

Butterfly Gifts

by Paul Banks

Both Annie Dillard in "Living Like Weasels" and Scott Russell Sanders in "Wayland" recount specific moments of their lives when they were thrust suddenly and unexpectedly into themselves, into a deep state of reflection, and into nature. They tell of what they learned when face to face with the earth, of gifts of understanding received upon their entering into mother nature's perfect largesse, into her bosom, into the dirt.

Annie Dillard startled a weasel on the bank of a pond. Both were left stunned and wide-eyed, and during the intensely silent stare that followed between them was transmitted the crucial message of life. Nothing. Silence. Merely the fact that they mutually focused their attention, for an instant both becoming the other's sole companion in the universe, screamed to them through the silence: "life!" The moment ended when Dillard committed the one act that separates her from the animal to which she was attached; she became articulately conscious of the attachment. She drew herself back and away from her bond with the weasel with thoughts of relevance and transience, her nature as human once again separating her from her nature as animal.

Scott Russell Sanders found his kinship as animal with a horse that approached him. As the horse licked the salt off his extended palm—a graciously received gift—he was aware of their wordless unity, of their unconscious and basic interaction. For him, the incredible force of the moment's simplicity brought calm to mind with subtle and silent understanding, an understanding of the fact that at that moment—as in any other—he was as equally a part of nature as the horse, or as the grass on which it grazed. A conscious conclusion about life came to him, and the moment remained.

Last year I went on a hike into a nature reserve in the province of Morelia, in the country of Mexico. There were six of us in the group, and we traveled with a guide. First we rode in the bed of a pick-up truck up to the point on the hillside where the tree

population was too dense to allow the truck to pass. We jumped down, tightened our shoelaces, and headed into the speckled woods, sunlight dancing off the bridges of our noses and reflecting off our smiles. We walked hunched over the rough terrain for an hour. I was repeatedly dismayed by the fact that I could not appreciate the rejuvenating feeling of the walk and observe the view around me at the same time. Every walker had his head bent down and his back slightly curved, eyes focusing on the span of ground five feet in front of him. Rocks buried into the weathered path and fallen tree branches and trunks provided constant obstacles, and there was plenty to keep one's eyes occupied. At the outermost edge of my forward vision I could see the lifting sneakers of our guide. That was all. More than a two-second glance to the side or up ahead could lead to a broken ankle or a graceless fall to the trampled dirt. Periodically, I paused and stood upright, catching and absorbing all the beautifully uniform scenery: trees. Layers and layers of huge trees filtered the air of sunlight through their green canopies, so that what little reached us was like the gift of the leaves. The sound of birds was constantly dense, unnoticeable. But if for one instance it should have stopped, the silence in those woods would have been unbearable.

I was the only one in the group who had not yet visited our destination. After hiking happily for an hour and at that moment on the decline of a rise in the path, I gauged the smoothness of the terrain for twenty meters ahead, where the slope ended and the path rounded a corner and disappeared behind the brush and tree trunks, and I allowed myself to walk thoughtlessly: for a moment to lose myself in the terrain that bordered the path. So I was for a minute. And it was from this state of pensive appreciation that I was yanked when the other members of the group stopped abruptly just as the path began its turn. One of my companions sat down on the trail and looked up at me calmly. I remember the gaze.

Blank.

I love to think about that gaze.

The others set down their packs and stretched, grunting, but silent. I was bewildered. Then I was told to go on alone, to round the corner unaccompanied, and to stop when I reached the clearing.

What I saw when I got there were the fluttering gold and black wings of ten million monarch butterflies. They swept across the clearing on the gentle tide of whispering unnoticeable breezes, all around me. They crossed the clearing from tree to enormous tree. They weighed down entire branches with their numbers. The trees lost their green and the air lost its peace in turn.

The butterflies that perched on the trees fell asleep as soon as the sun's rays left their bodies, blocked behind a cloud. So their mass, the mass of butterflies each weighing so little that you could not feel one if it rested itself in your palm, made every arm of the massive trees sag and moan. The leaves appeared to have turned black.

