Hear Him Roar
Wingfield, Andrew

Published by Utah State University Press

Wingfield, Andrew.
Hear Him Roar: A Novel.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9301.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9301

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=292990
The next morning followed a certain protocol, established through hundreds of repetitions stretching back over three decades. I rose a little earlier than usual and got dressed by artificial light. I went to the kitchen and started putting some sandwiches together for myself and Don. Once in a while I’d glance through the window, out to the street where I expected his pickup to roll in soon. Across the street, Al and Nora’s little rancher darkened as light welled up into the sky behind it. This light was slow and blue and soft, with none of the chalky yellow I’d grown used to the last several months. Would the rains begin today? The possibility gave me a lift.

By the time Don’s headlights slithered across my rosebushes and bounced up into my fruitless mulberry I had the lunch all made and packed. I stepped out the front door, smelled the air, and went back inside for my rain jacket and hat. My feet were lighter than usual, knees a bit giddy, my whole gait affected by the promise of a shower. California will do that to you. It’s not just the five or six month dry season that gets you, it’s also the memory you carry from past years when the rains never came, the fear you have of going through another drought. You never admit to this fear until the rain comes, and then you don’t admit it directly but with a liveliness of feet and shoulders and knees.

I took my time getting to the truck, inhaling like a pearl diver the whole way. I kept up this greedy breathing even after I’d climbed onto the high seat and closed the door on the dawn air. The atmosphere in Mackey’s cab was just as distinct as the one out there, and in its way just as precious. Ever since I’d known him
Don had driven this pickup. In that time the color of the vehicle had changed, and so had the model, the make, the year. What hadn’t changed was the way it smelled of an early morning. This was a many-layered odor, with dust and sawdust and WD-40 at the bottom of it, and on top of that the stale minty smell of Don’s Lifesavers, and on top of that the aromas of the coffee and doughnuts he’d picked up on his way over.

It had been at least two years since we’d headed off like this together. Those last work trips had been pretty tense, the lab’s fate was being decided then and we passed the time speculating about our bosses’ maneuvering and, in the quiet stretches, privately brooding or plotting. We both knew there weren’t many trips left, but the climate just wasn’t right for nostalgia. That had changed. A two-year hiatus was long enough to make the thousands of hours and tens of thousands of miles we’d logged together appear more meaningful than they had at the time. And because our relations had been cool since Don retired, this morning’s outing carried some of the bittersweetness a reunion should have.

Not that any of this was openly discussed. Hell no, talking about it would have ruined everything. I got busy tearing a sipping hole into the plastic top of my cup and then started fishing around in the doughnut bag. As always the radio was on, the same all-talk station that Don played continuously but never heard. He rolled slowly through my sleeping neighborhood, then gunned it up the freeway on-ramp and kept on gunning as the pickup drifted out into one of the middle lanes. We ascended the empty curve of bridge with the sky unfolding above us like an umbrella. The close dome of purple storm clouds stretched from the coastal mountains behind us to the Sierras up ahead. Beneath it a few white wisps scudded. To our left downtown Sacramento looked like its own shadow. To our right the river was a curving ribbon of reflected purple bordered by black levies. Raindrops started to smack the glass.

That was our cue to start talking. And what did we talk about? Water, of course. To talk of anything else would have
been unnatural, like shooting off fireworks on Thanksgiving. The rains had come. To us that meant it was time to compare the predictions we’d heard about the kind of winter we had in store. We had to agree that it probably wouldn’t be another dry son of a bitch like ’94. We had to hope it would be wet, but not too wet, like ’81. We had to discuss the levels of the major reservoirs and the flow rates of the rivers. We had to gossip a little about the latest big battles in our state’s never-ending water wars. It soothed us to do this. We were like a pair of old priests mumbling through the liturgy we loved.

We mumbled all the way out to Miwok Lake, pausing now and then to watch the morning develop. A warden stood guard at the gate where the crowd had been yesterday. Don stopped to chew the fat for a minute, then gave the guy some coffee from his thermos before we carried on up the bike trail. We traveled east along the lakeshore for about two miles. Near the head of the lake the trail veered left, climbing up over the hump of a little oak-covered hill. After that it wound through some fairly dense cover, rising and falling and curving with the contours of the bumpy younger brothers of the foothills farther east.

