



CHARLES HOOD

In Praise of Ugly Nature

From the world of bats

**JOSÉ GABRIEL
MARTÍNEZ-FONSECA**

Four Bat Portraits

Clockwise from top left:

*Wrinkle-faced bat, Rivas,
Nicaragua, 2018*

*Fringe-lipped bat, Río San Juan,
Nicaragua, 2018*

*Common sword-nosed bat, Rivas,
Nicaragua, 2018*

*Ghost-faced bat, Masaya,
Nicaragua, 2018*

Fine Art Photography

“Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.” This assertion, borrowed from the depressed, alcoholic, suicidal (and yet strangely compelling) poet John Berryman, has an equally disagreeable corollary, and that is that despite all the dolphins and happy puppies and alpine fields of edelweiss, nature is, on average, hideously ugly.

Besides being ugly, nature is also supremely inhospitable: mosquitoes want to give us Zika, snow wants to turn our toes black with gangrene, the average backyard raccoon would kick you in the nads and steal your car keys if it could, and if even you go into a cave to photograph bats—and trust me, I’m speaking from experience—you can expect a cascade of liquid poo as the roosting bats shit in unison all over your upturned face.

“But wait,” you say, “what about baby deer? *Those* are cute, right?” Here the internet steps in to clear things up, and we have Vox to thank for this clickbait: “You are way more likely to be killed by deer than by sharks, bears, and gators combined.” Deer also spread Lyme disease (via their ticks, but that’s no consolation when your joints flare red with arthritis), plus here’s a morbid fact: just in terms of absolute safety, if a deer jumps in front of your car, go ahead and hit it, since way more accidents happen from the veer-into-other-lane-to-avoid-it part of the interaction than from the actual strike itself. Especially along stretches of road like Highway 1 in California, it’s much better to hammer out a fender or swap in a new headlight than to swerve head-on into a busload of orphans on their way to church camp. Trust us: God will make more deer. She has plenty to go around.

If we move past the narrow world of Audubon calendars, a true appraisal of “nature” has to include all of it: the gloppy worms and bug-eyed benthic fish and back-of-the-cupboard cockroaches and one-legged seagulls and pubic lice and big-buttred, naked-tailed Virginia opossums and, out in the garden, just as you are trying to weed the roses, the swollen-bellied, mandible-clicking, ass-stench-leaking Jerusalem cricket. Another name for this last repulsive insect (though hardly any more palatable) is potato bug. The Navajo name translates as “big red skull,” and, yes, they bite, painfully so. My entomology friends pretend they’re fond of them, but it’s all false bravado: this is a seriously ugly insect, and they jolly well know it.