

JONIS AGEE

### *The Altitudes of Dream*

Living in the country you quickly realize that there are sounds in the middle of the night—some that become clearer than any other time of day, and others that are only heard in the darkness. On windless nights the engine of a passing car on the blacktop travels for miles, the distant hum of Interstate 80 is like a steady pull of ocean on the dark land, and in the yard, the almost mechanical chirring of locusts and crickets could drive you mad if you listened with the wrong kind of ear. Frogs join in with a deeper voice, and then the breeze picks up and rustles the five giant hackberries guarding the front of the house with their particular hissing rush.

A few miles away a dog wakes up and barks, and his call might or might not get picked up and sent around the countryside by the other dogs. The coyotes are quiet unless they're running prey or lonesome for the moon. When they have a good run going, their voices become musical, ululating up and down in a hauntingly beautiful song. It's joyful and terrifying to hear in the safety of the house, the wire mesh fence such a flimsy defense. The other hunters are usually silent until the moment their prey cries out as the talons and teeth and claws bite in. Rabbits scream like humans, high-pitched, hysterical. Then they go silent and die.

The other night just at bedtime our young bichon frise caught a rabbit almost as big as he is. Trotting away from us with the awkward load in his mouth to preserve his catch, he kept dropping the rabbit who could do nothing but lie there, too damaged to get away. His side was torn open, the exposed red muscle still pulsing, but his eyes were already blank, his mouth panting empty of sound. We were helpless to save the rabbit and my husband Brent took it away. He wouldn't say what he did, but I keep imagining a shovel severing the neck. It reminded me of the morning we found the rabbit body jammed halfway through the fence, the head missing. Foxes, I'm told, kill for the delicacy of brains.

There are certain things we don't talk about out here the way we would in town where a rabbit might be a happy sighting. Pete the dog hunts at night; anything that moves he tries to catch and bring

inside the house—once a toad that started down the basement stairs before I caught it, spiders and grasshoppers, rocks, sticks and leaves the wind must have shifted, and pieces of rabbit and mouse and bird. After his rabbit catch that night, he lay on the bed panting, his own black eyes bright and furious.

When the high cry of taken prey breaks into our sleep, the dogs shift and mutter, anxious to rush out into the dark, but afraid too. They seem to understand, as we don't always, that there is danger in the woods and fields at night, that they are lucky to be inside the fenced yard, inside the gate I shut at dusk each evening against the coyotes.

When I first moved to the farm there was an orange barn cat that paid periodic visits. Judging from the amount of cat food left by the previous owner and the empty tins down in the corn crib, the cat wanted only to be fed, not touched, not taken inside, and not protected. The very definition of barn cat. I abided by the rules all the way to the first bad cold spell in December of that first year.

The cat hadn't been around for a while, although I had passed him on the blacktop two miles from the farm, stalking something in the high grass of the ditch in late fall. I just assumed that he knew what he was about, was catching enough prey or getting fed by the neighbors on the corner. So when he showed up in the middle of the deep arctic freeze, meowing at the gate to the yard at daybreak, I threw on clothes and rushed out with food, frightening the heck out of him. Eventually he worked up the nerve to come back to watch me put the food in a pink plastic bowl for him. I could see that he was emaciated, his hair sticking out in wild tufts, and when I backed off so he'd eat, I discovered that he had two identical open wounds on either side of his head, just behind his ears. They were the size of quarters, deep and raw looking, almost as if some larger animal had grasped his head in its mouth or talons.

The cold hung on into January, and while the barn cat seemed to grow more friendly, rubbing against my legs when I brought the food, and I had taken to making special meaty broths for him, he still wouldn't let me pet or grab him for a trip to the veterinary. He even gained enough strength to spring over the fence and come up the walk to the house on mornings I was late. Then one day he didn't appear. I left the food out, and the whole thing disappeared—food and bowl. That was eerie. I searched the snow packed

barnyard, but no sign of the bowl. This happened for several days in a row until I'd run out of bowls and plates I could sacrifice and took to simply opening the cans of food and leaving them out.

He must be eating the food, I reasoned; it was gone.

A week later I was upstairs in my second story study writing and happened to look out the window to see a huge possum trundling up from the direction of the thicket of brush-choked trees between the barnyard and creek. The fat grey animal wasn't in the least bit shy as it walked directly into the old garage and began eating the food I'd left that morning for the cat. When I rushed outdoors to yell at him, he just raised his head and glared at me, then finished the last of the cat food, turned and trundled off again, looking more like someone's fat old aunt coming home from shopping than a wild animal.

