THE ANIMAL KINGDOM; Grand Metaphors

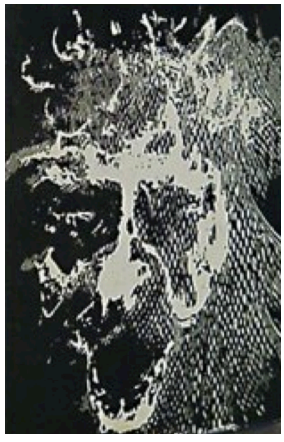
> From ghoulies and ghosties
> And long-leggedy beasties
> And things that go bump in the night,
> Good Lord, deliver us!
> - Traditional Scottish Prayer

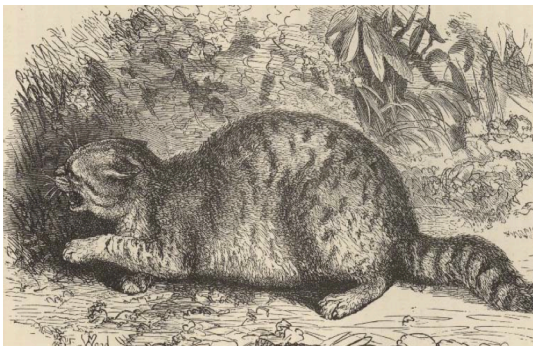
My cabin door is open to let in the mountain air. I am sautéing some chicken legs; and my overindulged housecats puff up, stare intently at the porch through the open door. I know he is there--the neighbor's cat. This is getting to be regular appearance, dammit. It used to be just one, the yellow one, thin and too long like a worn rubber band, even if you don't count the tail—SSSST! I have hissed it away, grabbing some water and heaving it in his direction. But tonight, it's the neighbor's other one, the black one; and in the dusk, at my repeated SSSST! it leaves slowly with a backward glance. It's eyes light up, green glittering spheres in a furry face so dark as to almost disappear.

I have a Swiss friend here who, speculating as to what his reception in the world would have been like in medieval times, looked up at me and remarked, "...and *you*! You'd be burned at the stake!" True, as the poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay, once said of her neighbor, I just about do weed my "lazy lettuce/ by the light of the moon," and most assuredly I spend the majority of my time in the company of other species—good god! they are *cats*. Perhaps my friend is right.

Heebie Jeebies

I don't remember exactly when I stopped getting the heebie jeebies going off to bed, upstairs, with the dark closing in behind me. But I do recall a book cover that illustrates that irrational fear—it was a black and white picture, a haunted face, features not too clear. One might even wonder if that face was completely human. It was the cover of Charles Darwin's *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*. Someone sketched the image, left room for the person looking at it to fill in the gaps—and not by reaching for the ketchup. For it isn't a digitally mastered, slick portrait of horror. Perhaps one mightn't fill in those gaps with fright, but I think it does suggest something that provokes growing human fear—fear of the *wild*, the uncontrolled and undomesticated.





Some pundits assure me that fear of the dark is the primal fear that has accompanied *H. sapiens* ever since those first wanderings on uncultivated terrain, when we ate fish and small game, nuts, berries, and occasionally a chunk of wooly mammoth or prehistoric antelope. Other animals are not afraid of the dark; at worst they are afraid of what is *in* the dark: they know when they are prey; their fears are of real predators, real dangers. They can smell the enemy. We human beings have relinquished our olfactory acuteness for the flash of the visual; and our many cultures reinterpret that with infinite variety. Worse, we often invent what menace lurks and impugn bizarre motives to creatures of flesh and blood that unnecessarily diminish them and magnify our self-importance. *Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows...*[1]

WILD

I am ever inspired by the fact that one of my old teachers, the Irish poet, Paul Muldoon, was reputed to read the dictionary—I assume the *OED*—the way some folk read a novel. While Visiting Professor in our MFA program, a number of years ago, he invited our class to his cottage on the outskirts of Amherst, Massachusetts, for drinks. It was a gloomy little place, a very old log cabin, once no doubt crowded in by an even thicker, gloomier colonial woods than the trees that framed it now. Yes, there were several dictionaries in the slightly disordered space where, we guessed, he wrote his poems and planned how to torment those of us who dared take his classes.

