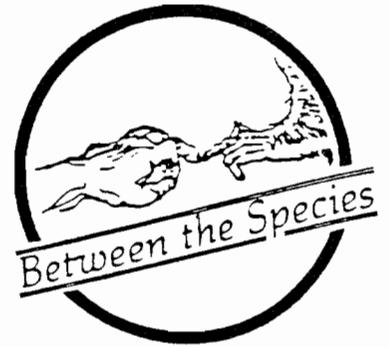


Coming to Meet the Wolf

Merritt Clifton
Animal People



May Day, in the labor movement, is supposed to be the day that exploited workers celebrate liberation. On May 1, 1992, the board of directors of *The Animals' Agenda* magazine inadvertently gave Kim Bartlett and me something to celebrate, by firing me for rocking their political boats too much, and by imposing other conditions that obliged Kim to resign. This enabled us to leave that sinking ship, which Kim had been bailing out with little help from the board for six years.

Within weeks we founded *Animal People*, our own animal protection newspaper—a faster, more flexible, more economical and above all more independent medium. We're still working the sixty to seventy hours a week we did at *Animals' Agenda*, and we're making even less money (I was never paid more than part-time wages even there). But we're reaching more people, reaching beyond the narrow "animal rights movement" audience to which we were formerly limited, and working conditions are infinitely better. Most importantly, at *Animal People* we answer only to our readers and our conscience, not to paid representatives of national groups with their own agendas.

I am a journalist, not an activist, a point I emphasize at every introduction. I am intensely sympathetic to

many causes I have written about, among them not only animal protection but also child protection, environmental protection, human rights, occupational safety, and peace. However, I believe these causes are best served by honest coverage, not partisanship. Partisans have a place and value—and also a tendency to confuse cause with self-identity. My job as a journalist includes pointing out the distinction between the objectives of each cause and those of individual leaders and groups, an obvious source of friction.

I was born in Oakland, California, and although I lived many places as a child, I spent more years in Berkeley than anywhere else. I remember looking up at the façade of the Berkeley High School auditorium when I was about five or six, picking out the words, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set ye free." I was still pondering their meaning a decade later, in the mid-to-late 1960s, when I attended Berkeley High and broke into journalism as a fifteen-year-old cub reporter. I don't think I've lived a day since without asking, "What is *true*? And what is *free*?" At the Seventh Day Adventist academy I attended for a while in Santa Rosa, sixty miles north, they told me that the words on the façade are attributed to Jesus and claimed he defined them as well. Others cite other gods, other idols, and other gospels, equally content to live by a single creed, whether it is religion, philosophy, or just the law. My own creed is more complex, including borrowed mottos



AUTO- BIOGRAPHY

as mutually contradictory as hammers and saws and likewise used not as commandments but as tools. With respect to lifestyles, I like the Hippocratic oath: "First, do no harm." I also like the Joan Baez line: "Take what you need and leave the rest." With respect to movements and causes, I frequently recall Ambrose Bierce: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." And the anarchist Joe Labadie: "Show me someone who would seek power, and I'll show you someone who would abuse it." William Randolph Hearst defined the purpose of my kind of journalism: "To comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable; print the news and raise hell." Added Mark Twain, "Get your facts first. Then you can distort 'em as you please."

I believe one must be one's own hero. The only messiah any of us will ever meet looks back at us from the mirror. I further believe that whatever one believes isn't a fraction as important as what one does about it. And I believe that conventional wisdom is usually wrong. I hold that it is better to think for oneself and risk making mistakes than to blindly accept the judgments of others who may not have all the facts or the integrity to weigh them fairly.

