver, an Arabian horse breeder near Winchester, Illinois spent sixty years gathering skulls. His collection of 160 Arabian horse skulls, thought to be one of the largest collections of horse skulls in the world, once filled a small outbuilding near his home.477 He collected and measured the skulls to investigate differences between Arabian horse bloodlines. Craver’s enormous hoard now belongs to the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh.478 One California collector, Ray Bandar, amassed a collection of seven
thousand skulls in his basement, mostly seals and sea lions. Alan Dudley, a British man who started collecting skulls with a fox he found soon after his eighteenth birthday, now boasts a hoard of over 2,000 skulls—one of the world’s largest and most comprehensive private collections. By day, Dudley selects and treats wood veneers for the interiors of luxury British autos. When he’s not doing that, he’s busy finding and cleaning animal skulls. His collection includes a tiger, a hippopotamus, and even a two-headed calf.

Dudley hadn’t given much thought as to whether or not his collection violated any laws, but one afternoon in March 2008, four police officers arrived at his door with a search warrant. Though police investigation found the vast majority of his collection to be perfectly legal, Dudley was charged with seven counts of violating the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES), an international agreement prohibiting unlawful trade in endangered species. Dudley’s academic zeal, the judge said, had crossed the line into an unlawful obsession. The court fined him £1000 and an additional £1500 in court costs for the crimes. Officials confiscated several skulls. Once reunited with the remaining skulls in his collection, Dudley vowed to be cautious about how he obtained more.

Collectors can obtain the bones of many species legally and ethically. But unlawfully obtaining a regulated species, especially one considered endangered, can result in fines and even prison time. Knowing that a species is critically endangered doesn’t stop a handful of collectors from lusting after their skulls. A few collectors sought the skulls of tigers, eagles, and sea turtles despite the threat of fines and imprisonment. Some people will risk everything for a beautiful skull.
A growing number of people in the United States maintain a collection of some kind.⁷⁸² About one out of five people in the U.S. report maintaining collections: usually these are conventional objects such as war memorabilia, dolls, baseball cards, or antiques, and I’ve met plenty of people with stranger collections: predatory plants, for example, or bottles of root beer.

We don’t simply collect items because we like them. Scholars of consumer behavior theorize that collecting is on the rise as a way to cope with the anomie of living in a postmodern world.⁷⁸³ Collecting may ease the loss of history and personal identity that comes with purchasing mass-produced goods; in this way, collections help their makers establish unique identities. We grow our collections out of a simultaneous desire to connect and compete with other collectors.⁷⁸⁴ Collections can even express views that might be difficult or socially unacceptable to verbalize.⁷⁸⁵ For some bone collectors, this could mean a higher than average comfort level with death.

Yet I suspect most bone enthusiasts gravitate to skulls for the exact same reasons some collectors pour millions into French Impressionist paintings: we are drawn to some inexplicable, hard to articulate combination of the object’s beauty, rarity, and the chance to possess an essence associated with that object—in my case, the essence of a beautiful and charismatic animal.

Jaak Panksepp, a neuroscientist who studies the origin of emotion in humans and animals, identified what he calls the blue-ribbon emotions—the core drives at work behind a variety of behaviors. Among them is a drive he called seeking; “the basic impulse to search, investigate, and make sense of the environment.”⁷⁸⁶ Seeking is the impulse—and accompanying pleasure—involvement in searching, finding, and gathering. In animals, seeking manifests as curiosity, hunting, and exploring new environments.
Humans demonstrate seeking behavior by shopping, looking forward to anticipated events, and gathering objects we like.\textsuperscript{487} That the seeking impulse drives us to collect rings true to me: \textit{Finding} is fun, all right, but perhaps it’s the \textit{looking} we love most.

Finding skulls—whether it’s in the woods, at antique stores, or on eBay—is easy and fun, but cleaning a skull takes real, often unpleasant work. The easiest way to remove flesh from bones is to leave them outside and let bacteria, insects, and scavengers do the work. This method has obvious drawbacks: weathering damages bones, and scavengers or neighborhood dogs can carry them away. Many collectors prefer to take matters into their own hands.

