

The Beast in Me

We tend to forget we are animals, until we become prey

Maxim Loskutoff

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Credit...Ward Zwart

MISSOULA, Mont. — In the summer of 2012, the same year that scientists fully decoded the genome of the bonobo, the last great ape, my partner and I were stalked by a female grizzly bear. We first saw her high above us in a field of huckleberry bushes as we hiked along Grinnell Lake on the east side of Glacier National Park in Montana.

It was the perfect distance to see a grizzly: close enough to make out the rolling power of her gait and the light gold fur on her back, and far enough away for us to feel safe. We watched her for several minutes, remarking on her beauty, then continued up the trail into a stand of stunted, high-altitude pine, the trunks just tall enough to obscure our vision. When we emerged, the bear had traversed and descended along our path and was now only 100 yards away. A football field. A quick sprint. Several things happened in my mind at once: I realized the bear was following us, I realized she wanted to eat us, and I realized that I was an animal.

It was a strange epiphany. To be human today is to deny our animal nature, though it's always there, as the earth remains round beneath our feet even when it feels flat. I had always been an animal, and would always be one, but it wasn't until I was prey, my own fur standing on end and certain base-level decisions being made in milliseconds (in a part of my mind that often takes 10 minutes to choose toothpaste in the grocery store), that the meat-and-bone reality settled over me. I was smaller and slower than the bear. My claws were no match for hers. And almost every part of me was edible.

My partner looked at me. I looked at her. We turned and sprinted back into the trees the way we'd come.

In the pounding of our footsteps, below the wild panic, I remember a distinct thrill of pleasure. Not in a suicidal sense (I was too frightened to look back, and certainly didn't want to feel the bear's jaws on my neck), but as a matter of perspective. The feeling was tied most closely to relief. Every other thing I'd been worrying about that day, from whether I'd worn enough sunscreen to whether my partner really loved me, fell aside. I had one concern: to get us away without being eaten.

Civilization itself is an attempt to protect us from this feeling. From its earliest iterations in fire-starting and cave-dwelling to its current zenith in the construction of megalopolises, as well as the careful documentation of every birth and the methodical laying bare of each strand in every helix, civilization is a way of setting ourselves apart from the prey we once were. Building walls, both physical and informational, to keep out the bears.

Yet even atop the highest tower in the most prestigious university we remain animals, directed by the same base-level needs and emotions that motivate living creatures from bonobos to rats. I've seen flashes of our animal selves in the most unlikely places: genius professors reduced to grunting rage, and overweight shut-ins catching a falling object with sudden, instinctive grace.

We were only halfway through the pine stand when a park ranger met us, running full speed from the other direction holding the largest gun I'd ever seen. He told us to get behind him. His neck shone with sweat. We peeked around his shoulders (and gun) at the bear, which was now lingering at the edge of the trees. "She's almost 12," he said, catching his breath as we backed along the trail. "It gets harder for them to find food at that age. She's been displaying increasingly aggressive behavior." I hardly noticed the fact that he seemed to know this particular bear intimately (I'd later learn that rangers track many of the grizzlies in the park), and instead had the strange image of

my own grandmother in her last days, hunting game with desperate, bloody abandon, rather than living in the guest room of our house.

Of course there are aspects of our communal society — caring for the old, the domestication of livestock, the cultivation of crops — that link us to only a few other species, and other aspects, such as the written word, that link us to none as yet discovered, but in no place but our own minds have we truly transcended our animal brethren. In bonobo societies, both the best and worst aspects of humanity have been documented: from a complex language of facial expressions, to helping the disabled, to the adoption of orphans, to the manipulative and violent pursuit of power. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously said, “Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.”

Most days, I remain fully entangled in this web, cursing at my smartphone while rolling across the earth in 4,000 pounds of steel. Yet there is something of the experience with the bear that remains inside me, a gift from my moment of pure terror. It’s the knowledge of my animal self. That instinctive, frightened, clear-eyed creature beneath my clothes. And it brought with it the reassuring sense of being part of the natural world, rather than separated from it, as we so often feel ourselves to be. My humanity, one cell in the great, breathing locomotion spreading from sunlight to leaves to root stems to bugs to birds to bears.

All of us fragile, all of us fleeting, all of us prey.

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Mr. Loskutoff is author of “Come West and See,” a collection of short stories set in the American West.

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