

JIDI MAJIA

TRANSLATION BY FRANK STEWART

I, SNOW LEOPARD

Dedicated to George Schaller

INTRODUCTION BY BARRY LOPEZ

AS A BOY I became interested in the ways of domestic animals. My companion dogs had a look in their eyes that told me there was more to them than the canid form in which I perceived them. I wasn't aware of the concept at the time, but later I understood that this is how dogs reveal their spiritual interiors, the nonmaterial part of them. I believed fiercely as a boy that the dogs who traveled the fields with me possessed a unique way of knowing.

They slept at the foot of my bed at night, alert to sounds and to movements in the surrounding darkness that were beyond my ken.

As I grew older and became more earnest about my formal schooling, I didn't lose faith in the spiritual dimension of certain domestic dogs; as a diligent student of history, human society, and the natural world, however, I began to refine my thinking. Also, I became very enthusiastic about ethology, the study of the behavior of wild animals. The wild animals I encountered in my reading seemed singularly ingenious in their design, each species all but unparalleled in its biology and ecology. Still, the full meaning of these animals seemed always to remain just out of reach of the part of my mind that approached them with rigor, logic, and analysis.

The first wild animals I met on their homegrounds lived in Southern California's Santa Monica Mountains, near my boyhood home. With them I became aware of the same quality of interior life I'd caught a hint of now and then in my faithful dogs. As I matured, and as I continued to read more widely on the nature and history of wild animals—and about what people in different cultures thought of them—I encountered two problems.

First, my intuition that all wild animals had a spiritual interior was not confirmed in my reading, nor was it supported in conversations with my teachers. To experience this part of an undomesticated animal, I discovered, one had finally to close the book and sojourn in the country where such animals are found, visit them in places where the wild animal continues to be a free animal.

The second problem was both practical and philosophical. In collapsing the behavior of every wolf, for example, into the one wolf that science has designated *Canis lupus*, how much of the fullness of what it means to be a wolf is lost? Was this generalization, *Canis lupus*, actually to be found anywhere? And if Darwin was correct in thinking that an enduring, evolutionary tension persists between the representatives of a species and the



environment that contains them, over what span of time did a particular species exist before it became, subtly, something else? In short, was the animal I beheld on its native ground a manifestation of being or becoming? And what sort of match was it for the creature pictured and described in the guidebooks I so conscientiously carried with me into the field?

AS A YOUNG MAN, then, I had an unresolved sense of the nature and meaning of wild animals. On the one hand, I grew to have feelings of great respect for the discoveries, insights, and conclusions provided by field biologists studying wild animals on the animals' homegrounds. On the other hand, I continued to be troubled by a feeling that something was missing from these summaries, something that was beyond the finite reach of biochemistry or mathematics. Nor could I make peace with another question, one that went even deeper, perhaps, than these others. My formal, Occidental education had encouraged me to believe that scientific progress made it possible to set aside certain cherished but unproven ideas about reality, that a reliable understanding about, for example, the behavior of wild animals could only be produced by rigorous, empirical science. The inferences to be drawn here, in contemplating

wild animals, were two. First, the arts—music, painting, literature, drama, dance—could be of no real help in unraveling their mystery. And second, the perceptions and insights of nonscientific cultures were of limited use, were finally only distractions, being merely entertainment for children and the uneducated.

IN THE EARLY YEARS OF MY LIFE I didn't travel much outside of North America. Then, as a teenager, before going away to university, I made a long journey with several friends and our tutors through western Europe, the landscape of my ancestors. It was not until I was in my thirties that I began to travel extensively, encountering many other cultures and landscapes. I felt a deep urge at that time to reach out, to avoid the familiar, to divest myself of the notion that mine was one of the world's exceptional cultures. I wanted to see what else I might learn, even if it proved to be radically different from what I felt to be the truth.

In my sojourns since then, to nearly eighty countries now, I've had the opportunity to accompany traditional people on overland journeys and, with them, to meet up with wild animals in places where the people's ancestors and those of the

wild animals have been observing each other for centuries, if not millennia. My powers of observation on these journeys, compared with those of my companions, have been amateurish—superficial and childlike. In a moment where they might be quickly assembling eight or ten things observed into meaning, I would be oblivious to all but perhaps one thing in the eight or ten they had noticed. I learned to be quiet, to listen carefully and not to jump to conclusions arrived at by too much thinking. In a clumsy and inept way, I tried to inhabit the landscape with them, not stand apart from it, observing it as one might stare at a computer screen.

I learned this, especially: I could not physically sense the land as well as they could, so their own science—their careful gathering of great swaths of data—was more complete, more nuanced than I thought mine could ever be. And what, since my youth, I'd felt was missing in the books and scientific papers I'd read—an awareness of the numinous animal—was as real for them, as present to them, as the pugmark of a snow leopard in a Tibetan snowfield.

THE ANIMAL THEY SAW WAS, essentially, more refined than the creature I perceived. The animal they saw was more historical, less burdened with human projections, and part of an ecology far deeper than the one my own culture was capable of conveying, glorious as that likeness often was.

These experiences changed my mind over the years about what it meant to speak with authority about wild animals. I came to believe that the nature of their more mysterious dimensions was not so much a problem to be solved as a complexity to be embraced and appreciated.

