

## 25 EXISTENTIAL ENCOUNTERS WITH WILDLIFE (July 2020)

Gardening this year in Houdetot with less noise in the village due to the lock-down, we have been aware more than ever of our nesting birds, who have colonised every nook. There were no hedges, shrubs, trees or flower beds when we arrived here in 1991, and consequently few birds. As the garden spaces developed over the years, birds came flocking. House-martins and sparrows are busy under the eaves of the main house; pigeons and doves (and bats) beneath the Charretterie, the ‘Old Waggon Shed’ that we saved from collapse and now rent out to holidaymakers; woodpeckers in a hollowed out cranny in a cherry tree; blackbirds and thrushes in the bushes behind. Hordes of tits, finches and many more unidentified (we’re so lazy and ignorant) little birds prowl around discreetly. The dawn chorus (when we’re awake to hear it) would swell the Albert Hall with its melodic din. What with the toads pinging like little electric alarms and frogs barking and bellowing out their lust in and around the village pond adjoining our ancient farmyard, there is much noisy excitement at this time of the year.

I was reminded of an incident last year that I can only describe as *existential* – one that might have stopped even Jean-Paul Sartre in his tracks and have caused him to re-evaluate himself as a human being (I like the French saying, “*Un con vivant, malheureusement, est plus intelligent qu’un intellectuel mort*” – Frédéric Dard). The event was trivial enough – I was having a discreet pee behind the enormous laurel hedge which we planted to block the westerly winds, when a thrush landed on a small branch within arm’s reach and stared at me accusingly. It was then that I saw the nest right behind her, almost hidden within the hedge at eye-level. Her bravery was absolute. I had only just started so couldn’t easily apologise and depart just like that. She waited for me, beadily challenging me to make a move if I dared. I still recall the calm courage in her black ball-point eyes. She didn’t stir or flutter in alarm, although I could now hear the spirited chirruping of her little family behind, all excited that mum was there (with food, they must have been hoping). I finished and slunk off, apologetic but thoughtful, too, about the significance of the encounter.

Of course, all animals show courage in protecting their young. They have alarm calls and will always instinctively try to defend their families. This was different. The thrush quite deliberately *took me on*. I could have easily touched or grabbed hold of her. But she thought, mistakenly, that I had seen the nest and had designs on it, and my continued presence spelt imminent danger for her family, and for her especially. She fixed me balefully with her bright black eyes and seemed to be... daring me? *willing me?* ...to desist. At all events, she was fully engaging with me as another *animal*, another *being*, in a way that I found directly personal. And she showed absolutely no panic, no fear or fluster.

Wittgenstein famously conjectured in his *Philosophical Investigations* (somewhere in Part 2...) that “If a lion could speak we should not be able to understand it”. It was less the case here, I felt - I was clearly being *told* by this bird’s eyes alone, for she made no sound, “Just you TRY, *matey!* You’ll have me to deal with – and incidentally, do you *have* to expose yourself so close to my children?”

As part atonement, I have included the short poem I wrote then to try to explore my reaction to this pivotal moment - for her - of direct engagement with another planetary life-form (me) posing a massive threat. (See APPENDIX). From my point of view, it was not just an everyday encounter, where say, a wild bird has flown into a room, panics, and you try to help it escape. There was something primal, visceral even, about that long minute of direct and challenging, personal involvement between her and me.

This almost existential aspect of how we sometimes experience and reflect on our encounters with wildlife (as opposed to our more familiar dogs, cats, tadpoles, budgerigars...) is present in the following two poems which I sometimes used to get pupils to try to compare critically.

I don't wish to pre-empt your readings, so I'll attach my thoughts after each poem.



### Two Look at Two by Robert Frost

Love and forgetting might have carried them  
 A little further up the mountain side  
 With night so near, but not much further up.  
 They must have halted soon in any case  
 With thoughts of a path back, how rough it was  
 With rock and washout, and unsafe in darkness;  
 When they were halted by a tumbled wall  
 With barbed-wire binding. They stood facing this,  
 Spending what onward impulse they still had  
 In one last look the way they must not go,  
 On up the failing path, where, if a stone  
 Or earthslide moved at night, it moved itself;  
 No footstep moved it. 'This is all,' they sighed,

