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The missing introduction to

## ***A Natural History of Empty Lots***

by Christopher Brown

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As I began working on the book that became *A Natural History of Empty Lots*, one of my neighbors here in the outer edges of East Austin told me she had seen a jaguarundi walking down her street. The jaguarundi is one of those rare and wonderful things you might encounter if you move a long distance from wherever you grew up: an animal you have never even heard of, but when you look it up is proven to be very real. In this case, a wild and nocturnal feline predator that is the color of the night sky, a little bit smaller than an ocelot, and was last seen somewhere around Brownsville in 1986. The possibility of such a creature prowling within walking distance from one's home is the kind of info-nugget that rekindles the sense of wonder modern life is so good at erasing, and momentarily shakes you loose from the trance of the everyday. Even if you know that what they saw was more likely just a domestic cat, out for an evening kill.

The neighbor who shared that report lives in a spot where such a sighting is unexpectedly plausible: a weird little street off an old highway in a heavily industrialized part of town. Her block is perched on a high green bank over the urban river, with miles of gravel pits and concrete yards behind, and on the opposite bank a gnarly acreage where asphalt shingles are recycled and a mountain of black tar rises up above the treeline. The street is also right in the flightpath of the airport, and every few minutes the jumbo jets come in so close that you can make out every rivet on the fuselages. And yet, in part because of the way these industrial land uses mostly keep the humans away, the zone is full of wildlife—birds, reptiles, amphibians, mammals and insects who thrive in that narrow corridor of unowned property defined by the river and its floodplain, some making their permanent home there in and around the water, others just passing through on their seasonal journeys between the southern tropics and northern plains. A simultaneously beautiful and sad place that embodies what we have done to the world, and evidences the remarkable resilience of our wild neighbors as they eke out a spartan existence in the leftover pockets we don't fully exploit.

When you get to know such a place, and learn how it provides unlikely habitat for everything from bobcats to bald eagles, you understand how very plausible it is that some more exotic wild predator from the borderlands might find its way here. Especially as the industrialization and militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, now compounded by the commercial space industry's conversion of coastal lands along the Rio Grande into a platform to expand our colonization of available real estate to other planets, has largely erased the traditional South Texas habitat of the jaguarundi. You also come to understand how easy it would be for us to nurture more such interstitial habitat within the margins of our own, and rewild the future, were we to really choose to share our domain with other life. Instead, we seem persistently stuck on the idea that the last wilderness is *out there*, beyond the horizon we can see from our office window or the freeway overpass, where they tell us expansive preserves unmarred by our occupation can still be found. There may be such places—I have been





lucky to explore a few candidates in my life—but the truth is that most other species live in terrains altered by human dominion, often in our immediate shadows. In many cases avoiding encounters with us by only emerging from their hidden dens when they know we are likely asleep.

*A Natural History of Empty Lots* is my effort to share my experiences exploring the wild edgelands that persist in the margins of our cities and suburbs, encountering the diverse life they harbor, coming to terms with the lessons they teach about how we got here, and undertaking experiments in how we might remedy that—first by trying to create urban habitat in and around our own home, and then in our wider community. I am not a scientist or a professional ecologist. My qualifications are those of a dad whose children helped him rediscover his own connection with nature, a dystopian novelist trained to see the liminal traces of immanent futures and forgotten pasts in the contemporary environment, and a lawyer who makes a living by mastering the source code we use to turn nature into property and valorize our own survival over that of other life.

I have tried to make the resulting book one that is pleasurable to read. And easy to read, as easy as the letters we used

to write each other. At its narrative core, the book takes the form of field notes—observations I have accumulated over more than two decades of stepping off the pavement, getting lost on purpose, and seeing what other realities I can find beyond the one the official city wants us to stay within. As a result, it's a book that works a lot like a walk in the urban woods—it covers wide-ranging territory and bears witness to things that cannot all be easily explained, while always finding its way back to home base, and staying anchored to a structure of understanding that endeavors to synthesize those observations into coherent and actionable learning. It's not prescriptive, or didactic. As I've done over the past four years in the weekly newsletter in which I first explored this material, I have tried to simply report what I have seen, and how I understand it, while recognizing that the truth is an elusive thing, whether relayed by a scientist, a lawyer, or a poet.

I have deployed some of the tricks I learned writing speculative fiction to try to break through conventional ways we experience and think about nature, starting with language and narrative inversion. At the root, this means challenging the artificial separation embodied in the very word "nature." It also means working harder to see the world with an inclusive eye: seeking the wild in landscapes marred by human industry, coupling the lyrical romance that nature writing typically emphasizes with a clear-eyed description of the everyday details, often ugly, of our own imprint on the land. The damage we see in our environment, when we choose to really see it as it is, is a mirror of the damage we can sometimes feel inside ourselves. The book tries to show how both of those conditions can be remedied, at least in part, by a rediscovery of the wildness that exists outside our doors, and within us.

This is a book about a house, but it's not a design book. It's the chronicle of an experiment in rewilding the home, and reconsidering the house as nature.





The book is a journal of my observations in the field, but it also tries to be a book of ideas—not just about nature, but also about how experiences of Anthropocene life help illuminate the ways that social and economic justice are inextricably intertwined with environmental justice. Its field notes and extrapolations draw not just from natural history, but also mine folklore, law, economics and political philosophy. At its narrative core, the book sets out to repurpose the stories of exploration, colonization and settlement that are in many ways the literary roots of American identity, in an effort to find paths to decolonization of the land, the community, and the self.

The book is packed with a menagerie of plants and animals, native and exotic, real even when they seem imaginary: ringtail cats, barred owls, killer bees, giant butterflies, crepuscular armadillos, coral snakes, kingfishers, urban ospreys, downtown coyotes, parking lot red wolves, foxes who walk through walls, street dogs, red-shouldered hawks, Texas vultures, escaped parakeets, ancient oaks trapped behind strip malls, drainage ditch wildflowers, color-shifting waxwings, chiltepín, bluebonnets, cicada killers, Mastodon chiclets, powderpuffs, ants that have mastered packet switching, birds who make nests from industrial materials, eagles with toupees, blue crankys, musk mares, whitetail deer, Arkansas giant bulldogs, giant walking sticks, inland sea oats, brownfield spiderwort, sphinx moths, baby wolf spiders, black widows, Aztec spur throats, mustang vine, millipede infestations, bee bonnets, raccoons, opossums, skunks, that jaguarundi, a chupacabra, and more.

Plus: this book has pictures! All taken by me, many on an old film camera, that try to complement the text with glimpses of the urban nature vignettes that might otherwise seem implausible.

Structurally, the book has three main sections, each one shorter than the one before, and all made up of subchapters that should be easy to read in a single sitting. The first section is a deep exploration of the wild city: how to find it, what you find there, and what you learn. The second section is about rewilding domestic life: in particular, how to restore feral ecology to garden and yard, and cultivate other life within the human domus. The third section widens the aperture to the community—trying to take some of the lessons from the field to find paths to a greener and more just future.

If I have done my job well, this book should be of interest to a diversity of readers—those who enjoy reading about nature and the outdoors, climate and biodiversity, landscape, design and urbanism, speculative fiction and futurism, creative nonfiction, memoir, and even self-help. In its simple

accumulation of one person's memories of living in the world, and learning how inclusive that world can really be if you open your mind to it, it aims to provide a palliative, and maybe even a cure, for eco-anxiety. An ambition that is fully bounded by the understanding that I don't have the answers—just some ideas on how the nature we ignore and abuse can help us find them.

