

WILD DARKNESS: IN NATURE, DEATH IS NOT DEFEAT

BY EVA SAUITIS, ORION MAGAZINE, MARCH/APRIL 2014

FOR TWENTY-SIX SEPTEMBERS I've hiked up streams littered with corpses of dying humpbacked salmon. It is nothing new, nothing surprising, not the stench, not the gore, not the thrashing of black humpies plowing past their dead brethren to spawn and die. It is familiar; still, it is terrible and wild. Winged and furred predators gather at the mouths of streams to pounce, pluck, tear, rip, and plunder the living, dying hordes. This September, it is just as terrible and wild as ever, but I gather in the scene with different eyes, the eyes of someone whose own demise is no longer an abstraction, the eyes of someone who has experienced the tears, rips, and plunder of cancer treatment. In spring, I learned my breast cancer had come back, had metastasized to the pleura of my right lung. Metastatic breast cancer is incurable. Through its prism I now see this world.

I'm not a salmon biologist. I don't hike salmon streams as part of my job. I hike up streams and bear trails and muskegs and mountains for pleasure. The work my husband, Craig, and I do each field season in Prince William Sound is sedentary. We study whales. For weeks at a stretch, we live on a thirty-four-foot boat far from any town, often out of cell-phone and internet range. We sit for hours on the flying bridge with binoculars or a camera pressed to our eyes. Periodically, we climb down the ladder and walk a few paces to the cabin to retrieve the orca or humpback catalogue, to drop the hydrophone, or to grab fresh batteries, mugs of hot soup or tea, or granola bars. We climb back up. We get wet; we get cold; we get bored; sometimes we even get sunburned. We eat, sleep, and work on the boat. Hikes are our sanity, our maintenance. We hike because we love this rainy, lush, turbulent, breathing, expiring, windy place as much as we love our work with whales. It's a good thing, because in autumn weather thwarts our research half the time and sends us ashore, swaddled in heavy rain gear, paddling against williwaw gusts and sideways rain in our red plastic kayaks. What we find there is not always pretty.

Normally, September is the beginning of the end of our field season, which starts most years in April or May. But for me, this year it's just the beginning, and conversely, like everything else in my life since I learned cancer had come back, it's tinged with the prescience of ending. The median survival for a person with metastatic breast cancer is twenty-six months. Some people live much longer. An oncologist told me he could give me a prognosis if I demanded one, but it would most likely be wrong. I changed the subject. No one can tell me how long I will live. Will this be my last field season? Will the chemo drug I'm taking subdue the cancer into a long-term remission? Will I be well enough to work on the boat next summer? Will I be alive?

A summer of tests and procedures and doctor appointments kept me off the boat until now. A surgery and six-day hospitalization in early August to prevent fluid from building up in my pleural space taught me that certain experiences cut us off entirely from nature — or seem to; I know that as long as we inhabit bodies of flesh, blood, and bone, we are wholly inside nature. But under medical duress, we forget this. Flesh, blood, and bone notwithstanding, a body hooked by way of tubes to suction devices, by way of an

IV to a synthetic morphine pump, forgets its organic, animal self. In the hospital, I learned to fear something more than death: existence dependent upon technology, machines, sterile procedures, hoses, pumps, chemicals easing one kind of pain only to feed a psychic other. Existence apart from dirt, mud, muck, wind gust, crow caw, fishy orca breath, bog musk, deer track, rain squall, bear scat. The whole ordeal was a necessary palliation, a stint of suffering to grant me long-term physical freedom. And yet it smacked of the way people too often spend their last days alive, and it really scared me.

Ultimately, what I faced those hospital nights, what I face every day, is death impending — the other side, the passing over into, the big unknown — what writer Harold Brodkey called his “wild darkness,” what poet Christian Wiman calls his “bright abyss.” Death may be the wildest thing of all, the least tamed or known phenomenon our consciousness has to reckon with. I don’t understand how to meet it, not yet — maybe never. Perhaps (I tell myself), though we deny and abhor and battle death in our society, though we hide it away, it is something so natural, so innate, that when the time comes, our bodies — our whole selves — know exactly how it’s done. All I know right now is that something has stepped toward me, some invisible presence in the woods, one I’ve always sensed and feared and backed away from, called out to in a tentative voice (*hello?*), trying to scare it off, but which I now must approach. I stumble toward it in dusky conifer light: my own predatory, furred, toothed, clawed angel.

