

by Gabriela Halas

In Southeast Alaska, a hunter searches for kinship with the wild



The intent to take life is to discover an element most modern humans are shielded from—our untamed selves. A mountain goat's death brings life into focus.

We watched a wolf, silhouetted against the horizon, and wondered what that lone scout smelled. Through binoculars, we examined several groups of mountain goats feeding on distant peaks high above Chilkat Lake, in Southeast Alaska. My hunting partner and I sat on huge ash-colored boulders spilled on the bottom of a mountain slope, at the edge of a large open basin. The goats' impossible footing as they navigated the distant gray scree made my body tense; I felt small, insignificant. As the wolf slid away from the saddle, I turned to scan the ridge behind us. And there, feeding above us, was a single goat.

Her flint-colored horns curved backward, and a small jut of beard hung under her chin. I remember her posture, legs taut with muscle; that long face nestled into alpine green. Even our whispers seemed too loud for the cool, still air of a late August evening. We decided that I would move toward the goat alone,

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and shoot when ready. I began a slow crawl, scratching my palms on the rough mats of black lichen that cloaked the huge boulders underneath me. As I climbed, the goat stopped eating to gaze below, meeting me, it seemed, eye to eye. Then she turned her attention back to the tufts of greenery, and I wondered if animals experience the inexactness of perspective, the sense of a subjective reality. What was I to her, as I moved closer?

I was lucky there was no breeze; I didn't want to think about imperfect shots. And I had a clear sightline in the flat gray mountain light, but I needed to get closer — to see in my scope the steady crosshairs fixed on her coat. At roughly 150 yards, she worked her way to a boulder that jutted from the hillside. She looked down at me with her small black eyes, the muscles of her chest folded neatly under the white smoothness of her fur. Her pause seemed deliberate, open to possibility. My heart pounding, I contorted myself into an awkward position, belly to stone and thighs braced, the rocks under me sharp and unforgiving. I steadied my sights on her chest, where I visualized her lungs. I pulled the trigger.

Two days earlier, we had boated up the silt-heavy Chilkat River, then through a narrow slough where Chilkat Lake edged a thick blueish-green Sitka spruce forest, several hundred miles from my home in Anchorage. On the hike up the mountain, we trailed paths made by bears that had thrashed through dense alder and devil's club, the scat they'd left behind filled with salmonberries. We too pulled the wet bursting berries from their stems and savored the juices that ran down our chins; they tasted like fresh rain. Devil's club needles traced thin red marks along my arms. I was drenched in sweat, my pack heavier with every stride. We shimmied on our bellies under deadfall, the duff under our feet thick and deep. We made camp where the last wind-blown hemlocks stood, nestled between spongy moss and lichens, the edge of the alpine.

I had come to the mountains primarily to bring wild meat home. Yet I also sought something more fundamental: a chance to feel closer to a wild animal's life and, perhaps, to access a part of myself that I hadn't before. The intent to take life is to discover an element most modern humans are shielded from — our untamed selves. The farther and faster we are shuttled along an ostensibly inevitable course of "progress," the more disconnected we become from every other living thing. Hunting, to me, is a way to reverse that, and, in so doing, become more fully myself.

That afternoon above Chilkat lake, I didn't hear the recoil of the rifle, its sound seemingly absorbed by the landscape. The goat hadn't moved. I chambered another round, looked, and shot again. She turned, half-trotting toward the ridge behind her as I grasped my binoculars, and then — a hard stumble. My stomach dropped: excitement, disbelief, a pang of grief mixed with joy. I knew I had taken her life, and as I watched her climb toward the saddle of the ridge, I thought, I did this to you. I scrambled toward her across the steepening slope, clutching bunches of garnet-colored *Haematoma lapponicum*, blood-spot lichen; they loosened their rhizines as I shattered what delicate hold they possessed in the scree.

When I saw the first pool of blood, it startled me, the way brilliant red can. It continued: rose-pink, burgundy, crimson, layered like the folds of carnations. I carried my rifle in my left hand as I came over the saddle. I bent down and touched a wet star-burst of red, then brushed the back of my neck at the hairline with her blood. I had wrongly assumed I could deliver a quick death, and waves of disappointment and guilt came over me.

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Hearing stones tumbling down the talus, I looked across the long open side of the mountain slope where the goat stood, her right front quarter scarlet. We stood quietly watching one another. If I continued the pursuit, she would keep moving — and I couldn't risk increasing the distance between us. Instead, I turned and headed back to camp. As I hiked, I thought of her life in the moments before I shot her, focused on late summer lichens. I felt I had failed her, and sadness arced through me as I questioned if I had been ready for this hunt.

