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COLD SPELL

Anne Coray

Three iceless winters, and now the water's
tethered and freezing down. Ice builds
to four inches in our bay—enough, we believe,
to travel on. Steve and I had almost forgotten
how beautiful is cold, the snow a bright alarm
warning *You'd better love. It's not forever.*

On skis we follow the tracks of a fox
and wonder why one leg on the right
—a front or hind—carves a small
but regular depression. We figure an injury;
our neighbor's a trapper. And already
I'm thinking *mend, be careful, have no trust*

in surfaces, all are wax paper thin.

We have only to look at this lake, these mountains,
this sky, to be caught in luminous illusion:
shrine-white, glass-blue, even the boughs
of birches and spruce—umber and ebony-green—
transfigured beneath a stippling of frost.

What do we learn, oh how we continue
to fracture and dream, that all
will be sewn together and ever return,
as if each season is given,
as if our bodies are held by light,
as if the coil isn't waiting for a new release.

THE CLOSER TO HOME THE BETTER

Anne Coray

One hundred and sixty air-miles and a ninety-minute flight southwest of Anchorage, Alaska, lies Lake Clark National Park and Preserve. At 4-million acres, it includes four of the five biotic zones: tundra, riparian, coastal, and forest. The entire park and preserve is roadless wilderness; Lake Clark itself is a beautiful but formidable stretch of water forty-five miles long and five miles wide. An inland lake surrounded by a mixed spruce-birch-poplar forest, where the Alaska and Aleutian Ranges intersect, it is sparsely populated. On the north shore, only a cluster of summer cabins lie within the park proper; not far away, near the park/preserve boundary, is a five-acre homesite my parents purchased in the 1950s. Twelve years ago my husband, Steve, and I decided to make this family property our year-round residence.

Living here, miles from the nearest community, with our closest neighbors five miles either direction, Steve and I live as simply as possible. We are off the grid, relying on solar panels and a back-up generator for power. We have no freezer or refrigerator, no washing machine, no TV, and only a simple water system, gravity-fed from our nearby creek in the summer. We have a wood cookstove (our primary heat source) and an outhouse. Although we do have machinery—a small, two-seater airplane, two snowmachines, two skiffs, and a four-wheeler (all-terrain vehicle)—we make efforts to reduce our fossil fuel consumption, and we opt to do many things by hand. We also practice subsistence, a term that has been uniquely applied to Alaska.

When, in 1980, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) was passed, Congress made a special allowance for Alaska. Recognizing that many Alaskans live in remote areas and depend on hunting and gathering as part of their livelihood, a “subsistence lifestyle” was considered a cultural value. Thus, people residing in newly established federal parklands were granted the right to continue harvesting resources, including fish, game, berries, and firewood, as they had for generations. The federal law defines subsistence as “the customary and traditional uses by rural Alaska residents of wild, renewable resources for direct personal or family consumption as food, shelter, fuel, clothing, tools or transportation.” [Title VIII, ANILCA, Subsistence Management and Use Findings, (§803)]. In many respects, Alaska subsistence activities mirror a larger, nationwide trend toward sustainability.

Steve and I feel both lucky and blessed that the subsistence provision is in place. Over the years, we’ve exercised our rights most notably by gillnetting annually for red salmon. But our most memorable subsistence harvest took place in late April 2008, when a cow moose fell through the ice near our home. We were out walking on the still-frozen lake the following day when we caught sight of the hole from a distance.

Steve, a former guide and lifelong outdoorsman, was quick to assess

the situation. Something about the shape of the hole—roughly forty-feet long and five-feet wide—gave him a visual clue, and he accurately pieced together the story well before we laid eyes on the moose’s disfigured ears and yellow-brown back. A pressure crack had opened, then healed, creating a thin spot in the ice, which had given way under the ungulate’s 800 to 1,000-pound body.



photo credit: Steve Kahn

She was almost completely submerged. A strip of exposed skin ran the length of her spine, and scattered hairs suggested to me some shedding due to bodily breakdown. But Steve pointed out that this was the work of birds.

He studied the tracks around the opening and determined that another moose had been traveling with the drowned one. We concluded it was the same pair we’d seen a week or so before. The other moose was a bull.