I realized that last, I think, even before I noticed the Berkeley High School façade. I mistrusted adults and authorities from my earliest recollection. I began what I'm doing at *Animal People* very early, even if I didn't know exactly what it was and even though it didn't directly concern animals. I was always a vegetarian; my father became a vegetarian before I was born, as his protest against killing after he'd seen heavy combat in World War II. I was also always a couple of grades ahead in school, so that I was usually the youngest, the smallest, and the worst athlete in my class. For years, at different schools as we moved around, the bullies would trash my lunch, try to make me eat meat or sometimes dog feces, and try to make me shut up when I told them unpleasant but explicit truths about themselves. They never succeeded. The bullying was worst after we settled in Berkeley, that supposed bastion of liberalism. The sons of activists thrashed me almost daily, until one day I turned the tables on a boy half again my size and began a counterattack. Within about a year, new rules prevailed around the neighborhood. Rule One was that I welcomed everyone who wanted to play to join my team in the daily after-school ballgame: girls, little kids, anybody. In 1967 a couple of us put together a self-coached team of Little League rejects and

misfits, including a girl at second base, and compiled a 24-1 record in unofficial games against league members. Four years later, some of us who were then too old to be eligible coached another team of everyone else's rejects to the Berkeley t-shirt league championship. Members of both teams are still among my best friends.

In between came two serious challenges from apostles of the old way, the tradition of bullies. The first guy, a few years older, knocked me down over and over before giving up. I never even landed a good punch. In retrospect I know I won that fight, because I retained my leadership. The other guy was the one who changed. At the time I felt I'd lost, that I'd failed to defend a neighborhood girl's honor. Ashamed, I withdrew from social contact except on the ball field for just over a year. Not long before, I'd been an outcast. Now I was an exile. Thereby I discovered the value of leaving society to wander in the wilderness: *ostracism is society's ultimate threat. Choose it, embrace it, come to terms with it, and one becomes invulnerable.* I could never again be hurt through exclusion or peer pressure. After coming to that truth, I met the second challenge by simply putting my hands in my pockets and letting the would-be bully slug me, repeatedly, as his gang and my friends looked on in bewilderment. Eventually he ran away in tears. I refused to fight because I'd realized that while I'd earned leadership the conventional way, with fists and ball playing skill, I'd kept it with other qualities and had redefined my position. A bully could take my place only if I accepted the challenge on the terms of "Might makes right."

I still fought, on occasion. I just turned from fighting bullies to fighting crime. Between jobs as copyboy and stringer for local papers, I worked off and on throughout my high school and college years as a maintenance man in a couple of Oakland apartment houses, painting, laying carpet, and pinch-hitting on security duty against pimps, bikers, and just plain maniacs. I also slipped out late each night for an hour or so on the street as an unarmed lone ranger, first in Berkeley and then in San Jose, where I began classes at San Jose State University and began living on my own just before my seventeenth birthday. Usually I walked, kept an eye out for evil, and took the opportunity to observe feral cats, skunks, raccoons, and other urban wildlife. Sometimes, though, I did find people and animals in trouble. Several times I stopped men who were assaulting women, including

one man whose apparent intent was to kill his girlfriend. Another time I helped send a previously convicted serial rapist back to prison. Twice I caught burglars. And once I tried unsuccessfully to rescue a cat colony living in a storm sewer. The cats were eventually dispatched by San Jose animal control.

Although there has never been a time since September, 1968, when I haven't been doing journalistic work, my initial ambitions were literary. Like most cub reporters I figured I'd follow in the long tradition of great novelists who started in journalism, then moved on. When I got myself kicked out of the SJSU journalism program on my very first day for telling the department chairman his required courses were crap I'd already learned on the job, I just took the opportunity to petition the deans to design my own special major, nominally in creative writing but more specifically intended to inform Great Literature. I took intensive course loads from the journalism, English, religious studies, theater arts, and history departments. I graduated right on schedule four years later, with honors, at age twenty, despite having been kicked out of an additional forty-one units of classes for telling numerous other professors they didn't know their own subjects—and then proving it. Along the way I helped to edit a couple of editions of a semi-annual guide that graded faculty members. I also spent a disillusioning summer as a volunteer in the 1972 campaign to re-elect Richard Nixon. That led to a stint as conservative columnist for the SJSU newspaper. Everything I wrote in that capacity was crap, and I knew it.

