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Creative Nonfiction
Gonzo Journalism Assignment

Alpha and Omega

It's early afternoon, a beautiful day in early March. Slightly overcast, but still pleasant. It's the time of year when people get anxious to leave their winter coats at home, knowing that spring is right around the corner. This morning we did leave our coats at home—a mistake. Others around us have coats and gloves on. Mike and I wait for bits of sun to creep out from the clouds. When this happens, it starts to feel like spring, if only for a few moments until the sun creeps back into its hiding spot.

We're waiting for the next wolf tour to begin. This morning we drove from our home in Philadelphia to the little Lancaster County town of Lititz, PA. This is where the Wolf Sanctuary of PA is located, on the property of the eighteenth-century Speedwell Forge Estate. My husband Mike and I have been meaning to take a tour for over two years but haven't ever found the time. Finally, we have made the time. After the tour we are going to stay for one night at the bed and breakfast that is on the property.

It is cold. I have on a black cardigan with a black tank top underneath, and jeans. Mike has on a hoodie. We look like fools. I can imagine the other people looking at us and judging us. "Those people are idiots, don't they know it's still winter?"

The noon tour has to be split into two groups because too many people showed up. We are waiting with the second group of people. I take a break from shivering in place to look around. There are old barn buildings that seem to be abandoned, not having been taken care of over the years. The majestic stone mansion that houses the bed and breakfast is behind us, out of site. We had to drive past it when we first got here. The Wolf Sanctuary is in the back of the property, located on 22 acres of land. Our tour guide walks out of one of the old buildings with a bucket full of animal parts. It looks like chicken but I'm not entirely sure. The guide is wearing worn old jeans and a Wolf Sanctuary hoodie that also looks worn out and filthy.

About ten yards ahead of us, I can see the first tour group at the first pack of wolves. Behind a chain link fence, there are several beige colored wolves pacing back and forth. They are

beautiful creatures, and they don't look scary at all, despite how American culture might have portrayed them over the years. The fencing is extensive and high, and the enclosures within the fences are large—plenty of room for the wolves to run around. Slowly the first tour group walks away, around the corner to the next pack of wolves, and our guide begins to speak to us.

“Hi everyone I'm Darin and I'll be your tour guide. You can take all the pictures you want during the tour, but no recordings. Some of these wolves don't like me, so that is why I've got this food here...it'll make them come close to the fence so we can see them.”

Darin continues to tell us that they have seven wolf packs and over forty wolves here. The Sanctuary started because the Darlington family that owns the property had some pet wolves a long time ago. Regulations on pet wolves meant that the wolves needed their own enclosures and couldn't be kept in the house. So Bill Darlington started the sanctuary as a place for his own wolves, and then began to take in more wolves. It's since grown into a rescue. Darin tells us that most of these animals came from bad situations; some of them have been abused. They take them in from all over the country and let them form their own packs, choose their own mates, and live as close to a normal life as they can. They can't be released into the wild because they were born into captivity, so this is the closest thing to a wild life that they will ever know.

Darin instructs us to go up to the fence where the first pack is, the beige wolves. There are two fences separating the wolves from the tour group. Darin goes in between those two fences, so he is one fence closer to the wolves. From here he is able to throw the treats at them, and as he does this he tells us more about them. Wolves are actually indifferent to humans—they don't care about us one way or another if they encounter us in the wild. They'd most likely leave a human alone rather than attack. The only situation where a wolf will attack a human is if they feel threatened or their food is being tampered with.

Since the Speedwell wolves aren't entirely wild, having been born into unique situations, they know that the presence of a human usually means they are getting food. They greet Darin somewhat eagerly but walk away after they have what they came for, no longer interested. Darin points out what is left of a deer carcass lying in the enclosure...it looks like a dirty fur coat covered in mud. I never would have guessed that it was once a deer. When deer are killed in auto accidents around the county, they feed them to the wolves. Of course, the wolves would prefer the deer to be alive so that they can hunt, but this is not possible.

Darin tells us the backstory of this pack and mentions the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone Park. In Yellowstone, wolves were hunted and killed by humans to the point of near extinction. It tends to be in human nature to destroy what we can't control or what we don't understand. Being a top predator, wolves are necessary to the ecosystem and without the wolves to hunt the elk and deer, the populations of these species in Yellowstone ran wild. Then there was a chain reaction that affected smaller animal and plant populations. When wolves were gradually reintroduced to Yellowstone starting in 1995, biodiversity started to flourish again: proof that these creatures are needed in the wild and shouldn't be killed on site out of fear.

