

The last time I was in Texas in the summer I went down to see the people who keep rattlesnakes. They have many, many different kinds of rattlesnakes and care for them beautifully. Every year that I go to check on them there is something new in the tanks with plate glass fronts, sleepy and warm and seemingly well-fed. On the morning that I went to gaze upon their inscrutable scaled heads they were all coiled up asleep in the heat of late morning, in neat round checkered piles. Way out across the high desert mountains there was weather coming. Because of where we were situated on a high place, you could see for nearly 100 miles across the great summer-dry bowl of the lowlands, with mesas and peaks angling to the sky here and there. I was looking forward to the change and possible coming coolness, and watching the clouds sweep toward us as I stood in the door frame. Behind me there was a sudden ferocious buzz, another buzz, and the whole energy in the sleeping reptile room went heavy and electric, like a sparking power line. I was immediately drawn in and to the back of the room to the tank with the biggest, most intimidating rattlers in it: the timber rattlers of the highlands. Arced up and balanced on their braced coils, they swept their belly scales across the glass face, reached their dappled lengths as high as they could and hung their diamond heads level with my eyes, tails buzzing furiously. They swayed and lifted, dropped and swung, crawled across the glass and each other and paused in an attitude of urgency, all muscle, all a-buzz, and eyes of laser beam brown with honey-colored slits. I was entranced. What was it? What happened? What did they want? I turned to ask the snake keeper. "They smell it", he said. "They smell the rain coming". And suddenly like a vision placed right into my mind I got such a clear sense of the way the rain sweeps across the desert like a massive living hand, pushing electricity and hope in front of it and bringing life in falling curtains behind it. And how there must be a range of space like an indrawn breath in front of that great coming that pulls and pushes the animals up and out of themselves and their burrows in hope and hunger and need and exhilaration, everything on the move and then everything washed together, and the whole world shifted and made clean in the sharp sage and shale scent of the desert in the rain. The wet hand of glory was coming, and the timber rattlers had the sense to stand up and with every muscle and bone sing back the righteousness of it and the answering hunger in themselves.