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Moose: Recollections from a Northern Childhood

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Allison K. Athens

*Moose: Recollections from
a Northern Childhood*



John Athens

~Moose~

Moose loom large for me, too large to capture all at once. A flash of hoof is all I remember of one I startled by the garage when I visited my parents last winter. When I encounter another, I am too busy mentally weighing the imperious rack of antlers he maneuvers so deftly through the brush. And alone, in imagination, all I can put together are long twitching ears and dark brown eyes. I try to make her whole through breaking her down to component parts in an effort to understand how she is put together; how, despite her size, she keeps creeping up on me. I conclude, however, that the parts simply do not add up, words straining to contain her like an ordinary garden fence. Which is to

say, they don't. Each sentence only barely quarters her into—and sometimes out of—existence, like a hasty hunter out in the bush.

~Shadow~

The year of the early snowfall, a moose took up residence in our yard and stayed through the winter. I must have been around eight or nine that winter, young enough to enjoy sleeping in the living room next to the fireplace, old enough to feel concern for the animals and trees. Everyone was caught unaware that year. The mammals' fall feeding frenzy was abruptly and prematurely cut short. The last of the migratory birds were caught in quickly freezing lakes. Trees snapped in half under the weight of the snow on their unshed leaves. These broken trees were why we were sleeping in the living room; the power, I remember, was not to be restored at our house outside of the city limits for several days. The ice cream was stored on our front deck along with other freezer items: peas, corn, salmon fillets. But I especially remember the ice cream. Everyday I would come home from school, or swim practice, or Brownie meetings, anticipating the lights, wanting and dreading their return. Wanting the normal that was our everyday routine, flick on a switch and there was light; dreading the loss of the intimate evenings snuggled in sleeping bags and blankets encircled by candles whose flickering shadows couldn't breach the darkness, their light holding us together. The early snowfall was in September, the days beginning to darken, the nights creeping over us in our late-afternoon activities, descending upon us unaware as we moved through the soft hum of a generator in the clean, well-lighted halls of our schools, offices, and rec centers.

The moose slipped into that shadow sometime later that winter, becoming a part of it, a larger, darker knot amongst the trees as I walked down the driveway, just off the bus in the luminous twilight of a winter afternoon. The last rumble of the bus with the hard crunch of the snow chains lingers only for seconds, unable to hold out in the muffling density of the snow. My memory of the moose, however, is a silent one, these sounds surfacing from other memories. I add in the sweet call of the chickadee, endlessly re-affirming her onomatopoeic name, comforting in her year-round loyalty, her sunflower seed competitors having long since deserted the deafening whiteness, or perhaps that year, caught under it. She is drowned every so often by a raven's call that, unlike the bus, has the power to pierce the stillness as it lingers at the aural edges of my hearing. I'm worried as I walk down the driveway, moose are not known for their sociality—I've heard stories, I've been warned. I walk down the driveway towards my candle-lit home, taking one last look at the figure of darkness, another shadow. An unnamed thrill chills my spine as I hurry past the frozen blocks of ice cream that will never again taste quite right.

~Nuggets~

If you walk into any shop that even half-heartedly attempts to catch a tourist's eye you will find little cellophane packets that hold two or three gold foil wrapped objects that are about the size and shape of an Easter chocolate. These delights, if indeed they are not chocolate (which they usually are not), are "Gold Moose Nuggets," that is, moose droppings. I don't know when moose droppings, often called "nuggets," became such a sought after souvenir over the more conventional mug with an Aurora Borealis decal or the "Life Size Ulu Knife—Remember to Check it in Your Luggage." In high school, my sister worked at one of these gift shops that specializes in frontier Gold Rush kitsch, folding and refolding tee-shirts printed with sourdoughs panning for gold, wolves baying at the moon, polar bears staring stoically into the middle distance under the wearer's right shoulder, or a moose with a twelve point rack in a field of fireweed. She's the one who first brought my attention to the selling of gold moose nuggets, her tone a mix of disbelief and scorn at what outsiders would buy. Although wrapping them in gold had never occurred to me, the familiarity of the un-gold-leafed variety was without question. The nugget is what is leftover from a moose's feeding on woody bark and twigs in the winter and come springtime, with the snowmelt, it is surprising to discover how close these creatures came to you without your knowledge. These little mementos, enshrined in plastic or left in an unpretentious mound amongst the trees, next to your garden, or on your front lawn, attest to the proximity of a wanderer, just passing through.