Some bone enthusiasts “boil” bones to clean them. The high temperature of boiling water leaves bones brittle and cracked, but after an hour or so in a low and steady simmer, most flesh will fall right off. Preparing a simmered skull is not unlike cleaning a soup bone. Taxidermists and bone dealers also clean skulls with the help of carrion beetles in heated terrariums. The beetles can completely clean a skull in a matter of hours, with no damage to the bone. Submerging a skull in a tank of water and allowed to rot, a process known as maceration, allows bacteria to liquefy the brain, fat, skin and muscle, leaving nothing but bone. It’s not a process for the faint of nose or stomach.\textsuperscript{488}

Regardless of the process, most methods of cleaning bones still leave deposits of oil that stain bone yellow and cause it to feel greasy. Soaking bones in detergent or solvent solutions drives these oils and fats out of the bone. Most collectors use plain dish detergent and warm water, but very oily specimens may require ammonia or acetone.\textsuperscript{489}

Once the skull is cleaned and free from oil, it can be whitened—but not bleached. In the bone world, using bleach is a sign of an amateur; bleach leaves bones brittle and
porous. Experienced collectors whiten skulls with hydrogen peroxide solution, or a paste of hydrogen peroxide and magnesium carbonate, the same chemicals used by beauty salons to whiten hair. This preparation results in a lovely, translucent white skull with no odors or germs.\textsuperscript{490}

I got most of my skulls from people who know that I like bones (it's the sort of thing people remember about you for years), but my favorite bones—nearly all of them common or imperfect—I treasure mainly for their power to bring back memories. There's the raccoon skull that surprised me on the dust-covered floor of an abandoned barn, and the moss-covered leg bone of a deer from the old-growth wilderness of Minnesota. A roadside bathroom break led me to a beautifully weathered cow vertebra in the middle of the southern Colorado desert. I've spent hours walking in nature and most of those days have ended up as vague and happy memories. But a bone brings back the day I found it in sharp details; the smell of damp earth, the crunch of footsteps in the woods, the sudden sight of a skull peeking up from dry leaves.

I found an incredible skull last summer while walking in a dried riverbed. Months of drought slowed the water level to a trickle. As I rounded a corner cutbank, I noticed part of an enormous skull nearly buried in the sand. I found fresh footprints just yards away, but the skull was undisturbed. Scooping mud and sand away revealed the astonishing fossil skull of a bison, miraculously complete after hundreds or perhaps thousands of years in the river. Covered in mud and full of pebbles, it weighed nearly thirty pounds. Cradling the cold, wet, muddy skull against my chest made for a difficult hike. As I rinsed off my find, the skull emerged miraculously intact. Her teeth were worn to the guns, the sutures on her forehead nearly solid from age. Her horns measured two
feet across from tip to tip. I often imagine what her life was like. No doubt she roamed the plains as part of a herd of millions, across land I’d hardly recognize as my home. Now this is all that is left of her great dynasty.

Bones are inseparable from the land where I find them. I keep them as an archive, a journal of the places I love to explore. Bones smell richly of soil, often stained permanently with soil. In my collection, I have soil from the great north woods of Minnesota, the Alaskan tundra, the African savannah. If a bone absorbs enough soil over time, it will actually become stone, a fossil. Each bone has its own topography. The confluence of the skull plates of a young deer skull, viewed from above, looks just like a young river, flowing in oxbows and cutbanks across the cranium's terrain. Skull plates aren't unlike tectonic plates in their shifting and reforming during the animal's birth and life. The bones of every animal are made of minerals drawn from the earth. These minerals in their bones—and our bones—are made from the bones and teeth and shells of billions of other animals. We lease our bones from the earth and deed them to those who live long after we are gone.

