Chapter 1: Living in a Circle of Beating Hearts

It wasn't a good time to call with my request.

"You've gotta come see this!" I heard in the background. "Oh my god, look! He's climbing, oh, he's right on the porch, look, LOOK! This is so amazing. What great pictures."

Karen and Nancy were gushing about the latest photos on their "stealth cam" of a young black bear. I called to chat about the same bear—not to gush, but to ask them to remove their bear-level bird feeders. This bear had hit several area cabins and just had a run-in with my dog, which I hoped would prompt concern for their own dogs.

"Please, just bring the food inside until the bear moves on," I asked.

"Well, I don't know," Karen said slowly.

Karen and Nancy's cabin is a half-mile from mine—as the bear walks—in the high-elevation woods of western Wyoming. I summer here, far from Salt Lake City, where I teach during the school year. And my summers in the woods typify all the singular experiences and joys of watching wildlife: great gray owls hunting from the aspen, moose browsing at the meadow edge, warblers plucking insects from the branches. The encounters expand my human world into something much more brilliant and real.

There is good reason why people want to watch and get close to animals: of all the elements of the beyond-human world—geosphere, hydrosphere, atmosphere, and biosphere—it is the beating hearts in the biosphere to which we connect most deeply. As human ecologist Paul Shepard wrote, "Being human has always meant perceiving ourselves in a circle of animals." From prehistoric times to present ones, adventure among the Others (as he calls them) has remained central to our lives; our species emerged enacting, dreaming, and thinking animals. For reasons historical, spiritual, and biological, we cannot be fully human without them.

And, they are always physically near us—intimately so—even in cities. The animals with the beating hearts are the back-boned vertebrates—fish, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals—though these vertebrates account for just 5 percent of all the creatures in the Kingdom Animalia. All Animalia down to smallest beetle or worm are motile (meaning they can move, at least during part of their lives), eat, and breathe (the Latin word *animalis* means "having breath"). Yet curiously, many "animal kingdom" websites make no mention of *Homo sapiens.* Our language reinforces this us-them boundary; when we say "animal" we typically mean the nonhuman ones. At least Shepard's term "Others" conveys that there are countless Other animals besides humans, but I prefer the word Kin to denote all of us.

Despite animals' unity in independent movement, appetite, and breath, and their interpenetration in our lives and culture, we engage in an ironic dance of distance with them. We seek the company of favored animals and search with camera and scope or mount the motion-triggered cam. Animals we label as "bad" are feared, shunned, banished, exterminated. "Wildlife" (like black bears) are perceived as bits of good and bad, depending on which side of our acceptable boundary they stand.

If *Ursus americanus* "belongs" anywhere, it is up here in the woods. But I learned in the summer-of-bears at my cabin that all my black bear experiences (mostly cultural) followed me all the way up here. For starters in childhood: Cinnamon, my beloved stuffed bear with a lullaby music box; TV shows like *Wild Kingdom* and *Grizzly Adams;* Winnie the Pooh books; a favorite book *Blueberries for Sal* (where a bear follows a berry-picking girl, slyly eating out of her pail); and the fact that I was a badge-wearing Smokey Bear Junior Ranger. No matter if I see a bear up here in the woods or one wanders into a suburban strip mall (which happened last year), I attach cultural meanings of "bear." This is just as true for a backyard squirrel or a mouse, and it affects not only how close we can (or want to) get to animals, but also how close we can *be.*

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The first of several bear visits was my very first morning at the cabin in May. My golden retriever Maddie woke to a sound and planted her paws on the bedroom windowsill. I put on my glasses. A young black bear pushed the last of the birdseed into a pile with her paws and lapped it up with a dark tongue. The feeder, which I had hung just eleven hours before, sprawled on the ground.

I was proud of my feeder site: a lone, slender Douglas fir branch twelve feet off the ground, stretching almost four feet from the trunk. No bear in my decade of bird feeding had reached the feeder (some had tried), but this was "smarter than your average bear," and smaller—I guessed a two-year-old, light enough to shinny out the branch. The bear was also a repeat offender, judging from the blue plastic ear tags. I snapped some pictures through the window.

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In an exercise in my environmental communication class, students list animals on two blackboards, one labeled "good" and one "bad." Quickly and with relatively little disagreement, they fill both boards. Then we examine what lies behind our gut reactions; what is it about charismatic megafauna that we like and about insects that we don't?

