

Animal Encounters

Sabine Hrechdakian

AS CHILDREN, MOST OF US DEVELOP A RESPONSIVENESS TOWARD animals that has all the characteristics of a relationship: curiosity, fear, wonder, desire, hate—it is sensory, tactile and emotional. That physical flirtation continues in adulthood and becomes the basis from which we learn to acquire information and knowledge. Animals often seem to me the only beings capable of igniting my imagination. I feel their presence suggestively, as a rustling at the edge of the woods, a leaping out of headlights, a dream of serpents growing enormous and shattering concrete. Without them the world would retreat into pantomime. Civilization and nature are not as neatly divided as we wish. On some occasions, I have been aware of this incongruity—I have sought out those gaps—let myself be spoken to by things I do not understand.

Did animals once understand what we said? I have tried to resurrect that conversation in my travels, in my approach, but there is so much to make up for. Most of the time I have felt awkward and foolish, naked to the unforgiving stare of an animal behind bars, or like a voyeur gawking at some wild tryst uninvited. After hours, or days of groping it is a gift to be rewarded by the sight of a coyote trotting through creosote, or a snowy owl perched on a field of ice. That fleeting shudder of recognition in those moments speaks perhaps of the silent covenant threading us together. It is not the passive stare at exotic animals on TV or the depraved sight of them in cages, but the accidental wonder of two paths crossed in time. It is a haunting and passionate game I play every time I find myself outdoors. A type of interspecies hide and seek.

Memory is a collaborative collection, a collective fiction of stories between human beings and the landscape, both animate and still, with which we share life. Thinking back to all the places I have lived—Beirut, Boston, New York and now rural New Hampshire—I string together loose images of my encounters with the wild. I don't mean only in wilderness, but the wild that grows in fissures of concrete, herds clouds across the sky, and nests in spires of stone.

Beirut

When I go back to the beginning, my memories of childhood in Lebanon are scarce. They are diluted as memory often flows, by trickle.

It was mostly a landscape of colors and textures—the blue band of sea, bristling tree limbs, the grit of orange sand, stony hills—a living backdrop animated by snakes, cats, starfish and birds. There were frequent trips to the ocean, weekends in the mountains, Sunday picnics. But, like most children the landscape I knew best was in a contained perimeter around our house.

My family lived in an apartment perched on a hill on

the outskirts of Beirut. It was surrounded by a grove of olive trees on one side, and an overgrown feral garden with a long swing hanging from a tree on the other. I spent hours in the olive grove watching ants march around their hill in the chalky soil. I brought them crumbs of bread every afternoon and sat mesmerized by their antics, watching as they heaved my offerings twice their size, and staggered down into invisible tunnels. My parents did not allow pets into their meticulous house, and so I developed an almost possessive attachment to the ants. My afternoon pilgrimages took the form of a feeding ritual and I believed that without my bread crumbs the colony might starve.

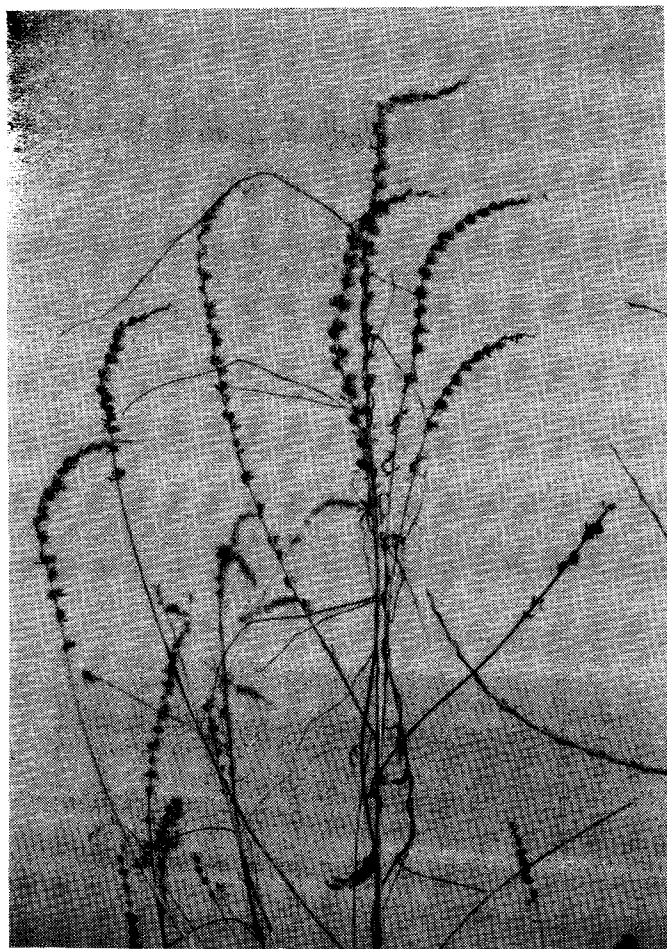
The garden with the swing was a jungle in comparison to the dry, almost desert like patch under the olive trees. No doubt if I went back I would find a paltry and meager lot of weeds, but to me then it was a fecund haven. Lying belly down in the soft grasses I found an assortment of frogs and garden snakes to play with, looping my hands around their cool and viscous bodies. I watched Praying Mantis, their forelegs clasped to their chests, poised quizzically on the tips of leaves. Birds which I cannot name congregated in the leafy canopy. Stray dogs would wander under the dappled shade of trees to escape the noonday sun. Swaying back and forth on the swing I felt the incessant hum and buzz of living things growing, crawling, and moving all around me.

