

FORAGER

Signs of Spring in The Peaceable Kingdom

by Steve Sprinkel

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The snake barely moved when I brushed it with my hand, accidentally, while I was cutting lettuce with Quin a few days ago. It was a big red and gold striped garter snake, *Thamnophis sirtalis infernalis*. And my, wasn't February a bit early for a slither? Yes, making our El Nino a source of many phenomena, including night after night without frost, big grasshoppers dropping in early, and fresh cold-blooded creatures, wakened too soon and hungry.

The many red boxes on the garter's flanks seemed like windows on a night train. It was tame. Too tame. Or just in a coma from having eaten whatever rodent was obviously ballooning its belly. I would move a few feet on my knees and do my work and the snake would slide forward just out of reach. We slid down the row for an hour together. The snake sat there with its head on its coil watching me and in no big hurry to escape from its biblical enemy, sworn to an eternity of enmity. Could it not see the eight inches of cold hard Chinese steel with which I flayed the vegetation? The scene was an interlude borrowed from Henri Rousseau. Quin suggested that the snake "liked" me. He just did not know me. I am a killer. I kill to save the food. I also prevent like hell, but what I do creates enemies I must turn aside. Otherwise, I would be overrun.

I may battle the beasts nearly every day, but for most of them I still have patience, wonder, reverence. The garter snake is indeed my ally, but I can be cold. The brigades of gophers massing in the high grass by the wall are free to eat there as long as they care to. I have no quarrel with them. But I know they will not be satisfied with foxtail grass and malva. Their huge piles of earth promise tunnels beneath the surface, tunnels heading for my future cucumber field. There, in that



chest-high tangle of green I have observed serpents before, all friendly to our cause. They sleep safely under the rotary mower, and hunt under the pallets where the soybean meal is stored, looking for rats.

I hope for natural equilibrium, for scenarios I do not have to participate in, for a balancing out as profound as lady bugs in profusion everywhere a week before the aphids appear. High overhead, Cooper Hawks announce the births of baby ground squirrels and witless gophers, straining just a little too far from the safety of their burrow for one last bite of broccoli. I may lament when I see a hawk hauling a snake back to a tree but I still understand.

The farm is a bowl-like stage, with wildlife drawn to the abundance of food. We fill our boxes surrounded by desperate contests: stalking herons and egrets, ready to lance a reckless rodent, thousands of lady bug larvae devouring aphids on flowering kale, the loud tracks laid nightly

by the coyote, crisscrossing the fields as they seek their hard-won feasts. My nightwatch is superior to any man. In the morning I find a coyote dig, with beets or lettuce kicked everywhere as the coyotes struggled vainly against a gopher that had long vanished. I praise this work. When I trap some poor beast I lay out the remains for the coyote to snack on in the evening. And in the morning its usually gone. The gift works better than any trap, because welcoming these dogs to the farm assures my territory is safe from much larger trouble than a few dead beets. In the field below the prison, I have seen deer droppings, and Francisco once observed raccoon tracks. Large mammals enter here at their peril. John has observed rabbits in his field, but none across the bridge, thanks to the family of coyotes that lives in the oaks not far from us who howl loudly when sheriff's sirens invade their ears.

Am I the only one who hears the mountain lion? The warning muffled roar is always during daytime, still near the oak mott, near the packing house. I walked round the building, nearly expecting to find the cat behind the next turn, staring at me with its tail flicking. Years and years ago I had seen one, on the other side of Chismahoo Mountain, a short pitch from my goose pen. When I found nothing under our oaks here, I wondered, if there are ghosts, and I know there are, can't there be ghosts of wild animals, perhaps dissatisfied with how they made their exit, angrily roaming my space?

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