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NONFICTION



Coyotes (Photo by Karl Umbriaco | Dreamstime)

LEAVING A TRACE

By Nels Christensen

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*Don't piss in the mouth of a river that flows to the sea,
Nor in the springs either. And don't ever shit in them.*

—Hesiod, translated by Stanley Lombardo

I was twelve years old. My dad and I were hunting on Stover Mountain near Chester, a small logging town in Northern California. After having gone along on my dad's hunting trips just to watch since I was eight, I was finally old enough to carry a rifle myself. I distinctly remember the weight of it. But in this particular memory, the rifle isn't slung across my shoulder or pressed firmly against it, safety off, ready to fire. Instead, it

stands about five yards from me, wedged upright in the crook of a tree.

Moments before, I had left my dad and moved into the thick woods alone in order to partake in the ordinary and decidedly un-romantic outdoor activity that, to this very day, he calls “taking a dump.” There I was in my characteristic half-squat developed over many years of trial and disastrous error. Pants pulled down, knees bent, left arm shot straight out against a tree behind me, I achieved the necessary angle of defecatory repose — leaning far enough back so that I could leave my mark without marring my boots, but not so far as to compromise my stability.

I was in exactly this position when I heard a noise that somehow disguised itself as a feeling; it was the presence of something so strangely acute as to be inseparable from the sound of its arrival. I looked up and saw four coyotes standing not more than ten yards from me. They must have come from deeper in the woods — where else? — but judging by their seemingly instantaneous appearance, they may well have dropped from the sky. I gaped. They appraised me. Caught in our respective acts, we crouched and watched, waiting for whatever would happen next.

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This memory — part extraordinary animal encounter and part ordinary bodily fact — sticks with me as I walk through the Whitehouse Nature Center on my way to the campus of Albion College in south-central Michigan, where I teach environmental writing and literature. I regularly bring my classes here, to this 144-acre stretch of reclaimed land along the Kalamazoo River. We observe and study the natural world, and we write about what we see and feel and why it matters. But the Nature Center is by no means a pristine wilderness. The land, in fact, bears the marks of a long history of human impact — including, as it turns out, a dump.

My students tend to find this fact funny, even shocking: the Nature Center was once a dump. Their reaction comes from the ineluctable way the idea of a dump, and even the word itself, bumps up against their desire to romanticize this place. They want to think of it as their own little tract of preserved wilderness, not as a place where people come to discard old cars and couches. They come here, as they say, “to experience nature” and to write about that experience — which, as I take it, is their way of saying that they want to write about a coyote. About something extraordinary and wild. A coyote moment. Learning that the Nature Center was a dump — and will never, ecologically speaking, fully return to its pre-dump days — messes with the idea of the Nature Center they’ve created in their minds and with their sense of themselves as environmental writers. After all, who goes to the dump to write about nature? Or, worse, what environmental writer would ever write about taking a dump?

Those questions seem particularly important to me because, when we write about nature, we aren’t merely representing our experiences: We are, in a powerful sense, defining what actually constitutes a natural experience at all. Put a different way, writing about the

natural world teaches us not just how to pay attention but also what to pay attention to. Stringing together grand tropes about coyote moments — those rare encounters with wildness — tells only a small part of a rich, complicated story at the risk of ignoring the rest. And “the rest” is where we live most of our lives. As writers, we move around in the world, poking and prodding our experience into words, choosing, say, to focus on meeting four coyotes in the wild but skipping the fact that we may have been taking a dump at the time. And those choices matter.

While it may seem more shocking to find human dung in the Nature Center than, say, a rusty barrel, maybe it shouldn't. Both the dung and the barrel tell a similar story, a story suggested by the oddity of my dad's favorite expression, one familiar to every adolescent boy: that taking a dump is less an act of taking than of leaving. Taking a dump really means leaving your shit. And judging by the range of objects I find in the Nature Center, humans generate lots of different kinds of shit.

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Trackers have a name for the piles of excrement animals inevitably leave behind as a sign of their presence. They call it scat. But I've never heard anyone refer to human excrement as scat. Scat doesn't carry the pejorative connotations that shit does. Finding scat on the trail is exciting. I pick it up, break it open. Finding shit on the trail is just gross. Once, while I was in the Maine woods teaching a set of poems about bears to a few students, a young man named Ryan said he had found some bear scat nearby. We went to look. Arriving at the spot, I pointed out the nearby wad of bleached whiteness and said that, as far as I knew, bears didn't use toilet paper. Scat turned to shit. We were all disappointed. But what really is the difference between scat and shit? Why does one stir a romantic, outdoorsy impulse in me and the other disgust? Isn't shit simply a human sign, a kind of track?

