

Introduction: The Encounter

Forests are enchanted enough without elves or hobbits. Did you ever see a ruby-throated hummingbird?

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BETWEEN RAINSHOWERS IN Kansas City in the spring of 1931 I was out on my scooter. Around the corner from our house on Kenwood, in the middle of 60th Street I found a box turtle. My grandmother Grigsby, sitting on the porch, said it was a "terrapin." It wouldn't do, she said, to put it in the aquarium with the minnows, perch, little bass, and young pond turtles which my father brought home from fishing. The turtle seemed terribly strong, pushing with its front feet against my fingers, its taut, skinny neck aiming the toothless head toward some destination as secret as the meaning of the yellow lines and dots on its shell.

Three years later, by the time I was eight, we had moved to the Missouri Ozarks. Great-uncle Jack made a hoop from a coat hanger and my mother sewed cheesecloth on it to make a butterfly net. Collecting butterflies combined the pleasure of running with the joy of collecting. Each netted butterfly was killed with a squeeze and then pinned to cardboard. Like box turtles, butterflies too had alphabet-like marks, and I think my feeling about them was mixed up with learning to read. Every capture required a trip out and could be brought inside; each had come from a chance encounter, was a tro-

phy and a mystery, a way into the world and a way of bringing the world into the household.

I next discovered the magic of bird eggs when collecting them was still possible and moral. Their colors gave me at ten the same palpable sensations that crayons had given when I was five. The exquisite markings on the shells, different in each species and varied in each egg, were messages. Like the eggs of the crested flycatcher with their purple scrawls, hidden in a hollow tree in a nest that always contained a cast snakeskin, every new egg was a summons and a wonder. Collecting was a grand Easter egg hunt that lasted all spring. These uncanny found objects could be pondered at odd moments throughout the year as they lay in their glass-lidded box, the blown shells on a sheet of cotton, each labeled in pencil on round, metal-rimmed tags. Each egg evoked a recollection of the moment of discovery in a particular nest or mere cup in gravel, a certain fencerow or tree hole. In one supreme moment, when I was eleven, Professor Rudolf Bennitt, of the University of Missouri, took a look at my egg collection along with dessert while dining with my parents—he was studying the bobwhite quail and my father was an avid hunter—and corrected some of my identifications. Some eggs were mislabeled; others I never did identify before the collection was lost in the years that followed. Even now as I write there seem in these letters to be echoes of those scrawls: tentative meanings that were possibly true or untrue—like this book—relicts, traces of a search with its backtracking and comparing, re-collecting the mystery of the animal figure in human scrawls in a thousand books. Egg collecting is now illegal and unethical—too many collectors and not enough birds. I am still astonished at eggs and the birds who make them. The egg is something writ small, like bones and shells, little puzzles in a bigger mystery.

Many of my other early memories are of birds and other animals—of the aquarium lives, the brown rat which, cornered, bit me, the chipmunk someone gave me, a tiny owl on our porch, and all the frogs and pet crows and stalking with BB guns over the years. Another kindly professor at the University of Arkansas, W. J. Berg, became a pen pal by the time I was twelve on the subject of spiders, as had George Moore, chief naturalist of the Missouri State Parks, on the identity of cave salamanders.

Memories of boyhood collecting somehow inform my theory—a kind of miniature presentment—that the human species emerged enacting, dreaming, and thinking animals and cannot be fully itself without them. Looking back I can see that my work to this point has been a circling round this idea as though I had been imprinted by the movie westerns I saw as a boy with the

Indians circling the wagon train. My first book, *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature*, was like the sweeping “pan” shot with which the scene opens. *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game* was a somewhat rowdy assertion of the epitome of love in the heart of the hunter. That foragers were the first craftsmen of ideas, as animals became terms in a language we still use, was the subject of *Thinking Animals*. In *Nature and Madness* I was fumbling with the concept of ontogeny as the key to our relationships to nature. With *The Sacred Paw* I attempted to flesh out the human relationship to one species as if no area of study were irrelevant. In this book I return to the animals as Others in a world where otherness of all kinds is in danger, and in which otherness is essential to the discovery of the true self.