After sniffing about the master's digs, we settled in front of a large stone fireplace that dominated the living room, trying to be oh-so-sophisticated in his august presence. In mid conversation, then, one of us looked up and blurted out, "What's that?"

I imagined Europe's whispered assumptions about frontier Yanks, their crude manners and their hair-trigger mentality, as Muldoon replied, "oh, *that—"* (*That* was a

[1] For anyone who was not even a twinkle in their progenitors' eyes when this radio program was aired—as I was not—it was a mystery program with a solver of crimes called "The Shadow," and those words accompanied the theme music announcing the show. My favorite crime novel bookstore on Greenwich Ave., NYC—and now gone—used to do readings from old radio scripts, complete with the old, ingenious way of producing sound effects.

large, sand-colored hide spread-eagled over the mantelpiece, with a tail—) "*...that* was the last wildcat in Western Massachusetts, shot in 16-somethingoerother."

At the time, I remember thinking it was so wrong that a creature would be shot simply for being itself. I know Muldoon wrote a poem about it which, of course, I cannot locate; but I think he said something in it about being brushed by a few wisps of its tail.

Both that unlucky wildcat and Muldoon's passion for words and the dictionary, stuck—raw, as Levi-Strauss once posed, and cooked. My *OED*, indicates that the raw part of that equation, "*wild,*" has followed a meandering path—Old Teutonic, Welsh, Greek, Lithuanian, Old Slavonic. Maddeningly, the *OED* says confusion as to its origin is because of "uncertainty as to its primary meaning"—AHA!—though the list of word origins shows an overarching theme of forest...*if you go out in the woods today, You better not go alone...*

It's lovely out in the woods today— Your surrogate, stuffed imitation beasts might come alive—*But safer to stay at home.* Despite that gaiety, that innocence, you never know what could happen. For the forest is where the wild things are. What we imagine and what we imagine about what *is* out there makes the trigger happy do things like extinguish the last remaining wild cat in Western New England. Not out of necessity, but fear.

Where the Wild Things Were

> Fasten your snake ears to both sides of your head.
> Your ears measure heat, detect movement.
> You may hear
> a secret in your ear. Warm sounds may enter
> your ear
> and melt the snow; may you drink its waters.

Thus Turkish poet, Ece Temelkuran, in her *Book of the Edge*, invites the reader, perhaps from an Alevi[2] philosophical background, on a serious journey to self-discovery. Sourced in a mysticism with specific views about the unity of nature and humankind, it is among a minority of contemporary works for adults, that pays respect to that relationship. We, of another tradition, fear and pejorate snakes; our medieval bestiaries were replete

[2] Turkish Alevi is NOT the same as the Syrian Alewi. Turkish Alevi, though they, too, revere Ali, uniquely combines pre-Islamic, Turkic folk tradition with Islamic beliefs; they are a strong minority whose women and men worship together, and who espouse politically progressive ideas. I believe the euphemism "Sufi," is often used as a neutral word to protect the person referred to, as Alevi have not always had an easy time with the Sunni majority.

with homilies comparing some beasts to the crucified god, to devilry, etc.; but, paradoxically we sometimes ennobled creatures *in* the wild. In literature, our children even made friends with the animal kingdom (Consider the combination of the above in C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* series.)

* * * *

Among my own contacts with *wildness*, I have had some startling, if not serendipitous experiences: once, in that twilight hour before a dark rain forest night near Panama. It was rainy season, when the water comes down straight as if someone were pouring a bucket over your head; and everything turns to mud and mildew. In a four wheel drive, I struggled to get uphill through the muck, stopped, cut the engine, and—should I try once more? just simply curl up and go to sleep till dawn? A dark, bulky form slid by like a cloud, weightlessly, a few feet from the windshield—*tapir*...

I have heard that Chinese folk belief claims that tapirs eat peoples' nightmares...

