

# Six Thousand Lessons

WHEN I WAS A BOY I wanted to see the world. Bit by bit it happened. In 1948, at the age of three, I left my home in Mamaroneck, New York, just north of New York City, and flew with my mother to a different life in California's San Fernando Valley, outside Los Angeles. I spent my adolescent summers at the Grand Canyon and swam in the great Pacific. Later, when my mother married again, we moved to the Murray Hill section of Manhattan. Another sort of canyon. I traveled across Europe by bus when I was seventeen. I went to Mexico. In 1970 I moved to rural Oregon. I camped in the desert in Namibia and on the polar plateau, twenty kilometers from the South Pole. I flew to Bangkok and Belém, to Nairobi and Perth, and traveled out into the country beyond.

Over the years I ate many unfamiliar meals, overheard arguments on town and city streets conducted in Pashto, Afrikaans, Cree, Flemish, Aranda, and other tongues unknown to me. I prayed in houses of worship not my own, walked through refugee camps in Lebanon, and crossed impossible mountain passes on the Silk Road. Witness was what I was after, not achievement. From the beginning, I wanted to understand how very different each stretch of landscape, each boulevard, each cultural aspiration was. The human epistemologies embedded in the six thousand spoken ways of knowing God compare with the six thousand ways a river can plunge from high country to low, or the six thousand ways dawn might break over the Atacama, the Tanami, the Gobi, or the Sonora.

Anyone determined to see so many of the world's disparate faces might easily succumb to the heresy of believing one place is finally not so different from another somewhere, because in the moment he is weary of variety or otherwise not paying attention. I have found myself there. But each place is itself only, and nowhere repeated. Miss it and it's gone.

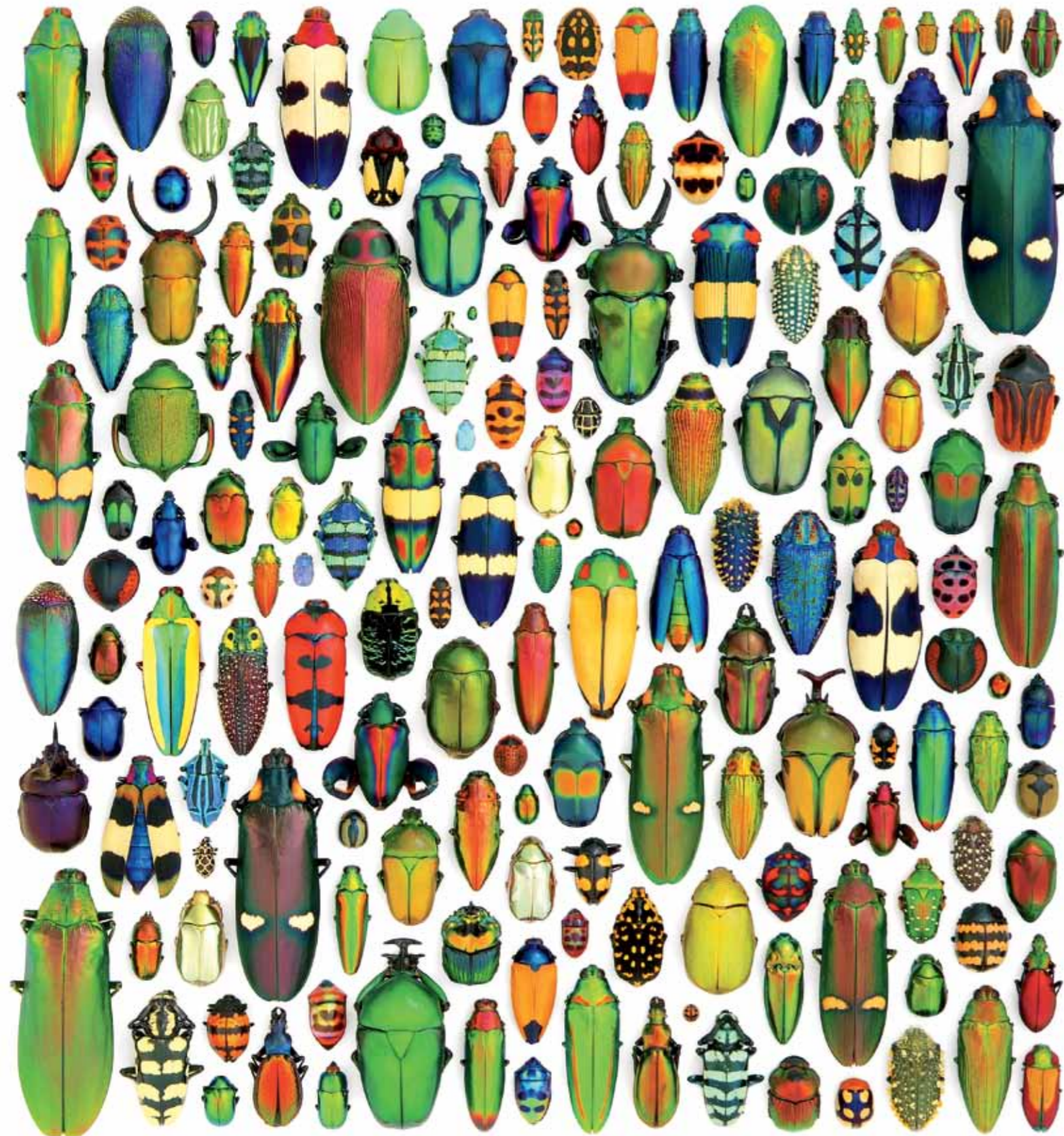
Of the six thousand valuable lessons that might be offered to a persistent traveler, here is one I received. Over the years, in speaking with Eskimo people — Yup'ik and Inupiat in Alaska and Inuit in Canada — I came to understand that they prefer to avoid the way we use collective nouns in the West to speak about a species. Their tendency is not to respond to a question about what it is that "caribou" do, but to say instead what an individual caribou once did in a particular set of circumstances — in that place, at that time of year, in those weather conditions, with these other animals around. It is important to understand, they say, that on another, apparently similar occasion, the same animal might do something different. All caribou, despite their resemblance to each other, are not only differentiated, one from the other, but are in the end unpredictable.