NO ONE TEACHES US how to die. No one teaches us how to be born, either. In an essay about visiting the open-air cremation pyres of Varanasi, India, Pico Iyer quotes the scholar Diana L. Eck: “For Hindus, death is not the opposite of life; it is, rather, the opposite of birth.” It happens that my stepdaughter, Eve, is pregnant. I’ve known her since she was three years old; she’s thirty now. One late afternoon this spring, early in her pregnancy, early in my diagnosis, we picked bags of wild rose petals together in a meadow below my house; she intended to make rose-flavored mead. We hadn’t talked much about the implications of my cancer recurrence; in the meadow, we almost didn’t have to. It hovered in the honeyed sunlight between us. That light held the fact of life growing inside her and the cancer growing inside me equally, strangely. We talked around the inexplicable until, our bags full of pale pink petals, we held each other in the tall grass and cried. Watching her body change in the months since, without aid of technology or study or experience, watching her simply embody pregnancy, should teach me something about dying. In preparation for giving birth, she reads how-to books, takes prenatal yoga, attends birthing classes. She studies and imagines. Yet no matter how learned she becomes, how well informed, with the first contraction, her body will take over. It will enact the ancient, inborn process common to bears, goats, humans, whales, and field mice. She will inhabit her animal self. She will emit animal cries. She will *experience* the birth of her child; she will live it. Her body — not her will or her mind or even her self — will give birth.

Can I take comfort in the countless births and deaths this earth enacts each moment, the jellyfish, the barnacles, the orcas, the salmon, the fungi, the trees, much less the humans? I woke this morning to the screech of gulls at the stream mouth. We’d anchored in Sleepy Bay for the night, a cove wide open to the strait where we often find orcas. The humpbacked salmon — millions returned this summer, a record run

— are all up the creeks now. Before starting our daily search, Craig and I kayaked to shore. As we approached, I watched the gulls, dozens of them, launching from the sloping beach where the stream branches into rivulets and pours into the bay. They wheeled and dipped over our heads, then quickly settled again to their grim task, plucking at faded salmon carcasses scattered all over the stones. The stench of a salmon stream in September is a cloying muck of rot, waste, ammonia. Rocks are smeared with black bear shit, white gull shit. This is in-your-face death, death without palliation or mercy or intervention. At the same time, it is enlivening, feeding energy to gulls, bears, river otters, eagles, and the invisible decomposers who break the carcasses down to just bones and scales, which winter then erases. In spring, I kneel and drink from the same stream's clear cold water, or plunge my head into it. It is snowmelt and rain filtered through alpine tundra, avalanche chute, muskeg, fen, and bog. It is water newly born, fresh, alive, and oxygenated, rushing over clean stones, numbing my skin.

After we dragged the kayaks above the tide line, Craig wandered down the beach to retrieve a five-gallon bucket he'd spotted and left me alone at the stream mouth. Normally, I am nervous about bears. But this time, I walked up the stream toward the woods without singing or calling out. I stood on the bank and watched the birth-death spectacle. When Craig joined me I uttered this platitude: "We have separated ourselves so much from nature." I didn't say what I really meant. I rarely do these days. I fear most people, even those who love me best, would think me morbid if they could read my thoughts. Sometimes, with Craig, I imagine he hears the words beneath my words, knows my mind, and then silence seems the best form of conversation. What I really meant was that despite the lack of palliation or mercy or intervention, I envied those salmon their raw deaths, not for a moment separated from nature, not even when dragged from their element by a bear. I thought about my childhood cat, Mince, who, when she got sick, wandered off into the woods to die. She didn't want our comfort. She reverted to her primal nature. My mother told me that was what animals did. They died in private. I imagined Mince's brindled form camouflaged in a bed of leaf litter deep in the neighbor's blackberry bramble. I confess. I have imagined myself laid out naked on a muskeg, shuddering my last moss-and-tannin-infused breath.

I know, I know. Dying of cancer in a bog would not look or sound pretty or peaceful. Hidden from view in this dream scene is the suffering, is the agony. Is the needle, and the morphine pump, unavailable to the salmon, eyeless, its wordless mouth opening and closing, body swaying in its tattered, whitening skin.

I DON'T BY ANY MEANS think constantly about dying. My reality is dual: one foot firmly in the living stream, the other on the gory bank. Life has become vivid and immediate these last months. No years of Buddhist meditation got me to this place, just words on the phone: *the cells were malignant*. Later that day, after the crying, after the sitting mutely on the living room couch and staring out the window, Craig and I hauled a quilt into the backyard and lay down on the ground at the edge of the woods. We curled up, listening to wind in the birch leaves, the frenetic din of territorial birds, staking their claims. Spring sprung on while we dozed off. Staying in the present moment isn't difficult when the alternative is dire: useless imaginings of what might or might not come to pass.

Every morning when I wake, my mind darts down the dying-of-cancer path, and I reel it back by reminding myself of a poem by the late Jane Kenyon, called “Otherwise.”

*I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise.*

Kenyon died of cancer when she was about my age. She ends the poem: *But one day, I know, / it will be otherwise.* Her words in my mind, I talk myself home to the real. Right now, Eva, you are here, listening to gulls shrieking on the beach. Right now, your two legs, your two arms, your two lungs, your beating heart will carry you, under your own power, up the salmon stream, into the woods, where the blueberries are ripe. You will pick gallons to freeze, a bulwark against winter’s want, against a dearth of hope.