New York. *My neighbor is on the phone—"look out on our fire escape." A large red-tailed hawk perches on the iron railing. Scurrying to my fridge, I fumble around and pull out a raw chicken leg, and toss it onto the fire escape. In a second, the hawk drops down from the railing, raises up its head and we are face to face, his eyes, that from meters up see the slightest trembling of a hare, that gyre, bore into mine—a consciousness so fierce, so alien— When had my species lost, so thoroughly, that contact with the wild? Like a snake, it thrusts its head forward, snatches up the chicken leg, lifts up onto the railing, tears the meat off the bone and gobbles it down, then flies away.*

Birds, I remember, were once prehistoric reptiles with leather wings.

In the scorching, dry heat of Guanacaste Province, Costa Rica. Inside the cage of an adult puma raised as a kitten in a sanctuary for animals displaced by human activity—

sand-colored fur, not a whisker out of place, dark eye shadow with a long line drawn down from each inner corner of the eye, sometimes merging with the charcoal etching around her snoot. Her paws were a good five to six inches wide; with one swipe she could have sliced right through my stomach and had me for lunch. But she didn't. With the *noblesse oblige* of a proud animal, she permits me to stroke her—*just do not presume to look me in the eye*

The contained fury, or dignity retained, of kept wild animals. The sparks of wildness sheared from the flint of that red-tailed hawk's gaze. Wildness profoundly unsettles humankind. We don't rule it; that intricate result of chance—nature—does; and most of us feel very alone in that world. Most of us would not survive one night if stranded in it. Like the Great and Terrible Wizard of Oz[3], our dominion is but smoke and mirrors.

I think there is something else, something which adds to the marginalization of an imaginative person as well as the artist, something which frightens the rest of us. However lyrically the King James Version describes us, I don't believe we are some sort of hybrid a little lower than the angels, but not of beastly kind. For it is not so much what we see *in* the eyes of a wild creature but what we see looking back at us—our fellow wildness. There it is. Our imagination, relentlessly analogical, wants to be a mind reader; but it is also a receptor, and not one we can so easily switch on and off.

The Shadow knows.

* * * *

In the 1841 first edition of *The Fables of La Fontaine* translated from the French into English, Elizur Wright, translator, speaks lyrically and reverently of early human invention: "Human nature, when fresh from the hand of God, was full of poetry. Its sociality could not be pent within the bounds of the actual." Besides spirits, monsters, and impossibly hybrid creatures, the figments of human imagination then included the "lower inhabitants of air, earth, and water," and even "those elements themselves."

In revisiting La Fontaine, I am reminded of my stay in La République du Bénin. Bénin is layered, rich with cultural nuance and with language. No less than any other African on the continent, Beninois are well known for their use of fable, parable and oral storytelling, including tales linked with their traditional divining system, Fa. Their verbal arts confirm what Wright has said above. In an ordinary conversation, you might hear—"Yes, and that is like the story of _____," and the speaker would then relate that tale to illustrate his or her point. Indeed, one Sunday, when with the vodun group I followed and when sitting around the head priest, Papa's, apartment, I watched two high status adepts

[3] See clip from the Wizard of Oz

parry one tale, one fable, one fabulous metaphor after another in just that fashion. Rewriting and reiterating Bénin's history.

And, believe me, they all knew that history. The pre-colonial southern Bénin kingdom of Dânxomɛ is so named, the legend goes, because the Alladanou conquerors of the old capital, Agbome, boasted that they would erect their capital on the belly of its soon to be former Gedevi ruler, Dan; and Dânxomɛ means "in the belly of Dan." Dan is also the name of the great serpent spirit whose body symbolically stretches from sky to earth, whose body is lightening, who, in New World legend, is the rainbow bridge over which enslaved Africans can travel to return to their homelands. While the Alladanou made good that insult to Dan's anatomy, and though a bit more complicated than I mention here, the subsequent royal lineage also traced its origins to a mating of a princess and a leopard. Most often represented iconographically by an animal, each ruler had a "strong name," which testified to some outstanding trait he possessed. At the turn of the 17th century, for example, Tegbesu, who profoundly changed the theological as well as political landscape of the region (and its demography, for he profited greatly from the international slave trade)—Tegbesu's icon and strong name was that of the water buffalo. No dearth of creatures there.

