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Nature, Tooth and Claw

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I might have died without ever having felt sweat moving down my breastbone like an ant while the nearby vegetation ticked with bugs and summer squatted, centered, stalling, stubborn. I might have gone my whole life long thinking a body was something to dress, something to stop in a pose and measure by the question, “How do I look?” I might have taken my last gasp escalating up from the fast food court in transit to Saks to try on a few pairs of high heeled boots or leaning on a glass case cleared that very morning of the finger smudges of customers before me to determine the effect of a little bronze rose applied to my cheek. But it’s better this way. There’s no way around how plain I am. It’s better that I found other pastimes, better that I left the suburbs of Chicago and discovered how keen the eye can become to cabbage worms camouflaged in the broccoli, disease on the leaf, signs in the soil, subterranean invasions.

I once saw a gardener follow a surface tunnel to its active verb, digging-right-now-as-we-watch, stick a spade in just behind the point of activity, flip the shovelful into a galvanized bucket, and kill that mole before it could scramble off. Maybe you can’t admire that from where you stand—somewhere near the head lettuce and parsley, perhaps, weighing your newfound loyalty to buying organic against the exorbitant price per pound even as the leaves are soaked and weighted down again
in an auto-spray of freshening—and, if you can't, read on if you like, but be prepared to make more judgments, because if you take a garden pest for a drive and drop it off in some idyllic out-of-town place, you release it to its own or to its cousin's starvation, even if you release it also and unknowingly to the tidy nearby gardens of anonymous.

And in those gardens, as in my own, it is today 100° and that's before the formula's applied to make us all hotter by bringing up the index. It's so hot, as Jan said on the phone, it's dangerous, the peak day, most of us hope, of six days running in the high nineties and greater at close to end of July. Mention the heat on a day like this and the other person in line says, it's not even August. Or sometimes, abbreviating, since it's too hot to speak, they just give you that look. A complete stranger with complete understanding, not a common thing.

But you're waiting for the encounter in my garden, you're waiting for that held moment between us, the two creatures, my enemy and myself. I'd gone down for what I could salvage, what might still be upright, green, and alert among the lettuce stubs and bolting mustard and the going-spongy broccoli, since between the heat and groundhog raids, the picking has been slim, so when my eye lit on the reliable chard, I strode towards it, thinking, at least there's that, but halted at the sight of a hole as big as a wastebasket, a somewhat horizontal hole running into the side of a bed of beets, onions and tomatoes. Stooping, I could see in. That hole was so large, it was partially lit. There was no mistaking the fur, the slight animation given it by pulse and breath. I knew what to do. My husband had killed two of them in June.
and I’d seen the fight they had in them, the long incisors and digger claws. I exited and closed the gate. Now I had the fence between us and from there I could see that for whatever reason or error in judgement neither entrance to the hole came outside. Furthermore, neither entrance to the hole was far from where I stood, and I could see her, huddled just inside the farthest one. I grabbed the hay tines and, reaching over the fence, stabbed at her, thinking—even as the tines hit her skin—*I can’t, I can’t.*

But I pinned her for a moment and I think I may have injured her, although only with the first thrust could I have stuck her a little, and I had to rise up on my toes to attempt this, that’s how short I am, but I could just reach her from either side as she ran back and forth, frantic, alarmed. *Eventually she’ll try another tack,* I thought, and this brought me back to the gate to secure it, while she of course ran opposite—across the radishes and cress and out through a fault in the fence, and as I watched her scuttle into the blackberry brambles, smart as Brer Rabbit, I sank into myself and damned my very hesitation.