**Now and Then**

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When Conquistadors saw their first bison in 1540, they described their astonishment. This was not a cow, sheep, goat, camel, scorpion, lion, though they compared bison to these things. Long beards, like goats. Hair woolly, like sheep. The great hump, like a camel though larger. In front of the girdle, the hair long and rough like a lion. “The short tail they carry erect when running, like a scorpion. And, their little calves are red, *just like ours*.”

There used to be wild bison, millions, before slaughtered en masse by white men using their rifles out train windows.

Before cell phones, cities had telephone booths. If you were late, tied up for some reason, the person you were meeting would simply wait. No exclaiming, no texting, no information. You waited, that was all, forced to master your irritation and anxiety.

Monarch butterflies were named for King William III, Prince of Orange. They *are* royal, traveling up to 2,800 miles during migration. There used to be billions of monarchs. Since 1980, there has been a 99.9% fall in numbers. Even fireflies face extinction. When I was a kid, they were thick as blades of grass. Hard to see your hand through the blinking glow of green.

I used to sleep on a beach with a colony of fifty sea otters. When I first saw them, I thought they were white bears lounging in the ocean. I also lived for decades with a 500-year-old yew tree before it was cut down, along with the surrounding old growth forest. I used to hitchhike across the U.S. meeting strangers, and drank pure, clean water from sparkling streams in a now-defunct rainforest.

There used to be millions of bats zinging through the air, feasting on what used to be zillions of insects. After a 10-minute drive, your car would be splattered with insects’ yellow and red remains. Had to stop and scrape before driving on. In Vermont, where I live now, 99% of all the bats are gone due to white-nose syndrome. Acadian flycatchers, yellow-throated vireos, black-and-white warblers, and hooded flycatchers have disappeared completely.

Aleppo, Syria used to be a thriving city teeming with antiquities; a covered souk, the eleventh-century Great Mosque, the famed Hotel Baron which T.E. Lawrence frequented owned by Armen Mazloumian’s family since 1911. Today the market lies in ruins; the mosque’s minaret pulverized; Hotel Baron a home for refugees. War. The Syrians flee. A family has to walk 1,400 miles to get to Serbia, a safe haven, which would take roughly 50 days if they could manage to walk eight hours a day.

A Syrian family of six took me in for a week in Aleppo. They had only two rooms, gave me one of them. In Palmyra, before ISIS destroyed the ancient city, I held a poisoned dog in my lap as he died. I also walked along the long towering golden colonnade, singing madly. Today, rubble on the ground.

Hurricanes, fires, floods, heat, cold, fear. We’ve done it all. Extravagantly.

There also used to be an abundance of wild; I mean deeply wild. The kind that startled you into reverence.

There used to be an abundance of time; that was before we started running out of time.