“Where do the wolves sleep when it's cold?” a little girl asks.

Darin laughs. “They prefer the cold—it's where nature intended them to be. They can adapt to any season, but they thrive in the cold weather.”

We walk over to the next wolf, Chipper, who is slightly smaller than the previous wolves. Chipper is white and gray. He is a lone wolf, not belonging to a pack. Chipper gets very excited as we approach. “Chipper is a sweetheart and he is lonely,” Darin says. Darin explains that Chipper is a half wolf hybrid mixed with Siberian Husky. This explains his smaller size and his excitement at seeing humans. Chipper's only pack mate, another hybrid who had been used in the film *Dances With Wolves* as a cub, has passed away, leaving him alone. I hope that another hybrid will come to the Sanctuary to keep poor Chipper company. Wolves and hybrids are used in the movies a lot, and after they can't be used in films anymore and have no place to go, they end up in rescues like this one. It makes me sad as I think about this...it seems that no animal species has the monopoly on suffering at the hands of humans. Even though Chipper has Husky blood, he can't be completely trusted as a companion since he is still part wolf...so he can't be adopted as anyone's pet, even though he seems to like humans.

We move on to the next pack, five wolves who are all siblings. Delilah, a black wolf with two different colored eyes, is the fan favorite. One of her eyes is an icy blue and the other is gold. She looks like a zombie wolf. Darin tells us that this means she has some Husky or Malamute blood somewhere in her ancestry—wolves never have blue eyes, always gold. This pack came from a woman who was breeding wolves to make money. When she was found out, she had to give the wolves up to the sanctuary. Later, I would go home and google “wolf cubs for sale” and be disgusted at the smiling ignorant faces beaming at me from the computer screen, holding tiny cubs, with no idea that these creatures should not be kept as pets.

We make our way around to the rest of the packs, finally ending at the last pack, which is the largest. This pack has at least ten wolves and is in the largest enclosure. We get a treat when we get to see them bark and howl briefly. I snap many pictures of this pack, and I'm fascinated as Darin explains which wolves are the alpha, the beta, and the omega. In such a large pack, it is easy to see this leadership dynamic in action. The alpha wolf is right up at the front of the fence, since he is the one who always eats first. The omega, Geronimo, the low wolf on the totem pole, hangs out in the back of the pack. He is the underdog, and he always eats last. Darin throws some meat directly back in his area so that he gets some of it without competition from the others. Geronimo has a sweet look about him.



The tour lasts about an hour and fifteen minutes, and I realize that I had forgotten about how cold I was, being caught up in the stories of the wolves. Then, in grand *Disneyland* fashion, everyone ends up in a gift shop. There is a coffee station set up too, and the beverages are free, but donations are recommended. I put one dollar in the donations jar and get myself a hot chocolate, which hits the spot after walking in the cold for over an hour. Proceeds benefit the wolves, as does the price of admission to the tour, so I don't feel so bad spending \$50 on souvenirs. They are doing good work here at the Sanctuary, giving these animals homes and taking care of them. The Sanctuary receives no government funding and relies exclusively on donations from patrons and volunteers.

After we leave, Mike and I go to eat lunch, and then we arrive back at Speedwell Forge to check into our magnificent room at the bed and breakfast. In the middle of nowhere, we are staying for the night in a one room stone cottage from 1795 that was an addition onto the main

house (the main house was built in 1760). Very peaceful and quiet, it is a wonderful place to go to relax. There is a creek next to the property, and I look out the cottage window and see some deer eating on the other side of the water. I instantly think of the wolves, both the Speedwell wolves and the Yellowstone wolves. Sometimes, it seems that humans might just get in the way, abusing our power at the top of the food chain. The Wolf Sanctuary is helping the wolves—but they only need help because us humans messed things up so badly. Wild wolves haven't been seen in Pennsylvania in over a century.

For one night, we have a restful experience away from the hustle and bustle of the city. When I wake up the next day, I can hear the Speedwell Forge wolves howling in the distance. I'm reminded that soon I'll be back to my real life, my "domestic" life. The wolves will be replaced by people, the creek and deer replaced by strip malls and fast food restaurants. The open grass and field replaced by black top and concrete. The trees replaced by cars. But now I know that ninety minutes from the city there is this peaceful place, a place that will take me to the tranquility of another time.

Speedwell Forge Wolf Sanctuary offers public and private tours all year round. On Saturday nights during the full moon, they have special Full Moon Tours, which are adults-only and include a bonfire and entertainment. I'm sure we'll be back to howl at the full moon with the wolves in the future.

For more information visit www.wolfsanctuarypa.org