'Good-night to woods.' But not so; there was more.  
 A doe from round a spruce stood looking at them  
 Across the wall, as near the wall as they.  
 She saw them in their field, they her in hers.  
 The difficulty of seeing what stood still,  
 Like some up-ended boulder split in two,  
 Was in her clouded eyes; they saw no fear there.  
 She seemed to think that two thus they were safe.  
 Then, as if they were something that, though strange,  
 She could not trouble her mind with too long,  
 She sighed and passed unscared along the wall.  
 'This, then, is all. What more is there to ask?'  
 But no, not yet. A snort to bid them wait.  
 A buck from round the spruce stood looking at them  
 Across the wall as near the wall as they.  
 This was an antlered buck of lusty nostril,  
 Not the same doe come back into her place.  
 He viewed them quizzically with jerks of head,  
 As if to ask, 'Why don't you make some motion?  
 Or give some sign of life? Because you can't.  
 I doubt if you're as living as you look.'  
 Thus till he had them almost feeling dared  
 To stretch a proffering hand -- and a spell-breaking.  
 Then he too passed unscared along the wall.  
 Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.  
 'This must be all.' It was all. Still they stood,  
 A great wave from it going over them,  
 As if the earth in one unlooked-for favour  
 Had made them certain earth returned their love.

Frost's experience is related in a very positive way. In terms of structure, he is using a form that is associated with a tradition going straight back to Wordsworth, of reflections on nature in freely conversational yet disciplined blank verse (ie unrhymed iambic pentameter). Wordsworth famously wrote his great autobiographical poem (or poems, as there are three versions to choose from) "The Prelude" in this form, so our poetic expectations might well be of a similar sort of psychological analysis of events marking the poet's experience of nature.

Here, however, the persona is not alone; he's with someone close to him (probably Elinor Miriam White whom he married in 1895), although he is discreet enough not to elaborate, but merely to suggest their intimacy. The poem starts with "Love and forgetting..." – they are lost to themselves out in the wild somewhere (in Vermont, at a guess, a familiar area for him). The events are described simply and matter-of-factly. They were out on a

ramble up a mountain, too engrossed with each other to think of how late it was and how they might be in some danger, with darkness falling when they were so remote. It is their vulnerability that is stressed here. The ‘they’ sounds very much like a ‘we’, for as readers we are given their thoughts:

‘This is all,’ they sighed,  
‘Goodnight to woods.’

This is the first stage of their delight and wonder, which is nevertheless fairly low-key, although much is hinted at. They would like to have wandered further, and we have a sense of the pleasure they were gaining from this beautiful remoteness and their regret at having to leave. I like the reflection,

On up the failing path, where, if a stone  
Or earthslide moved at night, it moved itself...

a sort of recognition that nature as a whole is strange and sometimes unfathomable.

It’s significant that it’s a *man-made* obstruction that stops them from advancing: the “tumbled wall” and “barbed-wire binding”. The caesura, the pause in the middle of the line with its *full-stop*, marks out poetically their blocked path.

And then comes the ordinary, but also extraordinary encounter. Like two mirror images of each other, both ‘couples’ (for they are standing watching, and being watched by, a pair of deer, a buck and a roe) take in each other. Surprisingly, the two animals are not afraid, perhaps having spotted that they are separated from any danger by the wall. The phrase, “She sighed and passed unscared along the wall” marks a second stage of awe and delight:

“This, then, is all. What more is there to ask?”

What’s interesting is that the human couple are already treating the animals as if they have minds and reactions that are human. We are certainly into Wittgenstein “lion” territory here with the guessed-at thoughts of the buck which follow. And far from being patronising, Frost makes the human couple, amusingly, seem inferior if anything. Obviously, this is the persona’s (the poet’s) thoughts as he tries to ‘read’ the thoughts of the male deer:

As if to ask, 'Why don't you make some motion?  
Or give some sign of life? Because you can't.  
I doubt if you're as living as you look.'

The poet (as I did) feels almost challenged:

Thus till he had them almost feeling dared  
To stretch a proffering hand -- and a spell-breaking.

I love the bare simplicity and yet the *momentousness* in the phrase that sums up the event:

Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.  
'This must be all.' It was all.

And there is something very moving about how this experience seemed to confirm them (the human couple) in their “love” for each other, as if they were linked together by nature - a sense that it is a two-way thing and that humans are not necessarily ‘above’ nature, but bound by the same laws of attraction, curiosity and even acceptance.

The last lines leave us with a very positive sense of belonging, with “love” finishing the poem, just as it began the poem. Only, here, one could say, there would now certainly be no “forgetting”.