Craig and I hiked up the creek to where a path led into the forest, where blueberry bushes grew along the margins of bog. It wasn’t a pleasant way to get there. The rocks were slick with decay, the water rushing and tea-colored from weeks of rain. The stink was thick as syrup around us, unrelenting. I stepped around half-consumed corpses, curled and sloughing skin, over eyeless heads, headless flanks, brainless skulls, pearly backbones stripped of meat. As I crossed the creek, live humpies thumped my ankles, then battered themselves against the rocks to get away. In their singular drive to spawn, they plowed right through eddies of bleached-out dead, as if that fate were not meant for them. Pico Iyer describes the charnel grounds along the banks of the Ganges in this way: “Spirituality in Varanasi lies precisely in the poverty and sickness and death that it weaves into its unending tapestry: a place of holiness, it says, is not apart from the world, in a Shangri-La of calm, but a place where purity and filth, anarchy and ritual, unquenchable vitality and the constant imminence of death all flow together.” If there is spirituality in nature, it is in the sublime purity of wild roses and wild mushrooms in mossy woods and the vitality of deer nibbling kelp on the beach and the violet light of an oncoming storm and, equally, in the anarchy and filth of the spawning grounds, in the undoctored real of the ever-dying world.

In the seminal 1989 book *The End of Nature*, Bill McKibben confronts a new reality, a world in which human impact alters even the untamed force of weather. Our dominion over the earth, our global reach, our changing climate, our acidification of the rain and the ocean, our mass poisoning of the communal food supply mean nature as we once conceived it — bigger than us, out of our control, pure and free — is over. Nothing on this earth is apart from human tinkering. No raindrop falling on my face is free of human causation. Even my body, burdened with cancer, burdened with fifty years worth of toxins, enacts this truth. My greatest fear is a variation of McKibben’s revelation: that the end of nature means the end of natural death, the end of a natural return to earthly elements. I read his book years ago, and my new eyes see it differently now. Maybe you can’t trust the perceptions of someone like me, desperately seeking meaning in the face of metastatic cancer, in the face of personal extinction. But I will give you my scouting report just the same. Watching those salmon, stepping around their wrecked, spent flesh, I kept thinking, “No one told them. No one told these fish, or their predators, the bears, the gulls, the eagles, the microbes, that nature is over. They don’t get it.” No one told the cancer in my body either.

IN “KING OF THE RIVER,” a poem by Stanley Kunitz, he too watches salmon battling up a stream, and the parallel he draws with human life and striving and passion and aging is tight and explicit and maybe even a little overwrought — at least I saw it that way when I first read the poem. I was in my thirties then, and my health was a given. Now the poem reads more like a biblical truth. *The great clock of your life / is slowing down, / and the small clocks run wild.* These great clocks and small clocks are the very texture of our days on earth. Yet for most of us, most of the time, they tick on unheard. In the society in which I live, in that other world, across the mountains — far from this wild place where death is explicit and occurs in plain sight, where it is ordinary and everyday and unremarkable — people don’t talk about dying. People rarely witness the dying of their fellow humans (much less the animals they eat). Special people minister to the dying. Sometimes people in their travail fly overseas and pay strangers to hasten their dying. We have no charnel grounds, only cemeteries shaded by big trees, mowed and tended by groundskeepers. Or we’re handed the ashes of our loved ones, in sealed urns or handsome boxes, to disperse at sea or from mountain peaks.

Facing death in a death-phobic culture is lonely. But in wild places like Prince William Sound or the woods and sloughs behind my house, it is different. The salmon dying in their stream tell me I am not alone. The evidence is everywhere: in the skull of an immature eagle I found in the woods; in the bones of a moose in the gully below my house; in the corpse of a wasp on the windowsill; in the fall of a birch leaf from its branch. These things tell me death is true, right, graceful; *not* tragic, *not* failure, *not* defeat. *For this you were born*, writes Stanley Kunitz. *For this you were born*, say the salmon. A tough, gritty fisherman friend I knew in my twenties called Prince William Sound “God’s country.” It still is, and I am in good company here.

We have no dominion over what the world will do to us, all of us. What the earth will make of our tinkering and abuse can be modeled by computers but is, in the end, beyond our reckoning, our science. Nature is not simply done to. Nature *responds*. Nature talks back. Nature is willful. We have no dominion over the wild darkness that surrounds us. It is everywhere, under our feet, in the air we breathe, but we know nothing of it. We know more about the universe and the mind of an octopus than we do about death’s true nature. Only that it is terrible and inescapable, and it is wild.

Death *is* nature. Nature is far from over. In the end, the gore at the creek comforts more than it appalls. In the end — I must believe it — just like a salmon, I will know how to die, and though I die, though I lose my life, nature wins. Nature endures. It is strange, and it is hard, but it’s comfort, and I’ll take it.

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