

## **Compromising Chiroptophobia or Why I'm Giving Up and Learning to Love the Bat**

*Creative Nonfiction by Karen J. Weyant*

I sit there shivering, even though at dusk, it is still very warm, the temperature lingering in the lower 70's. I'm wearing only a long white T-shirt – my summer attire for sleepwear – and a pair of white cotton underwear. I pull my knees close to my chest and stretch the material to my ankles in an effort to cover as much of me as possible. Still, my bare thighs rub against the splintered wooden porch steps; slivers dig into my skin. I am well aware of how vulnerable I look.

But I don't move.

I'm 22, sitting on the steps of my first apartment in the small Pennsylvania town where I was born and raised. Around me, the smell of a charcoal grill coats the summer air, and I can hear the neighborhood kids playing. *Red Rover, Red Rover, Send Jason Right Over*, a girl calls to a game that I didn't think children played anymore. My second floor apartment is cheap, with purple walls and a bear clawed bathtub that has a leaky faucet. The front hall sports a shag carpet the color of avocados. It always smells faintly of sauerkraut (from my landlord's apartment downstairs) and Pine Sol (from my efforts of masking the sauerkraut smell). It's too hot in summer and too cold in winter. But it's mine, rent paid for with my own money, with my first real job as a reporter at the local newspaper. I love it.

Except for one thing.

My father pulls up from his quick 15 minute drive across town. I watch his truck jerk backwards as he parks on the hill in front of my apartment. He steps out, stares at me, and sighs.

“Jesus H Christ,” he says, “all this over a little bat?”

I nod, and pull myself closer. A half hour before I had been talking to my mother on the phone, when I looked up to see a little brown bat emerging from the walk in closet in my bedroom. I barely got the words out of my mouth, “Mom, it’s a bat,” before I dropped the phone and was down the steps and out the front door.

He sighs again. Then, he takes a closer look at me.

“And for God’s sake, put on some clothes.”

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I was a small town girl. I played with Daddy Long Legs and pulled fishing worms from the damp grass at night. I kicked milk snakes aside when they slithered by me in the fields by my house. I cradled crayfish in my hands, tugged hooks from the mouths of trout.

But I was afraid of bats.

I’m not sure of the origins of my fears. It could be from the old black and white horror films my brothers were fond of -- the ones that I wasn’t supposed to watch because my mother thought for sure they would give me nightmares. But I watched movies with giant ants and tarantulas and alligators that crawled out from the sewers. There was even a movie with a giant praying mantis. No nightmares.

More than likely, my fear came from the one night when I woke up to a bat bumping against the wall of my bedroom. Somehow, I knew right away what it was although I couldn’t have been more than five at the time. I remember calling for my mother, rather feebly – not the blood curdling shrieks one would expect from a terrified child – and then crawling under my bed. Still, it was my sister, not my cries that brought

my mother to the rescue who later laughed about the situation, explaining that the bat flew down the stairs only to come face to face with our family cat who thought the whole episode was one big lark.

Bats were important fragments of my world. They lived in old barns and sheds. They got into our homes, especially through old attics. At dusk, we knew that it was finally time to stop our summertime games when the bats emerged, and our baseballs, tossed high into the air, came dangerously close to hitting their wings. They were as part of the Pennsylvania natural landscape as the squirrels that ran across our telephone wires, as the rabbits that chewed my father's garden, as the raccoons that upset our garbage cans. Knowing this, my mother was determined to help me overcome my fear of bats.

First, she tried logic, explaining that bats actually helped us. "They eat bugs," she explained. "Mosquitos," she added, pointing to the bites scattered across my arms, I often scratched open.

But it didn't help.

Then, one night, she captured a small brown bat, the kind that usually invaded our home through attic space. Using an oven mitt together with an old tennis racket (my mother's weapons of choice for such situations), she gently pressed the bat in her mitt, holding its frantic wings in place with the racket's strings. "Look," she said. "Look. It's not going to hurt you."

I was not convinced.

Thinking back to that moment, I know I should have felt sorry for the bat, that my mother's words, "He is more afraid of you than you should be of him" (giving the bat gender, how did she know the wiggling creature in her hands was a he?) were right. The

strings made gentle criss-cross lines in its fur as if someone was drawing a tic-tac-toe board, and its face stared straight ahead, dark eyes glittering. It didn't snarl or hiss (both sounds I knew for sure would come from bats). Instead, it let out a high pitched ekkk..a sort of distress call. I covered my ears.

“See,” my mother said, holding the bat out toward me. “See.”

But I didn't want to see, shaking my head and turning away.

She sighed, gently carrying the bat out the front door and throwing it to the wind – I watched as it fluttered away, a bit lopsided at first, not unlike the bats thrown in for atmosphere in the 50's horror movies. Then, it straightened out, almost defiantly, and flew into the night air.

My fear has a name. Chiroptophobia. The fear of bats.

Describing this fear is an art. I don't want to fall into cliché's – the heart pounding, the shortness of breath, the tightness around my throat – although all these reactions were very true, at least in my case. Even when bats were far away from me mere shadows in the blue-black dusk of twilight, I would become paralyzed, freezing, as if holding perfectly still would discourage a sudden bat attack. I was afraid that a bat's body would smack into my face, its leathery wings and claws scratching my skin.

I carried this fear into adulthood, and I know that I'm not alone. Some would say that the fear of bats is a rational one – after all, some bats do carry rabies. While exact statistics are hard to pinpoint, many bat advocates point out that overall statistics of rabid bats are very low and that indeed, bats are not the number one danger when it comes to rabies. Yes, when a rabid bat finds its way into someone's home, it makes local newspaper's headlines, but the fact is the local garbage can prowlers, the neighborhood raccoons, are more problematic.

