On Not Encountering
an Eastern Panther

by Chris Bolgiano

Sometimes it seems that I am the only person I know who hasn't seen a panther in the mountains of western Virginia, where I live. Reports come in from all sides. Lori saw a black one playing at the foot of Little North Mountain not far from here, but she is a poet and a writer of fantasy novels, and sees things in the shadows that other people don't. My neighbor Willy was startled the other night by a big, long-tailed cat that ran in front of his car; he is a hunter and said he never saw anything like it in the woods, but it was night and he barely got a glimpse as the animal streaked by. David saw one on the outskirts of the small city down in the valley where he lives, but he is, sadly, too often in his

cups. Gil was riding his mountain bike just across the state line in West Virginia and swears he saw one gliding through the green gloom, but he runs a bike touring company, and if tales of eastern panthers spark up his clients' experience, so much the better. Dave is a self-taught woodsman who lives what is called an alternative lifestyle, and he is convinced that the eyeshine and yowling beside his campfire one night was a cougar, though he couldn't find any sign. Larry watched a mother and kitten in his rifle scope for several minutes one brilliant autumn afternoon while he was squirrel hunting. He is a professional biologist, and his story is not easily discounted.

The cat that easterners call panther, painter, or catamount was officially extirpated by 1938, when the last wild cougar was shot in Maine, but sightings have never ceased. Sparse and scattered in the early twentieth century, by the last quarter of it cougar sightings swelled to such a volume that they became a phenomenon in themselves. Of the thousands of people who have reported a sighting in recent decades, a handful found the experience powerful enough that it changed their lives. A glimpse of rippling cat muscle and long, low, curving tail charged their view of the world with a new kind of emotional, if not spiritual, energy. Afterward they dedicated themselves to collecting other sightings, interviewing the sighters, and searching for field evidence to confirm the existence of the great cats. They are sane people, as far as I can tell, and invariably kind and friendly. There is about them a definite aura of the outcast as well as an unquestioning faith. If they had a leader, they might qualify as some sort of harmless cult. The eastern cougar has become a mythic presence. I cast my mind in search of it, as I walk through my 100 acres of woods along the flank of Cross Mountain.

Until the 1990s, state and federal wildlife officials routinely dismissed eastern cougar sightings. People who reported seeing cougars were often subjected to rude treatment as cranks or drunks. There's no telling what good evidence was trashed by

closed-minded bureaucrats unwilling to take the risk that cougars might actually be there. Finding cougars would mean some unpleasant work for public wildlife agencies. The eastern cougar subspecies is listed on the federal Threatened and Endangered Species List (as *Felis concolor couguar*), giving it certain protections, at least on federal land. Agency officials would need to review the uses of public land and call into question those, like the still-popular tradition of hunting with dogs, that might injure cougars. Officials of all kinds would also have to undertake an educational campaign to teach people how to live with an animal that can, and occasionally does, eat humans.

Shyness is the norm for cougars, but historical records show them quite capable of treating people, especially children, as prey. There's at least one tombstone in the East, dated 1751 in Chester County, Pennsylvania, that marks a settler's death by cougar. Native Americans must surely have now and then lost some wide-roaming children. Today, cougar attacks have increased dramatically out West, as human sprawl crowds into cougar country. More people—a total of nine—have been killed by cougars in the twenty-five years from 1973 to 1998 than in all of the previous century. I feel no fear, though, as I pad along the moss-carpeted old logging roads that now serve as forest paths. I almost wish I did.

The once-gashed roads I follow are part of the legacy of irony that I have inherited in Appalachia, my chosen home. It was the destruction of Appalachia's fabulous hardwood forests by private loggers that prompted the government to buy up seven million acres of national forest and parklands for restoration. Stretching down the southern Appalachian Mountains from Virginia to Alabama, these now comprise the largest complex of federal lands east of the Mississippi. Here lies the eastern cougar's best hope for the future. My property borders the George Washington National Forest, at the northern threshold of that geography of hope. If cougars are making it anywhere in the East, sooner or

later they ought to be in my backyard.

My yard is an open half-acre of meadow and garden, a tiny tear in the forest that sweeps down Cross Mountain over my shoulders like a cloak. By counting tree rings as we cut firewood, my husband and I have found that most of our trees are between eighty and ninety years old. By this, by the U.S. Forest Service archives for the area, and by an iron-wheeled lumbering crane rusting on a nearby ridge, we can date the last major cutting cycle through our woods to around 1910–20. This was the height of the great Appalachian lumber boom. Floods became common as whole mountainsides were denuded and left exposed to erosion. Limbs left by loggers dried out, were ignited by sparks from steam-powered trains and sawmills, and fueled wildfire after withering wildfire. On many of my acres I find old fire-charred stumps, one of them twenty feet high and deeply blackened to the top. It terrifies me to imagine those moments when that tree was burning.

