

an excerpt from

THE DAWN COLLECTOR: ON MY WAY TO THE NATURAL WORLD. By Reg Saner. Santa Fe: Center for American Places, 2005. 280 pp. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Douglas Carlson

On one level, *The Dawn Collector* is an invitation to the landscape of the Rockies, with enough detail to welcome any first-time or returning traveler. Saner delineates the environment thoroughly, but with a curious and poetic eye rather than a technical one. “Scientific rigor,” he says, “is all very well for the happy few, but too much like canned spinach for the rest of us.” In the manner of Thoreau, he finds correspondences: in magpies’ bold aggression, in competition among mule deer, in marmots expressing the need to expand their range. He writes of them, however, not as animals acting out human roles but—since they were on earth first—as creatures expressing traits that survived into human behavior. The mountain lions that panic Saner’s suburban neighborhood are not on a mission to retake the land once theirs, nor are the mule deer that trash backyard gardens mere vandals; they are simply being mountain lions and mule deer.

Saner’s personal connection with his surroundings, driven by the unifying presence of the sun, leads him to the central concern of this book: the interconnectedness of all sentient things. A willingness to “scandalize bioscience” allows Saner license, for example, to watch a coyote stalking a vole from each animal’s point of view. His “paleo-recall” returns him to “some Mesozoic time when I was a down-to-earth vole myself” and reveals a world design that “would look like talons or a fanged maw.” At the same time, the role of the coyote—or that of the menacing mountain lions—adds another layer: “Watching my predator side explained there with the candor of coyotes and big cats does complicate the face in my bathroom mirror.” Thus, Saner takes what he identifies as the essential step in confronting questions about humans and nature—“know thyself”—and the answer is as clear as sunrise:

Everything here is some visible stage of cosmic momentum begun long before the sun was. After the big bang, all motion is memory. Consequently from me the atoms currently dreaming they’re human will migrate in an eventual diaspora and head to new career after career, maybe far as the world’s four corners. . . . Hardly an impossible trip, considering where the heavier atoms in our bodies have come from; among them, our bone calcium, the iron in our blood, blown kablooie! through a succession of stellar explosions we call supernovae. Then into us, on loan. My share assembled a creature keen on seeing an unexploded star’s daily rise, a creature apt for thinking about that.