

The Deer in the Swimming Pool

By Michael Fine

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There were hawks everywhere. Hawks, ospreys, falcons and kestrels, even bald eagles, flying up the Pawtuxet River. Owls in daylight. Lewis looked up hawks and owls in a bird book: red tailed hawks, sharp-shinned hawks, Cooper's hawks, red-shouldered hawks, broad-winged hawks, even rough-legged hawks. Eastern Screech owls. Great horned owls. Barred owls. Barn owls. Long eared owls. Short eared owls. Snowy owls but only along the coast in the winter. He heard the cries and shrieks of all these birds at midday.

Lewis had seen ospreys and even eagles when he went out in the morning to walk the dog, following the river at dawn. But now he was seeing these birds everywhere: flying across the road when he went out to the store for milk or bread; in the median strip on Route 95 when he drove home from work. In his back yard when he was working on the pool or mowing the lawn. Birds of prey at mid-day in daylight, he thought. In Garden City. In Cranston, Rhode Island. The ancient Greeks thought that birds of prey flying about was an bad omen, a prophecy of danger or doom. But this isn't antiquity, he thought. You can't tell the future from these birds.

Or can you? Perhaps those birds knew something Lewis didn't know. Perhaps the loss of biomass, the shrinkage in the numbers of insects as a result of too many people and too many insecticides and chemicals, as a result of the carbon dioxide in the air and climate change had caused smaller birds that were prey to the raptors to disappear, and the hawks, falcons, owls and eagles were hungry, so they flew at midday. Perhaps there was some shift in the electromagnetic field of the earth that disturbed the birds of prey, but humans didn't notice. Perhaps there was a scientific explanation for what ancient people observed, but those phenomena were omens just the same: perhaps something was out of balance in the universe. Perhaps people needed to pay attention. Perhaps Lewis himself needed to listen up.

Lewis was a librarian, trained to think about how books are catalogued, how ideas are organized so they can be found when needed. Architecture is like archeology, as man starting building in antiquity and one age learned how to build from the people who built buildings before them. Chemistry is a little like physics: first we learned what forces operate in the universe and how matter behaves. Then we learned how matter itself is organized, the building blocks of tiny particles, the protons, electrons and neutrons and smaller particles yet, and the forces that let them congeal or repel them, so elements and molecules can be assembled out of nothingness, and solutions, crystals, compounds can be built out of atoms and molecules, and reactions between elements and compounds can be studied and catalogued. Something out of nothing. Matter out of ideas. Coherence out of chaos. There was a beauty to existence, and Lewis could see that beauty in the way the whole was assembled from its parts, in the way ideas came together, in the way books went on the shelves. And G-d created the world, and on the seventh day he rested, and it was good.

Lewis lived alone now, in a little brick house on Newbury Street in Garden City with a row of carefully clipped boxwoods that ran next to the street and along the driveway, and a second row of perfectly shaped conical thujas, also in line with the street, which gave Lewis the illusion of privacy, which of course, no one in Garden City ever really has. Quarter or eighth acre lots. Garden apartments. Walking distance to stores and to the river. In Garden City you can see your neighbors, but no one knows their neighbors. You see their cars or see them walking their dogs. Privacy in the midst of a zillion people. Isolation despite a thousand eyes looking at your house as people drive by. Starvation in the midst of plenty. That's how we live in America today.

Lewis had a beautiful little in-ground swimming pool surrounded by an eight-foot-tall wooden fence. The pool water was crystal clear and sparkled in the sunlight, all summer. There was a row of daylilies lining the fence on the sunlit side and a row of hostas lining the house on the side of the pool that was shady all day long.

One night in the summer of 2022, during the brief window when Covid wasn't such a threat, a storm blew in from the ocean, the wind out of the south and east, making the branches of the trees sway and the trees themselves list from side to side and even bend in the wind. The rain came in sheets or lapsed into an all-day drizzle between the bands of heavy downpour. Water came streaming off the roofs and ran in waves over the street or collected as small street lakes in the low places after the storm drains got clogged with leaves blown off the trees. Shutters on nearby houses banged in the wind: the blue tarps people used to cover their boats or their piles of stacked lumber flapped or were stripped away, as the wind was unforgiving.

But the storm blew past during the night, and in the morning the air was cool and crisp.

Lewis awoke just before dawn, which comes early in Garden City at that time of year. The sky was a thick blue grey, almost silver before the sun rose. You could hear just a few trucks rumble and whizz on Route 95, and their sputtering growls seemed more distant than usual despite the quiet, the hush that lay between the houses like a blanket.

He heard something through the hush. It sounded like splashing. Lewis listened again. Sometimes a wind whipped the surface of the swimming pool into little waves which lapped over the edges of the pool, running over the concrete skirt around the pool and that made a sound, a flat regular sound like that of pancake being flipped as it landed back in the pan. But there was no wind. And this was splashing, chaotic, rambunctious, and irregular. Was someone, or something, in his swimming pool?

