THE FACE IN THE TREE

Simone Poirier-Bures

It was an overcast, November day, cool and still. A good day for a walk along the gravel roads in rural Virginia where I live. I had been struggling with words all day, trying to find them, tame them, use them. The act of walking calmed me; the cool air filling my lungs, refreshed.

As I rounded a bend in the road, I felt myself being watched. I looked up and saw an odd-looking creature eyeing me from the crook of two bare branches. I studied the long white oval face, the narrow slanted eyes lined in black, the pink nose, the rounded black ears with pink tops. It didn't look quite real, more like the face of a plush toy, or a novelty balloon. For a moment I thought it might be a stuffed animal that someone had put in the tree as a joke. But as I advanced it moved the tiniest bit, keeping its beady eyes on me.

Except for that small flicker of movement, the possum was as still as the tree itself, not even blinking. I met its gaze, keeping myself just as still. I noted its leathery tail curled like a hook, like an upside down question mark. I wondered if I had surprised it, this nocturnal animal, now trapped in daylight, and whether it was terrified.

I could feel the possum studying me as well, though it remained as still as stone. It was amazing, really, the two of us facing each other across the huge divide of our separate species. “Hello”, I said in a low voice. “I won’t hurt you”.

I sensed that it understood, though not from my words. Some other language ran between us, a language of gesture and scent, perhaps. I thought of how we must smell, we big galumphing humans with our sweat and soaps and perfumes, as we thump and thrash our way through their woods. Does danger have a particular scent, I wondered, something other than normal human scent? I imagined hunters as giving off a hot red peppery scent, the walker a more benign one, like salt. Surely the possum could smell my good intentions, or at least, my lack of bad ones.
I realized, then, that the possum must have been aware of me long before I had become aware of it. It had been unlucky enough to be caught in the open, but why had it not run off? Why had it stayed there, locking me in its gaze?

Native Americans believe that animals choose to show themselves to humans, so that humans can learn from them. Perhaps the possum had shown itself to me on purpose, wanting to teach me something. How lacking and insignificant words seemed now!

All around me, I could hear the low twittering of birds, things rustling off under the trees. They were tiny sounds, sounds I probably would not have heard if I were not then as still as the possum. I wondered how many other creatures were watching me, watching this little drama unfold. I imagined them peering out from burrows, from rocks, from behind and over tree trunks.

I felt acutely aware, then, of the whole teeming animal and bird and insect world, that enormous parallel universe that goes on side by side with the human one, though most of the time we are barely aware of it. Here, I was the intruder, the outsider, “other”. I felt a sudden piercing desire to know that world, to see it through those thousands of eyes peering out from the trees and leaf mold, to know how it must be to experience the world wordlessly, through eye, ear, and nose.

The possum continued to watch me, and I, it. I knew that it would stay this way for as long as I met its gaze - for hours, if necessary. But my fingers were frozen, my leg muscles stiffening; it was time to go home. I bent down to fix my shoelace, and when I stood up the possum was gone. I had heard nothing, not even the faintest rustle; it had slipped away, as silently as an apparition.

All the way home I peered into the trees, looking for faces. I saw none. But I knew they were there, watching. Another would eventually show itself, some brave ambassador come to remind us that we are not alone here, that the human world is not everything, that another, larger world surrounds us, like a dim memory waiting to be recalled.
Biography

Simone Poirier-Bures is the author of two books: Candyman (1994), a novel set in her native Nova Scotia, Canada, and That Shining Place (1995), an award-winning memoir of Crete. Simone’s stories and essays have won numerous prizes, and have appeared in more than two dozen literary journals in the United States and Canada as well as in eight anthologies. She is currently working on a book of stories (fiction and personal narratives) about human relationships with animals and the natural world. She teaches in the English Department, Virginia Tech, US.
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