Based on extensive surveys, over twenty different factors influence whether we like or dislike certain animal species, such as size (we prefer large over small), intelligence, mode of locomotion (we like animals that walk instead of slither), and evolutionary closeness to humans (we like chimps). We prefer zoomorphism (animals who bond to humans), animals with individual personalities, and animals with relationships to human society (such as pets, farm animals, game, and exotic animals). We like animals with similar social habits, like parenting, pack loyalty, and helping each other. We are less magnanimous toward animals capable of harming us or our possessions, like crops or gardens. The students put black bear on the "good" board and grizzly bear on the "bad."

This list makes it clear: we like animals "like us," even if we are reluctant to put ourselves in the "animal" camp. This inhibits our ability to see who many animals are and all that we share physio-logically with them.

A mother black bear poking her nose through the triangular vent window on our pale yellow 1960 station wagon on a family vacation was my first encounter with a bear. Her two cubs stood well behind her, watching. It was thrilling, and a little scary, but mostly thrilling. At Yellowstone National Park in those days, black bears were park panhandlers, looking for picnic baskets like Yogi Bear and Booboo (and the open Park dumps). To me, that mama bear was feeding her cubs, a good animal. She stood upright and used her front paws to take the marshmallows and bread slices offered through car windows (though our parents didn't let us feed her) and seemed friendly enough.

Whether bears or birds or bugs, animals are a key cultural metaphor we use to express core feelings and perceptions about the world and all our Kin. If an environmental group wants to "save" a forest from some threat, they focus on an animal who is an iconic symbol of that place. Sentient beings with beating hearts and a language of their own are symbolic barometers of our fundamental beliefs and valuations of nature—in ways that trees or rocks or rivers are not.

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The bear left the grounded feeder and walked toward the bedroom window where Maddie and I stood. When she saw us, she stood, stared at us, and sniffed the air. Maddie gave a soft, low growl. I banged on the window and yelled, "go on! get outta here!" Nonchalantly, the bear resumed walking and circled the cabin, finishing at the bird feeder with a few more mouthfuls. Satisfied, the bear walked over to my car and put her front paws on the passenger door and sniffed (I later learned she smelled mice in there). She then galumphed past the shed and disappeared over the rise. I made coffee and called several neighbors to be on the lookout.

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The late Stephen Kellert (and longtime professor at Yale University) famously described nine different attitude orientations toward animals based on a large national survey. Roughly a third of respondents were strongly Humanist (interest and strong affection, particularly for individual animals) and another third had Negativist-Neutralist attitudes (active or passive avoidance due to indifference, dislike, or fear). One-fifth of people were strongly Utilitarian (concern for practical and material value) and another fifth were Moralist (concern for right and wrong treatment of animals). The least common attitude orientations were Aesthetic, Naturalist, Ecologist, Scientist, and Dominionist.

Why are such attitudes important? These feelings guide our everyday portrayals and cultural communication about animals, and the destiny of many species depends on people's subjective feelings about them, whether mountain goats or monkeys, skunks or chipmunks.

We bond with wild and domestic animals, says animal etholo-gist Marc Bekoff, because they show us their feelings and hearts—both universal emotions like happiness, fear, anger, and sadness, and secondary emotions like sympathy, guilt, and jealousy. Animals talk with their tails, postures, gaits, gestures, mouths, eyes, and noses. Several species, including elephants and magpies, have mourning ceremonies for fallen comrades. Bekoff told of two grizzly cubs whose mother was shot, and the female cub cared for her wounded sibling, catching fish for him and waiting for him as he limped along.

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Five days later, Maddie and I awoke to clanking on the porch. The same blue-tagged bear pawed at the moose antler on top of the barbecue grill. On a walk the day before, Maddie had raced past me, clutching the heavy antler prize tightly in her jaw for the half-mile back to the cabin. When she let me hold it—a good-sized, palmated paddle—I discovered how she discovered it: it reeked, probably from some critter's scent marking. So I parked the paddle on the grill, intending to wash it the next day. Guess the bear thought it reeked, too. I banged on the glass and the bear startled and ran to the dead-end portion of the porch, high above the ground. She sat cowered in the corner, head tucked in, dribbling a little urine, looking scared and staring right at me. Poor thing. I waited until the bear rose to all fours, then I banged again and she galloped off the porch, down the meadow, and into the woods.

