



WILDISH WOMAN: A PORTRAIT

by Nicole R. Zimmerman

It was at the end of another season in Alaska when Jessica Eden confronted a peculiar creature. Each year, the biologist conducted field studies for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a region so vast and unmarked there are no roads or human trails. Only animal tracks. Jessica had seen muskoxen, Dall sheep, and moose moving over the immense landscape. Once, cresting a ridge, she startled a pack of wolves that peered back at her with curiosity as they darted away. But the day she leapt up the stairs of the government bunkhouse and put her pack down, Jessica was stopped short by the sight of an unfamiliar figure. Wide shoulders and sinewy biceps tapered to a slender waist over sturdy legs. Untamed dark hair, sprinkled with gray, lay flat above full eyebrows and radiant eyes. Staring back, Jessica soon realized it was her own reflection that had taken her by surprise.

“I was looking into a full-length mirror mounted on the wall, seeing myself in a way that I hadn’t considered for months,” she recalled one afternoon on her back porch in Northern California. Intrigued by her transformation into this Wildish Woman—a sort of contemporary shapeshifter who withstood the shock of re-entry into the peopled realm—I sought to reconstruct Jessica’s physical and interior worlds as she transitioned between environments both wild and human-made. During the first of several interviews we sat under the cool shade of coastal redwoods, which towered over a two-bedroom house she shared with her girlfriend, Jean—partners for more than a decade. A pottery wheel stood in one corner of the yard where Jessica fashioned ceramics that filled the kitchen hutch stacked high with rustic earthenware bowls and glazed mugs from which we sipped our tea. Inside, photos of the couple and a close-knit community of friends covered the refrigerator door. Colorful woven textiles from their world travels adorned the coffee table and comfy reading chair.

Out on the tundra, far from this domestic scene, there weren’t many human signs—just a few tents under the open sky near a frozen ocean at the edge of the continent. “The noticing of self, other than on a compass or in a creek, is mostly interior. You’re just not focused on what you look like,” Jessica explained. She had grown so unaccustomed to her own image that in that moment she could no longer distinguish herself. The harsh elements of the wilderness and the hardiness required to work in them had rendered her unrecognizable.

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Flying north from the Brooks Range in late spring, it’s as if she’s heading back into winter. Sizable snowbanks cover everything. To the untrained eye the earth below is a puzzle of polygon shapes, the nondescript white pieces laid up against each other. But the bush pilot, experienced with the topography, interprets various undulations as separate streams and ponds. He’ll navigate an aircraft fitted with skis over snow or a floatplane with pontoons onto open wa-

ter—anything near the survey region. Safe landings aren't taken for granted. Without warning, they'll hit hard and fast, and soft spots on the ice are enough to make the little plane crash. There's no way for Jessica to fully anticipate what she'll encounter. The unpredictability of the terrain is the only predictable thing.

Weather and extreme temperatures in the Arctic can be just as perilous, making the window for getting into field camp narrow. The biologists offload government supplies before the pilot takes off as quickly as he can. If conditions hold steady, he'll make another run, leaving them alone to set up camp. They layer up with wool and polypropylene. Whipping winds numb fingers, otherwise nimble. Ice fog forms crystals on their jackets. They lash the gear onto sleds: marine batteries for the solar-powered laptop; four-season expedition tents; thermal sleeping bags; a Yukon portable stove; bear-resistant food canisters the size of barrels; a little kerosene heater if they're lucky. Jessica ties ropes around her waist, ready to pull her sled to their designated site, and trudges through thick snow that comes up to her torso, before returning for another load.

When she walked into the equipment shed before her departure, the guy issuing the gear—late fifties, gristly, gut protruding over his belt buckle—took one look at Jessica and laughed. "Why, you're smaller than a sickly moose calf," he said, scratching at his teeth with a toothpick. Standing just five foot two and weighing one hundred eight pounds, she's used to people underestimating her size and strength. But she has learned over the course of eighteen field seasons how to negotiate the extreme environment. Piled high with provisions, a sled can tip if it isn't balanced right. Traversing slippery ponds or allowing frigid water into her hip waders can be life threatening. She relies on her own strength and remains hyper-alert to her surroundings. Jessica feels the cold, ignores her aches and pains. She'll spend at least the rest of this day and into the next hauling the heavy freight. Being her own sled dog prepares her for the exhausting months ahead, when the days are distilled to physical labor and sleep.