I am still haunted by ontogeny, a kind of necessary pattern of growth toward maturity in which we acquire respect for that which is unbridgeable between ourselves and the animals. It is an attitude of accepted separateness which I think characterizes both the great naturalists and primal peoples. Among such naturalists—chief influences on my own life—I would include Konrad Lorenz, Frank Darling, Ernest Thompson Seton, George Bird Grinnell, Adolf Portmann, Loren Eiseley, Edward O. Wilson, and Charles Darwin, and among the tribal peoples I would include my own Celtic ancestors. It is their humility to which I am attracted—not civilized “kindness” but rather curiosity, receptive courtesy, gratitude, and respect for the power of animals. The idea of “mercy” toward animals, with its detached overriding of nonhuman life and its assumptions about “lower” and “higher” life-forms, seems to me more dangerous and anemic than the robust, meat-eating, storytelling, primal peoples or the best of modern hunter-naturalists.

After World War II, I went to study wildlife conservation with Bennitt. In his class we used Aldo Leopold’s 1935 text on game management. By the time I left Columbia, Missouri, in the summer of 1949, Leopold was dead and we had all seen his new book, *A Sand County Almanac*, published posthumously. Those three years and that book framed the question that has dogged me ever since.

The Cooperative Wildlife Unit at the university included not only faculty and students but representative biologists from the Missouri Conservation Commission, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Wildlife Management Institute. Everyone I knew there loved animals, and yet they were all in the “management” business of killing them. Leopold wrote about land ethics and in the same book spoke of the joy of seeing the kicking red legs of a shot duck dying in the morning sun. In the forty-five years since

then, none of the people or programs for "saving" animals has seemed to me anywhere near as devoted and committed to the nonhuman world as those academics, mid-level bureaucrats, and their student candidates for jobs in state and federal game departments.

But I did not recognize the question for another twenty years, when I began reading the anthropological literature on hunting and gathering. Here I found the same paradox, only expressed in archaeological and religious terms. The only way I could resolve this contradiction of both loving and killing animals was, on the one hand, to try to understand "native" cosmologies (or their traces in the modern unconscious) in which killing and eating animals was a positive quality and, on the other hand, to seek the flaws in the "humane" movement in all its forms.

* There were many surprises along the way—among them, how important animals are in the *intellectual* lives of "primitive" peoples. I began to wonder whether the human species had similar beginnings to my own, that is, whether human consciousness, intelligence, or ways of perceiving owed their existence to animals in some grand analogy to my personal experience. Admittedly, the analogy of the self and the species is a peculiar restatement of an old biology chestnut, "Ontogeny Repeats Phylogeny," the defunct theory that each child repeats in its development the evolutionary history of the human species. Even so, I suppose that fifty years of my life went more or less unwittingly to probing the idea that my personal relationship to nature was my best source of information on how we became human in a world of nonhuman others over millions of years.

As for the animal protection movement, with its high-sounding terms of "rights" and "ethics," how can I be ecologically related to the living community by means of such abstract connections, by a deliberate distancing and hands-off attitude? It is almost as though spectatorship is to be the philosophy of nature. In the perspective of the enormous history of life and the role of animals in human evolution for a million years, I feel only disconnected by the precept of untouchability, the peculiar sentiment that animals and I should be friends at a tidy remove rather than interacting in each other's physical and psychic domains, used and user. Valuing animals as though they were museum specimens reduces them to camera grist, intellectual ciphers, words, models for woolly toys, and monuments to esthetic detachment, as if wild animals were shrines or works of fine art.

Great naturalists and primal peoples were motivated not by the ideal of untouchability but by a cautious willingness to consume and be consumed, both literally and in a mythic sense. Everyone lives in a mythic world, how-

ever ignorant of it they may be. The most revealing source of information about how people conceive of themselves in relation to the nonhuman world is myth. In studying the perception of animals, I am led again and again back to storytelling and songlines, to narrative and music, which are basic to the mythic tale and its enactment as ceremony. All myths operate on three levels: one deeply personal, concerning an inner, unconscious life; another the social and ecological milieu; and third, the society of spiritual and eternal things in tales of creation. Typically a story we call mythic informs our individual lives with exemplary models, our relationship to others in standards of conduct, and a vision of the invisible and eternal powers that govern existence. Many of the student friends of my undergraduate years, who would spend their lives counting deer or planting habitat for wild turkeys, would not develop much of a personal, social, or religious philosophy, the way their primal counterparts would, and yet they had available a fabulous myth from which to work.

My emphasis on myth does not imply that I hate what is modern or Western. Indeed, I am passionately committed to a scientific form of an old tale of kinship to other life. It is the myth of biological evolution, a wonderful story about how things came to be, in what sense what is here now is still the original, what kinship to the other animals means in terms of sharing energy and form and genetic codes that change in spite of sameness, and how each species is a master of a particular way of being that foreshadows something about ourselves. Because they deal with actual descent, evolutionary tales—whether they are fossil, genetic, biogeographical, or anatomical—speak of kinfolk and ancestors in the larger sense, of the perspective of life in the universe as a continuation of its order-creating character. Evolutionary tales confirm difference in a way that relates us to animals but does not assume that we understand them. Our modern myths of Faustian Historical Man and monotheistic hubris are motivated by fear of death, a compelling avoidance of biological nature, and chosen exile into a fantasy world of man-the-conqueror.