I have lived for seven decades in North America. I know enough not to say, as a Euro-American, even as a Euro-American whose family came to the Americas in the 1650s from Schleswig-Holstein, that I can tell you who the Navajo are or who the Lakota are. And, just as I feel largely uninformed about these human traditions that I respect, these ways of life fundamentally different from my own, so too am

I reluctant to attempt to define the lives of the black bears, elk, salmon, birds, and myriad insects I have shared my rural home landscape with for the past forty-five years. The more I've learned among them, the more I've sensed the limit to my knowing.

IN HIS POEM "I, Snow Leopard," Jidi Majia asks us to listen to the voice of the snow leopard, an animal that we know right from the start is not the *Panthera uncia* of Western science. It is a being with an interior life, with the attributes of personhood. Its voice, were we to try to place it, could be described as that of a wisdom keeper, a person who embodies his or her culture's history and its high values, someone who converses in a way that transcends politics, partisanship, and the personal.

The voice we hear in the poem is the expression of someone who takes life seriously but who has no cloying desire to be known or accepted. The voice is traditional, but also modern in its awareness and sensibility. The snow leopard speaks of a world rife with deception and slaughter, in which he sees the colors of hell smeared across the sky.

The voice is urgent but not panicked. It is imploring but not begging. It is without sentimentality or irony. And it calls to us from an unremembered time, an era when people knew better, when the sky above was not misted with the color of red snowfall.

IN THE TRADITIONAL HUMAN CULTURES of which I am aware—and this story might be so widespread as to justify our calling it universal—humans are thought to have arrived on the continents with few capacities and even fewer skills. They fell into the created world like an unfinished idea. To come fully to life, someone had to tutor them. For example, they needed to be taught how to feed themselves (meaning, also, shown which foods not to eat). They needed to be taught how to build shelters against inclement weather. They needed to be instructed about how to behave toward each other and

toward those living around them. Their teachers, in most instances, were animals, some of whom seemed to know more than any human about leading a respectable life, one that served others and so ensured that life all around would go on.

It makes eminent sense that the Nuosu (Yi) poet Jidi Majia, himself born into a traditional culture, one that came into being over time on the northeastern edge of the Tibetan plateau, would choose to have us listen to a snow leopard. Here is a dramatic presence: the smoke-gray fur, chased with a pattern of dark rosettes “spun from limitless space,” the long, heavy tail, its balance pole as it bounds across a cliff face, the pale-green stare. An animal possessing both metaphorical weight and biological authority, an endangered species, shadowed by a malevolent sky. Majia’s oracle speaks to us from a specific, local geography, clearly; but it isn’t a restrictive geography, a circumscribed country. We can quite easily imagine ourselves in this place; we also feel the transcendence of the wisdom the snow leopard wishes to impart to us, its universal appeal.

From an aerie on the Tibetan plateau, gazing down at bluetinted snow in a mountain-girt valley far below, then up at unbounded star fields in his domain’s night canopy, the snow leopard, it turns out, actually tells us little that we do not already know. His purpose, however, is not to bring us unprecedented wisdom. With his awareness of deep time and his appreciation of the vastness of earthly spaces, his intention is to continue the revitalizing work of human ceremony. He is reminding us of what every one of us is prone to forget. We regularly forget what we want our lives to mean. Indeed, the poem, in imitation of origin stories embedded in cultures the world over, is a reminder of the Achilles heel of human consciousness—the lapse and disintegration of memory. We repeatedly lose touch with what we intend our lives to stand for. To protect us, the elders must constantly reacquaint us with our ideals.

The genius behind this Paleolithic invention—story—is this: when we lose our way, a particular story can remind

us once again of where we intended to go, and do it before disaster overtakes us.

Majia’s snow leopard is “navigator of high terrain,” a “guardian” of remote places far from the crowded precincts in which humans wear masks and where their conversation is disingenuous. Unlike most of us, the snow leopard, who can hear the fall of rock dust, imagines time flowing like water. He is “geometric order against the chaotic scree” and heaven’s hurled lance. Above all, he finds his natural place in the hazy ecotones between darkness and light, between death and birth, in the in-between of every opposing dyad. His is the wisdom of the borderland, and so he is the patron of all who try to live honorably in the middle ground between tyranny and revolution, between despair and euphoria, between defeat and victory, between the political right and the political left.

The snow leopard says that he is trying to awaken in us another language, another way to address our now universal predicament. The “prayer” he prays is for all creation. In acknowledging our “age of terror,” he says that “there is no other place for any of us to go”—for endangered snow leopards or the marmots they hunt, for any tribe seeking to diminish another, for people mindlessly destroying the planet to make the world more comfortable for humans, for either the oppressors or the oppressed. The destiny of one is the destiny of the other.

The poet has opened a door here that any one of us can walk through. What the snow leopard and his amanuensis, Jidi Majia, offer is an intelligence that transcends ethnicity, nationalism, even cultural epistemology.

“I, Snow Leopard” is both a lyric and an elegy. It is easy to imagine its lines being loudly hailed in whatever country the poem finds itself in. Its publication comes at a time when people everywhere have begun to wonder what a voice like this, suppressed for centuries, wishes to say now, in this moment when the snow leopard’s human brothers and sisters find themselves side by side with him. Imperiled. 