Now, I did not have much congress with the "lower inhabitants"' of Bénin, though before leaving, I had every shot known to man or beast, including those for yellow-fever-without-which-you-will-simply-not-be-let-in-to-sub-Saharan-Africa-period, and typhoid. I took my Malarone (an anti-malarial) every day, starting two weeks before departure. However, I did not get a "pre-Rabies" shot.[4] Thus, I kept well away from anything on four legs. Within a month of my arrival, however, when visiting an art exhibition at the Centre Culturelle Française, I noticed several masks of canine figures, hunting dogs, visual synedoches for the presence of spirit, Ogun (called Gu in the Fongbe language of southern Bénin.) Immortalized, so to speak, was my reason for avoiding the four-footed:

> Gu is 'god' of iron, war, and, oddly, fertility—a very masculine fellow whose colors, if we believe the color-coding of both Yoruba and Fon, indicate that he is a "hot," not a calm, deity. Red eyes, a sign that the person the god the dog is ready for battle; and there they are, Gu's doggies, all with their red, ready-to-attack eyes. Red. *Rabid.*

No one wants rabies. Untreated, it is 100% fatal.

[4] Fool. Should some mad dog or other frothy-mouthed creature sink their fangs into me, I would have had to be air-lifted out of Bénin to some other country where they could treat me. The shot buys time.

Now, I am accustomed to seeing my dead animals in packages, not in their skins, not crying out in fear just seconds before the sacrificial knife, milliseconds before their demise. Fear of disease or squeamishness about seeing an animal killed, however, has not made a vegetarian of me. Had I continued my study of vodun long enough to become a priestess, at the least I would have had to off a live chicken for sacrificial purposes. More than one, no doubt—"but you eat them, don't you?" Yes, I do. I like my steak to flinch as my steak knife hovers over it. I like my roast lamb dark pink; my birds, well done. With a little soy sauce and a ton of wasabi, I eat fish raw; and, presumably, my ancestors, before taming fire, why they ate their bird and their rabbit and their other game raw also. Nonetheless, when my young son caught a small perch from a stream several years ago, I lost my nerve: I put that perch in the freezer—live—because I had heard that when you die of cold, you just go to sleep. Mercy fish killing. We socialize and unwind while a dead animal turns on a spit, roasting for dinner. Just don't ask us to be our own butchers.

When I was much, much younger, my not-yet-ex- and I crossed a border into Eastern Europe, unaware that it had become a war zone. Failing to get a ride further into the country, we'd spent a sleepless night in a tent, with what sounded like thunder in the distance (it wasn't; it was gunfire) and with some strange lengthy critter periodically trying to raise up under my insomniac derriere. Next morning, we caught a ride back to where we'd come from, after the folks picking us up explained that there had been an "in-waysion" and kindly turned around and took us to the border. We were the last "westerners" to cross. We were told that the next person to attempt a crossing was shot.

I remember hitching further away from that border, stunned, and stopping in a roadside restaurant, crowded with people sent back. We sat and ate—what? I don't remember. What I do remember is looking out across a field into the back yard of a nearby village, watching every step of a pig slaughter being conducted by a group of farmers.

It was like a Breughel painting, where the main event is but a flyspeck in the distance.

* * * *

So what is the mystery of ingestion—*this is my body which is given for thee*—eating the very meat of creatures who transport sensation, locus, scent and nurture? I was horrified when my colleague in Africa, Rufin, as refined and fastidious a man as I have

ever met, admitted to having eaten cat. Thus we live; they perish, so animalian in nature...

