I was poking about belly-deep in the water at West Meadow one afternoon, swaying gently along with the flotsam, browsing, when I spotted a small crab hanging at the surface. I swept it up, and abruptly it seemed to jerk out of my hand back into the water. It unlocked into pieces as it hit the surface. The crab had been holding itself together, evidently, with the weakest of glues, and now—I’ve never seen this happen so literally—it simply fell apart. Its smooth carapace floated out from the rest of it. Its many legs, tipped by delicate points, tumbled away in slow motion. Its innards unraveled into a cloud; its face came off. What was so recently a being, feeding on morsels and busily growing up, was now a teaspoonful of chitin and organ meats, drifting to the bottom so, so slowly.

So much for the Peaceable Kingdom. I wanted sharp facts, and I got one: this is how bodies work, bottom line. They fall apart. That’s how new bodies get made—from the parts. If a body doesn’t fall apart, it gets chewed apart.

Every beach I visited seemed to concur on this point. I headed out one weekend to Montauk Point, at the tip of Long Island’s South Fork. The South Fork is where every vacationer in the New York area heads on weekends; I was anticipating something bright and friendly. The beach at Montauk Point, however, turned out to be a rank, narrow, rocky strip between low cliffs and frayed hillocks on the inland side, and dark, kelpy stones and an irritable Atlantic Ocean on the other. It was built of the kind of coarse sand that made every stroll a trudge. Only a few minutes there
and my thoughts were assaulted and captured by dead matter: the variety of it, and the sheer tonnage.

Dried tangles of kelp, tossed out by the waves, slumped everywhere in great arcs. Sand fleas who had been busy feeding bounded and scattered from them as I approached. The shells of sea slippers, clams, and crabs of every form lay in the sand in various states of disarray: whole, perforated, shattered. The sand itself, for that matter, was built with these shells: I walked on not just the bones of the earth, but the pulverized bones of fine creatures, who once roamed this coastline quick, famished, amorous, poised. Gulls pulled at whatever meat was scattered among the rocks.

Horseshoe crab sheds and corpses were strewn everywhere, a memorial to their furious mating season, now on the wane. One horseshoe lay splayed on the stones, its forehead cracked in two directly through its right eye. Another, uncommonly intact, caught my attention; I crouched over it and after a pause, flipped it. Most of its legs were still attached, skeletal tubes emptied out by scavengers. It was a male, small, but sexually mature: it still bore the mating foreclaws with which it would grasp a female. I tried to extend one, opening the fine planar joints of the leg, and it snapped off at the wrist, the exposed fibers glistening and drying quickly under the sun. “Nature,” said Thoreau, “is inhumanly sincere.”

Yes, well, it’s comforting to think of such goings on as inhuman, the same way it’s comforting to live in neighborhoods where the unravelings of our own bodies and our prey’s bodies are hidden discreetly from sight. On the surface of things, in a place like Long Island, death
seems to have been made extraneous to human life: unnecessary, an interruption. We appear to have set aside a space in which to live in which we and the animals are cleanly in all our ways and treat each other politely. That bodies-unraveling, red-in-tooth-and-claw business might be fine out in the wilderness somewhere, but we are civilized human beings; these are the suburbs. We don’t leave our bodily members scattered over the carpet, like the crab that unlocked itself all over West Meadow. We don’t stick forks into each other, like the horseshoe crab who comes to scavenge bits of it off the seabed. Even my landlady’s cats were declawed and raised on canned food, rather than mice.

Beneath the surface, however, the distinction between peaceful, oak-lined neighborhoods where even our pets are never uncouth and the lurid wilderness where animals hunt each other in strange and exciting ways evaporates into fantasy. The way we obtain our hamburgers and crab cakes is lurid enough. From the beaches at Montauk, where squat armored creatures battle each other under the waves, to the nearest human habitations is perhaps a five-minute walk down a paved road. There’s only the one system of lives in the world. “Wilderness” and “neighborhood” don’t identify pieces of land; they identify the particular dream one chases.

In early July I was chasing neighborhoods Gilbert White-style, and chasing them far afield. I was getting impatient for beauties less subtle than West Meadow’s, messages less demanding. Thus for Fourth of July
weekend I headed off with Vanessa, a fellow marine sciences student, to go camping on Indian Island, at the inland tip of Peconic Bay.