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It doesn't take Jessica long to feel at home in Alaska. The scientists hike out to the mountains to study animals' habitat associations, or collect data on the breeding and migration patterns of birds on the coastal plain. They paddle their kayaks down remote rivers to survey rough-legged hawks, peregrine falcons, and other raptors, or drive Zodiac boats along the barrier islands of the Beaufort Sea to observe nesting sea ducks. Monitoring reproductive success—when adults lay their eggs, when they hatch, how many chicks are fledging—Jessica takes note of each species' behavioral adaptations and the environmental factors required for their survival. Turning her lens outward, she's focused on the minutiae of the natural world instead of the daily drama of human interaction. She delights in the birds' mating rituals and identifies different songs. She watches the graceful wings of the Arctic tern with its long, forked tail, distinct red beak and feet, and beautiful black cap, swoop over the water. With a circumpolar range covering the lengthiest yearly route, the little bird crosses a distance of eleven thousand miles one way, from its wintering grounds off Antarctica, just to make nests during this small segment of time. Aware of her own migratory journeys, she appreciates the tremendous effort it takes for most beings to simply stay alive.

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On rare days off, Jessica hangs out in her tent on the plateau. It's spacious enough to sit up in, a small shelter from the wind. A few personal items lie within reach: a book; some magazines; her music on the iPod; colored pencils for a quick sketch. Simplifying her surroundings is not a huge leap. Jessica and her siblings grew up with a rural sensibility—twenty-some fruit trees and each kid with a garden plot. Her family grew its own food, raised goats and chickens, and gathered the eggs. An epiphany came at the age of eighteen when she first volunteered with a wildlife biologist and realized that not only did she love being outside, but that she could have a life outside. At the beginning of her career, she worked in Alaska for

six months at a time, driving to Homer and the Maritime Refuge in her two-wheel-drive pickup to study seabirds in the remote Aleutian chain. During the other half of the year she'd sleep under the truck's shell, traveling all the way down to Baja before popping back up. Those days she was practically monastic—just two pairs of pants and a few shirts in her possession—even living for a spell in a cold little cabin where the windows didn't meet the walls and tree branches grew right through it.

Nowadays Jessica limits her field season to a few months, allowing her the flexibility to pursue her art or travel. During the off-season, she works part-time at a college radio station or her landscaping job while Jean teaches theater and directs plays at the university. Leaving her beloved behind is the one thing that doesn't get easier, but Jessica also savors their summers apart. There's more room for spontaneity, each person moving to her own tempo. No need to negotiate social schedules or household tasks, to feel hemmed in by ordinary routine.

Poring over several pictures by her pillow, she admires a photo of Jean standing in her wetsuit on the beach, a boogie board held under one arm. Jessica reaches across the immeasurable distance to a memory of how they met, moving together each week in an improvisational dance class, their vibrant exchange of energy replacing the need for words. Jessica closes her eyes until she conjures the physical sensations. Invoking her lover's presence in a premeditated way makes the imaginal almost tangible. A small bridge between worlds.

Most seasons, each biologist is permitted one ten-minute call a week on the satellite phone. Despite the palpable urgency of those increments, it's never enough to communicate everything essential. Sometimes there are logistical things to contend with—bills to settle and other mundane details to discuss—business that has so little to do with her everyday reality. The sound is distorted so she hears her own voice echo, and with the delay they often end up talking over each other. It's Jessica who watches how many seconds are left on the clunky handheld device, and often Jean who is caught in the middle of a sentence.

Jessica steals away into a quiet corner to call. No guarantee where her campmates will be. This evening everyone's cooking, so she settles into her sleeping bag, only to hear her campmate cough in the next tent. Darn. She's got company. Here on the plain, where tents stand in close proximity for protection from predators and to prevent too much trampling on the delicate ecosystem, she's learned to let go of her inhibitions. But isn't it funny, to be so far away from everything and still feel like it's not private enough?

