

Thursday, March 20

Another dark and dreary day, with snow off and on, and some rain.

During the night the wolves had left the forested hills and crossed a river that flows down the eastern edge of a broad, open valley. They roamed among a few widely scattered settlements strung along a dirt road running up the middle of the dale. In the morning we drove along the road, listening to the beep via the directionless antenna on the roof (piped into a portable speaker), dodging or slowly bouncing through deep, iced-over, water-filled holes. We stopped to take a directional reading and to see if there were any tracks in the shallow, wet snow. Peter's intuition proved correct — a set of fresh wolf tracks crossed the road no more than ten meters from where we stopped.

Since the wolves were currently somewhere in the hills farther up the valley, we began following the tracks in the direction of travel, away from the road and towards the river, past a lonely farm house and into an open field behind. The hills from which the wolves had descended the night before rose sharply just beyond the banks of the river, the bare hardwood trees crowning the snowy hills like a stiff, gray-red mane. Before reaching the gushing river, the wolf tracks diverted sharply to the left, to the north, leading in the downstream direction through an open field behind a couple more farmhouses and an old military storage building. We soon noticed dog tracks wandering about, and since the snow was slushy and the prints not sharp, we began to wonder whether we were really following the tracks of wolves.

The tracks continued running straight down the valley, and we were regaining confidence that we were following the impressions left by purposeful wolves and not frolicking dogs when we came upon a large depression that was obviously formed by hoofs, not paws. A red deer print here, a wolf print there, both leading in the same direction...which tracks were laid first? We sensed we were now on to something interesting, if not dramatic, so we proceeded briskly, our attention entirely focused on the lines of holes in the snow, until the trail led into a large yard surrounded on three sides by a two-meter-high chain-link fence. The yard belonged to a small, decrepit hydroelectric plant that spanned the river.

Noticing a brownish spot on the snow across a small tributary stream, Peter handed me Djanga's leash and waded across, where he found a few drops of blood. Meanwhile, fiercely barking dogs brought a man out from one of the buildings. As the man approached he was screeching a rapid-fire monologue and I assumed he was informing me of the obvious — that we were trespassing — before I cut him off with my most diligently practiced Romanian phrase, "*Eu vorbesc foarte puțin Româneshță*" ("I speak very little Romanian"). I signaled for him to wait while I pointed at Peter and restrained Djanga from delivering a message of her own. After Peter had finished wading back across the stream, the excited man had much to say with both his mouth and his hands.

"Four" wolves killed a "giant" red deer on his property last night. The deer's carcass was in his shed and he was in the process of butchering it. He led us around to where the kill occurred in the corner of the yard, where the ground was thoroughly trampled with hair and blood and snow and mud. The man pointed around as he shouted his story, and he showed us where the deer had inflicted a serious dent into the sturdy metal fence. He then took Peter inside the shed to show him the carcass while I remained outside with Djanga. They returned a few minutes later, and whether the expressive man ever finished telling his tale of a fierce nighttime battle with wild beasts, we left to others to know. We had heard more than enough to satisfy our own curiosity, and took our leave.

We decided to follow the tracks back to see if we could reconstruct the detailed anatomy of this hunt.

The wolves encountered the deer about two kilometers back, near the road. As the majestic stag walked slowly through the dale, senses alert, kicking holes into the crusty snow to expose a few blades of grass or a few broken stalks of last year's corn, it suddenly stopped, lifted its head, thrust its wet nostrils into the cold night air, and twitched its ears. Something was wrong. Some disturbance — a slight scent drifting on a shifting breeze, or a delicate snap of ice shattering the deathly stillness, or a fleeting shadow wavering over the starlit snow — instantly crystallized the deer's being into complete and focused presence. Like an unobserved quantum of energy ready to act as particle or wave,⁶⁶ the deer stood

with muscles twitching, perfectly poised between action and non-action, completely receptive, existing and perceiving existence with its entire nature, perhaps exchanging a final, instantaneous stare with its stalkers...and then it was off.

The deer bounded down the valley, fleeing for its life, barely noticing the tributary streams and the five rail fences it leaped with ease.⁶⁷ One deadly pursuer followed directly at its heels, just as focused, just as determined to survive, relentlessly shadowing every zig and every zag, jumping every stream and every fence. A second shadow darted along beside, but then veered to the right, towards the river, running past the ends of the fences, preventing the deer from reaching the water and possible escape.

Wolves will often quickly give up chasing as healthy and dangerous an animal as a large and speedy red deer. But not this time; at least not yet. These two predators had eaten just yesterday; they could not be considered especially desperate, so perhaps they were just evaluating, knowing they had plenty of energy for an extended pursuit of possibilities. Or perhaps they had already detected something vulnerable in this lone red deer. Or maybe they were just especially experienced, brazen, and confident wolves, suspecting at some intuitive level that as a pair they were at their peak hunting effectiveness.⁶⁸

After about 1,500 meters, with its heart pounding and its lungs screaming for air, the deer recognized a chance. Its direct pursuer, the wolf that had once nipped its leg, had lost a few centimeters at the jump of a fence, and then a few more at the jump of the next. And now the wolf recognized it hadn't the power for another leap, so it diverted to the right to avoid yet another approaching fence. The wolves then swapped roles, the less fatigued herder dashing to the left to become the direct pursuer. But time had been lost and their quarry gained ground. Now the deer could hear the distance growing, could sense the retreat of death. But just as hope gave the fleeing animal a final surge of energy, just as it felt the impending triumph of its unyielding will to live, the end came in a violent crash. An invisible barrier intruded mercilessly into the deer's existence, instantaneously stopping all the momentum of its motion, its hope, and its life.

Perhaps the deer was knocked to the ground, perhaps not, but

it was bounding no more and could not clear the tall, chain-link fence. Hope, ever tossed about by the vagaries of the indifferent Fates, having fallen from the deer was retrieved by the wolves. The predators tore at the deer's legs as the desperate victim tried to escape. The wolves sensed that their prey was now stunned and hurt, but the stag still managed to kick them off, and left tufts of hair on the fence as it rubbed along the confounding barrier trying to find a break. Where the deer's progress was stopped by yet another invisible obstacle, it swiveled to face its frenzied attackers. Stomping its feet and dropping its head to use its antlers as a shield, the deer drove the wolves back to the other corner of the yard. But there, trapped again and hurt, the large and once powerful red deer could find no escape, and whenever it turned to face one of the wolves, the other attacked ferociously from behind...

The wolves didn't get to realize much of the benefit of their wit and labor. Dogs joined the fray, likely kicking up a fierce storm, barking and charging at the intruders, both the wolves and the fallen deer. The electrical plant attendant heard the ruckus and rushed to the melee, and recognized that a large package of fresh venison had been delivered. Facing too many threats, the wolves were forced to give up. The predators retreated into the black and silent night.⁶⁹

"So why did he say there were four wolves? Is there another pack around here?" I asked.

"People exaggerate about wolves. And when he came out, there also were dogs and he was confused. It was dark."

Apparently our wolves had become very efficient hunters. Our team had already found more wolf kills this week than during any other previous week of a predation study in the ten-year history of the CLCP, and more than over many of the month-long studies (or so I heard). And the week wasn't over. But Peter suspects that it wasn't usually the wolves that had been inefficient during those past studies. The researchers probably hadn't found all the kills. We had had good luck and seemed to be on a roll.