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When I was younger I lived at the junction of a pair of Tri-Cities desert ridges. The view off the back porch was steeply sloping golden brush, low-flying hawks, and, further down, a sparsely populated valley patched with velvety cropland. I spent the majority of my time trekking through the vast wilderness, the smell of the heat-cracked dirt in the summer, my boots leaving tracks in the crust of ice that covered the sagebrush in winter. The ridges are a priceless natural commodity, a view that also offers a sense of exclusive prestige, and consequently, the area has since been developed, a trail of upscale houses lining the rolling crests. But, when I was younger, wilderness it was.

And not always the scenic kind. My family and our neighbors weathered the fiercest dust storms, listening as the dark wind ripped the shingles off our roofs. The storms could come without warning, a sudden rise from over the hills, but were often preceded by an ominous sign, a thin black line over the ridges across the valley. The sky turned to dust, the wind dark and heavy with it, always beating against the houses, screaming through the cracks. I always wondered how much the walls could bear, before buckling and yielding to the barrage. Each time, the morning after, there would be children on the grass, spitting out the grit between our teeth, watching the adults in their never ending series of repairs. We all heard each other's stories of missing rabbits, cats, even a ferret, lost in the night to some bold coyote, and once an enormous hawk, an aberration to say the least, set its sights on my ninety-pound golden retriever. From the back porch, I saw it dive, catch itself with dark lustrous wings, reaching with its cruel talons. While it was unable to carry her off – a serious fear, as I had seen similar attempts with varying degrees of success involving coyotes –

the dog was left with two rows of deep punctures, a souvenir of the ordeal. And yet, without a doubt, the most wild and threatening aspect of life on the hill was the snakes.

Snakes are not a daily worry for most. Few encounter vipers outside of the movies, and more categorize rattlesnakes as ambience for a western film rather than a serious threat, but their presence was unmistakable in the hills. As a bloated curve along the road's edge on a hot summer's dusk, and maybe the next morning the same snake now a wasted body in the road's middle, they were simply a part of our lives. One of my father's more interesting pastimes - the "snake run" - involved a late afternoon drive. With an end goal of massive snake casualties, he would take the winding two-lane road at reckless speeds, swerving to hit whatever he could. One day a visitor may have found the few children old enough to care gathered around one such snake. A morbid curiosity, or perhaps the desire to see what we had been scolded away from, always warned of, splayed out on the scorching asphalt, drew us out to observe. We would crane our necks in, feet as close as we dared - we had all been told never to touch it, that even dead they were dangerous. And most had seen a case or two where a snake's jaws continued to snap long after being cut off from the body. Factors like this revenge after death and their cruel, sudden attack lent the rattlesnakes an otherworldly quality, demonstrating to all who'd seen them the reasons these snakes have inspired such legends.

While most of my childhood memories centered on mud puddles, reckless adventures with my neighbors, and long wanderings through the hills with my dog, some of the most vivid are of the snakes. In fact, I must credit them with many of the lessons I've learned. Young rattlers are always the most dangerous. Mercury-fast, they are distinguishable from the common garter snake only by their angular heads and faintly diamond patterned backs. They are just as poisonous as a full grown

snake. More than one morning, I stepped onto my warm brick porch to the shock of a thin dusty ribbon shooting past my bare feet. Out of necessity, I learned to appreciate caution, awareness.

And through the rattlers, I was introduced to more somber matters. Unsurprisingly, a venomous snake on one's property was bad news. I can remember coming home to find my mother frozen on the back porch steps, my father's air rifle trained just below her feet. In dusty work clothes and a baseball cap she maintained a ridiculous one-legged balance, arms wrapped tightly around her rib cage. From under the slatted steps came a sharp buzz, the iconic rattle. The snake was a monster, easily four inches in diameter. It was impossible to gauge its length, as it was already coiled and ready to strike. For what seemed far longer than it could have possibly been, we stood in a precarious balance, hearts in our throats, tension straining our lungs, until my dad finally tightened his aim, squeezed the trigger, and fired a small metal BB cleanly through the viper's skull. The snake shuddered, and then slumped into a limp coil under the porch; the stillness was interrupted only by the snake's postmortem twitches and the rush of our collective relief. In this incident, and others before, I'd witnessed survival, death. It was a fight for life, although some would say that man's advantage, with our tools and knowledge, makes it less of a fight, and man more of a bully. But I was there; I felt the tension and saw the ease with which the snake could have struck, before any of us could have moved. When my father dragged the snake from under the steps, coiling it into a black plastic garbage bag, I saw the ease with which my father could have missed, how my mother could have shifted her weight and broken the standoff.

While I felt the necessity of death in matters like this, other circumstances agitated my youthful sense of justice. The similarity between the garter snakes and young rattlesnakes was the primary cause of such instances. I remember rushing inside to tell my father of a small snake outside, asking him to take a look. He came out, shovel in hand. Once we'd located the snake, I

realized it wouldn't remain whole for long; as always the protector, my father lives by a policy of "the only good snake is a dead snake," loosely translated into better safe than sorry. But, as the shovel came down, I noticed the snake's bright green skin, noticed that it couldn't have been a rattler. An angry, panicked feeling began to rise in me as the decapitated garter snake writhed on the ground. It was anger at my father's rashness, anger that he'd acted on instinct, however sound it might have been. It was panic and remorse that I hadn't stopped it, couldn't have stopped it. As my father scooped up the thin bright body and tossed it into a garbage can full of yard trimmings, I was struck by an inexplicable wave of injustice. Whether or not you consider it significant, a harmless creature with no ill intent had been killed on my behalf, and guilt began to roil up in response.

The closeness of our lives and nature frequently forced incidents like this. This event in particular, and perhaps my following week of sullenness and several daughter-to-father scoldings, inspired innovation. Following what I perceived as a wrongful death, my father took it upon himself to find a solution. He invented an ingenious snake-catcher, a simple but effective device that consisted of a long pole with a sliding noose made of thick plastic line. He was able to catch the snake and examine it from a distance, let the harmless ones go, and kill whichever he deemed dangerous; I grew to value this discernment.

While most of these subjects seem heavy for a young kid's mind, even then I appreciated the perspective gained from living so close, and so often at odds, with nature. From the brave feeling of defiance while riding out a storm, to the introspection forced by the rattlesnakes, my early memories are characterized by fierceness and an unusual depth.

And though I've long since left that hill, I feel the need to hang on to that view, to remember the beauty in its roughness, all in the face of safe, saccharine suburbia.