> We sit on a ledge with M.[5], her brother and their sister, eating deep-fried bean balls and fried yam with HOT sauce, the latter of which I adore. A majestic black and white rooster with a trembling red cockscomb strides before us, a living Ozymandias out of the coop.
>
> "Watch out," I address that vainglorious bird. "You might be next."
>
> M. snickers.
>
> We meet with a young man, Benjamin, whom the vodun country priest just outside Ouidah uses as diviner. Another young diviner joins us. As such, they have committed thousands of parables and stories and "throws" to memory, passed down orally from generation to generation. On a rather crude board, Benjamin, the primary diviner, throws the cowries. He then tells us,
>
> > Caba and Maxi [pronounced "Chaba" and "Mahi'] were walking along and they discovered a dead animal. Each one wanted some, but they began to fight over sharing the meat until Legba came along . Why are you fighting? Go home, he told Caba and Maxi, I will divide up the meat and bring it to you. Legba took 16 knives and cut up the meat so each knife had a piece on the tip, then he put the intestines and offal in a bag. He ate the meat and brought the bag to Caba and Maxi. When they opened it they discovered the bag was full of entrails and shit. The moral of the story is to share. (**Benjamin** ABOH Sogoadje, diviner 29 May 2008)
>
> 
> Entrance to a temple of a priest of Dan, the serpent, in Agbome, the old capital of pre-colonial Dânxomɛ. Dan, also called the Rainbow Serpent, has
>
> Maxi and Caba territories border each other on the linguistic map of Benin; and they have been traditional enemies. Legba (Elegua, Esu) is the guardian of crossroads, of doorways and portals, and of language; and it is he whom you must petition in order to learn about Fa. The major "throws" of the kola or cowries or divining chains are 16 in number. It is Legba's face that, from the world of the spirit, peers over at the petitioner on the divining board. Around many divining boards, as well, spirals Dan as Ayido Xwedo, Great Rainbow Serpent.

Ironically, my translator did not want to share; but I had enough Fongbe to transcribe what I heard and then took it to my friend, Rufin, who helped me decode the story. The tale is rich; and one might also interpret thus: the animal kingdom has not only furnished us humans with food, given their hides to clothe and keep us warm, hunted by our sides and kept away vermin, clearly they have enriched our spiritual beliefs, furnishing our storytellers and orators with metaphor. I maintain that latter largesse, as the Fa parable above shows us, *is* also vital nourishment. As solitary or socially constrained as the writer or artist might be, his or her art is ultimately to be shared; and in some way, I believe, it should nourish us.

[5] "M." is my translator.

Now, I confess to having written a novel in the fabulist vein. A friend has penned a marvelous series of tales about Beaky, a cheeky chicken, whose best friend is a vegetarian fox. My favorite episode in those *Beaky Chronicles* evokes a little of Poe's "Masquerade of the Red Death" in its brooding ambiance, a little of P.G. Wodehouse in its feline swipe at the pompous upper class, and most brilliantly shows the struggle of nature vs. nurture as Beaky gets his vulpine friend drunk, then lets him loose in the midst of a gathering of high-fallutin' *G. domesticus* in full "fowl conviviality." The result is, well, blood and feathers, and Beaky's mad escape—

"You used me!" –I snarled.

Thus speaks Beaky's friend, the fox, as they race away. Those words seem especially poignant; and though the subsequent escape is introduced by the fox as "giving in to instinct," what also are we to make of the fox's id, once the constraints of the ego are loosened with drink?

* * * *

Neither tale is written for under aged readers. A more exalted author, Fontaine, wrote for grownups. Granville's *Private and Public Life of Animals* was pitched to grownups of the mid- to late 19th century. Saki addressed grownups when he wrote about Tobermory, the candid kitty who might have told all about his mistress's intimate life. However, in the absence of a traditions like the Beninois, in fact, we of the 21st century have come to think of stories which include animals as only children's stories; and while I am concerned with grownup preoccupations, I shan't dismiss children's literature. I do not mean trendy nonsense. I mean literature which conjures up the inner life of the wild, animals in an uncertain and now threatened world, animals sometimes used to mock human frailty and that same uncertain world, so tenuous in the face of human beings' lack of care: work by my revered Kenneth Graham (*Wind in the Willows* and its madcap, auto-nicking Toad, overly domesticated Mole fearful of a forest full of weasels and stoats, the Great God Pan...) nature-red-in-tooth-and-claw Kipling; ferocious brothers Grimm; in certain ways *Where the Wild Things Are* Sendak.

