

The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating

Elisabeth Tova Bailey

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First Edition

To biophilia

A small pet is often an excellent companion.

— FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE, *Notes on Nursing*, 1912

*The natural world is the refuge of the spirit . . .
richer even than human imagination.*

— EDWARD O. WILSON, *Biophilia*, 1984



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue

PART I THE VIOLET-POT ADVENTURES

1 Field Violets

2 Discovery

3 Explorations

PART II A GREEN KINGDOM

4 The Forest Floor

5 Life in a Microcosm

6 Time and Territory

PART III JUXTAPOSITIONS

7 Thousands of Teeth

8 Telescopic Tentacles

9 Marvelous Spirals

10 Secret Recipes

PART IV THE CULTURAL LIFE

11 Colonies of Hermits

12 Midnight Leap

13 A Snail's Thoughts

14 Deep Sleep

PART V LOVE AND MYSTERY

15 Cryptic Life

16 Affairs of a Snail

17 Bereft

18 Offspring

PART VI FAMILIAR TERRITORY

19 Release

20 Winter Snail

21 Spring Rain

22 Night Stars

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

Appendix: Terraria

Selected Sources

Permissions

PROLOGUE

*Viruses are embedded into the
very fabric of all life.*

— LUIS P. VILLARREAL,
“The Living and Dead Chemical
Called a Virus,” 2005

FROM MY HOTEL WINDOW I look over the deep glacial lake to the foothills and the Alps beyond. Twilight vanishes the hills into the mountains; then all is lost to the dark.

After breakfast, I wander the cobbled village streets. The frost is out of the ground, and huge bushes of rosemary bask fragrantly in the sun. I take a trail that meanders up the steep, wild hills past flocks of sheep. High on an outcrop, I lunch on bread and cheese. Late in the afternoon along the shore, I find ancient pieces of pottery, their edges smoothed by waves and time. I hear that a virulent flu is sweeping this small town.

A few days pass and then comes a delirious night. My dreams are disturbed by the comings and goings of ferries. Passengers call into the dark, startling me awake. Each time I fall back into sleep, the lake’s watery sound pulls at me. Something is wrong with my body. Nothing feels right.

In the morning I am weak and can’t think. Some of my muscles don’t work. Time becomes strange. I get lost; the streets go in too many directions. The days drift past in confusion. I pack my suitcase, but for some reason it’s impossible to lift. It seems to be stuck to the floor. Somehow I get to the airport. Seated next to me on the transatlantic flight is a sick surgeon; he sneezes and coughs continually. My rare, much-needed vacation has not gone as planned. I’ll be okay; I just want to get home.

After a flight connection in Boston, I land at my small New England airport near midnight. In the parking lot, as I bend over to dig my car out of the snow, the shovel turns into a crutch that I use to push myself upright. I don’t know how I get home. Arising the next morning, I

immediately faint to the floor. Ten days of fever with a pounding headache. Emergency room visits. Lab tests. I am sicker than I have ever been. Childhood pneumonia, college mononucleosis—those were nothing compared to this.

A few weeks later, resting on the couch, I spiral into a deep darkness, falling farther and farther away until I am impossibly distant. I cannot come back up; I cannot reach my body. Distant sound of an ambulance siren. Distant sound of doctors talking. My eyelids heavy as boulders. I try to open them to a slit, just for a few seconds, but they close against my will. All I can do is breathe.

The doctors will know how to fix me. They will stop this. I keep breathing. What if my breath stops? I need to sleep, but I am afraid to sleep. I try to watch over myself; if I go to sleep, I might never wake up again.

THE SOUND OF A WILD SNAIL EATING

Part 1

THE VIOLET - POT ADVENTURES

Try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now.

