

A.I.

having-seen-snake

By Sriwhana Spong

I want to share with you an experience I had in the summer—a Philadelphia summer—of 2016. An encounter that occurred in the silence of the unverifiable, in the indistinguishable cacophony of waters at the threshold of language just before it is fed into the intricate plumbing of signs and symbols.

I went for a walk through the city, passing George Warhola Scrap Metal—a reminder I was in Warhol country—and after a few hours found myself in the Allegheny Cemetery. Wandering around the 300 acres that make up the burial grounds, one gets a sense of the wealth of the city built on industry—first steel, later technology. Deer graze among Egyptian-themed mausoleums, neoclassical family crypts, and marble obelisks. In a lower part of the cemetery, you arrive at a flat area where the tombstones are smaller, and then further on you come across an expanse of small plaques fastened flat to the ground, barely peeking over the newly-shorn grass, each marked with a miniature American flag. The men of government and industry lie under marble crosses, Gothic-revival spires, statues of women in allegorical poses and life-sized weeping angels. They are accorded the symbols of heaven, while the soldiers below lie under plaques lower than level with the grass, each decorated with a fluttering red-white-and-blue.

I'm standing in the cut grass thinking about the little-plaque deaths as opposed to the weeping-angel ones.

Colour suddenly flashes and bursts, pushing out to blinding white. In a snap. A brightness whose edges shimmer with colour. And I become like this bright emptiness with shimmering edges in a sort of, close to, sudden humming stillness. In a snap. And a loud silence, like the brightness, as if hearing every sound all at once. In a snap. I'm suddenly spectral and wide-open. "SNAKE." The word slides down into me. I literally feel it. It's like those slow-moving shutters wound down against the sun on hot afternoons.

I wanted to try and put across to you what happened, but there is a divide between the memory and the words that I manage to claw from my mind's inventory. Creature. Creature sensed, not "seen." Sensed in the blindness of eyes open like a jacket without a zipper in a storm, and skin, what skin? The scent of snake? Imagine! This is how I understand what happened: A moment of indistinction when, as one creature to another, I respond in my creatureliness and then language reasserts itself, and with it distinction. And then there is "me" and "snake," and then I am afraid. I think I time travelled in a way—I rushed out ahead of language, and then I was snapped back.

There are three photos of the event, before and after, that compose a sort of sequence—act as a sort of witness. The first is of the soldiers' graves. This is time-stamped "12 July 2016 at 1:47:09 PM." The second is a selfie. I'm wearing an extremely wide-brimmed hat that frames my face like a halo, obscuring the background. This is time-stamped "12 July 2016 at 1:47:27 PM." The third is of a slim, black snake with yellow stripes running the length of its body. This is time-stamped "12 July 2016 at 1:48:10 PM." And here is the measurement of the event: forty-three seconds.

An impulse to capture everything, to remember through receipts. The whole walk back through this now even more unfamiliar city. What just happened? Am I dehydrated? Am I ill? That evening, with eerie synchronicity, I stumble across a recently published interview with George Saunders in the *White Review*: "It's kind of like, if you see a snake and it scares the shit out of you, typing, 'Suddenly I saw a snake' doesn't get it—has nothing to do with what you felt in that instant. How to use or exploit or get at that (having-seen-snake) energy? The energy of what you actually felt in that instant?"¹ Seeing snakes, or ghosts, or gods, that "having-seen-snake" energy, that sudden and nonnegotiable life impulse—we are still working out how to "get at that."

It raised its body and flared its hooded head, ready to defend itself. Two meters away, about two running steps, my body miraculously responded and I froze before I could even articulate "cobra" in my mind. Once I regained control over my body I backed slowly away, my eyes riveted on the snake. Forgetting the photo of Mt. Kenya, I took a shaky photo of the wary snake instead.²

Anthropologist Lynne Isbell's experience resembles my own encounter. It led her to develop Snake Detection Theory that suggests snakes were responsible for the way vision developed

as the most dominant sense in primates. Her book *The Fruit, the Tree, and the Serpent* offers a way of thinking through my experience using her particular discipline of science. According to Isbell, all vertebrates share the superior colliculus (SC) pulvinar visual system. This is linked to non-conscious vision and is important for detecting and avoiding predators quickly, without need of assessment. It is also connected to the response mechanism of freezing. The more recent lateral geniculate nucleus (LGN) visual system appears in mammals and helps us edit out objects in the environment, perceiving and identifying risk and helping us choose how to respond—we are never not editing.

So, what happened in the burial grounds could be understood as my (SC) pulvinar system rushing ahead, helping me detect and respond to the snake before my (LGN) visual system was able to identify it as such. An ancient system of detection erupting in the present, producing a slim moment of sensing as perhaps my vertebrate ancestors did, crawling out of the ocean, draped in scales and mud, under a low sky. A gurgling mass of things finding shape: moist and restless, teeming with forms—mange, ulcer, black stain, blister—crying, roaring, weeping she was—a room with an open fire, a running sore.

But what of the need both Isbell and I felt to photograph the snake? According to Isbell, humans are the only species that point declaratively. It is a developmental precursor to language: to declaratively point is to share with others one's interest in an object, to direct attention to that thing. Imperative pointing, on the other hand, is a gesture shared with other animals and points at an object wanted by the pointer. It has been hypothesised that cooperative communication created the need for declarative pointing. The pointer desires that others feel an emotion, gain information and act. And Isbell speculates—based on tests that show we point faster and more accurately at targets in the lower visual field and have faster reaction times to people pointing down rather than up—that only one predator, the venomous snake, could have created such selective pressure on the visual systems of our human ancestors.

An iPhone is my index finger. Without you here, I take a photo because I still need to share. Marguerite Duras declared: “Love can be made only among three.”³ The action of pointing declaratively gestures to something at a distance, and in doing so draws you, me, and it together, articulates a dynamic between us. It is not the direct line of the imperative, to be shortened as quickly and as expediently as possible, but a relational tracing. This might also be the location of the mystic, standing at the threshold between language and the ineffable,

declaratively pointing to something I can't quite see, announcing themselves and me and it, tracing a triad, a ground between three that shimmers with kinship and difference.

¹ Aidan Ryan and George Saunders, "Interview with George Saunders," *The White Review*, June 2016, <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-george-saunders/>

² Lynne Isbell, *The Fruit, the Tree, and the Serpent*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 95.

³ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable, Volume One: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 196–97

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