Quiet Creatures
A Summer on Long Island

by
Neil Solon Banas
B.A., Swarthmore College, 1995

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Lynn Ross-Bryant

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Sam Gill

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Eric Reinders

Date ________

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Banas, Neil Solon (M. A., Religious Studies)

*Quiet Creatures: A Summer on Long Island*

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Lynn Ross-Bryant

I spent a summer working in a marine biology lab on the north shore of Long Island, padding along the local beach, watching the dramas of animal life there and searching for the keys that would make sense of them: the avenues along which I could enter the animal’s home and feel myself at home. These desires—for a sense of logic and order in nature, and a sense of home and family—I see reflected in many other naturalists, from Gilbert White in the eighteenth century to Edwin Way Teale and Annie Dillard in our own.

The landscape I observed answered and rejected those desires simultaneously. The biological world is neither exactly logical nor a chaos; neither a ball of warm sentiments nor cold and aloof. It runs on other principles: a musky, tactless intimacy, and a meandering logic, full of reversals. We are absorbed within a complex organic system and fully dependent upon it, linked to millions of species, each with its own way of getting along, by a great web of family relationships.

Intimacy in a landscape consists, for the most part, of digestion: gory and grotesque, but also smooth, balanced, and eternal, what Paul Shepard calls “a universal metabolism.” Our human pursuits blend into this metabolism smoothly: the death of a creature under a microscope isn’t so different from the death of a creature between a pair of jaws. When we ignore such congruencies, however, as our body-distaining culture
encourages us to, our inquisitiveness turns sour, and yields odd, unwholesome relationships. The alternative—so simple in the abstract—is to accept our full participation in animal life. We live within a great mystery: the mystery of bodies and their conjunctions, and, too, the mystery of how we, inquisitive and posturing, awestruck and cocky, rise from its midst.

I’ve written this as a personal essay, because these are personal issues, inextricable from my own desires and my own wrestling bouts with specific animals. I have tried to give a voice to the creatures I encountered on Long Island; I found that they had much to say, and sly and grave ways of saying it.
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