— RAINER MARIA RILKE, 1903,
from *Letters to a Young Poet*, 1927



1. FIELD VIOLETS

*at my feet
when did you get here?
snail*

— KOBAYASHI ISSA (1763 – 1828)

IN EARLY SPRING, a friend went for a walk in the woods and, glancing down at the path, saw a snail. Picking it up, she held it gingerly in the palm of her hand and carried it back toward the studio where I was convalescing. She noticed some field violets on the edge of the lawn. Finding a trowel, she dug a few up, then planted them in a terra-cotta

pot and placed the snail beneath their leaves. She brought the pot into the studio and put it by my bedside.

“I found a snail in the woods. I brought it back and it’s right here beneath the violets.”

“You did? Why did you bring it in?”

“I don’t know. I thought you might enjoy it.”

“Is it alive?”

She picked up the brown acorn-sized shell and looked at it.

“I think it is.”

Why, I wondered, would I *enjoy* a snail? What on earth would I do with it? I couldn’t get out of bed to return it to the woods. It was not of much interest, and if it *was* alive, the responsibility—especially for a snail, something so uncalled for—was overwhelming.

My friend hugged me, said good-bye, and drove off.

AT AGE THIRTY-FOUR, on a brief trip to Europe, I was felled by a mysterious viral or bacterial pathogen, resulting in severe neurological symptoms. I had thought I was indestructible. But I wasn’t. If anything did go wrong, I figured modern medicine would fix me. But it didn’t. Medical specialists at several major clinics couldn’t diagnose the infectious culprit. I was in and out of the hospital for months, and the complications were life threatening. An experimental drug that became available stabilized my condition, though it would be several grueling years to a partial recovery and a return to work. My doctors said the illness was behind me, and I wanted to believe them. I was ecstatic to have most of my life back.

But out of the blue came a series of insidious relapses, and once again, I was bedridden. Further, more sophisticated testing showed that the mitochondria in my cells no longer functioned correctly and there was damage to my autonomic nervous system; all functions not consciously directed, including heart rate, blood pressure, and digestion, had gone haywire. The drug that had previously helped now caused dangerous side effects; it would soon be removed from the market.

WHEN THE BODY is rendered useless, the mind still runs like a bloodhound along well-worn trails of neurons, tracking the echoing questions: the confused family of *whys*, *whats*, and *whens* and their impossibly distant kin *how*. The search is exhaustive; the answers, elusive. Sometimes my mind went blank and listless; at other times it was flooded with storms of thought, unspeakable sadness, and intolerable loss.

Given the ease with which health infuses life with meaning and purpose, it is shocking how swiftly illness steals away those certainties. It was all I could do to get through each moment, and each moment felt like an endless hour, yet days slipped silently past. Time unused and only endured still vanishes, as if time itself is starving, and each day is swallowed whole, leaving no crumbs, no memory, no trace at all.

I HAD BEEN MOVED to a studio apartment where I could receive the care I needed. My own farmhouse, some fifty miles away, was closed up. I did not know if or when I'd ever make it home again. For now, my only way back was to close my eyes and remember. I could see the early spring there, the purple field violets—like those at my bedside—running rampant through the yard. And the fragrant small pink violets that I had planted in the little woodland garden to the north of my house—they, too, would be in bloom. Though not usually hardy this far north, somehow they survived. In my mind I could smell their sweetness.

Before my illness, my dog, Brandy, and I had often wandered the acres of forest that stretched beyond the house to a hidden, mountain-fed brook. The brook's song of weather and season followed us as we crisscrossed its channel over partially submerged boulders. On the trail home, in the boggiest of spots, perched on tiny islands of root and moss, I found diminutive wild white violets, their throats faintly striped with purple.

THESE FIELD VIOLETS in the pot at my bedside were fresh and full of life, unlike the usual cut flowers brought by other friends. Those lasted just a few days, leaving murky, odoriferous vase water. In my twenties I had earned my living as a gardener, so I was glad to have this bit of

garden right by my bed. I could even water the violets with my drinking glass.