If there’s any place on Long Island where one can go to contemplate nature in its purity, it isn’t Indian Island, a one-hundred-RV campground just barely outside the city of Riverhead. I was in such a good mood, though, that I did anyway. I serenely contemplated nature from the park’s tiny beach. I serenely contemplated in the leafy woods, I contemplated more inquisitively, but still serene, in the strip of odd scrubby dunes between them. The land was woven together perfectly, fresh and clean. The sun was hot; I scuffled back to the campground, towel slung over my shoulder, the dirt road wandering up between my toes. A boy from a nearby campsite beamed as he introduced me to his dog, which I scratched behind the ears. Here was the archetypal Independence Day weekend: I saw nothing on the American continent today but friends and neighbors. I was raised up from the rich soil like Adam; I was a dweller in Eden, at home in a landscape of generous hospitality. And in the car on the way home, I found a fat tick dug into the back of my shoulder.

I imagine it sidled onto me as I brushed against some stem and then crawled up the outside of my shirt, under my collar, and down my shoulder blade until it found a spot it liked. It must have found me while I was in the woods that morning, which means that there was a three-hour stretch in which the tick was sipping at my blood, as serene as I was. But when I found it welded to me in the car, I ruined the blissful moment for both of us in a hurry—my own hospitality, apparently, not so generous.
I ripped it off—not the wisest thing to do with ticks, especially in the land of Lyme disease—luckily a piece of my skin came off with its jaws, rather than its head coming off its neck and staying buried in me. I felt a little crazed. Vanessa kept on driving; I trapped the thing in a fold in a plastic bag and did my best to murder it. It was a quarter of an inch long, a sickly beige, and, incidentally, one of the horseshoe crab’s closest living relatives, though this was not on my mind at the time. I was too busy hating it, scorning it, staring in awe at it, and fearing it in quick succession. I wasn’t observing very closely what the tick was doing during this time: wriggling, probably, losing some legs under my fingernail, definitely not dying. Just a few days earlier, I had been reading Kathryn Harrison’s account in *The New Yorker* of the battle she fought with a tick wrested from her daughter’s head. She has the tick imprisoned in a coffee mug, floating in white rum from a gift bottle, and she writes,

> The rum brings the tick horribly close to my eye, so close that the bloated gut seems planetary in its hugeness. Yes, huge: there is nothing bigger in the world than this tick stuffed with its minute apparatuses of consumption and digestion.

I knew the feeling.

I finally flung the tick out the car window and it whipped behind us at fifty miles an hour. I wouldn’t be surprised if it made it back to the woods. My shoulder healed in a couple of days—no Lyme disease. Then a few days later, back in Stony Brook, as I sat down to lunch at the picnic table behind the lab, a spider bit me on the thigh, in response to being sat on. I cursed at it; a week later, the inch-wide welt on my leg started to subside. I don’t know if the spider got away, and, frankly, even now I find it hard to care.
There’s no war-glory in these encounters, none of that crimson-streaked, lion-taking-down-a-springbok atmosphere that the nineteenth-century Romantics and their modern successors—TV wildlife specials—find so satisfying. There’s precious little of it out in the wild anywhere. Animals in general just aren’t angry at each other, even when they’re eating each other, and they fight dirty. Most of the violence in the world isn’t combat, but something slower, more banal, more sniveling.

Nature isn’t really so red in tooth and claw; it’s more like black comedy, occasionally dry and understated like the dead kelp on a beach, more often slapstick. The world’s full of raucous marauders (like the gulls who snatch up spider crabs and drop them on the rocks from forty feet up, repeatedly, to crack them open), practical jokes (like the spider crabs discovering that out of the water they’re too weak to lift their own pincers to defend themselves), and plenty of raw meat—a real carnival, in the sense of the word that honors its linguistic link with carnal, carnage, and chili con carne. Try to spend a weekend inhabiting a nobler or friendlier kind of wilderness, and some greasy critter shows up on your shoulder to remind you how good you taste. This is our family. We’re going to be meeting at these holiday barbecues till the end of time.

