

by Sarah Keller

Hunting for Myself in the High Montana Sagebrush - A hunter celebrates a new vision of queerness and rural culture.



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A week after one of the most important relationships of my life imploded, on a sunny November day last year, I went antelope hunting. I'd drawn a tag for my favorite spot, in an area I'll just call the Beaverhead, a stretch of high Montana sagebrush on the edge of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. From afar, the steep, grassy slopes dotted with cattle look like the "harsh Western landscape" of stereotypes, where private ranches and Bureau of Land Management parcels intermingle. But as in many such obscure spots, reality is much richer.

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Here, for me, antelope hunting becomes a portal into a world of flushing sage grouse and Brewer's sparrows, golden eagles and elk, a landscape of secret coulees I can sink into, where I can nestle into the sagebrush and lose myself in its fragrance while tracking puffy clouds. The time I've spent in that place, alone and with the people I've loved the most, has marked my late coming-of-age as both a hunter and a human.

Antelope (technically the American pronghorn, but for many hunters the names are interchangeable) are my favorite ungulate to eat, my least favorite to kill. They are deeply underappreciated in mainstream hunting culture and often dismissed as poor table fare. If someone treats an animal more like a target, it is less likely to receive the field care that this or any game meat needs: being cleanly dressed and cooled quickly, often with ice. These attitudes and actions can mean the difference between a steak that is tender and flavorful, with a light touch of sage, and one that tastes like a tough hunk of rancid goat. Aging the meat and meticulously butchering it helps too, and that again requires investment.

I prefer to stay away from throngs of hunters shooting within spitting distance of their pickup trucks, and instead look for pronghorn in the sagebrush, within the folds of the land. I try to meet them on their terms, on ground more like the Pleistocene savannah where they evolved. They've survived in North America nearly unchanged since the last Ice Age, and as the last members of their family, *Antilocapridae*, I believe they deserve reverence. They are relicts whose ancestors shared the landscape with dire wolves, mastodons and long-horned bison. Their 60 MPH speed helped them outrun now-extinct predators such as the American cheetah. They are champion migrants whose age-old movement corridors serve to remind me that I'm part of something much older and larger than my individual life.

When pursuing animals elegantly adapted to a world that no longer exists, I find that details gain new relevance. That fall day in the Beaverhead, I'd spotted a herd of about 20 antelope, and every dip in the micro-topography, every tree, shrub or grass clump was a potential ally in my attempt to stay concealed until I reached rifle range. As I belly-crawled up a gully, I reveled in the cactus jammed into my thigh, the rocks stabbing my shins, the fact that I was now as low as dirt in my pursuit of an Ice Age being.

My strategy was to creep through the vegetation as far as I could before it ran out and hope the animals hadn't grazed out of range by the time I reached the end of the scrubbiest sage. I was finely attuned to how they held their ears and heads. They are always watching, and sometimes they spook even when I'm sure they can't see me. I concealed my rifle near a clump of sagebrush, chose an animal that was standing broadside, placed her heart in my crosshairs, inhaled, exhaled and squeezed the trigger. And missed. Missed a shot that was well within my abilities. Then I lost my phone in the sage while checking for blood, trying to make sure this was a cleanly biffed shot.

Woe is the heartbroken hunter. I plopped down on the ground and pushed back tears, blinking at the lightly frosted peaks of the Bitterroot Range rising across the valley. Missed shots weigh heavily on me, and this seemed like another screw-up in a year that had already pushed me to my limit.

I grew up in Appalachia, wanting to be a hunter like PapPap and Dad, who taught me the word "larynx" as I helped him butcher a deer in the cold unfinished addition of our house. As a small child, I

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understood hunting through the smell of chilled meat mingling with cold air and sawdust, a deer transformed into meatloaf. But I never fully grew into a young hunter. Instead, I became alienated from even the periphery of my family's sporting traditions at the same time as I began to feel unsafe in my own skin.

