Beauty and Brutality

by Theodore Dalrymple (July 2025)

When Worlds Collide (Patricia Seaton Homonylo, 2024)

I mistrust environmentalists, who seem so often to hate humans more than they love nature. Hatred is, of course, always the most powerful political emotion; but in addition to hating humans, they seem not to care very much about the visual or aesthetic qualities of the environment. They—or some of them—would happily cover the earth in solar panels, and a wind turbine in a place of outstanding beauty seems to bring joy to their hearts. In this, oddly enough, they mirror the early Soviet inconography of progress, in which black smoking chimneys (especially in the distance) seemed to symbolise for them Man's triumph over Nature, which they regarded almost as a malign force hell-bent, like Capitalism, on keeping Man poor

and wretched. Nature was for them an enemy to be wrestled or beaten into submission.

The opposite feeling, that Nature is utterly benign and therefore Man should just accept what she (Nature is always she) dishes out to him, is similarly foolish. This view is satirised on the website of the *Save the Guinea Worm Foundation*. As the website puts it:

> *The Save the Guinea Worm Foundation was founded to speak out where the environmental movement has remained silent, and stop the United Nations and the rest of its international Cartel from destroying the world's most endangered species forever.*

The Guinea worm, for non-medical readers, is a human parasite, *Dracunculus medinensis*, responsible for the disease, dracunculiasis. Its larvae enter the human body when water infected with an intermediate host, a tiny water flea, is drunk by a human. The flea is digested but the worm larvae survive. Once a female is fertilised, a mature female worm migrates, usually to the leg of the unfortunate person, and then leaves the human body via a blister. The worm, as it slowly leaves the human body, releases hundreds of thousands of larvae, often in a water source (it is natural for the infected person to seek relief by bathing his foot in water), where they are ingested by the water flea and the whole cycle starts again.

There is no medical treatment known for this disease. The method of removing the worm, which can be a yard long, is to wind it gently round a stick and wind it out a few centimetres a day, being very careful not to break it, so then a very nasty inflammatory reaction can be set up and the wound may even become a site of entry for tetanus. The patient is

usually debilitated while the worm is emerging or being removed.

However, knowledge of the parasite's life cycle has enabled preventive measures to be taken that have all but eradicated the disease, even though it was present mainly in the very poorest of African countries. The number of cases reported annually has declined from about 3 million forty years ago, to a mere 15 last year, an unsung triumph of public health. *Dracunculus medinensis* is on the verge of extinction: hence the satirical website.

Nature is not always benign any more than it is always malign: but it is not here my intention to enter into questions of theodicy, justifying the ways of God to Man (or the other way round).

But to return to environmentalists. You don't have to be Greta Thunberg to be alarmed at the degradation of a lot of the world's surface by the activities of Man. In my own country, Britain, which was never one of the world's richest places in flora and fauna, though its contributions to zoology and natural history have been great, wild species that were once common have become rare or even locally extinct.

It London gardens, for example, the song and mistle thrush used to be common. I haven't seen one anywhere for years. Starling which would once almost darken the evening sky, so great were their numbers, have also become, if not rare exactly, very much less numerous. There were even house martins and swifts in the suburbs of London, but no longer. Even in rural areas, cuckoos are seldom heard.

What of it, you might ask? I am essentially an urban creature, even if I now prefer small towns to vast conglomerations. Would I sleep any the less soundly, eat with any the less appetite, if the starling went truly extinct? The answer is, of course, No. I would continue my avocations as before. After

all, I have lived up till now perfectly satisfactorily, or as satisfactorily as I could have hoped, for many years while the numbers of starlings declined precipitously. For the great majority of that time, I have not even thought of starlings or their demographic problems. But to argue that nothing is important that fails to make you lose sleep or put you off your food is philistine in the extreme, and the argument is destructive of civilization itself when applied to cultural loss or decay.

Deadly Bite (Ian Ford, 2024)

Besides, in the long term it is probably not sound even from a narrowly utilitarian perspective. Intense, if sometimes fleeting, pleasures are denied by the disappearance of wildlife, but the reasons for that disappearance are of sinister augury. For example, the virtual disappearance of cuckoos from much of England is the result of the loss of the birds whose nests they parasitise, and that loss in turn is the consequence of the disappearance of the environment in which those birds nest, and in particular of the insects on which they feed. The loss of insect life = bees and other pollinators, the scavengers that digest leaf mould—is potentially very harmful. Bees are in severe decline; and it is a long time since drivers have had to clean insects from the windows of their cars, as they used to have to do.

As connection with wildlife is lost, so does fascination with it increase, as if by nostalgia for what we have lost. One manifestation of this is the magnificent annual Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition, run by the Natural History Museum in London. Last year, there were 57,000 entries from around the world; the organizers waive the entry fee for photographers from poor countries. This, surely, is foreign aid in a good cause (though I could not help but wonder whether, if competitors had cameras capable of taking superb photographs, they could be too poor to pay an entry fee).