The next poem, by Lawrence, takes place also in a very remote environment – the Lobo Canyon in New Mexico; only here, the encounter is with a wild animal, a mountain lion, (or lioness) who is dead, shot by humans.



### **The Mountain Lion** by D.H. Lawrence (1885 -1930)

Climbing through the January snow, into the Lobo canyon  
Dark grow the spruce-trees, blue is the balsam, water sounds  
still unfrozen, and the trail is still evident.

Men!  
 Two men!  
 Men! The only animal in the world to fear!

They hesitate.  
 We hesitate.  
 They have a gun.  
 We have no gun.

Then we all advance, to meet.

Two Mexicans, strangers, emerging out of the dark and snow  
 and inwardness of the Lobo valley.  
 What are you doing here on this vanishing trail'?

What is he carrying?  
 Something yellow.  
 A deer?

*Que tiene, amigo?*

*Leon -*

He smiles, foolishly, as if he were caught doing wrong.  
 And we smile, foolishly, as if we didn't know.  
 He is quite gentle and dark-faced.

It is a mountain lion,  
 A long, long slim cat, yellow like a lioness.  
 Dead.  
 He trapped her this morning, he says, smiling foolishly.

Lift up her face,  
 Her round, bright face, bright as frost.  
 Her round, fine-fashioned head, with two dead ears;  
 And stripes in the brilliant frost of her face, sharp, fine dark rays,  
 Dark, keen, fine eyes in the brilliant frost of her face.  
 Beautiful dead eyes.

*Hermoso es!*

They go out towards the open;  
 We go on into the gloom of Lobo.

And above the trees I found her lair,  
 A hole in the blood-orange brilliant rocks that stick up, a little cave,  
 And bones, and twigs, and a perilous ascent.

So, she will never leap up that way again, with the yellow  
 flash of a mountain lion's long shoot!  
 And her bright striped frost-face will never watch any more,  
 out of the shadow of the cave in the blood-orange rock,  
 Above the trees of the Lobo dark valley-mouth!

Instead, I look out.  
 And out to the dim of the desert, like a dream, never real;  
 To the snow of the Sangre de Cristo mountains, the ice of  
 the mountains of Picoris,  
 And near across at the opposite steep of snow, green trees  
 motionless standing in snow, like a Christmas toy.

And I think in this empty world there was room for me and  
 a mountain lion.  
 And I think in the world beyond, how easily we might spare  
 a million or two of humans  
 And never miss them.  
 Yet what a gap in the world, the missing white frost-face of  
 that slim yellow mountain lion!

Here the scene is clearly and vividly located (in quite a detailed fashion) for us at the beginning, but the easy, prose-like description is soon dramatically interrupted. Lawrence's free verse is very effective for giving thoughts, dialogue, dramatic tension as well as description. The interruptions, the pauses, all work economically in building up this drama.

Comparing it with Frost's encounter, we notice that Lawrence locates the poem more geographically. The Sangre de Cristo mountains have a very evocative name, but we also get the month, the precision of the plants and the location of the lion's lair. The "we", as in Frost, is left undefined. The other member(s?) of the hike are (similarly to the Frost poem) left out of the picture.

The drama and uneasiness of the situation is well drawn:

He smiles, foolishly, as if he were caught doing wrong.  
 And we smile, foolishly, as if we didn't know.  
 He is quite gentle and dark-faced.

Lawrence, like Frost, gives an almost human dimension to the lion, but in a very different way.

Lift up her face,  
 Her round, bright face, bright as frost.  
 Her round, fine-fashioned head, with two dead ears;  
 And stripes in the brilliant frost of her face, sharp, fine dark rays,  
 Dark, keen, fine eyes in the brilliant frost of her face.  
 Beautiful dead eyes.

Here is where Lawrence characteristically starts whittling away, repeating and honing his descriptions (maybe a little too much) for emphasis. The “her” and the “bright face, bright as frost”, repeated several times build up a feeling of his fascination with her ‘femininity’, and thus, by implication, her vulnerability. Yet, there is a lurking ambiguity here. Why does he write, “A long, long slim cat, yellow *like* a lioness” (my italics)? Is he just assuming that because it is a cat, feline and “slim”, he can just *assign* the animal a gender that he finds convenient? I note that he ends the poem with “lion” rather than “lioness” and the title is very clearly “Mountain Lion”. If this switch of gender is deliberate, as opposed to just being careless, then it seems to signal that all of his speculation is based on the animal *seeming* to be female, as if he hankers after those particularly feminine qualities: slimness, chilly beauty, solitariness, a hint of danger, vulnerability. There is also ambiguity in the “frost” (negative, lifeless) and “bright as...”, “brilliant” and later “bright striped frost-face” (positive). In death, this ‘female’ seems to assume even more beauty as a result, and by the end Lawrence almost appears to be *attracted* to this beautiful dead female!

