

Catching the Garter

– Jeffrey S. Cramer

I am an armchair naturalist. I leave it to others to enjoy the sting of the insect, the plunge in the icy rapids, the searing madness of having lost ones water and ones way in the desert. These things are not for me. There is nothing more comforting than to sip an iced coffee as one reads *Desert Solitaire* or to feel the warmth of your tea sinking into your belly as you read *Arctic Dreams*. Though I long for these experiences as I read about them, when the book is closed, so is the desire.

Behind our house is a cement-lined hole used by the previous owner for the holding of garbage—before the days of garbage disposals or today’s renewed interest in composting. It is covered by a cement disk. Although not terribly large, I was afraid that somehow our young daughter would get entombed in it, in spite of the fact that she was capable of neither removing the top nor fitting inside if somehow she could get it off. Still, I thought it best to fill in the hole.

Filling it up with a few shovelfuls of dirt would have been too simple a solution. It would have required no time and little effort. I needed, as is my wont, a more complicated and time-consuming solution. I would fill it up with things—those things that I had no use for, were in the way, and I had no other way to get rid of. The first thing I found was a cement elbow I had recently removed from a dry-well.

I slid the lid off and blindly tossed in the object. Some juvenile part of me wanted to hear the cement smash in pieces as a cloud of dirt and cement dust rises out of the hole as from a geyser, to create some minor catastrophe in my otherwise sedate life. I was sadly disappointed. It made a little noise, nothing else. I looked inside and under one piece of rock already there in the hole, I saw the rear half of a small snake. I watched for a minute, saw its tail move, then, knowing that it wasn't hurt by my blind bombing, slid the lid back on and went inside.

It was later that day that I realized I had possessed an opportunity to experience nature first hand. Sure, it was only a garter snake, and not a very large one at that—but we must take our experiences where they are offered.

Besides, this was a first encounter. I was not yet ready for rattlers or pythons. I should have reached into the depths of that two-foot hole and removed the garter for a closer look. It was a cold day and from what I could see the snake was benumbed and lethargic. Chances are I would have lived to tell the story of my adventure without injury.

I decided to go back to confront the garter. Catching the garter, I hoped to be somehow wedded to nature. All my reading was the courtship – this was to be it, the beginning of a life from which I would not turn back. It was going to be a first step. I already longed for more – maybe let a spider crawl on my hand, a dragonfly hover near me exploring. It was a far cry from dancing with wolves or swimming with whales, but it was to be a start. When I went back a few days later – it took that amount of time to convince myself that this was what I really wanted to do while giving the snake enough time to get away – it was gone.

Sitting in an armchair reading a book of nature writing, I have the ability to control time – I can slow it down, I can make it go backwards, I can simply stop it by closing the book. I can be going down the river with

Edward Abbey, heading for a rapid, or watching the alewives run on Cape Cod with Robert Finch, then put the book down, and when I get back to it, whether it is five minutes or five weeks later, the rapids still loom ahead and the alewives still run. However obvious it may seem, and however much I knew it to be so, my snake, not being caught in the pages of a book, would not wait for me to find the time to come back to see it.

Later in the week I was out raking leaves and saw the snake lying in a pile of wet, brown, late-Autumn leaves. It was larger than I remembered or perhaps it was a different one. It did not matter. A little under three feet, three yellow stripes running down its back, its red eyes staring coldly, blankly, it lay still with cold or fright. Did it see me? I did not move. It did not move. Was it aware that in some small way our lives were to meet?

Could I do what I had for so long desired—touch the snake? My imagination ran ahead as I saw the snake in my hands, slithering between my two hands, its two small eyes staring into mine as its tongue darted in and out to smell what kind of creature I was. I thought I would first touch it with the rake, to see if it was in an attack mode or still benumbed with cold. I

touched it cautiously. It did not move. Slowly, carefully, I slid the rake under the belly of the snake, lifting gently.

The snake had been gutted from head to tail. What bird or animal had done this I could not tell. The inside was red with raw snake meat like some insidious sore. I held dangling on the end of my rake my missed opportunity, time lost. I felt my length of days shorten as time slipped away. It does not fall away in clumps, like an avalanche, but in short moments like these. An hour here, an afternoon, then a day, a week, a year, a decade, a life.

There was to be no wedding. Instead, I felt a death-like grip which constricted the breath from me as I felt another moment lost. The slightest hesitation can eliminate a unique moment in time, a chance to observe, to partake of something singular which you may never have the opportunity to witness again. A longer hesitation is asking, mistakenly, self-centeredly, humanly, for the world to wait for you, frozen, as in the pages of a book.

Originally published in *Baybury Review* (vol. 2) pp. 9-11

www.jeffreyscramer.com