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A Driving Thirst

Glennis Waterman

I saw the deer lying on the pavement for just a moment before my car passed the scene of the accident. The carcass sprawled before the grille of a crumpled Honda, its head tilted, lolling broken, impossibly large ears like drooping dark lilies, on the shoulder of our two-lane canyon road.

Browsing on shrubs and leafy vegetation, California mule deer inhabit coastal chaparral and riparian oak woodlands here in the Santa Monica Mountains. As water and greenery vanish in the high mountain reaches of Topanga State Park, the deer descend from the high meadows and woodland to our human world, starving. They converge on our neighborhood's irrigated lawns and gardens. They come up our driveways in daylight, onto our decks and patios, right up to our windows.

One Sunday afternoon in September, inside at my desk, I heard leaf-crunch outside. From behind the glass I watched as, emboldened by hunger, two deer stepped delicately into the garden to nibble fern and rosebush, lantana and geranium.

On a dark October evening returning home, my car's high beams swept across a foursome, crossing the low saddle in the road where the culvert drains the hillside. They leapt the asphalt berm and plunged into the dark woods.

We meet our neighbors on the street and speak of deer sightings. We say, "I've never seen so many since I first moved here." The deer seem to be everywhere this year.

Yet the state's population of mule deer has dropped, from almost two million in the '60s to less than half a million today. As California's historic drought continues, tempered only slightly by El Nino, loss of habitat and poor conditions drive them closer to our homes. Even as they are more visible to us, they are dying, imperiled by disease and parasites, predators and progress.

California mule deer possess a mysterious beauty and poise. I often see them when I walk my dog in the morning. They live in small families; usually a mature doe and a sister with a couple of young ones. Yearling males with velvet-furred antlers still live with mom, though older bucks tend to roam solitary.

They are camouflaged the same dun brown as dry oak-leaf duff underfoot. As my boot crunches dry leaves on the path, they draw themselves suddenly up, still as statues. Their triangular heads are alert, wide eyes and black noses, with huge ears that swivel like satellite dishes seeking signal. If the dog moves or growls low in his chest, they startle and take flight, hop and bounce away on impossibly delicate limbs, with a flash of white rump disappearing through the trees.

These huge ears give mule deer their common name and also their scientific name, *Odocoileus hemionus*. The genus name translates to “hollow-toothed,” referring to the structure of the animals’ molars, but the species name means “ass-like”, referring to their donkey-sized ears.

They are smaller than you might expect, no more than shoulder-high to the plastic waste bins on our street. Knock-kneed and gangly, they cross the asphalt road like awkward teenagers in new high heels.

Autumn is breeding season for mule deer, when bucks go into rut, sparring with one another for the attention of the females. Even young ones quicken, and it drives them to trouble. One morning cresting the rise, I saw two yearling bucks in the clearing below, head-butting. Like boys on a playground, they shoved at one another, slow and clumsy, stumbling and staggering, shaking it off and then clashing again. Their antlers clacked together like plastic swords.

Rutting males have only one thing on their minds. Horny and aggressive, they turn reckless, like the jackasses they’re named for. Perhaps that’s what drove the stricken buck downhill to the traffic of the boulevard. What driving hunger, what thirst must have spurred him to descend the mountain, through our neighborhood, seeking the wet and green cool stones of Garapito Creek?

There, just north of the School Road, he emerged from the trees onto State Route 27 and met his end during the morning commute.

As my car passed in a line of tail-lights, I saw that the stricken deer’s hind end had been riven open from the blow, a white scaffold of bone starkly gleaming beneath the split brown pelt, the clotted flesh dark muted red, like thick velour.

The scene was not one of gore but one of somber finality. Another young male lost to terrible need and drought. The unlucky car’s driver stood, clutching his phone, awaiting the Highway Patrol and AAA for help.