

LISTENING  
to **COUGAR**

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J U L I A B . C O R B E T T

TALKING WITH A COUGAR

*Utah – A seemingly benign visit with a cougar calls on this author to revisit her communication with all animals.*

Anyone with a pet knows that hint of movement out of the corner-most reaches of your vision that tells you of the presence of another. That's how I first see her, a whisper of movement without sound, a sense before a confirmation. A cougar.

It's a simultaneous glance, me turning left, her turning right. Fifteen feet away, maybe twenty. Tail, god, so much tail. Thick, lush, the color of cooled butterscotch. *Puma concolor*, the cat of one color. Except she isn't. A darker stripe, beginning at her rump, travels down the top of her tail and ends in a dark chocolaty tip. Her belly and chest are butterscotch with milk stirred in. Her body angles away, head turned back toward me. I hold my breath, hold my body mid-motion, freezing the moment to study like a painting.

Between us are a few sagebrush and scrub oak bushes; behind me is a cliff of golden sandstone that I just left. She was studying me when I was out there, I know she was. A human, so quiet,

so motionless, legs crossed, fingers upturned and slightly curled, hands resting on the knees. My mind out there on that rock, however, was anything but still. The thoughts rushed in. The noise in my truck's rear axle. Data analysis. My recently failed romance. The usual. When I meditate, I try to acknowledge the thoughts as they pop up and then let them pass through, like the ticker tape that runs across the bottom of the TV screen announcing severe weather or basketball scores. Eventually the thoughts slowed, my shoulders sagged, and the tightness around my eyes slackened. My breathing softened and deepened, and the patient, steady wind over the cliff edge became white noise. A sudden slap of wind and gathering darkness on the backs of my eyes is what prompted me to open them and clamber off the cliff and into the woods, face to face with the cougar.

"Wow."

I don't realize the word has left my lips until I hear it. I can't believe I'm standing in front of a cougar. Or a mountain lion, puma, panther, all names for the second largest feline in the western hemisphere. Creature of snarls and ferocity in old Westerns, frequently debased to advertising cars and football teams, but revered by native peoples for its connection to God. The wild one before me, one of the most secretive large mammals of the West, can't be one and the same.

I am planning on this encounter lasting just seconds, which was the length of my only other cougar encounter nearly fifteen years before in Idaho's White Cloud Mountains. That time, I was squatting outside the tent at 5:00 A.M., first-light in midsummer, when a cougar materialized on the slope opposite me; by the time I blinked and pushed up my glasses, the apparition—consisting mostly of tail—had vanished. There's no way this one will stay, no way; this is fleeting, ethereal.

"You are so beautiful," I whisper.

She stares and begins to flick the dark tip of her tail, first left, then right, and back again. I stare, right into her eyes. I don't remember that with some animals—wolves, maybe bears too, I can't remember—you're not supposed to look them in the eye but

to avert your gaze and play submissive. I'm not sure about big cats, but it's too late anyway. I inch a hand down into the camera case hanging around my neck. There are a few glimmers in my head, none of them lasting long enough to register, of recommended actions when you meet a cougar. Picture-taking isn't one of them, but this is a meeting I want recorded.

I haven't taken many pictures this trip because of the "male rains," the name the Navajo give the late-summer, early-fall monsoons because of their intensity and violence. A cloudburst of male rain on a mesa can fill a slot canyon fifteen miles away with a charging mass of muddy water twelve feet high. For the two days since we arrived in the La Sal Mountains of southeastern Utah, rain has beat down on prickly pear and piñon pine, cutting gullies and washes through tight and tangled patches of brush.

During the downpours, Becky, Camille, and I read in our borrowed cabin, listening to the syncopated *thwack, whack, whop* of rain pellets on the green metal roof. In moments of clearing, we ventured out in rain pants and slickers, swishing along until sunlight steamed the rocks and we were forced to strip down. Back and forth, layering and stripping, turbulence and calm, wavering on the cusp of summer and fall.

"Were you watching me on that rock?" I whisper. "My god you are so gorgeous." I unzip the camera case.

Still fearing she'll vanish, I choose the automatic setting. *Zzzzz, zhhmmmm*, the noisy autofocus slides into position. Her tail like a silent metronome bobs left, bobs right. It isn't a spastic twitching like my cat does before he pounces but more like a marker that my presence, my conversation, is entirely noticed. The midafternoon sky hangs darkly; I pop up the auto-flash. Without leaving our mutual gaze, I slowly pull the camera up to my eyes and shoot. The auto advance—*zzzrrr rrr rrieehh*—cracks as loudly as dry kindling.