Most crucially, and very unlike Frost’s realisation that the world is a place where nature reinforces ‘love’, Lawrence’s summing up of what the encounter has meant for him, leads to quite a dark and, I think, morally suspect reflection:

....how easily we might spare a million or two of humans  
 And never miss them.  
 Yet what a gap in the world, the missing white frost-face of  
 that slim yellow mountain lion!

This isn’t the first time that Lawrence has complained in his poetry that there are too many people on the planet for his liking, eg:

There are too many people on earth  
 insipid, unsalted, rabbity, endlessly hopping,  
 They nibble the face of the earth to a desert.

The very thought, to “spare a million or two of humans And not miss them”, is not really worthy of him. Would he, for example, count *himself* amongst this large number of humans to be euphemistically “spared” (ie not *spared*, so much as conveniently *wiped out*)? And so, although brilliantly vivid and written - seemingly “in the heat” of the moment, seemingly full of empathy, his visceral, emotional response to the incident – in the end, the poem leaves me with a bad taste in the mouth.



My dear friend Ag recently sent me Geoff Dyer's "Out of Sheer Rage", a very amusing book, purportedly a "study of D.H. Lawrence" but more a study of Geoff Dyer *attempting* to write a study of Lawrence, with, along the way, many highly interesting reflections about Lawrence as he travelled about the world, searching for somewhere he could reside and call home, while he, Dyer and his girlfriend, are similarly wandering in Lawrence's footsteps, wondering about their own voyaging.

Lawrence's best poems, I think, are when he is taken out of himself and when he responds less self-consciously, to animals particularly, as in "Snake", for example, or "The Blue Jay". He can become so terribly turgid and didactic when he is banging on about himself or the state of the world, as he does quite a lot of the time. As Geoff Dyer notes very well, anger and frustration come easily to Lawrence (just as they do to himself, Dyer!): you only have to check out a poem like "How Beastly the Bourgeois Are" to see Lawrence's inner rage.

.....

How beastly the bourgeois is  
especially the male of the species -

Nicely groomed, like a mushroom  
standing there so sleek and erect and eyeable--  
and like a fungus, living on the remains of a bygone life  
sucking his life out of the dead leaves of greater life  
than his own.

And even so, he's stale, he's been there too long.  
Touch him, and you'll find he's all gone inside  
just like an old mushroom, all wormy inside, and hollow  
under a smooth skin and an upright appearance.

Full of seething, wormy, hollow feelings  
rather nasty -  
How beastly the bourgeois is!

Standing in their thousands, these appearances, in damp  
England  
what a pity they can't all be kicked over  
like sickening toadstools, and left to melt back, swiftly  
into the soil of England.

There are too many rants in too many of the poems. I prefer his short stories, where his real genius, I think, is to be found (eg "Fanny and Annie", "Odour of Chrysanthemums or "Strike Pay").

Here is "The Blue Jay", however, where the touch is lighter:

### *The Blue Jay*

The blue jay with a crest on his head  
Comes round the cabin in the snow.  
He runs in the snow like a bit of blue metal,  
Turning his back on everything.

From the pine-tree that towers and hisses like a pillar of shaggy cloud  
Immense above the cabin  
Comes a strident laugh as we approach, this little black dog and I.  
So halts the little black bitch on four spread paws in the snow  
And looks up inquiringly into the pillar of cloud,  
With a tinge of misgiving.  
*Ca-a-a!* comes the scrape of ridicule out of the tree.

*What voice of the Lord is that, from the tree of smoke?*  
Oh Bibbles, little black bitch in the snow,  
With a pinch of snow in the groove of your silly snub nose.  
What do you look at *me* for?  
What do you look at me for, with such misgiving?

It's the blue jay laughing at us.  
It's the blue jay jeering at us, Bibs.