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Black bears have come to cabins since people have built cabins, attracted by all manner of smells, provisions, and plantings. Bears emerge from their dens and let their appetites walk them through the seasons, first dining on winter-killed carrion, new grass, and aspen catkins. Next come grubs, rodents, dandelions and stream-side frogs, snails, and fish. By late summer, berries are dessert. I once sat uphill from a black bear for an hour as it dexterously ripped apart a large decaying pine log and delicately lapped up all the beetles, grubs, and ants inside. Black bears, like many species (including us), are opportunists with an adaptable omnivorous diet. Their foraging patterns easily divert for "anthropogenic attractants," such as birdseed or garbage.

The attributes of a species—like the food-driven curiosity of black bears—are just part of what influences our attitudes toward them. Our attributes as human observers (such as education level, sex, income, residence, and experience with animals) also play a part. Women and urban dwellers have stronger affective perceptions than do men and rural residents. Children who have relationships with animals have positive emotions about animals and focus less on utilitarian value. For both kids and adults, direct, parti-cipatory contact with animals, such as bird-watching or hunting, is tied to greater appreciation, concern, and knowledge.

It is hard to generalize what people know about animals, except to say, it isn't much. Overall, we know most about pets, animals who harm people, and wildlife involved in emotional public issues (think wolves and grizzlies). The people least knowledgeable about animals live in cities of more than a million residents. Knowledge of wild animals in the United States is pretty abstract and indirect. For many, the

generic *bear* or *trout* is the common level of recognition; a specific species reference, *black bear* or *cutthroat trout,* suggests greater cultural importance. Rarer still is when a person recognizes an individual of a species, like a particular bear.

So where do our cultural cues and animal facts come from? Folklorists say conversation and oral stories, children's literature, popular and commercial culture, public performances, elite culture, and scientific discourse. Pop culture and entertainment affect perceptions enormously, from Animal Planet to PBS. On a class field trip to the zoo, where my students listen to how people talk about the animals, we hear kids call them by the Disney character they played. A mom told her toddler who got excited by the "big kitty" cougar that "no, honey, that's a *bad* kitty." (Sadly, studies report that most people learn virtually nothing about animals at the zoo, save for how animals behave in captivity.) Regardless of where we live, we see more animal portrayals in everyday culture (advertising characters like the insurance gecko, animal sports mascots, eagles on T-shirts, news stories about cougars, YouTube videos, photos shared on Facebook) than we ever personally experience.

Cultural portrayals rely on a stereotyped shorthand to represent a particular animal—sharks are manic killers, swans are regal, ladybugs are cute—that convey every fear, admiration, envy, and longing we possess. In just seconds, shared meanings (even ignorant ones) of jaguars or pandas are exaggerated and exploited to sell you products. It's difficult (perhaps impossible) to parse the human-generated symbol of a particular animal from the living and breathing animal symbolized. In essence, what we see when we look at animals is our reflection.

We do not think twice about stereotyping an entire animal species, yet work to avoid stereotypes within the human species—Mexicans, gays, the homeless. Any stereotype makes it easier to marginalize, hate, and fear an entire group and see it as a threat to the established order. We stereotype that cougars or bears simply are a certain way and possess identical traits, in part because it's unlikely that we can differentiate individuals and their behaviors. Thus, when one cougar attacks a jogger, fear and loathing applies to the entire species.

Conversations and stories shape our beliefs of what animals are like. In our speech, animals are both verbs and nouns representing countless human conditions. As Shepard notes: We duck our heads, crane our necks, clam up, crab at one another, carp, rat, crow, or grouse vocally. We…lionize and fawn…We fish for compliments, hog what should be shared, wolf it down, skunk others in total defeat, and hawk our wares. We outfox and buffalo those whom we dupe; we bug and badger in harassment. We hound or dog in pursuit, bear our burdens, lark and horse around in frolic. We bull, ram, or worm our way, monkey with things, weasel, and chicken out. We know loan sharks, possum players, and bull-shitters.

