

DEATH, UP CLOSE AND IMPERSONAL

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The trail to the summit of New Hampshire's Mount Willard is an easy walk for most. Though Mount Willard rises more than 2,800 feet above sea level, the trailhead stands at an elevation of 1,900 feet, and the gently graded path spans only a mile and a half. Railroad ties and stones demarcate stretches of level ground edged with soft pine needles, disintegrating scrolls of birch bark, and moss-covered logs. The path is often crowded. Even the most novice hiker, after all, can attain the summit and obtain a spectacular view of the forested Crawford Notch with relatively little exertion. Hot dog carts and ice cream stands would not appear entirely out of place along the path. Visitors routinely wear insensible shoes, ranging from badly fitting sneakers to cheap flip-flops. Fashion-minded types could probably stroll up Mount Willard in Italian stilettos. The path is suitable for people averse to discomfort or unwilling to countenance any sort of physical frailty. Even on Mount Willard, though, death occasionally rears its ugly head.

I was halfway up the trail when I bent down to tie my shoe—a canvas sneaker with worn treads and frayed laces—and saw the dark scales partially obscured by fallen leaves. Only three feet in front of me, a two-foot-long garter snake was stretched out beside an opening to the hollow of a disintegrating log. It had captured a large gray toad, in somewhat uncharacteristic fashion, by its hindquarters. With its back legs trapped in the snake's mouth, the toad strained to escape, lifting its head and gripping the snake's separated jaw with its exposed front feet, and filling its vocal sac with uneven bursts of air. I remained crouched before it, entirely transfixed, imagining the toad's gruesome journey through different stages: futile resistance, inevitable exhaustion, and final resignation. Life and death, at that moment, existed in a precarious balance about to tip, and I felt the shift with a tinge of sickness.

I don't know what moved me to pull my phone from my pocket and photograph the toad in its final moments. What compels any nature

documentarist to film a lioness snaring a gazelle, or to photograph a frenzied shark tearing into a seal? Maybe I wanted to confront the mortality that haunts us all. Maybe I wanted to frame a moment marked equally by brutality and necessity, and in doing so, to better understand the violence and death that perpetuates the cycle of life, whatever has been contained or effaced by gentle switchbacks and railroad ties, freshly paved parking lots, and the imprints of designer boots and expensive walking sticks.

After taking the picture, I quietly studied the rhythmic contractions at the base of the snake's head and stared into the toad's wide, black eyes, unable to disengage from its terror. I was witnessing something excruciatingly painful and raw, something well beyond my experience and understanding. I had dishonored the toad, I thought, and considered deleting the image and walking away. In the end, I lingered too long. I was still crouched beside the log when a middle-aged man paused on the trail and asked me what I was watching. Humans are creatures of habit, conditioned to respond to social overtures, however unwanted or mundane, and mistakenly—for I had already intruded upon the most horrible and significant moment in the existence of another being—I gestured to the snake and toad.

"I took a picture of it," I said without introduction or obvious reason. Maybe I needed to confess my voyeurism to a stranger, to expose my own misdeed and shed some of its weight.

The man crouched down beside me and leaned forward to peer at the snake still lying in forest debris where the rotting log curved away from the earth. The snake, consumed in the act of killing, didn't move from its spot. It simply contracted its muscles, over and over, drawing the toad deeper and deeper into its throat in nearly imperceptible increments. Somehow, in the presence of a stranger, I felt less uncomfortable with the act of witnessing a death, and less sickened by my own morbid curiosity. I felt less alone, too, reflecting on the mysterious essence of life, that precious energy ebbing from a toad in desperate death throes, and ruminating on the end awaiting everyone. We knelt in silence for a moment or two, each lost in our own thoughts. Then, the young couple appeared.

"Something interesting down there?" the woman asked.

The middle-aged man pointed to the toad. "She took a picture of it."

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Maybe he hoped to distract the couple from his own voyeurism. Maybe, like me, he felt sickened by something inexpressible, or ashamed of his own curiosity. Confession can be contagious.

Once the young couple leaned forward and began pointing, others on the trail paused to identify the source of growing excitement. Soon, an assortment of human specimens in brand-new hiking gear, college sweatshirts, and T-shirts emblazoned with beer ads began to block the trail. People stopped on the path without knowing why, stood on the tips of their toes and craned their necks. By the time two dozen people had gathered, the sedentary snake and captive toad had barely moved, but the balance between life and death had tipped. Half of the toad's body had disappeared into the snake.

