

Dust in the Wind

I was reading in the upstairs bedroom when an angry whine came, high in pitch, rising and falling, that set my nerves on edge. It was a hornet, or something of the

ilk, that had wandered in through the patio door. It was looking for a way out.

The beast was fast, very fast. Outrunning it, should it prove to be of ill temper, would be impossible. Such dragons are well-armed. I knew, having stepped on one barefoot as a boy.

Watching it skim along a window, not understanding glass, I wondered whether we really know in which world we live. We might not like it if we did.

I have looked a hornet in the face. (When I was 8, I had a microscope and looked at everything.) They are horrors—strong, quick, conscienceless, with nightmarish eyes. We see them as just bugs only because of our size. If we lived at their scale, they would not be just bugs.

People rush about, writing reports and building airliners, and it all seems very important. We seem very important. Why, one might ask, and to whom or what? Around us, even in cities, a vast and intricate dance of creatures we hardly see goes on. It has gone on for hundreds of millions of years and may go on for as long again. We are not the only game in town.

On the rocky hills behind our house, cows graze. Iridescent green dung beetles congregate on their droppings. In pairs they roll perfect balls and then set off across the land, standing on their heads and pushing the balls with their hind legs. Where they go, I don't know. I don't have to. They seem to have it under control. They don't know I exist, and probably wouldn't be interested. They have other fish to fry.

I think we overestimate our centrality. We are new kids on the block, and maybe too full of ourselves. The world

hums with trillions of lives we don't know whose view of things we can't imagine—the infinitely variegated, clicking little monsters in any garden, strange worms around smoking volcanic vents in the night of the deep oceans, all manner of things. We reduce them to the fourth-grade simplicity of nature shows on television.

I am reminded of J.B.S. Holdane's comment: "My own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose." Just so. We seem more intelligent than things around us and so think our race the culmination of everything. Clearly, all of this vast universe is here only to spit us up on the cosmic beach. And of course an academic with an IQ of

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180, smarter than those around him, can think that he must be the culmination of the culmination. Surely, he has a handle on the web of being, of life, of the stars in their orbits.

But perhaps he is only more complexly confused.

We have in our house a street puppy we adopted, La Coyotita. The Mexicans say she has a lot of coyote blood. I can believe it. She is the color of the hills, with long loping legs, quick curiosity about everything, and a powerful jaw suggesting that she may have descended

from an alligator. She's friendly enough, but there is a wildness in her that doesn't go away.

In what world must she live? Her kind are perfectly comfortable in the rough mountains at night, trotting easily where I stumble cautiously, unable to see. She can run a rabbit down if need be and has ears and nose that must make this seem a different place. She belongs in the world as we do not. Hers, to me anyway, is an enviable independence.

Our other pup is a floppy-eared pooch who needs us. The Coyotita, all fangs and self-reliance, doesn't.

The fashion is to think of coyotes and dung beetles in 19th-century terms of adaptation and fitness. Maybe. People seem to crave overarching explanations, whether they quite make sense or not. For many it is not easy to stare into the abyss and say, "I don't know," or "Something is going on here that is above my pay grade."

So we invent stories, God or gods, evolution, the earth is a great ball balanced on the back of a turtle. If the facts (whatever that means) do not always fit, we shoehorn them, because any faith is better than none at all.

I suppose there's no harm in it. Still, I'll wager that we understand this place only as a goldfish understands its tank. I think it was Chesterton who said you could go mad trying to fit the limitless world into a limited mind. Better to float on the sea of things and enjoy the curiosity and mystery. ■

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