And, we see ourselves in animals' experiences. My friend Flo came to my cabin one Sunday to watch from my deck a nest of soon-to-fledge woodpeckers. The red-naped sapsucker parents arrived with food in quick intervals, prompted by the continuous hunger-begging peeps of the chicks. Between feedings, the chicks poked their heads out the nest-hole, surveying sky and earth. Suddenly, one chick clambered out and walked up the aspen trunk, swiveling its neck to see the world and testing its beak on the bark with a few quick pecks. In a couple of minutes it flew away, perfectly, on untested wings and landed in a fir downslope. Shortly, the second chick repeated the fledge. The male returned and searched for the chicks, poking his head in the hole, walking around the trunk and back to the hole, where he clung for several more minutes. Wow, empty nest syndrome. Flo, whose adult daughter had flown back East that morning, said, "I know how the adult sapsuckers feel. No matter how old they are, I always hate to see my kids leave."

Our attitudes toward animals are not merely the result of photos, plush toys, and beer commercials but of ancient influences. Biologist E. O. Wilson claims that our evolutionary heritage created biophilia (the innate tendency to connect with other forms of life) as well as evolution-derived fears and prejudices toward certain animals. Over millennia, our brains and bodies evolved through participation in the animal

world as both prey and predator, thus animals are justifiably at the heart of human symbolism. For many Paleolithic peoples, it was the bear who became a model of ourselves.

Many attribute a grand turning point in our relationship with animals to Charles Darwin, who taught us that differences among species were largely differences in degree, not differences in kind. Darwin overturned the presumption that there was a special origin for humankind; instead, our species is corporally related (directly or indirectly) through millions of evolutionary webs to *every* other organism that we encounter. Recent science has also challenged the fixed boundaries between humans and nonhuman animals in terms of physiology, brain functions, and "human" attributes like consciousness, self-awareness, and emotion. In *Beyond Words: What Animals Think and Feel,* ecologist Carl Safina reminds us that consciousness seems necessary for all creatures who must judge things, plan, and make decisions. Octopuses use tools and solve problems as skillfully as do most apes. Honeybee brains have the same "thrill-seeker" hormone that is in human brains. And elephants live in matriarchal families built on close bonds and communication.

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Three ponderous, moist piles of bear poop lay in the middle of the game trail. Maddie and I were halfway down the meadow below the cabin commencing a hike. The blue-tagged bear had not returned in three weeks, but a grizzly was reported recently near the highway about seven miles away. I turned around and headed back to the cabin for bear spray.

The phone rang; it was my friend Sara. Outside, Maddie barked excitedly. Since she is not a barker, I figured someone was coming up the driveway, but all I saw from the window was Maddie trotting up the drive, looking behind her. Sara and I kept talking. Maddie's paws scratched at the front door; I went to let her in, but she wasn't there. I returned to the back door and saw at the far side of the driveway a bear standing with her front paws on a tree trunk, but no Maddie. "I gotta go, there's a bear!" and threw down the phone. Then I saw Maddie by the woodpile, ten yards from the bear. I called her and she came flying up the back stoop, glancing back. The blue-tagged bear ambled past the woodpile, past the fir that once held the feeder and toward the stoop. When her paws thumped on the steps, I slammed the door several times, yelled, and pounded the glass. The bear showed no sign of fear or aggression. She padded back down the steps and strolled over the ridge. I do not know if the bear chased Maddie or if Maddie chased (or was ready to chase) the bear. My heart pounded. In the intensity of the moment, it didn't occur to me to use the bear spray.

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Zach from Game and Fish asked if I knew the number on the bear's blue tag. I enlarged my photos and found it. She was a two-year-old female who was trapped as a one-year-old last summer after causing problems several miles west at my friend Phyllis's cabin. The bear was released in the Upper Green River valley—a couple of hours away as the human drives, or thirty miles of mountainous terrain as the bear walks. Phyllis fed all sorts of critters for decades, winter and summer, and no one could convince her not to. Phyllis died in March and left her property and cabin to animal welfare groups. And now her bear was visiting me.

When I learned the bear's story, I felt differently about her, this young girl bear I decided to call "Phyllis." In her short life, Phyllis had learned that cabins are sources of food, and that people mostly stay inside those cabins and don't hurt you. Many one-year-old cubs hibernate with their mothers a second year, but Phyllis survived on her own in the wild Upper Green. Amazing. No wonder she trekked back to familiar ground. Zach said the sooner a cabin-visiting bear is relocated, the better chance it has of "reforming." It was not good news that Phyllis was back.