The cat reappeared a few days later, exhausted, beat up, the head wounds reopened all the way to the bone, and the fur on his face wet and mucousy, as if he had spent the entire night in the jaws of something much bigger. I tried again to capture the cat, to coax it to stick around so we could nurse it back to health. I made a bed in the old garage for it. I left food and water. At first, he seemed to understand, and I had hopes again of saving him, but then a sudden January thaw melted the snow in two days, and the cat disappeared for good in the brief warmth of sun and mud.

The reason I bring this up is that for the past two years I have been haunted by images of the barn cat's nightly fights just to survive. While I spent warm nights in my heated house, he was in the big barn or probably under it, hunted just as he had hunted so many nights himself. I could not save him. I do not know how to save anything out here. I see beautiful red-tailed hawks circling overhead, riding the currents of air, suddenly drop down and grab a mouse or rabbit. I've seen a hawk flapping toward the woods with a snake writhing in its talons.

While there is this majestic silence in the country night, there is also a tension that belies any peace. The dogs won't go into the woods after dark. Even when the gate is mistakenly left open, they patrol the fence on their side, refusing the invitation. Raccoons climb over the cars and trucks parked outside. Once my sister met a raccoon sorting through the things in the bed of her truck. It was after dark, of course. My sister was the startled one. We've seen

them walking the top metal pole of the yard fence, not an easy trick, wobbling along on all fours, shaking the whole fence so the wire sounds like someone is banging it with a stick. They're the land pirates of the place, but they're not the cute, comic cartoons we think of in the city. They're fierce and hungry, and the size of miniature ponies. Even the dogs back off and let them eat what they want of my bushes. The tops of all the forsythia and roses I planted last fall.

Once I took a walk down the quarter mile driveway to the road well after dark the first fall I lived out here. I hadn't gotten married yet, had no dogs. I was leading the life I'd always dreamed of on a farm. My flashlight was too dim to help, dying batteries, so I kept it off in case I needed the bit of failing light for an emergency. It didn't matter. It was dark and I kept my head thrown back, watching the stars that seemed so bright and distant in the fall air. This was what I'd moved out here for. No ambient light, just the world and naked sky and me. I was really feeling proud of myself, really being generous with my new view.

As I rounded the corner just past the house, however, I heard something moving in the woods on the right that followed the driveway and creek all the way to the road. A deer, I told myself, a—and then I went blank. What animal large enough to be brave around people could possibly be out there. And not be dangerous. I thought back to the sounds I'd heard at 3 a.m. in August when I'd come outside to enjoy the night air while my visiting family slept inside. They were cat-like noises, yet louder and deeper, growling, snarling maybe. Bobcat? Mountain lion? Not here, surely, but after thinking about it, I'd gotten up and gone inside. Later I read that there were signs of bobcat in this county.

Whatever was in the woods stopped as I rounded the corner for the long straightaway to the road. The field to my left was down, the winter wheat harvested, and yet, the night was so black, it was impossible to tell if anything was out there. The woods were full of little noises. The wind picked up and rubbed two branches together, producing a squeaking that sounded almost like a child crying. There was a sudden rush of something running in the brush, then it stopped abruptly. I felt as if eyes were following me, how many I couldn't tell, but I wasn't alone; I knew that much.

I began to sing loudly, breaking the night with my noise. If it were a man, and I finally did think of that, I was utterly alone. I looked at the crushed rock at my feet, hoping for something of size to fight off what was out there. Nothing. Then I spotted a stick, half-rotten, but at least enough to pretend to myself that I could strike a blow if needed. What I wouldn't let myself do was turn around and go back. Not until I made it to the road. Nor would I let myself run—that would only attract an animal large enough to hunt me. No bears, I kept telling myself, this is Nebraska, not northern Minnesota.

By the time I reached the house again, I rushed in, slammed the door, double-checked the locks, turned on all the lights and shoved chairs underneath the doorknobs. I went upstairs to the bedroom closet and got out the ancient over-under rifle I'd bought for ten dollars from the previous farmer. It had the beginnings of rust on the barrel, and the wood stock looked dried out enough to split if it were fired again. It had been his father's gun, and I could see that it was that old. The day we negotiated the sale of the farm, riding lawn mower, and gun, all I'd need for my new life, I'd decided, he insisted on putting the .22 and shotgun shells in the proper places and then firing the gun at his lilac bushes to show me that it still worked. I bought it because I knew that you needed a rifle when you farmed—for livestock, snakes, etc. It took me two years to figure out that it was his rabbit gun, and that because I haven't used it, we are being eaten out of house and home by rabbits. I plant a bush or flower, and they eat it down. I had to plant tomatoes three times this spring and buy four foot high special rabbit fence to get any crop at all. We run the risk of running them down daily on the driveway as they scatter in front of the tires, plentiful as sparrows.

