

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

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**Hunting for Sheds**

I got my first job as a wildlife biologist working for a small ranger station in New Mexico, in a forest-bound village of less than 300 people. It was at the end of a mountain range, in a creek valley tucked into the west side. One of the other employees told me it reminded him of Narnia. He explained how in winter you would come over the mesa from the highway and see the village and its valley white with snow, sparkling in the sunlight. The village was just under 8,000 feet in elevation and as I would later know for myself, it was as wintery as any mountain town in Colorado.

It was spring when I arrived. I was excited to finally be a year-round employee after working a never-ending string of seasonal jobs as a wildlife tech. I moved into the ranger's house next to the office. It was built of wood and adobe and smoothed with stucco as is the style in New Mexico. It had a low fence of adobe and stucco around the yard. An irrigation ditch ran along one side of the fence. The ditch had just been turned on and the rushing water had flooded into a small depression near the house, creating a short-lived pond. I could hear chorus frogs singing at night from the water, as if to say, summer is coming. I had a lot to do at my new job. It had been vacant for a year. I worked hard on and off my paid time. The work side is a story worth writing an essay about, but I want to tell a different story here. I want to tell you about hiking near the station after work and on the weekends. I had decided, not just to go on hikes, but to form a theme, or purpose, around hunting for sheds, the antlers that deer and elk cast away once a year, before growing a new set.

Like most hunters, if you ask them how it went when they come home empty handed, they'll talk about how happy to were just to be out. I had a lot of opportunities to do that. I didn't find any sheds at first. But eventually, I found one. It was in summer. It was a shed from a mule deer, with 3 tines. It was small and light, and it balanced easily in my palm. It was half-buried by needles under a piñon pine. It had been sitting there for a long time, out of sight. Even the squirrels hadn't found it. There were no chew marks yet.

On another day, I followed a long trail to a rim over a small canyon. The creek bed below was dry. I stopped where the rim curved for a view of the valley below. There, an ancient piñon stood with spreading, open grown branches. The tree made a perfect patch of shade for sitting and viewing. I dropped my pack and sprawled out among the needles and cones. I looked up into the branches above me. There, high up and jammed into a double trunk, was an old, weathered and whitened elk shed. Someone had put it there. It had 5 tines. I climbed up and ran my hand across it. Flakes of bony material rubbed off onto my fingers. I asked one of my new friends at the station about it. He said to leave it. It belongs to local viejas, he explained, who put it there by moonlight.

Winter came and snow piled up on piñon and juniper branches. I saw how the village and its valley looked like Narnia. And, I agreed, it looked like a magical place from a magic book. The snow sparkled, the whole valley sparkled. I learned there was a tree you could climb on the mesa

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you came over from the highway to get a view over the snowy village. I climbed it many times. My mom came to visit and she climbed up into the tree, too. Back on the ground, she couldn't stop smiling. "Wow!," she said, again and again, laughing with unrestrained joy.

Spring came, and winds blew across the open desert that stretched out to the west. The winds raised clouds of dust that blew into the valley and the mountains around. I had never seen anything like it before. Spring is a dry season in New Mexico with rain coming in the monsoon, in July and August. I had so much to learn. I was loving it. I had taken four years of college Spanish and I was finally using it. Meetings at the ranger station started in English and then gradually, the Spanish mixed in. I knew just enough to follow, barely. It felt great. It was also to be my last year in New Mexico. I didn't know that then. I'll always wish my journey-level job could have been longer. But, my career path had different ideas. Later in life, I learned to put the brakes on the endless spin of promotion. It wasn't easy. That's another story and we won't get to it in this essay.

The March winds melted any lingering snow and I went back to shed hunting. I should have explained this sooner, all this hiking was off trail. There weren't any established trails nearby. I weaved my way through dusty openings between piñon and juniper trees. I followed ridges, hiked along rims, and followed dry washes. I followed deer and elk trails. The hills and mesas around the village are winter range for deer and elk and every hillside is crisscrossed with their trails. They do the hard work of finding a path for you.

That second year, I noticed a set of boot tracks, like clockwork, a week ahead of me. I was getting to know people in the office better. They said, "Oh yeah, that's so and so, from the village." I think it's well understood that people in New Mexico have strong ties to the land. Some of the ties are about collecting things people need, like firewood, piñon nuts, and wild game for the freezer. Hunting for sheds was a more playful tie to the land. There was a bit of prowess to it, too, a way for someone to show off their land cred. Every day or so someone would run to my office and say, "Ted!" I found a shed this weekend!" They would tell me how they had driven up with their kids to a high mountain meadow where the road had just melted open and there it was, a shed laying out in the grass, waiting to be picked up. I didn't realize it at the time, but my efforts at shed hunting, even all the times when I came back empty handed, and there were a lot of times where that happened, were threading a place for me in the fabric of the community.

Sheds or no sheds, I found there were so many things to find. Mesa edges and ridgelines tend to have winding stretches of soft, bare soil where you can see the animal tracks that passed ahead of you. Sometimes I'd find turkey tracks, and over the turkey tracks I would find coyote tracks. On one hike, I brought some plaster and made a cast of some especially crisp, delicate coyote tracks. I made the cast while hiking to the piñon pine with the shed that belongs to the viejas. It was a place I went back to many times.