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It snowed last night. The ground in the Nature Center is a white skin, inked here and there with the imprints of passing critters lined out in the snow. On mornings like this, I'm always drawn here. I know the tracks will be there, and I feel a powerful expectation not unlike the sensation of reading a novel — the developing impression of pattern, the revelation of experience, the unfolding of story. But reading tracks in the snow differs from other types of reading in one main way: reading tracks typically starts in the midst of things, like opening a book randomly in the middle. Something has been there, left its trace, and moved on. In theory, if I follow the tracks far enough in either direction, I'll find the beginning or the end of the story. Once I came upon some small tracks outside my apartment door. I followed them around the corner of the garage and found the squat, wet author: a muskrat backed into a concrete corner, decidedly not looking at me looking at it. Another time, while following a line of tracks in the woods, my head bowed intently to the ground, I looked up to find the prints leading to a skunk not five yards away. End of story.

For me, following animal tracks approximates more closely than anything else what James Galvin, in his lyrical meditation *The Meadow*, calls “seeing narratively.” For Galvin, we see narratively when we experience the world with the senses of an animal. Take coyotes, for instance. Galvin says that because the coyote “sees” so much by scent it knows “not only where things are but where they have been, and how long they have been gone, as if everything seen had a gently diminishing streak behind it like a comet, showing where it came from and how fast it traveled.” To follow tracks is to seek and, if you are lucky and patient (and quiet), to find the track-maker. It is a process of reading the evidence of a passing presence, the heft of body, the press of paw, the hot weight of scat. I am drawn to Galvin’s description for the way it reminds me that we humans are implicitly a part of that animal narrative. We, too, make tracks. Seeing ourselves narratively shifts our perspective: It puts us inside the larger story of our presence in the natural world. It requires that we see the impact of our lives — call it our tracks, call it our shit — not as separate from those lives but as the lives themselves.

For those of us with an environmental bent, an important part of heading into the woods is the attempt to erase our tracks, or at least render them invisible. We call this philosophy “leave no trace.” But despite its admirable ethics, “leaving no trace” is ultimately a fantasy: as if we could actually live traceless lives, could leave nothing behind, no track or testimony. There may be no greater example of this than the act of shitting in the woods.

I feel the deep and familiar urge in my bowels. I squat. And when I walk away, a small but not insignificant biological bit of me remains. In the woods, I can’t flush my waste away — out of sight and smell, out of mind. As a boy, I learned from my dad to think of taking a dump in the woods as something akin to ritual. My dad never has, and never will, dig a hole. For him, when you shit in the woods, you shit on the ground, not in it. It reminds me of coyote scat I’ve seen on the trail, prominently and dramatically deposited in plain sight, on display, as if to say, “See. I’ve been here.”

It was only later that I learned a ritual of another kind. Dig a hole six inches deep; put your shit in it; cover it up. And while I relish most opportunities to claim the moral high ground with my dad, I can’t quite trick myself into feeling superior about my new, environmentally progressive ritual. “Leave no trace” practices make absolute sense, of course, particularly in a world where so many people seek out the same patches of “wilderness.” I don’t want to deny that. But there’s something brutally honest, something gracefully animalistic, about my dad’s full exposure dumping policy. As if for him taking a dump acknowledges the bodily fact of the waste, its materiality, its existence.

Whether we dig holes or not, the basic fact that confronts us when we shit in the woods is the shit itself. It forces us to notice it, to pay some kind of attention to it. We must decide, ultimately, what to do with it, even if that simply means doing nothing, walking away. The trace is there, displayed or buried. It’s there.

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We are, in the end, waste makers. Food comes in, and shit goes out. It’s pretty basic. But

when people get together and form societies, things get more complicated. The shit starts to pile up. And I don't just mean feces. I mean all of it: the plastic bags and tampon applicators, the diapers and deodorant tubes. All the unremitable evidence of lives guided by what TV commercials call convenience. Wash it or toss it. The glib choice in that marketing hook should shock us. But it doesn't, quite. I could either wash the crusty sauce out of this plastic container or just pitch the whole works in the trash, and away it goes. Flush.

