

The Hopes of Snakes

Jesus saith, Ye ask who are those that draw us to the kingdom...? The fowls of the air, and all beasts that are under the earth or upon the earth, and the fishes of the sea, these are they which draw you...

The Sayings of Jesus, second saying

It was the season of wind, wind undressing the trees, trees dropping their gold, lime and ruby red lingerie of leaves to the gasping fields of an old farm where, on this particular day, an Oktoberfest celebration was underway. Chimney smoke and the scent of roasting chestnuts swept through the people strolling along in the seductive arms of the cool, smooth air. Wagons of pumpkins and gourds, hawks, the fattening hedgehogs eating farther out in the fields—these were welcome accessories to the day, signs of autumn people pointed out and stood still to see. Things embraced. But a snake—a snake migrating toward the darker doors of the earth, down to the hotter core of things to wrap itself like a winter scarf around the cold, dry bodies of other snakes—would be unwelcome. On this afternoon, though, a snake did slide out of the woods and with it came the biggest question of the day: Who would kill the snake?

Who would wrestle with the six feet of muscle that slithered neatly under the people and around the legs of tables set up to sell crafts and food on this festive occasion? That the unease over the snake was disproportionate to the actual danger of the creature was not relevant. The concern seemed to be: Who does this snake think it is, venturing out of the trees to travel into the open grasses where stood people just now realizing the snake by their feet was not a child's toy but an actual live serpent? People perhaps seeing a snake of such size for the first time in their lives.

Of course there are those who would argue that the snake did not, could not, in any way decide anything at all. Those who would contend that although a snake can see quite well—not just lightness and darkness but actual images—it could not have considered what was before it: weekend visitors who just hours ago this very happy afternoon had fled the confines of their suburban homes to arrive at this island of farmland. Certainly, people had come to the park with thoughts of apple fritters and cider on their minds. They did not have as part of their plan for the day a meeting with what, I believed, as I watched the chaos mount, to be a black rat snake—a nonvenomous, daytime prowler that can grow longer than six feet and, in comparison with other North American snakes, meets the criteria for being a near giant in the United States.

Someone ran for a park naturalist who was last seen moseying around the candle-maker's table. The naturalist arrived with an apparent lack of conviction over what was to be done to this obviously magnanimous snake sunning and resting itself along its itinerary. By the time the snake continued moving, seemingly determined to get somewhere but confused—*what is all this in my way?*—there had been time to see that, yes, it was a horse of a snake in the grass; a black beauty of a rat snake.

Soon enough the naturalist poked her walking stick in front of the snake, assuming that such action would turn the snake back to its dark and leafy woodland. But the snake was persistent in

its plans and the naturalist's annoying stick that blocked the snake over and over again caused the animal to rear up in an effort to find a way around the obstacle. This rearing up, this show of its intent—or, as the crowd understood it, this show of the snake's absolute anger—heightened the anxiety of the crowd and a certain controlled panic set in. It wasn't that people were possessed with erratic yelling and jumping; rather it was an unease displayed with various body languages. Some people stomped and then rubbed their feet into the ground in a circular motion (as though perhaps the snake could be squished); others began gathering sticks and large rocks (as apparently the snake could be “sticked and stoned” to death); children—boys, especially—fashioned their hands into guns and fired off a few rounds. The whole scene conjured up images of what I imagined as prehistoric humans preparing for the sacrifice. It was as though the autumn winds had summoned all the rage against and fear of snakes throughout the ages and imparted it to these otherwise innocent and festive-seeking citizens, of which one, or a few, would be chosen to kill the serpent at their feet.

At the Oktoberfest celebration, people hovered near the black rat snake in the field, as did I, until, inexplicably, and without any mindfulness on my part, my legs began walking toward it. My heart was pounding with uncertainty and fear. Soon enough, I was standing above and somewhat behind the snake. Hands that were my hands—hands that had in the past been bitten vigorously by a snake—were at the same time not my hands, in the sense that I did not think about any precise second when it might be best to pick up the snake, or even how to pick up the snake.

And then, in a moment, as in the way a breeze can stir out of nowhere, my heart went calm when I lifted the snake up close to my chest and guided its long black body around my arm, where the snake rested patiently. He was a giant, and at times heavy and awkward as parts of him occasionally slipped off my arm and I had to nudge him back up with my torso. Through crowds of people and quite a long way across the grass and back to a woodpile by the edge of the autumn forest we went.

Trying to make sense out of it all now, I am reminded of what the poet W.G. Sebald wrote: “Our brains...are always at work on some quivers of self-organization, however faint, and it is from this that an order arises, in places beautiful and comforting....”

Perhaps, I think sometimes—and find it comforting to think so—that I don't live in the real world, as Freud had said. Maybe I occupy a world nuanced with the hopes of snakes, as though the message is that any of us, with our pounding hearts of faith, could be the messenger for whatever it is that draws us. Of course I never can say for sure; but there are things that happen, and this is how it was.

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