Behind our apartment was an elevated rectangular garden belonging to the building next door. It was planted with palm, banana and fig trees, and swarming with stray cats skulking around, hissing with raised backs, or curled up on mangled tails. At night their plaintive howling drove me out of bed and onto the balcony shivering with curiosity. I was always involved in vain attempts to seduce them into domesticity, but my pleas went mostly unheeded (although my offerings of food were graciously accepted). Their defiant proliferation on a patch of ground between two walls of concrete was a testament to the unruly alliance between our two worlds.

The day my parents told us to pack our things after the war broke out, the sun was shining, everyone was calm, the geraniums had bloomed in the garden. We said good-bye to our neighbors and got into our car. I looked for a stray cat that had finally allowed me to adopt her, but to no avail, until the moment we were ready to leave, she appeared out of nowhere and jumped into my lap in the back seat. Looking at her rusty, spotted fur on my black skirt, feeling her warm breath on my palm, I was suddenly filled with regret. When I let her go, I knew I would never see her again. I was later told that we had a motorcade escort to the airport. I should think that I would have remembered the sirens and motorcycles, the soldiers and sleek cars, but all that comes to mind is the blue sky, the red geraniums and my cat.

Desert

In nine months of travel through the Southwest I crossed the animal path only a few times. It took weeks of walking down dry washes, over mesas and across the open palms of desert in search of the cougar, the fox and the owl. Even then I was given only clues to their presence. Scat full of berries, tracks in the mud, feathers stuck in the spines of Ocotillo, a tail caught by flashlight. Once, walking in the canyon country of Utah, I came to a fork in the trail and stood at the intersection wondering which direction to take. I sensed a small shape to my left and turned my head to find a gray fox standing motionless. I froze. We stared at each other for what felt like hours—I saw into his rich eyes, noticed the grayish tips on his coat, saw his flanks rise with each breath. I imagined his shape so often, had seen evidence of his passage everywhere and now he stood before me. He broke our gaze, turned his head, trotted over a jumble of rocks and disappeared. I had been waiting for this moment since my trip began in Texas and nearly wept. I took it as an omen and walked up the left trailhead.



Jerry DeMarco

On another occasion, climbing in the outback of Utah, I stopped to rest after a series of exhausting switch backs. It was early enough for the air to hold a hint of coolness. Desert Phlox, Indian Paintbrush and Manzanita were in bloom bursting in tufts of color from the sandstone walls. Leaning back, I caught sight of a cliff sparrow rising upwards in tight rhythmic circles. I

must have been watching it for a few seconds when the canyon filled with sound, a rushing boom, and suddenly the sparrow vanished. I stared in disbelief at the empty space where the sparrow had been. A few switchbacks ahead of me my friend had also stopped to rest and followed a peregrine falcon rising on columns of air warmed by morning sun. When the falcon folded his wings and began his descent at 200mph towards the sparrow I did not even see his shadow. I only heard the sky split open.

There are some occasions in which the encounter is neither accidental, nor altogether willful. Although I played with snakes when I was young, I have always had a fear of bugs. Their complete otherness in purpose and body plan: segmented bodies, huge bulbous eyes, and alien habits inspires a horror completely disproportionate to their size. We tend to relate to elements in nature which reflect a human sensibility; large expressive eyes, tenderness towards young, long mobile fingers, mating for life. Why do the insects' draconian social orders, militaristic relationships and cannibalistic habits inspire *dread*? One might assume, as I did at first, that it is their difference which arouses revulsion, but perhaps the reverse is true: insects may be a repository of the worst fears we have about ourselves. We see in them what we don't want to recognize in ourselves; the capacity to inflict punishment, the lust for war, tyranny towards our own species. We see in nature only what we want to see in ourselves—the violent, biting and strange face of nature we turn away from.

