

Old Three Toes and Other Tales of Survival and Extinction

John Joseph Matthews

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A bobcat needs a wristwatch like a cactus needs a calendar.

Yes, we have time, that peculiar human tendency to grid our existence into segments of seconds, minutes, hours, et cetera. But at what cost? What's the tradeoff? We can be certain of one thing: living in expectation of the next thing on our schedule keeps us from being fully present in the here and now.

In each of the nine short fictional stories in *Old Three Toes*, John Joseph Mathews warps the passage of time to that of a desert rattlesnake—coiled next to a dry creek bed, motionless for however long it takes a warm-blooded critter to come within fang reach. He writes of the red deer's ancient fear of eagles, somehow genetically encoded after untold thousands of generations of terror. And how a certain fawn named Royal rose up on his hind legs and struck at an attacking eagle with his front hooves, living to fight another day, albeit with a gray scar on his shoulder for the rest of his life.

The Osage author of several books and a hunter, Mathews died in 1979 at the age of eighty-four. His immense talent was centered around his ability to write about wilderness and wildlife through the eyes and ears and noses of animals. In an afterword, Susan Kalter explains, "Mathews' deep empathy for other earth beings, his understanding of their individual consciousnesses and their intelligence both individual and collective, arose from his boyhood seclusion from the world of mankind, his early becoming embedded in the world of the birds and mammals with whom he engaged in the 'earth struggle.' His usually unconquerable urges to hunt were never to him a signal of superiority, but evidence unrelenting of our commonality with all life."

MATT SUTHERLAND (Spring 2015)

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