

We Danced with Rattlesnake

By Gloria Wilson

My family has a story about Rattlesnake. Long ago, when our ancestors were migrating West in covered wagons, my grandma's great uncle George came upon a group of Southwest Indian kids in a circle, dancing around a rattlesnake. Terrified for their safety and assuming his superior intellect, he raised his gun and blasted its head off. Later, the tribe demanded retribution for this infraction, and Uncle George, indignant at the Indians' stupidity for not thanking him for having protected their children, rode off, ignoring their request.

If it is true that stories become a part of us, imbedding in our psyches and revisiting us throughout our lives so that we may fully learn the lessons they teach, this would explain why, for as long as I can remember, I've dreamed of snakes. As a child deep in the land of sleep, I'd dream that I was walking in my grandma's backyard, where I'd find them. At first they would appear as coils of rope, but just as I began to move closer, the rope would come alive, and I'd startle as I saw it for what it was: a writhing heap of snakes. Turning to leave, I would see that another snake lay in wait behind me like a tightly wound spring, and when I looked to my side, about to jump to safety, I'd see there was another one. Everywhere I looked, all around me, there were snakes. The whole yard was filled with piles and piles of snakes, and there was nowhere I could go. I'd awake in a sweat, trembling as I ran to the safety of my parents' bed. But even there, the quilt's intricate fabric reminded me of the patterned geometry of scales, and in my imagination they were moving all over the bed. It seemed impossible to get away.

It was years after these first dreams that my family began to hunger for land. Our garden in town had grown so big it spilled over the fence, and we wanted more soil to sink our shovels

into. We wanted wilderness, after seeing too many wild places eaten up by housing developments and strip malls. And I hungered, too, to know a piece of earth the way it's possible to know a person—deeply.

And so began our search for property at an affordable price, which I soon discovered meant land that had something wrong with it. One parcel was intersected by high-voltage power lines that made a sinister buzz every five minutes, another had an easement dispute and no road access, and one was in a flood zone filled with poison oak, which gave me such a bad rash that I looked like I'd turned into something else. Another was up on a shale mountain so high that drilling a well deep enough to reach water would be a long-shot, and yet another was in the parched Carrizo Plain with too much salt in the soil to grow anything.

As with love, finding the right land requires not ignoring the flaws or trying to change them, but learning to live with them. And after a day spent exploring what is now our home in the remote folds of the Santa Lucia Mountains, trouncing in summer's heat through oak-dappled meadows, scrambling through brush thickets, and wandering the dry creek beds where monkey flowers tumbled down the slopes, with red smears of penstemon and Indian Paintbrush flickering against the pale sandstone, I knew I could live with the flaws: the isolation, the hour-long car ride to town, the rugged terrain, and the intense summer heat. These were all things I could handle, and as we drove away, the scent of sage still on our clothes, I took off the locket around my neck and threw it out the window. It was my promise ring, a prayer that we'd come back. And we did.

We moved in a heat wave. Temperatures peaked at 115 degrees, and after cramming our belongings into the small camper-trailer that would serve as our temporary abode, we sat beneath the shade of an oak and ate ice like it was candy.

It was the beginning of a strange new way of life, and I loved it. We didn't have electricity then, and my mom cooked on a camp stove. I took baths in a plastic bucket out in the open air, soaking in the warm water on balmy nights as the stars came out more vibrant than I'd ever seen, the Milky Way flowing above me like a giant river. In starlight, one could still make out the pale figures of Yerba Santa, the fragrant herb we smudged to ward off mosquitos, while all around, crickets played the violins of their thighs.

In the fall, we moved into our "real" home, a thirty-foot yurt: a round, tent-like dwelling developed by Mongolian nomads. Originally, yurts were felted and insulated with yak fur, but my parents had seen a modern version advertised in Mother Earth News, sporting a canvas exterior and even able to accommodate a wood stove.

I remember the first night in our newly erected yurt, the cold October air blowing outside as I lay gazing at the rafters that radiated like sunbeams from the ceiling's central dome, which also served as a giant eye to the outside world: a window to stars, moonlight, and clouds.