I'm often asked what it's like, as someone who loves animals, to be constantly surrounded by reminders of animal death. My orientation to death is complex—I've seen things few others have seen, or want to see. I've seen beautiful bodies of animals reduced to reeking slurry and writhing masses of maggots. The thought of this happening to my own pets, or anyone I love, haunts me, as it should anyone. I know intimately the dissolution death brings, but I've also witnessed the life that rises from it. I was comforted to see, for example, how the grass grew especially thick and dark over our family dog's grave. Even the flies who attend wild animals' funerals, like green and
blue jewels, are necessary if not beautiful in their own way. The wingbeats of flies, the
hatch of carrion beetles, the gnawings of scavengers drum out a steady rhythm: life goes
on, goes on, goes on.491

Our attempts to put off decomposition cost our families and our environment
dearly. Embalming is an expensive, invasive, and toxic process. I’ve always thought of
the funeral industry as rather predatory, upselling bereaved families on plush caskets in
a time of great emotional duress. If we can somehow move past our discomfort with the
process of postmortem decomposition, we can save our love ones’ money and take better
care of our planet. Death will never be comfortable, but what happens after death can
indeed be comforting if we’d only allow it to be.

Just as it doesn’t bother me to think of someone moving into any of the old
apartments I’ve had, I don’t mind the thought of someone using—or admiring—my
vacated skull.

I began collecting skulls partly to improve my understanding of animal anatomy for
wildlife art, but recently I’ve been painting the skulls themselves. Skulls and bones lend
themselves to contrast and chiaroscuro, the kind of powerful and decisive brush strokes
that thrill any artist’s heart. They are a lovely and satisfying alternative to a bowl of fruit.
The art world is filled with people who’ve seen the poetry in bones: Gendron Jensen’s
pencil drawings of animal skeletons resemble impossibly detailed anatomical
etchings.492 Jessica Joslin combines real animal bones with clockwork and mechanical
fittings to create skeletal cyborgs.493 Mark Taylor’s close-up photographs of bones
resemble the desert environments in which he found them.494
Georgia O'Keeffe was the undisputed master of painting skulls. Best known for her flowers, she also painted the sun-bleached skulls and bones of animals she found in the deserts of New Mexico. I feel a strong kinship to this artist who sent boxes of bones back to her studio in New York. A portrait of O'Keeffe sitting beneath a massive elk skull hangs in my studio. She too saw bones as “keenly alive.”

Bones are just as honest as they are beautiful. Bones solve crimes, offering mute but powerful testimony of an individual’s life and death. Likewise, the bones of animals remind us that nature is not a frolicsome place: broken and healed ribs, crooked jaws, the stubs of partially amputated legs.

One skull I’ve seen bears witness to a heart-wrenching crime. It is the skull of a massive old Alaskan wolf, a huge animal whose skull measured over a foot long. This skull belonged to a wolf with a fierce and physical will to live. Jaws that could crunch through a moose’s femur were no match for a trapper’s steel snare: the wolf broke most of his teeth – ground them to stubs – trying to chew through the wire. For what must have been hours and might have been days, he tore away at the snare with his broken and bleeding mouth. The snare sawed past his lips, tongue, and gums, cutting deep into the very bone of his lower jaw. The wolf endured this horrific end so that someone could decorate Alaskan parkas with his fur.

The bones of animals can tell us a lot about people: the snapped bones of battery-cage hens, for instance, or the grossly deformed bodies of pedigreed dogs, cripples by design. The scale of the massacre of American bison can be described distantly as abstract millions, or made real by one photo taken in 1870, a man dwarfed by a mountain of bison skulls.
Bones tell heartbreaking stories, but they heal. Accustomed to old cow skulls in deserts, most people think of bones as rigid and dead. But bones are miraculously alive. Anyone who has ever broken an arm or a leg knows this because they felt the pins-and-needles ache of their bones knitting back together. Bones are organs with important work to do. They store precious minerals and produce white blood cells for our immune systems. Bones evolved to help complex creatures to move over the earth, leveraging muscle in wagers with gravity. In experiments conducted in space, scientists discovered that animals (and astronauts) lose bone mass in the absence of gravity. It is as though bones reject the prospect of living without their anchor, the land.

