The Unnaming of Aliass

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Southern thunderstorms are something else. What begins as a far-off throb, what could almost be rumbling guts, the distant rolling thuds at first blur the boundaries of inside and outside. Then the little wind comes to tell it: soon the bruise-colored cumulonimbi roll in and pour over the trees. The dogs slink into hiding, as the atmosphere darkens, darkens, darkens more, and the air grows thick-electric and begins to tremble like flesh. In the barn the horses get restless, stomp and blow, then go tense and still, waiting in their wooden stalls like seafaring cargo for the hammering hiss of hard rain on the metal roof. Thunder cracks close, then a breathless lull, then closer, and closer again, as the big winds roar up in a sudden swirl and the thunder booms and cracks hugely, right here, just as the sky rips opens and the first few splats of rain come, one by one kicking up a tiny cloud of dust before the world disappears in dripping veils. Come the lashes of lightning, and the every-which-way winds twist the heaving branches and pale underleaves as the forest canopy turns wild and inside out.

Thunderboomers like this used to come like gifts to the sweltering, humid dog-day afternoons of summer on the Virginia farm where I grew up. After lunchtime each day in July and August, we’d begin to hope and wait. We listened, mostly with our skins, for the hints of wind and
thickening, for rumbles past the hazy blue horizon. The gifts of the storms, when they did come, were not just in the cooling off. All-encompassing atmospheric changes could shift the speed of time and bodies’ boundaries, too. Once it happened in the thick moments just before a storm hit. I was racing to get a mare and foal in from the paddock when a black snake hurried across the dirt road in my path, moving fast from one thicket of shrubs to another. The black snake slithered furiously, with its sleek shiny head raised six inches off the ground. It seemed to cast about wild-eyed as it whipped across the open space of the dirt road. How a snake can have an almost comical, Chaplinesque expression of frantic worry is beyond my powers to describe. But I remember how it seemed, along with the strange feelings this chance crossing of paths stirred. In that naked moment with the snake I was struck by an unforeseen sense of kinship, as we each rushed for cover from the coming storm.

Few inhabitants of that old farm in the Appalachian Blue Ridge foothills – full as it was of domestic beasts and wilder ones, each hidden and exposed in our various ways among the rolling hill pastures and cedars groves and thickets of woody shrubs – were more incomprehensible to me than the snakes. I both feared and obsessed over them, and spent hours in the barn office poring over a hardback field guide someone had given us, simply titled *Snakes of Virginia*. That summer, violent and frequent thunderstorms supposedly washed scores of snakes down from the mountains – at least, that was the colloquial explanation for why the little creek pool beneath the culvert pipe became a vibrant and mesmerizing, knotty tangle of reptiles of every size and color for a few weeks: bright milk snakes and corn snakes, thick slit-eyed copperheads, and even the slow and blunt-nosed, seldom-seen hog snakes. Rumors also circulated that summer that the benign, enormous black snakes (who sometimes grew up to eight feet long) were interbreeding with ven-
omous copperheads. This became an excuse for lords of the land to wantonly hack apart resident black snakes, who were mostly left alone otherwise to keep rodents at bay. (One huge black snake thick as a human arm, who lived in tunnels under our barn, grew lumpy-fat one summer on the generations of white and spotted laboratory mice and rats who thrived there after a kindhearted neighbor set them free from their glass cages.)

When they were not spectacularly tangled in the creek pool, the snakes of Virginia were a looming presence just at the edges of perception. I knew they were out there, hidden in the folds and cracks of the land. I used to fantasize that I had a magic power to snap my fingers and suddenly turn everything stark white except for the snakes, thus revealing in an instant exactly where each snake hid coiled or moved through the brush. Aside from the remote threat of viper’s bite, danger was not what compelled this special fascination. It was that the snakes commanded a certain respect in their hiddenness. Their vaguely menacing, unseen presence was powerful and challenging. This mystery of invisible, wild presence was something I wanted to learn to live with. If asked back in those days, I would have said I’d rather not live with snakes, but the odd feelings stirred by the surprise pre-storm encounter with that black snake, as we crossed paths in a charged and vulnerable moment, said otherwise.

Remembering that encounter now feels like recalling a dear and long lost friend. That crossing-of-paths was a crack, a fleeting sliver of opening across boundaries of species and shared habitat I thought were impassable. The bodies we lived in were as different as vertebrates can get, yet the thunder still meant something to both of us. When the thunder says it’s time to move, each and every body heeds it, every one sensing in our own ways that our worlds are about to get changed – whether just wet and muddy or washed away, annihilated.
Mostly summer thunderstorms on the farm were cool relief on sweltering afternoons, but they were laced with dangers, too. Snakes displaced by torrents piled up in the creek. Once my wiry little mother was thrown back ten feet in an arc across the dirt road when a bolt of lightning hit her through the metal pasture gate. And do not forget that phone call from Johnny, from the dark Nelson County hollow hideout where he went to live those years after the farm was lost and the family scattered. The call was unexpected. His voice cracked in a way I’d never heard as he told me how Zak and Tarbaby and the new gray mare whose name I forget were all three lost in a green mountain thunderstorm the day before, when lightning struck their shade oak in the pasture, shot up through the roots and into their bodies through their metal shoes. No human saw it happen. One can only imagine how a few minutes later the storm must have passed, as they do, leaving only cooler air and glistening leaves and grass. Johnny found them later that afternoon, laying where they fell under the big oak tree, their bones all shaken loose and their soft eyes blown out like bulbs.
Fig. 1. Aliass with an early incarnation of the Dead-Car Wagon. Photograph by Jack Christian.