By then, white-tailed deer, the favorite prey of cougars, had already been hunted to the point that merely seeing a set of tracks made for a local event. Unable to recover on their own, deer were restocked on national forest lands in most Appalachian states. They have since prospered only too well. Farmers and foresters alike complain about heavy browsing by deer. Lyme disease, spread by a type of deer tick, has become locally common in recent years. We've learned not to plant certain ornamentals because the deer invariably eat them. A doe took residence near the house several years ago, and periodically I stumble onto a spotted fawn in a brushy patch. The forest, too, has recovered, though it is only a ghost of its former self, and has lost so much topsoil it can never reclaim its former glory. There are a few white oaks on my land now that are just a little bigger than my arms can encircle. Good habitat and abundant prey are once again available. Most biologists agree that human attitudes are the only limiting factor for eastern cougars.

The psychology of cougar sightings is convoluted. People who think they've seen a cougar resist the obvious and logical explanations. "It was a dog," I told Lori, Willy, Gil, and Dave, only to be met with angry stares. They want to believe they've seen the rarest and most dangerous animal possible where they live. Surely these cougars are cultural projections, drawn perhaps from guilt for our collective ravaging of the continent, or from yearning for the exoneration that the survival of cougars would confer. Surely, too, there is an element of thrill-seeking in the sightings, in a culture addicted to the fastest, highest, and fiercest, whether in machines, mountains, or animals. Maybe the image of cat goes deeper than culture. Maybe it has been permanently etched on human consciousness by eons of that peculiar tension between fear and admiration, the anxiety of ambivalence. Cat sightings may be a primal expression of the human understanding of nature. I peer at whiskery arrangements of twigs and leaves in the shadowy undergrowth of my forest, and my back awaits the sensation of cat eyes on it.

Despite the chaos of cultural images, in the burgeoning mass of eastern cougar sightings there is a small core of utterly convincing accounts. Respected naturalists have reported encounters with cougars. People with no woods experience have noted details of cougar appearance and behavior that they could not have known. I have myself seen a home video filmed in western Maryland in 1992 that showed an unmistakable cougar stepping momentarily between trees in a forest. The 1990s brought much more proof of cougar existence than any agency wants to admit. The Canadian province of New Brunswick confirmed cougar presence there in 1993 by analyzing a scat collected by a provincial biologist. It had cougar hairs in it, presumed to be ingested during self-grooming. A year or two later, Maine state biologists verified cougar tracks. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service confirmed three cougars—a mother with young—in Vermont in 1994, by the same kind of analysis done in New Brunswick. In

1997, Shenandoah National Park was swamped with so many credible cougar sightings that park biologists set up baited camera stations, hoping (in vain as yet) to get a picture. The next year, a committee of the Virginia legislature agreed to recompense a mountain farmer in southwest Virginia whose pygmy goats were believed killed by a cougar. The farmer sought repayment from the state because cougars are protected by the Endangered Species Act and he couldn't go after the one he blamed for killing his livestock. At the same time, state biologists in Tennessee were rubbing their chins over some plaster track casts they had taken near the Cumberland Plateau, on the western edge of Appalachia.

So much persuasive evidence has accumulated that the wildlife establishment is beginning to acknowledge it, sort of. Instead of denying all possibilities of cougar existence, officials are routinely quoted as saying that yes, there may be a few cougars out there, but they're all escaped or released captives that originated in the western U.S. or South America, not remnant natives. (Even the thirty to fifty remaining Florida panthers, the only officially acknowledged population of eastern cougars, were castigated by opponents of the recovery program when it was learned that some Florida panthers had an ancestor from South America.) Therefore, these cats being seen in the East aren't really eastern cougars at all. By implication, they aren't entitled to the protections of the Endangered Species Act. It's a handy way to sidestep any responsibility for a wide-ranging, threatening predator.