Lewis got up and went to the window at the back of the house. He couldn't see the whole pool. He could see the wooden fence and one corner of the pool, the water blue and clear in the dusk before the sun rises. Sure enough, the back gate to the pool had blown open. The water in the pool churned with activity, with chop, froth, and even small whitecaps. Someone, or something, was in the pool.

Lewis threw on a pair of swimming trunks and hurried outside.

There was a deer in the swimming pool. It was a brown deer, without antlers, and looked a little like a dog or a goat – a long face, tender pink lips and ears that were tipped with black and stood erect, as it thrashed from place to place. The deer was swimming. Swimming and thrashing. It had come up from the river in the storm, through the open gate, and jumped or stumbled into Lewis's pool. Now it was thrashing about, swimming from side to side in the deep end near the diving board. It reached out with one hoof again and again, trying to mount the edge of the pool but always fell back, the walls of the pool being straight up and down. The deer's body was not meant to navigate such things but only to ford rivers with their gradual banks, to swim in ponds and lakes, which also have gradual embankments. Little beaches, sometimes made of stones and rocks and branches under water which sloped gradually into deeper water.

The deer was more brown than grey with bright but unintelligent eyes and those ears that were pointed up, like antennae. Lewis could hear it breathing as it struggled. It wheezed and bleated, soft bleats like the sound of a wounded rabbit. Lewis didn't think deer spoke. Or made any kind of sound. Deer are silent, he thought. Mute, like me.

What do you do? Lewis was a man alone. I'll call 911, he thought, and then imagined the absurdity of fire trucks, police cars and ambulances gathering in front of his house to rescue a deer. A ladder. I have a ladder. That's what the fire guys would use.

Lewis went to the garage, took the ladder down from where it hung on the wall, and put it in the pool, in the shallow end. Then he went inside to call 911.

When an operator said *police? fire? or medical?* Lewis hesitated. He looked out of the kitchen window as he started to explain.

But by then the deer was gone. Lewis hung up the phone so they wouldn't think he was a crazy person, and send a police car or ambulance for him, so his street didn't get crowded with emergency vehicles and fire trucks, their red, blue, and white lights flashing. They never send just one police car now, Lewis thought. They always send a whole army. I'd be so ashamed, he thought, overwhelmed by this image as if it were a real event that had already occurred.

His old dog, a small spotted pug, pink with black spots with a squashed-in face and jowls, yipped at his feet, waiting to be fed. At least someone is awake, Lewis thought. At least there are signs of life somewhere on the planet. He fed the dog and went back to bed. And slept.

That day a new homeless woman came into the library and sat at a computer.

The library entertained a number of homeless people every day, something most people don't know or think about, people who have no where else to go. Most were regulars, with regular habits: one older white man with a long scraggly beard would come in the morning, sit in periodicals, and read the Wall Street Journal and the Financial Times cover to cover every day. A skinny Black woman who was partial to brightly colored thin red dresses liked to sit near the woman's toilet and would make her rounds: first to the computer, for the permitted fifteen minutes. Then to the drinking fountain. Then to the toilet. Then to the movie sections, where she pulled out DVDs and read each DVD cover. Then back to her seat where she would rummage through her two plastic bags and appeared to be checking that all her possessions were present and accounted for.

These people felt like friends to Lewis. He never spoke to them, but he appreciated the regularity of their lives, which gave his life meaning and purpose: most people don't know that librarians respect homeless people and feel that giving them a place to stay during the day is part of their scope of work, just like maintaining a children's section and having story hour. Most people don't see librarians as contributing to the social fabric of a place, as holding each place up, without notice or fanfare. But that is what librarians do and are most proud of. Homeless people are welcome as long as they don't get rowdy or try to use a computer for more than fifteen minutes each hour.

This new woman looked more straggly than most. She was older, or at least looked older. Lewis knew that people who sleep outside age fast, a process some people call weathering, and when he got closer to her, Lewis thought she was only thirty-five or forty. Her face was lined and pitted, her skin thick and red and she had thick, matted dreadlocks that

were blood and grey. There was a wild, undisciplined look in her eyes -- and she seemed unable to understand the library's rules about what a person could bring inside (which everyone else knew -- not more than two shopping bags, please) so she tried to bring her shopping cart inside and got a little agitated when Lewis asked her to please leave it outside. But she calmed down when Lewis told her clearly a second time and said she could leave it right in front of a window, so she could keep her eyes on it while she was inside.

