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GAZE EVEN HERE

Opening our hearts to brokenness

A COUPLE OF HOURS past the ferry landing that links Victoria, British Columbia, to Port Angeles, Washington, past the vacation area around Lake Cowichan, with its bait and tackle stores, small grocers, and cabins huddled among tall pines on the lake, the paved road ends and a rutted dirt logging road begins. Almost immediately the forest itself ends, and a clearcut breaks over us like a tsunami. There are four of us in the car, and we all get out to face it. Down the mountains and up the mountains, unrelieved except by the road that cuts through it, lie the remains of a forest. Rounds of massive trunks supply the only focal point for the eyes, while a tangle of ripped branches and limbs fills every conceivable space between them. All the way to the horizons the land has faded to gray. The place is not only dead, but mutilated. For several moments we stand there and allow ourselves to be hit, over and over, by the sight of it. When we get back into the car, shocked silence clatters behind us like a dragging muffler.

We drive on.

AVERSION IS A NATURAL RESPONSE to bearing witness to something tragic. “Why don’t you switch channels and see if there’s anything else on.” That’s what the husband of a friend of mine would say during those weeks in the spring of 2010, when oil from BP’s Deepwater Horizon blowout was gushing into the Gulf of Mexico, and his favorite news channel showed yet another image of dying wildlife: a brown pelican struggling to raise heavy wings drenched in oil; a pod of dolphins plowing through viscous pink and blue ribbons of petroleum, expelling oil through their blowholes; a gull peering out through a thick chocolaty confection, the eye within obviously belonging to a creature who was barely alive and not likely to endure much longer. My friend’s husband would make his request casually, as if he were merely curious

whether something interesting might be happening on another network. The truth, she told me, was that the sight of those helpless animals made him so sad he couldn’t bear to look at them.

Who among us doesn’t know the feeling? Those photos were wrenching. Every time we were confronted with one, a reserve of sorrow and pity cracked open inside us, threatening to release a flood of something overwhelming. Our immediate reaction was to make the whole situation go away: turn the channel, turn the page, click to a different page of the internet. In the weeks following the spill, however, I began to wonder whether relief might lie not in looking away, but in deliberately turning our attention to those suffering creatures.

According to Francis Ponge, the early-twentieth-century French poet and chronicler of the mythic existence of ordinary things, we cannot truly see something until we allow it to “disarrange” us. Ponge advocated a manner of regarding the world’s constituents not as inferiors that we must somehow corral for our use and understanding, but as equals capable of startling us with the marvel of their particular selfhood. To a busy, focused adult negotiating life today, Ponge’s advice may sound naïve, romantic. To allow ourselves to be disarranged by things would be to concede to a kind of helplessness, would it not? Instead of penetrating the world, ever pushing ourselves forth with the great engine of human intention that, we believe, enables us to control, organize, manage, and cope, we would, if we took Ponge’s advice, submit to being penetrated ourselves.

Of course, whether we’re aware of it or not, we do consent, and willingly, to such visual penetration many times throughout the day. The world thrusts itself upon us, and we take heed. We’re driving, walking through a parking lot, eating in a restaurant, working at our desk when something suddenly swoops in, grabs us, and yanks us in its direction, and we can’t help but follow. Someone

beautiful walks into a room, a waiter drops a tray, a colleague taps on the office door. Then we're momentarily disarranged as curiosity takes over. Sometimes the interruption is so out of the ordinary that we wish to look longer, to give ourselves over to soaking up the surprise—to stare. But staring is rude. When we were children, our mothers hissed at us and jerked our arms when they caught us staring at some fascinating human who looked different from anyone we'd ever seen. As adults, well trained, we look quickly away if we're caught staring, pretending that our focus was but passing over the other and would never, ever linger. Staring is hungry. It wants more and more. It invades the polite space that is supposed to separate us from others. When the starrer is caught, it's he, not the stared-at, who's exposed.