At mid-century the intellectual ferment around the concept of evolution was greater than it had been for seventy-five years. The syncretic work of G. G. Simpson and Ernst Mayr, the ethological pioneering of Konrad Lorenz, the leadership of Julian Huxley, were dazzling. In graduate school at Yale I attended a seminar called "Evolution in the Light of Genetics, Biogeography, and Paleontology." It had the effect on me of a religious epiphany. Evolution does not answer the big questions as to where the world is going or why—myths don't have to explain everything. Evolutionary thinking

gives me relatedness, continuity with the past, common ground with other life, a kind of celebration of diversity. It is much more humble than the eschatology of "world religions" or the arrogance of secular progress or literary humanism. Its signs are around me every day, not as the handiwork of a remote Great Craftsman or a celebrity artist, but in the weather and in eggshells and the lines on a turtle's back. In its broadest sense, evolution extends our kinship to the atoms and to the stars, confirms our continuity with the chemical elements and an extinct sun from which we come, although such things are too remote for much fellow-feeling. My relationship to plants and animals is more vivid than that.

In fact, the celestial big bang or the final illumination predicted from analysis of the subatomic entities, explaining everything, seem more like shields against the inescapable tenuousness of life as fragile as a wren's egg yet complex enough to resist our final control. Theories of a universe, presented by a priesthood of physics, converge with our old escapist religions of the sky, emphasizing the very big and the very small, from subatomic particles to the flux of galaxies, from devils to omniscient saviors, transcendent heavens, and final things, a metaphysics too grand for trees, crested flycatchers, or the middle ground where I live, in the words of W. H. Auden,

where all visibles do have a definite
outline they stick to and are undoubtedly
at rest or in motion, where lovers
recognize each other by their surface,

where to all species except the talkative
have been allotted the niche and diet that
become them. This, whatever micro-
biology may think, is the world we
really live in and that saves our sanity.¹

What saves our sanity occupies landscapes. While animals are my subject, I must give plants their due. Plants play powerful roles in human life—as food, narcotics, fermenters, healers, sedatives, tools, shelters, mood-makers. Our evolutionary continuity with them is profound: we share bacterial ancestors. But our perception of them as presences is limited by their immobility and form, a patience bordering on indifference. They are true beings whose otherness is so profound that it tunes and tempers our instincts for cover and comfort and protected observation. Their "intentions" appear to be at once more general and more subtle than those of animals,

who fill the world as intermediaries between us and plants, signifying not simply in their strangeness but in an uncanny likeness to us wrapped in a difference.

My sense that the marks on bird eggs were an unknown script is widely shared. People everywhere have long believed that animals bear secrets, that our kind once married them, and that they, being both familiar and extraordinary, are a means for charting our lives. Edward O. Wilson calls such feelings for other forms "biophilia," defined as "the innate tendency to affiliate with other living things." But he does not mean husbandry disguised as kindness or that the Others are dependent, lesser beings than ourselves. The modern marginalizing of wild animals is associated with their physical absence and our shifted attention, as though we had lost both the opportunity and the ability to see them. Deep in my heart is Ben, a boyhood friend who could hunt the cottontail rabbit with rocks because he could see it hunched in its grassy form. He would point toward the earth ten feet away, but I saw only the grass while Ben saw with an innocent and archaic vision.² In him the synapses connecting desire, perception, and significance had never been broken by glancing—by what Christopher Fry once called attaching "visual labels" to things, making them invisible.³

Ben's capacity to see was part of a rural childhood, and in a longer sense with foraging, a basic human ecology. He was living out the myth (which is what they are for) that nurtures the capacity to see. From color vision in ancestral primates to our forebears' terrestrial audacity in savannas, to the most abstruse ideas, the hunt made us human. That quest is mainly attention to slight cues, a roving look punctuated by focused intensity. My grandsons, Philip and Brandon, hunt elk with their father in Wyoming. When they visited Yellowstone National Park one fall the "wild" elk were easily visible, great supernormal signals, living black holes. Unlike the children of tourists, who were bored after ten minutes with animals who grazed quietly or lay in the sun, the boys were ecstatic, almost hypnotized, for nearly an hour, as though the elk were an epiphany. They were experiencing an ancient, vigilant vocation, graced by repose, of which only traces remain in the usual brief stare at zoo animals, our scrutiny of pets, and hunger for "nature" on our television screens.

