



Natural Grief

Notes on the real cost of developing the American West

by Barry Lopez

For most of my adult life I've lived on thirty-five acres of mixed old-growth forest on the west slope of the Cascade Mountains. The house sits on a bench about twenty feet above and two hundred feet from the McKenzie River, a white-water tributary of the Willamette.

It is still typical of this part of Oregon for a wanderer to find patches of primordial woods a few minutes walk from the edge of a road. A privilege of living here over the past twenty-five years has thus been the sometimes startling nearness of wild animals -- elk, mountain lion, black bear, river otters, a large, elusive weasel called a fisher, harlequin ducks. Every September chinook salmon the length of my extended arm deposit eggs on a gravel bar in river shallows in front of the house. From that spot I can see two active osprey nests. I don't keep a bird list but if I did it would be long. This morning I heard a belted kingfisher, ravens, a pileated woodpecker, Swainson's thrushes, the ubiquitous robin, and an Eastern kingbird call out. This afternoon I watched twenty-some swallows hunting the surface of the river for insects, each of the three species -- cliff, violet-green, and tree -- swooping in a slightly different way.

When I was a young man I wanted to impress people with the wildness of this spot we'd found. Now, even as my knowledge of it continues to deepen, and as it lies threatened like a thousand other natural places by the development rationale of capitalism, I have grown oddly silent. From the outside it must seem I've grown philosophical about loss.

Our house is walled and stacked with many hundreds of books -- plays, novels, collections of poems, histories. They lie about marked or open in every room. I know and have appreciated, in places as different as the Vatican Museum and the streets of Nairobi, the depth of human culture, its intractable and beguiling intricacy. I know the landscape in which I live is as deep. It resists as steadily the intent of Enlightenment philosophers to impose order on chaos. I find in the fabric of these woods -- in their colors, convolutions, textures, movement, perfumes, their sonic amplitudes -- a continuation of nearly everything I read. Among the vivid and undelineated insects, in the image of a coyote moving smartly through stormlight after a rain or an osprey tearing a fish out of the river, looking at my own fistful of elderberries, I find an amplification of every kind of knowledge I've gained, from Bach to Vermeer to Stephen Hawking.

The sobering realization that the wildness of this landscape is diminishing, its edges snipped continually by timber companies and real estate developers, haunts me daily. I am no cynic but no optimist either about the temperament of Congress. My arguments for the preservation of this land, based on Enlightenment principles of dignity and justice, on a plea for wisdom, to conserve the deeply complex, "quarkish" patterns inherent in what we call "the woods," would fall dead to the floor.

So I am silent in public venues for the most part. Like other writers, I console myself with the adage that the problem can be attacked in myriad ways, and that I am better at some of these other ways.

But my silence still rankles me.

This past spring, within the same few days, I saw a mountain lion come down to the far bank of the river to drink at dusk and woke at two in the morning to hear a bear dismantling my wooden compost bin. Standing on the porch, shooing the cinnamon-colored black bear, I had the same thought I'd had seeing the cougar, who bounded across a road to reach the water: the country is shrinking. Digging down through my emotions after those two incidents, I found something unexpected: grief.

It is grief that makes me silent.

Over the years -- I know because I've counted -- fewer salmon have been coming back here to spawn. Fewer birds now migrate in the summer. I've walked thousands of acres of nearby old-growth clearcuts, morose with disaffection, as tight in the chest as a distraught relative. It is not nostalgia I feel, anymore than I would feel nostalgia over the loss of my fingers to a power tool. It is grief. Sensing the cougar and the bear are now cornered has compounded the grief.

When people visit here, there is little of the cause of this sadness I can point to. What most see is beautiful and overwhelming. I cannot show them a kind of history, the long process I know of life in a forest by a river. It is this deep, sprawling, diverse natural history, not objects (a bear, a fish, a bird, a tree) that is disappearing. And because my history is entwined in this history, I can't purge the grief I feel unless I obliterate the affection in those memories. It is not a grief another geography, a change of scene, can cure.

I want to say to the bear, They want your home, you know. Hold out as long as you can. Eat my table leavings if you must. A lot of us will be going down the river with you.

The last, unyielding days will be beautiful I believe. I do not think the bear will ever honor the request to dance.

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