But the smell. You don't want to think it. You don't want to say it. You mean no disrespect. But there it was, burning and powerful, not like the rotting of a dead thing but almost as dense, the smell of urine and estrogens and sweat, bitter like coal smoke and sweet at the same time, as if a forest of maple trees had caught fire just as the leaves were turning. It made you want to cough. The smell came with her, wafting across the library like tear gas in a crowd, so everyone looked up, when that woman came in, which people don't usually do. They don't usually look up when a homeless person comes in. Mostly people glance up for a moment if they notice anything at all, and go right back to their work, giving the homeless person their space and by doing so, handing them a measure of respect, although no one ever approached one of them or asked for their name.

But not this woman. Everyone in the library looked up. People's eyes teared a little. Some patrons shook their heads. Others touched their noses with a fist, wanting to but not quite able to hold their noses. Others stood and moved as far away as they could get, and still others walked out, their heads down.

It was summer, and homeless people weren't coming into the library very much. Lewis would see them in the park from time to time, sitting on park benches, or walking on Route 117, panhandling with signs, or pushing their shopping carts, filled with huge garbage bags of bottles and cans.

What am I going to do? Lewis thought. *What am I going to say?* You can't tell another human being that they stink. You can't throw them out of the library. It was hot outside. She likely needs a drink of water and to sit in the air conditioning for a few hours, and perhaps to put her head on her hands, sitting at a library table, and sleep, in this space that is safer for her

than the street. But the other people! Don't they have a right to the quiet enjoyment of this space, which is a holy place, for them and or me. Just like everyone else. A place to think one's own thoughts. A place to learn. A place where ideas can be categorized, and where every idea has its place in relation to all our knowledge and all our other ideas, our history,. and our stories. A place to dream.

I would like to take her home, Lewis thought suddenly in a way that surprised him, *and let her swim in my swimming pool.* No, not swim. Bathe. I would like her to languish there for hours, to stand and swim in the cool clear water, her privacy guaranteed by my perfect wooden fence, and let the layers and layers of dirt and grime slowly melt off. I would like her to be able to wash her hair so that the mud washes out, and let her brush and comb her hair, so it becomes way and flowing again, and then let her dry that hair in the perfect sunlight of the late afternoon.

But I can't do that, Lewis thought. It wouldn't be proper.

The woman walked with her two shopping bags to the water fountain, not even watching her shopping cart, which stood outside the library in front of a window at the front entrance, hidden in plain sight, guarding it. She drank for what felt like ten minutes, as if she hadn't had anything to drink for weeks. Then she took herself to the bathroom.

As soon as she closed the bathroom door, all the patrons in the library looked up. They all looked at Lewis. *What am I going to do?* Lewis thought.

A small child, sitting on the floor in the children's section, yelled out "Mommy mommy. Take me home. It's stinky in here."

There was no pretending. Everyone smelled it. And they were all looking at Lewis.

I will take her home to swim. I will. Lewis thought.

After a very long time, likely close to an hour, long enough so that Lewis thought of knocking on the door or calling the police because people had overdosed in the library's

bathrooms before and God knows this woman might, the woman emerged. She wore a thick green coat although it was summer and she carried her two plastic bags, one in each hand. She walked slowly, with great dignity, toward the door. She didn't look at or stop at the circulation desk. Lewis stood at the desk, awed but also convulsing inside, wanting so much to help, but helpless himself. A person's privacy and dignity must be respected. Then the woman turned and pushed the inner glass door open, and then turned again, opened the other door, laid each of her shopping bags on top of her shopping cart, and then got behind the cart and walked away, pushing her cart like a ship's captain sailing into the night, although it was daylight, in the summer, and the sun was strong.

Two nights later, it occurred again. A wind in the night. The wooden gate banging hollowly against the fence in the wind. (*I know I locked that gate, Lewis thought. I took precautions so that this couldn't happen again. I know I did.*) The sound of splashing before dawn. The bleating of a beast that was terrified and confused.

Lewis stood still and studied the deer for a moment. No antlers. Those erect, black tipped ears. The eyes that were just terrified, and absolutely without intelligence. *It has to be the same deer, Lewis thought. It has to be.* How many deer are there in Cranston? You would have thought the first deer learned something from the experience and stayed far away. But then there were the omens, those birds of prey flying about at midday. Perhaps something is awry with the universe after all. I have no way to know if this is the same deer or a different deer. He looked for a distinguishing mark, some way to tell if this deer was his deer, in case it came back. But what do I know about deer? Nothing, Lewis decided. Perhaps whatever is disordered in the universe is forcing the gate open in the wind and calling deer to my swimming pool. Or not. Perhaps it is just coincidence, just two different deer who were wandering by when two different winds blew the locked gate to my swimming pool open. Twice. Same gate. But different days. Perhaps.

Then Lewis went out to the garage, took down the ladder again, put it in the pool, and then went away. And the deer was gone again by sunup.

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