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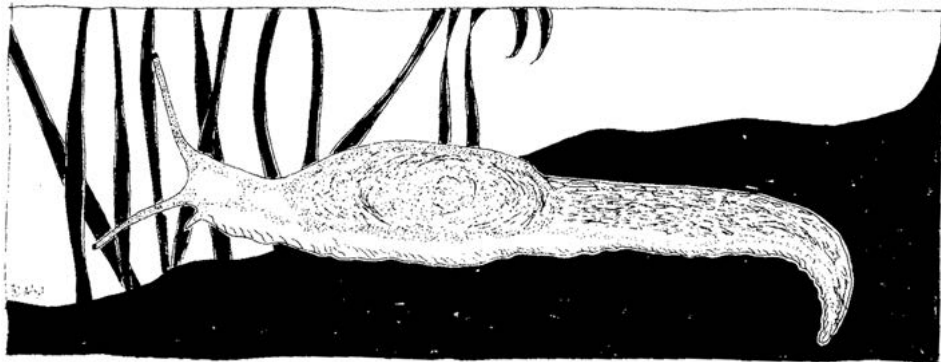
A Slug By Any Other Name

Slugs are sluggish. They travel four inches a minute, and rest often. Their home territory is at most a few yards square and a slug travels around this area on a mucus highway. Not only does he/she have to protect its soft body from rough terrain, but all the skin of a terrestrial slug must be kept damp to enable the exchange of oxygen. For a slug, your skin is your lungs.

These are snails, and when I was growing up this is what we called them in my family. We kept shy of four-letter words, did not even say “shut up,” which we mainly heard from the mouths of the bad guys on TV. What did we say instead? Ma told us to say, “I beg to differ,” but it sounded so silly I don’t think we ever did. Nor even, “Oh, yeah?” We learned to talk our way through, or around things. Soft and slow, like a slug. I mean, like a snail.

Slugs are gastropods, one of the many mollusks in the world, most of which are aquatic. Most snails and slugs are aquatic, too, which makes it easier to keep that skin damp and keep on breathing. In order to travel, the ones on dry land put out a mucus highway, which is slippery and yet sticky, as we find when we pick one off a broccoli plant so we can send it air-borne into the next zone. Here at our place that would be the orchard, where there is plenty of green grazing available to all. We try not to think what it is like for a slug to find itself so many feet away from home. There is much we controlling humans try not to think about.

Now and then I find myself talking about slugs. A friend asks, “Don’t you think slugs are disgusting? Slimy?” Slimy, yes. Disgusting, certainly not. Some folks object to slugs in the broccoli bed, but it is not about disgust or slime. It is about browsing. Slugs and other gastropods, or snails, whether terrestrial or aquatic, with or without shells, have a mouth on the underside of the “foot” and it is called a radula. Turn a



slug over and you will see a small opening underneath. Inside this opening is a fine set of teeth on a conveyor belt called a radula. The radula is pulled back and forth against the tomato or broccoli until it has rasped a hole. Bits and juices are carried along by the movement of the radula, up into the esophagus and stomach of the slug. Some marine snails can even rasp their way into the shell of an oyster with this device.

Most people don’t take time to watch slugs’ behavior – how can anything going so slow be said to “behave?” But for the person with a little time, the life of the slug can provide entertainment and education such as you never saw at the rated movies. I refer to the sex life of the slug.

Slugs are hermaphrodites, so a pair of slugs can do two things at once, at least. They go through a slow ritualized courtship behavior which is stately at first with much circling and waving, but then progresses to tail-slapping and biting and in some species seems almost sado-masochistic as they pierce each other with calcareous darts. This is thought to be a mechanism for species recognition: “Ouch! Oh, it must be you.”

A slug has both a penis and a vulva and produces both eggs and sperm. In most cases sperm is deposited by slug A under the “mantle” of slug B. Later, eggs are fertilized as they are laid by slug B and vice versa. This careful arrangement assures cross-fertilization. But slugs know no taboos, and in some species individuals lead

rather monastic lives and never even meet another slug.

Self-fertilization is rare in animals, but these slugs are permitted to do it by the Natural Selection Board of Censors. If you want to see how it is done, you can go see the movie, or else spend more time on your knees in the garden. Whatever you do, don’t put salt on slugs. Pick them up — wear rubber gloves if you have to — and put them somewhere dark and damp where they can carry out their slow, slimy, kinky lives in peace. And if you want your children to grow up to be slug-lovers, refer to the creatures as “snails” during the kids’ formative years and never say “shut up.”

— Bonner McAllester