

Our Blond Summer Guest



Young Hare, Albrecht Dürer, 1502

It was early June when we first saw her, brightly standing out against the green and brown landscape. We've gotten to know her pretty well by now, or so we think. "Hi B.B.," my wife says to her in a chirpy voice.

"Why do you say *her*?" I say, teasing.

"B.B.'s a girl, I just know it."

B.B. regularly shows up for meal time a couple of hours before dusk, and sometimes in the morning when we're eating our own breakfast. She's been here all summer, and she's been a delightful diversion who never disappoints. She amuses us, mesmerizes us, and enchants us. What more could you ask of a summer guest?

The thing that makes B.B. special is that she's a blond rabbit—not white like the archetypal domesticated kind, and not the usual grayish brown of field varieties—hence my wife's name for her, "Blond Bunny." I suppose that in ancient times she might have been considered an omen of some kind. Technically we think B.B. is a leucistic rabbit, not an albino, which lacks melanin or skin pigment altogether. B.B. has a recessive gene that makes her butterscotch colored and therefore more vulnerable to predators, since she lacks the camouflage of her habitat.

In fact early on we thought B.B. had been the victim of such an attack. She regularly appeared in our backyard to munch on grass and vegetation and these tiny dark berries on vines where the woods meet our backyard. Then she was nowhere to be seen. My wife was downcast. I just passed it off as one of those infinite occurrences in nature, the food chain and all that. But I missed her a little too.

Then she reappeared! But she had a pair of nasty dark-red gashes on the back of her neck. We looked through binoculars to check it out in detail—they were fresh and raw.

We figured they were made by the talons of a hawk, several of which we've seen circling over our backyard and the woodlot behind our house. I knew what my wife was thinking: a few years ago when we were living somewhere else I was grilling one night on the patio when I heard a faint but sharp sound

and glanced over toward the woods and watched, as I grilled our burgers, a large hawk devouring a rabbit just inside the line of trees, maybe fifteen to twenty yards away from me. I'll never forget how it towered over its quarry, stepping on the carcass with its claws while it jerked the flesh upward savagely with its ferocious beak, consuming it in about the time it took me to cook and eat our own dinner.

The rabbit I saw eaten by the hawk was the typical grayish-brown rabbit. So what chance did B.B. stand, in all her glorious blondness and oddness? Yet she recovered, the wounds eventually healed.

Of course it wasn't lost on me that I was doing the same thing as the hawk, except that I hadn't actually *killed* my food (though I would if I had to, as a devoted and enthusiastic carnivore). I've even eaten rabbit myself once—rabbit parts braised in a mustard sauce, in a little restaurant in Québec City. It was so-so, but I'd never eaten rabbit before and wanted to try it.

Not many people eat rabbits these days, for several reasons I think. Rabbits, because they “chew the cud (or appear to),” are on the list of unclean animals that the Mosaic law forbade the Israelites to eat, and they don't taste nearly as good as pork or oysters, also verboten biblical foods under the old covenant. And pigs and mollusks aren't little bundles of fur that have button noses, long pointed ears, and white cotton tails. Or a symbol of Easter (the pagan version). Or anthropomorphic characters who have enchanted us in tales that are part of our collective imagination.

For me, perhaps along with Aesop's “The Hare and the Tortoise,” the story that first comes to mind is *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which is now a century and a half old.

It actually includes two rabbits of sorts. Of course there's

the White Rabbit, whose hole Alice freefalls down through to this wild world of expanding-shrinking surrealism, giving us the idiom “going down the rabbit hole.” He (and the White Rabbit certainly seems like a *he*, despite Lewis Carroll having Alice use the pronoun *it* to refer to him) pops up as a familiar marker throughout the zigzagging narrative, a sort of elusive, enigmatic tour guide. He’s jittery and harried, a bit of a trickster. The March Hare, which popularized the proverb “mad as a March hare,” is a sidekick and counterpart of the Mad Hatter and hops back and forth in madcap repartee at their eccentric, timeless tea party.

Hares and rabbits are also different in mundane old life above the rabbit hole, though not as much as in the fairy tale. Rabbits are born blind, hairless, and helpless, and it takes time before they become self-sufficient. Hares, on the other hand, are born with sight and fur and are ready for action almost from the get-go. They also have longer legs and ears than rabbits, which in the latter case is saying something.

