Outside

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When we love a woman, or when we love a man, our eyes spot the slight upward curl on the edge of the lips that forms when she or he smiles, dance in the sparkle of her or his eyes, view the smear of light that brings out the contour and the unnamable color of the cheeks, drift in the haze of light that is caught in her or his hair. All these surface effects. Our eyes watch her or his fingers spreading or stroking the air or the fabric of a dress or the soft leather sofa, watch the sway and design of her or his gestures. These surface patterns that take form and disappear. When we embrace a woman, or a man, we fondle the downy arms and stroke the contours of the shoulders, the back, we feel the shivers of pleasure on her or his skin. We feel small gusts of her or his warm breath moving across our skin.

We do not want to think of the contents of the body we are holding up against our own—the stomach pouch, the intestines, spleen, liver, kidneys, the biles.

Contained and also protected by our skin, the inner contents of our bodies are completely concealed from us. We can see nothing of what is behind our skin. We do feel, vaguely, something of what is back there, in a mix of attachment and repugnance. We are attached to the beating of our heart and to the filling up of our lungs with fresh air. But we feel repugnance over substances expelled from our bodies—gases, excrement, vomit, mucus, pus. We feel repugnance in the brief thought of our kidneys, our liver, the grisly kinks of our big intestine pushing along chunks of mush turning brown with dead bacteria, the biles, the slabs of yellow fat. What we call filth, what provokes repugnance outside are things we come upon that resemble what comes out of our bodies or what is inside them.

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Box jellyfish, common in the South Pacific, produce and store in their bodies the most deadly venom in the animal kingdom. Box jellyfish consist of a four-sided body called a bell from which hang up to 15 tentacles, each of which has about 5,000 stinging cells. This venomous overkill is used just to kill fish and shrimp instantly, so that their struggle does not damage the jellyfish's delicate ten-foot-long tentacles. By pumping water in and out of their bells, they can move up to two yards a second. Box jellyfish are transparent and pale blue in color, which makes them pretty much invisible in the water. So much so that for years nobody knew what was causing swimmers such excruciating pain, shock, and heart failure. Since 1954 box jellyfish have been found to be the cause of 5,567 human deaths. A group of jellyfish is called a "smack."

Our bodies also produce toxins, and when, as in the case of kidney or liver malfunction, they are not pumped out of the body, they can cause death. Box jellyfish produce and store in themselves toxins capable of killing bodies hundreds of times greater than themselves. Humans do strap explosives on their bodies capable of killing hundreds of humans about them, but they themselves die in the explosion.

Spots and zigzags of gaudy colors cover the skins of the coral fish; golden plumes stream over the backs and wings of birds of paradise; huge powder-blue lacey crests tipped with white circles spread over the heads of Victoria Crowned pigeons; stripes, different on each one, cover the bodies of zebras, great manes fluff about the heads of golden lion tamarins. These surface colors and patterns have no relationship with the functional parts of their bodies; they do not outline lungs, stomach, or muscle systems. They are organs to be seen, Adolf Portman explained, snares for the eyes. Some of these colors are indeed camouflage; we do not see the female Ruffed grouse crouched on her nest until our foot touches her, but look closely at those dead-leaf-brown feathers and each one is intricately penciled in lines of subtle shades of color, not at all like the veins of leaves. The Malay Great Argus pheasant spreads the three-foot-long decorative feathers of his wings into a complete circle in front of him, with his five-foot-long tail high over them; he hides his head behind that circle and performs complex dance steps before the female he is courting. Watching him perform, we murmur: he knows how he looks to her; he knows he is gorgeous.

We sense that we are frowning, expressing skepticism, looking surprised or sarcastic, or rather we know that we are. We are sure of what our expression—our frown, quizzical, skeptical, or ironic look—looks like. But we have no view or feeling of the muscle contractions and dilations, nervous circuitry, and pulses of blood behind our skin that produce those surface expressions. In fact, all our expressiveness, our convictions, our attitudes, our character, our personality are on our skins. At the Body Worlds exhibition, cadavers are on display preserved not by replacing the blood with

formaldehyde but by replacing the blood, body fluids, water, and fat with liquid plastic, a technique invented by Gunther von Hagens. There we see that those whose faces have been skinned are now anonymous. We cannot imagine what these individuals were like. Remove the skin and you remove the expression, the attitude, the personality.

We move, we act by not seeing, by not watching how we move. We can dance only when we stop watching where we are putting the right foot, then the left foot; we can type only when we stop looking at where we are putting our fingers. When we move, we look outside. We scan the environment for open and also possible pathways, for objectives in the distance, catching sight of moving obstacles; our gaze plunges into the misty horizons and upward into the skies. We can see the environment about us because we do not perceive anything behind our skin. It is the most fundamental structure of our kind of organism.

By looking at the surfaces of the body of another human, we understand what he is looking at, where she is going, what he is going to pick up and manipulate. In embracing a woman or a man we sense the commonality of her or his life and our own. But also the life in us understands the life in other species. We look for what the vultures are circling over, we hearken to the drumming of the Ruffed grouse calling for attendance at his springtime dance, we taste the berries the budgerigars are gobbling up. There is an inner desolation in a human life that speaks to only human voices and grasps only human hands, caresses only human bodies. Our life is by nature destined to know life, to speak with the voices of antelope and Bactrian camels, gaze into the gaze of owls and octopods, fondle the faces of cats and zebras, skip and soar with robins and albatross, hum and chant with bumblebees and locusts, creep and shimmer with caterpillars and silverfish. We trot like horses, crouch like cats, slink and crawl like snakes and worms. In the ocean we weave our fins and swim with the fish. The one word we use—life—to characterize all of them indicates that our bodies deeply feel kinship with the bodies of other animate species.