Scientists determined our place in the animal kingdom from bones, proof that humans and other great apes evolved from a common ancestor. Our family history is written in bones: Australopithecus, Homo antecessor, Homo erectus. If it weren’t for bones, we would know nothing of Tyrannosaurus rex or Archaeopteryx. We wouldn’t know that whales evolved from land mammals that returned to the sea. Our bones prove just how animal we are, with our canine teeth and vestigial tail. Yet our bones distinguish us: unlike most mammals, human males lack a penis bone (called baculum, from the Latin word for staff). A baculum keeps the penis rigid for quick opportune matings, but we don’t need it because we can pursue, make our way slowly, smolder. This is thanks to our braincase, massive enough to house whatever crucial difference resulted in nuclear warfare, sonnets, public radio, rock and roll, Buddhism.

Yet our brains are forever locked in a battle with our bones. Biologists call it the obstetrical dilemma: our pelvises must be narrow in order for us to walk upright, which prevents our huge crania from swelling any larger.
Bones place us into context, exalting and humbling us. They disrupt the chronology of decay by lingering long after all else is gone. Only the tiniest fraction of skeletal remains ever fossilize, but if we are lucky, the shape of our bones might last hundreds of thousands or perhaps millions of years. Yet when the archaeologists of the future discover our bones, they will learn so few of our secrets. Evolution, a living process, sculpts us; in our bones, it leaves its lovely signature, reminding us how long it took to get here, and how hard it was, how chancy.

Treasure bones for their beauty. Honor them for saying “we were here.”
ENDNOTES

CHAPTER ONE

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13 ER, episode 155, “Fear of Commitment,” directed by Anthony Edwards, aired on May 4, 2001 on NBC.


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18 Samuel Conway, interview by author, Des Moines, Iowa, December 20, 2014.

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20 Ibid.


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26 Christy Grandjean, personal communication.


28 See Alison Hawthorne Deming, Zoologies (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2014).

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32 Samuel Conway, interview by author, Des Moines, Iowa, December 20, 2014.

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34 Fred Patten, e-mail message to author, October 13, 2014.


37 Samuel Conway, interview by author, Des Moines, Iowa, December 20, 2014.


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51 This American Life, episode 506, “Secret Identity,” aired October 4, 2013 on NPR.
CHAPTER TWO

56 Based on an established prevalence of zoosexual acts as between two to eight percent of the population.

57 Based on an established prevalence of zoosexual fantasies as between two to ten percent of the population.


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71 Ibid., 3.

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73 Ibid.

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95 I found this material by Google searching for terms including “bestiality,” “beastiality,” “farm sex,” “beast sex,” and “zoo sex.”


98 Ibid., 2.
99 *Zoo*, directed by Robinson Devor (THINKFilm, 2007).


101 *Zoo*, directed by Robinson Devor (THINKFilm, 2007).

102 This film can be seen at http://www.2guys1horse.com, accessed April 14, 2015.


109 Ibid.


112 Ibid.


122 Piers Bierne, “Rethinking Bestiality: Towards a Concept of Interspecies Sexual Assault,” *Theoretical Criminology* 1 no. 3 (August 1997).

124 Piers Bierne, “Rethinking Bestiality: Towards a Concept of Interspecies Sexual Assault,” *Theoretical Criminology* 1 no. 3 (August 1997).


128 The vast majority of “how to have sex with animals” guides I encountered online included instructions on training animals for this activity. Few guides made the assumption that the animal would initiate sexual contact on his or her own.


131 *Grizzly Man*, directed by Werner Herzog, (Lions Gate Films, 2005).


CHAPTER THREE


140 Ibid., 125.


155 “Dogs Decoded,” *NOVA*, aired November 9, 2010 on PBS.