The next morning, after a half-slept night filled with goat dreams, I crawled out of my tent. My partner and I climbed to where I had turned back. Through my binoculars I saw the small white figure on a rock. She had the characteristic slender horns of females, more sharply angled at the tip than male goats, and a smaller body. Now she was still, though no part of her body was arranged as I thought death might look, limp and soft. I had known hunters to track bleeding animals for days, yet never anticipated she might live through the night.

And then, she moved.

She stood, placing her weight tenderly on the leg stained red. My mind replayed where my scope sights had focused on her chest and the feel of my cheek on the rifle stock. She took steps on her wounded leg, then stumbled. But, slow and dogged, she climbed a vertical seam of rock, summited, and came to rest at the base of a large boulder. Overpowering loss flooded my brain as she seemed more and more out of reach.

The possibility of driving her farther away from us raised again a hunter's worst fear: to leave a wounded animal in the field. We knew we had to wait before moving closer. Watching the goat rest, we decided that my partner would go back to camp, and I would wait — either for the goat to move out of sight, or for the billowing fog above the lake below to rise higher and offer enough cover for me to start my hike toward her. In the meantime, there was nothing to do but watch, breathe and wait for the unknown things that come with taking a life.

The night before, as the sun waned behind craggy peaks and shadows overtook our small camp, my hunting partner and I had talked of patience, fear and loss, and she had shared some of her hunting stories with me. We cradled hot mugs of tea in our hands and waited for our dinners to rehydrate. *Usnea* lichen hung in tufted masses, its pale-yellow dusty cord wrapped around long-dead tree limbs. My hunting partner was a firm believer in the company of fire, and I watched her coax flames to life on a small patch of cleared ground. I had worked and recreated in the wilderness, and felt that was where I best connected with myself. Yet when I hiked or camped, I merely moved through landscapes, as a passerby or observer. I wanted to hunt to give myself the chance to more deeply understand that life itself depends on death, to feel my hands accept the responsibility of obtaining what keeps me alive.

In my own life, I have gone from being a young immigrant girl, barely aware of moving half a world away, to questioning values I once thought reflected a deep land ethic. My parents, sister and I immigrated in the early 1980s from communist Czechoslovakia and settled in northern Alberta. My parents, like many immigrants, reveled in the grandeur of the North American landscape and raised us to know and love the natural world. Somewhere in teenagehood, I became horrified at factory farming

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and quit eating meat. Years later, I worked seasonally in remote parts of interior Alaska and the Beaufort Sea coast, where months sleeping in tents and the real possibility that a bear might wander into camp left me increasingly comfortable in tough terrain and stressful situations.

I began to question my food habits again a few years ago, when I was working on a master's degree in natural resource management. My studies took me to northwest Alaska, where Inupiat caribou hunters expressed concerns about the increase of non-local hunters and aircraft and the effect they were having on caribou migration. The local hunters depended on either caribou or frozen packs of beef and pork flown thousands of miles to get to their plates. Sure, I didn't eat meat, but where did the rest of my food come from, and how far had it travelled to get to me? I had always considered myself a part of nature, not apart from it: the air, the water, the trees, the animals I loved. But I began to see fishing and hunting as viable options for a way of living more in-tune with what I felt was being degraded on a daily basis: humanity's understanding that we are actually of the earth, physical, material beings entirely dependent on the health of the very elements we come from: the water, the soil, the dirt.



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The mountain slope high above Chilkat Lake in Southeast Alaska, where the goat left its bloody trail and the hunter pursued it. Gabriela Halas photo.

Back on the saddle of the ridge above Chilkat Lake, I moved my binoculars from the goat to the near-vertical seam of mountain she had climbed. The strength she maintained was tremendous. Lichen, soft on my thighs, waved low in the building winds, and I settled on a bed of soft mosses. The scent of wet earth and the slight musty fragrance of plant life rose around me each time I shifted position. Caressed by near silence, I could hear tender operculum explode on the head of fruiting Sphagnum, the spores billowing skyward. Fog over the lake brushed up the mountain slope where I lay, and the colors, though fixed in forest and rock, seemed to shift with folds of light and shadow. In that moment, time stilled, free of structure. My focus narrowed to just me — sole human — the lone goat, and a bed of green. I felt a purpose I wasn't sure I'd felt before. There was a reason I was here, and it was not simply to enjoy the view. I thought about how the trip had merged from potential to reality; how over my lifetime I had made decisions that brought me closer to a shared ecology with other living organisms, not further away.