Then there are the other myths I didn't believe, but nevertheless, could never quite forget though logically they didn't make sense. No, bats did not fly low to get tangled in a person's hair. No, they did not drink blood (I would later learn that there were bats that did drink blood, but they certainly did not live in Western Pennsylvania where the predominant species was the Little Brown Bat who lived on insects). No, they are not blind, even though they do rely on echolocation, a biological sonar system that allows them to detect where an object is, how big that object is, and what direction the object is moving. (And thus, the reason they are way too smart to get tangled in a person's hair)

For years, after I moved out of that first apartment, I avoided the bat. I counted myself as lucky. I lived in apartments sealed tight from bats (although one had a mouse visitor and the other an ant problem). I went on to graduate school. I became immersed in new jobs and new responsibilities. I fell in love and got engaged. I looked straight ahead.

At dusk, I rarely looked up. I forgot about bats.

Then, news of the mysterious disease broke.

In 2006, a strange fungus was found in a group of hibernating bats in an Upstate New York cave. Later named, the White-Nose Syndrome (WNS) because of the white fungus that forms around the noses and wings of hibernating bats, the mortality rate of infected animals is often over 90 percent. The name is actually a bit misleading because the deadliest part of this fungus is when it attacks the wings, literally eating away at the soft membranes. This syndrome kills bats because it wakes them out of hibernation, and when they fly out of their caves, they either starve (because there are no insects) or they fall to the ground, their wings mangled by the fungus. Descriptions of the piles of dead

bats liken them to crumpled pieces of tissue paper. I have not seen the effects of this disease first hand, but the photographs remind me of crinkled dry Autumn leaves.: bat bodies and wings that would crunch under my feet.

It's hard to admit now that I barely gave the initial reports a thought. It's not that I was not unsympathetic. In spite of the fact that I was scared of bats, I didn't want them dead. I just didn't want them around me.

But then, the disease spread, making its way into the New England states and then Pennsylvania, killing hundreds of thousands of bats. Just this past year, white nose syndrome has been confirmed in Warren County, Pennsylvania, my home. Bat counts are underway but leading experts in the area already know that Pennsylvania is facing a serious decline in bat population. In fact, there are many that believe that we may be facing the extinction of the little brown bat – America's most popular bat, and certainly the bat I had my most close encounters.

Facing this fact, I'm suddenly sympathetic. What would it be like to be awakened from a slumber, only to die from hunger or hypothermia because you are staggering into a cold world that is unknown to you? Would it be like waking up in the middle of the night to find that your Achilles heel has been cut? Or the thin skin between your fingers shredded?

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Jen Moore is a bat fanatic. As Environmental Education Specialist of Chapman State Park, she makes teaching the public about bats a number one priority. At the park, she has access to 800 acres of forested and open areas where she builds bat boxes and

conducts programs in hope that people will take some interest in helping out the bat population.

It's mid-November and we have had our first snowfall, although most of the snow has already melted by the time I meet Jen in the afternoon. "At least now I am in a position that I can actually make a difference."

Like many naturalists, scientists, and wildlife biologists, Jen is mourning the decline of the local bat population. "They tell me that thousands of bats use to fly over the lake at dusk," she says. "This past summer, I counted maybe twelve bats."

Twelve bats. That number echoes in my head as I drive home. Twelve bats. When I was a child, we saw more than twelve bats in a single twilight.

The late autumn landscape lends itself well to thoughts of mortality. Ghosts of cattails and asters line the country road and bare branches, knotted by old birds' nests and the last remaining brown leaves of the season, poke and prod at the gray sky. I find myself thinking of other animals that were part of my childhood – animals that are now disappearing. The Monarch Butterfly, for instance. Numbers of the once familiar orange and black butterfly have diminished because of climate changes and disappearing Milkweed. Or the honeybee. In the last few years, the honeybee population has taken a serious hit with bees disappearing from their hives, part of Colony Collapse Disorder, a syndrome that is still not fully understood by scientists.

My memory drifts to this past summer and one lone bat. One late afternoon, I was walking alone on the banks of the Allegheny River when a bird – or what I thought was a bird – flitted in front of me and landed on a maple tree.

But it wasn't a bird. I recognized the shape and size – it was a Little Brown Bat.

I walked over, making my way through the debris of the forest floor. I leaned over to take a closer look – coming much closer to a bat than I ever had before.

For once, I wasn't afraid.

The bat crouched close to the tree bark, its wings slanted upwards, as if they are elbows, its eyes forward, cautious and steady. Its fur was a rich brown, the same color of a homemade brownie. It looked soft, almost cuddly. Part of me actually envisioned myself reaching over and plucking it from its perch to cradle it in my hands.

I also noticed that it was free from the white fungus, the face and wings unmarked.

Then, it darted away from me, flying towards the river where night insects were out in droves. It swooped low to the water, so close I thought it was going to touch the river's waves.

But it didn't.

It's this single bat I think of now. This time of year, bats are hibernating in caves. The Little Brown Bat, especially, is fond of sleeping in colonies. Maybe the little bat I saw that day is huddled with others, safe from the disease that could wrestle hundreds of its comrades from their sleep. Or maybe the fungus is starting to form, hiding in cracks and crevices just waiting to emerge and pull the bats from their slumber. Maybe. Maybe not.