

The Beauty and the Terror: Nature Can be Awe-full

By Sara Maitland

It is bitterly cold and as I come over the shoulder of the hill above the glen I realise the wind is rising wildly. By the back end of the winter the moor here has been scoured down, the old bracken fronds, gold brown in the autumn, are stripped away by wind and rain leaving the ground naked and the chunks of extrudant granite rocks stand out harsh and cold; the heather looks black and skeletal; the sheep have cropped the patches of green grass billiard table close; down below along the river the reed beds are blanched peroxide blond. The view is huge and naked and I decide that the whole walk is a stupid idea and turn for home. But this means turning into the wind, battering and biting at me, and across on the other side of the valley I see a snow eddy moving like smoke, a fast swirling mass running over the hillside towards me. The tiny hard flakes, chips, of snow hit my face and sting; and the world disappears. It is shocking in its suddenness, in its ferocity and in its beauty.

And then there is a terrifying sound — a huge growling roar; my normally bold little terrier howls and comes cringing to my feet. I share her terror. I turn my back to the wind, to protect my face and comfort her, and watch the heart of the snowstorm writhe its way up the hill above me. There is a blinding flash of light and then another roar. I am shaken, overwhelmed by the strength and the beauty but also the extreme scariness of what I am experiencing — violence, peril and mystery. I am strangely exhilarated by my own fear and at the same moment I feel belittled by the immensity of the elements, tiny in an enormous dangerous space. Then, as suddenly as it came, the terror has gone; it is just a grim winter day. I totter home cold and wet and disproportionately weary; but also giddy and reeling from the emotional impact.

The phenomenon is called Thundersnow — I was not under attack from dragons or demons. Technically thundersnow is a thunderstorm where the precipitation falls as snow, hail or graupel rather than rain. We normally associate thunderstorms with humid summer weather, but in fact all that is needed is for

the atmosphere to be unstable and the layer of air closest to the ground warmer than the air above it. Thundersnow is a fairly unusual weather event in the UK, but this January the sea was abnormally warm relative to the land and thundersnow occurred in various parts of Britain. Thundersnow delivers its own specific effects: the snow deadens the distance the sound of the thunder travels (so you have to be near the storm to hear it), but the lightning, reflecting off the snowflakes, appears unusually bright.

The emotion it induced in me is called Awe — that weird primal mixture of beauty and terror; the breath-taking power of the external event and the sense of self-diminishment, painful ‘littleness’, even humiliation. Awe is an ancient, a pre-modern, chthonic emotion. It used to be the true response to an encounter with the divine, with the Gods: it was awe that made Elijah cover his head with his cloak when he heard the voice of his God as ‘the sound of sheer silence’ (a more accurate translation than the traditional ‘still, small voice’) on Mount Horeb in the desert; that caused Abraham to fall to the ground, that made the shepherds in the fields ‘sore afraid’ when the glory of the Lord shone all around them. Awe is closer to ‘panic’ than to ‘wonder’: panic is the specific terror inflicted by an encounter with Pan, the Greek God of the wild places, who is always both beautiful and frightening, both childlike and fierce. We might like to have awe without the terror, but we will be cheating ourselves. Dictionary definitions of awe include ‘A feeling of respect or reverence mixed with dread’; and (my favourite) ‘an emotion comparable to wonder but less joyous.’

It is usually huge events that inspire awe and they are often noisy: thunder storms, wild breaking waves, crashing waterfalls after hard rain. The Pentagon knew just what it was doing when it named the first assault on Iraq in 2003 ‘Shock and awe’ — a ‘military strategy based on achieving rapid dominance over an adversary by the initial imposition of overwhelming force.’

But the strange mix of horror and beauty can come silently too — and the silence can be part of the provocation. Star gazing and mountain heights are both famous for provoking awe and shrinking ego; the almost unimaginable scale overwhelms a sense of self and one’s own importance. Because sound, unlike light, cannot travel through a vacuum the whole of space is not just empty it is silent. Think about it; it is a nearly unbearable absence — inhumane, disinterested and shot through with glory. For me meteor showers (shooting stars) deliver true awe more consistently than any other event — although it remains always random,

chancy, unpredictable. I think perhaps this is because an active meteor shower is one of the very few things that allows one experience physically the counter-intuitive, but totally true, fact that the earth is hurtling around the sun at over sixty-six thousand miles an hour, pushing its atmosphere in front of it: each shooting star is a chip of debris from the tail of a passing comet being ignited by the force of the impact. This is awe-full.

