

# NATURAL DISASTERS

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N A T A L I E A N G I E R

For a girl who grows up in a fierce neighborhood of the Bronx, dodging cars while frolicking in the middle of the street, or watching race riots break out between the neighborhood black and Irish boys, or being slammed down onto the sidewalk and beaten into a slobbering pulp by bigger and surlier children, what else is there left to be afraid of but nature?

As a child, I spent fifty weeks every year in New York City and the other two weeks somewhere in the country, on the annual family vacation: up in the Catskills, out at Cape Cod, up by a lake near the Canadian border. The exact location didn't matter—country was country, and the country terrified me. It was too green, too bushy, too alive, and it succored dangerous things I couldn't see. Everything had a sinister purpose, and that purpose was directed against me. Insects wanted to sting me, plants wanted to brush against me and make me break out in a rash, colorful toadstools wanted to tempt me to eat them until I toppled over, poisoned, like Babar the Elephant's father.

Because I never learned to swim well, lakes were an assured threat, even if I simply splashed around in shallow water by the shore. After all, you never know when you'll hit a sudden drop-off in the lake bottom and find yourself in completely over your head. Nor did the terra seem much firmer. I'd read about quicksand, and I was always on the lookout

for a spot of ground that would suck me into extinction. And to feet reared on concrete, every dirt path has a suspicious give to it.

The countryside was so unsentimental, so starkly didactic. I hardly ever saw wild animals when they were alive; most of my transphylogenetic encounters were with corpses—a dead deer, a dead raccoon, a dead robin, all of them stiff, smelly warnings against excessive merriment or youthful smugness. Once I watched a hawk scoop up a field mouse in its talons and then flap away triumphantly, the mouse's little feet and tail dangling down pitifully, like untied shoelaces. All the rest of the afternoon, I kept feeling things brushing against my hair, and though I hated mice when they came into our cabin, that day I was in trembling solidarity with rodents everywhere.

My fear of nature began with bees. Somewhere around the age of four, I picked up the deep-seated conviction that were I to be stung by a bee I would not be able to bear the pain. I imagined that a bee sting would be far worse than being punched or scratched or any of the other injuries I was accustomed to—worse because of the legend of the angry bee. In my view, any creature willing to sacrifice its life to punish a human surely must deal a parting blow that is itself nearly fatal. People always told me, "If you don't bother bees, they won't bother you," but I didn't believe it. Bees to me were fuzzy pellets of unpredictable malice. Step near a bee without realizing it and *wham!* it turns dogface, no questions asked, no prisoners taken. Sniff a flower that just happens to conceal a foraging bee and *zing!* there goes the nose.

My fear of bees dominated several of my summers in the country. Every shape in the grass began to resemble a bee, and every buzz was an oncoming bee. If there were bees or hornets around a picnic table, I would take my food and go indoors to eat, even though that meant I would be eating alone. I remember going butterfly catching with an older friend. The boy put down his net over a butterfly and then wandered off for a moment. I noticed that besides the butterfly there was a bee trapped beneath the net. It was buzzing and it was *mad*. Unwilling to see how it would respond once liberated, I abandoned my friend and fled back to my mother. The bee in the net remains my most vividly terrifying child-

hood memory, exceeding the alarm I felt at age six when I visited Niagara Falls with an uncle and he jokingly said he was going to throw me over in a barrel.

My pathological fear of stinging insects kept me unstung until the age of fifteen, when I stepped on a yellow jacket while I was walking barefoot on the beach. The pain eclipsed my worst expectations. I thought I had caught fire; I thought I had been shot. I cried, I screamed, I hopped. My lower leg swelled up as though I were a float in a Macy's parade. And the sole consolation for my suffering was the knowledge that my lifelong phobia had been justified.

Most of my memories of leaving New York are memories of confronting new threats of nature. When we visited relatives in Arizona, I was perfectly delighted with the heat, the saguaros, and the horizon, but then my aunt mentioned rattlesnakes. There were a lot of rattlesnakes outdoors, she said matter-of-factly. Because my only experience with snakes had been in the Bronx Zoo, where we could pester them mercilessly by tapping on their glass enclosures and *ba! ba!* they couldn't get out, I thought it almost a certainty that the snakes would take their revenge on me now that I was on their turf. When I looked out my aunt's window at the unceasing expanse of sand, I was sure the sand was moving, swaying, rattling, waiting. The entire desert had become a mouth agape. I spent most of the visit indoors.

When I was eleven, another aunt and uncle invited me to spend a year in Zambia with them and their three young children. I was a sophisticated girl, and I knew that the international experience would make me a more interesting person. Then I learned about the tsetse fly. The tsetse fly transmits sleeping sickness, I discovered—a disease for which there was and is no cure. The idea of a stupor overtaking you, and your spirit and personality seeping out of you, struck me as the most awful fate imaginable. No, I told them. I can't go to Africa. I might get bitten by a tsetse fly.

