

Radical Bears in the Forest Delicious

There once was a king of Babylon who was too proud, so he was given the mind of an animal and put out to pasture. For seven years he roamed the fields on all fours and munched on grass, after which period he was allowed to return to his palace and rich robes of purple, his barley beer and skewered locusts and royal hairdresser who gave him back his dignified ringlets. (Along with an animal's mind he had been given the animals' hairstylist.) It is not specified which animal's mind Nebuchadnezzar received, but from his glad return to civilisation and fine cuisine we can infer that it was not the mind of a panda bear. If he had had a panda's mind for seven years, in the end he would have rejected the restitution of his kingdom; he would have somersaulted away, to continue leading a free, elusive, unfollowed life.

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Having followers is an honour pandas dream not of. There is no tragopan so trustworthy, no bushpig so dependable, that they would want it tagging along. Pandas even head away from pandas, like the stars in the universe, spreading farther and farther apart (you can never be too far away to say goodbye) – except their territory is neither infinite nor expanding, and in order to deliver more panda bears into existence, they can't just scatter into particles at the end. Pandas come together every two years or so; marriage isn't always marriage of the mind.

Maybe if they had been given a choice they would have picked a less conspicuous coat, one to better correspond with their reclusive spirits. Admirers can be secret admirers and afflictions can be secret afflictions but pandas cannot be secret pandas, since they contrast dramatically with green ferns, grey rocks, pink rhododendrons, and their own bellies and ears and legs. They are showy bears, sensationally visible, which might actually be an advantage for a solitary species: the easier to avoid you, my dear. Camouflaged animals must always be bumping into each other.

What does the animal do all day who is not engaged in society, its duties and pleasures and ferments? There may be some wedging in trees, some gazing into the mist, some fiddle-faddle. Sometimes the panda breaks an icicle off a branch and tosses it

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into the air over and over till it melts. Sometimes, trotting pigeon-toed across a hillside, he trips, then rolls, because he is round; having enjoyed that, he climbs back up and rolls back down. He might pick wild irises or crocuses and recline among the fern-fronds to eat them, or lounge underneath a weeping willow, munching on the little leaflets that dangle into his mouth.

Mostly what pandas do with their time is eat bamboo. Bamboo, that sturdy wooden grass, makes up to 99 per cent of their diet and they eat it for up to fourteen hours a day. They have to consume it constantly since they are only assimilating about 20 per cent. Their penitential diet is a mystery; pandas are like celery saints – everyone else is convivially dining on stuffed eggs, truffled fingerlings, little pies and oranges, enjoying the tableside crooners, while out behind a bush sits a celery saint with his basket of celery, crunch crunch crunch. Eat enough pies and you can put aside the desire for food and pursue something else, such as a cowhand. Rare is the romance of the celery extremist.

With their carnivorous anatomy and herbivorous behaviour, it is as if pandas are pledged to an ancient covenant – as if they used to be bon vivants like other bears, blood and berry juice staining their muzzles, slugabeds all winter, until one day they fell

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into a trance and received a deep message: 'You are standing, pandas, on the very borders of the eternal world, but you have become charmed with infatuating food; the subtle poison of sensuality courses through your veins. You must disregard custom and the strong clamouring of appetite and passion. It will take, at times, every particle of willpower which you possess; but give yourselves wholly to a bamboo diet, and guided by firm, unspotted principle your lives will become pure and noble.' Thus was formed that radical sect of bears, the Bambooists. Modern-day Bambooists show a remarkable resistance to temptation: a stream runs by, serving up fresh fish, and what does the panda do? Wades across, to get to a stiff thicket of bamboo on the opposite side.

But willpower might not entirely account for such abstemiousness anymore. Bamboo is not power food, and the bear who eats it is not a power bear, and swiping fish from the river takes energy, as does sleeping all winter. If you're going to sleep for seven months you need to eat your hickory nuts, your ungulates, your honey. Bambooists have to stay awake all winter to eat bamboo – incidentally witnessing the sapphire sparkles of snow falling from a branch, the cliffs draped with icy fringes, the white snow powdering the green bamboo leaves. (Could any dream compare with winter?)

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What does a panda know, who studies just a few cloudy-mountain miles of the world? From her experience she must know about fallibility. Icicles melt, flowers fail, intangibly small babies grow tangible and autonomous, and one day when you come back from foraging to collect yours from the tree fork where you left him, he is gone. Mushrooms, moonlight, everything is ephemeral, with one exception: bamboo. Bamboo never fails, bamboo is eternal, evergreen, green in the orange season, green in the white season, green in the green season, poking up sweet little shoots into the spring rain. Blessed is the bear that trusteth in bamboo.

For lucky pandas it is true, bamboo never fails. Bamboo can be eternal for a hundred years, which is four times as eternal as panda bears; but there is in the character of bamboo a devastating defect. Most grasses stagger their dying, piece by piece, like an orchestra – though a trombonist goes down the collective life carries on. The trouble with bamboo is that it crashes all at once: after a century of continuous availability the entire thicket flowers together, dies together, and like a dead orchestra it can take twenty years to get back on its feet.

At this point an animal might wise up and become a Whateverist. With so many edibles in the world why consume, almost exclusively, a miserably nutri-

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tious, erratically fallible one? It's not as if bamboo is pleasant to eat, like horsebeans; bamboo splinters poke and scratch the swallower all the way down. That old covenant was arbitrary and perverse; bamboo is a silly staple; specialism is folly. Consider pragmatists – when the linguini runs out, a pragmatist will eat the centrepiece, and when that is done he will eat the tablecloth. As pragmatists have no principles their numbers are myriad.

But pandas betrayed by bamboo go looking for bamboo. For there is such a thing as specialised hunger, being hungry for one thing – similar to specialised loneliness. Sometimes they don't have to travel far; pandas eat several kinds of bamboo, and even though arrow bamboo collapses, there might be umbrella bamboo growing nearby. Sometimes they have to go farther afield, and sometimes they travel in pitiful directions – would you know which way to go to find a hotbed of celery? – until their coats don't fit very well anymore. Vagrancy used to be easier on the animals, because there used to be more forest. Even if an expedition wasn't efficient, it was foresty all the way, just as the journey from earth to heaven is milky all the way. Now, between patches of forest, there are villages and gravel mines, steep cornfields, dance tents, frightened people waving blankets, mushroomers, other things to avoid.

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People have tried to help pandas become pragmatists, to see sense, to switch to alternatives during a bamboo strangulation. And in captivity they comply – they eat the yams and bananas and fish set before them. But compliance is not conversion. When they are set free, pandas return to their ruinous fidelity to bamboo, shuffling past opportunity – for on the far side of that hill might be the Forest Delicious, where they can lie back, in the million-column sanctuary, a bamboo cane in each forefoot, crunching on the one and then the other, munching on flappy bundles of leaves. There are fewer than twenty-five hundred free pandas left and they're all in the same boat, made of bamboo. When it goes down they go down with it, into dark water, and they won't switch to another boat, not for all the tea in China. Pandas have their own wisdom, unaccountable and unamendable, whose roots shoot down deeper than we can penetrate, and if they mind anyone at all it is someone more elusive than man.