The latent meaning of the itinerant box turtle, the hunched rabbit, and the charmed elk is somewhat like a piece of music to the listener, or a poem in its cadenced voice. Of the elk the watcher asks, as John Ciardi once asked, "How does a poem mean?" Another poet, Ted Hughes, answers in animal terms: "The special kind of excitement, the slightly mesmerized and quite

involuntary concentration with which you make out the stirrings of a new poem in your mind, then the outline, the mass and color and clean final form of it, the unique living reality of it in the midst of the general lifelessness, all that is too familiar to mistake. This is hunting and the poem is a new species of creature, a new specimen of the life outside your own."⁴

Perhaps this is why poetry finds animals irresistible. The meaning of animals is implicit in what they do: eat, run, leap, crawl, display, call, fly, mate, fight, sing, swim, hide, slither, climb, and die. One or another animal does each of these things with more finesse and more expertise than people. Their keenness is reflected in the shapes of their bodies and the traces they leave. Animate signs and signatures move through our dreams and imagination, evoke our feelings, portray "us" in a kind of allegory. The signature of the animal is somehow more apt than the colossal hieroglyphic of the rocks, the silent autograph of the plants, or the calligram of the landscape itself. Like amusing, wise, terrible, curved mirrors, animals prefigure human society. The lion, for example, shares a primordial ecology with humankind, a long history of symbolic power linked to our own feelings "in the blood." Likewise, the bird is spirit and the snake is the earth of our most elemental self, our mundane world, and our imagination. Sometimes, as cultures change, these figures gain in complexity, as the lion melts into the sphinx, the bird becomes the angel, or the snake coalesces into the dragon. Or they can lose their immediacy, weakened by cultural decay, distanced from their origins by the loss of tradition, becoming shadows the way the sphinx dies into an architectural decoration on the library steps, the angel becomes the pageboy between a manlike god and chosen humans, and the dragon turns into a cartoon. But even as their images become obsolete, others emerge. More than monuments to human imagination, the whole panoply of their mythic, fantastic forms is based on a thousand millennia of watching and studying real, wild animals. This creative perception of animals is in us still, a perennial satisfaction and pleasure, one of the oldest human vocations, building on the complexity of natural history, limitless not only in gathered facts but the feeling that one is part of a gathering, a new understanding, a deepened participation. Children respond spontaneously to the details of nature and the names and movements of animals because animals were (and are) the path into categorical thought and, eventually, the terms of a philosophy or a cosmology.

In this book I have addressed these changes in consciousness. I have tried to write about childhood in this connection to nature as critical to human history. But I am leery of my own enthusiasm for writing. Is our relationship

to animals essentially a branch of nature writing? Our bookstores and libraries are fat with accounts of the natural world, yet nature writing is flawed. The flattery of the printed word is as pushy as a German shepherd near a coffee table of sandwiches. It makes nature a subject matter and becomes a secret enemy of the natural world—from the death of trees for paper to its linear form, its misplaced concreteness, and the isolation of the writer. "Nature" is easily framed within the modern temper of alienation, a collusion with dispassionate apartness, the surreal estrangement of plants and animals as art. For example, the perfect nature writer is Henry Thoreau. When F. B. White called *Walden* "youth's best companion" he could only have meant an exceedingly perspicacious youth, perhaps as he himself was. For me Henry Thoreau is as tedious today as he was for many a century ago.⁵ He is a maker of aphorisms, the favorite of professors in college English classes and the educated in a human-made world where nature, as art, is of value mainly as an embellishment. Nature writing nourishes the view of nature as esthetic abstraction—something like the sphinx on the library steps, the denizens of a bestiary whose charming irrelevance teases us out of the burdens of urban life and its stewpot of political and social drama where intellectuals have their true home. Nature writing breeds in the writer the greed for literary reputation and captivates its readers with a spurious substitute for experience in the natural world.

But that is an aside. Our species and our best observers emerged in watching the Others, participating in their world by eating and being eaten by them, suffering them as parasites, wearing their feathers and skins, making tools of their bones and antlers, and communicating their significance by dancing, sculpting, performing, imaging, narrating, and thinking them. Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* was not simply a warning against widespread pesticide use but against the deafened self, against emptiness. We must understand what to make of our encounter with the animals. Because as we ourselves prosper in unseemly numbers they vanish, and in the end our prosperity may amount to nothing without them. If art—writing—is to be a mere substitute, seeking to replace animals with an alternative reality, then let us seek instead an antiwriting against the seductive illusions of the "beauty" of nature. The account in this essay of a box turtle on a wet street in Kansas City in 1931 strives to transcend the event itself. Primal peoples know what we have forgotten: art can never replace, certainly not explain, that adventure among the Others which remains central to our lives, though it is the principal means of evoking it.