There is nothing lovable about ticks. They’re microcephalic; even though they have eight legs they seem to creep, rather than walk; they have an ignoble livelihood, pursue it shamelessly, and spread diseases to boot. I never expected to react to them as extremely as I did. Maybe my repulsion and Harrison’s are a legacy of our hominid ancestors, who had
more serious reasons to avoid parasites. Maybe ancestry has nothing to do with it.

It’s draining, though, to try to stay mad at ticks. They so obviously don’t reciprocate the feeling. We may understand our dealings with them through the metaphors of social relationships and emotional exchanges, but I can’t imagine how ticks would have evolved to do so. Our emotions are irrelevant to them, though our blood is very interesting indeed. Besides, if a tick feels anything for the body that hosts it, wouldn’t it be a cozy, peaceful love, like a suckling infant’s? I don’t think the fear of disease explains my harsh reaction to being bitten by one. Why was I so unwilling to be a beneficent mother?

Harrison writes,

I shake the mug, and the tick bounces around inside like a bean.... A tick wants blood more than anything, I know, and as I say the words to myself, as I articulate the tick’s longing, I understand what I myself want: to make it bleed, to make it surrender what it stole from my child. It’s not that I demand this creature’s imagined remorse, but what was Sarah’s must be returned. A nervous, cool dread uncoils within me.

What was my daughter’s must be returned: in the end, our interactions with other creatures aren’t about remorse or conscience, not about civility or offensiveness, but about a dreadfully earnest bodily exchange. We aren’t merely socializing; we’re scraping our lives together, partners in a grassroots economy in which we trade the flesh as currency. As Harrison said, there is nothing bigger in the world than a tick with its “apparatuses of consumption and digestion.” This is the level on which our relationships with animals achieve mutuality—the level on which we
click into place as segments in great cycles. A tick takes a drop of blood, and Harrison or I struggle to reclaim it.

The emotions that accompany these exchanges are secondary—although considering what’s at stake, it seems only appropriate to get pretty worked up. A drop of blood is a pittance, merely symbolic, that is true. But the drop over which I’ll fight a tick doesn’t symbolize a sentiment or a principle; it symbolizes a larger quantity of blood.

“A nervous, cool dread uncoils within me.” This is unfamiliar territory for most of us, though we’ve lived here all our lives, and as Thoreau said, it is awfully sincere. It often feels as though the logic of this economy were remote, hidden, belonging to some alternate order of human life. “A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork,” writes John Berger. “What is significant, and is so difficult for the modern urban stranger to understand, is that the two statements in that sentence are connected by an and and not a but.” The crucial mystery—which the economic language of ecology hints at, but still holds at arm’s length—is that death, decay, and consumption are not accidents and not wars, but collaborations. This is the mystery of the universal metabolism Shepard speaks of: the awesome balance between carnage and growth in the world, a balance as intricate as the network of capillaries in your hand.

If the machinery of the world’s metabolism isn’t readily apparent, it might be because most of it is so very small. Dillard says she heard once that the “average size of all living animals, including man, is almost that
of a housefly”—and that’s just the animals. Factor in the protists, the 
algae, and the mountains of bacteria that keep the rest of us going, and the 
average, I’m sure, would withdraw to a microscopic scale. Meanwhile, we 
pack our eyes along a full five feet or so above the ground. Most of the 
business of life you just can’t see from up here, at least until it crawls up 
your leg.

There’s a small, elongate pond tucked into the middle of the SUNY 
Stony Brook campus—Roth Pond it’s called, after the dorm complex that 
surrounds it—where Jeannette took me early in the summer to sample 
some freshwater plankton. One humid afternoon mid-July, I stopped 
there again on my way back to the lab from the life sciences library. It was 
quiet here, save for the rhythmic cheet of the frogs hidden in the reeds. 
Dragonflies, their race even older than the horseshoe crabs’, periodically 
swooped and dipped across the water, as fluid and precise as terns. Slightly 
less often an undergraduate would pass by. Out in the center of the pond, a 
monumental carp tried to blend in, making the most of an odd situation.