When Jean answers, Jessica launches into a tale of working along a cliff, not paying much attention as she coiled up her rope, when she looked up just in time to see a grizzly moseying along, head down like he was looking for ground squirrels—

“How far away?”

“I'd say four feet or so. The steepness of the slope—”

“Oh, God.”

“You should have seen his expression. As shocked as mine, I'm sure. Of course my pack—”

“It makes me shudder to think...”

“—was not anywhere nearby. Before I could even think what to do next that critter had already hightailed it out of there.”

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Pre-trip training includes how to take a grizzly down with a gun. Although she has only had to shoot cracker shells as a noise deterrent to scare a curious bear, Jessica knows the potential dangers of a freak encounter. One year, her team was conducting shorebird studies for several weeks in July, camping along a braid of the Jago River against the impressive backdrop of the Romanzof Mountains. They waded through gooey mud along fingers of the mudflat delta that spanned out in all directions to the sea. The day Jessica helped her boss and a couple of biotechnicians outfit the Zodiac for them to set up a second camp, the weather turned. Thinking the vessel looked too heavy, Jessica and a couple of her colleagues tried to convince them to wait it out. It would be an uncomfortable sixty-mile ride in that kind of squall, at best. But this guy was a pro,

used to muscling through. Heck, this was bath water compared to the Aleutians, he said. Jessica reluctantly watched them head off into blustery conditions.

The next morning she waited to connect via satellite phone, but heard nothing. She watched great gusts of wind chop the waves. Finally, a call came in. The day before, the boss and his cohorts had made it all the way to the mouth of the river when a wave hit them sideways. It flipped their boat, its steel hull and outboard motor upside down in the Arctic Ocean. One of the biotechs, a hardy Alaska kid raised by a pair of biologists, popped up first, then reached down and pulled up the other one. Once their boss surfaced, the three of them stood in the waist-deep water and watched their belongings floating away in the wind currents. They grabbed whatever they could. Started hauling things to shore. The boat wouldn't flip back over and the engine was swamped, but they dragged it along too. Most of their camping gear was gone, along with all of the survey equipment and their twelve-gauge shotguns. But they managed to salvage one tent and some food. They changed into clothes from the dry bag and gobbled down a couple of Pop Tarts before crawling into the little tent together to sleep.

Sometime in the night, Jessica's boss said, he awoke to the sound of material ripping. Then he felt movement down by his feet. He saw a massive white head poking through the claw-slashed tent and munching on their food. Screaming, he awakened his mates, who together made quite a commotion. The polar bear raised its snout, took one look at them, and scrambled away.

Most likely this bear, so quick to turn tail, had encountered humans before. With the drifting pack ice breaking up, moving out farther and farther, polar bears can end up scavenging on shore. When they're not hunting among the ice floes to consume the blubber of one-hundred-fifty-pound ringed seals, the giants wander between barrier islands, meandering their way among the villages. Usually the animals keep their distance once they find out that people are associated with loud gunshots.

After that report, Jessica and her crew alerted headquarters, which launched an emergency helicopter to pull her colleagues out.

No doubt they were spared from what could have easily become a mauling—maybe even a killing—by the world’s largest carnivore. Had this bear been starving instead of snacking, with these human animals acting like prey, it would have been a different story.

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Summertime in the Arctic is brief, but intense. The mountains warm up, while the coast never creeps past sixty degrees Fahrenheit. It can snow anytime and the next day there’s brilliant sunshine. When the sun circles above the horizon twenty-four hours a day, eleven o’clock in the morning looks like eleven at night. Everything feels vital. Everything is alive. What are the birds doing today? They stopped their breeding calls and now it’s quiet. Jessica listens to the wind. She contemplates a miniature world of wildflowers in bloom alongside tiny versions of rhododendron and willow—the brilliant plant life unfolding through the active layer, just a bit of thawed soil above the permafrost. She observes a poppy open to cup the sun. Writes poetic musings about the cotton grass. Sure, she’s annoyed by the lumpiness under her sleeping bag. She curses the rain while trying to wipe when the toilet paper is wet. But when she looks out at those nine-thousand-foot snowcapped peaks, watches a herd of caribou roaming over the treeless tundra, and listens to the high notes of her campmate’s flute lilting through the air, that’s when she knows this life is wondrous.

