A CONVERSATION ABOUT RAC[C]OONS

Rupert Loydell and John Levy live an ocean apart but have mutual friends and have known each other and read each other's work for decades. Thanks to email, they often have brief conversations about their work, politics, culture and their different lives.

The four poems which follow were prompted by a brief discussion – along with some desert snapshots of Levy's – about wild animals. It prompted Loydell's 'Bandit Country', remembering seeing racoons search through the bins at an American summer camp in 1980 where he taught sailing and art for a season. Although the racoons and camp setting are real, the frequency of the bin raids and the narrator's attitude to his young charges and camp activities are not.

'Bandit Country' prompted Levy to recall and write about his own summer camp experience as a boy, this one a stricter regime with uniforms, punishments and no time to be alone. It directly references Loydell's first poem and also makes a humourous connection to the way poetry can be constructed by 'pawing // through the garbage and making noise'.

Meanwhile, Loydell was doing exactly that, throwing his original poem into an online cut-up machine with phrases found by searching for bandits online. The edited and shaped poem allowed for wider, sometimes surprising, connections, from the 'wild west' to 'racoon accountability' and the animals' education and relationship with humans.

In response to this third poem, which Levy suggested seemed like a missive from another planet, along with a prompt from Carrie Etter's poem 'The Unicorn', published in Loydell's *Stride* magazine\*, Levy riffed on unlikely connections he had made:

No one con-

fuses

a raccoon

with a uni-

corn.

Or trains a

rac-

coon to ride

a

bicycle for

a living

The act of both presenting and denying these ideas holds contradictions in balance, as does the – again negated – second part of the poem which moves from the idea of a God who made the racoons but is not spoken about, to those raccoons who, 'one by one', enter raccoon Heaven.

This poetic exchange was neither premeditated or planned, but does evidence chains of thought (which some might call inspiration) and how the writer sidesteps and dodges the obvious to change the subject, make connections or try to make it new.

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Just as this introduction and the original four poems were finalised, a fifth raccoon poem arrived, from author Mike Ferguson. It is appended here.

**Bandit Country**

Each night at summer camp,

the cabin blinds drawn up

and boys asleep, I would

hear the nearby trash cans

being knocked over, sit up

and watch racoons search

for something good to eat.

Black masks and bushy tails,

they were alien to me, first

time abroad, trying to not

be homesick or uncool, fed

up with gross chocolate,

rude kids, bad behaviour,

nights of disturbed sleep.

I could cope with hungry

animals though, who kept

their distance and looked

like children's cartoons.

Just me and them, putting

off the morning, its dull

hours of sport and games.

Rupert M Loydell

**What I remember from a military summer camp.**

We dressed in uniforms. We slept in bunk beds. We

were near water. We

swam. We competed. We marched. On

the first day, standing

at attention in front of our bunk beds in the cabin,

one of us farted. Not me. It was loud. I don’t recall

any fragrance. What I haven’t

forgotten is that the counselor (he was

old, maybe 18) was outraged,

which shocked me. No one

got angry at home—although Mom

prohibited the word “fart,” and called the sound

and/or smell a Yiddish word that sounded cute, a word

I’d have to research to spell. The counselor (with his military

bearing) ordered the offender to go outside.

Or did the counselor devise a different

humiliation? I’m not sure. What I recall

is fury as he demanded we exercise self-control.

Maybe the counselor commanded the boy

lift heavy objects, one in each hand, and hold them

straight out

for three minutes, announcing that any protest,

groan, or tremble

would be utter failure

and justify more torment. My memory fails, sometimes

utterly, or with a tremor that rotates memories that slide

over each other. Later, at this camp

on the shore of

Aubbeenaubbee Bay (I’m sure I didn’t know,

back then, this body of water’s name—plus, I thought

it was a lake), I managed to

be

alone, for great

minutes

at a time, and would stand

near several tall dreams, or, rather, tall trees,

wishing I’d see a flying squirrel’s flight

from a high branch to a higher or lower one

through, maybe, ten feet of air, but

I never did. As for the raccoons Rupert recalls

from his time as a counselor somewhere in

America, I never saw one, which

I accept but with a small sense of

deprivation, a little like a raccoon in Rupert’s

poem, with black mask and bushy tail, pawing

through the garbage and making noise, which let’s not compare

to writing poetry.

John Levy

**Cowboy Bandit Taxidermy Squirrel**

See these families again as they surface

if lawns are wet. Goes to show that

infestation is damage to your parents.

Act with integrity and racoons see this

as a strength; they will trust you with

the education of their children.

They have to have a point of entry,

are as clever as monkey snipers who

hunted the values that matter to us.

They never let me down, show respect

at all times and follow my lead through

any and every normal working day.

Racoons are schooled locally to find

crawlspaces, attics, faith and ethics.

Watch lesson changeovers, note their

good behaviour, how they play nicely.

Nowadays, in areas where racoons are

out of control, it is like the wild west,

with animals simply out for themselves,

compromised responsibility and no clear

direction of travel toward tasty treats.

New assessment frameworks are another

serious problem, racoon accountability

measures have got teachers bitten.

Each night at summer camp we work

at full tilt, cause damage and create

telltale signs of racoon infestation.

Rupert M Loydell

**Notes about Raccoons**

*for Rupert Loydell*

No one con-

fuses

a raccoon

with a uni-

corn.

Or trains a

rac-

coon to ride

a

bicycle for

a

living (that

is,

the trainer’s).

Or

speaks

of God, the

God who makes

the

raccoons, those

on

Earth and the

ones

(one by one)

in

their Heaven.

John Levy

**Rupert and the Raccoon**

He told me he'd come across

the snarling thing when

climbing a tree near railway

lines. I reminded him this was

*my* story, and he reminded me

we read what we want to read.

Mike Ferguson

NOTE  
\* Carrie Etter's 'The Unicorn' can be found [here](http://stridemagazine.blogspot.com/2024/07/carrie-etter-describes-unicorn.html)