But what about this snail? What would I do with it? As tiny as it was, it had been going about its day when it was picked up. What right did my friend and I have to disrupt its life? Though I couldn't imagine what kind of life a snail might lead.

I didn't remember ever having noticed any snails on my countless hikes in the woods. Perhaps, I thought, looking at the nondescript brown creature, it was precisely because they were so inconspicuous. For the rest of the day the snail stayed inside its shell, and I was too worn out from my friend's visit to give it another thought.

2. DISCOVERY

*the snail gets up
and goes to bed
with very little fuss*

— KOBAYASHI ISSA (1763 – 1828)

AROUND DINNERTIME I was surprised to see that the snail was partway out of its shell. It was alive. The visible part of its body was nearly two inches long from head to tail, and moist. The rest of it was hidden in the attached inch-high brown shell, which it balanced gracefully on its back. I watched as it moved slowly down the side of the flowerpot. As it glided along, it gently waved the tentacles on its head.

Throughout the evening the snail explored the sides of the pot and the dish beneath. Its leisurely pace was mesmerizing. I wondered if it would wander off during the night. Perhaps I'd never see it again, and the snail problem would simply vanish.

But when I woke the next morning, the snail was back up in the pot, tucked into its shell, asleep beneath a violet leaf. The night before, I had propped an envelope containing a letter against the base of the lamp. Now I noticed a mysterious square hole just below the return address. This was baffling. How could a hole—a *square* hole—appear in an

envelope overnight? Then I thought of the snail and its evening activity. The snail was clearly nocturnal. It must have some kind of teeth, and it wasn't shy about using them.

MY HEALTHY LIFE HAD been full of activity, filled with friends, family, and work; the pleasures of gardening, hiking, and sailing; and the familiar humdrum of daily routines: making breakfast, exploring the woods, going to work, reading a book, getting up to get something. Now, getting up to get something, anything—that alone would be an accomplishment. From where I lay, all of life was out of reach.

As the months drifted by, it was hard to remember why the endless details of a healthy life and a good job had seemed so critical. It was odd to see my friends overwhelmed by their busy lives, when they could do all the things I could not, without a second thought.

Whereas the future had once beckoned with many intriguing paths, now there was just one impossible route. So it was into the past, with its rich sedimentary layers, that my mind would go instead. A breath of wind through an open window stirred the memory of crossing Penobscot Bay on the bowsprit of a schooner. With the simple wish to brush my teeth came thoughts of my farmhouse bathroom, with its window view of the old apple trees and the poppy garden. It had amused me to see the laundry hanging on its line over the poppies; their yellows, oranges, and reds accented the blue sheets and the nightgowns, which reached with their arms down toward the flowers.

ON THE SECOND MORNING of the snail's stay, I found another square hole, this time in a list I was keeping on a scrap of paper. As each successive morning arrived, so did more holes. Their square shape continued to perplex me. Friends were surprised and amused to receive postcards with an arrow pointing at a hole and my scrawled note: "Eaten by my snail."

It dawned on me that perhaps the snail needed some real food. Letters and envelopes were probably not its typical diet. A few long-gone flowers were in a vase by my bed. One evening I put some of the withered blossoms in the dish beneath the pot of violets. The snail was awake. It made its way down the side of the pot and investigated the

offering with great interest and then began to eat one of the blossoms. A petal started to disappear at a barely discernible rate. I listened carefully. I could *hear* it eating. The sound was of someone very small munching celery continuously. I watched, transfixed, as over the course of an hour the snail meticulously ate an entire purple petal for dinner.

The tiny, intimate sound of the snail's eating gave me a distinct feeling of companionship and shared space. It also pleased me that I could recycle the withered flowers by my bed to sustain a small creature in need. I might prefer my salad fresh, but the snail preferred its salad half-dead, for not once had it nibbled on the live violet plants that provided its sleeping shelter. One has to respect the preferences of another creature, no matter its size, and I did so gladly.

