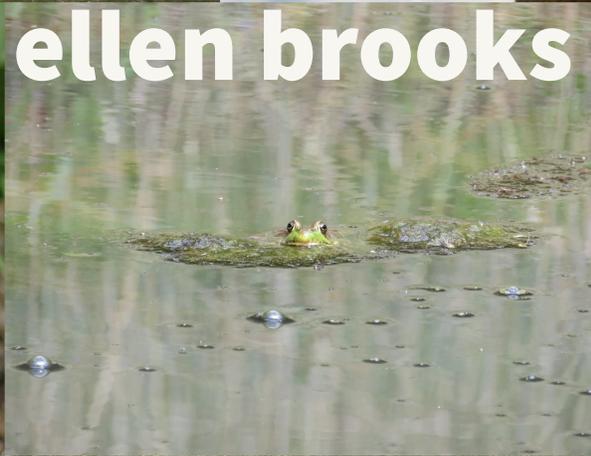




animal communities

by robin ellen brooks



Part I

Myself

Inside me is an animal. My outside is an animal, too. My animal has, by some estimations, transcended animalism. Or so I'm led to believe. But I know my animal. She's still in here, lapping up cream and waiting for the moments I unchain her.

Some divine thing keeps my animal contained, most of the time. My animal that is me loves to eat. She loves to run and chase a ball. She likes the feel of fur and the sound of the wind. She cuddles. She coos.

Inner animal me doesn't like the indoors, not for long stretches. She doesn't like the vacuum or the smells in her apartment building. She doesn't like startling noises or planes flying low overhead. Give her a swim in a clear pool or a walk on damp earth. That she'll appreciate.

My inner animal me is surprising, even to my container, my intellectual me. She lashes out. She has road rage against other road ragers, lions fighting over an already clean carcass. She inflicts injuries with her mouth, words flicking out as venom. She thinks mean thoughts. She dwells on them, the thoughts running through her mind like a constant, wearing rain.

She wants to think calm thoughts, mossy green thoughts, cool and soothing thoughts. Thoughts she could share with others as a balm in a dust storm. Sometimes what she shares becalms. Sometimes what she shares inflames.

Anim-me knows nothing of oil-slicked surfaces; anim-me would eat plastic food films if she could. She doesn't know better. Only my container keeps anim-me from the poison discardings, the feckless tossings of our carnal enemies. Anim-me can't conceive of these aggressions.

Animal-me is a creature wise and strong, athletic and savvy. She knows her own mind, the animal one, despite the constant corrections of the container. Animal-me doesn't care about containers. Or manners, rules, etiquette, consequences, or failures.

Animal-me only knows myself and my surroundings and the rest of my pack, and that's all she cares about. Perhaps sometimes the container is good. But oftentimes what's contained might well be suited to be turned loose, to instigate change, to investigate, to howl at the cruel moon.

Animal-me likes to know things, to make discoveries, to go past where the lines are drawn and explore the out-of-bounds. Animal-me I admire. Animal-me I respect. Animal-me saunters down the trail knowledgeable, knowing, content to be
just animal-me.

Part II

The others

If you're quiet and patient,
 and if you go in the places
 where other people don't go,
 and if you go with others who know
 not to talk on all the time,
 and if you're observant,
 and if you're respectful,
 and if you walk peacefully,
 and you don't make sudden moves,
 sometimes you will bear witness
 to the lives of animals.

*

Twenty-three years ago. From a bluff I count exactly 100 alabaster swans bobbing in a cove at Ludington State Park in Michigan. Something startles them on the north end, and like a fluffed bedsheet they rise up in a wave and fly away south, every single one of them. (1 - 7, †)

Eight baby raccoons walking down the middle of a path at Presque Isle State Park in a cluster. They crawl right up to my feet and gather around me, bumbling over my tennis shoes. I am afraid their mother will come and attack me for being so near them, but they move on eventually, and so do I. 500 yards up the path I meet their mother. She scurries down the middle as well, but she doesn't acknowledge me; doesn't even notice me. She's searching for them, but they are not lost.

A red fox in a frosted field pouncing at something in the snow-covered grass. It pops up as if suspended, all feet off the ground, then pounces again. Did it find what it was looking for? It was all play under the crystal sky.

A profusion of dragonflies flitting over lily pads at Bloedel Reserve, iridescent wings shimmering in the supercharged sun. I would learn later that dragonflies eat one another.

The underside of a frog, its heart beating through its translucent skin in the moonlight, as it clings to my childhood bedroom window. How it climbed the two stories, and where it was going, I couldn't say.

The curious least weasel peering up at me from within a woodpile, so cute, so inquiring, so determined to return to the sidewalk of our cabin to claim the tiny, perfect baby rabbit it had just killed.

An albino deer, resting in a clearing, knees tucked beneath its pale torso. I observe it. It observes me. I hike onward, both of us undisturbed.

Three pods of orca whales traveling north as we in our whale watching boat spend hours trying to catch up with them, and then, just as the captain announced “we’ve got to go home” and miss them entirely, in a God moment all three pods turn around and swim toward us. Dozens of whales. “It’s whale soup,” the guide cries. One of them dives underneath our boat and comes up on the other side spouting it’s fish-smelly blow, a mist across my face, disgusting, extraordinary.

A stunned bumblebee on the sidewalk as I walk home from the bus. I give it an Uber on a leaf to my front doorstep; offer it sugar water on a cracked plate. After a time, away it flies.

Puffins drifting offshore of Tofino, BC, their orange beaks bright spots of color in the black, ever-undulating ocean.

A mother brown bear and three cubs crossing Paradise Road in the ravine, my own mother driving, my and my two siblings’ hearts beating, pressed against the seat belts as she slows to let them pass.

