

of caterpillars and kalashnikovs

There is a caterpillar here with spines that sting if you even just brush by. They are no more than an inch long, invisible until you look for them. Often on the underside of a leaf, of course: softer green to eat. Eventually it makes a small brownish silky cocoon from which a small (half an inch) brown moth appears. Wonders of nature. The sting is painful to me, lethal to a few people. I don't swell up, but it lasts for about three hours of being very aware that something is going on there. Our clever agricultural scientists discovered, tested, and spread, a small wasp that is supposed to kill these caterpillars. But, as everything in nature, at best the little wasps will end up making another balance between it and the stinging caterpillar. The caterpillar and the beetle both come from Taiwan — obviously both exist side by side there.

I should wear gloves when I garden. But I like to touch things, leaves, stems, the smooth or rough bark of a tree, the silk of a flower.

Now there are also several kinds of plants with thorns. Historians have written that these islands, so far from any land, had no thorny plants for a long time because there were no grazers. Now we have grazers and nasty stinging plants. Bougainvillea for instance has inch long needle sharp thorns. There are other plants that have hooked thorns, they hang on to your cloth or skin. The worst, here at least, is what I call "touch-me-not," when you touch one leaf all leaves fold in. Here it reaches out many yards up and around. With leather gloves it is not difficult to pull them out, their root system does not seem to spread or go deep. Ideal, of course for land that as yet has only a thin layer of soil over lava rock. But the thorn plant grows at least an inch a day. They say everything grows here. Not much soil but almost always sunshine and until recently enough rain. Water is beginning to be a problem. I've lived on these islands for almost half a century. My memories are of a very predictable calendar. There were months with little rains, usually only at night, and certain other months with rain during the day but even then sunny periods in between showers. Now that rhythm is broken. Here—because weather is extremely local on this island, one huge volcano with two or three active lava craters—we now have days, sometimes a week of much rain all the time. But after that two or three weeks, a month, of no rain at all, not even dew. That is serious when enough rain is a necessity here. And that is on this side of the island, usually called the rainy side. The other side, where the tourists go, has had enormous forest fires high in the mountains where there are no roads, just wilderness on steep slopes. The only way to fight those fires is from helicopters and this is a poor island, helicopters are expensive.

But helicopters are not rare. A few of them show rich tourists the flowing lava from the air. Most of the helicopters are scanning the ground for even one cannabis plant. Rumor has it that there are cameras that recognize the particular color green of cannabis leaves. When those cameras spot more than two plants it is a "plantation" and a brave man rappels down a wildly swinging rope, spraying something that kills cannabis and all plants around. The Federal Government is said to pay us two hundred and some million dollars a year to do that as our contribution to the War on Drugs. Cannabis is thought to be the biggest underground economy of this island. I don't know much about the black economy. I rarely read local newspapers or listen to local radio. Hear about people and art shows from my sons and visitors.

Now, a bit more than two hours after evidently brushing my hand against a nettle caterpillar I can still feel where it stung but it does not hurt any more. Certainly does not seem to interfere with pushing the right buttons on a keyboard.

My little world does not seem very unlike the larger world. There is danger everywhere, there are dangers that you brush against and give you a pain or worse. I look at plants and animals, they look at me. In the larger world we are spying on each other. From my perspective, the perspective of a very old man, the poison and the spying have multiplied, and a balance is far to find. In fact, any sense of even wanting a balance seems to be gone. Completely unnatural, against all the laws of nature. Our human striving for domination is so anti-ecological that I cannot imagine this madness surviving.

The "laws" of nature—and there are few—do not allow one species to control the planet. The planet is a large organism, does everything on a very large scale. A planetary scale. Global warming means just that: the whole globe is affected. The entire atmosphere is affected. All life is affected, and that includes homo sapiens without the second sapiens. Sapiens means wise, but it is all too clear that what wisdom we had has been replaced with science. Science, we are taught, does marvels. It unravels how it all works. It would be interesting and fine if it ended there. But no, we use science to invent technologies to make things, fabricate smart things like the wheel, the screw, endless shapes of containers to keep stuff in. And then in our insane drive for more, more of everything, we went from the useful to an unending search for ways to change anything and everything. Sooner rather than later that means destroy, kill. Somewhere I read that 50%, half of all scientists work for the military directly or indirectly.

Yes, we kill to eat; life eats life. But the large ecology keeps a balance. Sooner or later—my bet is on sooner—the nettle caterpillar and the little beetle will reach a balance. They will both survive within the limits of nature here. Maybe, eventually, the caterpillar will run out of food and both will disappear from the scene. Until another pest will find this island, and another anti-pest will appear. And they too, sooner or later, will achieve a balance. Until they too will disappear. That's how it works.

Humans, according to science, have been a unique species for perhaps a hundred thousand years. If my little calculator is right the time humans were humans is 0.00003% of the time there was life on this planet, an estimated three billion years. We are by far the youngest of our family of apes and they are late comers. Yesterday I read that Neanderthal Man was on this planet for at least 400,000 years, far longer than modern humans have been. There may have been at least four kinds of humans at one time; we are the only one to survive. That must mean that we are particularly aggressive, intolerant, fierce fighters. Scientists say we absorbed Neanderthal Man whom we found when we finally reached Europe; perhaps there were other cousins we absorbed in other parts of the world. All that in a few thousand generations...

We, today's humans, are like teenagers addicted to Kalashnikovs. We think like teenagers. Addicted? Put them in prison for half a lifetime or a whole. Someone from far away threw a stone at me. I must send an army to them and destroy not just the stone throwers—they are dead anyway—but the people who hid them, raised them, loved them. And while we do that we give them kalashnikovs, or our own brand of the same, to become as addicted as we are and so throw not stones but bombs when they take revenge for our attacking them.

Maybe we will grow up suddenly and look at ourselves with astonishment, *what are we doing?* Sudden changes do happen; hard to predict.

Now it looks as if the planet will make life so difficult for us that we forget being addicted to killing our neighbors. This time it may not be a flood, it will be water and fire. Some of us will rediscover that in the beginning we cared for each other, shared food and shelter. We fitted in as Darwin said. After walking out of Darwin's evolution as we walked out of the planetary ecology, we will meekly ask to be in again. We learned to use force to fit nature to our whims. We will learn again to be part of without force. We'll wake up to discover that we cannot be masters of this globe.

Yes, we live in interesting times, as a Chinese wise man said. Witnesses to the man-made confrontation of one species against the planetary ecology. It is obvious how that will end. Sooner or later some kind of balance will be established again. We won't be in charge. The planet can nurture maybe one billion of us; not seven. Mother Earth will make a new planet with a new balance. And we better fit in, or she'll throw us out with our weapons and all our poisonous-to-the-environment gadgets.