You can see this in the classic painting by Albrecht Dürer called *Young Hare*. Painted in watercolor and gouache, it’s only about ten by nine inches. Despite its diminutive size, it’s incredible for its detail, a virtuoso example of observational art. You can even see the individual multicolored hairs, with each one having bars taken from a palette of earth tones (B.B.’s fur also has streaks of light brown, especially a stripe on the back of her neck), and the way the fur grows in different directions. The steady eyes—one of which even has the panes of Dürer’s window in his studio reflected in the right pupil—gaze out at the viewer, not quite a predator but unknown nevertheless. The ears stand tall and pricked up, always on the alert.

Strangely, but maybe not so strangely, Dürer removed the hare from its natural habitat: the background is completely white, without a blade of grass or tree in sight. It’s unclear exactly how he painted his subject—from a live model in his

studio? from sketches done in the field? Whatever the method, perhaps the lack of external elements allows us to focus as intensely on this engaging animal as the artist himself does, without any competing elements to distract us.

Dürer's *Young Hare* was copied by many artists after it appeared in 1502. It still entrances with the wonder and intricacy of nature. But it also highlights what's not explicit—the master of the animals, man himself, who appreciates and studies and paints and infuses it with the deeper spiritual meaning of God's creation.

I also think of what the naturalist John Burroughs said: "To find new things, take the path you took yesterday." Thankfully, though our backyard isn't large, there are ample woods behind it where we can watch a little wildlife at our leisure. A white-tailed doe moseys through the trees and lies down in the brush and stays as still as a praying mantis. A pileated woodpecker, with its black body, black-and-white-striped face, and red cap down to its bill, jackhammers away, carving out neat little holes in tree trunks; a husband-and-wife pair of northern cardinals (the male is red, the female is brown with red wings, crest, and tail) alight for a while and then streak away like they were boldly brushed there by an invisible hand.

But B.B. is our favorite.

She is still not that big, but she has grown quite a bit since we first spotted her in the underbrush at the edge of the woods. Right from the beginning B.B. didn't run away from us. She regularly comes within ten feet—a few times almost five feet—of our concrete patio, which hold our table and benches and our grill.

How still she is! She will sit there motionless, except a slight twitching of her finicky nose, as she chews and chews. She does little performances too—stretching out her legs and

lying almost flat. Then she'll perk up and suddenly raise her head and ears, which are white and pink like a large, thick flower petal, and sometimes dart off into the woods in seconds.

She's quite comfortable in our smallish backyard, which is really all hers. Perhaps because our lawn isn't as manicured as some of our neighbors'—it's not a *raison d'être* for us—it attracts B.B., with plenty of tiny pits to mine. And sometimes the grass is a bit higher than it should be; one time I felt a tinge of remorse mowing it, since she'd have less to eat.

But we like to think it's because of us that she chose our home to be her summer retreat.

Sometimes she's comical. But sometimes the open-air stage unpredictably turns to drama. One early evening we saw a scene from my our second floor that captivated us for a good ten minutes.

Another rabbit—a regular brownish gray one that we wouldn't normally blink an eye at—came into B.B.'s domain. The interloper and B.B. kept their distance, eyeing each other warily. Then B.B. froze, the interloper froze. They crept their way closer, closer, patiently feeling each other out. Then they touched noses! Was this a mating ritual? Was this rabbit love? But almost instantly B.B. recoiled and dashed into the woods and the regular rabbit zinged after her, but to no avail. He—it was a *he*, my wife and I decided without conferring—sat on this big rock that was nearly covered with foliage at the edge of the woods, frustrated in either love or war. Or, most likely, both.

As I walk into the kitchen, my wife announces: “B.B.'s here for dinner.” I'm just heading out to the grill myself—tonight's menu features a juicy ribeye as the grand finale of the summer season. My wife also informs me that the grayish-brown interloper (or would-be suitor) was back but

she'd shooed it away. The last I saw them, B.B. and her cohort were grazing and scoping each other out; they never got closer than five or so feet before parting, one after the other.

It's only a half hour before sunset, twilight descending earlier now that fall is just about here. B.B. isn't scared away by my grilling at all. As I cook our sausages she rears up on her hind legs to eat some berries at the edge of the woods. Then she chomps on this piece of tall grass with a few leaves on it—it's almost twice as long as her—and we watch her slowly munch it away. My wife and I laugh.

I have a soft spot for underdogs like B.B. As a boy I was very small for my age (I'm still short), and I stuttered. I also had a younger brother who was born with Down Syndrome, and if that weren't enough, he couldn't walk because of a congenitally dislocated hip. So I know what it's like to be physically deficient. It's made me a lifelong scrapper, for better or worse.

For now it's enough to say that it's been a turbulent summer, and B.B. has brightened it a little in her own modest, natural, endearing way. Even when I didn't feel much like it, she compelled us to slow down, to look and look again, longer and deeper, outwardly and inwardly.