John Athens

~Tracks~

One summer after college I worked as a camp counselor for an outdoor day camp run by the local environmental center. Divided into one-week sessions, over the course of the summer I was in charge of different groupings of kids aged 6-7, 8-9, and 10-11. Our camp consisted of four large tents, one for each group, and miles of migratory bird fields riven with trails that extended into the surrounding boreal forest. The location was once an old dairy and when the last Creamer (the actual name of the family) gave up farming, he donated the land and barns to the city as a place for migratory birds to congregate, rest, eat, and swim on their journeys north and south, to wherever their final destination may be (but it was also not always “once a dairy;” it was also, once, a seasonal hunting ground for migratory people). In July of that year, sparrows, starlings, thrushes, a few species of duck, and the odd juvenile crane were the extent of our avian co-habiters. Part of our mission was to introduce our campers to the natural wonders that reside in their own backyard; in other words, through a lot of walking on trails, crawling through grass, staring through magnifying glasses, making paper “binoculars,” searching for and identifying, insects, small mammals, birds, trees, feathers, tracks, droppings, and lots and lots of songs, we were supposed to impart an abiding love and sense of stewardship into our young charges, of whom an inordinate number seemed to have an allergy to grass.

In pursuit of these ideals, I found that the youngest groups loved the traces of an animal’s passing even more than the visible animals around us. Coming upon the muddy edges of the lake, the campers would beg me to take out my pocket-sized Alaskan animal track chart, complete with ruled edges for checking print size, given to me by the camp director. The pocket-sized chart was really too pocket sized to be able to read and, as it was simply a photocopied and laminated piece of paper, the quality was less than clear. Nevertheless, any odd indentation in the mud brought squeals of delight and guesses ranging anywhere from polar bear to wolf to fox (predators, no matter their habitat, were a favorite). The most common, and easily recognized, tracks belonged to moose. The distinctive split hoof with the pointy tips and the rounded backs crisscrossed our heavy water-boot treads, leading us in circles, first towards the pond, where he may have fed on the pond-weed and then away again, when he heard us coming, into the shadows of the trees. Of course, the moose could have been female, but only one set of tracks in July suggests that it was a male, I didactically informed my awed spectators, envisioning the growth of the mammal through the re-telling of the day’s events over the dinner table. Ten feet tall! Gigantic antlers! I *saw* him *looking* at me. Unfortunately, as much as finding a set of tracks is a captivating moment, wondering from where and from whom they came, the mystery only holds seven year olds for so long before we diverge into chasing butterflies and playing foxes and rabbits in the grass. As I follow my hopping and itching campers through the grassy fields, I take one last look back towards the trees, and wonder at the tracks left in the campers’ imaginations by the spectral presence of what might be there. If nothing else, the awe of the unseen, grown large through retelling, has built a connection for futures, for both campers and moose.

~Legs~

When I was a sophomore in high school, a girl in my geometry class hit a moose while driving. Moose, like other deer, like to feed along roadways as well as travel across them. I would say what most differentiates moose from other deer, though, are their legs: they're extremely tall and relatively delicate in comparison to the large sturdy body. I have seen a very large moose hop gracefully over a six-foot fence into the garden. Hitting a deer is dangerous; hitting a moose is often fatal for both driver and moose. In particularly snowy years, roads provide pathways for moose that require less exertion for traveling. Most of my hometown would probably be considered rural, with more than a few roads left unpaved, including my own house located about ten minutes from town. And even if a road is paved, it does not mean that it will be well lit and plowed. Most cars, excepting some diesel trucks and Hummers, are situated at such a height that when it strikes a moose in the legs, the body falls through the windshield, landing on the driver and front-seat passenger. In response to this not uncommon event, I have heard that in Norway and Sweden local car manufacturers distinguish themselves from foreign car companies with the rather macabre guarantee of "moose tested."

I was thinking about my classmate as my sister and I drove on the only highway north to visit our parents. Right outside of town is a sign that reads: "Give Moose a Brake." Underneath a picture of a mother moose and calf it reads: "Road Kills this Winter," followed by a number that indicates how many moose (but not humans) have died on roads in the region; the number is changeable. When we drove passed in December, 478 moose had been hit by cars since July. In her encounter with a moose on the road, my classmate did not die, although her face was never quite the same again. The body of the moose she hit was recovered by the Native Association, which harvests the hides and other useable portions of moose casualties. Wolves and bears are shot from planes and their cubs are suffocated in their dens in order to increase the moose population for human hunters. But my classmate was not a hunter.

~Rump~

One summer my best friend's grandfather came to visit her from Poland. He only lingers in my memory as the vaguest of outlines with the traces of an accented voice attached, but tenuously, like the image of the sun burned into your retinas when you weren't quick enough to shut your eyes. I guess you could say he made absolutely no impression on me whatsoever except that he was from Poland and I showed him his first moose. My friend's family lived on the hill across from ours, with our elementary school in the valley in-between. Her house was on the south side of her hill, while mine was on the north side of mine, and she had a large window from which you could sit at the table and gaze into the surrounding trees and into the neighbor's yard. I had spent the night and while we were eating breakfast, I was looking out the window, at the sunlight, the play of different colors

of brown, the gold of the sun reflecting off the Aspen leaves, the rump of a dusky brown horse up against the fence. At least, that is what I saw. My passion for horses let me conjure up horses at will; I would ride them around the schoolyard, I could pat them on low-lying walls, I could jump them over fallen branches and bunches of grass, I would build stables out of snow banks. I wondered out loud when the neighbors had gotten two horses, only to be stared at with blank incomprehension for a still moment that lasts in my mind like the drop of a pin as the next few moments fast forward in the great shock of emotion of a grown man seeing his first moose.