The meeting place was a little clearing tucked between two small hills. The attack had happened seventy or eighty yards up the trail from here, Don told me, and yesterday the hunting party had treed and killed the lion less than a mile away. There were two green department pickups in the clearing when we arrived. Within the next half hour a dozen more vehicles appeared. There must have been thirty people out there. Some I recognized from the department, but many I didn’t. Almost all the unfamiliar faces looked out from beneath blue ballcaps that bore the same fang-filled logo I’d seen on Don’s COUGAR ALERT newsletter a couple of days before. There wasn’t a woman in the bunch.

Standing in a pickup bed, Cliff Carter called us all together to hear instructions for the search. I recognized his voice as the one that had addressed the crowd at the gate the day before. With my backup glasses on I also recognized the tan, chiseled face
that lurked in the shade under the bill of his green department-issue cap. I didn’t know Carter the way Don seemed to, but I’d certainly seen him around the compound and across the table at various meetings. He stood out among Wildlife people because he had some polish to him. Most of the folks who end up working for the department find other animals more interesting than the human kind. They’d rather be outdoors than indoors, much rather be wading in a stream or tromping through the woods than sitting at a meeting or talking to people from the press. This Carter seemed different. For one thing, he was a good talker. I’d noticed that in meetings before, and it had come through even more clearly yesterday. The way he’d handled the demonstrators and reporters had been smooth.

This morning he was also smooth, but in a different way. Much that had been cinched down or buttoned shut yesterday was opened up now. “All right,” he began, with scorn and mischief meeting at the corners of his hard mouth, “if I wasn’t an employee of a state agency dedicated to providing equal service to all citizens, I might be inclined to say this is the opportunity we’ve been waiting for. Hell, I might even say we had the Friends of the Mountain Lion by the short curly ones.” Here shoulders jumped and faces opened and laughter tumbled out to fill the clearing. Carter showed us his white teeth as he waited for the laughter to subside. Then he explained how concerned he was that none of the momentum gained from the cougar attack be lost. The Friends were on the defensive now—it looked like the law they’d written had cost that jogger her life. To take the heat off themselves they’d be looking for something to cry foul about. A dead kitten or two would be just the thing. We couldn’t give them that kind of opportunity, not when we had them on the ropes.

And so on. Carter harangued us for a couple more minutes, making sure we grasped the importance of bringing back a kitten. Then he started talking tactics. He explained that we would use the attack site as a reference point, since it was obviously part of the mother cougar’s hunting range. Her den was likely to be
somewhere in the general vicinity, though not necessarily too close. We would walk up the trail a ways and then fan out. Half the group would search the area to the north of the trail and the other half would take the area to the south. Each man would be responsible for a strip of terrain twenty yards wide. Carter recommended moving forward in a tight zig-zag pattern, crossing from one side of your strip to the other, looking for anyplace that a lion might den. We should keep our eyes open for rock overhangs, spaces between rocks, pockets in the brush. “It’s a fine-toothed comb operation,” he said. “There’s no quick way to do it.”

Which was fine with me. On the first rainy morning of the season it was a pleasure to be outside. The land reminded me a little of myself the day before, just after my dip in the lake. It was like a hard shrunken sponge suddenly sprinkled with water. All around me things were opening, expanding, softening. The anise couldn’t have been more pungent if I’d crushed the seeds with a pestle. The dead grass underfoot reminded my nostrils of damp hay, and the oaks gave off an odor like cured leather. My strip of terrain had a few pines mixed into its oaks. Their scent made the air smell as clean and fresh as this cool rain made it feel.

The ground I had to cover was rarely flat. Besides the hills and hummocks that had been there a few million years, there were big mounds of the river rocks dredged out and dumped by the gold-seekers of the last century. Being loose, and big as loaves of bread, those rocks were no fun to walk over, but they were something to see when the rain relieved them of their chalky summer skin and set them darkly glistening. Against their moist greens and grays the scarlet leaves of poison oak glowed, and the green lichens on the oak limbs and the boulders glowed also, but paler.

I was no more stirred by all of this than the birds were. Crows filled the treetops with their harsh goadings. Through the lower limbs a gang of jays swooped and shrieked. A couple of big magpies worked lower down, yacking through their yellow bills as they hopped about on big black feet. I’ve got a soft spot for the Corvidae. They’re like the clan down the street whose business
everybody knows. Their racket was a fact of the neighborhood, and I didn’t mind it.

But as I picked my way back and forth, my eyes alert for potential lion dens, I kept my ears open for the quieter songs that played beneath the Corvidae’s noise. For a while I caught intermittent snatches of a nuthatch yank-yanking from some hidden limb. Ahead of me a quail laughed. Of course every clump of brush was alive with sparrows back from their summer in the mountains. It was good to have them here, good to know my company by voice alone. Like most birders I take a certain smug comfort in blind sightings, and nothing rankles me more than a bird whose call I don’t know. In unfamiliar places you expect this, but when you’re on your home turf it simply shouldn’t happen.