And as awe can be silent, so it can be small too. Once I watched a stoat kill a rabbit; stoats are not uncommon in the UK. There are approximately half a million of them, but they are secretive, alert, subtle, and so seldom seen except in wild places, glimpsed in their passing. They are also, for me at least, surpassingly lovely — lithe, elegantly muscled, a rich red-tan with a creamy white underbelly, a wide sweet face, bright eyes and an almost ridiculous black tipped tail. But in action you can see that every lovely thing about them has evolved solely to make them efficient killers. This stoat had sunk its teeth into the rabbit's neck behind its ears; the rabbit, at least five times larger, struggled to throw it off and the stoat was tossed from side to side, tail lashing and the black tip thrown around like a negative strobe light. But the stoat hung on for the full twenty minutes that it took the rabbit to die. I watched the primal battle, oblivious to the world, focussed and carried out of myself, filled with a kind of fascinated horror or dread, but also, at the same moment also with a deep sense of privilege and joy; it was fierce, visceral and beautiful and had nothing to do with me. I did not matter to either of them.

One morning I stood at my kitchen window watching my bird-table busy in the snow; at the time I was trying to distinguish individual chaffinches by the white patterned bars on their wings (someone had told me that these were as individual as human fingerprints; I still do not know if this is true — it is hard to see and remember that well) so I was watching the bird-table through binoculars, although it is only about twenty yards away from the house. And suddenly, shockingly, the whole range of my view was filled with ecstatic power, moving fast, alive and as white as the snow. It was a male Hen Harrier; they hunt low — and this one ambushed the bird table, swooping up over the dry-stone wall, even as I watched; the black ends of its wings outwith the width of my binocular field. There was a panic of small birds, barely a break in the swift passing of the Harrier, and then there was a mess of feather and bright blood, fresh scarlet on the white snow. And it was gone. I was gasping and reeling with the speed, the

power, the lethal efficiency and the astonishing shocking beauty of a perfectly executed kill. This was not 'lovely' or 'pretty' — it was precisely awesome; there was a horror, a dread on me at the very same instant as I knew I was privileged to see so beautiful a thing, and the terror and the beauty walked hand in hand.

Of course there are lovely gentle things as well: great sweetness in springtime growth and autumnal death; deep wonder in the complexity and intricacy of it all; true kindness of welcome and the joyful inaudible music of the woodlands and the meadows and the lochs and the high hills. There is a sweet and generous beauty here, there and everywhere — casual marvels to delight me as I pass. But ... 'It's not all primroses and otters', Kathleen Jamie writes of nature. 'There are other species, not dolphins arching clear from the water, but the bacteria that can pull the rug from under us.' And at least the bacteria relate to me. The killer stoat, the bird of prey on the stoop, the vicious elegant aerial ballet dancing of carrion hunting skua or the sun darkening impossibility of starling murmurations; the ever-regression into haze and then invisibility of the enormous view down from a high ridge; the waves of a storm attacking a coastline; the thundersnow ... they have no interest, no concern, no consciousness of and no care for the great importance of me. They will do what they do, beautiful, powerful, indifferent. I am privileged to see them but of no consequence to them whatsoever; terror is a proper response and so is joy. Together this is awe.

On the whole we prefer not to admit it. Despite all the warnings and knowings we go on wanting to be the centre of it all. We want our nature as submissive, as willing to serve our ends, aesthetic or emotional and much as economic — every bit as strongly as the criticised Victorian industrialist; calling it ecology does not change anything. We are so protective of our egos and so afraid of our fears that we dilute and corrupt language itself to cover the dark hole: "I'm terribly sorry, I had a horrid journey, the traffic was appalling and the road works dreadful. I am astonished you waited for me. I feel awful."

Beauty without terror, without awe, without abasement, seems to me a thin and mingy thing and a perilous loss — everything rendered 'pretty' or 'lovely' when there is something more out there waiting, ancient, forgotten and thrilling. Be afraid, be very afraid, and let your fear make you humble because that is where you will encounter nature — red if you like, in tooth and claw, but free and unconquered, and beautiful. Beauty and terror walk hand in hand.

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