I began to get back in touch with myself by founding my own literary magazine and chapbook series, called *Samisdat*. I envisioned it as a showcase for my own short stories and poems and those of talented friends. It did serve that purpose: the first book of poems I published, by a Maine professor, was runner-up for the 1974 National Book Award, and the first collection of short stories, *A Few Good Men*, by classmate Tom Suddick, was subsequently in print for over a decade as an Avon paperback. What it didn't do was help me find a job when I graduated. Not that I looked as assiduously as I could have. Instead, I bolted SJSU a week before my last exams when out of the blue I was offered the opportunity to try out as a pitcher with the Portland Mavericks, a professional baseball team. This wasn't my first pro tryout. I'd wangled the promise of one with the Oakland

Athletics' organization at age fifteen, by pretending to be eighteen. My pretense was detected, but the episode led indirectly to the Athletics' discovering and signing a one-time Colt League teammate, Claudell Washington, who went on to play seventeen years in the major leagues. I'd also been cut at an open tryout hosted by a Baltimore Orioles' affiliate. This time, though, the ball club invited me. I told my professors to grade me as they pleased and caught the train to Portland. There I found that the same invitation had been sent to 225 other prospects and suspects, many of whom had already played professionally. I nonetheless survived the first and second rounds of cuts, pitched three innings of no-hit relief in my one professional game but lost it on an unearned run, and after the last cut was invited to stay with the team as a batting practice pitcher, at my own expense. If someone got hurt, I might be added to the roster. I calculated the odds, said thanks but no thanks, and decided to seek my fortune in Alaska. Seven jobless, sick, and very hungry weeks later, someone sent me a clipping: the day after I left, a pitcher broke his leg. The Mavericks signed ex-major leaguer Jim Bouton, who later returned to the majors, to take his place. Maybe they'd have signed him even if I hadn't left, but I'll never know.

Ironically, I did get into the Baseball Hall of Fame, sort of. As a hobby statistician, I devised a system of rating players based on statistical relativity, subsequently refined by many other people, and was given a lifetime pass to the Hall for donating an autographed copy of my book about it.

Alaska was no place for a vegetarian intellectual. With my brother's help, I finally did get work, first unloading boxcars and then as a pulp mill hand. I made good money, but I never found enough to eat. I lived on peanut butter sandwiches and canned pineapple juice, took extensive notes on wildlife, pollution, deforestation, and occupational safety hazards, took fire fighting training, and rediscovered the reality of hard physical work. I conceived a new purpose for *Samisdat*: voice of the voiceless, whoever and wherever they were. That would remain my purpose in publishing it for exactly twenty years, 242 monthly issues in all, during which I used it to advance the concerns of Vietnam veterans, working people, gay people, people of color, and of course my own concerns about the environment, social justice, and animals. I returned to San Jose with a

grubstake, bought an old printing press, and buckled down to it.

Despite latent empathy for animals, they were never a big part of my life until my early twenties. Although my parents taught us to be kind to animals, we'd only briefly had a cat and never any other animals. Certainly I'd never heard of animal rights when in late 1975 the now-best-selling author Gabriele Rico got me a job as ghostwriter for the late philosopher Tobias Grether. Rico was my first and favorite writing teacher at SJSU, who always had special empathy for me when others treated me as a loaded loose cannon with the fuse lit. Grether later served as an advisor on German/American cultural affairs to former U.S. president Ronald Reagan. Over the next year and a half, the three of us spent many an afternoon arguing about animal rights over beer in Rico's kitchen, without any awareness that anyone else had ever even contemplated the question. I maintained adamantly that animals had the Jeffersonian rights to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness according to the needs and nature of their species. Grether insisted that one couldn't have rights without having a conception of what they were. Rico, as effective a diplomat as she is a teacher, kept us on friendly terms.

My first cat, Catapuss, came with my first marriage, to a manic-depressive Quebec farm girl with writing talent who'd arrived in San Jose as an illegal alien. We initially attributed her affliction to lack of an animal companion. We adopted Catapuss as a kitten from poet Lorna Dee Cervantes, whose literary magazine we were printing along with *Samisdat* in our garage. Catapuss, now quite elderly, is in my lap right now. I insisted that he be neutered, and he became Exhibit #1 for spay/neuter wherever we lived thereafter.