As those closest to the snake began to point and gasp and turn away from the log with expressions of horror on their faces, those standing at the back of the group started to press forward without knowing what, exactly, they were seeking. A burly man in a track suit and his wife, a plump woman in pink sweat pants, managed to elbow their way up to the log.

The woman stepped onto the bed of leaves beside the path. "What's everyone looking at? I can't see anything."

"You aren't close enough." Her husband cupped her elbow and pointed at the dark recess beneath the log. "There's a snake eating a toad."

She leaned forward and just as quickly recoiled from the snake, the doomed toad, the rot and decay, and the gloom looming behind it all. She rested an opalescent fingernail on her lower lip, shook her head and then turned around, as if to address the group. "Disgusting." She shuddered and took her husband's arm. "I can't look at things like that. I'll have nightmares."

"It's just a snake eating a toad," her husband said.

"I don't want to get near it. If I look at that snake again, I swear I'll get sick."

"You see this kind of thing on TV all the time."

"That's different," she maintained, glancing at the log.

A guy in fluorescent biker shorts pointed at me, then. "She got a picture." He nodded at my phone. "A close-up. You should check it out."

The woman released her husband's arm and leaned into me, as if to engage me in intimate conversation. "Can you see it? The toad."

"I did see it." Suddenly, people started pressing in around me for a glimpse of my phone.

"I mean on your phone," the woman said. "Can I see it?"

Something about her directness, and her desperate need to know what was happening beneath the log, combined with the movements of everyone seeking a more indirect and sanitized view of the snake and toad, caught me off guard. I held out my phone, and the woman grabbed it from my hands. Her face lit up at once. She contemplated the image on its screen with a rapt expression.

"This is one of those new phones. How do you zoom this thing?"

Her husband snatched my phone from her hands and used his fingers to enlarge the image. She leaned against his shoulder, and together they studied the shape of the snake's detached jaw, the toad's forelegs braced for a losing battle, and the shining black eyes of both predator and prey. Only slowly did her husband relinquish my phone. He handed it to a young boy edging toward the log.

"Here, you'll see it better with this."

Over the next few minutes, my phone passed through the sweaty hands of at least a dozen strangers. Almost everyone who saw the phone shared descriptions of the snake with more squeamish bystanders—those unwilling to look either beneath the log or at the glowing screen. They made unseemly jokes, expressed their regrets for the toad, and offered vague platitudes about the harsh and unforgiving nature of, well, nature. Not everyone, though, was resigned to the toad's fate. At some point, a middle-aged woman in platform sandals and Capri pants looked at my phone and let out a tiny shriek.

"Oh my God, somebody has do something." She pressed my phone into the hands of a little girl and held out her hands in a gesture of supplication. "We can't just stand here and do nothing."

I'm not sure what, exactly, she wanted someone, anyone, to do. Perhaps she hoped someone would extract the toad from the snake's throat and set it on its half-digested feet to begin life anew. Maybe she wanted us all to point our fingers at the snake and shame it for its cold-blooded ways.

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Maybe she hoped someone would call a park ranger, or better yet, the New Hampshire State Police, and have the snake arrested. Alas, despite the heavy traffic on the trail and our easy access to asphalt lots and paved roads, there were no police in the vicinity to stun and cuff the snake or issue citations to individuals loitering at the scene of a murder-in-progress.

The woman's odd enjoinder had, if nothing else, a sobering effect on the crowd. No one could, in fact, do anything. She had confronted all of us with our own helplessness, with the impossibility and absurdity of intervening in the toad's losing battle with death. We were all just spectators, utterly irrelevant to the specific situation unfolding before us, however caught up, consciously or not, in its larger significance. When we failed to respond, she placed her hand over her mouth and started down the path, seemingly shaken and disappointed.

Soon, members of the crowd began to disperse in one of two directions. At that point, I just wanted to retrieve my phone from so many grasping hands. Before he handed my phone to me, a young man leaning on a walking stick took one last look at its glowing screen. I can't say if he was more sickened or satisfied by his last look when he started down the hill, toward the crowded parking lot. I waited for some time, until the path had cleared, knelt down on damp leaves and whispered my apologies to the toad. By then, it had stopped breathing and died in the snake's throat. With no alternative, I rose from the dirt, brushed off my jeans, and started up the trail, toward the summit, in search of something unsullied and incontrovertibly sublime.