

Disrupting the Cycle
By Tamara Busch

She had become emotionally invested in their lives.

The more she watched, the more she understood, the more she had to close her eyes and thoughts against it.

She walked back over to sit on the retaining wall by him.

If she closed her eyes, with the heat, humidity, the smell of their sweat, for a moment they could be sitting on another retaining wall, beneath a tree, in another hemisphere, waiting on the Wednesday canoe from Munda to Tabaka. Where waiting felt like being. With memory she could be anywhere if she let it be. Time and space stretch out. It could be a day where she said, in a very relevant way, that she wasn't sure what she would do if he were in the water and there was a shark. Like she couldn't be sure she could "dive in" for him... not because she didn't want to, but because "you can't be sure how you are going to react in a crisis." She didn't want him to be disappointed if she froze, that his last thoughts would be feelings of disappointment or betrayal. So they would both have this to darken their humor when they got in the canoe. To put distance from that location, she added in, "same with a train coming, not sure if I could push you off the tracks in time."

There was no smell of the sea, sounds of water lapping, outboard motors, or the market. Crows were calling, not a hornbill. Crows that caused the dog to bark at the perceived aerial threat. Train tracks were more relevant now. Sometimes she or they would walk the dog along the tracks. Along the tracks that cut through the land and around the neighborhood she had collected seeds in previous summers - black-eyed Susan, aster, milkweed. Seeds she scatter planted in winter for cold stratification. Germination in the spring. Summers growing pollinator patches around the house. Timing the blooms. Some survived the pounding paws and grew.

Summers, falls, winters, springs - she, they, had spent building trust with two shelter dogs through walks and play. Autonomous creatures they had brought into their home. Creatures who smelled, heard and saw the world in a different way from them. But it was in a dog's DNA to be sociable with humans. She felt they could relate to each other.

If she closed her eyes and heard the rustle of an animal jumping between branches, it could be a monkey... it could mean she found the "Guanacaste" troop. But then if she heard with the shaking of a branch walnuts drop from the tree, hit the roof and then the ground, it meant they were Iowa squirrels jumping between branches and she could see one dog shaking by the patio door. If she opened her eyes that dog was no more. Kidney cancer, not a walnut air raid or crow attack as that dog had feared.

He threw the ball for the other dog, power paws. She brought it back, like good dogs do. She barked in the play bow, like happy dogs do. Their four-legged, fur girl.

She walked back to one of the small world patches she had nurtured. Patches that had brought in bees, butterflies and the occasional hummingbird. They had watched whenever a monarch landed, hunted for the eggs, monitored the caterpillars. Four then five growing fatter, bigger as they ate away the leaves. Saw one get as far as the pupa. Then a day later, found the pupa eaten, possibly by a chipmunk. She wanted to see again, what she had seen on a neighbor's plant, the emergence of a butterfly. She read about the monarch's four stage life cycle – the egg, the larvae, the pupa, the butterfly. She read that there were four to five generations in a single year. The monarch migration was a journey of generations on fragile wings. One generation crossed no borders – a lifespan of a few weeks. Another generation had no words, no map for such and lived for months. How the caterpillar, the butterfly experienced, perceived, processed the world - so alien to her. Genetically it was so much further removed from humans than the dog. The otherness crawled through her mind. She could not remember when a caterpillar was a new creature to her. The caterpillar had no thoughts of her. The caterpillar does not think in those terms, does not reflect on its place in the world. Going about its caterpillar business.

She could remember when the dog first discovered a buzzing cicada, took it in its mouth, spit it out still buzzing. Its only insect encounter that she was aware of. The dog thought not of the caterpillar.

She updated him on the current caterpillar count, four. She made him an audience to her narration of these events. If she could invest one other person in this world, in this moment.

In a past moment, they had seen sea turtles in the Solomon Islands. In another, they had walked with a tour group down a beach on the west coast of Australia to watch baby sea turtles hatch and run to the water. Witnesses to life's dramatic beginnings. What happened after they began to swim, none of the group would ever know, content in the knowledge that these small creatures had reached the sea.

Years later, in Costa Rica, but still in the same hemisphere, they had an opportunity to hike miles down to Playa Nancite for one night with the hope of witnessing the arribada, a mass sea turtle nesting. Not the same turtles returning to the same beach as they had seen before, but theoretically to see another step in a migration life cycle. She had this image of completion when they planned it. The night before, a couple of researchers had seen fifteen turtles. The night she and he marched up and down the beach for hours, time stretched along the sand. They finally saw one shadowy turtle burying her eggs, from a safe distance. Staring at the tracks in the sand in the next morning's light, she had said to him, "I suppose this would have been a lot less work to just watch on TV, and the lighting would have been better." She knew him. He had smiled, "I wouldn't have hiked down here if I didn't want to."

This miniature drama playing out in her pollinator patch involved only minutes of his attention on any given day. Then he could go back inside, turn on the TV, eat some snacks. He threw the ball to the far side of the yard again, away from her small world as instructed. The good dog brought the ball back. He came over to see the caterpillars. The happy dog followed. The excited dog jumped up on the retaining wall, to bring its joy close to him. She tried to knock the dog's joy back down with her arm. But the Dogzilla tail swept out one maybe chrysalis forming caterpillar. Pawzilla smashed another "like a bug". They looked at the collateral damage of the dog's momentary joy. The butterfly it will never be. There were so many ways that could have happened. It's just this is the way that it happened. They looked at the dog's questioning eyes and the slowing, lowering, cautious tail wag. The Dogzilla could not focus in on the caterpillar - too small, too close, out of its color range, not smelly enough, out of its concern. It was an accident, of the paw, of the power paw and joy.

Two, maybe still three, other caterpillars did not know they lived in apocalyptic times.

It was not the end of a species, not in this moment, in this patch. If another species was evolving to replace it, she did not know it. But she had seen the beginning and the end of one individual. The smallness of it was so big. What cataclysms had she unknowingly caused with her stomping foot on the ground, a flipper against a coral reef, the wheel of a car, a windshield – it had been years since she remembered needing to clean a windshield from bug splatter. How many places had she taken her careless joy around the world on steel wings? Could he see what she saw?

Surely, they would pull the dog off the train tracks, in time to save her... and Pawzilla wouldn't jump in shark infested waters...

"The whole world will end with or without us," she thought. And still she wanted a happy dog and a butterfly.