

Alice Hatcher

Our Exalted Terrestrial Kingdom

He behaved strangely from the moment he crawled from the swamp, with loosely threaded strands of algae clinging to his mottled back and his gills still straining for oxygen in the sparse atmosphere. Once his novice lungs began to function, he gulped as if he were trying to consume every oxygen molecule floating past. He gesticulated with his vestigial tail and hefted his distended belly from the ground, splayed his webbed feet and lurched forward, thrashing and flopping at every turn and spluttering with every minor exertion. *There is something decidedly uncouth about him*, we agreed. Still, we forgave his unsightly behavior and observed him with a studied indifference. We reminded ourselves that we, too, had crawled from the brackish water, blinking against the caustic light and straining to breathe. Before calluses formed on the soles of our fledgling feet, we had also been tormented by sharp twigs and jagged stones, painful reminders of our distance from a watery world surrendered in a fit of hubris. We had all been awkward in our first steps on land.

As time passed, though, his oddities became more pronounced. We were always careful to refer to his *oddities*, rather than his *imperfections* or *innate weaknesses*. Evolution is not predicated upon the survival of the fittest, contrary to what crass characters often claim when rationalizing their accidental advantages in a particular niche. Any arthropod or troglodyte knows this. *His inherited traits*, we conceded, *might actually be suited to our inhospitable world*. However *unpalatable*, they *might be advantageous*. Still, we couldn't help but wonder if we were witnessing some expression of atavism, or an instance of maladapted behavior, when he placed his tiny foot on an elevated rock (as if claiming it as his own), surveyed his alien surroundings and spewed forth bilious muck he must have gathered from the cold slime of his bottom-feeding days. We considered the oily substance coating the rocks around him, detected something foul drifting through the air, and shuddered from our receding tails to our burgeoning toes. *He is*, we thought, *an embarrassment to our tiny patch of land*.

His bulging eyes, above all else, unsettled us. They were fairly large for his smallish head, insofar as they occupied space that might have been much-better dedicated to cranial development. They were certainly too large, relative to the young planet's thin troposphere; he might easily have been blinded by a solar flare or sudden burst of lightning. *He is hardly fit, we mused, to weather the slightest storm.* To invoke what hadn't yet become a tiresome cliché, his eyes were too large for his stomach, or maybe his gastric sac, for none of us knew what, exactly, his bristling skin concealed. They betokened an entirely unnatural appetite and insatiable hunger. They portended a level of consumption far beyond the normal wont.

During his first weeks as a terrestrial being, he ate voraciously, as if there were no end to the earth's yield. He tore up the grass, stripped the soft bark from almost every tree, and devoured countless nascent blooms and beds of moss. He gorged himself on every available piece of low-hanging fruit. He masticated, without fail, in unimaginably unsightly ways, grinding the overabundant incisors crowding his ample jaws and drooling on everything. He snatched winged creatures from the air and ate them too quickly. He grew fickle and polluted the shore with the remnants of his abandoned feasts, his strange regurgitations, and the acid of his indigestion. *He eats, we muttered, as if he alone owns the narrow stretch of shore we have all come to call home.*

Some of us counseled patience, arguing that he was a neophyte to terrestrial affairs, a yet-amphibious amateur bound to adjust in time. It seemed, then, that we had *all the time in the world*. Some of us ventured that we, too, had exploited our tiny niche to survive. Certainly, in moments of hunger, we had nibbled delicate reeds down to the nubbins, plucked unripe berries from unsuspecting trees, and chewed through the roots of outraged bushes. We had ensnared insects in our darting tongues and snatched fish from the shallows close to shore. We had never failed, though, to marvel at the delicate skins of ripened fruit, the iridescent blue wings of beetles, and the silvery scales and tender flesh of fish. As for the unfortunate fish, we had once lived and looked as they had, and for that reason, felt an indissoluble kinship with them.

