

Hektoen International

A Journal of Medical Humanities

ART
ETHICS
HEALTHCARE
HISTORY
LITERATURE

[Current Issue](#) [Past Issues](#) [Library](#) [Gallery](#) [Links](#) [Contact Us](#)

 GO

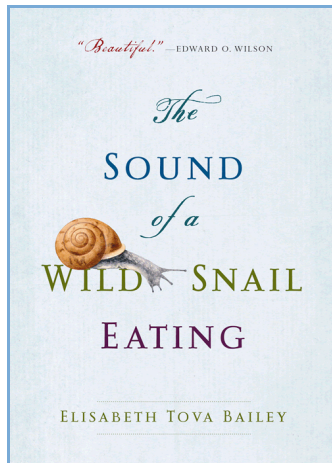
[About Us](#)

The sound of a wild snail eating

[ShareThis](#)

Elisabeth Tova Bailey
Maine, United States

Adapted from *The sound of a wild snail eating* by Elisabeth Tova Bailey © 2010 Elisabeth Tova Bailey. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. All rights reserved.



While an illness keeps her bedridden for months at a time, Elisabeth Tova Bailey watches a Neohelix albolabris—a common forest snail—as it takes up residence on her nightstand. Intrigued by the snail's molluscan anatomy, cryptic defenses, clear decision making, hydraulic locomotion, and mysterious courtship activities, Bailey becomes an astute and amused observer of the curious life of this overlooked and underappreciated animal. This short excerpt from The sound of a wild snail eating shows how a small part of the natural world illuminates our own human existence.

*The velocity of the ill,
however, is like that of the snail.*
—Emily Dickinson, in a letter
to Charles H. Clark, April 1886

Inches from my bed and from each other stood the terrarium and a clock. While life in the terrarium flourished, time ticked away its seconds. But the relationship between time and the snail confused me. The snail would make its way through the terrarium while the hands of the clock hardly moved—so I often thought the snail traveled faster than time. Then, absorbed in snail watching, I'd find that time had flown by, unnoticed. And what about the unfurling of a fern frond? Its pace was undetectable, yet day by day it, too, reached toward its goal.

The mountain of things I felt I needed to do reached the moon, yet there was little I could do about anything, and time continued to drag me along its path. We are all hostages of time. We each have the same number of minutes and hours to live within a day, yet to me it didn't feel equally doled out. My illness brought me such an abundance of time. Time was nearly all I had, and my friends had so little time that I often wished I could give them what time I could not use. It was perplexing how in

losing health I had gained something so coveted but to so little purpose.

I eagerly awaited visitors, but the anticipation and the extra energy of greetings caused a numbing exhaustion. As the first stories unfolded, my spirit held on to the conversation as best it could—I so wanted these connections to the outside world—but my body sank beneath waves of weakness. Still, my friends were golden threads randomly appearing in the monotonous fabric of my days. Each visit was a window that opened momentarily into the life I had once known, always falling shut before I could make my way back through. The visits were like dreams from which I awoke once more alone.

As the snail's world grew more familiar, my own human world became less so; my species was so large, so rushed, and so confusing. I found myself preoccupied with the energy level of my visitors, and I started to observe them in the same detail with which I observed the snail. The random way my friends moved around the room astonished me; it was as if they didn't know what to do with their energy. They were so *careless* with it. There were spontaneous gestures of their arms, the toss of a head, a sudden bend into a full body stretch as if it were nothing at all; or they might comb their fingers unnecessarily through their hair.

It took time for visitors to settle down. They sat and fidgeted for a while, then slowly relaxed until a calmness finally spread through them. They began to talk about more interesting things. But halfway through a visit, they would notice how little I moved, the stillness of my body, and an odd quietness would come over them. They would worry about wearing me out, but I could also see that I was a reminder of all they feared: chance, uncertainty, loss, and the sharp edge of mortality. Those of us with illnesses are the holders of the silent fears of those with good health.