Belgium

One night, when visiting my parents in Brussels, I left the window open to my room and the light on. When I came back a couple of hours later the walls were papered with a virtual taxonomic jungle of insects. There were hundreds of species of every imaginable variation. Their strange shapes, antennae and roving legs were outlined against the white walls. Some were painted in colors I had never seen before: iridescent, neon, translucent green. I froze in the doorway and my heart started to beat wildly, palms drained of blood, every cell in my body fluttered; I felt an almost nauseous revulsion.

But having overcome my fear of deep water by jumping into a bottomless quarry at night, I controlled my impulse to bolt. The insects' strange presence in my room felt like an invitation of sorts, so I reached into the room, running my hand against the wall until I found the light switch; took a deep breath, maybe several, and turned the light off. Suddenly the room and I were plunged into darkness. I wavered in the doorway and walked inside feeling their multi-legged presence clinging to the walls, fear raising itself on the surface of my skin, neck tingling. I ran towards my bed and jumped under the covers. Eventually, I calmed myself and summoned enough courage to uncover my face. Lying perfectly still in the darkness, I fell asleep in their alien company. When I woke up in the morning, the walls, of course, were bare and nothing remained of their visit but a coiled green insect's body on my pillow.

New York

When I lived in Brooklyn—industrial wasteland of abandoned warehouses, noxious factories, endless pounding trucks, and garish whores—I often wondered whether I had

become so numb from the abuses of living in the city that I was no longer touched by wild things. There was a bulging dump down my street teeming with gulls. I would close my eyes to hear ships throttling in the East River and the gull's raucous calls and picture myself by the ocean. At sunset the sky bloomed a nuclear orange over the leviathan metal bridge, and feral dogs hunted for trash in roving packs like wolves. Walking home from the subway at night down these sinister and deserted streets I felt alert to the presence of unforgiving wildness. These dogs instilled in me a sense of fear, not pity, and I walked with the same care as I had for grizzly in Montana. I saw my first owls and herons in Central Park. I went to the Jamaica Bay Refuge where ducks floated in bulrush swamps and the city glittered, rising out of cattails. Even in a place so consumed by the extravagances of culture the imprint of the wild left its mark.

New Hampshire

Two years ago I moved to rural New Hampshire, leaving behind the buzz and din of cities I had always called home. I now live in a small house, nestled between a cove of white pines at the end of a long dirt road. Out here I interact very little with people, and without their companionship I am tuned into what other life surrounds me. There is no husband to talk with, no children to hold, no TV to distract, no pets to covet—it is a bare existence. City friends ask: "Aren't you lonely, or scared out *there* all by yourself?" I explain that the red oak tree which drops acorns dribbling on the roof, the young maple's striated body and enormous fanning leaves, the towering white pines turning the ground into rusty duff, the chipmunk who lives under my stone steps and leaves middens of

acorn strips in his wake, and the breath of wind which scrapes boughs and rattles windows and pipes all conspire to make me never feel alone. The lack of human company does not leave me bereft of life, but opens me to a wider circle of companionship.

Here, my house is littered with bones, skulls, antlers, feathers, nests and scat. The fire mantle, a long piece of pine sawed in half, is adorned with antlers I have found during my walks and travels. Each piece brings back the image of fallen bones uncovered by spring's first thaw and are clues to the mystery of the life that once held them. Next to the mantle is an enormous Cabeza de Vaca which an old roommate left as a gift. On my bookshelves are nests I have found toppled from trees, some woven with bits of plastic and metal, others made of feathers and straw. Bugs, butterflies, rocks from all of my travels are arranged on the window sills. Upstairs, where I immerse myself in baths, is my place for shells. In my room are more rocks, bones, corn, and wood, with one piece found by a friend in Mexico the shape of a bull.

I do not own clothes, sheets, or towels with the faces of animals stitched on them. No mugs of deer in trophy poses, sunset posters of the Arctic, or panda slippers. Having my house adorned with works of nature is the next best thing to living in a menagerie. It is what I feel the animal or place has given me as a token of our crossing paths. The crafted work of other creatures inspires me and keeps me from forgetting that my house is but another nest for my own bones.

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