Cosmologically speaking, you pay your life and take your choice. My

experience tells me that neither the creationists nor the postmodern critics are right, one thinking that the world was made for us and the other that it is made by us. A better vision of the animals is that we are one among them. The only drama in town, to paraphrase G. E. Hutchinson, is the evolutionary play on the ecological stage; what holds the story together is the transformation of energy and substance. Somehow we must find a way into these exchanges in full awareness and discover how to cherish the world of life on its own terms. Thus do I return to the theme of love and death, the possibility that killing and eating could be the ultimate act of respect.

In keeping with the evolutionary myth as the core of my own cosmology, I have started this book with a section on assimilation in Part I, "The Animal Fare," in the sense that "taking the world into ourselves" shapes us, as it does all beings. The thought which emerges from that encounter is the subject of Part II, "Cognition." It follows that the words and concepts for the other animals makes possible the self-consciousness I discuss in Part III as "Identity." After incorporation, transformation becomes the essence of our being and my subject. "Change," Part IV, is the music of life, and animals represent and symbolize this subtle truth. Proceeding from the roles of animals in human biology and social life in the early sections, I have tried in Part V, "The Cosmos," to indicate by some selected examples from history how necessary the animal figure has been to our ideas of ultimate meaning. And in the last section, "Counterplayers," I have again chosen themes that illustrate the unlimited flow of nonhuman lives through the drama that being human means.

The nineteenth-century art of Jean Grandville, which I have selected to illuminate these chapters, is typically perceived as "bizarre" in modern eyes. Grandville does not fit easily into the conventions of our time. If our relationship to animals as true counterplayers is to break out of the banal stereotypes of "kindness" on the one hand and that of animals as mere automatons on the other, then radical ways of revisioning, at once unromantic and free of the old logic of hierarchy, are necessary. From time to time Grandville's cartoons are reproduced in literary reviews as satirical conversation pieces. But I see in them a persistent challenge to the old boundaries that have defined human and beast, the humor of our deflated pride, and insistence on an underlying continuity that demands redefinition of ourselves in the context of a larger animal world rather than as outsiders to it.

PART I

The Animal Fare

Being human has always meant perceiving ourselves in a circle of animals. The crucial event in this encounter has been ingestion. We have attended passionately to this consuming force until the idea of assimilation has permeated the nature of experience itself. To begin at the beginning is not rudimentary. It is the essence of all that follows.



Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. W. H. Auden, "Ode to Terminus," *New York Review*, July 11, 1968.
2. The death of Ben Rook at eighteen in World War II deprived us of a bit of that anachronism we need now, for he combined the paradox of the hunter and a tenderness far beyond that of the modern self-appointed animal protectors.
3. Christopher Fry, *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920).
4. Ted Hughes, "Poetry in the Schools," *American Poetry Review*, September/October 1977.
5. E. B. White, "Walden 1954," *Yale Review*, Autumn 1954. See also Robert Erwin, "The Village Apollo," in *The Great Language Panic* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990).

1. THE ECOLOGICAL DOORWAY TO SYMBOLIC THOUGHT

1. Harry Jerison, *The Evolution of the Brain and Intelligence* (New York: Academic Press, 1993).
2. Jay Boyd Best, "The Evolution and Organization of Sentient Biological Behavior Systems," in Allen D. Breck, ed., *History and Natural Philosophy* (New York: Plenum, 1972).
3. Polly Schaafsma, "Supper or Symbol: Roadrunner Tracks in Southwestern Art and Ritual," in Howard Morphy, ed., *Animals into Art* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).
4. Whitney Davis, "Origins of Image Making," *Current Anthropology* 27 (1986):193-202.
5. Alexander Marshack, "Comments: Whitney Davis, 'Origins of Image Making,'" *Current Anthropology* 27 (1986):205-206.
6. David Guss, *The Language of the Birds* (San Francisco: North Point, 1985).

2. THE SWALLOW

1. Valerius Geist, "Did Large Predators Keep Humans Out of North America?" in Janet Clutton-Brock, ed., *The Walking Larder* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).
2. Clifford J. Jolly, "The Seed-Eaters: A New Model of Hominid Differentiation Based on a Baboon Analogy," *Man* 5(1) (1970).