Steve looked closer at the tracks and reflected on the weather: a light snow had fallen two days earlier. The drowning must have occurred within that time.

Though saddened by the loss, I recognized that death was death—tragic but irreversible. Almost immediately my thoughts turned pragmatic: I realized that the meat was probably still fit to eat, and it seemed that we should be the beneficiaries.

Proud locavores, we include large and small game animals, as well as fish, in our diet. Since we’ve lived here Steve has taken four moose, all but one within a half mile of our house, and two of them shot from our porch steps. Not that hunting is easy in this area of Alaska. In fact, the moose population is low here, but the bull-to-cow ratio is still high enough that regulations in the preserve allow the harvest of one bull during a two-week period in September, with eleven extra days in August and a six-week winter season for qualifying residents.

I suggested we walk to our cabin and drive our four-wheeler back to

the drowning site. The winch mounted on the front of the machine would be the perfect tool to pull the moose from its watery grave.

Steve hesitated. This was not a “legal” animal—there was no spring hunting season. Furthermore, we live within the preserve, and we would need permission from the Park Service before we could begin butchering it. After some discussion, we agreed that we should attempt to at least get the moose onto the ice. This we accomplished with relative ease.

We dragged the moose a few feet from the hole and studied it. The slightly swollen teats suggested possible pregnancy, but we were uncertain. She was quite young—a two-year old—and not large by moose standards.

I thought we should drag the cow back on the ice as far as our cabin. I didn’t want critters—wolves, coyotes, birds—to get to the meat if there was any chance we would be given permission to salvage it. Steve disagreed.



photo credit: Steve Kahn

“It’s not our property,” he insisted. “We might get a citation.”

“Look,” I argued, “in the event we do get permission, we’ll have the moose closer to home, and the meat will be in good shape. We won’t be breaking the law just by towing it.”

After a heated exchange, Steve reluctantly relented.

“All right,” he said, “but I don’t agree with it.”

“Oh come on,” I countered.

“I’ll visit you in jail,” Steve replied, joking and annoyed at the same time.

The carcass slid easily behind the four-wheeler. Leaving it in full view of our cabin window, we slipped inside, where I hurriedly drafted an email to Joel Hard, the Park Superintendent. The subject line of my email was “Urgent Request.” I explained the circumstances of the moose’s death and said we had found the body a couple of hours ago. I went on:

“As you know, Steve and I are big subsistence users, and since our supply of meat is quite low, we would welcome this

ready source of protein. It would seem a real shame for the meat to go to waste, especially considering the price of gas to fly in beef that was probably raised as far away as Colorado. In short, utilizing this meat would be both economically and environmentally practical. (And it might keep another bull from getting shot during hunting season next fall!)

With your permission, we would like to proceed with butchering the animal. In the hopes that this would be possible, we managed to winch the moose out of the water and drag it on the ice in front of our cabin, where it now rests. As a way of documenting the event, we took photos, which we have attached.

Obviously, we would need to skin and butcher the moose as soon as possible, but we will await your reply.

All Best,

Anne and Steve

Steve and I held our breath. We figured the response could go either way. Who knew what convoluted, bureaucratic government channels would need to be cleared before we could get approval? The Park Service is not known for streamlined decisions. Nevertheless, we had contacted Joel on several occasions, and his responses were always immediate—a fact that impressed us both, given his high position.

By 8:30 Monday morning, Joel had replied:

Anne and Steve:

Thank you for the email. If you have not already done so, please go ahead with the salvage. Consuming the animal is at your risk though, since I cannot be certain of the time of death and condition of the animal.

Best wishes,

Joel

Thus our work began. Steve sharpened knives while I collected gloves, boots, and hats. He dressed head-to-toe in rain gear; I wore a raincoat and an old pair of ski pants. Once we hit the lake's edge, I backtracked. A fifteen-knot east wind at thirty degrees above zero was just enough to send an uncomfortable chill through my layered clothing. Donning a vest and an extra sweater, I rejoined Steve.