Every day since the snow is here  
The blue jay paces round the cabin, very busy, picking up bits,  
Turning his back on us all,  
And bobbing his thick dark crest about the snow, as if darkly saying:  
*I ignore those folk who look out.*

You acid-blue metallic bird,  
You thick bird with a strong crest  
Who are you?  
Whose boss are you, with all your bully way?  
You copper-sulphate blue-bird!

Wittgenstein's lion is stalking even here, as the poet and the dog are stopped in their tracks by the jeering jay! Where the poem succeeds is in its sense of immediacy, of the poet's unmediated, almost unmeditated response to the bird. The details are so sharp! This is not, again, what I would call an 'existential' encounter, in the way that I think the Frost poem counts as one, but I like it for its inconsequentiality. Lawrence cannot help giving the jay negative human (and male) characteristics – "Whose boss are you, with all your bully way?" and he turns the bird into something almost industrialised ("acid-blue metallic", "copper-sulphate blue-bird").

He has a lot of spleen to vent, as Geoff Dyer is good at reminding us! In a sense, the good humour aimed at Bibbles breaks down as Lawrence launches his sudden anger at this (male – “he”) presumptuous bird, who has the effrontery to mock and sneer at *them*. He must have felt a lurking sense of inferiority or insecurity to assume so readily that the jay’s noise was personally directed at ‘Bibs’ and himself. And his anger drives him to portray the jay as *unnatural* – “acid-blue metallic” - rather than seeing that if anyone is unnatural (civilised, socialised etc) it is Bibbles and himself.

Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney, in more recent times, have also written of wild animals and we could, if we wanted, compare, for example, “Trout” by Heaney and “Pike” by Hughes

### **Trout** by Seamus Heaney

Hangs, a fat gun-barrel,  
deep under arched bridges  
or slips like butter down  
the throat of the river.

From the depths smooth-skinned as plums  
his muzzle gets bull’s eye;  
picks off grass-seed and moths  
that vanish, torpedoed.

Where water unravels  
over gravel-beds he  
is fired from the shallows  
white belly reporting

flat; darts like a tracer-  
bullet back between stones  
and is never burnt out.  
A volley of cold blood

ramrodding the current.

### **PIKE** by Ted Hughes

Pike, three inches long, perfect  
Pike in all parts, green tigering the gold.  
Killers from the egg: the malevolent aged grin.  
They dance on the surface among the flies.

Or move, stunned by their own grandeur,  
 Over a bed of emerald, silhouette  
 Of submarine delicacy and horror.  
 A hundred feet long in their world.

In ponds, under the heat-struck lily pads -  
 Gloom of their stillness:  
 Logged on last year's black leaves, watching upwards.  
 Or hung in an amber cavern of weeds

The jaws' hooked clamp and fangs  
 Not to be changed at this date:  
 A life subdued to its instrument;  
 The gills kneading quietly, and the pectorals.

Three we kept behind glass,  
 Jungled in weed: three inches, four,  
 And four and a half: fed fry to them -  
 Suddenly there were two. Finally one

With a sag belly and the grin it was born with.  
 And indeed they spare nobody.  
 Two, six pounds each, over two feet long  
 High and dry and dead in the willow-herb -

One jammed past its gills down the other's gullet:  
 The outside eye stared: as a vice locks -  
 The same iron in his eye  
 Though its film shrank in death.

A pond I fished, fifty yards across,  
 Whose lilies and muscular tench  
 Had outlasted every visible stone  
 Of the monastery that planted them-

Stilled legendary depth:  
 It was as deep as England. It held  
 Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old  
 That past nightfall I dared not cast

But silently cast and fished  
 With the hair frozen on my head  
 For what might move, for what eye might move.  
 The still splashes on the dark pond,

Owls hushing the floating woods  
 Frail on my ear against the dream  
 Darkness beneath night's darkness had freed,  
 That rose slowly toward me, watching.

Of the two, Hughes' poem is the more personal, perhaps, as he describes a night's fishing for this mythical monster. He might appear to be scared, but I don't think that either of these two poems counts as an encounter as such, nor as *existential*. Both are more meditations on the fishes' essential, generic characteristics rather than a particular encounter as such. That's not to say they aren't good and interesting poems; "Pike" certainly shows Hughes as unusually, and uncharacteristically, *cowed*, which is something!