More and more, I became involved with animal work, yet totally unawares because so much else was going on. When Catapuss came, I was living under an assumed name, among a community of illegal aliens who eked out their livings assembling transistors from bags of parts that Cervantes and her husband brought home from a factory. Their minimum wage jobs in effect supported three whole families. Poverty and police were constant threats. When we weren't worrying about putting beans on the table and dodging U.S. Immigration, we were each trying to create our way out of the *barrio*. Some of us made it, including our next-door neighbor, a teen-aged carpenter named James Brown who now writes hardback novels and

movie scripts. I got his first novel published by an underground press in Arizona, just before my wife and I fled back to her native Quebec a jump ahead of the law. I learned to drive by piling everything we had into an old Rambler and jockeying it through the Sierras, the Rockies, and the Adirondacks in the late spring of 1977, with Catapuss yowling on my shoulder most of the way.

I documented my West Coast years in three closely autobiographical novels published during the 1970s. My 13 years in Quebec brought the gradual dissipation of dreams of literary glory and renewed dedication to change-oriented journalism, documented only by *Samisdat* back issues and twenty-odd scrapbooks of newspaper clippings. I arrived shortly after the separatist *Parti Quebecois* came to power, touching off an ongoing exodus of the English-speaking population, but while I never became fluent in French, I never met anything but warmth and friendship from individual *Quebecois*, including cabinet ministers whose policies I opposed. I lived for the first twelve years on my in-laws' struggling dairy farm, helping with hay making and other heavy chores in exchange for living space. As my first Quebec winter hit, I was delegated to round up four maverick heifers who'd spent the summer in the woodlot and didn't want to return to the barn. Suffice it to say that I gained considerable respect for bovine intelligence and independence over the next few weeks and never did catch them. (Someone else did, after drugging them.) I also developed a lasting intolerance for dairy products and distaste for the whole business of animal-based agriculture. The conflict between family obligations and my feelings about dairy farming reached resolution only when the whole operation disintegrated in a nasty dissolution of the family partnership.

On Christmas Eve of my first Quebec winter I stumbled into the first trap line I'd ever seen. Perhaps it was my recent memory of how intensely the heifers valued their freedom that fired my rage and revulsion. Whatever the case, I stayed out until after midnight, finding and destroying the traps, one by one. I didn't know then that it was illegal for anyone but a warden to destroy a trap line, even on posted land. The local deputy warden told me a few days later. He also authorized me to act as his assistant, to smash trap lines anywhere I found them on posted land so long as I had the landowner's permission. I soon patrolled

a group of adjoining farms totaling more than a square mile, including quite a lot of streams and river front, prime areas for muskrat, coyote, fox, and raccoon. Every winter morning throughout the next dozen years I spent an hour to two hours jogging and busting trap lines. I also helped apprehend deer poachers and assisted fire crews. In 1988, just after the deputy warden's death and just before I moved to another community, the township nominated me for an honorary Olympic medal, which I received from the Canadian government. Officially it was for my accomplishments as a marathon runner, of some regional success, especially at distances of longer than the standard marathon. Unofficially it was for my work in protecting the local environment, both through journalism and in person. The Women's Institute of the neighboring township awarded me a plaque for similar reasons.

I'd always done some environmental journalism, beginning even before I helped to promote the initial Earth Day in 1970. It became my career in earnest in 1978, after the Canadian Pacific Railway used potentially lethal asbestos waste to rebuild the roadbed under 90 miles of track, including a right-of-way through the farm. I sold an exposé to the *Sherbrooke Record*, the only English daily in Quebec outside Montreal. This led to eight years of steady reporting work, operating out of my own small office. Since the *Record* didn't pay quite enough to make a living, I also became lead feature writer for a monthly alternative paper, *The Townships Sun*, and sold articles to just about every other English-language paper in rural Quebec and northern Vermont as well. I covered a region the size of Connecticut, addressing topics including water pollution, asbestos, nuclear waste, acid rain, pesticides, and chemical waste dumping. I also covered the siege of Akwesasne by the New York state troopers in 1979-1980, as one of only two Caucasian reporters to cross the no-man's-land and talk to the isolated Mohawks in person.