My family was largely unaware of our unconventionality. A yurt was simply the quickest, cheapest, and easiest dwelling we found available. Similarly, moving an hour out of town was what it took for us to afford land, and the fact that my brother and I were homeschooled just made the transition easier. Friends and family were quick to peg us. In the eyes of some, we became paragons of environmentalism, to others just a bunch of crazy hippies, while others speculated that we might be heading off the Libertarian deep end. Some dubbed us "pioneers," forerunners of the next generation's back-to-the-land movement, equipped with solar panels and internet to accompany our foray off the beaten track. And though it came with no ill intent, I cringed at the comparison to those early settlers coming West to a world they did not understand nor value as deeply as those who'd lived in harmony with it for thousands of years.

But in a way, it was true. Though I embraced the wild, I had never been taught to live without modern conveniences and the destruction they cause. And I was only beginning to know the land and its secrets.

At night we all shared in the sounds of the mountains: the coyotes' cries, the shrill, raspy bark of foxes, and the wind that jiggled the rafters and boomed against the canvas sides of our tent. We chased bats out of the yurt with brooms, embraced the thunderous rain that howled down on us in winter, and became paralyzed in summer's heat like lizards. I learned the names, smells, and sometimes tastes of the native plants. My brother and I made trails and explored the hills, discovering caves, tunnels, and ephemeral waterfalls.

And the snake dreams followed me to our new home. One night I dreamed that I saw a rattlesnake in the yurt, and another time I saw one biting its own tail to form a loop, which I later learned was an ancient symbol, *europa*—a metaphor for continuity and the cyclical nature of life and death. It was a symbol that, if I'd realized at the time, could have been an omen that I was coming close to revisiting the story of my ancestor.

But I *did* see these dreams as a sign of the deeper connection I shared with snakes. The snakes reminded me of myself. Close to the earth, quiet, sensual yet serious, solitary though intimate, graceful in their natural environment, gliding over rock and dirt yet remaining awkward on pavement. Like the wilderness itself, snakes have often been misunderstood and regarded with fear. And as I stumbled into adulthood, exploring my inner wilderness, one of both passion and fear, it was the snake who helped me understand myself.

I grew to love them. The long ribbony California Whipsnake, the shy Gopher, and the dazzling striped King. Once, I even unearthed a blind albino snake, its flesh milky and translucent like a large worm. But Rattlesnake, while I admired its power, I still avoided in fear.

One late summer afternoon, as my parents were preparing to go into town, we heard it. The sound didn't register so much as the sensations it sent through me: the electric whip that snapped down my spine, a vibration both inside and outside, below and above, all around.

At first, I had no idea what it was. *A helicopter?* I wondered. *A chainsaw?* And then it hit me, immediately: a snake. Dad grabbed something from beside the bed and rushed out the door.

"Where's he going?"

"I don't know, stay inside," Mom hissed.

But I followed him out the door anyway. I saw him aim the shotgun. I heard the deafening blast, and my eyes flooded with tears. For a moment, he had become our Great Uncle George.

"I'm sorry," my dad said.

"You didn't have to kill it." I saw a twinge of guilt in his eye for having let me down.

"It's not good to have them so close to the house," he said. "Remember what happened to Oliver."

A year earlier, our beloved Black Lab, whose fur always smelled of sagebrush and whose tail wagged even on his deathbed, had succumbed to a snakebite.

"I know," I said. But as he left, I wept more. I peered in the bushes where the snake lay, a ruby of blood oozing from its side.

Later, after my parents left for town, I fished the snake out of the brush with a stick. I'd decided to skin it. It seemed wrong to just let it die in the dirt without a ceremony. I wanted to process this, literally and figuratively. Moments after my parents left, I googled the appropriate method for skinning a snake. It looked easy enough. Just slide a knife up the middle and pull the skin off—like peeling a banana, I imagined. I grabbed the snake to carry it to my work area, then

dropped it with a startle. It had twitched in my hands. Looking down, I watched its ropey muscles clenching and flexing as it twirled in the dirt in a slow, surreal dance.