He fixed a rope to the moose and towed it, again using the four-wheeler, into the middle of our bay. Soon bears would be emerging from their dens, and we didn't want to attract them too close to the property. I followed, pulling a small plastic sled equipped with a meat saw, tub, and buckets.

Steve made the first cuts into the hide—a long slice the length of the spine, then down the legs. Soon we were both at work, lifting sections of hide with one hand and running our blades beneath it with the other, gradually exposing more flesh. We removed the hind and foreleg, neck meat, and backstrap from one side. Steve split the outer sac that holds the intestines, careful not to puncture it. The entrails and another large sac fell away, and we discovered, to our dismay, that the moose had been carrying two calves. I turned away, trying not to allow the sad and slightly repugnant image of the fetuses distract me from the task of butchering. After removing the cow's ribs, we flipped the carcass over and repeated the first steps. We set aside the heart, which we intended to eat, and the liver, which we hoped would be of interest to one of our neighbors.



photo credit: Steve Kahn

The main butchering job took an hour and forty-five minutes, but by the time we'd separated all the pieces and hauled them back to the lakeshore it was nearly two o'clock. We were starving. We allowed ourselves a relaxing lunch, followed by hot tea. Warmed and rejuvenated, we resumed our work, hanging the pieces in the meathouse and setting up an electric fence around the structure in case any bears caught the scent of fresh meat. We ended the day cleaning our clothes and tools, and dining on the first delectable sample of our larder: moose heart.

For those who have never participated so directly in the harvest of food, particularly game meat, what I've described must sound like a tremendous amount of work. But this was just the beginning. With no

freezer, our only means of preserving food is pressure-canning it, which we do in glass jars.

For ten days straight, averaging ten hours a day, we toiled, hauling the meat from the drowned moose bit by bit up the hill to our cabin, trimming the waste, hand-grinding burger, cutting up stew meat, washing and filling jars, loading the cooker, and monitoring it for ninety minutes once it reached the required ten pounds of pressure. All this, in addition to keeping the wood boxes filled, left us exhausted. Though we shared some meat with neighbors, we essentially processed seven-eighths of an entire moose.

Was it worth the effort? Like most intense jobs, this one felt, as we were doing it, as though it would never end. But it did end, and in retrospect—as is usually the case, thanks to our poor memories—it wasn't that bad. Ten days is not so long for a good two years' worth of jarred meat. Already cooked, it can be added to noodles or rice for stir-frys, with minimal heating required before it's ready for the dinner plate. More than once, after one of us whips up a ten-minute meal, the other will tease: "Did you do that yourself?"

Perhaps what pleases me most is that we won't be ingesting antibiotics and growth hormones fed most commercial livestock. But I also appreciate that we won't have to purchase canned beef from an Anchorage store 160 air-miles distant. And we are conserving fossil fuels.

Since reading Ted Kerasote's *Blood Ties* (1994) several years ago, and more recently, Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2007), I've thought deeply about the high price (literally and figuratively) we pay for consuming foods shipped around the globe. As a nation, we seem to be getting the message that it's up to us to reduce our carbon footprint, but Kerasote was ahead of his time with this line of thought, particularly as it relates to that most basic act of human survival—eating. A resident of northwestern Wyoming near Grand Teton National Park, he once contacted a professor at Cornell University for help in calculating the cost of his food. He concluded that 79,000 kilocalories of fossil fuel energy went into the 150 pounds of elk meat he gets from an annual hunt, whereas the equivalent caloric value of rice and pinto beans, shipped from California, was 477,000 kilocalories.

Because Kerasote lives in a place whose climate limits the vegetables he can grow, he concentrates on potatoes. But few of us would want to subsist on potatoes alone, though reducing the array of foods in our diet is not a bad idea. Also, growing wheat, corn, soy, and the like are not without environmental cost: fossil fuel to run the equipment used for planting, harvesting, transport, and irrigation pumps; clearing of forests (thus displacing scores of creatures from their natural habitat); and the attendant deaths of small birds and animals as combines sweep through the fields. Kerasote's brief conversion to vegetarianism came to an end when he asked about the lives lost on a mechanized farm:

One Oregon farmer told me that half the cottontail rabbits went into his combine when he cut a wheat field, that virtually all of the small mammals, ground birds, and reptiles were killed

when he harvested windrow crops like rye and sugar beets, and that when the leaves were stripped from bush beans all the mice and snakes who were living among them were destroyed as well (Blood Ties, 232).