Here, however, is a final poem to consider, by Elizabeth Bishop, and I think it quite brilliantly fits the bill, for me at least. Apparently, it took her twenty years to write and is set in Nova Scotia, where Bishop, when very young, was brought up by her maternal grandparents. Her father died when she was eighteen months old, driving her mother into mental illness that led to her being institutionalised for the rest of her life. Poor little Elizabeth Bishop was only five. Grace Bulmer Bowers, to whom the poem is dedicated, was an aunt who helped bring her up.



## **The Moose**

BY ELIZABETH BISHOP

For Grace Bulmer Bowers

From narrow provinces  
 of fish and bread and tea,  
 home of the long tides  
 where the bay leaves the sea  
 twice a day and takes

the herrings long rides,

where if the river  
enters or retreats  
in a wall of brown foam  
depends on if it meets  
the bay coming in,  
the bay not at home;

where, silted red,  
sometimes the sun sets  
facing a red sea,  
and others, veins the flats'  
lavender, rich mud  
in burning rivulets;

on red, gravelly roads,  
down rows of sugar maples,  
past clapboard farmhouses  
and neat, clapboard churches,  
bleached, ridged as clamshells,  
past twin silver birches,

through late afternoon  
a bus journeys west,  
the windshield flashing pink,  
pink glancing off of metal,  
brushing the dented flank  
of blue, beat-up enamel;

down hollows, up rises,  
and waits, patient, while  
a lone traveller gives  
kisses and embraces  
to seven relatives  
and a collie supervises.

Goodbye to the elms,  
to the farm, to the dog.  
The bus starts. The light  
grows richer; the fog,  
shifting, salty, thin,  
comes closing in.

Its cold, round crystals  
form and slide and settle

in the white hens' feathers,  
in gray glazed cabbages,  
on the cabbage roses  
and lupins like apostles;

the sweet peas cling  
to their wet white string  
on the whitewashed fences;  
bumblebees creep  
inside the foxgloves,  
and evening commences.

One stop at Bass River.  
Then the Economies—  
Lower, Middle, Upper;  
Five Islands, Five Houses,  
where a woman shakes a tablecloth  
out after supper.

A pale flickering. Gone.  
The Tantramar marshes  
and the smell of salt hay.  
An iron bridge trembles  
and a loose plank rattles  
but doesn't give way.

On the left, a red light  
swims through the dark:  
a ship's port lantern.  
Two rubber boots show,  
illuminated, solemn.  
A dog gives one bark.

A woman climbs in  
with two market bags,  
brisk, freckled, elderly.  
"A grand night. Yes, sir,  
all the way to Boston."  
She regards us amicably.

Moonlight as we enter  
the New Brunswick woods,  
hairy, scratchy, splintery;  
moonlight and mist  
caught in them like lamb's wool

on bushes in a pasture.

The passengers lie back.  
Snores. Some long sighs.  
A dreamy divagation  
begins in the night,  
a gentle, auditory,  
slow hallucination....

In the creakings and noises,  
an old conversation  
—not concerning us,  
but recognizable, somewhere,  
back in the bus:  
Grandparents' voices

uninterruptedly  
talking, in Eternity:  
names being mentioned,  
things cleared up finally;  
what he said, what she said,  
who got pensioned;

deaths, deaths and sicknesses;  
the year he remarried;  
the year (something) happened.  
She died in childbirth.  
That was the son lost  
when the schooner foundered.

He took to drink. Yes.  
She went to the bad.  
When Amos began to pray  
even in the store and  
finally the family had  
to put him away.

“Yes ...” that peculiar  
affirmative. “Yes ...”  
A sharp, indrawn breath,  
half groan, half acceptance,  
that means “Life’s like that.  
We know it (also death).”

Talking the way they talked



in the old featherbed,  
peacefully, on and on,  
dim lamplight in the hall,  
down in the kitchen, the dog  
tucked in her shawl.

Now, it's all right now  
even to fall asleep  
just as on all those nights.  
—Suddenly the bus driver  
stops with a jolt,  
turns off his lights.

A moose has come out of  
the impenetrable wood  
and stands there, looms, rather,  
in the middle of the road.  
It approaches; it sniffs at  
the bus's hot hood.

Towering, antlerless,  
high as a church,  
homely as a house  
(or, safe as houses).  
A man's voice assures us  
"Perfectly harmless...."

Some of the passengers  
exclaim in whispers,  
childishly, softly,  
"Sure are big creatures."  
"It's awful plain."  
"Look! It's a she!"

Taking her time,  
she looks the bus over,  
grand, otherworldly.  
Why, why do we feel  
(we all feel) this sweet  
sensation of joy?

