

CHAPTER TWO/The Animals Know

Cervidae

I was sitting in a chair in the garden, perhaps a year after our home was built. The young buck that walked through the garden stopped and stood briefly before ambling past on its way to another yard. I am certain that he knew I was there, watching him, though he neither looked my way nor changed his path or pace.

I had planted, watered, weeded and played in my garden that morning, and in the early afternoon while my children built creations in the woods on the other side of the house, had retreated to this quiet, shady corner to read, to draw, to rest.

Time has a way of returning to us, unbidden, and this day – the moment of the deer – was one such point.

I could not with complete certainty be sure which season it was, only that it was dry and sunny, which perhaps indicates summer. I could not with completely certainty be sure which year, though perhaps I noted it in a long-forgotten journal. Only that the garden was new, and that I was younger than I am now.

My life is filled with moments of wonder. Bright points that stand out in memory, that return again and again. In a movie, or a novel, perhaps those bright points could be called foreshadowing, an intentional attempt by an author to prepare the audience for what comes next. But in real life, the recurrence of theme or event is rare, and only rarely recognized at the time. And its purpose, if there is a purpose, varies, inscrutable, tantalizing...

Let me state outright that I am not vegetarian. Though for a short time our family ate only plant-derived products, finances and availability made the inclusion of animal-based foods important.

I am also not a hunter, nor have my “farming” habits led me to raise or slaughter the animals we consume directly. We have, however, met and admired the animals we intend to consume when we have had occasion to do so, and we take care to not waste or squander the lives of other creatures.

Thus, the deer are safe in my yard.

They seem to know this, though I grumble and joke about venison being on the plate at the next meal each time I see a rose or tree has been “pruned” without permission.

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Indeed, much of the time I do not begrudge them foraging – they are hungry, and their natural food sources in this time of climate instability are uncertain, coming on at the wrong times of the year (usually late). If I have a plant that truly must not be trimmed I cage it, or spray it with a chili pepper and rotten egg spray of my own devising.

Daily in the growing season, the eating season, the deer patrol the yard, out of reach of the hunter. They count and number the edible things.

Daily, in the eating season, the growing season, I hear them moving in the shadows at night, feel them slipping past me. They recline and rest among the wildflowers.

Their wisdom is in moving on swiftly during the night, nibbling but not destroying.

And so, every so often a deer will come to visit me.

I will see it in the orchard or the yard, watching me as I walk or work or sit. It will pause, observe and then wander off.

Each one reminds me of that young buck so long ago – they are probably his descendants, the few who manage to hang on and return time and again.

Watchful guardians, the deer defy boundaries, leaping over fences, even braving the narrow passage through garden gates to reach tender, tasty, tantalizing treats. They sample, even occasionally make a meal, and then bed down in the tall, unmowed meadow that is the area under and near the orchard trees.

Year-round, we find evidence they have passed through – a pile of scat here, a slender footprint there.

Year-round, we also find apparent predator sign as well. Next to, but clearly more recent than, the deer sign. And we don't find the deer, except when they choose to be found.

These forest-dwellers, margin-livers, keepers of secrets pass by and move on.

They bring a message. The lesson is to be quiet, to be watchful, to wait. Take what you need, and move on.

Do not linger over the past, do not fret about the future.

Here. Now. This moment.

I am here. You are here.

We are.

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Corvidae

Many, many long years ago, there was an aviary in a park near my apartment. Though generally reserved for a few exotic birds on occasion a local bird that needed recovery time was placed there until ready to take flight.

I visited the aviary often on long walks, and it was there I found my voice.

Like the deer, the event returns, the distant relations of the connection continue to remind me, to bring me around, to pull me back in time and learn again.

A crow, bright-eyed and frightened huddled in a corner of the aviary. Other people were nearby, humans, oohing and aahing over pigeons and white doves.

Carefully, watchfully I moved closer to the edge where the crow sat. I watched it. It watched me.

Carefully, I placed my hand on the cage, palm up.

And then, I spoke to the crow.

In the low guttural dialect I had heard crows using as they were nesting, I made an attempt to reassure it.

And the crow edged forward.

For several minutes, we spoke back and forth. It was afraid. It wanted to fly. It wanted to be home. It was safe. It would fly soon. It would go home when it was strong.

I did not know when it would go home, only that it would, when the time was right.

And then we stopped communicating. The words of the crow's family left me.

It looked at me, and I looked at it. I left, intending to go back the next day. I do not know why I didn't, only that the next time I went to the aviary the crow was gone.

For many decades, there have been crows in my life. Scolding, playing, fighting, stealing, teasing, flying.

Crows are feathered ambassadors that bring news of far-away events: a shift in the weather upstream, or a cache of food in the woods, or the close of the day.

Singly, in pairs, in caucuses, they move about and share their observations. They live alongside, but never with humans. Independent and curious, defiant and

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dignified. Social in their own way, they have a loosely structured community that allows individuals to come and go as they please.

They have a reasoning all their own, different from humans, different from other animals, different from other birds.

Observe, figure out, and then move. Use the light and the shadow to your advantage. Accept gifts but promise nothing. Enjoy this moment, and be ready for the next.