THE STUDIO APARTMENT WHERE I was staying had lots of windows and a beautiful view of a salt marsh. But the windows were far from where I lay, and I could not sit up to see out. Though they brought me light each day, the world they framed was beyond my reach. Unlike my own farmhouse, which was full of color, the walls and ceiling of this room where I woke each morning were entirely white—I felt trapped inside a stark white box.

During the earlier years of my illness, I had spent countless hours on a daybed in my 1830s farmhouse, staring up at the hand-hewn beams overhead. Their rich, golden brown hues soothed my soul; the knots told a history of branches and long-ago wilderness; the square-headed nails sticking out here and there once had purpose. Each room in the house was trimmed in an old-fashioned milk-paint color. In the room where I lay, the trim was a deep blue, and I could turn my head to see red in the kitchen, green in the bathroom, and a calm gray in the front room.

The daybed at home was right next to a window so that I could look out without sitting up. In the summer my perennial gardens were in view, untended but still thriving. I would watch for the arrival of friends as they came by foot, bike, or car, bringing stories to tell, and I'd wave them off as they set out again. When I woke each morning at dawn, several cats would be prowling the field. I'd hear my neighbors drive off to work, one by one. The morning slant of sun would climb toward

noon and then shift its slant for afternoon. One by one my neighbors returned. Evening settled over the field, the cats took up their hunting in the long grass, and finally night descended.

Though I was grateful for the care I was receiving here in this white room, I was not at home. It was hard enough that my body was a bizarre and bewildering place, but I was homesick as well. I was far from the things that delighted me, the wild woods that sustained me, and the social network that enriched me.

Survival often depends on a specific focus: a relationship, a belief, or a hope balanced on the edge of possibility. Or something more ephemeral: the way the sun passes through the hard, seemingly impenetrable glass of a window and warms the blanket, or how the wind, invisible but for its wake, is so loud one can hear it through the insulated walls of a house.

FOR SEVERAL WEEKS THE snail lived in the flowerpot just inches from my bed, sleeping beneath the violet leaves by day and exploring by night. Each morning while I was having breakfast it climbed back into the pot to sleep in the little hollow it had made in the dirt. Though the snail usually slept through the days, it was comforting to glance toward the violets and see its small circular shape tucked under a leaf.

Each evening the snail awoke and, with an astonishing amount of poise, moved gracefully to the rim of the pot and peered over, surveying, once again, the strange country that lay ahead. Pondering its circumstance with a regal air, as if from the turret of a castle, it waved its tentacles first this way and then that, as though responding to a distant melody.

As I prepared for the night, the snail moved in its leisurely way down the side of the pot to the dish beneath. It found the flower blossoms I had placed there and began its breakfast.

3. EXPLORATIONS

*As the exploration is pressed,
it will engage more of the things close
to the human heart and spirit.*

— EDWARD O. WILSON, *Biophilia*, 1984

WHEN I WOKE DURING the night, I would listen intently. Sometimes the silence was complete, but at other times I could hear the comforting sound of the snail's minuscule munching. With my flashlight I'd search until the beam of light found its small shape. If it was eating, I'd peek to see which of the wizened flowers it preferred. It usually stayed within a few feet of the flowerpot, which sat on a crate that I was using as a bedside table.

Every few days I watered the violets from my drinking glass, and the excess water seeped into the dish beneath. This always woke the snail. It would glide to the rim of the pot and look over, slowly waving its tentacles in apparent delight, before making its way down to the dish for a drink. Sometimes it started back up, only to stop at a halfway point and go to sleep. Waking periodically, and without moving from its position, it would stretch its neck all the way down to the water and take a long drink.