I think about these early fears often, now that I'm an adult who loves nature, who is practically a card-carrying pantheist, who borders on fascism in her belief that wilderness must be preserved at all costs. (Forced

sterilization after your second child? Sure, why not?) I think about it, because I worry that my love may be more theoretical than real, and in the end almost useless. I've had plenty of epiphanous experiences in nature. I have hiked and backpacked and canoed and rafted. I've nibbled on mud and leaves in the Olympic rain forest in Washington, seeking a visceral connection with Mother Gaia. I've taken my tree-, bird-, and flower-identification books on walks and learned to name names. I have stood still in the woods and and just breathed and breathed, annoyed with my lungs for their short-term memory and wondering why somebody couldn't just bottle this air and sell it in the city.

I have seen bears and coyotes and monkeys and whales and dolphins, and every time it has been more exhilarating than catching a glimpse of Al Pacino or Mikhail Baryshnikov on the streets of Manhattan. You feel privileged when you see a creature flash across your path unexpectedly. It's a momentary state of grace.

Yet through it all, I am still, at bottom, scared of nature. The trees, the bushes, the symphonies of thousands of chattering birds at dawn, the raw efflorescence of renewal and decay, continue to confuse me, and confusion, of course, is the midwife to cowardice. I can walk the streets of New York late at night and feel cocky about my toughness, but when I'm in a dense forest I'm as skittish as a gerbil. Once, I went hiking in the woods of upstate New York with the Cornell biologist Thomas Eisner, who was the subject of a story I was working on. He was showing various insects to me, overturning rocks to reveal millipedes, picking up and gently squeezing beetles until they secreted a defensive chemical that smelled like the menthol you rub on aching muscles. All of a sudden I noticed a big, hairy, multilegged insect on my sleeve, probably a caterpillar. Without bothering to temper my reaction in front of a man whose life had been spent extolling the splendor of arthropods, I shrieked like a child and frantically brushed the creepy thing off me. Eisner frowned at me in irritation and disappointment. "You still don't take insects seriously, do you?" he said.

At the time, I vigorously denied the accusation, but Eisner had a point. In the abstract, and from a distance, I find insects fascinating; but

if to take something seriously is to respect it up close and on its own terms, then the truth is no, I don't get the point of insects. I feel queasy when they're around, and I probably wouldn't mind—maybe I wouldn't even notice—if I never saw another representative of the class again.

The same might be said of so many other things I supposedly love about nature. I love hiking and camping, but only in short bites, and only because I know I can put an end to my wilderness experience at pretty much any time I choose. A girlfriend whom I think of as a genuinely woodsy sort of woman once observed how little time humans in the Western world spend outdoors, and I thought, Gee, she's right. We work indoors, we sleep indoors, we spend time with the family at the end of the day indoors, we commute in closed vehicles. If I had to guess, I'd say that most adults spend less than an hour each day outdoors. Realizing this simple fact, my friend and I shook our heads and agreed how awful it was that we cut ourselves off from fresh air, sun, nature's rhythms. But again, I was lying. In fact, I prefer being indoors most of the time. For me, indoors is the default mode, the place where I will end up if I don't have a pep talk with myself on all the great virtues of going outside, or if my husband and I haven't planned some sporty outdoor activity.

When I have been on assignment in seriously outdoor places, like the tropical forests of Central and South America, I have felt schizoid. On the one hand, I'm always elated to be the receiving end of large sensations, images that are at once ancient and fresh: to see a flock of parrots sweeping in emerald arcs through the sky, or a capybara, the world's largest and laziest rodent, snuffling through the forest undergrowth like a sack of butter perched atop four web-footed limbs.

On the other hand, the rain forest is merciless. You trudge through mud as high as your kneecaps and feel it slip over the top of your rubber boots, gather at your feet, and ooze around your toes, hour after hour. You wear an oil slick of insect repellent and still every mosquito in the district finds the dime-size patch of skin behind your right ear that you neglected to slather over. You think of how desirable you are to so many bloodsucking species around you, how much you look to them like a

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lunch cart. You think of how you can't wait to get back to the campsite, douse yourself in cold water, and zip up the tent.

Whenever I have been in the tropics, I have understood why it is that human beings throughout history have sought to put a barrier between themselves and nature, to beat off its relentless hunger, to domesticate it, to pave it over. This is always a depressing realization to me—one that works against my gauzy fantasies and shapeless ecopolitics. Many people talk, have always talked, of how humans should learn to live in pragmatic rapport with nature, to see that we are all cut of the same fabric, to stay within our means and the means of the planet that supports us. But I don't know if humans will ever be able to live in the vicinity of nature and not muck it up.

For a long time, I've had a notion that is anathema to my biophilic friends and to the part of myself that hikes and camps and canoes: if we really want to save nature and its stupendous diversity, we should draw a line down the center of the planet. One half of the world will be for people, in a great linked metropolis, while the other half will be set aside for everything else. Forget about harmony, evolutionary fraternity, and the great challenge of intelligent stewardship. Humans clearly are capable of wreaking spectacular havoc on nature, and they have yet to demonstrate that they are capable of anything else. Maybe that's because there are too many others like me around, and nothing is more dangerous than a bunch of scared people.