"Curious creatures,"  
says our quiet driver,  
rolling his r's.  
"Look at that, would you."

Then he shifts gears.  
For a moment longer,

by craning backward,  
the moose can be seen  
on the moonlit macadam;  
then there's a dim  
smell of moose, an acrid  
smell of gasoline.

Elizabeth Bishop, "The Moose" from *The Complete Poems*,  
1927-1979. Copyright © 1980 by Elizabeth Bishop.

The first half of the poem builds up a very detailed picture of the social and geographic environment. The bus journeys from the coast towards Boston, leaving the cosy beauty and the domesticity of the coastal ports and villages, with their fishing, farms and cottages. Ordinary people board the bus at various stops as the bus heads into the night and the forested wilderness of "the New Brunswick woods".

Moonlight as we enter  
the New Brunswick woods,  
hairy, scratchy, splintery;  
moonlight and mist  
caught in them like lamb's wool  
on bushes in a pasture.

Here is where the poem changes key a little, and a slightly darker note creeps into the atmosphere. "The grandparents' voices" drone on about the hardships of life "(also death)", but generally the mood in the bus is relaxed and unremarkable.

The arrival of the gigantic moose, that blocks the road and makes the bus come to a halt, could have been a moment of terror. But the description carefully shows us that "she" is unthreatening:

Towering, antlerless,  
high as a church,  
homely as a house  
(or, safe as houses).  
A man's voice assures us  
"Perfectly harmless...."

As the moose considers the bus and the passengers consider (and talk about) the moose), as in the Frost poem, there is a feeling of duality – both sides are taking in each other. And for the human passengers there is a moment of heightened awareness and shared delight (a sort of "*prise de conscience*" in French(?)):

Taking her time,  
 she looks the bus over,  
 grand, otherworldly.  
 Why, why do we feel  
 (we all feel) this sweet  
 sensation of joy?

The poem ends ambiguously with the “moonlit macadam” where human civilisation and nature are combined. As the poet cranes her head to keep the animal in view, we are left with the “dim smell of moose” (positive?) and “an acrid smell of gasoline” (negative?). Nature is tainted by humanity, somewhat.

The moose is not a threat. “High as a church” suggests sanctuary in some way. The encounter breaks into the cosy ordinariness of provincial life with a reminder of the power and “otherness” of nature. It is felt and imagined as a sort of blessing, bestowed by a nature that can, if it wants, be “hairy, scratchy, splintery” and potentially dangerous. “Moonlight and mist” mixes beauty and danger.

I like, also, the informality of the writing, which is more like a jotted memoir or impressionistic diary entry. The six-line stanzas create a casual rhythm to the story of this very particularised journey and the observations of the poet. The dialogue also gives us a sense of the life going on around, creating drama, too.

Here, perhaps, is Emily Dickinson’s “Zero at the Bone” – that lovely phrase she uses at the end of “A narrow Fellow in the Grass”, her own writing about encountering snakes (probably imagined rather than lived, as she describes herself as a “Boy” and “barefoot”, like a sort of Huck Finn). The final phrase “Zero at the Bone” summons up, however, that strange, experiential tingle (here, more like fear) we can get when we are made to realise that humans have a complicated interaction with wildlife. Protected as we are in this very man-dominated world, we need to be reminded of our hubris, our comparative frailty and ignorance, as well as our own animal roots.

I’m sure there are far more poems about *existential* encounters in the wild, but these are quite enough to be going on with. If you have some favourite examples, do send them in for me to ponder.

## APPENDIX

### THRUSH

I had a primal moment yesterday,  
 Almost Lawrentian, so perhaps I'll write  
 About it thus:  
 I was taking a leak against the high laurels  
 In the garden, enjoying the sun and peace.  
 Suddenly, a thrush flew down, alighting  
 On a stem no more than two feet away.  
 Her arrowed breast was palpitating fast.

I could have reached and touched her.  
Clearly, her nest was just behind her.  
I noticed white shit stains on the leaves.  
She eyed me beadily. Quite calm,  
But daring me to make a move.  
I was completely knocked out by her courage;  
I could have touched her, but she struck *me* with her gaze.  
She was ready to defend her young,  
Come hell or high water;  
I hoped I'd do the same.  
Shaking the remaining drops,  
Finally, I slunk away, stirred -  
Belittled by this small, determined bird.

(June 2019)