No movement from the cougar, except the metered tail, despite being shot with a camera and flashed with light. I take another.

"Thank you. Thank you so much," I say, louder than a whisper now, but hushed. I feel ready to explode, maybe with tears, maybe with a giddy giggle.

She takes three steps to the side, turns, and sits, facing me. Regal, dramatically regal. She blinks her eyes, slow, deliberate blinks, blinks like the “I love you blinks” you get from your cat. Almost blissful. With domestic kitty behavior as a guide, she looks positively sleepy. The tail is quiet now, wrapped around her. I snap one more picture.

In this moment, neither of us is afraid. We share this. I know this more than I’ve ever known anything. Through the wisps of bare branchlets between us, the ether blends our marrow, our essence, our species. I am talking to a cougar and have never felt so powerful in all my life. Fire fills my flushed cheeks, yet on the inside, I’m blue, cool, and big. Very big. I’m utterly out there, alone and unguarded, yet entirely not alone. It is the most pure moment I have ever shared with another creature.

And that’s what friends question about this story: “Wait a minute, weren’t you afraid? My god, you were taking flash pictures of a large predator!”

“I know. But all I felt was powerful.”

“And you were talking to it?”

Well, talking is a pretty anthropocentric way of looking at it. What a cat hears from “talking” — according to that *Far Side* cartoon — is a lot of blah blah blah. How human of us to think we have cornered the market on meaningful communication. Our words are crafted with design, strung together with intent and outcome in mind; they’re never really very accurate, or at least very complete. There’s no faking a sense, a presence without a protective package, as when you’re around a horse you’re afraid of. The horse knows. You move with fear, smell like fear, become it; the words “Whoa, nice horsey” are just “Blah, blah, blah.”

My words to that cougar are conveying something, I have no doubt, but the words themselves matter not at all. Like a newborn not understanding its mother’s speech, yet precisely and immediately tracking her emotions through touch and tone and posture and movement and mood, and then mirroring back; reciprocal, deep, undeniably — unintentionally — honest. Whatever I am expressing to that cougar, she is mirroring it back to me; we are partaking of each other.

I can’t pinpoint when this divine communion begins to melt, when the power and peace evaporate. Maybe it was like a stare-down, and I just blinked first. It was a shift I didn’t feel I even participated in. First, I noticed the rapid boom of my heart. And I thought, *This is so strange that she hasn’t left. This is simply not normal. Not normal at all. How did she know I was on that rock meditating? Did she smell me on my moon, smell my menstrual blood? Is she sizing me up right now? And why on earth am I calling it a “she”?*

Most animals seem to have social distances with humans. Earlier in the day, an immature turkey vulture perched on a snag a hundred feet from the cabin was most expressive about his comfortable distance; he always flapped away with a labored *whoosh* of wings when I crossed the very same invisible yard line. But with this cougar, I am feeling no boundaries, as if I could snap flash pictures and talk all day and she’d just keep blinking. It is unnerving. If neither one of us is afraid, perhaps one of us ought to be. And perhaps that should be me.

This reasoning flashes through me in nanoseconds, but its effect on my presence, my being there with her, is irreparable. I need to end this encounter; I need to leave. I pick up a silver stick lying to the right of my feet and wave it over my head. They say with some animals you need to make yourself look larger.

Firmly and loudly now, I say, “Go on! Get out of here! Git!”

Slow, sleepy blinks from the cougar. She clearly is not finished with our moment.

I glance ahead to detect a path and begin putting one foot behind the other, almost walking sideways. Reluctant to turn my back on her, I take slow measured steps toward the cabin, which is at least a hundred yards down the ridgeline, carrying my stick. I try not to step on noisy things or make sudden movements, as if that actually matters. Twenty yards, I stop, turn. She pauses, mid-step, the distance between us unchanged. I hope this qualifies as a socially acceptable distance. Cougars can easily leap the distance that separates us now.

I don’t know how to view her: inquisitive feline following me home or large predator sizing me up, considering which flank to

bite first. She has given absolutely no clue of ferocity, more like curiosity, yet I'm uncomfortable being the object of it. The attention is too intense.