Until I called Game and Fish, Phyllis was doing what she did every day of her normal bear life: sleeping, roaming, eating, pooping—nothing newsworthy by human standards. Wildlife "make the news"

when a human makes claims about them, or when boundaries—symbolic or real—between humans and other animals are blurred or are breached. Moose visits neighborhood, insects visit crops, duck nests downtown, bird collides with plane, black bear has run-in with a golden retriever. That is important to remember about “news” versus the long, languid stretch of “normal” in the everyday lives of animals. Some zoologists estimate that many animals basically rest and “do nothing” 80-90 percent of the time.

Government wildlife officials, like Zach, are the most predominant voice for animals when they make the news. Years ago, I analyzed news coverage of wildlife in four urban and four rural Midwest newspapers. About 60 percent of all quoted news sources were government employees, and 80 percent of all stories were about game animals. This reflects the dominance of game animals in wildlife management, the role of state wildlife departments, and the big animals we prefer; it also parallels where wildlife management dollars are spent. Urban newspaper stories focused on animal “stewardship,” which makes sense in cities where people see wildlife infrequently or as a by-product of outdoor leisure. The predominant story theme in rural newspapers was “utilitarian,” which makes sense in a place where people live physically closer to wildlife, and directly interact with them, and where many jobs depend on working outside. Rural Americans greatly value animals (wild and domestic) for what they provide, and dislike them for what they take or harm.

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The day after Maddie’s encounter, Zach towed a bear trap up the driveway. While we talked, Maddie nosed cautiously toward the round metal tube, then sprang back with fright, which she repeated several times. “She smells ’em,” Zach said. He positioned the trap halfway down the long drive, out of view of the cabin. He baited it with two pieces of fresh trout and grain pellets, and mounded fresh dirt below the opening to catch paw prints.

The trap stayed for four days, but the only creature caught was a golden retriever who could not resist the fish. Zach replaced the fish and reset the door. When Zach came to remove the trap, the fish was once again missing, but there were no paw prints in the dirt. “Probably ravens,” he said. Clever ravens. The day after Zach pulled the trap, Phyllis appeared on Bill and Jane’s porch, neighbors a half-mile east. Jane was upset she didn’t get pictures.

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There are three choices for solving human-bear conflicts: try to change the bear’s behavior (trap and relocate), kill the bear, or change the humans’ behavior. Changing the bear sounds good, but early intervention for Phyllis did not work (and she likely was now trap-wary). Changing the humans is even more problematic. Karen and Nancy would not alter their big array of bird-feeding stations, nor would a dozen other neighbors. A couple of neighbors fed their cats outside. Zach once spoke to our neighborhood meeting and posted roadway signs about removing food sources when bears are present, but little changed.

My neighbors’ sentiments about bears matched those reported in bear-human management studies. Most people like black bears, enjoy seeing them, and appreciate their place in the ecosystem. People perceive them as highly intelligent and aesthetically appealing. But sentiments are mixed about the threat bears pose and what “management actions” are appropriate. One neighbor (who cooked her bacon outside and didn’t secure her garbage) was ready to shoot any bear on sight. Some neighbors warned me not to call Game and Fish for fear that Phyllis would just be shot. And a great many continued to refill bird feeders, either unaware of the phrase “a fed bear is a dead bear,” or oblivious to their connection to it.

When mammals like black bears, foxes, coyotes, deer and others cross human boundaries (invisible to their eyes, of course), they are perceived as enigmatic wild creatures, or as destructive intruders. The boundaries are firm in urban areas—the “intruder” must go—but seem more fluid in a rural area, depending on the species (coyotes are often dispatched as “varmints”) and perceived harm to livelihood. A bear’s

“trespass” is mitigated by our ecological concern for them and by their pervasive cultural presence. At my Summer Solstice party several days after the bear trap rolled away, Jennifer brought me a straw ornament of a bear as a hostess gift. I hung it near the kitchen sink.

The decor of most Wyoming cabins includes multiple repre-sentations of woodsy animals: bears on kitchen towels, antler coat racks, moose light-switch plates, couch throws adorned with trout, bear toothbrush holders, owl clocks, and artwork and photo-graphs with these animals. The tchotchkes often repel me—the Disneyfication of a woods full of far more than charismatic megafauna and game animals. How tawdry using animals to hock consumer goods, the very production of which shrinks habitat and pollutes and warms our world. Why depict cartoonish moose standing on two legs? And a dopey-looking bear holding the toilet paper—really?