Other than these creatures, though, the murky pond seemed 
perfectly still from where I stood, empty. The sun was so bright that 
everything looked slightly blasted. I lay down on the soggy ground, my 
face so close to the water that I had to breathe shallowly to keep from 
rippling it, and the pond woke up, suddenly metabolizing hard. A school 
of alevins pulsed by, rushing and slowing like blood in an artery. The floor 
of the pond was tawny and matted, dotted with bubbles of oxygen excreted 
by algae. At intervals a bubble flew up and popped silently at the surface,
rebuilding the earth’s atmosphere. A clan of tiny snails migrated inexorably over the spiky underwater plants. I had read just that morning that some aquatic snails could glide upside down on the underside of a pond’s surface, hanging off the surface tension; now I watched, gaping, as a snail twisted itself off a high leaf, maneuvering glacially, and cruised off in just that way, grazing like an upside-down sheep. A legion of ants found my toes after just a minute or two, scurrying over the silt I lay on. Something that looked suspiciously like an ant ambled along underwater.

My jeans were still damp when I got back to the lab. A plastic bucket of leftover pond water an inch or two deep had been sitting in the corner of our sink ever since Jeannette and I took that sample a month earlier. I had been plainly neglecting it; now I started eyeing it more curiously. A few largish bits of pond bottom still sat in the waste water. With an eyedropper I transferred a few teaspoonfuls into a petri dish and slipped it onto the microscope stage. I looked through and teased the dish from side to side with my fingers to bring the bits of sludge into view. At this magnification they opened up like a great three-dimensional forest; and they were inhabited.

It was like stumbling into Brigadoon. The waste bucket had been, to the best of my knowledge—to the extent I thought about it—waiting inertly in the sink for me to wash it out. It was the waste bucket after all, the water out of which we had filtered the interesting animals like copepods. But a fragment of the pond had been carrying on its business there all this time, dreadfully out of context, and now lay scrambled in a
petri dish, illuminated harshly from below. I was mesmerized. Creatures like transparent cigars curved themselves through apertures in the vegetation, seamlessly controlled. Paramecia cruised in long arcs through the clearings, rotating slowly, grandly, around their long axes, their profiles shifting sensuously.

I slid the dish a quarter of an inch. One darker creature shaped entirely like a caterpillar, stubby legs and all, crawled up a plant fiber. It bumbled, but with a certain delicacy, like an elephant on tiptoe. I plucked out a strand of my hair and lay it across the microscope field to check its width against the caterpillar’s length. About one third.

Almost everything swimming swam fast enough to escape from my field of view in only a few seconds. Thus I launched into a game I had learned to play with the copepods, of tracking the animals as best I could with the eyedropper, siphoning them up, and depositing them in droplets in a fresh petri dish, so that they were effectively caged and couldn’t wander off. It was a maddening endeavor—the mouth of the eyedropper was dozens of times larger than the creatures I sought, and its intrusion scattered everything—but the process was punctuated by frozen moments of success in which I stared awestruck at one of these tiny, hungry lives, bobbling in circles under my gaze.*

With care one can wick away the water in one of these droplets

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*Berger, on the subject of caged zoo animals: “The space which they inhabit is artificial. Hence their tendency to bundle towards the edge of it. (Beyond its edges there may be real space.)”
until the animal inside is barely surrounded and can’t move at all. This is useful for studying their anatomy, or for gluing them to things. One series of experiments by Jeannette and her collaborators involved supergluing copepods to thin wires or strands of hair, in order to watch the currents they set up in the water to draw algae or prey animals toward their mouths. They create these currents by paddling their many legs.

As it swims and hovers, the copepod’s laminar feeding current takes the unstable nature of small-scale turbulence, organizes it, and makes the domain a familiar territory within which signals can be specified in time and space...giving the copepod early warning of the approach of a prey, predator, or mate.

Seen from the outside, the act of gluing copepods to wires and videotaping them resembles the copepods’ own behavior: a matter of organizing an unstable environment into a familiar territory, squeezing predictive power over one’s neighbors from a turbulent landscape.