It took a while before I regained the courage to pick it up again, having to remind myself it wouldn't hurt me. I held it for a long while, feeling it twist in my hand until eventually it went still. Then I lay the snake on a makeshift chopping board and began incising. It wasn't easy. Scales are there for a reason and prove a tough armor to get through with a knife.

Even when I'd cut through it, the skin was hard to pull down. I'd never looked inside an animal before, having veered away from the cow's eye being sliced open at the Exploratorium, and having dodged, via homeschool, the obligatory dissection of frogs in high school biology. But something felt different about what I was doing now. In a science lab, unique and beautiful animals can become mere specimens; what I was doing was spiritual practice.

It was like another world inside: full of color and wonder, each organ perfectly formed for the thriving of this beautiful creature. As I scooped out the ruffled green intestines and shiny heart, I felt honored to touch each part.

Finally, I made a fire and got it hot with chamise and sagebrush. Sliding a stick through its ribcage, I held the long pink flesh of the snake over the fragrant smoke. I cooked it for a long time, until the sky deepened to the dusky blue of Scrub Jay wings and the sun slid behind the hills, leaving a copper glow on the horizon. And finally, after saying a prayer, I tasted its meat. They say it's like chicken, but to me it's just snake. Light and smokey, maybe closer to catfish in flavor.

Whatever it was, it was hardly a meal. I ate it in strips and bits removed from the ribs, not for physical sustenance but spiritual nourishment. Closure. My dad had killed a snake, which was my kin animal, and now I was allowing its energy to incorporate into my own.

After this experience, and others in my young adulthood, I began to wonder what kind of person would want to share life with me. It was hard enough, in my rural existence, to find another woman who wanted female partnership, but it seemed like a stretch—even for my vivid imagination—to find one who wanted to be with a snake-loving, snake-eating, wild woman who slept under the stars and spent most of her early twenties climbing trees, writing by candlelight, growing food, and dreaming of building a mud hut in the woods. I had resigned myself to life as a hermit, before I met Dori. She didn't eat snakes, but she also didn't despise them. She was as gentle as I was sensitive, full of laughter and luminous with possibility; she could swoon at the sight of a field mouse, and sought a rustic way of life; she knew how to swing a scythe and could find a universe of wonder in a seed. What's more, she had her own dreams of thatch huts and gardens, and after falling in love with me and realizing that the Santa Lucia Mountains and I were inseparable, she learned to love them too.

With the help of magic—and as Dori reminds me, hard work too—we were able to buy another 40-acre parcel a mile from my parents, and in springtime when I finished college we moved there to pursue our vision of living in harmony with the land. The oak and Grey Pine woodlands were filled with an array of wildflowers: garnet-headed peonies, the translucent petals of Mariposa Lilies, and fragrant spires of Hummingbird Sage. It seemed we could lie for hours in the fresh grass and sunshine, watching pine branches shift in the wind, mesmerized by the silver ripple of their needles.

But with the first heat of June, the hills faded to a dull yellow, like old newspaper. Summer in this part of California marks an end to the "honeymoon stage" of springtime. The ground becomes studded with star thistle, burrs and foxtails, the biting insects arrive, and the days grow long and hot. Then, the snakes come.

We saw more snakes that one summer than I'd seen in my entire life. They lived beneath our small cabin; I chased a Gopher Snake out of the house and found a King draped over a shelf in the shed. We learned to coexist with them—even the rattlers, which were many. We watched a huge one weave in and out of the yucca plant near our hammock, and every day a smaller rattlesnake—we named her Serene—slid over to the cool shade of the clay pot where we stored our food, never bothering to budge from her restful bundle a mere foot away as we retrieved vegetables to prepare a meal. Aware of their powerful venom and scared to get a taste of it, we went cautiously about our chores, constantly mindful of the companions whose home we shared.

One day, we were even honored to witness two of them mating. For over an hour, with his tail entwined around hers, the male slid his body along the female's in jerking motions, licking until he reached her head, at which point their tails would writhe in a wild jumble of snake ecstasy and they would begin again.

And while we should have expected it, we were still surprised weeks later to see a baby emerge from a nearby hole, the single bead of its rattle bulbous on the end of a skinny tail, scales glossy and black tongue already probing the air. We watched for a moment, transfixed, as it moved across the ground.