Yet, I haul home moose paddles, elk antlers, jawbones, and feathers. Egg shells, fossils, and assorted teeth line my bookshelves. It’s the naturalist in me, my attempt to touch corporeal remnants of my Kin and feel I know them. In a way, these objects are as much collective markers of a specific place, a habitat, as the manufactured knickknacks—a way to feel I possess these woods and the Kin who live in them more fully. Both types of fetishes may contribute to an exaggerated (even false) sense of intimacy, that we somehow “know” bears or owls or moose. It speaks to the hunger we have for animals, the desire to have them near, whether actual fragments or humanized versions of them. We are “species lonely,” writes author Thomas McGuane in *Some Horses* and therefore rely on needy dogs and cats to connect us to Earth’s other inhabitants.

In contrast to other animals’ rootedness in place, modern humans are adrift in standardized spaces and not solidly oriented to landscape or native creatures. While driving across Idaho recently, I exited to get gas and lunch, and for a moment I had no idea where I was because the franchises, billboards, and parking lots were the same ones I saw everywhere, anywhere. Other animals completely possess their home places with ease and confidence of movement and deep knowledge. Animal Kin live lives congruent with and rooted in their surroundings with skills and abilities perfected honed to it.

Many of us spend our lifetimes trying to get close to animals, in hopes that our meetings will magically bridge the chasm between their world and ours—as if these are somehow two separate places and not one in the same.

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As the summer blossomed and deepened, I missed the birds. I caught glimpses in the aspens or heard them sing in the morning, but without the feeder I rarely saw some species. Then I spied in a closet a small plexiglass feeder with suction cups to hang on a window, a gift I never used. Ah-ha, I could attach it to the office window that was twelve feet off the ground and above the cement walk-out basement; there was nothing for a bear to hold onto and climb.

Immediately the evening grosbeaks materialized, as did the Cassin’s finches, black-headed grosbeaks, pine grosbeaks, and pine siskins. And what a view I had from my desk in front of the window, no binoculars necessary! Their slender talons clutched the feeder rim, their beaks frenetically opened the shells, their heads cocked when I spoke to them. I witnessed pecking order; the female evening grosbeak ruled the plexiglass roost, and the tiny nuthatches waited. I was a voyeur with a box seat on the bird world.

There is magic in the wild and close encounter that is hard to name or replicate. The best nature documentary is incomparable to seeing cow elk dance in my meadow, or startling a sandhill crane when I hike. It is like the difference between seeing a mountain peak in a postcard versus hiking there yourself; with all the exertion, anticipation, and engaged senses, you see and feel the mountain in full color and context. With other animals, it’s powerful, intoxicating even, to be in their presence, to know you’re sharing the air, the light, the moment. The magic is also the serendipity and uncertainty of the encounter, and even the possibility of danger. Animal Kin define and create the moment as much as I.

Like most photographers, I often snap a photo when the animal looks my way. It's seductive to think they returned my gaze, that we shared a moment of mutual recognition and they saw me like I saw them. However, when the hooved animals grazing my meadow early and late look up at me on the cabin deck, it's to judge my threat; it's a look of alert caution, nothing more. Their interest is eating (like the bear's) and I am judged as impeding that or not. They may recognize me as a human animal, a species that mostly means danger to them. If I want to watch them, I must keep my distance.

Yet on another level, our glances and interactions are interspecies communication with shared meanings and understood signals. Once many years ago, the communication was the purest I have ever experienced with another creature: I talked with a cougar. She had been watching me as I meditated on a rock at the edge of a cliff in southeastern Utah. When I stood and saw her, she took several paces away, her head turned back to watch me, the tip of her tail flicking side to side. I started talking to her, amazed how beautiful and regal she was. I took pictures. Then she turned to face me, sat, and wrapped her tail around her body. She gave me the slow, deliberate blinks of a contented cat. I believe we understood the other's intent at a palpable and visceral level; we were partaking of each other. It was reciprocal, deep, undeniably—unintentionally—honest. It was prayer, which in its most elemental sense is speaking *to* things, rather than merely *about* them.