I isolated one ovoid creature in a drop, its surface delicately vented, its innards full of earth-tone organelles, and started drawing the water off, to try to convince it to stop wheeling and sit still. The edges of its drop released tiny beads of water as they shrank smoothly across the plastic; I could just see the twisted-up corner of the Kimwipe I was using to wick up the water through the microscope. Then my hand vibrated and the drop was gone, vacuumed up. I searched frantically over the Kimwipe for my charge, thinking I might be able to reanimate him, but I found no trace. I dumped the forest in the petri dish back into the waste bucket, switched off the microscope, and left sullenly to do some more programming at my workstation. A few days later I tossed out the water in the bushes and
washed out the bucket.

All summer long, as I kidnapped plankton from Roth Pond and Stony Brook Harbor to the lab and subjected them to such extremities, I found my behavior strange, a bit distasteful; I seldom left the microscope stool exactly happy. Yet I persisted, without much to say for myself. I thought sometimes of a scene from John Burroughs, normally so pacific. He’s relating how once on a November day he dug out the four-foot tunnel leading to a chipmunk’s burrow, and found a full two quarts of wild buckwheat seeds in the larder. “Think of the amount of patient labor required,” he exclaims. “Probably every seed was husked with those deft little hands and teeth as it was gathered, before it went into his cheek pockets, but what a task it must have been!” Then he adds, “Digging the little fellow out, of course, brought ruin upon his house, and I think the Muse of Natural History contemplated the scene with many compunctions of conscience,—if she has any conscience, which I am inclined to doubt.”

I was starting to wonder about the status of my own. The morning of the day I left Indian Island—during the interval in which the tick sucked at my shoulder and I hadn’t realized it yet—I was wading with Vanessa at the advancing edge of the tide on Peconic Bay. We stood on a dot of beach down a short scramble path from some picnic tables; shady land faced us from across a narrow inlet. A school of alevins pooled, indecisive, halfway between my ankles and a patch of half-submerged beachgrass beside me. I was in love with alevins this week. I wanted to
look at them. I lunged at them with cupped hands, trying every trick I could think of to catch one.

Vanessa, who’s studied marine biology a lot longer than I have, was displeased with me. “How would you like it if some giant person came down and scooped you up...?”

“I know.” I tried cornering them against the shoreline. No go; they slipped away.

“Just leave them alone.”

“I know.” I tried cutting off their escape route with my legs; they dodged me and dashed to regroup. I was losing patience with them.

“You’re just exploiting the difference in size between you, your power—”

“I know!” I knew: I knew very well that you don’t treat animals like toys, that there’s no honor and little point to an investigation that does, that a deeper satisfaction lies in keeping one’s distance and sneaking glances as the animals allow.

Rightfully, none of our dealings with animals are purely up to us. They are always exchanges, negotiations. Scratching a mopey dog behind the ears in a campground, clawing at a tick, chasing a young fish through the water: each is its own kind of bodily conversation, in which we may speak harshly or gently, as we choose. Animals respond to us as we fit into their categories, just as we respond to them: I become a tank of warm blood or a particularly ponderous aquatic predator, depending on the circumstances. A domestic dog, I imagine, responds to me from within a
muskier version of my own social awareness. I feel it’s good for me to enumerate the list of things I become for the animals I interact with. I do it to remind myself that I am, by my birthright, as multiple and convoluted as they are, and also to remind myself how ponderous a predator, how much like a domestic pet, I really am.

Case in point: I’m reading in my landlady’s backyard one afternoon. Some squirrels go about their business nearby, foraging in the dead leaves like paramecia. A handsome male sparrow lights in a tree, looking about. I see it and I tense and strain at it from my chair, trying to will us into contact, trying to will something into happening—the sparrow hops to a lower branch and flies off. I don’t think it noticed me there at all. I sit back, embarrassed by my desperation.

I realize suddenly how much the way I gawked at that sparrow reminds me of my family dog, who will spot a squirrel nibbling a seed on our back fence and freeze, wriggling on her feet, squeaking a bit, trembling with longing. Sometimes she begins to stalk, creeping toward the squirrel with a half-remembered skill she never actually learned. She’s never come close to catching one. I can’t imagine what she’d do with a squirrel if she ever succeeded—or what I’d do with an alevin slapping about in my palm—but stare and stalk we do.

