

Nancy Marie Mithlo, Summer 2021 Writing Practice

I decided to actively start writing this manuscript on the night of the afternoon of the day I killed a five-foot bull snake at my front door with my garden hoe. It took maybe hard eight strikes. I prayed as I marched across the yard, saying out loud to myself, “I am going to kill a snake.” I heaved big breaths as I grabbed the gardening hoe leaning in the crook of a dead apricot tree, clear in my intent now. Turning back to the house with my weapon in hand, and gaining in determined speed, I repeated, stronger now, “Dear God, forgive me, I have to kill this snake.”

The graphics are tempting to relate, but did you know that a snake’s blood runs red as our own? And that afterwards, after the pulse of the snake ceases and the sun bakes the spot, it takes a great amount of effort (hot water and bleach and a broom) to get the evidence to disappear as if at a crime scene? And that as you push the broom back and forth, and back and forth across the red stain, that all you can think of is other spilled blood –inside a school classroom, in a church, during a police raid, in front of a convenience store, at a demonstration, in an office building, at the hands of a partner at home, in an aisle at the grocery store or even terrifyingly, given the recent news from our Supreme Court banning abortions, at an abortion clinic.

So back to the snake. That creature had the grace of not biting me as I crossed the threshold of my door. There I was, vulnerable, with my bare ankle just inches above his head (strange how I am certain the creature is male...) and he chose to sunbathe rather than attack. In fact, in the exact seconds I first saw him, in one of those swift moments when visual evidence does not fully register in the mind, I noticed that this creature was oddly relaxed, even unperturbed in his sun-soaked meditation. Did he know his fate was sealed? Was I receiving a message?

I had crossed the threshold of my house a dozen times or more that afternoon, hauling my summer supplies into the house from the truck – bird seed, cranberry juice, tequila, eggs, coffee, tinned milk, garden soil, a black-handled knife, 5 pounds of rice, canned beans, salt, pepper, sugar, chamomile tea, stress-less tea, black tea, spice tea, mason jars, mason jar lids, a blue-speckled enamel pot, two spools of black thread, an American flag (actually, a stylish red, white and blue Martha Stewart bow for the mailbox out front in demonstration of my good citizenship), red fingernail polish, a brow pencil in dark brown, cashews, raisins, a new mop and broom, a gallon of Pine Sol cleaner (lavender scent), two dozen tortillas, a bedside lamp, light bulbs, index cards, hair dye, melatonin, tape, apples, a pack of my favorite black ink pens (total luxury there..), and tooth floss- all essentials for my writing retreat.

Inside the Super Walmart in Alamogordo, New Mexico that afternoon, (yes, I sleep with the devil, having long given up on ethical consumerism; I also shamelessly buy from the notorious consumer bully Amazon, such is life...), a sudden strike of ferocious thunder hit, so loud and powerful you could feel it. In something of a bonding moment, I saw my fellow shoppers collectively eye the available exits in case it was not simply thunder but gunfire; you never know, this is America. Once reassured, we nervously laughed, as if children frightened of a sudden noise.

Exiting to the parking lot pushing my heavy, overflowing shopping cart, I caught that that sweet heavy smell of rain in the desert, as soft drops began to fall on the black asphalt. Everywhere, locals moved in tandem, not quickly like ants before a storm, but in a relaxed tempo, like a dance

– a young cowboy with square-toed suede boots guided his girlfriend in tattoos and a tight skirt, his arm gently around her waist, a full-figured mom and her equally heavysset adult daughter walked together in step, arm in arm, a young family in their Sunday best tried to manage kids scrambling everywhere, a bald, aging man in a baby blue nylon jacket crossed in a motorized chair, two Mescalero Apache boys dressed in black t-shirts and expensive sneakers, laughed loudly, throwing their heads back, older sisters bickered as they loaded the car– one sunburned with purple dyed hair and Spandex shorts - the other more conservative in tight curls and ironed jeans. No one really seemed that concerned about the rain...

So back to the snake. Yes, that the snake letting me simply step over him as he lay there buttressed against my door in three long coils should have been a message. But was I listening? In my defense, I was not confident in knowing the difference between a bull snake and a rattlesnake. My last snake encounter was, I thought, a rattlesnake, also in the front yard, but not at my doorstep. It was a full moon night, and my aunt and uncle from Oklahoma were inside getting ready for bed after dinner. July 4th in Mescalero is like many other Native communities in the U.S. where celebrating the nation's birthday was a pretense for conducting traditional ceremonials during times of religious suppression. During feast season on the 4th, girls and their families can choose to have their coming of age ceremony largely sponsored by the tribe as a public event, although most feasts are private and tucked into the valleys at other times in the summer. On the official 4th, hundreds come to witness up there in the mountains, maybe thousands depending on the year. Think Christmas for Indians, loosely conceived. There is a rodeo, concessions, vendors, fireworks. You have the joy of being with family, the luxury of

time and the thrill that come from being in the presence of group, all in heightened awareness, participating even if only by witnessing the dances.

