

Woodsong

Gary Paulsen

We have bear trouble. Because we feed processed meat to the dogs, there is always the smell of meat over the kennel. In the summer it can be a bit high¹ because the dogs like to “save” their food sometimes for a day or two or four—burying it to dig up later. We live on the edge of wilderness, and consequently the meat smell brings any number of visitors from the woods.

Skunks abound, and foxes and coyotes and wolves and weasels—all predators. We once had an eagle live over the kennel for more than a week, **scavenging** from the dogs, and a crazy group of ravens has pretty
10 much taken over the puppy pen. Ravens are protected by the state, and they seem to know it. When I walk toward the puppy pen with the buckets of meat, it’s a toss-up to see who gets it—the pups or the birds. They have actually pecked the puppies away from the food pans until they have gone through and taken what they want. **A**

Analyze Visuals ►

Examine the painting closely. What do you see?

scavenge (skāv’ənj) v.
to search for discarded scraps

A NARRATIVE NONFICTION

Reread lines 1–14. What imagery does Paulsen use to depict life at the edge of the wilderness?

1. **it can be a bit high:** the smell can be rather strong.





Golden Autumn (1901), Stanislav Joukovski. Oil on canvas, 87.5 cm × 107.5 cm. Museum of Art, Serpukhov, Russia. © Bridgeman Art Library.

◀ Analyze Visuals

What **details** in the painting suggest that the house is in the wilderness?

Spring, when the bears come, is the worst. They have been in **hibernation** through the winter, and they are hungry beyond caution. The meat smell draws them like flies, and we frequently have two or three around the kennel at the same time. Typically they do not bother us much—although my wife had a bear chase her from the garden to the house one morning—but they
20 do bother the dogs.

They are so big and strong that the dogs fear them, and the bears trade on this fear to get their food. It's common to see them scare a dog into his house and take his food. Twice we have had dogs killed by rough bear swats that broke their necks—and the bears took their food.

We have evolved an uneasy peace with them, but there is the problem of familiarity. The first time you see a bear in the kennel it is a **novelty**, but when the same ones are there day after day, you wind up naming some of them (old Notch-Ear, Billy-Jo, etc.). There gets to be a too-relaxed attitude. We started to treat them like pets.

30 A major mistake. **B**

There was a large male around the kennel for a week or so. He had a white streak across his head, which I guessed was a wound scar from some hunter—bear hunting is allowed here. He wasn't all that bad, so we didn't mind him. He would frighten the dogs and take their hidden stashes now and then, but he didn't harm them, and we became accustomed to him hanging around. We called him Scarhead, and now and again we would joke about him as if he were one of the yard animals.

hibernation

(hī'bər-nā'shən) *n.* the state of being inactive through the winter

novelty (nŏv'əl-tē) *n.* something new and unusual

B NARRATIVE NONFICTION

Reread lines 15–30. At what point are you excited or anxious about what happens next? Note the details that create suspense.

At this time we had three cats, forty-two dogs, fifteen or twenty chickens, eight ducks, nineteen large white geese, a few banty hens . . .
40 ten fryers which we'd raised from chicks and couldn't (as my wife put it) "snuff and eat," and six woods-wise goats.

The bears, strangely, didn't bother any of the yard animals. There must have been a rule, or some order to the way they lived, because they would hit the kennel and steal from the dogs but leave the chickens and goats and other yard stock completely alone—although you would have had a hard time convincing the goats of this fact. The goats spent a great deal of time with their back hair up, whuffing and blowing snot at the bears—and at the dogs, who would *gladly* have eaten them. The goats never really believed in the **truce**. **C**

50 **T**here is not a dump or landfill to take our trash to, and so we separate it—organic, inorganic²—and deal with it ourselves. We burn the paper in a screened enclosure, and it is fairly efficient; but it's impossible to get all the food particles off wrapping paper, so when it's burned, the food particles burn with it.

And give off a burnt food smell.

And nothing draws bears like burning food. It must be that they have learned to understand human dumps—where they spend a great deal of time foraging. And they learn amazingly fast. In Alaska, for instance, the bears already know that the sound of a moose hunter's gun means there
60 will be a fresh gut pile when the hunter cleans the moose. They come at a run when they hear the shot. It's often a close race to see if the hunter will get to the moose before the bears take it away. . . . **D**

Because we're on the south edge of the wilderness area, we try to wait until there is a northerly breeze before we burn, so the food smell will carry south, but it doesn't always help. Sometimes bears, wolves, and other predators are already south, working the sheep farms down where it is more settled—they take a terrible toll³ of sheep—and we catch them on the way back through.

That's what happened one July morning. **E**

70 Scarhead had been gone for two or three days, and the breeze was right, so I went to burn the trash. I fired it off and went back into the house for a moment—not more than two minutes. When I came back out, Scarhead was in the burn area. His tracks (directly through the tomatoes in the garden) showed he'd come from the south.

truce (trōōs) *n.* an agreement to end an argument or fight

C NARRATIVE NONFICTION

Reread lines 42–49. What conflicts exist between the animals?

D AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

Reread lines 56–62. Why do you think Paulsen wants you to know these facts about bears?

E NARRATIVE NONFICTION

Look back at lines 30, 55, and 69. How does Paulsen build suspense by using single sentence paragraphs? Why is this an effective technique?

2. **organic, inorganic:** *Organic* refers to plant or animal material that breaks down naturally. *Inorganic* refers to man-made material that will not break down naturally.