Still, with little awareness of the existence of any organized animal rights movement, I nonetheless addressed most of the major issues. I pointed out the connections between factory farming, pollution, and soil erosion. My work on toxics led to an exposé of how animal test data is often misleading and/or deliberately falsified by companies and bureaucrats eager to cover themselves against liability suits. At about the same time, I discovered and began surveillance of the

considerable traffic in dogs between Quebec and U.S. laboratories. When a nearby farmer started a canned hunting operation in 1979, I amended my daily jogging route to keep an eye on it, leading to numerous exposés and a visit from a small-time gangster who had a stake in the business. I told him to go to hell and published his photograph. I likewise used my camera to help a concerned local housewife force improvements in how puppies were treated at pet shops. And I exposed the sad case of Zira, an infant gorilla who was brought to the Granby Zoo from the Camaroon through a loophole in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. She contracted avian tuberculosis after being caged next to a collection of exotic birds. Eventually she was relocated to be with other gorillas and has reportedly recovered, while the Granby Zoo underwent a complete turnover of administration.

As a weekend sports columnist, I promoted vegetarianism, citing my own success as an endurance runner and, even more particularly, the success of my longtime friend Cindy New, an ethical vegetarian who twice won the Montreal International Marathon.

Print journalism brought me sporadic TV and radio work with both the major Canadian networks, CBC and CTV. I won a national award in 1980 as one of the first journalists to expose the Canadian acid rain problem and in 1984 received the Quebec government's first and only award to a journalist for distinguished environmental reporting. Yet I never earned enough money to even pay income tax. Constant budget cutting at the CBC and the dwindling circulations of English newspapers in Quebec didn't help. Finally I did a series of exposés of alleged financial corruption involving a regional school board and members of the politically powerful Desourdy family, builders of the James Bay hydroelectric development and the Montreal Olympic stadium, who also happened to be the most prominent fox hunters in Canada. In August and September, 1986, they pressured my markets, and I suddenly couldn't sell anything but my sports column to anyone in the province. My marriage, always difficult, was effectively over. My in-laws' farm was collapsing under the combination of debt and a lawsuit among the former partners. I had to bear more responsibility for more people than I'd ever felt before, and I was both broke and effectively blacklisted.

That's when Kim Bartlett became editor of *The Animals' Agenda*. The magazine sent out a letter seeking

freelance writers, and I responded with a resumé plus photocopies of my work on animal issues. Kim responded with a cover story assignment, initiating our long association. Not that either of us had any inkling how close we would become. I remained in Quebec another three years, helping bring my former in-laws' crisis to a just resolution. In addition to my work for Kim, I served as Canadian correspondent for a variety of other American environmental magazines, wrote for baseball publications, dipped into Vermont as a regional correspondent for a Burlington alternative newspaper and served as lead feature writer for the now defunct journal of the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. My biggest single assignment was a six-month job researching the economics and socio-demographics of the fur trade for the Humane Society of the United States. On this assignment I discovered and documented points of vulnerability we've all been attacking ever since.

Kim and I met in person just once, briefly, at a party in January, 1988, where *agent provocateur* Marylou Sapone mistook me for a desperado and tried to talk me into planting a bomb to blow up U.S. Surgical president Leon Hirsch, for doing sales demonstrations of surgical staples on dogs. Since Sapone appeared to be drinking heavily, I mistook her for a besotted and bored housewife trying to pick me up and patiently outlined the fallacies of responding to violence with violence. Months later, Sapone encouraged Fran Trutt to plant a bomb in Hirsch's parking space at U.S. Surgical headquarters, and I've been testifying both formally and informally about the case ever since. If I'd had any idea Sapone was even going to remember what she'd said the next morning, I'd have called the cops. And if Kim had tipped me off then that she already suspected Sapone was an *agent provocateur*, I'd have called the cops anyway. Having fought my way into burning buildings as a fireman, searching for either human or animal victims, and having seen 6,000 pigs die in one especially bad fire, I have no use for anyone who either commits or incites arson, whatever the pretext.