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Sure signs of spring for me are the smell of warm wind, gathering light, robins sparring in the backyard—and, when the nest cams go live. Wildlife cams around the world beam animal intimacies: puffins, snowy owls, penguins, bald eagles, pandas, and the fishing brown bears of Katmai National Park. One cam site's founder told Associated Press, "What we are doing is building out the zoos of the future, where animals run wild and people from everywhere can feel connected to the experience."

The animals are wild and the video feed unedited, which gives the viewer critter-life in real time with long expanses of normal quietude in their everyday lives. Hanging out. Sleeping. Flicking away flies. Looking around. Grooming. More sleeping. Even for fishing bears, there is lots of standing around in the water, watching, waiting, interspersed with occasional tiffs over riverbed turf. After enough cam viewing, a viewer learns what is involved in feeding chicks, catching rodents, and fishing for salmon.

In today's culture, we believe electronic encounters make us more connected and shrink the world. But as philosopher David Abram argues, the primary lesson you learn watching nature programs "is that nature is something you look at, not something you are *in* and *of.*" The cams do allow me to enter the bear's watery restaurant as a silent voyeur half a world away. But there is no investment on my part, no consequences. I'm not sitting on the bank swarmed by mosquitoes, I cannot smell the rotting fish, and I'm in no danger from these talented carnivores. Do I have a stake in any outcome—theirs or mine? I'm entertained, I'm awestruck, but am I "connected"?

Compared to watching bears fish at the Anan Creek Preserve near Wrangell, Alaska—no. I took my dad on a small-boat cruise of the Inside Passage, and Anan was an optional day-trip. We were instructed to leave anything that smelled (food, gum, suntan lotion, soda) on the boat. We marched single file behind a burly woman with a rifle—no stopping!—along a wooden boardwalk to an enclosure of sorts. A series of wooden decks with railings overlooked a stretch of Anan Creek where an ensemble of black bears and brown bears fished for migrating salmon. No loud talking, no camera flashes. Sign up for fifteen minutes down in the blind at the river's edge. If you need to pee, a guard with a rifle will escort you to a porta-potty; open the door and wave when you want to be escorted back.

For four hours, we were bewitched by bears. Bears staked out fishing holes—black bears upstream, brown bears down. Cubs cavorted and climbed trees and napped in them. The smell of broken salmon wafted up to us, along with the rush of rapids where the bears fished. Above the rapids in a stretch of calm, shallow water, exhausted salmon who had run the gauntlet prepared to spawn. We identified bears with great fishing skills and those who missed a lot. Some bears walked their fish up the bank to eat the

guts and brains, abandoning the rest for the long line of scavengers. Some bears ate their catch on a rock in the river before turning back for more. When a bear ambled by close (the guards on alert), I saw duff in its fur, smelled its dusky body. Though we were just yards from them, we felt invisible—that's how focused they were on the feast. But I realize that our presence likely changed the scene itself in some way. And I recognize that my Anan experience was one that only a privileged few ever experience.

Four decades ago, radio telemetry revolutionized wildlife biology, allowing biologists to attach small pieces of electronic equipment to a captured animal and track its location once re-leased. Oh, the reams of data collected: cougars roaming great distances and birds migrating vast oceans. Biologists said it minimized animal disturbance and slashed hours in the field. Then came web cams, which ramped up the viewing several notches. Then came the drones.

One May, some tourists buzzed a herd of bighorn sheep in Zion National Park with a drone, causing young sheep to separate from the herd. The park ranger said they encountered people using drones in the park several times a week to get close to wildlife. Other national parks reported visitors disturbing nesting birds with drones. The following month, the Park Service prohibited drones in all national parks because the devices annoy visitors, harass wildlife, and threaten safety. National Park Service director Jonathan Jarvis said they would educate visitors about how drones disturb wildlife. (Just like managers educate cabin owners about bears, I wondered?)

Wildlife biologists argue that drones are once again revolutionizing their work, and they "need" drones to learn and understand animals in order to better protect and manage them. It is a typical anthropocentric perspective: animals need us and our knowledge, and any drone disturbance is therefore justified in the name of the larger animal (if not public) good. I trust that biologists are more sensitive about disturbing animals with "conservation drones." But is that even possible?