156 The author visited the Mission: Wolf sanctuary in Westcliffe, Colorado from July 20 to August 2, 2014.


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CHAPTER FOUR


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199 Ibid.

200 Merritt Clifton, email message to author, December 23, 2013.

201 Marco Festa-Blanchet, Fanie Pelletier, Jon T. Jorgenson, Chiarastella Feder, and Anne Hubbs, “Decrease in horn size and increase in age of trophy sheep in Alberta over 37 years,” The Journal of Wildlife Management 78 no. 1 (January 2014) 133-141.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


220 Ibid.

221 Sara B. Marcketti, personal communication.


223 Ibid.


225 Ibid.

**CHAPTER FIVE**


The author visited “Jaime,” a professional taxidermist who asked that her real name not appear, in Duluth, Minnesota from May 16-18, 2015 and January 3-5, 2015.

2014-2015 McKenzie Supply Catalog 40

Taxidermy.net, http://www.taxidermy.net


Ibid., 13.


Ibid., 52.

Ibid., 52-53.
248 Ibid., 56.


250 The author visited the Traders Rendezvous on March 15, 2014.


CHAPTER SIX


255 Ibid.

256 Ibid.

257 Ibid.


259 Ibid.

260 Ibid., 143-148.

261 Ibid., 107.


266 For a detailed description of Arabian horse grooming practices, see Patti Schofler, Flight Without Wings, (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2006) 220-221.

267 See Rebecca von Zitzewitz, Horses of Qatar (Kempen, DE: teNeues, 2009).


270 Ibid.

271 Ibid.

272 Ibid.

273 Ibid.

274 Ibid.


277 Ibid.

Ibid.


The American Quarter Horse Association confirms that Kids Classic Style tested positive for equine hyperkalemic periodic paralysis, a dominant genetic trait.


Ibid.


Ibid.

294 Of the fifteen horses that won two year-old, three year-old, or senior stallion open halter champion status at the American Quarter Horse World Show during the last five years, the American Quarter Horse Association confirmed by e-mail to the author that nine were affected by HYPP.


298 Ibid.


312 Ibid.


314 Ibid.

315 Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


333 Ibid.


CHAPTER SEVEN


337 Ibid.

338 Ibid.


The American Veterinary Medical Association notes that although there appears to be a breed-specific problem with fatal dog attacks, other breeds may attack or kill at higher rates. See American Veterinary Medical Association, “Dog Bite Risk and Prevention: The Role of Breed,” March 12, 2015, https://www.avma.org/KB/Resources/LiteratureReviews/Documents/dog_bite_risk_and_prevention_bgn.pdf.


Ibid.


David Grant, “Political and practical problems with dangerous dogs,” Veterinary Record 168 no. 5 (2011) 133-134.

This scene was imagined from accounts of dogfights published by Briar Storms as well as video footage of dogfights viewed by the author.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid., 20.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


American Pit Bull: Killer Canine or Family Friend, directed by Marilyn Braverman (Braverman Productions, 2007).

According to Form 990-PF documents filed with the Internal Revenue Service, Animal Farm Foundation received $2,893,000 in contributions and gifts in the 2012-2013 fiscal year. In 2012, Best Friends Animal Society spent $500,000 on its pit bull initiatives.


Ibid.


*Pit Bulls and Parolees* (Animal Planet) and *Pit Boss* (Animal Planet).


Ibid.


Jeff Hughey, “Get Rid of 'Pit',” *American Game Dog Times*, November 1987, vol. 1 no. 1, 6.


National Canine Research Council, www.nationalcanineresearchcouncil.com


470 The author has frequently encountered comments from pit bull supporters which seem to use the words “thug,” “gangster,” and “irresponsible dog owner” interchangeably.


CHAPTER EIGHT


Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid., 10-11.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.


“American Icons: Georgia O'Keeffe’s Skull Paintings,” *Studio 360*, aired November 12, 2010 on NPR.