I knew that baby rattlesnakes weren't something to mess around with. Their underdeveloped rattles can't signal a warning, and their slender bodies are almost impossible to detect curled in a woodpile or between rocks. Moreover, I've heard that in the fledgling stage, rattlers can't control their venom and, when they bite, latch on for minutes.

"What about when kids visit?" Dori looked at me with concern.

I saw her point. We wanted to create opportunities for people to get closer to the natural world, but exposure to rattlesnake venom seemed closer than most people would want to get.

Moreover, while a full-grown person could likely survive a snakebite, chances are slim that a child bit by a baby rattler would make it to the hospital in time.

And in that moment, shovel in hand and blind to any alternative, I became my father, I became Uncle George, not knowing any other way to deal with a snake than to kill it. In a quick blow I chopped the snake in half, then again in quarters. Watching its pieces twitch in the soil, I felt tears gather at the seams of my eyes and a painful prayer began to form in my chest.

Just then, I saw another one sliding out from the hole.

"What if we relocate them?" Dori asked.

Although a nice thought, this seemed naïve. But one thing I've come to appreciate about Dori is her way of seeing feasibility in solutions that others would disregard as impractical. After a moment's thought, we devised a strategy: I would scoop the snake onto a shovel and deposit it into a 55-gallon drum, where it would be unable to scale the sides.

This is crazy, I thought, grabbing my shovel and tracking the snake. By now, it had worked its way so far into the tall grass that it would be impossible to scoop up. My mind filled with visions of children, pets, and future visitors, all of them vulnerable to this little anklet of a snake. *It's true*, I thought. *Snakes aren't good to have this close to the house.*

"Maybe I should just kill it," I said half-heartedly.

No sooner had I spoken these words than the snake, who had been hiding motionless in the grass, turned and began moving swiftly away from me.

"No, no, little snake. I don't want to hurt you." The words came to me soft and gentle. "If you just come onto the shovel, we'll take you somewhere you can be safe, where you can have a beautiful life."

And then, unfathomably, the snake changed direction and began to come toward us, as we coaxed it with our voices. Probing the air with its tongue, it shyly inched forward. And then gradually—inexplicably—it slid onto the shovel. I lifted the handle, arms outstretched, as I transported it to the metal drum. That first snake was followed by five other hatchlings, each of which we handled in the same way.

When my dad stopped by later that night, I informed him that we had a barrel full of snakes! We loaded it up, and I sat in the bed of his pick-up truck to make sure our drum wouldn't tip on the bumpy dirt road. After a few miles, we released the snakes by moonlight, watching their bodies flow like rivulets into the safety of the brush. My father and I embraced, a triumphant euphoria rising in our chests. In the past, he had killed a snake, as I had earlier that day, but now we had saved six of them.

I remain haunted by the memory of that day, the passage of communication that opened between myself and the snake. Why in the world would this vulnerable reptile have chosen to emerge from the protection of warm grass to the exposed, cold metal blade of a shovel? But then I think about the Indian children who, long ago, my great-great-great uncle George startled with his gunshot. Like him, my father and I have both killed snakes out of fear, not trusting our own capacity to connect with the natural world, not trusting the mysterious power of the universe that those children danced with, and that now—for a moment—we have danced with too.

I tell this story because it isn't just the story of my ancestors, of my family; it is a story inside you as well. Whether you see yourself as the children dancing, or as Uncle George with his gun, both experiences are alive inside each of us and come into conflict whenever the purity of innocence is confronted by the hubris of adulthood, or the awe-inspiring mystery of the Divine

is confronted by the picture we've been told it is, or our hunger for the wild is confronted by our fear of its foreignness.

Each of us, in our way, is still journeying West, searching for a part of the Earth to call our home—a place to know intimately, to love in all its seasons. And on this journey, we will all face Rattlesnake. It is up to each of us to ask ourselves, when we find her, squinty-eyed and spiraled, beautiful as a pine needle basket, or perhaps loose and languid, sliding across the ground, the pearls of her rattles making music in the grass: will we try to destroy her, or will we touch our soles to the earth and dance?