In fact—and speaking of the *id*—take Max, the naughty boy of *Where the Wild Things Are*: he has gotten himself up in a Wolf suit and run amok. Sent to his room as punishment, he is kidnapped by his imagination, swept up into another world inhabited

by "wild things." He becomes ruler of these scary and idiosyncratic beings, but, alas, the author sends him home to his mother and a hot meal. Yet if you ever read some of the Victorian era children's tales, or Grimm's, children do always not come home, let alone to a hot meal. Herein lies one of the threats of the *wild.* Our children, rather like the mediocre John Boorman film of 1985, *Emerald Forest*[6], might get caught by, or just choose, the wild. Or revert, much like the more terrifying *Lord of the Flies.*

It is out there...waiting.

Think about this for a moment: a child's imagination, untampered with, un-Disneyfied, raw. A child misbehaves, as children do; in the case of Max and in the human world, the imagination saves that child from despair, or even from arbitrary, insane caretakers. The imaginary creatures that the child invokes are scary, uncontrolled (*wild*) by many a preachy, sentimental adult's standards. Indeed, the imaginary world conjured up by the chastised child reeks of revenge, of a need for mastery (even tyranny); and the voyager who travels into the land of imagination, of *wildness*, by so doing acquires a certain kind of power. Not unlike the great West African spirit, the grownup hunter/blacksmith/creator/destroyer Ogun, the child in the forest is touched not only by the animals there, but by particular, we would say imaginary and some would say supernatural, amoral creatures. Unlike the hunter, Ogun, the child is readily welcomed back into the fold, whereas Ogun, in crossing the boundary between the world of spirits—the world of the *wild*, the forest—must purify himself of his contact with extranormal beings, must rid himself of the taint, the blood of the creatures he has killed. Further, as Ogun is a spirit whose dominion includes war; in some myths—for one, those of the old, precolonial kingdom of Dânxomɛ, in southern Bénin—warriors returning from battle had to purge themselves of the contamination of blood, of killing other human beings. Thus, hunter Ogun is always regarded as a bit tainted, a bit unpredictable, a bit *wild* himself. Transitional figures always are.

Traditional African Shrine with altars to several sprits. The arrow points to Ogun's shrine.

[6] Nonetheless, apparently, though loosely, based on a true incident where the son of a Peruvian family living near the rain forest gets snatched up by a group of *indigenes*. Much later he is rediscovered; however, he chooses the tribe, rather than return to "modern" life.

So are writers, if they are doing their job.

By The Red Flower

> ...said Baheera, leaping up. "Go thou down quickly to the men's huts in the valley and take some of the Red Flower which they grow there, so that when the time comes thou mayest have even a stronger friend than I or Baloo or those of the Pack that love thee..."
>
> "The Red Flower?" said Mowgli. "That grows outside their huts in the twilight. I will get some."
>
> - Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book*

In *The Jungle Book*, by that old imperialist, Rudyard Kipling, Mowgli, the child raised by wolves, is bound by the Law—what guides *wild* creatures and which, should creatures disobey it, metes out not "justice" as we know it, but complete and utter devastation. The Mowgli stories focus not simply on a child's fantasy of animals that talk, of kinship with them, but also to varying degrees, on the confusing arbitrariness of human or adult "law" versus the implacable Law which governs nature and natural creatures. We might call it DNA. Biological determinism. No court trial, no clemency, no bargaining, no bought verdicts. No doubt Kipling, who coined the phrase, "nature red in tooth and claw," subscribed to a crude sociological interpretation of the relatively new Theory of Evolution; but even an author does not have complete control over his creation. He got one thing right: the woods, the wild, is not lawless, we are just not central to it; its justice is impartial and unsentimental, and it is *metaphorically* speaking, an indifferent god.