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At the close of the season, just when she’s sinking into those long days, Jessica is pulled from nature’s rhythms. The biologists are flown back home in stages. First, the bush plane drops them off in a remote and rugged Alaska Native community—Athabaskan, Inupiaq, Yu’pik, or Aleut—where they land on a gravel airstrip at best. The transition from field to village is jarring enough, but setting foot in a frontier city like Fairbanks is simply overwhelming. The pace at which people move, the paved surfaces, the cars zipping to

and fro, the assault of flashing lights and sounds that have nothing to do with the natural landscape—none of it makes any sense. Even driving twenty-five miles per hour, when she’s used to tromping around in her boots, feels fast.

Later, transferring to a connecting flight in San Francisco, Jessica enters the ladies’ room. How odd to sit on porcelain and flush after hovering above a bag-lined ammo can shared by the males in camp. Coming out of the stall to wash her hands under the automatic release of running water, she hears a child at the adjacent sink ask, “Mommy, isn’t this the girls’ bathroom?” Jessica notes the look of alarm on the woman’s face in the mirror and, dressed in her cut-off shorts and faded sweatshirt, realizes that she was mistaken for a man.

“I’m a girl, too,” Jessica replies to rectify the misrepresentation. “I’m just a girl with short hair.”

In Alaska, stripped down beneath the layers of customary interaction, personalities were laid bare; in the vast openness there wasn’t much reason to hide behind one’s countenance, so considering her presentation wasn’t pertinent. Now, returned to civilization, she’s suddenly aware that her unmasked face isn’t feminine enough. Her lean, boyish body doesn’t measure up to conventional female standards—another reminder of societal expectations. In time she’ll grow accustomed to the inadvertent comment or scowl in response to her androgynous and down-to-earth appearance. Picturing herself from the outside in and contending with the way others see her is just part of the challenge of coming back.

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Upon landing at the small airport near her coastal town, Jessica ambles across the tarmac. With her elfin physique and feral gait, she isn’t hard to spot in the crowd.

“The way she carries herself is different from the way I know her in the domestic realm,” says Jean. “The wilderness creates a way of being that always comes home with her.”

As soon as Jessica steps into their house she heads straight

for the shower. No longer does she have to carry water from the creek or heat up only the amount she'll need. Exhausted from traveling within cramped spaces after carrying a seventy-pound pack six to seven days a week, she luxuriates under the falling hot liquid that soothes her shoulders, soaks her head, and slides down her back. It feels like the single most remarkable thing.

To celebrate her partner's return, Jean arranges flowers, makes coffee, and puts out fresh bread. She places Jessica's slippers back in the hallway. Hangs a welcome home sign. Settling on the couch, the lovers hold hands and tentatively touch each other, caressing skin, hair, and lips as if for the first time. The atmosphere is charged, their connection potent. They know to relish the newness before the interlude slips away and they revert to familiar patterns.

Jessica takes her time reacquainting with her household environment, lingering over the books that line the living room shelves amid an eclectic collection of feathers, shells, and river rocks. A walrus skull sprouting thick ivory tusks—one of her favorite field treasures from a few seasons in the Togiak Refuge—inhabits a space under the grand piano. Operating in a somewhat altered state, as if occupying another dimension, Jessica is not quite of this world as she transitions back into it.

She pitches a two-person tent in the backyard, behind the shed under the plum tree, where she will spend her nights for several weeks. She longs to expose herself to the elements, to experience her world more viscerally than four walls can afford. Indoors feels unnerving with its stale air and creature comforts. Outside, away from the buzzing fridge and ringing phone and ticking clocks, all those mechanisms of a manufactured life, she can adjust at a quieter pace. Jean arranges their sleeping bags so they can look up at a sky filled with stars. Even Puma, the old cat, curls up just outside the tent flap. It's nice to know there's a warm bed waiting, well above ground, when Jessica's ready. Here, under the tree with its wine red leaves, she can still feel the earth's pulse beneath her.

In the morning she creates a list. On a piece of paper she writes: Watch clouds. Make a fire. Sit with memories. Play it all back.