An hour or so later, the goat stood up, took a step, and was gone. It was time for me to follow; this was the cover I had hoped for. As the trail shifted in and out of tufted vegetation, it was easy to see where the goat had walked, her route marked by sprays of dulled red. The path, long and angled sharp along the mountain's slope, did not curve behind a wall of rock and come up on grassy slopes, as I'd imagined. Instead, it inclined severely downwards, into a couloir — narrow and tall, like a gouged-out tower. From there, perhaps 50 yards down, I saw thinly worn ground: The goat trail was carved into the cliffside, but below it the chute continued, no bottom in sight. My legs tensed, the muscles already responding to the rising panic triggered by my fear of heights and falling.

I would only give up on the goat if I felt like my life was truly at risk; simple fear, on the other hand, I needed to manage. I braced my body into the gravel of the couloir and began slipping downwards, trying to clench my feet and hands against rocks that rolled and skidded, dust filling the air. I slid down to the shallow depression of goat trail snaking out of the couloir. The path was narrow, and as I tried to take a few steps, my pack rubbed the tight vertical wall to my right. A wave of fear and panic caught in my throat as I considered a steep fall. My breathing was irregular, my palms tacky with sweat. Injured though she was, the goat had gone where I could not. The pursuit was over. I stood on the side of the mountain, heart heavy with loss and shame; I felt disconnected from the weave of life around me.

The chute loomed above me, the only route back to camp. I began to climb, small avalanches of dusty slate sliding away with every step. When my path reappeared, I rolled myself onto it, unable to stand. I let go all the pack weight and felt my legs melt. Deliberately, slowly, I ate salmon jerky, the smooth fat of it filling my mouth, willing my body back to itself.

I looked up the curve of the trail back to camp. And there — paused, still — stood a bear.

She was a small adult black bear, with brown tufted fur that ridged her back. She had, as I had, followed the trail of blood across the mountain slope. She was maybe 50 yards away, and I felt the fear

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in my blood rise once again; I suddenly felt more alone than I had in the couloir. I banged my trekking poles at her, the tinny noise insignificant. I called out, my voice small. Time stretched as I reached for the rifle in my pack, and she stood still, watching. I unclicked the safety and chambered a round. I saw nothing to steady the gun on, so instead I crouched, the bear in front of me, the couloir's impossibility behind. After long minutes of waiting, she made a purposeful advance down the trail toward me. And there was my chance; I shot. A stark sound, and she was hit. She turned, limped hard, her back leg shattered; I shot again. I saw her take a last step — two — and it was done. Hard in the rocks and clustered grasses, she died. A slight wind carried the one word I managed to say: *Help*.

I looked at the bear's body through my binoculars. It was hard and dead and still. Two shell casings lay in the shale dust and I placed them in my pocket. I stowed my rifle, adjusted my pack, and turned for camp. The soft ridge, once so full of green promise, now seemed steep, dangerous — and burdened with sorrow.

Later, I thought about how the hunt was nothing like I had expected. I had caused the death of two wild beings, and although I had gone to the mountains with the intention to kill, I felt weight on my conscience. The reality of life means my actions cause a ripple effect — outcomes cannot be undone. Yet I also found an elemental connection I had been searching for, a feeling like true kinship with the goat and the bear — the recognition that our actions had continued the millennia-long thread of relationship between our species. Their deaths forced me outside the confines of my domesticated life to an intimacy with their wild ones.

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The next day, my partner and I processed the bear's body and carried her skull and hide, with feet attached, down the mountain. We salvaged all the meat we could. In my last look at her, she lay almost as she had died. My partner asked if we were leaving the bear in honor, in a respectful pose — laid upon the rock as we would no doubt want our bodies to be. We looked at her near-human form, shorn of her outer bear being, her ghost face rested in the crook of her paw-less limbs.

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Back at camp, we hunched under a tarp against heavy rains. As my fingers hovered above a tiny struggling fire, built on two flat stones above the drenched earth, I felt certain borders thin, the membranes of our skin and muscle merging with the edges of soil, rock, flame, the flesh of another. Then, an affirmation of perspective when closeness still scorched, and surprised us with its waiting heat.

Gabriela Halas immigrated to Canada during the early 1980s with her parents and sister, grew up in northern Alberta, and lived in Alaska for seven years. She has published short fiction, poetry and essays. This essay first appeared as a contribution to High Country News and is republished here with permission.

Banner image: *The Chilkat River, near Haines, Alaska, is edged with Sitka spruce forest. David Goehring image - CC via Flickr*