Eventually, discomfort moved through my visitors, nudging a hand into motion, a foot into tapping. The more apparent my own lack of movement, the greater their need to move. Their energy would turn into restlessness, propelling their bodies into action with a flinging of the arms or a walk around the room; a body is not meant to be still. Soon my visitors were off.

My dog, Brandy, was a mix of golden retriever and yellow Lab. Even at eight years of age, her energy was extreme compared to my own. It was incredible that I, too, had once moved through life with such exuberance, with her at my side. From my bed I could give her scraps from my dinner and manage a few strokes of her soft ears. I loved her so, and her intense longing for more made me ache to leap from bed, fling open the door to the outside world, and escape, the two of us heading, once again, deep into the wild woods.

Whereas the energy of my human visitors wore me out, the snail inspired me. Its curiosity and grace pulled me further into its peaceful and solitary world. Watching it go about its life in the small ecosystem of the terrarium put me at ease. I began to think about naming the snail, as it was an individual with its own unique character traits. I had learned in the book *Odd Pets* that snails are hermaphrodites, which narrowed the options. But a human name didn't seem to fit. The snail was not just an individual creature that I was coming to know. It was introducing me in spirit to its entire line of gastropod ancestors, which, I guessed, reached far back in time. Looking into the terrarium was like entering that ancient era. From my recumbent bedside view, the ferns and mosses appeared as miniature forests and fields, and as I watched the snail go about its life, it seemed as if it lived in a timeless world without change. I liked the sound of the word "snail" every time I said it; the word was as small and simple as the creature itself. It is a word from Old English, with an earlier derivation from the German *schnecke*, for snail, spiral, or spiral-shaped yeast bun. So in the end I decided not to name my companion but to continue to refer to it as "the snail."

Given its tiny footprint, the snail had plenty of territory in the terrarium to survey in minute detail, finding endless nooks and crannies of interest. I, on the other hand, rarely moved beyond the familiar section of my sheets. Occasionally, when the snail slept and an urgent need for change—no matter the cost—swept through me, I would slowly roll from my right side over to my left side. This simple act caused my heart to beat wildly and erratically, but the reward was a whole new vista. The other side of the room was spread out before me like a map with countless possibilities of faraway adventures, including the most tantalizing of things, a window and a door.

Nothing, of course, was in reach. I could just see into the corner of the bathroom, where I knew, if I could only look farther in, I would find a claw-foot bathtub. Just to

think of a bath, the kind one can settle into as if it were a relaxing, normal routine, caused an unfathomable longing. Across the room there was a shelf that held many books, each cover a different hue, their titles of possible interest if only I could decipher them, but the distance was too great. There was a window I could look out if only I could stand. And there was the door, the door to the outside world.

Was this truly a door that I would someday open and walk through, as if walking out into the world were an ordinary thing to do? I would look at the door until it reminded me of all the places I could not go. Then, exhausted and empty from my audacious adventure, I'd make the slow roll back toward the kingdom of the terrarium and the tiny life it contained.

[ELISABETH TOVA BAILEY](#)'s recently published natural history/memoir, *The sound of a wild snail eating*, is drawing increasing interest from the medical humanities field. Her unusual narrative, which intertwines natural history and the illness experience, offers an excellent basis for discussions of palliative care, compassion, and the meaning of life. Attracting acclaim from the natural history field as well, the work has won the John Burroughs Medal Award for Distinguished Natural History for 2011 and a National Outdoor Book Award in Natural History/Literature for 2010. Her recent essay, "A green world deep in winter: the bedside terrarium," was just published in the free access online *Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*. For the author's website, please visit: www.elisabethtovailey.com. To purchase her book, go to <http://www.workman.com/products/9781565126060/>.

[RETURN TO HOMEPAGE](#)

[Site Map](#) | [Privacy](#) | www.hektoen.org

Hektoen International Journal is published by the [Hektoen Institute of Medicine](#)

2240 West Ogden Avenue, Chicago, IL. 60612

ISSN 2155-3017 - Copyright © 2009

journal@hektoeninternational.org

Visit us at: www.hekint.org | www.hektoeninternational.org