To a wild creature, drones in anyone's hands are paparazzi, an alarming buzz of unwelcome attention. It reduces the vital, private space animals need to thrive, and reduces the space doubly with the noise they bring. Like electronic dogs hounding a fox. Animals need quiet privacy and deep retreat; they know this and they seek it. And if we recognized that we are one animal among many animals (not the other way around), we would know that we need quiet privacy and deep retreat, too. But society is hell-bent in the other direction, ever more oblivious to privacy: we give it away on Facebook and phones that track us and the Google Earth camera that snaps close-ups of our homes. People "retreat" into ear buds and constant e-connections, which is not retreat, deep or otherwise.

The wrong question is, "How close can or should we *get*?" to animals through any means, drones or otherwise. The deeper question is "How close can we *be*?" in a way that is irrespective of distance. We live in a circle of animals, one community of countless beating hearts, whose fates are far more intertwined and synchronous than we can fathom.

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Though I did not see Phyllis again that summer, I have no doubt that she (and other bears) traipsed across the area all summer. Signs let me know they were near: scat in the woods, a paw print in mud outside the basement door, another print in the road dust. By August, bears smashed through the raspberry bushes a mile up the road, depositing crimson piles of evidence nearby.

When neighbors came together, we told stories of bears, stories that reminded us that Kin were fully present and proximal in our lives. Gail's bear tore down a bird feeder. Anne's dog chased a cub off their deck one morning. Tom got pictures of a bear on his cell phone, though he wasn't sure whether it was "my bear." Karen and Nancy got pictures of a bear visiting their porch on their stealth cam eight times. Only after the last visit, when their dogs cornered the bear and a shotgun blast in the air was necessary to end the confrontation, did they bring all their bird food inside.

But I was uncomfortable with our stories because the bears remained objects of our human gaze, a bit like circus bears who came to our cabins to perform for us, but sometimes crossed the line from desirable to unwanted, from close to too-close, from rewarding to costly. We were turning them into panhandlers, threatening the very creatures we so enjoyed.

Humans seem to feel safest with boundaries: inside/outside, private/public, wild/tame, nature/culture. Yet any such division demarcates two separate worlds—when there is only one world available. And we long to be in that same world with our Kin, a longing that is a deep-rooted piece of who we are, as imbued in our language and dwellings as in our hearts.

In 2016, an extensive study by the World Wildlife Fund found that between 1970 and 2012 populations of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish around the globe dropped 58 percent. I read the study several times, trying to fathom the unfathomable numbers. The report said biodiversity loss is much higher in low-income countries, and it correlates with increasing resource use by high-income countries. It's related to consumption, climate change, scarce water, and degraded land. In just forty years, almost 40 percent of terrestrial wildlife is gone, vanished.

Writer and poet Alison Hawthorne Deming ponders in her book *Zoologies* what the disappearance of animals means for the human imagination and spirit. She wants "to remember what it feels like to be embedded in the family of animals, to see the ways animals inhabit and limn our lives, entering our days and nights, unannounced and essential." What we need is a cosmology that is able to see ourselves as just one species among Kin in a global circle of circulating hearts—whether we encounter them in the backyard or the distant wild. A cosmology that holds as its general universal law that Kin are as elemental to our being as gravity, as essential to our biosphere as oxygen, as crucial to our hearts as the blood beating in them.

In *The Others,* Shepard composed a letter of reply from the animals to the humans, which concluded:

> We are marginalized, trivialized. We have sunk to being objects, commodities, possessions. We remain meat and hides, but only as a due and not as sacred gifts. They have forgotten how to learn the future from us. . . . Their own numbers leave little room for us, and in this is their great misunderstanding. They are wrong about our departure, thinking it to be part of their progress instead of their emptying. When we have gone they will not know who they are. Supposing themselves to be the purpose of it all, purpose will elude them.

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One late summer evening after a sudden heavy cloudburst, a black bear lumbered up the steep meadow. The storm quashed my BBQ plans and I cooked veggie burgers inside; when the pan got too hot and smoked, I opened a window. The bear was large and rotund, far larger than Phyllis and without ear tags. He rounded the big Douglas fir twenty yards below the kitchen door and then stood, sniffing the air, his massive paws and pencil-thick claws resting on his belly below his beating heart and a white chest blaze. He fell to all fours and took a dozen more paces up the meadow, stood again, and sniffed again. I grinned, agape, clutching a dish towel. The bear turned and in a few large strides, cleared the ridge and disappeared. Thump, thump, thump went my heart.