A little more dirt was needed around the roots of the violets, which my caregiver procured from the vegetable garden and added to the flowerpot. The snail was *not* pleased. For the next few days it carefully crept up the side of the pot and directly onto a violet leaf, never touching the garden soil, settling in for the day's snooze perched high in the crown of the plant. Rather abashed, I asked for more help, and the sandy garden soil was exchanged for humus from the snail's own woods. Soon the snail was sleeping beneath the violet leaves again in a soft new hollow.

IN THE 1920S, THE crate beneath the pot of violets had traveled to Burma and back with the belongings of my maternal grandparents. They were medical missionaries, and my grandfather's skill as a doctor was well respected. He treated many people with illnesses and injuries and even saved the life of a man severely mauled by a tiger. When the sawbwa of Kengtung's favorite elephant was ailing, my grandfather was called. Bravely, he lanced the elephant's giant boil and treated the virulent infection.

My grandparents returned to New England, and my grandfather settled into life as a country doctor. The living room served as his office, and it was there that he saw patients. When I visited as a child, I was petrified he might hear me cough. A ticklish throat or the slightest pallor, and he'd rush to a large jar of revoltingly long tongue depressors, thrusting one down my gagging throat. Yet when he answered a patient's call, even in the middle of the night, his very first words were always "I am so sorry you are not feeling well." How rare it is to hear a doctor express such empathy.

AS THE WEEKS PASSED, the snail's nighttime forays became more adventurous, and so did its appetite. The flowers I fed it clearly were not enough. One night it ate part of the label on a vitamin C bottle. Another night it climbed up a pastel drawing made by an artist friend and ate some of the green border. I woke one morning to find a hole in a padded envelope for mailing books.

More and more frequently, in the middle of the night, the snail set off on a longer journey into new territory. I'd discover it partway down the side of the crate, sometimes nearly to the floor. Often, it investigated the india ink words stamped into the wood. It seemed to have a particular interest in anything the color of rich, dark soil, like the crate's black lettering or the base of the lamp. It was equally attracted to white things such as paper. Perhaps, I thought, paper was its woody version of fast food.

After being transported from the woods, the snail had emerged from its shell into the alien territory of my room, with no clue as to where it was or how it had arrived; the lack of vegetation and the desertlike surroundings must have seemed strange. The snail and I were both living in altered landscapes not of our choosing; I figured we shared a sense of loss and displacement.

EACH MORNING THERE WAS a moment, before I had fully awakened, when my mind still groped its clumsy way back to consciousness, my body not yet remembered, reality not yet acknowledged. That moment was always full of pure, sweet, uncontrollable hope. I did not ask for this hope to come; I did not even want it, for it trailed disappointment in its wake. Yet there it was, hovering within me—hope that my illness

had vanished with the night and my health had returned magically with daybreak. But that moment always passed, my eyes opened, and reality flooded in; nothing had changed at all.

Then I thought of the snail. I'd look for the tiny, earth-colored creature. Usually it was back up in the flowerpot asleep, its familiar shape reminding me that I wasn't alone.

By day, the strangeness of my situation was sharpest: I was bed-bound at a time when my friends and peers were moving forward in their careers and raising families. Yet the snail's daytime sleeping habits gave me a fresh perspective; I was not the only one resting away the days. The snail naturally slept by day, even on the sunniest of afternoons. Its companionship was a comfort to me and buffered my feelings of uselessness.

In the evenings there was a short but satisfying time when I knew the rest of the human world would join me, if just for the night, in my recumbent lifestyle. When healthy people take to their beds, they sink deeply into a privileged sleep. But with my illness, sleep was diaphanous and often nonexistent. The snail, once again, came to my rescue. As the world fell into sleep without me, the snail awoke, as if this darkest of times were indeed the *best* of times in which to live.

After weeks of around-the-clock companionship, there was no doubt about the relationship: the snail and I were officially cohabiting. I was, I admit, attached. I felt some guilt that it had been taken, unasked, from its natural habitat, yet I was not ready to part with it. It was adding a welcome focus to my life, and I couldn't think how I would otherwise have passed the hours.