In the Hoh Rainforest, a diminutive emerald green snake sleeping on the exact same shade of emerald green-colored moss. A friend extends a finger to prod it; I imagine the snake is as relieved as I am when she doesn’t.

As we stepped from the vehicle, a sound unlike any other I’ve heard. A thousand - no, a hundred-thousand - no, a million? forest tent caterpillars chewing, chewing, relentlessly chewing through the Northern Michigan vegetation, the light falling through the foliage in a strangely cast shadow, the leaves no match for their small, insatiable mouths, the trees besieged with the beasts, so full even the branches couldn’t hold them, and they fell to the ground, still chewing.

A baby moose on the two-lane mountain highway as I travel from Moscow, Idaho, to Kamloops, British Columbia, to meet my future sister-in-law. I barely stop my Ford Escort for it, pray no one rear-ends me into the canyon beyond. The moose is still awkward on its legs; they move marionette-like across the pavement. It’s bigger than I could’ve imagined, unbelievably just feet in front of my hot hood, and yet I know it’s a baby. I don’t see its mother.

As viewed from a raft while traversing white water rapids, innumerable mayflies flutter over the rushing water of the middle fork of the Salmon River, each wing a miraculous sparkle in the crisp June sunshine.

Fireflies dancing through the darkness along the shore of Lake Superior. Above, the stars twinkle, improbably nearly the same size. Every fly goes dark after the dog I’m walking farts. I don’t blame them.

Twenty painted turtles sunning themselves on the shore of Lake Washington. Some take a dip at the sound of our paddles; others, sun-dumb, stay.

A red-tailed hawk plucking a songbird from a feeder, still swinging. From the treetop, delicate white feathers drift slowly earthward.

A single gray whale, bubble fishing along the shore of Clover Pass near Ketchikan, AK, as we view from a tandem kayak. My paddling partner, terrified of tipping, won't paddle closer, so we watch from a distance as the boats in the marina lift a couple of feet in the air and crash down, straining their rope tethers and sending shocks through the ocean waves, as the whale occasionally sprays in between mouthfuls.

Skittering across the rocks next to a river in Twisp, Washington, a six-inch lizard camouflaged in the blue and turquoise-flowered pattern of my bathing suit, because it had been resting on me as I laid in the sun. Was it more startled, or was I?

A family of four otters playing in a pond, mother, father, two babies, all tumbling over one another in the center, the placid water making concentric, overlapping circles with each move. They look so happy. We watch them, and watch them, and watch them some more.

Notes

- (1) "One day, the fisheries scientist Daniel Pauly looked around at his contemporaries, and noticed something curious. Despite an objectively recorded long-term decline in certain fish populations, each generation of scientists seemed to be accepting the lower abundance and diversity they studied as their "baseline". They did this despite stories that prior generations had experienced and observed ocean life quite differently. For example, Pauly recalled how the grandfather of a colleague had once expressed annoyance at how, in the 1920s, bluefin tuna would regularly get tangled in his nets in the North Sea – a region where the species is now largely absent.

What this blindspot meant, Pauly argued in a short-but-influential paper, was that the scientists were failing to account fully for the slow creep of disappearing species, and each generation accepted the depleted ocean biodiversity they inherited as normal. He dubbed the effect "shifting baseline syndrome."

Since then, the shifting baseline effect has been observed far more widely than the fisheries community – it takes place in any realm of society where a baseline creeps imperceptibly over generations." Fisher, Richard. "Generational amnesia: The memory loss that harms the planet," BBC Future.

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20210623-generational-amnesia-the-memory-loss-that-harms-the-planet>

- (2) "Extinction is hard to see. We may not realize how much of the natural world has been lost because the "baseline" shifts with every generation. Past generations would regard what we see as natural today as terribly damaged, and what we see as damaged today,

our children will view as natural.” Cho, Renee. “Why Endangered Species Matter,” Columbia Climate School.

<https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2019/03/26/endangered-species-matter/>

- (3) Vaughan, Adam. “Young people can't remember how much more wildlife there used to be,” New Scientist.
<https://www.newscientist.com/article/2226898-young-people-cant-remember-how-much-more-wildlife-there-used-to-be/>
- (4) “Why do so many people not seem to care about what’s happening to nature? Part of the problem with our relationship to nature is that people don’t see things that change slowly. If you walked outside one day and all the trees were gone, you’d notice. But if Norway maple trees start infiltrating and crowding out native species, you might not notice that for decades.” Ferguson, Laura. “The Extinction Crisis,” Tufts Now.
<https://now.tufts.edu/articles/extinction-crisis>
- (5) Says Robert Watson, professor of environmental sciences at the University of East Anglia: “We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide.” Chow, Denise. “1 million species under threat of extinction because of humans, biodiversity report finds,” NBC News.
<https://www.nbcnews.com/mach/science/1-million-species-under-threat-extinction-because-humans-report-finds-ncna1002046>
- (6) “Humans have directly altered at least 70% of Earth's land, mainly for growing plants and keeping animals. These activities necessitate deforestation, the degradation of land, loss of biodiversity and pollution, and they have the biggest impacts on land and freshwater ecosystems.” Begum, Tammana. “Humans Are Causing Life on Earth to Vanish,” The Natural History Museum.
<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2019/december/humans-are-causing-life-on-earth-to-vanish.html>
- (7) “‘Without biodiversity, there is no future for humanity,’ says Prof David Macdonald, at Oxford University.” Carrington, Damian. “What is biodiversity and why does it matter to us?” The Guardian.
<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/12/what-is-biodiversity-and-why-does-it-matter-to-us>

† I have not seen 100 swans together since.