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Arachnophilia

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English 128: Shaping the Shadow: Argument and Insight
Professor Beverly Conner

Arachnophilia

They say that if you find yourself caught in a riptide in the ocean, you should not try to swim back to the shore. Rather, you should remain calm, even if doing so allows the ocean to pull you into further into the unknown. Center yourself, look for the shore, and then swim parallel to it, gracefully side-stepping the current. People who have lived through riptides recount how difficult it is to actually let go in such a situation; many people who knew better have died because they could not resist the primal urge to swim back to land. Fatigued and disoriented, they succumbed to the undertow, and it was precisely the struggle that killed them. I was caught in such a riptide myself, albeit a metaphorical one. I was pulled by Nature into the depths of the unknown, forced to face my fears, and in the end, forced to face myself.

I had taken a bus and arrived at night in the middle of Montezuma, a small Costa Rican town nestled between forest, hills, and the sea. There was not much in the way of lighting, save for a couple of quaintly lit restaurants that provided hazy yellow glow around the edges of the bus stop. I was in an unfamiliar place, and I was surrounded by a complete and utter darkness that simply does not occur in Chicago.

A taxi took me up the steep hill to the Mariposario, a relatively remote butterfly garden and hotel where I was to live and work for three months. The night seemed dense and palpable, the car's two headlights slicing through the thick darkness ahead. When I got out of the car in the driveway, I noticed the sky breaking through the treeline, which looked like a rip in the darkness. It was as if someone had torn the middle of a large piece of black wallpaper from the firmament to reveal a

celestial blue that, contrasted by the matte landscape, seemed to glow from within. Never had the night sky looked so bright to me.

In Chicago, the night sky was always a menacing dark expanse, threatening in the distance, caged like a dangerous animal by street lights and lamps. Robbed of its dimension, it would lay sedated behind the buildings and skyscrapers, out of sight and out of mind. The natural atmosphere of night was transmuted into a sort of prosthetic daytime, and people populating urban areas seem to prefer this illusion. In the same way we have tried to cage and control darkness, we have also removed ourselves from Nature. We take comfort in climate controlled boxes that offer heat when it's cold, conditioned air when it's hot, light when it's dark and overall a clean, sanitized respite from the scruffy griminess that is the outdoors.

There is no such illusion in Costa Rica. All of the houses there had but three walls. The fourth was occasionally sealed by a cascade of water sent from seasonal rains pounding on the corrugated tin roof, but other than that it was wide open. This openness allowed a constant flow of ocean breezes and tropical fragrances emitted from the aromatic flowers and fruit trees, welcome in a place where the heat makes stillness feel like stagnation. The guest house, where I would be staying, was no different. The entire town was pitch black, but I could see an orb of light insinuated from behind the foliage of Mariposario. I was instructed by the owner to follow the light. I felt like a moth or some other kind of insect, because my attraction to it was so wholly consuming. When I turned around and was met with a dwarfing expanse of blackness, I hurried my step, lest I be lost in it forever. Once I arrived, I was thankful to have the stark light bulb affixed to the ceiling of the common area of the guest house. The whole world seemed to end at the edges of its illumination, and there I sat in the center, bags in hand, completely alone.

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I sensed something moving. It was as if a piece of the shadow broke away from the whole, slowly creeping in. My eyes darted to the source of the movement, confirming my fear of its identity. A black tarantula, the size of my hand, was wandering towards me on the white tile.

Arachnophobic and completely unaccustomed to seeing spiders in general, much less spiders of such size, I felt my stomach churn itself into a knot of cold terror. The spider paused a few feet away from me, flicking a hind leg that it kept aloft, poised and ready to resume movement at any moment. Frozen and horrified, I tried my best to come to terms with what was happening. "Talking myself down," as my mother calls it. Telling myself I can handle it. Taking deep breaths.

Just then, I noticed another piece of the darkness crawling on the wall, and another from the entryway. One more tarantula made its way through the threshold of the kitchen. All paused, and time itself seemed to stop with them. Four tarantulas had me cornered, and all I had was a useless security blanket of light. Talking myself down was no longer an option. I was officially freaking out.

Save for this family of arachnids who apparently were bunking with me, I had no roommates, and morning was hours away. I stared into the face of the night behind me, and could not make out much more than a fuzzy black treeline. It was like an impressionist painting, and there was no sign of the returning sun or even the moon. My eyes struggled to focus, and I noticed blind spots in the center of my vision where the cones in my retinas simply did not have enough light to perceive. As a diurnal creature, night was clearly not my territory. I was witnessing a nocturnal parallel world, rife with all sorts of inhabitants we humans would never see or notice were it not for electricity. The way the tarantulas paused to study me seemed to evidence this. It was as if they were going about their routine, and I was a strange interloper, uninvitedly barging into their living room.