But when we come upon jellyfish we find ourselves at the limit of what the life in us can understand. The bodies of most jellyfish are transparent. We cannot imagine what it would be like to try to climb a ladder, to pick up things, to sit down if our bodies were transparent. If we could not help seeing our glands secreting biles, our intestines processing our last meal, our nervous circuitry throbbing and producing dilations and contractions in bundles of muscle fibers, we cannot imagine how we could move and act among the things spread out about us.

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Let us stop admiring our heads for a moment, Georges Bataille said, and consider our feet.[1] Our big toe is the distinctively human part, the

only new body part in the human ape; it stabilizes our upright posture. We no longer support ourselves on the trees; we stand and survey the terrain about us. We map it out, stake out its directions and dimensions, its depths and its heights. Standing upright we support ourselves on the earth and raise our eyes over the landscape in the light of the skies.

Just look at our feet, Bruce Chatwin said; they are long and set parallel; they are made to move on ahead.[2]

Adolescent migratory birds leave the first autumn of their lives and return to the very place where they were born. Ruby-throated hummingbirds, doubling their weight from one-tenth to one-fifth of an ounce in preparation, fly nonstop 900 kilometers over the Caribbean. Bristle-thighed curlews fly 10,000 kilometers from Alaska to Polynesia, making a nonstop flight over Pacific waters of 3,200 kilometers. Lesser golden plovers migrate in an ellipse, going from northern Canada south by way of the eastern United States to South America, returning by way of Mexico and the western United States. Arctic terns fly the whole extent of the globe, a round trip of 25,000 to 34,000 kilometers, seasonally traveling from the Arctic to the Antarctic, enjoying more sunlight than any other biological species.

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By *nature*, we mean the mountains, plains, rivers, beaches, and oceans that are visible to the 4,500 species of mammals, 10,000 species of birds, 20,000 species of fish, the between 2 and 30 million species of insects that are born and grow by themselves. A hectare of tropical rain forest can contain 300 species of trees; every zone of nature is an ecosystem of countless species, every knot of ocean under the polar ice caps, every square centimeter of the most thoroughly vacuumed carpet in the doctor's office. When we go to the sequoia forests, the Andes in Patagonia, the Amazon rain forests, the ice continent of Antarctica, when we go to dive the oceans and visit briefly the swarming coral fish, when we go to soar on paragliders the winds and the sky, we go to visit realms unmarked by human intentions and ungraspable with human concepts.

The landscape paintings of the nineteenth century depicted nature as consisting of scenes, spectacles, to be viewed. The scenes to be contemplated from a lookout point, the paintings to be contemplated from the sofa in our living rooms.

But nature is becoming, is, in Sartre's vision, the realm of the disordered, unstructured, unorganized multiplicity, creeping, crawling, scuttling, swarming, teeming. Nature is movement; the so-called climax forest in never-logged jungles undergoes storms that uproot vast swaths of root-entangled trees; divers know that sunken ships are soon broken

apart by underwater storms and encrusted with corals and gorgonians; the continental plates drift and collide.

To go to nature is to leave sedentary and stabilized existence and enter into movement. Nature is revealed to us through movement into it and movement with it. Moving with the falling leaves in the fall winds in the mountains under the drifting or gathering clouds. Moving through the savannah and the forest with the winds, ascending the mountains with the mists, drifting down the rivers. Moving with the herds of wildebeests, zebras, and impalas in the Serengeti. Soaring on a paraglider in the thermals with the vultures. Swung by the surge in the ocean with the coral fish. To go to nature is to greet all the oryx and squirrels and hummingbirds and moths with passionate kisses of parting. It is to build nothing, to manipulate nothing, to collect nothing.

We go off, to the nearby or far-off forests, to the mountains, the glaciers, the beaches, the oceans. Look at our feet, Chatwin said, they are long and set parallel; they are made to move on ahead. We make our way with the antelope and the eagles across mountains and continents as the continental plates collide and buckle up these mountains that freeze the west winds and dry out these deserts. We descend with the voles and the lizards into the Grand Canyon and the Quebrada de Humahuaca, treading the eons that deposited these fifty strata of petrified sediment. In the crystal nights of deserts and mountains our gaze travels with the migrating birds the light-years of the stars. We visit excavations and monitor the millions of years from algae to dinosaurs. We trip through the savannah with the wildebeests and the impalas and stroll the beach, tacking the waves with the plovers.

Stepping across the splashes of tinted light in forests, we fine-tune to the scale of the rustling leaves and the silence plucked with the small songs of shy insects and birds. Climbing the mountains we step into the winds and onto the immemorial stillness or imminent freefall of the stones. Diving the oceans we abandon the movements of the human upright posture and steer in the surge with our fins like the fish. We find ourselves welcome in the penguin rookeries of Antarctica as long as we pick up the movements, concentrations, currents of the colony and do not come with the movements of predator orcas or skuas.

Our minds no longer grasp, appropriate, collect, legislate; they become rushes and rhythms and flows. They join the birds in the sky. "Our own ideas move," Paul Shephard wrote, "through the velvet cranial spaces as unpredictably as the passage of herons or the brief flash of a startled deer at twilight. . . . They flit through consciousness, . . . are attended to momentarily, and in a flash are gone."[3]

Notes

1. Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, trans. Allan Stoekl, with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 20.

2. Bruce Chatwin, *Anatomy of Restlessness* (New York: Viking, 1996), 102.

3. Paul Shephard, *The Only World We've Got* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996), 60.