3. **take a terrible toll:** destroy a large number.

He was having a grand time. The fire didn't bother him. He was trying to reach a paw in around the edges of flame to get at whatever smelled so good. He had torn things apart quite a bit—ripped one side off the burn enclosure—and I was having a bad day, and it made me mad.

I was standing across the burning fire from him, and without
80 thinking—because I was so used to him—I picked up a stick, threw it at him, and yelled, “Get out of here.” ♦

I have made many mistakes in my life, and will probably make many more, but I hope never to throw a stick at a bear again.

In one rolling motion—the muscles seemed to move within the skin so fast that I couldn't take half a breath—he turned and came for me.



COMMON CORE L5

Language Coach

Multiple-Meaning

Words *Bit* is an example of a multiple-meaning word, or a word with more than one meaning. In line 77, *bit* means “a small amount.” The word *bit* is also the past tense of the word *bite* and can mean “cut off with teeth.” Reread lines 75–78 and identify at least two more multiple-meaning words.

GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT

Read the sentence beginning “I was standing . . .” on line 79. Notice the writer uses correct pronoun-antecedent agreement. The singular pronoun *it* agrees with the noun *stick*.

Analyze Visuals

What words would you use to describe the bear in this work of art?

Close. I could smell his breath and see the red around the sides of his eyes. Close on me he stopped and raised on his back legs and hung over me, his forelegs and paws hanging down, weaving back and forth gently as he took his time and decided whether or not to tear my head off. **F**

- 90 I could not move, would not have time to react. I knew I had nothing to say about it. One blow would break my neck. Whether I lived or died depended on him, on his thinking, on his ideas about me—whether I was worth the bother or not.

I did not think then.

Looking back on it, I don't remember having one coherent thought when it was happening. All I knew was terrible menace. His eyes looked very small as he studied me. He looked down on me for what seemed hours. I did not move, did not breathe, did not think or do anything.

And he lowered.

- 100 Perhaps I was not worth the trouble. He lowered slowly and turned back to the trash, and I walked backward halfway to the house and then ran—anger growing now—and took the rifle from the gun rack by the door and came back out.


He was still there, rummaging through the trash. I worked the bolt and fed a cartridge in and aimed at the place where you kill bears and began to squeeze. In raw anger, I began to take up the four pounds of pull necessary to send death into him.

And stopped.

Kill him for what?

- 110 That thought crept in.

Kill him for what?

For not killing me? For letting me know it is wrong to throw sticks at four-hundred-pound bears? For not hurting me, for not killing me, I should kill him? I lowered the rifle and ejected the shell and put the gun away. I hope Scarhead is still alive. For what he taught me, I hope he lives long and is very happy, because I learned then—looking up at him while he made up his mind whether or not to end me—that when it is all boiled down, I am nothing more and nothing less than any other animal in the woods.  **G**

**F NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**

Reread lines 84–89.

What imagery helps you understand what it's like to be in Paulsen's shoes?

coherent (kō-hîr'ənt) *adj.*
clear; logical

eject (ĭ-jěkt') *v.* to throw out from inside

**G AUTHOR'S
PURPOSE**

What does Paulsen now think about his place in nature? Identify the line that tells you this.

NEWSPAPER ARTICLE Gary Paulsen's love of nature is not limited to the wilderness. In this article, based on an interview with Caroline Scott, Paulsen describes a typical day on his sailboat, on which he lives alone most of the year.

Section 4

C4

A Life in the Day of Gary Paulsen

At 5:30 A.M. I have a bowl of oatmeal, then I go to work. First up, I stow all the gear away. Then I take the covers off the sails and fire the engine up to get out of the harbor. I hate the motor—once it's off, there's silence. I have a steering vane so I can go below and cook or sit and write. Sailing is an inherently beautiful thing. To me it's like dancing with the wind and the water; it's like running with wolves—a perfect meeting of man and nature. . . .

On the boat there is nothing, and I know I work better that way. I think that the writer in the city, with the traffic and the parties and the theater, is at a disadvantage, because the distractions are so enormous. I work in the city when I have to, but I find it really hard. I don't need much. The way I live is nobody's idea of luxury, but that's the way I like it. I use a battery to charge my laptop and I just head out to sea. Sometimes I go 150 miles out and 150 miles back; sometimes I head out and keep right on going. . . .

I write all morning, then I have a two-hour break to answer mail. I get around 400 letters a day from children and I have a secretary in New York who helps me answer them all. I owe a great deal to dogs and

a great deal to children, and I try to help both of those species. A lot of what I write is fiction based on my life. . . . I spent my whole childhood running away. A lot of kids know this through my books, so I look for mail from kids in the same situation. It helps them to know you care. I'll try and get in touch with their school to let them know this child is in trouble. I'm aware I might be the only person they've told. I got a letter once from a girl who said, "My only friends in the world are your books." . . .

I don't get lonely. There was a time when I [wished I had] somebody who I could turn to and say, "Look at that!" I'd be leaning over the bow strip to touch the dolphins swimming alongside the boat. One time, three of them somersaulted in the air and crashed into the water, which was golden with the sinking sun. It was the most beautiful thing, and I felt so happy I just wanted to tell someone. But I realized that I'm telling it through my writing the whole time. . . .

I used to think I should be fulfilled by awards or by earning a million dollars, but with age has come some kind of self-knowledge. My rewards are less tangible: they're the killer whales who reared up out of the water to look at me. Or a 15-knot wind across my beam. Those are my moments of pure joy.