

Dear Students, Colleagues and Friends,

Happy Halloween! With a nod toward the holiday I decided to supply a piece for you on a seasonal favorite: spiders! Enjoy and have a safe and jolly All Hallows Eve!

Spin

The truth is that squatters have taken up residence surrounding my house. I walked out the door today smack into a jail cell arrangement of spider silk from several of the hundreds of spiderlings who are jettisoning across my front walk, back patio, path to the car and back again.

Let me move to assure, I am a very egalitarian, live-and-let-live kind of neighbor with a crazy quilt mix of species who also call this place home. “But ick,” I spit as I pulled more spider silk from my face and hair, “Can we not have some rules about where you [balloon](#)?” I glared at what looked like empty space to the passing cyclist. “Can we not have some decorum?”

And yet spiders do what they do, a dance in air as they climb to a bush top or perch on a brick wall high enough for their liking. There they arch and shoot forth their silk from spinnerets on their [abdomens](#). Some simply send single stretches of spider yarn out between houses, cars, trees and any other sizeable objects they find to begin a web. Others triangulate their strands to help carry them away to their exotic destinations yards away.

Most all of the ones making themselves known to me, use draglines to [anchor](#) onto launch pads. Discretion is, after all, the better part of valor. My little neighbors’ persistence in setting the anchor before setting sail secures a longer life. However, the spiderlings spin single strands of fine [gossamer](#) to “fly” in the wind to their next destination. It has often been thought the threat of fratricide in part, ignites this practice of the young in the fall. Cooler nights trigger egg sacs to open driving hundreds of hungry little siblings to spring away from each other repopulating the porch and surrounding environs. Many spiderlings actually cooperate at this [time](#) by building communal webs until they decide to pack up their silk and head for new territories. This reduces the opportunity for mass extermination, by whatever means, as well as providing healthy numbers to occupy a larger niche.

Whether draglines or gossamer, silk is their tool for all purposes. These tiny creatures create silk as strong as steel, yet elastic enough to flex in the breeze. Completely wrought from proteins, they have several different types of silk in their arsenal – from the robust draglines to fairy-like gossamer, soft silk for egg sacs and silk spun especially for enveloping prey.

Many species happily call my home theirs year-round as only brown recluse and black widows are odious here. I never take much notice until the spiderlings refuse my roof for parts beyond. It is then, when autumn lands and maples trade green for scarlet, I regularly find myself eyes to eyes with these sometimes bristly little homesteaders. Although they are active in all the warm weather months, it is in the fall that I most often wonder what they think of me as I tangle with them more frequently. If I were to ascribe human traits to them I might imagine a little spider Wikipedia describing hominids as: “large bipedal organisms, extremely aggressive and clumsy.” The reality of their reactions is more likely the same sort of startle response I achieve when running into yet another web. No Faustian death scene with an eye (or eight) toward being overlooked to survive another day, they sally forth to build where they can best catch dinner - usually directly in my path. Still, I feel guilty. When hiking through the park in autumn, I carry my “web wand”, a stick I twirl in front of me to dislodge any silken strands or full-blown webs. It’s quite effective and yet, I think about all their lost work.

Who am I to call them squatters? Their lineage evolved in fields and forests close by, while mine originated in a faraway place. What foul form of interloper must I be? How dare I? But this thought is invalid. It is yet another example of human narcissism afflicting conservationists with our sometimes “protect everything” mindset. We do not fault the white-tail for bounding through webs. Neither do we blame the fox or possum or masked marauding coons who will even [eat](#) spiders if they get the chance.

A more rational mindset is to live in mutualism with our eight-legged neighbors. We provide shelter and food sources. Spiders provide an array of benefits from help in the garden eating insect pests to providing the genius of varied forms of silk which we might emulate in the future for constructing bridges or reconstructing human ligaments.

Peace, Spider. You are not the squatter I made you out to be; nor I the clumsy monster threatening your existence. We are just two creatures, neighbors, inhabiting this place together.

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Give good people good information and they'll do good things.

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