Later in the spring, I found a perfect elk spike shed, a single tine 14 inches long, and curved like a bow. It was laying in the shadow under a curl of bunchgrass. It was on a hillside where the creek runs deep into the

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mountains. I gave it to one of my coworkers, a wildland firefighter who lived in the ranger house with me. He was from a small village a mountain range over. He said, "It's the only spike shed I'll ever keep." I had asked my coworkers in the office how to cook beans. They told me how. I went to Santa Fe and bought a crock pot and started making beans. I added onion, garlic, and the frozen green chile that every store in New Mexico carries. My housemate said my beans were better than his wife's. I'm not supposed to tell anyone that. He would get up in the middle of the night and sit in a kitchen chair in front of the fridge, and eat the cold beans straight out of the plastic container I had put them in.

The nicest elk shed I found was high in the mountains. It was on a gentle flank just under 10,000 feet in elevation. The shed was hidden under a log, in an area with jackknifed timber and aspen saplings making a play for the open canopy. The shed was dark brown except for the tines, which were rubbed to a pearly white. I often wandered into these places hoping to find a raptor feather or something else wildlife-related. Sometimes a single goshawk feather can unlock the location of a territory where a pair built a nest and raised young. I found another shed in a nearby tangle of down trees and saplings. Some of the logs looked unsteady so I left it. I could see that the shed had been chewed to a nub by red squirrels. I'm always surprised how I find elk and deer tracks and their antlers in the most inaccessible places.

On another day, I was hiking lower down in the mesa foothills. I was lost in thought and mindlessly following the one person's tracks in a dry wash. They usually knew the best way through. On one side was the base of a steep hillside which steepened to a red and tan cliff and mesa rim. I heard a series of long, descending shrieks ahead of me. There was a raptor soaring high over the rim. It's a peregrine, I said to myself. I pulled out binoculars and found the bird in the sky. It was a peregrine. I saw it dive, in only the way a falcon can, and curve at the last minute to land on a shelf under the mesa rim. Part of my job as a wildlife biologist was monitoring peregrine falcon nests, or eyries as they're called. This one wasn't on my list to monitor. It was a new one. I sent an email to the regional coordinator for monitoring peregrines. He came the next day and put his glasses on the eyrie. It's a new one, he confirmed.

My favorite place to look for sheds was an area where I never found one. To get there, I would drive along the creek to where a diversion structure cut water for an irrigation ditch. There was a good place to park by the structure. It was higher up the valley and into the mountains, at the point where piñon and juniper give way to ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir, and not far from where spruce and white fir mix in. Above the irrigation structure there was a massive log jam. I would walk across the creek using the logs and hike into the conifer forest above. After going a few times, I pulled out the topo for the area and noticed a mark for a tiny pond, higher on the slope and bit farther than I had gone. I went back and eventually I found a string of aspen stands which led to several small ponds just below the ridge line. The ponds were shallow, just a trace of water over mud, deep in the shade of huge, older Douglas-fir trees. I sat on my pack and leaned against a tree trunk. It was very quiet. I felt thankful to be witness to, almost, time standing still. On the way down I found a beaver skull. Huh, I thought to myself, it was at a half way point, about

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a mile from the ponds and still a good distance from the creek. It was in a drier patch of forest. To me, the ponds hadn't seemed big enough to attract a beaver. And yet, maybe the beaver had gone on a walk about, somehow sensing water nearby? Had it been picked off by coyotes? Maybe a predator got it by the creek, and then something carried the skull up into the forest? As is often the case when you find an animal skull, there's a hidden story you'll never know.

And, there's a hidden story behind every shed. Actually, there are two stories, and the second story starts when the antler falls off and becomes a shed. For example, the shed I saw deep in the tangle of down wood and samplings had become a stash of calcium for the resident squirrels and other small mammals. Gradually, over years, the tines had been gnawed down to nothing. By now, I bet it's been chipped through and the pieces scattered.

A lot of gnawing goes on in the forest. I often found circles of nibbled off ponderosa pine twigs, the work of Abert's squirrels who nip off the twigs and eat the tender cambium under the thin twig bark. Just like on an old shed, when you pick up the twig you see the telltale rows of toothy chisel marks left behind.

I found a cool knife once. I was out in the shrubby desert, past the foothills, and past the piñon and juniper, but within sight of the mountains. The knife was a dagger, not a hunting knife. On the steel was engraved, Made in Italy, and Rostfrei. It had never been sharpened and was dull as a letter opener. I wasn't sure what to think. Later, I realized it was likely a prop for a movie shoot that got left behind. Studios come to New Mexico to film the scenes where they need the real thing in the background, a sweeping view of desert between reddish buttes and mesas, and mountains beyond. The knife had been sitting in the sun for a long time. The half of the wooden handle inside a sheaf was good, the other half was cracked and faded. I thought back to all the westerns I've watched. Was that knife on someone's belt in a movie I watched as a teenager, one that had been filmed before I was born?

Summer opened up and my last day approached. I was leaving soon for a job in Montana. On one of my last days, I walked to the post office to close my box. A truck stopped next to me. There's no need to pull over in a small village, you just stop and cut the engine. "Ted!" someone said, through the hinge window on the extra cab. It was one of my friends from work, he was on his day off. He said, "Look in the back!" I looked. In the open bed of the truck, resting on the dented and peeling paint, were four beautiful elk sheds. They had 6 to 7 tines. I picked one up, it was heavy. The driver told me where they had been. It was not an easy hike, and not a place most people would go. They had done a shuttle and were pulling through town on their way to get the other truck. All roads go through the village at some point.

I got up super early on my last day in New Mexico. I had a long drive ahead of me. It was predawn, which is extra early in summer. I went outside. Birds were singing from the cottonwoods around the ranger's house and light was building to the east. I went into the office one last time. I left my keys on my desk. I went down the hall to a coworker's office, empty at that hour. It was someone I had spent a lot of time talking to. I slipped one

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of the nicer sheds I had found between his keyboard and the monitor. And then, I was off.