

The Porcupine

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This day,
This one, late-winter afternoon,
Deep in the Maine woods, well behind our farmhouse home,
It is a porcupine, of all things,
Who is at the center; the center of the universe.

There have been other moments when
I transmigrate to such other worlds:
The loon a few yards off a tree-lined shore,
In the far, northeast cove of Clearwater Lake,
No cottages nearby.
I kayak around a rocky point, see her preening,
Ship my paddle,
Keep rapt silence. Look on.
She lifts one wing, then the other, tosses water, again, again; water
With thrusts of her bill she tosses water on her sleek feathered body:
Dip; splash; dip; splash.
Gracious bird of the northern waters,
At bath.

The coyote.
Ah, surprises us both.
Itself, me;
As I slip through the forest
South of the Saddleback Range,
On a multi-day hike,
Heading towards Reed's Mill and Orbeton Stream;
The coyote, trotting, on the hunt,
Cuts across my path 50 feet on;
Spies me, halts, lowers the head; stares;
I stare too.
I freeze in place, remain utterly still,
We stare, hunter and rambler;
Each of us takes measure of the other.
I blink first, deferring to the hunter.
My coming repast is stashed in my backpack;
The coyote has to return to the hunt for its next meal.
"Good to meet you!" I call.
Tawny ears perk up; coyote disappears into the cover,
On the hunt.

Then there is the time of the fawn and the doe.
I round a corner in the high Sierras,
Among lodge pole pine,
To come upon a fawn, nursing from her doe,
A few feet off the trail.
I remain in place; make no sound.
The fawn, feeding, pays no attention to me;
The doe, though – our eyes meet.
My instant thought (Is it possible to know?):
In her universe,
She stands at the decision point: Feed? Flee?
I stand, mute, unmoving.
For a length of time it is beyond my entranced capacity to measure.
The fawn, nourished, releases, steps back, peers my way.
It is the three of us now, looking.
The doe turns to the fawn, a touch of her nose to the fawn's light brown head;
The two of them step away - soon out of sight,
Mother; offspring.

The porcupine?
My wife and I walk on snowshoes
Across the wind-blown dunes and drumlins of the snowy hayfield,
Into the shaded opening that leads to our mixed-growth woods:
White pine, white birch, rock maple, beech;
Follow an old path that once led the way to a spring,
Long-since superseded by a dooryard well.
Past the point where the rock walls end,
Down to a thick area of alder, though with ample fir, cedar, ash.
Where there rises, above all other growth around it,
A hemlock tree, a good 80 feet high;
Halfway up, out near the end of a stout branch:
The porcupine.
Porkies seek the tender tips of hemlock,
Winter sustenance - strength for newborn porcupettes to come.
Undeterred by height, or cold, or even wind,
Out she comes from her den – a hollow by the base of a blown-over fir;
She journeys each winter day,
To the hemlock, and life.
We look on, in silence,
As though invited to stand.