But at this point I wasn't thinking of rabbits; I was thinking of defending myself. I had the shells on the bed beside me, and I had the gun across my lap. The only problem was that I couldn't remember how to load it. I still don't know. If I ever figure it out, there'll be rabbit funerals for a week. So I just held it for the next couple of hours in case someone or something tried to break in. Then I finally gave in, turned off the lights and went to bed.

I have never taken another late night walk alone.

Kepler saw that "empirical observation was key" and ended up with the larger purpose of seeking "the poetic structure of the world, the grand geometric symmetry of all creation . . . to map the

mind of God.” I used to think that if I could only escape the city, if I could move more simply into the natural world, find the harmony, the purified present, I would find myself as I truly am. I would be purified also. I could spend my nights in the yard, lying on my back, watching the celestial motion of the sky without the ambivalence and boredom that have accompanied most of my adult life. Kepler wrote to Galileo: “Let us create vessels and sails adjusted to the heavenly ether.” For Kepler there would be a new world in the moon, a place to have control over destiny. For me, the dreams are smaller, more earthbound. I wanted a place to be utterly myself, to be alone, yet so soaked in beauty and natural rhythms that I would finally understand what there was to understand. Sounds simple, doesn’t it?

Yet, Proust said that “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

I have moved on the average of every three years for the past forty years. I have felt barely at home on this planet. In my own skin. What I discover daily is that I cannot move again. When you are finally in the dream of dreams, you have to stay, because it’s your damn dream, and you used it to prop yourself up for so many years that it’s like another hand now. But this is not the world I imagined.

It is not a slow-paced, mind-numbing existence. If anything the cycles are quicker out here, accelerated by the urgency of living and dying, surviving day and night. It’s us, people, who interfere and try to preserve, try to stay the inevitable. I don’t think I’d last long out there in the woods at night. Truth be told, I’d give up or perish long before that orange barn cat did. And that’s something to think about when I wake up in the middle of the night to the high music of the coyotes running the creek again. I don’t know who to root for anymore, even though it could be one of the cats people from town keep dumping out here, the pretty grey and white I tried to befriend last summer or the terrified black that darted into the woods yesterday, but the coyotes are being driven away too by the houses that are moving like herds of mastodons across the fields, up over the hills to the north.

Maybe I just open my eyes and listen, hoping the kill is quick, the hunger slackened enough for a good sleep, hoping they aren’t hungry enough to wait for my dogs in the morning this time, the way they did last May when there was such a heavy fog that the young

dog running ahead of me down the drive disappeared. Schmidtty, the old dog, walked more slowly and was still used to city life, so he was sniffing at the new grass just beside me, keeping pace when we heard the pup start his yelping. Schmidtty, overweight, short-legged, took off like a shot and quickly disappeared into the fog. I started to trot, calling their names, thinking they'd just found a rabbit. Pete was already wild for them.

But just as I rounded the corner and headed down the straight-away, the fog started to lift. At first all I saw were these long brown legs and the two short white dogs, of course. Deer, I thought, how odd that deer would stand around with those two. Then the fog thinned and blew away revealing three coyotes milling with the dogs right in the middle of the driveway. As soon as I started to shout and run at them, the coyotes lifted their heads, saw me, and took off loping across the field. I was shouting the dogs' names at the top of my lungs, and Pete hesitated, then came toward me, but Schmidtty decided to chase off the intruders and took off after them. He was still defending the puppy then. The three coyotes split and slowed, drawing the dog on so they could close in around him. My voice grew higher, hysterical, shredded with tears, and something in Schmidtty heard it and stopped and looked at me. Oh, please, come, I begged, and because I'd dropped the commanding tone, I think, he finally understood the danger he was in, wheeled and ran back to me. I took the dogs home and immediately put them on leashes for our walks around the farm from then on.

I know I saved Schmidtty's life that day. Maybe Pete's too. I think about that as I listen to the woods in the middle of the night, the sky stitched shut until morning. So this is your dream of dreams, I say to myself, as the world begins to hunt.