Kim asked me to become her news editor in August, 1988. We met again over a year later at a seminar she and Priscilla Feral of Friends of Animals hosted on the status of the animal rights movement; we were married four months later.

Kim and I have different perspectives in many respects. Kim's twenty-plus years in animal work and mine as an environmentalist pose an obvious contrast.

So does her southern upbringing and my experience on the West Coast and in Canada. There are others. The biggest may be that she is a gentle person by nature; I am one by choice. Although street fighting is decades behind me, I understand why men fight and hunt. I suspect that the difference between myself and Kim in this respect is elemental, part of our sexual self-identity — and therefore not just a facet of our own characters but also an issue that all of us in humane work must explore, because it has a direct bearing on why so many men kill and abuse. It is obvious enough that to a certain extent male violence and aggression is sexually attractive; this is what draws young women toward athletes and soldiers. It is equally obvious that historically the male impulse toward violence and aggression has been of value to women, children, and even some domestic animals, who have been safest when protected by brave, strong men. What is not so obvious is how to deal with male violence and aggression in a social context, now that it kills and abuses women, children, and animals much more often than it helps to fend off sabre-toothed tigers. We must find and demonstrate ways for men to be men without becoming dangerous bullies. We must help other men to make the choice I have made, which is a choice that can probably be made only by men who feel they have already proved themselves, and who do not feel that their strength and courage are in doubt.

Acculturation is part of what we must change, the traditions of men teaching younger men to kill, whether for sport or in war, and of honoring such activity as a rite of passage into manhood, so that the ability to kill, for many, becomes subliminally confused with the ability to exercise manhood itself. But acculturation is not the whole issue: I never played with toy guns, never hunted, and indeed, was never even encouraged to participate in sports. I discovered my capacity for violence and aggression nonetheless, and am now seeing our son discovering similar instincts, at age two and a half, even though he is essentially cheerful, gentle, and genial, quite obviously like his mother.

We must renew the role of man as father/protector, which need not be confused with the roles of patriarch and tyrant. Children need fathers; men need to be fathers, not just sowers of sperm. In this respect we can take lessons from certain other social animals, especially wolves. In a peaceable society men would still compete against themselves and each other, in sport and in business, but only as wolves do. Contestants would back

off before causing each other serious injury. They would never exercise violence against women, or children, or animals, because this is not an equal context; there could be no joy or honor in it.

Our son is named Wolf. Kim and I each knew at the moment of conception that Wolf would be his name. We probably chose the name, though, for different if complimenting reasons. Kim thought of the beauty and

nobility of wolves. What I thought came to me in a dream: I walked to the edge of a brook in deep woods, looked up, and saw a wolf looking back at me. I looked down at our reflections in the water. There, on the bottom of the brook, was a rusted musket.

Together, with Kim's help, the Wolf and I will seek a new path for men and wolves, a path where we can be brave and strong without harming one another.

State of the Ark

a right noble species we are,
lookit how far we've come:
a seed at first, like a dorsal
or scale scuttled
by that life come crawling
out of the seething sea,
out of the swamp-spawned foam.

lookit how far we've come out of the foam:
outpaced the apes in record time, we did
(energized state-of-the-Ark, oy!)
with our toolbox magic,
stentorian histrionics and kamikaze
voodoo kultur:

seers, shamans, diviners,
priest-kings & warrior-kings,
landlords & warlords,
censors & senators,
czars & commissars,
orators, merchants,
diplomats, statesmen ... the lot,
with their armies
of publicists and promoters,
apologists and scribes,

perfecting, always, the grand illusion,
the sleight of hand, the prestige
of our species: El Animale Grande.

and lookit all we've won:
with clay and straw and wood and stone
and brick and mortar
we built our Babels and Babylons,
our tall towers
tethered to our infinite vanity,
to our god-impressing adulation
of our own gilded likeness,

arrayed in our satorial shrouds,
to preen
prouder than any corpse,
to construct,
along with our soaring spires,
our asphalt cemetaries,
an opiate cloud, raining death,
and the fallout
of rosewater lies.

George Sukol