The Muse of Natural History, if that’s who urges me on, does indeed seem low on conscience. What she seems high on is simple, toothy carnivory. Good breeding, in any species, only goes so far: suburban dogs and suburban humans alike still carry their ancestry in their hearts and
paws. I wager that any reason Burroughs has for wrecking a chipmunk’s larder, any reason I have for straining at a sparrow, if it’s been concocted in the last ten thousand years, can only be a new coat of paint on a more basic need. Hunger is hunger: at root, all modes of communion run together.

There’s the famous passage in Walden in which Thoreau writes,

> As I came home through the woods...I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw: not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented. Once or twice, however, while I lived at the pond, I found myself ranging the woods, like a half-starved hound, with a strange abandonment, seeking some kind of venison which I might devour, and no morsel could have been too savage for me.

And this from Thoreau, the walking classical allusion, who introduces us so genteelly to his “brute neighbors” at Walden. Even the most virtuous, the most civilized, by their inheritance, track mud and blood from the wilderness into the sterile lab, the barnyard, the gaily painted zoo.

There remains the continual temptation, though, to try to opt out of our desires and the metabolic mess, to wash and manicure ourselves and the animals, too, while we’re at it. Cleaning up the animals generally means overwhelming our negotiations with them with sheer power—not the kind of power exercised by a carnivore woven into a landscape’s ecology, but a power less descriminate, more bludgeon-like. Baudrillard, in fact, describes laboratory biology as a kind of modern Inquisition, an effort to wring from the animals a confession of rationality—rationality being a particular kind of behavioral and anatomical neatness. Often this effort relies on our powerful technologies, like eyedroppers; but often it proceeds
perfectly barehanded. I think sometimes of Darwin pondering the iguanas on the Galápagos by throwing them.

“The usual length of a full-grown one is about a yard, but there are some even four feet long.... Their tails are flattened sideways, and all four feet partially webbed,” he begins, the careful, detached observer.

I threw one several times as far as I could, into a deep pool left by the retiring tide; but it invariably returned in a direct line to the spot where I stood. It swam near the bottom, with a very graceful and rapid movement, and occasionally aided itself over the uneven ground with its feet.... I several times caught this same lizard, [and] nothing would induce it to enter the water; and as often as I threw it in, it returned in the manner above described.

A farcical scene, and rather elemental. A scaled animal warms itself on a rock; a furry animal throws it into the water; the scaled animal crawls back onto the rock; the furry one throws it back into the water; the cycle repeats until the sun swallows up the earth. It’s a picture of the life of the world with the center missing—an empty exchange, the wheels of the great metabolism running full tilt with nothing being metabolized. The characters get a glazed look in their eyes and forget what the story is about.

Darwin on the Galápagos, dreaming of animals that make sense and thus throwing the iguanas—dreaming also of birds and tortoises that cared more for him. It isn’t just logic that we pursue so ponderously: the dog collar is as potent an instrument as the eyedropper. It recasts relationships in our terms just as thoroughly. But when was the natural world ever without its own logic? When did the animals ever turn their backs on us?

Why do we feel we have to grab at them so rudely?

Irenaus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, a biologist, writes that
[r]hesus monkeys isolated from birth prefer pictures of their own species which are projected onto the walls of their cage to other pictures. They emit contact sounds, invite them to play, and when the projection is switched off they quickly learn how to project these pictures for themselves by pressing a lever.

Raise an intelligent, sensitive animal in pathological conditions and you produce a pathological animal. We are not only the experimenters in this scenario, but also the experimented-upon. Most of us, too, in our own way, have been isolated from birth; and the spectacle of Darwin throwing his iguanas, or me pawing at my alevins, or a doctor removing the claws from an anesthetized housecat, starts to look like scenes from the desperate fantasy life these rhesus monkeys fall into.

Isolated from birth: I’m referring to the estrangement of a culture that hides its bodily negotiations with the animals in the coat closet, forgets there was anything to hide, and then laments that the room has gotten so quiet—an inorganic, rectilinear culture that in its aversion to the real, messy stuff of the world, has taken to projecting images of itself onto every living body in sight—a heady culture that has forgotten almost absolutely how to speak with beings who aren’t as heady as it is. I’m speaking, that is, of my own estrangement when I yearn so hard for signs of an inquisitive, friendly mind behind the sparrow’s short face, instead of tossing him some seed or just letting him be.