And there's likely a large grain of truth in the claim that at least some eastern cougars are former pets. There's an astounding market, legal and illegal, in exotic felines. I've read ads in newspapers and magazines for cougar kittens, and out of curiosity once wrote for a price list from an animal farm in South Carolina. Cougar kittens were on sale at the time for $850. Adults were cheaper at $600, and jaguars, leopards, black leopards, Bengal

tigers, and something called a "leopard jaguar" were available upon request (and—this was noted in small print—with the proper Department of Interior permits) for $1,250 to $2,000. Federal laws are a maze, states have varying or no regulations, and estimates are virtually impossible, but where exotic cats can be reckoned, they number in the thousands. Talk about the human psychology of cats! Not to mention the rationalizing needed to justify caging a large animal designed by two million years of evolution to run free.

Endearingly cute as kittens, cougars grow into unpredictable, voracious adults. Surely, some number of fearful or exasperated owners have driven to the nearest forested area and opened the gate. The survival chances of such human-raised cougars are unclear. Lacking instruction from a mother, would their hunting ability be adequate? Some biologists with experience in cougar adaptability think so. The abundance of small prey in the eastern woods, including raccoons, opossums, skunks, and ground nesting birds, might just supply enough food until a cougar taught him- or herself how to bring down deer. How much would being declawed hinder them? Not long ago I asked the owner of two pet cougars, who come at her call and lick her hands, how many captive cats are declawed. She is involved in various wild cat associations and knows many owners, and said she thought quite a few, if not most of them, declawed their pets. The expert I consulted on cougar biology would say only that declawing would certainly be a disadvantage, but beyond that nothing was known.

So in addition to any last lone eastern natives that might have survived the timbering holocaust, captive-raised cats from other cougar populations are probably loose out there. To these two sources might be added a third: the migration of cougars out of the west, northeast around the Great Lakes, and down the Appalachian spine. Coyotes did it; why not cougars? There are fragments of evidence to support such speculation, like cougars being documented in recent years in Canada in places where

they have never been seen before. Throughout the East, the number of credible accounts of a mother with young point toward reproduction. My own theory is that at this moment in time, as the millennium turns, we have a proto-population of eastern cougars composed of mongrels.

I say "proto" because studies done as part of the Florida panther recovery program showed that a very small cougar population can be very fluid, its social network too weak to hold individual members firmly in place over time. Individuals wandered all around, rather than staying in one home range. In larger populations, home territories tend to be more defined, with the best habitats kept constantly tenanted. In those places, evidence of cougar presence is easily found. Where cougars are far fewer and more transient, their sign will naturally be rare. And they will likely wander until they meet their fate or a mate, whichever comes first. It remains to be seen if eastern cougars, from whatever source, can multiply enough to bind themselves in place and, finally, to fully reveal themselves.

I call them "mongrels" for a reason as well. Biologists are just as vulnerable to racism as anyone else, and a demand for racial "purity" can corrupt science just as surely as it does human relations. By its own tools, science has now proved that purity is nothing more than a human concept, with little application in the wild. For four years, I tracked a doctoral student working on a dissertation to analyze DNA from all subspecies of cougar. To represent eastern cougars, which were almost exterminated before anyone thought to keep museum specimens, the student collected tissue from six pelts. The conclusion: that the fifteen subspecies of North American cougars had too little genetic variation to warrant subspecies classification, and should be reduced to one. Taxonomists have been too eager to freeze dynamic interactions into static categories. There is simply no way, based on the handful of specimens available, to positively define an eastern cougar as uniquely distinct from other cougars. It doesn't make a

whit of difference where those cougars in the eastern woods come from. They are all capable of filling the eastern cougar niche. We ought to be grateful to them for their courage in trying.

A Cherokee lady I recently met asked me if I ever felt a cougar in my woods. I had to say I didn't. I want to, because I long for the benediction that the sight of a cougar might bring, but I know desire can deceive. I rein my mind in from its probing through the forest, and try to put cat images aside. Yet there is an image that haunts me, not only when I am in the woods. It comes from the true story of the cougars of Paddy Mountain, a few miles north of my house. In the snowy winter of 1850, local farmers tracked two of the last cougars in Virginia along the crest of Paddy Mountain, where boulders stand tall and flat-faced as houses. One cat, the male sibling of the pair, was shot, and someone from the Smithsonian Institution collected his skeleton the following spring. One hundred and forty-three years later, in a small room equipped for the preparation of specimens, I held the poor shattered bones of that male cougar in my hands. His sister escaped. I see her crouched in a rock den on Paddy Mountain, high above the valley, her muscles taut. I see her yellow eyes gleaming in the dimness of the cave. She does not look at me, but beyond, maybe into the future.