Anura

We have frogs.

Not the brash, middle-of-the-path frogs of my childhood in another place, but the bright, hidden green frogs of the coastal lowlands. They are swift, loud, small, long-legged and covert.

In the middle of the night they sing, and on gray, misty days they call.

They are small, these frogs. They do not hunt far from the margins of water.

They do not stray far from the shelter of logs and leaf mould.

A wavering creak, a whispered chirrup, an explosion of song, then silence.

I saw a wee young frog once, when I was working barefoot in my flower patch, near the parched, fishless plastic puddle between the lilacs. Moving the pots and ornamental pieces back and forth, I thought a piece of dirt had fallen.

But dirt isn't bright green, the bright green of spring, of new leaves.

Soil does not, in the traditional sense, respire, its sides moving in and out.

Earth does not, generally, leap swiftly away as a startled hand reaches down to brush it aside.

No bigger than a quarter, the tadpole tail only recently reabsorbed, it landed on a stem, jumped to a leaf, and disappeared among the geraniums.

Its kin are more skilled at secrecy, it will learn.

A hint only, the frog reveals, ready to leap. Safety first, joy in the sunlight, contentment in the mist. Seeking companionship, but cautiously.

Yes, I am here. Where are you?

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Trochilidae

They are small, these gentle, fierce warriors.

From the safety of a branch inside a tree they dart out and defend the nest.

A nest no bigger than a thimble on the inside, lined with thistle fluff, or dandelion fluff, or the most ephemeral of feathers.

Eggs like pearls.

Ferraris of the sky, burning rocket fuel to zip back and forth. Pure energy.

Elegant design and sleek, a paint job to make enthusiasts drool.

When I am sitting by my window in the winter, sometimes a curious face appears at my shoulder, glancing back and forth, trying to locate someone who might have a flower – or sugar water. They know that sometimes I hang feeders in the smaller trees and shrubs near the house.

In the spring and early summer they dive-bomb inadvertently as they delight in the sun, and show off their best moves to an unseen lover.

In the summer and fall they joust over the best blooms, protecting the source.

Randomly, they launch themselves at windows. Stunned, they sit on the ground, easy prey.

And then, I cup them in my hands, keeping them warm and safe, whispering to them until they open their eyes.

They look around, blink, and when they are ready they fling their tiny bodies into the air and pirouette, back where they belong.

They live fast, brilliant lives.

Sparkle, flash. Chirrup, whirl.

Confuse them with color, don't hide unless you need to, protect what is yours, be alive!

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Canidae

I have lived most of my life with dogs.

A beagle, a Chesapeake Bay retriever, a mutt or two, a German Shepherd.

In the distance, I have watched coyote and fox as they hunt or range in their territories, but never closely enough to be introduced.

But closer in, with the house-hound, I know them well.

I know what the eyes are saying, what pacing in a certain way indicates, whether things hurt when they lie down.

I understand a whine, a bark, a whimper.

I know how to run.

I know how to play.

I know how to throw a ball, and when to retrieve it.

I am a member of the pack, the all-wise Alpha who brings food.

I command obedience, I dispense comfort.

I make a safe den.

I receive love.

And after all, isn't that enough?

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Hominidae

We are the overlords.

We move freely, roam far from our origins, and make homes in inhospitable places.

We possess, we do not request.

Mountains kneel before our mighty deeds, oceans part to reveal their secrets. The depths of the earth yield tributes to our greatness.

We, the naked apes.

We, the inventors and communicators.

We, the rugged individuals who pretend to independence.

After all, what use is communication in isolation?

Looking around, where are the barriers? Where are the boundaries that define us?

We cluster together in cities, huddled in hand-built caves that shelter us from the fury of storms. Or that don't.

When our constructions fall before Nature and Time, we are bereft. Where now, our superiority?

The land moves without us. The waves curl over our borders. The wind shrieks as it dashes among us. The skies descend and overwhelm our spirits.

Yet we remain.

Aloof, apart, alone.

Defying the boundaries of our unarmored, unarmed bodies we craft our security with what we find. We create and destroy. We possess and lose, gain and fall back.

Do we notice what lies beyond our eyes?

Are we listening to the others, those whose knowledge is deep and abiding?

In another time, ancient and wise, we learned from other than ourselves. Life was the principal, Nature the teacher, Time the counselor.

Singly, in pairs and in groups we studied mysteries great and small, not ranking them by importance but valuing each lesson.

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Valuing not our selves, but Earth and the mysteries that surrounded us.

At what point did one of us look into the sky and decide it could be possessed?

At what point did one of us look around and decide the land was an object, to be traded and sold?

At what moment did one of us look at another and decide we could possess any part of the person – or the person’s work?

At what point did we cease to cherish nothing more than ourselves?

At what point did we stop hearing, stop seeing, stop feeling?

Locked up in boxes, shielded from sun, protected from rain, supported against gravity, we stare out at an alien landscape. We call out to the emptiness, and receive no answer.

We do not belong any more.

We do not belong.

We do not understand.

We are afraid.

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