In middle school, the outdoorsy boys I emulated became regulars at my family's back pasture pond. Together, we tossed lures from old inner tubes in pursuit of a large bass we called Carl who hid in the murk. The boys gave me fishing tackle for my birthday and nicknamed me "bass master." In the ninth grade, my best fishing buddy pushed me to be his homecoming date, and when I resisted, his friends turned against me and began making jokes about sexual assault when they saw me outside of school. I understood then that they saw my participation in masculinity as a form of sexualized flattery, not a bid for brotherhood. High-school boys in loud trucks harassed me as I rode my bike on the back roads, forcing me at times to hide in the woods and wait for them to leave. By high school, I was enduring sexual abuse from an adult family friend.

Meanwhile, Dad was spending less time in the woods and more time drinking and fighting with Mom and me. On more than one night I hid in my room, wondering if I was going to have to drive him out of the house with the loaded handgun he kept under his mattress. It's taken me two decades to learn how dangerous my all-too-common situation truly was. For many reasons, I knew I'd be leaving as soon as I could and going far away.

But part of me knew that I wanted to take some of the trappings of rural self-sufficiency with me. Dad was elated when I asked him for tips on how to handle chainsaws and firearms. He had never longed for a son; to my father, a "butch" daughter who could do anything "like a man" was just as good, or even better. The spring before I left for a summer job in Colorado and then college in Montana, he and I went turkey hunting. He proudly photographed me in PapPap's old cotton camo fatigues buttoned to the collar and my bad small-town pixie cut, holding a 12-gauge shotgun and a turkey decoy. For a long time I hated that photo, but it took me two decades to understand why.

Until a handful of years ago, I'd silently rejected my rural background, my queer identity, my nonbinary gender. I internalized the transphobia and homophobia around me, and the wounds added up, leaving me ashamed. I erased my sense of self before anyone else could do it for me. Today when I look at that turkey-hunting photo, I see someone who was trying to reconcile two seemingly disparate cultures; I'm proud, now, to recognize a kid who was already one very queer redneck.

In my early 20s, in New Mexico, I met and married Jim, a kind, adventurous and stalwart computer engineer with ginger hair. When I began to understand my queer identity, I told him first. At the time, we were both growing into the adults we wanted to be, trying to balance our professions and build lives more centered on food, community and being outside. We picked up Michael Pollan's books, then Dad's hand-me-down rifles, recognizing the value in my family's hunting, foraging, gardening and food-preservation traditions. When Jim shot a cow elk in southern New Mexico's Gila region, a friend taught us to butcher in our tiny Albuquerque kitchen. Then we moved to Montana.

As self-taught hunters in a new state, we spent many days and many miles without seeing a patch of fur

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or spooking animals, dispirited in our self-doubt. Eventually, a fellow hunter in a small-town bar sent me into the sage hills of the Beaverhead with a tip that rolling terrain is good for stalking pronghorn. By then, I wanted to shoot an animal as badly as I'd wanted anything. Not for the killing, but to honor my youthful self, the kid who had longed to be a hunter and never learned. I wanted to know that I could put food on our table straight from the ecosystem we loved, to know that I could revere a life, take it, and then pack it out on my back. The next day, I crawled through sagebrush and steadied my rifle on an unaware doe antelope as Jim waited patiently behind me on a hill. I fired at the doe, and when she fell, that act tied me to the Beaverhead forever. It felt like the rite of passage I never got as a kid.

Years later, I went back home to see my dad and I decided to explain my life to him. There, in his 200-year-old farmhouse, next to the old woodstove where often as a child I'd watch PapPap sleep after his deer hunts, I came out to Dad as queer and polyamorous, telling him that Jim and I were doing great and I had a new partner, M. I expected dirty jokes at best and full estrangement at worst, but he took the news in stride.