Every year, the museum publishers a book of the winning entries in several categories. The photographs are superb and are not just beautiful but often cause for reflection, worth of return again and again. One admires not only the subjects of the photographs, but the patience, dedication and skill of the photographers. Sometimes, no doubt, they are just lucky in capturing an astonishing scene, but—as Pasteur said—luck favours the mind prepared. Ian Ford, for example, might have been fortunate to witness and photograph a jaguar on the banks of a river at the confluence of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay, biting and crushing the skull of a large crocodilian, a yacaré caiman, but he had to be in the right place at the right time, and ready and prepared.

The caiman in the photograph is sideways on and its jaw is wide open, as if in a scream of protest, pain and outrage. Its formidable teeth are perfectly useless in this situation (the caiman, though it can grow to 9 feet in length, rarely attacks humans). Even though a caiman has only a reptilian brain, we cannot, on seeing this photograph, help but endow the creature with human emotions. I suspect that we are hard-wired to do so, such that initial anthropomorphism is not a choice for us, but has to be subdued by conscious thought and reflection.

The jaguar in the picture is face-on to the camera, at which it stares with a kind of malign, paranoid concentration with its amber eyes, while biting the caiman. So certain does it

appear to be of its victory over the caiman that it does not have even to look at it, but can issue a warning to those observing it not to interfere or try to take its prey from it.

All this goes through our mind almost instantaneously, the moment we look at the photograph: it takes a little while to put it into words.

Every photograph in the book tells, or at least suggests, a story. A Dutch photographer, Theo Bosboom, took a picture of mussels on the rocky Portuguese shore of Praia da Ursai. The composition is of great beauty, but more strangely, the mussels, that line the shore with the tide out seem also to have a human quality, as if they are a crowd on the way to somewhere. I cannot help but think of *The Walrus and the Carpenter*:

> …O Oysters, come and walk with us!’
> The Walrus did beseech.
> A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,
> Along the briny beach:
> We cannot do with more than four,
> To give a hand to each.’
>
> The eldest Oyster looked at him,
> But never a word he said:
> The eldest Oyster winked his eye,
> And shook his heavy head—
> Meaning to say he did not choose
> To leave the oyster-bed.
>
> But four young Oysters hurried up,
> All eager for the treat:
> Their coats were brushed, their faces washed,
> Their shoes were clean and neat—
> And this was odd, because, you know,

They hadn’t any feet.

Four other Oysters followed them,
And yet another four;
And thick and fast they came at last,
And more, and more, and more—
All hopping through the frothy waves,
And scrambling to the shore.

The Walrus and the Carpenter
Walked on a mile or so,
And then they rested on a rock
Conveniently low:
And all the little Oysters stood
And waited in a row.

The denouement is well-known: the Walrus and the Carpenter, despite the protests of the oysters, scoff the lot:

O Oysters,’ said the Carpenter,
You’ve had a pleasant run!
Shall we be trotting home again?’
But answer came there none—
And this was scarcely odd, because
They’d eaten every one.”

Strength in Numbers (Theo Bosboom, 2024)

One of the pleasures of the exhibition and accompanying its book is that it takes you away from the purely human world, with its burden of wars and murders and interest rates and tariffs—takes us away from politics, in fact—and immerses you in the beauty, the variety, the fascination, of the natural world. You are delighted to see a competition for young wildlife photographers, aged 11 – 14, and 10 and under. What is surprising here, and to me slightly disturbing, is that the quality of the photographs these youngsters take is not inferior to that of those of the adults. What does this say about photography as a fine art? Even the compositions of Mozart, a born genius if ever there was one, improved after his adolescence. Moreover, some of the photos are composite, some kind of amalgam of many shots. Are they therefore inauthentic in some way, vitiating our belief that we are looking at nature unadorned? I know that philosophers could easily persuade us that that there is no such thing as unmediated perception, and therefore no such thing as inauthenticity, but we are not—or I, at any rate, am not—quite satisfied by their arguments, suspecting sophistry.

When I say that the exhibition and the book free us for a time from the hold of politics on our mind, to our great relief, this is not to say that they are entirely free of polemical

content. In the category of photojournalism, for example, is a startling photograph by Patricia Seaton Homonylo, of Canada, of dead birds arranged in concentric circles that have died by flying into the tall glass office blocks of Toronto. In this picture, there are 3900 of them, of 103 species; more than a billion birds meet their deaths the same way every year in North America. Whatever your politics, I defy you not to be saddened by this.

We have always been inclined to take lessons by analogy from the animal world. The winner of the photojournalism category was the German, Thomas Peschak, with a series of photographs of the pink river dolphins called the botos, of whose very existence I was previously unaware. They are large dolphins, again up to 9 feet long, which inhabit the rivers of the Amazon basin. In some places, they have become a tourist attraction. The accompanying text says:

> *Thomas took his pictures in areas where botos are utilized by local communities to create an experience for tourists, However, it brings another set of problems, with river dolphins becoming obese and some younger animals now unable to hunt for themselves, relying instead on handouts from their human admirers.*

Parallels are never exact of course, but one can't help thinking here certain towns I could name in a certain welfare state I could also name.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *Neither Trumpets nor*

Violins (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and *Ramses: A Memoir* from New English Review Press.

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