A butterfly sleeps with its wings pointed straight up like a single colored fin rising out of its back. Each individual monarch took the place of each individual leaf, and hid the tree's color. And then, as the sun reemerged and gleamed back on them, they all woke and fell. They woke and fell. They fell together from every branch of the selected tree and seemed to be destined to plummet sleepily to the ground. But twenty feet beneath the branch where they had perched, their opened wings caught up in the swoop of the wind current and sent them all swirling back up again, into the air. This movement, of thousands of butterflies simultaneously diving to earth, is described in Mexico as a *cascada*, or a "waterfall."

I remained alone in the clearing with ten million butterflies for more than half an hour, before my companions entered behind me. By that time I was adapted to my environment. I had learned what it was like, as Sanders describes, to be simply a "creature among creatures" (559). No one that day or since has ever tried to give me an explanation for why I was sent in alone. It is obvious. They knew that entering that clearing was returning to one's most basic nature. To do it

alone is to do it defenseless. It was my way of being naked in nature. With no one to whom I could comment about the force of the moment, not even the comfort of a mutual glance between myself and another human, I was thrust, wordless, among the animals of the earth to fend for myself and to come to terms with the power of instinct that I had, gradually since birth, lost touch with.

The monarch butterflies had come, as they do every year, from Canada, on a massive migration that leads them always to the same clearing in the forest of Morelia. Together they fly, one butterfly being lucky to make the trip twice in a lifetime, on the same path, without discussion, without inquiry, but under the sway of instinct. It is this instinct that Dillard hopes to grasp as the wild animals do. Instinct is not something that is learned, and Dillard is well aware of this. She seeks to find, in *herself*, the instinct that drives the butterfly more than two thousand miles, the instinct that makes the weasel attack at the neck. She is envious of their natural submission, of their "yielding at every moment to the perfect freedom of single necessity" (214)—frustrated, because she, too, is animal; she, too, has instincts like any other. But as a human, she has drifted from them, has lost touch with the commands of instinct, and her own savage basic impulses have become foreign to her.

What I experienced standing among the swarming monarchs, was both humbling and disconcerting. I felt humbled as Sanders did standing with the horse in the pasture. I felt as an equal to the life around me. The force of inexplicable animal instinct is a quieting one, quieting in the sense that no matter how authoritative my voice, or how convincing my argument, I could never utter a word in a million years that could cause those butterflies to stop their ceaseless flight. In this I was humbled. I was disconcerted, too, by my own impulses at the time. Where was my instinct? I wanted to fly with the butterflies, let my sleeping body weigh down a leaf or two. I wanted to float on the breeze to nowhere in particular. But this is not my instinct. Never could I find myself trying to fly because of *instinct*. I am not meant to fly. That feeling is merely a confusion of my

senses. So why did I not find myself, when returned to nature with my true companions on earth, bursting with beautiful, lively, pure instinct? What is it that I do?

Perhaps it is because we humans have rid ourselves of true necessity that I found myself at a loss with the butterflies, and Dillard found herself longing to grasp her own purity like the actions of a weasel. Perhaps humans have manipulated their surroundings too much. Perhaps the planning has become excessive. In eliminating all the variables, we have deadened our senses, limited our abilities. Living a life that is planned and stable and secure to a great extent, has made our own instincts obsolete. Hence the fascination with the wild creatures of the earth: those who have always provided for themselves without glamour or decoration, those who have never known the feeling of self consciousness, or the greed that brings gluttony and excess.

And then perhaps, that is what we humans have left, consciousness. Through the degradation of our spirit, through our thorough knowledge of vice, this is the gem that we still hold: the articulate awareness of our surroundings, of our entire existence. We can ponder what has been lost through our own conditioning. And that is our gift. Maybe the next time that I witness the purity of nature I won't find myself at a loss for my instinct; while I stand in a clearing with butterflies I'll know what to do. I'll just think, as I did the last time. If my perspective remains true, I will be perfectly aware of nature and perfectly a part of it.

Works Cited

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