One of his first questions was whether M also hunted. I told him that they planned to start the next fall. He asked whether they had a firearm, and I said they didn't. Dad rummaged through his closets and brought out PapPap's old rifle, a lever-action .308 with acorn leaves etched into the stock. He gave it to me so that everyone in our household would be armed. The gesture sent a message that was very different from those I'd absorbed in my youth: I could be rural and queer, and my father was among the people who supported me.

The following autumn, Jim, M and I drew three antelope tags. I had offered to introduce M to the peace and clarity of my favorite hunting spot because we shared a love of sagebrush and pronghorn. We prepared for months leading up to the hunt. The first day was wet and rainy, and the three of us exhausted ourselves hiking through gullies and over grassy hills, chasing antelope to no avail. That evening, we passed under the "Welcome Hunters" sign into a small-town bar, celebrating our first family hunt together with steaks, affectionately joking with each other in a room full of ranchers and old hunters. No one noticed the queers camouflaged in the corner.

The next day, M and I stalked a pronghorn buck. M took the lead, reading the wind and the terrain with one of Dad's old rifles in hand. We moved through brush and grass, closing in to 100 yards before the buck began trotting away. At 150 yards, he turned broadside, and I whispered to M to shoot if they felt ready. The rifle cracked and the buck lilted and fell. M approached the dead antelope, and then knelt to study his shaggy black horn sheath, his long eyelashes, his straw-like hair. The wound confirmed a perfect shot through the lungs, a quick death and no wasted meat. We field-dressed the animal, peeling back the hide, feeling the heat leave its body, smelling the tang of blood and a musk that reminded me of my grandmother's goat pen. We all filled our tags that day, carrying three heavy packs to the truck, and we saved the hearts for a Valentine's Day treat.

Later that season, I found myself at an all-women deer camp set up by a friend. Women are the fastest growing demographic in hunting, one of its hopes for the future, yet it remains hard to find places that center women's experiences and voices. We swapped stories inside a wall tent on a blustery late-autumn night. I swallowed my anxiety and shared the tale of my trip to my father's farmhouse, my

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coming out, the hunt with Jim and M. To my surprise, no one seemed ready to disown me. In fact, there in the warmth of the tent, I felt more myself than I ever had, at least around strangers.

LAST YEAR, THE SAME GROUP held a second deer camp. I returned from the gathering with a mule deer in the truck and fortified by new memories made with my now-friends from the wall tent. I was riding an emotional high from being part of a supportive hunting community and looking forward to deer hunting with M the next weekend. But when I got home, they seemed distant and disinterested when I asked if they wanted to see my deer—usually a reason to jump up from the couch.

The relationship with M had felt uneasy for a while. For months, I'd accepted that I was the problem, that my open wounds from realizing that I was an abuse survivor made me too difficult to live with. Our communication grew increasingly strained, even as I was healing. We spent less time together in nature and more time arguing over basic relationship logistics. Then, the day I came home from deer camp, we had an explosive fight, and M left Jim and me abruptly. It all took me back to my violent childhood confrontations with Dad.

And so, a week later, I found myself back in the Beaverhead again, alone this time and in tears at the base of the Bitterroot Range, having lost my phone and missed my shot. I took a few breaths and thought of all the people who loved and supported me: Jim, the women from deer camp, other friends who truly knew me. People I'd sat with in the snow, hauled elk with in bear country, stood by in the cold and dark. We were rewriting what hunting and queerness and rural culture looked like. I could now see myself through their eyes, as a whole, capable person and hunter. I gathered my things and walked toward the hills where the herd had disappeared.

Eventually, I found a small group of pronghorn bedded down on a far hillside, then crawled close and hid behind a rock. My aim was steady and this time I didn't miss. I quickly dressed the doe and reconnected with myself through those practiced and functional movements. I slipped backstraps, hindquarters and front quarters into their game bags. By then it was dusk, the sky turning pink in the twilight as I hefted my pack and headed for the truck, ready for the long, moonlit walk ahead of me.

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