I stood there surrounded by tarantulas for hours. Every time I noticed one move out of the corner of my eye, I would swing around and face it directly, watching it until it stopped. It was exhausting, but the longer I stood, the more a strange feeling slowly dawned within me. My horror started to dissolve, transforming into curiosity. The tarantulas had such a graceful way about them, and the way they moved seemed to indicate a sensitivity of perception I had never seen before. Because of this, I could not bring myself to kill them; rather, spiders became a central part of my academic focus for the duration of my stay. How do they see? How do they feel? How do they sense the world of which we are both a part, and how is it different from the way I sense it? This led me to become friends with some arachnologists, and interestingly, I noticed that they all had something in common: it was their initial fear of arachnids that sparked their interest in them.

In the beginning, I came to the Mariposario as an intern to learn about ecotourism and international business. Multilingual and with a background in cultural anthropology, my main interest was translating not only languages, but cultural worldviews, helping tourists acclimate to the unfamiliar. After being hazed by the tarantulas in the jungle that first night, the task I was most often assigned was that of pest removal. It was for show more than anything, because even the more enclosed hotels and houses in Costa Rica had geckos, ants, and of course, spiders. They almost always found a way in, be it through drains, cracks in window frames, or stowing away in someone's belongings. A visibly shaken guest would come to the front desk where I was stationed, tell me that there was "something terrible" in their bathroom, and I would follow them up the stairs with a Tupperware container, ready to corral whatever life form had decided to make its presence known.

Once in the guest's room, I always noticed the way the intensity of the brightly lit indoors at night made the darkness of the jungle beyond the windows solidify into one ominous block. A black tarantula in the guest's room, though typically harmless, was itself a creeping piece of this darkness,

encroaching upon the socially constructed concept of the 'indoors.' In this way, the tarantula would become a representative of nature, epitomizing nature's role as the essential 'other.' I would scoop up the tarantula and let it free outside, and as it would melt back into the dark expanse, the guest would resume watching television or checking their email.

This is when something changed in my internship experience. When I was working at the garden, we had people from every continent stay there, and I utilized my skills in language and interpretation every day, diffusing potentially stressful situations and bringing people together. The largest, most difficult gap to bridge was not between people from different countries, but between people and Nature, and arthropods, in particular. The amount of fear, hatred and misunderstanding surrounding these creatures was surprising, to say the least. I understood it, because I had felt it myself, but I also started to realize that the concepts of "indoors" and "outdoors" were themselves illusory, especially in Montezuma, and that citizens of Nature had a right to coexist alongside of us. Arthropods in particular greatly outnumber human beings on this planet, and are far more instrumental to the success of the biosphere as a whole. Arthropods are one of the planet's most classically terrestrial beings, and yet they seem so quintessentially 'other.' In Ridley Scott's 1979 film *Alien*, for example, the extraterrestrial very strongly resembles a mud wasp in the way it reproduces, and functions with others of its kind like a social insect. The most alien entity we can conceptualize in pop culture is extremely terrestrial; what does this say about our relationship with Nature itself?

This intersection between humans and the environment is where I chose to focus my time and attention for the rest of my internship. When called to a guest's room to remove a pest, I would take a few moments to point out some of the offender's interesting features. When leading tours in the garden, I would inform people about the spiders and termites and other arthropods that lived there in addition to the butterflies. This helped them to view the garden as a microcosm of the natural world working in

tandem, rather than a simple haven for flowers and winged creatures. Viewing Nature in this way helped guests understand that they were a part of a larger whole, and though I may not have changed their outlook entirely, I hope I was able to plant some seeds of interest and respect for Nature in their minds.

A couple of days ago, I was walking through a forest in the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State. I found a spider hanging from my sleeve, so I offered my hand as a base upon which she could land. She lowered herself tentatively, stopping right before landing on my palm. Lightly brushing my skin with the tips of her legs, she immediately retracted, hurriedly climbing back up her thread of web. I tried to let her land on my hand again, thinking she might have misinterpreted my intent, but the same thing happened. That's when I realized that to her, I was just as creepy-crawly. She felt the oils on my skin with the sensory organs located on her legs and recoiled, as if she found the feeling repulsive. I understood her natural repulsion as I understood my own, and I was thankful for my ability to transcend it. Before Costa Rica, I would not have even considered touching a spider. Now, as I've had jobs in entomology and tropical gardens, it is commonplace, and I still find their subjective experience fascinating. Facing what was for me the scariest, grossest part of Nature allowed me to bridge my own internal gaps, and see myself as a piece of the whole rather than an alienated product of it. I was swept into the dark unknown, and reunited with myself. I hope I can use my experience to reunite others, helping humanity see Nature in themselves, and themselves in Nature.