That we produce shit is non-negotiable. All animals do it. But how much of it and what we humans do with it, that's a different story. Which is exactly why I find the Nature Center as a location for "nature writing" so compelling. It's beautiful, and it was a dump. Look closely, and you'll see it: industrial scat. The Nature Center won't allow those who go there for writerly inspiration to forget our role as waste-makers. The human waste in the Nature Center — a railway car, beer bottle, or shred of tainted toilet paper — is part of the "nature" we witness there. So we pick it up. Hold it in our hands. Most of all, we write about it, and in doing so, we see it, acknowledge it, and in a way, claim it. If you're paying attention, you can't miss it.

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Recently, I've been reading the eco-critic Dana Philips's book *The Truth of Ecology*. He takes people like me to task for treating ecology as merely "a point of view." We are guilty, he says, of adopting metaphors of ecology without any rigorous sense of the actual science that stands beneath those metaphors. He's right, I suppose. But when I think about the value of writing in and about nature — both to me and to my students — that vice begins to look more virtuous. For even if ecology for me is primarily a point of view, it is a rare and radical point of view — one that places me firmly inside the story the natural world tells, not apart from it. It's a point of view in which nature is no longer a place we go to see a coyote. It is the place where we are. And part of being there means leaving our shit there. That's a lesson that just might be better learned by writing about coyote scat, human shit, or a reclaimed dump than reading a science text book.

Such is the power of metaphor, I suppose. Ecologists and nature writers alike get a bit giddy when they talk about relationships, which is probably why they are so quick to move to metaphor, the stuff of relational language, of comparing this to that. I'm as guilty of it as anyone, if guilt is really the right word. Still, it doesn't seem overly metaphorical to say that we humans — or at least those of us I'm most familiar with — have a pretty strange relationship with our shit. When it comes to our waste, our knee-jerk reaction is to flush or toss, bury or burn. There's little deliberation in it, no sense of a choice to be made. Once it's out of me, get it out of my sight. What good environmental writing does, though, as Annie Dillard famously says, is remind us of the value of seeing what's there, even if it stinks. And the value with respect to seeing our waste seems pretty clear to me: Dealing with our shit begins with seeing it and acknowledging it.

Don't get me wrong. I don't mean to fetishize shit. I'm not interested in starting a crap

society where folks take to the woods, journals and watercolor kit in hand, seeking prize mounds of scat to paint and ponder. And I'm certainly not trying to join the small but vocal academic club "doing trash studies" who inhale (from a sanitary distance) the cultural *odeur* of our growing piles of crap. I simply think we've somehow created a world that allows us blithely to go on living as if we aren't daily, constantly, producing large amounts of shit. We need to start noticing it.

Other critters do. From the house wren who swallows its fledgling's fecal sac in hopes of deterring predators, to the raccoon attracted to the smell of those selfsame sacs, animals seem to pay more attention to their and other's waste than we do. Surely there's a lesson here. In the case of the house wren and raccoon, and maybe you and me, noticing our shit and doing something about it just might be a matter of life or death.

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Life or death. That sounds excessive, hyperbolic, but maybe it's not. So many things I encounter every day could kill me. But probably not a coyote. When those four canine figures appeared before me as I left my shit in the woods all those years ago, I wasn't really in any danger. I know that now, just as I knew it then. But, still, it was almost terrifying. Still. The four of them. Watching me watching them. And then? What happened next? Not much, really. Turning in one motion, they drew themselves away into the trees, leaving me there to finish my business.

This moment seems worth remembering, worth pausing over and considering, not because I saw something extraordinary in the woods that day. It's true: I'll probably never see a pack of coyotes in the woods again in my life. But that's not what really matters. What matters is that I was doing something so ordinary when the extraordinary arrived. I was taking a dump, leaving my shit, creating scat, making waste. And I'll do that till the day I die.

So what's more important — witnessing coyotes in the wild or taking a shit in it? It's a silly question, I know. Most of my friends, and their friends, and their friends' friends, and on and on, probably never will see what I saw that day. But they'll all make waste. Every day, till their dying day. What will come of it? That's the real question. Maybe, just maybe, the cause of the environmental crisis we hear so much about isn't that so few of us have come nose-to-snout with four coyotes in the woods. Maybe it's that so many of us have forgotten that the environment is the place where we leave our shit.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nels Christensen lives in Albion, Michigan. He works at Albion College, teaching

courses in environmental literature and writing, such as "Literature of the Great Lakes" and "Terrorists and Treehuggers." He also teaches at the University of Michigan's New England Literature Program.

On his connection to the Great Lakes, he has this to say: "I was born and raised in northern California. In my mid-twenties, I moved to Michigan. Somewhere along the way, I stopped saying I was from California and started knowing I was from Michigan. I can't say exactly when that shift happened. I just know it did."



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