I stop, face her, and bang my stick against a tree, "Go on! Go away!" They say with bears you need to make noise. The stick shatters, desiccated by the high desert clime. I feel naked; she sees the vulnerable that's displaced the powerful, I know she does. Frenetically I pull on a clump of branches, but it's still rooted; only a small branchy piece gives way. I grab again, quickly check the cougar's location, grab and pull, tug, tug and strain. The desert earth, although softened by the rains, won't yield the weapon. I resume my retreat, wildly pushing aside branches that *whap* back at me. My rain pants make a colossal noise against the brush, and cactus pads stick in my boots.

"You guys!" I yell toward the cabin, where Becky and Camille stayed to dry off after our hike. I know they're still beyond earshot, but in this shrubby jumble I won't see the cabin until I'm upon it. Again I yell, "You guys!"

I pause, panting. I half expect the cougar to appear in front of me next, without warning. She trots without touching the ground. She is that quiet; I am that noisy. I try to check my panting, quiet my heart. I turn just my head. The cougar has paused, still behind me, the distance between us maintained as if by tape measure. Oh god. I'm not walking now, not running either, more like the in-between hurried gait that spurs teachers to call out, "Now walk, don't run!"

"Beckyyy!" I whine.

The cougar has not growled, showed teeth, stalked, or crouched in any way, but I'm not thinking these finer details. I'm running with, from, beside a cougar that three minutes ago I was talking to.

"Help!"

I trust the cougar is still behind me; I've quit turning around.

"What is it?" I hear from the direction of the cabin.

"There's . . . a cougar . . . chasing me," I get out between gasps.

A long pause, then, "You're joking, right?"

The cabin is in sight now. Becky comes down the front steps. "Oh my god, there she is." She doesn't mean me but the cougar, who has stopped about twenty-five feet away, half tucked under the sloping lower branches of a piñon. When Camille appears, the cougar evaporates, I don't even know which direction.

That evening, Becky and Camille applaud my chutzpah and bravery. I bask in cougar glow. I got to talk with a cougar. I made her blink, slowly. The fearful feelings fade behind the powerful ones, but my heart pounds through my ears when I go alone to the pit toilet before bed.

I know that I attract animals, or that somehow they are attracted to me. More times than I can count, people are amazed how their timid dog or skittish cat immediately comes to me. Friends say they always see more animals and birds when hiking with me, but I attributed that to above-average powers of observation. I guess I always have talked to animals, as strange as that may sound. Squeak to pikas, caw to ravens, call out barred owls, and I even conversed with an elk once. It's an honor when they talk back or move closer. But I always assumed the talking was strictly for my enjoyment, not theirs. I shouldn't have doubted that some sort of connection might be taking place; Chief Dan George said that if you talk to the animals, they will talk with you, and you will know each other.

She still appears in my life, this cougar, as well she should. I sometimes see her face against a shimmering violet background in that space behind my eyes when I meditate. I framed one of the pictures I took of her and hung it over my bed. I've checked out library books on cougars and asked biologists what her actions meant. I learned that her behavior may have indicated well-meaning to a strange creature assumed to be a peer, which allowed her to stay with me, follow me, and be curious about this woman taking pictures. If my presence had communicated either fear or threat, she might have perceived me as potential prey, or she wouldn't have shown herself at all. Tail flicking was her sign of agitation or alertness, which ceased when she felt more comfortable with me. Her

slow blink, blink, blink was her way of watching intently, focusing on and trying to figure out this creature talking to her—a more submissive way of processing information without making direct eye contact. But sadly, most of what I've learned about cougars from newspaper stories is how to be afraid and to avoid moments with cougars. Those stories said I was supposed to avoid eye contact and not hike alone.

An encounter such as mine can be interpreted many ways, but regardless, I know that it meant something, that it signaled something. In the religious lexicon of my youth, this cougar was an epistle, delivering a message of transformation. The Chickasaw even called the cougar the "cat of God." To Native Americans, bushmen, and others who recognize humanity as a part of nature, cougar was my totem animal, carrying a message of personal power—about testing power and learning to use it.

And what is power but a complex amalgamation of force and fear, strength and submission, advance and retreat, like inseparable twins, appearing simultaneously in situations—and with creatures—outside ourselves? Not unlike talking with a cougar one moment and running from it the next.