In large part, my philosophies have been shaped as a result of reading such texts. Although I have lived in Alaska my entire life (aside from six years at college), I was not raised on subsistence foods in the way that most Alaska Natives and many non-Natives are. My brothers were duck hunters, and as a child I looked forward to their bounty—I relished the dark meat, the nutty, earthy flavor of teal, pintail, mallard, and widgeon. They also hunted spruce grouse. But our family did not eat game meat on a regular basis. Wild duck and game birds, a few caribou, and one moose—taken by my stepfather, Roy—were more of a treat, an occasional highlight in the midst of rather conventional American dinners: beef stew, fried chicken, pork chops, and ham. We ate some salmon and occasionally took advantage of the spring smelt run, but fish were not a steady part of our diet in my early years. The work involved in a subsistence lifestyle—much like life on a farm—is a job in itself, a fact to which Roy, who grew up in northern Montana, wittily attests: “Did I ever tell you why I left the farm?” Ironically, he later became a devout enthusiast of subsistence gill-net salmon fishing, and after retirement his renewed interest in gardening refocused his time and energies and earned him a reputation for growing carrots bigger than splitting wedges.

After I met Steve, my consumption of wild meat increased tenfold. Moose, black bear, and sheep became standard fare. Since moving to Lake Clark, salmon, burbot, grouse, and moose have become our primary sources of protein, though we have also consumed black bear and caribou.

My understanding and appreciation of subsistence has grown tremendously. Of course, hardly anyone today thrives exclusively on subsistence, and the term is subject to many interpretations, so that few issues outside of aerial predator control have sparked more heated debate among Alaskans than subsistence rights. Complicating things even further, the state of Alaska has subsistence regulations that differ from the federal law. In 1989 the Alaska Supreme Court ruled that the rural residency requirement violated the state constitution, which holds that Alaska’s natural resources belong equally to all citizens.

Despite the ruling, the decades-old battle never seems to end. Alaskans still bicker over how to define “rural”—should it include communities with populations of 2,000, or 5,000, or 10,000 residents? Should it exclude, as some have suggested, communities accessible by road? What of the urban dweller who has lived in Alaska since territorial days and has a long history of “customary and traditional” use? Should the law apply to all residents, or should it provide an Alaska Native preference? In the confused and often hostile claims surrounding subsistence, I keep returning to the simple, concise definition once proffered by former governor Jay Hammond: “You eat it where you kill it.”

Admittedly, even if it were possible to adopt such language into

law, more specificity would be needed. How should “where you kill it” be defined? Within two miles of home? Ten miles? Fifty? How to take into account that some animals have a greater range, and that other species, such as salmon, need to be harvested at particular sites? Common sense and flexibility are necessary when defining “local” harvest, but writing exceptions into the law is problematic. Practically speaking, though, few people would dispute that “the closer to home the better” is a good rule of thumb. It gets at something profound about how the spirit of Alaska subsistence usage should be understood. Indigenous peoples have typically established their communities or temporary camps near a resource.

Proximity is key. It’s a basic principle, and one to which more Americans are returning, as we recognize how using resources at hand contributes to the health of the planet. Across the country, people are joining food co-ops and purchasing locally grown crops. Some are tending small gardens on apartment rooftops, and community gardens are springing up in urban as well as rural areas. Like so many others, Steve and I find satisfaction in growing our own vegetables. I love being able to walk fifty yards down the hill from my house to pick fresh greens.

Today is June 20. This season, Steve and I have already eaten two small kale salads from our garden. In another two weeks we will be hard pressed to keep up with the supply. The spinach and lettuce will soon be large enough to pick, followed by Swiss chard, broccoli, strawberries, squash, peas, and finally, carrots. But kale is our mainstay. We will eat kale until late November or early December. An amazingly hardy vegetable, it can withstand below-freezing temperatures for weeks on end.