Well, it was happening now. The awareness had come over me slowly. There was so much noise and music in the air that for a while it was hard to confirm the alien notes. At first I thought I was imaging things, and then, when I decided to try and isolate what I thought I’d heard, it kept getting drowned out by the shrieking of the crows and magpies and jays. Then too, I was trudging along over loose rocks and past swiping bushes, I was making noises of my own. But finally I decided it was serious enough to postpone the search and just stand still a while, to see if I could get some kind of reading on the sound.

It took some time. The sound—it was a kind of chirp, though not like any bird’s I knew—didn’t make any kind of melody, and there would only be three or four chirps at a time. It seemed to be coming from somewhere ahead of me, probably on the right hand side of my strip of terrain. I pushed slowly onward, poking around any spot that seemed remotely denlike, all the time racking my brains for some clue about what kind of winged visitor I could be hearing. When I ran out of candidates among the wild birds I knew, I started running through alternative scenarios. It crossed my mind that a pet store fugitive could be hiding out here. Was it a parakeet or a cockateel? I didn’t think so. Those birds’ calls are quick and high, while what I was hearing had something plaintive in it, a softer kind of music.
As I nudged my way forward I determined that the sound was coming from somewhere to the right. And whatever kind of bird it was, it was sitting tight. It would let go of three or four chirps, then shut up for five minutes, then chirp again from the same spot. What was it? I sped up, putting the fine-toothed comb away. I was traveling downhill on the back side of a rock-heap. Quick but cautious, I picked my way along, careful not to cause any avalanches that might spook my chirper. When I got to the bottom I paused and waited until I heard it again. I stood in a small clearing. The next chirp came from beyond a boulder that was half-obscured by the thick brush at the right side of the clearing. I went to the brush and followed its edge, circling around the boulder when I came to it and then stepping softly on, pausing now and then to listen for the chirp. After half a minute it came—not from the brush beside me, but from somewhere behind.

I think I knew right then it was the kitten. But I wasn’t quite ready to deal with that, so I played dumb for a minute. I turned back to that boulder I’d passed, thinking maybe the strange bird had made a nest there. The boulder was as tall as me, all lichen-covered. The part that jutted into the clearing was triangular, narrow at the top and wide at the base. From a few steps away it looked like a giant nose. I snooped around the exposed part of it, then poked my head into the brush to check around the back. There was more of the boulder back here than I’d imagined. I leaned away, and saw that this part behind the protruding nose was like the rest of a giant head. There was a forehead that rose a few feet from the bridge of the nose and a cranium that curved back. I stepped deeper into the brush to follow the arc of the cranium. When I got to the very back of it I discovered a piece missing down low, the part under the occiput, that deep protected pocket where the old brain resides. I squatted to see into this low space scooped out of the rock.

A mouth full of fangs greeted me. The kitten—there was only one—stood as far back as the rock would let it, arched into the classic posture of the threatened feline—tail up, ears back, blue eyes blazing. He had chirped me in to the rescue, but he clearly
didn’t plan to make the operation easy. I didn’t blame him. My knowledge of orphan instincts came firsthand. Whatever I’d forgotten from my own training, Troy Muse had reminded me of just a day before. So this time I didn’t hesitate. Hands first, I dove.

The struggle was brief and a little bloody. When it was over I lay on my back on the porch of the den, my torn arms rigid above me, my scratched, gouged fingers clutching the writhing kitten. His claws stood out like sixteen tiny daggers. His heart drummed wildly on my thumbs. His whole livid skeleton raged against my fingers and palms.

My grip was at least as fierce as his resistance, and it stayed that way even after he conceded this first round to me and started saving his energy for the next opportunity. The whole way back, my hands didn’t relax at all. Partly this was to keep the kitten from getting any ideas about escaping. And partly it was to keep myself from losing hold of the gift I’d just been given. Here in my hands was the lesson none of Jean’s books could make stick. Here was a truth I could touch. Here was the pure and unforgettable fierceness of one who wanted life.

Eventually I had to give the kitten up to Cliff Carter, but even then its current stayed in my hands. It buzzed on as Cliff and Don and the rest of the searchers took turns congratulating me, as we loaded up the trucks and drove back over to the Department of Wildlife compound. It was still buzzing when I slipped away from the scene and walked over to the Hooked on Fishing office. There I sat down at Emilio’s typewriter and beat out a concise resignation.