Among the African cultures who honor Ogun, this indifference is understood, and it is thus that one needs allies. Ogun has his hunting dog, but is a bit of a loner, a bit apart from other vodun. He is also, himself, an intercessor. Other cultures have animal spirits whom they seek out and who guide them.[7] Children have animal friends. Still, the forest is often portrayed as a lawless, chaotic place because its order is not our order; certainly in West Africa, it is a place inhabited by spirits who occasionally can be cajoled into paying attention to us—spirits of the dead (see Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*) as well as the animals that a hunter such as Ogun would be tracking. All this aside, Ogun has more in common with Mowgli than with Max in Sendak's tale. Like Ogun, Mowgli is a hunter, living in association with *Canidae*, a species closely

[7] I resist, mightily, any attempt to colonize indigenous cultures by wannabe New Age shamans who purport to take anyone on a "Vision Quest"—it's not recreation; it is terrifying, serious business.

associated with domestication *and* the wild. In his case, Mowgli has his wolf family. He lives on the outskirts of society and travels from forest to men's settlements and back again. His association with the forest taints him in the eyes of men. Indeed, Mowgli's association with his wolf siblings results in accusations that he is a wizard, using spells.

Now the Red Flower, in the countryside of India where *The Jungle Book* is set, was fire carried in a wicker basket lined with clay and serving as a lantern in the dark. Fire, in the minds of Kipling's animal characters meant, of course, terrifying forest fires, brushfires, so frightening that they had all manner of euphemisms for it rather than call it what it was. For humans, our separation from the rest of the animal kingdom came with fire—the hearth, cooked food; and because we do not see in the dark like Baheera the Panther, at night, illumination. In places where the temperature drops, it is heat; fire so we can sit and talk to one another. Speech. Telling tales. Reading. Fireworks. Gunpowder. War. Thus fire quite efficiently separates wild from tame.

As noted above, one avatar of Ogun is the blacksmith; and his connection to the bellows and metal-working and, thus, fire, is very strong. While the West African spirit of lightening, Shango, attracts because of the flash, Ogun *uses* fire, dangerous as it is, for practical purposes. Mowgli uses fire, too, as a weapon to defeat his arch-enemy, Shere Khan, the lame Tiger, and to reassert the authority of his wolf father as leader of the pack—in other words, to restore order[8]. Order from chaos, carried by the force able to transverse the frontier between wild and domestic. If you can tame with fire, you can do anything.

* * * *

Nighttime, it gets chilly in these mountains where I live, far far away; and as I write this, I warm to fire in my fireplace, wood supplied by a giant alder that toppled in a windstorm. One cat is curled up next to me; the other sits as close to the hearth as possible without scorching her fur, which is hot to the touch. At first the sound seems like a party, people laughing and talking loud, but then the yipping starts—it's the coyotes—and with that the neighbors' dogs break into their canine chorus.

With animals no longer the indication of wealth, the means of transport, and with the substance of folklore and oral tales more like as not only recorded by scholars—less

[8]Ogou La Flambeau, to take but yet another example of "Ogun-ness," is a New World version of an Ogun that has been invoked in a Haitian neighborhood in Philadelphia to drive out drug dealers.

and less among the grand metaphors for human behavior—what remains and recurs is more and more cliché—"strong as an ox," for example, ""greedy as a pig," etc.—among persons who may never have met the flesh and blood article except on the dinner plate. When the hackneyed appears, it is only as a writer plays against the cliché as Darton does with his vegetarian fox, that human imagination takes flight.

For some time the natural world has been our *fuente*, our source; and it is important to note here that the Spanish word carries the implication of its other meaning, that of a spring, water source, the small burble of fresh, uncontaminated water that much farther down becomes a mighty river. To identify with the wild, with the animal kingdom is to acknowledge our own finite nature, no doubt to accept the inevitability of our own death, our own vulnerability. If we resign ourselves to being "pent within the bounds of the actual," neglect our connection to the natural world and our animal selves, the vocabulary to speak of these languishes; and we risk impoverishing our imaginations that for so long have drawn inspiration from it.