He felt nothing of the sort. He ripped off their heads and spit out their eyes, tossed them half-eaten upon the shore and then hunted for others. We considered the dried bits of cartilage scattered on the sand and rock and wrestled with syllables alien to our tongues, finally fashioning the word *glutton* to compass his behavior. Many of us submerged ourselves in muck or plastered our eyes with mud, just to avoid the spectacle of his never-ending dissipation. The bravest among us observed his erratic movements, wondering how long it would take before he adapted to his new environment or sat-

isfied his seemingly endless appetite. We waited patiently. *No one, we quietly croaked in unison, is perfect. No one's character is entirely unimpeachable.*

Over time (years, perhaps, or maybe eons, for none of us could quite remember the days that preceded his appearance), as he exhausted the earth and sapped the trees and filled the air with noxious fumes, our anxieties became unmanageable. The flaps of our vestigial gills prematurely withered. The few hairs sprouting on our heads fell out. Strange bumps appeared on our backs, and we began to grind the nubs of our germinal teeth. Exhausted, we renounced reproduction and eschewed sexual congress. *It would be sheer madness, some of us concluded, to bring new life into such a damaged world.* We experimented with hibernation, just to sleep through the disturbance he nightly created by tormenting young birds and snapping saplings in half. Then, even sleep became impossible.

Perhaps he craved an audience for his behavior (we had often observed him perched on a rock, peering down at his reflection between the blooms of algae in the swamp). When we attempted hibernation, he went out of his way to disturb our sleep. A choleric beast, he screeched and shrieked incessantly. He tweeted with abandon – mind you, without the grace of the winged creatures he so often startled from the branches of ravaged trees. He produced terrible sounds, unlike any we had heard before. The more delicate among us buried our heads in sand and mud, but to no avail. His noise was too jarring. Our brief respites from his unholy noise only made the inevitable return to our senses more painful. Each time we raised our eyes above the muck, we confronted ever-worsening scenes of chaos: the severed stumps of toppled trees, sun-bleached bones and the innards of fish, and withered worms exhumed for his amusement.

Our morale eventually reached its grim nadir. We searched our collective memory and agreed that our existence had become untenable. By unspoken consensus, we decided against all odds of survival to move further inland, into the hills for the precarious safety of higher ground, or to seek leafy shelter in the forest canopy. In the end, our stubby legs – if they could be described as such – proved unequal to our exodus. We were too ill-graced with stubby legs to surmount inclines of any note. Our fingers were too short to gain a sufficient purchase on the mangled bark of the remaining trees. In desperation, we sought a return to our ancestral swamp, only to find that our gills had sealed shut and lost their function, and that the webbing between our toes had shrunk. Our once-sleek fins had evolved into clumsy feet.

Despairing, we settled into the muck along the shore. We considered doing him violence once or twice but couldn't, or rather wouldn't, convince ourselves to compromise our embryonic souls. *We cannot, we agreed, sink any*

further as a species. And so we suffered his screeching and shrieking and flailing and tweeting, wondering if he might someday use his overworked jaws and aberrant incisors to shred us all. Every night, we entertained infernal visions of an indiscriminate creature crawling from the swamp and mating with him. *Could any creature, we asked, be so lacking in judgment, so driven by desperate impulse, as to reproduce without careful thought or measured feeling?* Some of us feared that our species had failed, that we had become a doomed band of evolutionary dead-ends. For the first time, we howled and wept, cast silent maledictions and seethed, but nothing moved him. He was, it seemed, an insensate beast.

Then one evening, he swiveled his head from side to side, surveyed the land and realized that he had eaten nearly everything along the shore. The lowest-hanging fruit had vanished, and all but the fattest insects and laziest birds had flown away. He scratched his scales, gnashed his teeth and turned back to the swamp. He seemed to ponder his predicament (though it's difficult to say what passed for his cognitive processes) and then lumbered back into the water, broke through an algae bloom and disappeared in an astonishing act of devolution. Tiny bubbles rose from the depths, formed an uneven trail from the shore and then vanished altogether. When enough time had passed to justify our fragile hopes, we experimented with new chirps and whistles, composed our first songs and ingested bits of fermented fruit, accidental delicacies bittersweet to taste.

At dawn, we drew the clouded membranes from our eyes and contemplated our ruined paradise – the stark shapes of upended stones and splintered branches and gutted exoskeletons. *The survival instinct is a remarkable thing,* we said, drawing away from the suffocating muck edging the swamp. Many of us slept, finally, and surrendered to dreams of dense, undisturbed forests and towering clouds. Others shuddered, unable to exorcise memories of impenetrable murk and unfathomable depths. However tentatively, some of us exalted in our terrestrial kingdom, breathed a collective sigh of relief and celebrated evolution's unpredictable course and our narrow escape from extinction, all the while lamenting the unfortunate turn for the fish darting to and fro to escape the suction of his downward spiral.