Edible native plants in this area are few, and we generally restrict ourselves to fireweed shoots, dandelion greens (we do have a type of native dandelion here, as well as an invasive species), and lady fern fiddleheads, all best consumed in early spring. Wild beach onions grow in profusion, but because of their strong taste we use them sparingly. In the fall, we look for wild mushrooms and have been especially impressed with the texture and flavor of oysters, goat’s beard, and horse mushrooms.

The first wild berries to ripen are currants, which we generally pick in early August. Tart and juicy, they make excellent jelly. By the middle of the month we are searching for blueberries, my favorite for jam. In late September we gather lowbush cranberries—best picked after the first frost—which we turn into a delicious, robust juice loaded with vitamin C.

With this much emphasis on procuring our own food, not to mention cutting firewood, I find it humorous when people in town ask, “What do you do out there?” Yet, for those unfamiliar with our lifestyle, this is the most common question. I’ve taken to answering, “We practice freedom from corporate control of our food.”

But I am not a purist. I occasionally indulge in a cut of prime beef or a T-bone steak. Still, some of my most memorable meals have been homegrown.

One September, Steve and I boated to one of the nearby islands for

dinner, carrying with us two spruce grouse he had taken earlier that day. We sliced them and wrapped them in foil, along with sweet peppers I had grown from seed. We roasted them slowly over coals from a driftwood fire. The meat was heavenly—moist, tender, and imbued with the flavors of the forest, sweetened, no doubt, by the cranberries these birds eat in the fall. It wasn't just the taste, but the whole experience, set in one of Alaska's most stunning landscapes—a glacier-fed lake surrounded by five and six thousand-foot mountains, their peaks dusted with the season's first snow.

Now, sitting in my favorite chair with a southern view of the Chigmit Mountains, watching the cobalt-blue lake ripple in a westerly breeze, and warmed by the radiating heat of the wood cookstove, the joy and labor of living here coalesce. Steve and I spent hours today splitting and hauling firewood. My arms are slightly sore from wielding the axe, and I'm reminded of the work we did last March: Steve felling standing dead spruce trees and sawing them into rounds while I limbed the many branches; loading our sled and hauling it down the hill; restacking the wood and watching the cords slowly build.

Steve brings me a bowl of moose stew. I swallow a couple of spoonfuls and marvel at the fine flavor, the perfect melding of spices. He's a good cook, and I tell him so. He's modest, though, and slightly suspicious of my praise, thinking I use flattery to encourage him to prepare more meals. "Besides," he says, "You're hungry. Anything tastes good when you've worked hard."

It's true. But there's something else. This was a special moose, that died an extraordinary death. It gives our meal a flavor of place that no five-star restaurant can match.

Steam rises from the pot as Steve ladles his own bowl full. He sits down beside me. Together, we eat.

Anne Coray is the author of *Bone Strings* (Scarlet Tanager Books), *Soon the Wind* (Finishing Line Press); and coeditor of *Crosscurrents North: Alaskans on the Environment* (University of Alaska Press). Her poetry has appeared in the *Southern Review*, *Poetry*, *North American Review*, *Connecticut Review*, the *Women's Review of Books*, in several anthologies, and on the *Verse Daily* web site. She lives at her birthplace on remote Qizhjah Vena (Lake Clark) in southwest Alaska.

Steve Kahn is a lifelong Alaskan whose collection of essays, *The Hard Way Home: Alaska Stories of Adventure, Friendship, and the Hunt* is forthcoming from University of Nebraska Press. His work has appeared in *Alaska Magazine*, *ISLE*, and *Terrain.org.*, among others.

GOAT'S BEARD

Anne Coray

Who knows your name
should know as well your face,
so fine a net of fur—
resemblance, hence
to the crop that hangs
below the chin
of hollow-horned, white-coated ungulate.

But look is not enough
to fully meet your pleasure:
so sweetly delicate, your taste—
a perfect match
for dill-laced omelette, topped with cheese.
(Though lightly browned in butter,
you're heavenly alone.)

Best of all, your reappearance,
year after year in the same place.
A fallen cottonwood, not yet decayed,
provides your bed and sustenance
just near my house;
after rains, in gentle shade, I seek
your sudden, august grace.