That time, that July 4th evening, I was stepping out in the fresh night air to close to lock the cattle gate at the top of my driveway when something shiny appeared in the pebbled path in front of me. It turned out to be a beer bottle cap, gold, and as I rose from picking it up, my sight line went from my feet to the horizon line under the apple trees. There, incredulously, I made out the figure a large snake, so large it didn't seem real, (now writing this, maybe it was a bull snake...?) laying stretched out long and with his head up, actively surveying me. I backed up slowly, carefully, and then made a beeline safely to my door. One doesn't really think of snakes out at night, but this one was regally making his presence known to me, and I listened.

Alright, back to this particular snake, the one I did not listen to – after praying and grabbing the hoe and marching across the yard in my worn sandals, I took to this creature in a fit of bodily exertion -in a full fury particular to a woman's rage. The shocking after-the-crime-scene – the pool of red blood, the symbol of everything at play here in this crazy broken world – was so traumatic, I instinctively hopped in my truck to collect my cousin down the road for comfort (thank goodness I had the car keys in my pocket because I really did not wish to go inside and cross over the creature I had just murdered). I madly knocked on his door, heaving and pale with the trauma of it all. By the time we returned to the scene, he following me in his jeep, the snake blood had congealed into a pattern that I was sure would always bear a stain on my concrete porch, and more impactfully, in my mind. How can I ever walk across that threshold again without thinking and simply leave my house with the same confidence?

Multiple familiar “how can I’s” started populating my head: how can I move freely in crowds, free of fear of a disease, or shop for groceries without concern for a mass-shooting? Even in the safety of the small village where I live, I was reminded of our collective vulnerability and my role in perpetuating the massive dysfunctions of our age – the mindless consumerism, the fearful protection of my home, my jump to assume the worst, that the snake was poisonous, rather than a protector. I must surely be a part of the general problem, with a known (and clearly, freshly demonstrated...) rage. Perhaps I am irrevocably unqualified as a social commentator.

I started to write this book on the night of the afternoon of the day I killed a five-foot bull snake at my front door with my garden hoe, not because I think my journey is necessarily unique. To live in these times – in a COVID infused reality, in an unsustainable environment devastated by exploitation, in political chaos, through rampant racism and more – is to live with uncertainty. This unmooring calls for special skill sets, not simply critique. I do not advise anyone to emulate the projects I document here, but to simply consider the multiple ways of entering, leaving, creating, and destroying that are available to us. Navigating instability despite, and maybe even in response to, our fear and collective rage is our present challenge. If there is any message here it is this - may we continue to stay curious.

The Next Day

Snake stories always have another after story. You will notice that this telling of a snake story may elicit your own remembrance of a snake story. Somehow, snake stories propagate other stories, as if in an automatic compulsion to confess our own encounters with danger, with the

unpredictable, with fear. I also must note here, because I have not yet, that typically Apache people do not mention snakes, do not go near snakes, do not talk about snakes. I am feeling now very beholden to my cousin down the road who rescued me that day and now to my uncle who promised to come to “fix” my house this July 4th gathering so that snakes will in his words, “Never go even near that house!” I’ve got to say, for me, this is a very comforting thought.

The morning of the next day after the day I killed a five-foot bull snake at my front door with my garden hoe, I saw my neighbor next door as we simultaneously dragged our large black garbage containers to the street. Waving him down, I shared with him the story of my encounter and my killing. Actually, in the first moment of seeing the snake curled up at my door, I had instinctually called for him over the fence, but he was out that afternoon. On this day, after generously sharing with me his extensive knowledge of all kinds of snake behaviors, (did you know that when a rattler is coiled he can jump the length of his body at his prey?) he ended by gentling warning me, “but you know, snakes usually come in pairs, so keep your eyes open.”

Sure enough, that afternoon I heard a commotion on the street and soon afterwards received his phone call. A truck had pulled up in front of his house, and at first, he thought it was another apricot thief, after his crop that was temptingly hanging there along the road by the acequia ditch. I had witnessed other trucks on our street do this, just pull under the branches and rapidly try to grab as many as they could. But no, it was a man in the back bed of his truck that had seen a bull snake crossing the road (the pair to the one I had eviscerated), and rather than simply mow him down with his truck, he had stopped, gotten his shovel, picked the creature up and moved it into the acequia. You see, bull snakes are actually good for the village because they kill rats and are

generally harmless. Unlike the rattlesnake whose bite kills its prey with poison, the bull snake kills prey by actually wrapping around its victim and suffocating it. These seem to me to be two deeply divergent personalities. Something to think on further, surely.

In any case, my dear neighbor ends his phone call with a simple request. Slowly, patiently, as if speaking to a small child, he told me, “Next time you see a bull snake in the yard, don’t kill it, just call me.” His protection and concern were fully evident in his voice as was the care the stranger in the truck took when he stopped in the middle of the road to move the second snake rather than mindlessly drive across him and kill him. This kindness stays with me now as I think upon the world we have collectively made, a world so fragile, so dangerous and so beautiful.

So, the story never really ends, and I await my future encounters. Next time, I hope to understand the message more clearly.