John Wright

~Chest~

Until my dad retired he worked in the same office building downtown, locally known as the “Keybank Building,” due, not illogically, from the fact that the first floor is taken up by Keybank. My dad, however, was not an employee of Keybank; he worked on the fourth floor in a set of offices leased to the Department of Transportation’s legal division. On weekends, when he had charge of me, we would take the elevator up, walking past the open Keybank doors, glass cases in the walls filled with relics of the pioneers and other historical artifacts of frontier nostalgia. I suppose the somewhat public nature of the ground floor encouraged such decorations, and to round out the theme, on the wall across from the elevators, was a stretched moosehide scraped and worked with a mural of a bull moose being taken down by a pack of wolves. The piece was called “The Last

Stand,” and the bull is shown menacing several wolves with his large rack of antlers as other members of the pack dive in at his sides, tearing away strips of flesh from his bony ribs. He flounders in a snow bank, the wolves are already eating away at his tender belly, and I believe I hear his last bellows as I ride away from the scene of such a savagely indecent exposure to his ending. It’s quiet in the deserted offices and while my dad goes over some files, I wander between the offices and cubicles, find leftover holiday candy, and look at the photos of other people’s families.

~Antlers~

My first protest was in high school and consisted of me and five friends waving signs and walking up and down the sidewalk in front of the public library while some of our parents looked on in mild support. I think we may even have had our picture taken for the local paper; it was a slow news time of year. It was later in the winter and probably not too late in the day as it was still light; I remember a puffy jacket and a scarf, or possibly one of those fleece neck-warmers we uniformly called turtlefurs. I remember feeling slightly embarrassed as I tried to summon the pictures of protests seen in National Geographic magazines and my history books, to try to feel that sense of urgency and dedication that those images captured so vividly. We were raising awareness about our disagreement with the construction of the Northern Intertie across the river flats and sensitive tundra habitat. Our contention was that it was not environmentally sound, it was neither the safest nor cheapest way to bring energy to the community, and it destroyed the crisp emptiness of the flats. The flats were empty not of wildlife, but of verticality—it was a swath of horizontals between the mountains to the north and the mountains to the south that stretched alongside the deceptively placid Tanana River. Of course the project went through, hardly even held up by a lawsuit from the environmental center. Soon after this event I went away to college to continue with this not very promising start to a less than interested engagement in political rallies and protests. This event would have completely passed from my thoughts if my mother’s colleagues did not once in a while tease my mother about her “agitator daughter” who is against people having electricity and heating for their homes. But even this “banter” doesn’t register as much as the image of a bull moose found dangling from between two 100 foot towers, the wires laid out across the tundra having tangled in his antlers, his body pulled aloft by the power of progress.

~Head~

Moose, like other deer, do not have upper teeth. Instead, they have a fascinatingly dexterous and well-muscled upper lip and muzzle. In the winter, moose mostly browse on willow branches but will also feed on other trees, such as the spruce that line our driveway, stripping the branches of needles and bark and leaving the trees ragged and forlorn come summer. Summer is a salad bar for moose in the Interior of Alaska with

plenty of willow, birch, pondweed, fireweed, bluebells, grass, and gardens. Moose are inordinately fond of broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, and lettuce and it is a race every summer and fall to see who will get the most from the garden, because a single moose can devour an entire quarter acre plot in a night. Some people resort to electric wire to deter moose (dogs might as well be mosquitoes for the notice moose give them); we just build our fences higher and, for the most part, this strategy has worked fairly well. Although one morning we did awaken to find the largest moose we had ever encountered happily eating her way through our cabbages while her twin calves stood uncertainly outside the fence, testing the newness of the dead wood with their noses. Confronted with this sight, you watch a bit helplessly at first, then a bit admiringly, then you run inside for your camera, and as you turn the corner of the garage, angling for the perfect shot, she looks up, spies your bright red shirt and shoots over the fence like it was an afterthought and trots blithely into the woods, her babies scampering behind on disproportionate legs, leaving you elated, dejected, and shaking your head.



John Wright

ALLISON K. ATHENS grew up surrounded by aspen, birch, black spruce, and cottonwood in the Interior of Alaska. One of her earliest memories is of her first day of kindergarten when she walked out of the house and went face to face with a moose happily eating the last of the cabbages. Wearing what later became known as her “moose scaring” outfit—a skirt and top in primary colors—all she had wanted to do when she stepped out of the house was marvel at the presence of the giant in that special smell of Autumn decay. She now holds a Ph.D. in Literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz and she continues to look for those threshold moments when humans and animals connect.