

The Mystery of Mountain Lions *continued from page 7*

on a landscape that's dominated by people? Is that even possible in some places?" Cougars need big, wild land, but they're better than most at living alongside humans. We are everywhere, increasingly. Can more of us accept visceral, actual proximity — and what that entails?

In theory, I'd say yes. My cougar encounter had come to feel lucky, and beautiful. But stepping into the woods with my dog at night, I remembered the fix of its inscrutable gaze. I had learned ways to lessen chances of trouble: Leash dogs; don't feed deer; fence the attractive dry space under porches; keep pets indoors and chickens, goats and sheep in covered enclosures at night. "It's like buckling your seatbelt," as Satterfield said. I was starting to realize, though, that my gathering facts about cougars wasn't the same as coming to understand them. The complicated mix of awe and fear I felt had little to do with what a cougar is likely to do, and everything to do with what it's ca-

pable of doing. Layered with this was the guilty knowledge that, if something happened, it could easily be my fault — and the cat would be the one to pay.

ON OUR FINAL DAY TOGETHER, Satterfield backtracked possible cougar meals, indicated by multiple GPS points sent from the same location over time. We were on the trail of the cat she had collared in my neighborhood. Satterfield pulled the truck up to a rustic home in sage hills a few miles from my place. The couple who lived there, devoted wildlife watchers, told us they had noticed perfect tracks down their snowy driveway the previous fall.

"Most people aren't surprised, but they're usually interested in finding out what the cat was doing there," Satterfield said. That's part of what makes carnivore work challenging and engaging, she added. "People care, whether they like them or hate them, or they're somewhere in the middle."

We paced back and forth on a scrubby hillside near the two-week-old signal until we smelled the sourness of vegetation spilled from a deer's stomach. Then, behind some bushes, a pile of wind-dulled hair and bone fragments. Satterfield jotted on a data sheet and we walked in widening circles, looking for a skull, a pelvis, any shard of story. There was nothing but a flock of juncos and

some scat — the lion and the land keeping their own council, the invisible presence of the one rendering visible the wholeness of the other.

Later, I began to notice tracks in the snow. I found them along the road to my house, atop my own at the riverside. I knew the cat's path had nothing to do with me: The river is a travel corridor with good cover and lots of deer. Still, each time I walked alone, I glanced behind me. That awareness was both uncomfortable, and a gift. It is easier to know a place as sentient if you feel it watching you back. Easier, too, to understand you play a part in its fate.

In November, I caught up with Satterfield in her final field season. My neighborhood's collared cougar still wandered the valley, she told me, showing me a camera-trap photo on her phone. In it, the cougar stood sidelong, the bright night-coins of her eyes lit by the flash. It was my first glimpse of her. Perhaps, I thought, she felt herself watched, and, seeing no one, hurried into the night with a chill down her own spine. Then again, she seemed to look directly at me. I couldn't shake the feeling that she had seen me before.

This article was originally published in High Country News on March 1, 2020. Sarah Gilman is a Washington-based freelance writer, illustrator and editor.

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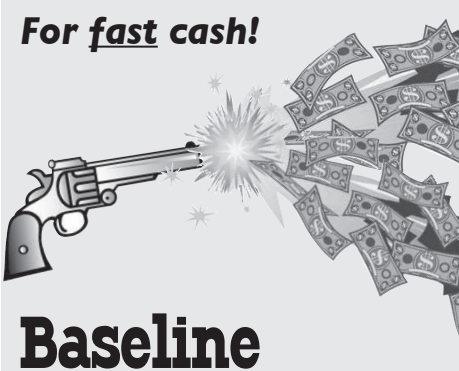
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