“What have we been doing all these centuries,” asks Dillard, “but trying to call God back to the mountain, or, failing that, raise a peep out of anything that isn’t us? What is the difference between a cathedral and a physics lab? Are not they both saying: Hello?”
The cathedral and the physics lab: as Shepard notes, our fixations all lead us to the infinitely great and the infinitely small, the cosmic and the subatomic, while pulling our eyes from the burgeoning middle ground, the world of fertile, kicking bodies. We show up at the great dinner party but spend the evening climbing on the chandeliers in search of someone to talk to. We’re still aware, dimly, that there are other members of the family out there; we watch the lions and springboks on PBS and stridently save the whales; but these things have become human dramas projected onto other bodies, the glory of battle, the long suffering of the innocent. The bodies’ own dramas get lost in the shuffle.

“I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them,” cries Thoreau from high on Mt. Ktaadn in Maine. “What is this Titan that has possession of me?” It’s as if he woke up from a daydream and found himself wearing someone else’s clothes. But bodies aren’t clothes, they aren’t carrying cases; they’re us. Who is this “me” he’s referring to? He flies on:

Talk of mysteries! — Think of our life in nature, — daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, —rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact!
Contact! Who are we? where are we?

On his way to making this scene, he says he and his companions walked over the “savage and awful, but beautiful” land with “a certain awe, stopping, from time to time, to pick the blueberries which grew there, and had a smart and spicy taste.” I like to think that Thoreau was still munching on a handful of blueberries as he stood there crying out for Contact. Bears and sparrows like blueberries too. Let’s hear it for food.
Ticks won’t spurn us on account of our feelings. I can shrink away from them in revulsion, I can ogle them through an electron microscope, I can work out schemes for keeping them and their diseases off my livestock—it makes no difference, something about me will still smell salivatingly good to a tick. I take this as a glorious, redeeming fact. It says that no estrangement is final: throw an iguana and inexplicably it returns, “graceful and rapid,” to your feet, the eternal second chance.

Each of us, each body that hunts and plans and squeals, is a junction point among cycles of exchange. We are upthrust from the earth like mountains, preen and recycle our parts for a while, and finally erode away. A crab grows in its medium, and then at some shock—the sweep of my hand, or a crash onto the rocks from a gull’s mouth—its elements disengage, and wander into someone else’s tissues. It’ll happen to you.

Thus no matter how good we’ve become at simulating the outsider’s perspective, peering at our bodies like we’ve never seen them before, we’re in the thick of the carnival crowd, getting shoved this way and that. What can we do? Stomp off to sulk in the corner with our mechanical toys, as if we’ve outgrown the tick and the seagull’s kind of roughhousing? It is possible to live less insulated than we do. A peasant, said Berger, becomes fond of his pig and then is glad to eat him. James Fernandez, an anthropologist, worked in northern Spain among cattle-keeping villagers who live in quarters directly above their dark, pungent stables. During the day and during the summer, when the cows are out, family life shifts outside as well. At night, Fernandez writes,
[t]he family is attentive to the signs rising from the dark below: the shifting of weight, the rubbing of a flank against a post, the signs of the laborious bedding down, an unexpected bovine cough or eructation, and even the sound of a new calf suckling. One senses that the family is about as attentive to these nether regions as they are to their own visceral processes....

One villager flings open his stable doors and exclaims, “Ye un paraiso verda!” (“It’s a paradise, isn’t it!”). It’s the oldest paradise, the only Eden that ever existed: the world as digestive system, bulky and warm.

“Above all,” Fernandez says, “the cow is a symbol of satiety.” The satiety of the cow that sates the human is the method to the carnival’s madness: natural violence produces death and round bellies both, in a smooth undulation. Despite appearances, bodily life is never a chaos—and, consequently, never free and easy either. The animals have never wandered, writes Baudrillard. They riot, but with a quiet precision. No wilderness: there is nothing on the earth but circumscribed, well-trammeled territories, the grounds on which we chase each other’s tails, and exchange what we exchange.