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THE LONELINESS

Mark Roper

What did you feel when you heard the stories, when you saw the images on your screen? A goose nesting in a flowerbed at a big city station. Green-winged orchids flowering on an unmown verge in a housing estate. Goats wandering around a seemingly deserted village.

Elation is what I felt at first. Deprived by the lockdown of my usual ration of wildlife, I was just glad to see and read about these flowers and creatures. And it was good to witness how quickly they can return to spaces which have been denied them — I felt a certain glee watching the goats take over the village. There was something dream-like about it too, a science fiction flavour. There was fear involved — the goats looked as if they were entering a world in which humans had become extinct.

Above all though, I felt a deep loneliness. To see these creatures venturing back into places where we should be is to know that they can only ever do so when we're not there. What the images and stories offered was a glimpse of the enormous distance we have created between ourselves and the 'natural world'.

'The Long Loneliness' was the title of an influential article by the American scientist Loren Eiseley. It was written in 1960, in the light of new research which was revealing that bottlenosed dolphins (he also calls them porpoises) possessed the ability to communicate — had a language of their own. In the article, Eisely laments our isolation from the natural world, the vast and ancient gulf between us and our 'animal associates' (57). He entertains an optimism that the new research might begin to lessen that gap. 'It is worth at least a wistful thought that someday the porpoise [dolphin] may talk to us and we to him. It would break, perhaps, the long loneliness that has made man a frequent terror and abomination even to himself' (64).

The idea of human loneliness is fundamental to 'Why Look At Animals?', an essay by John Berger collected in *About Looking*. Our relationship to animals was once so close that it would have been crucial to our development of both thought and language, Berger suggests. We first learned to 'see' ourselves in animals and their habits. They provided us with ways of describing and understanding ourselves; they gave us our first metaphors. They were, as the great cave paintings seem to show, the first matter of human art. All twelve signs of the Chinese zodiac are animals. For the Greeks, the twelve hours of a day were each given the sign of an animal. Hindus envisaged the Earth as being carried on the back of an elephant, in its turn carried on the back of a tortoise.

Not speaking our language, Berger goes on to suggest, animals:

> offer man a companionship which is different from any offered by human exchange. Different because it is a companionship offered to the loneliness of man as a species. Such an unspeaking companionship was felt to be so equal that often one finds the conviction that it was man who lacked the capacity to speak with animals — hence the stories of exceptional beings, like Orpheus, who could talk with animals in their own language. (1992: 6)

But, ‘everywhere animals disappear’ (26). We have slowly destroyed their reality, the reality of our relationship to them, by domestication, by turning them into pets and models for toys and cartoons, by putting them into zoos. We have now lost sight of them, Berger concludes.

Although humans have been around for perhaps just 200,000 years, our impact on the planet has been such that many scientists now call the epoch in which we live the Anthropocene — the Age of Humans. In *Half-Earth* (2017) the great entomologist and nature writer EO Wilson went further, suggesting that we are about to enter the Eremocene, the Age of Loneliness. Biodiversity loss, defaunation, extinction might will mean that human beings, our domesticated animals and our croplands, will soon be all that’s left.

‘The Thought-Fox’ is one of Ted Hughes’s earliest and best-known poems. Hughes liked to tell the story of how the inspiration for the poem came to him in a dream. He was trying to write an undergraduate essay. His study door opened and a creature slowly entered. It had a fox’s head, a long skinny fox’s body, it stood upright and its hands ‘were those of a man’. It smelt of burning, its skin was charred and bleeding. The creature walked to Hughes’s desk, placed its hand on the essay he was trying to write and said ‘Stop this — *you are destroying us*’. When he woke, Hughes decided immediately to abandon his course in English Literature.

In the poem, the word ‘loneliness’ is used in each of the first two stanzas: ‘the clock’s loneliness’ in stanza 1, ‘the loneliness’ in stanza 2. It’s midnight, the speaker is alone in his room — the loneliness is entirely understandable at a personal level. But what the word is also being used to evoke is surely what has come to be known as ‘species loneliness’ — defined by the writer Robin Wall Kimmerer as ‘deep, unnamed sadness stemming from estrangement from the rest of Creation, from the loss of relationship’.

One word that comes to mind when we see creatures and plants rising back into space emptied of us is ‘Abundance’. To see wildlife in abundance is unusual now. It can still be witnessed of course. Last year a friend took me to an old meadow where green-winged orchids grew in abundance with cowslips — an ancient, long-favoured combination. The luscious, almost sexual plenitude of the flowers must once have been common at the start of spring, reflected in old names for the flowers — the sight would have been, simply, part of life, part of our consciousness.

Last February I was lucky enough to fulfil a long-held wish to spend time with my partner at San Ignacio Lagoon, in Baja California. To this deep tidal lagoon grey whales come to breed, in their hundreds. You can be taken out in small wooden boats, pangas, to be among them. They genuinely do not seem to mind — in fact, if anything they often seem to relish the attention, coming up beside the boats and staying close, allowing themselves to be touched, even kissed. Not so long ago, they were being hunted to the verge of extinction in this very bay. Grudgingly known as ‘devil fish’, due to

their determination to fight to the last, it is quite remarkable they should now tolerate our attention. A long campaign led by the poet Homer Aridjis has led to this lagoon and its whales enjoying a high level of protection. To be so close to these 40-tonne creatures was a great privilege; to see vestigial bristles on their faces, dating back to the time they lived on land, was to pick up a faint echo of a deeply buried relationship.

Many more examples of such abundance exist, of course, but they continue to diminish. For forty years now a boggy field opposite our cottage in rural County Kilkenny has provided us with regular sightings of waterbirds such as heron, egret and mallard. In the coldest weather lapwings and even curlews might turn up. Spring evenings have been hallowed by the drumming of snipe. During the lockdown, drainage of the field has begun. Ditches have been dug, poison has been sprayed over the rushes, trees have been sliced through with a frighteningly large circular saw. The day after we visited the green-winged orchid and cowslip meadow last year, it was sprayed with a selective weedkiller to remove the flowering plants. These are small instances, I know, but they form the immediate, sour ground for the loneliness I felt when I saw the images on my screen. The space which is being re-entered is provisional — it only exists because we are not in it. This is not the sharing envisaged by Eisely. There is no sharing involved.

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