In Xian once, where Chinese archeologists had uncovered a marching army of terra cotta horses and soldiers, and where visitors could view them in long pits *in situ*, I studied several hundred of each with a pair of binoculars. The face of each one, men and horses alike, was unique. Itself only. I've watched hundreds of impala bounding away from lions on the savannah of Botswana Africa, and flocks of white corellas roosting at dusk in copses of gum trees at edge of the Great Sandy Desert in Western Australia, and I have had no doubt in those moments that, with patience and tutoring, I would learn to distinguish one animal from another.

It is terrifying for me to consider, now, how television, a kind of cultural nerve gas, has compromised the world's six thousand epistemologies, generalizing them into the inutility of "what we all know" and "what we all believe." To consider the campaigns mounted for all to speak Mandarin or English in order "to make life easier." To consider how a stunning photograph of a phantom orchid can be made to stand today for all phantom orchids through time. To consider how traveling to Vienna can signify for some that you've more or less been to Prague. How, if you're pressed for time, one thing can justifiably take the place of another.

During these years of travel, my understanding of what diversity means has changed. I began with an intuition, that the world was, from place to place and from culture to culture, far more different than I had been led to believe. Later, I began to understand that to ignore these differences was not simply insensitive but unjust and perilous. To ignore the differences does not make things better. It creates isolation, pain, fury, despair. Finally, I came to see something profound. Long-term, healthy patterns of social organization, among all social life forms, it seemed to me, hinged on work that maintained the integrity of the community while at the same time granting autonomy to its individuals. What made a society beautiful and memorable was some combination of autonomy and deference that, together, minimized strife.

It is now my understanding that diversity is not, as I had once thought, a characteristic of life. It is, instead, a condition necessary for life. To eliminate diversity would be like eliminating carbon and expecting life to go on. This, I believe, is why even a passing acquaintance with endangered languages or endangered species or endangered cultural traditions brings with it so much anxiety, so much sadness. We know in our tissues that the fewer the differences we encounter in our travels, the more widespread the kingdom of Death has become. 🐾



"COLEOPTERA MOSAIC," PROTOTYPE, FROM PHEROMONE: THE INSECT ARTWORK OF CHRISTOPHER MARLEY (POMEGRANATE COMMUNICATIONS, 2008). PHOTOGRAPH © CHRISTOPHER MARLEY

The first beetles (*Coleoptera*, meaning "sheath wing") evolved before the dinosaurs, 265 million years ago. They have since diversified to live in all habitats except the sea and the polar regions. Over 350,000 species have been described; that

constitutes 40% of all insect species and about 25% of all known life forms. However, new species are being discovered all the time and the full number of species is unknown. Habitat loss is the greatest threat to the beetle. To date 75 known species are

listed on the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List of threatened species. Of these 20 species are listed as endangered, 10 as critically endangered and 15 as already extinct.