ANOTHER MEANS OF PROLONGED LOOKING, the gaze is different from the stare. Gazing is the occupation of babies and lovers, some museum goers, and those who take advantage of scenic overlooks on highways. Babies don't know the world well enough to discern the anomaly in the familiar; it's all a wonder to them. The look through which they explore this mystery is open, receptive. It takes in the whole environment, available for whatever may appear. The gaze brushes its subject; the stare pierces. Later in life, when we bring the gaze to love, we offer it up as the doorway through which we can enter the mysterious depths of the other, while being similarly entered. The stare wants to sneak in without being spotted; the gaze has nothing to hide and assumes the other is equally accessible and open. This softening into the enchantment of the other is what Roland Barthes calls the "exaltation of loving *someone unknown*, someone who will remain so forever: a mystic impulse."

The gaze is demanding; you can't just schedule a few minutes for it in the midst of a busy day. You have to settle in with a gaze, as with a cocktail. If the stare gulps, the gaze sips.

Of course, the invitation to gaze is typically issued by what pleases the eyes, not by what affronts them. The man who asked his wife to turn the channel felt assaulted when the TV news forced him to consider images of wildlife tortured by oil. It's no wonder he wanted to get away. Not only is it painful to look at a suffering animal, but we're not used to having that kind of demand made on our sensibilities by the public media. In fact, we're generally discouraged from feeling pity for the nonhuman. Those who do call attention to the plight of a plant or a nondomestic animal may be derided as a tree-hugger, someone who cares more about owls (or fish or moss or beetles) than people. She may be accused of indulging in that ultimate form of mushy thinking, anthropomorphism.

Calling attention to suffering or about-to-suffer wildlife is typically the work of environmental and animal rights groups. The photographs they include with their appeals for donations make

us confront either a present horror (dogs and cats with wires and boxes attached to their living, flayed bodies) or an imminent danger (baby seals basking on a rock, presumably as a boatload of hunters rounds a nearby iceberg). The minute you look at those pictures, you know what is being demanded of you: horror, outrage, and the near simultaneous impulse to make those feelings go away. You don't even need to read the accompanying text. You're already sufficiently appalled, predisposed to agree that something must be done, and to trust the people who have disseminated the picture to know what that something is. All you have to do is write a check or type in your credit card number and click SEND. These campaigns make you look, but they protect you from having to look for very long.

Poet Gary Snyder has expressed his desire for a new branch of ecology, one that would force us to consider the "dark side of nature—the ball of crunched bones in a scat, the feathers in the snow, the tales of insatiable appetite." I imagine students of such a course in the grim, gruesome, and visceral taking notes as they watch vultures tear into the flesh of a deer lying dead on a highway. They would ponder examples of nature's perversity, like blight and mutation or the fat male macaque I once, yes, stared at in guilty fascination in a remote temple on Bali. In one gray paw he was dragging around an emaciated yellow cat, which he would remonstratively whack against the stone floor every time it struggled weakly, after which declaration of authority he would squat down and peer casually about his realm.

But the dark side of nature must also include those species and places that have been darkened by the insatiable appetites of the human race. In some ways we humans are like that macaque, only it's the wild places we love that are being beaten into submission. You know the ones I mean. Those places that were as much a part of you as your family and your own private thoughts. Those places where you could lose yourself and find yourself at the same time. Those places that had the power to enchant you every time you, like a lover, entered their mystery. You may think you've accepted their disappearance, convinced yourself of the indomitableness of progress, and gotten over the loss, but they're still there, residing in you, though you can no longer visit them. They linger, laden with emotion in your memory, and they hover like ghosts right there in the world where they used to be, even though other things have taken their place. They're there behind the "beauty strip," that neat scrim of tall trees left on the highway to fool you into thinking that a forest, rather than a wasteland of clearcutting, extends back over the hills. They're those scars you can almost see in the sky, tracing the shape of what for millions of years was the Appalachian skyline, now flattened since the mountaintops have been detonated to facilitate coal mining. They're in the waves still lapping at the beaches where you no longer take your children,

because toxic waste fouls the water. They're underneath the dead rivers, the filthy horizon, the dying ash and hemlock and pinyon trees, the meadows paved over, the silence over the roses that bees no longer visit, the twilight sky emptied of bats. The dark side of nature seeps into your memory and imagination, reminding you not just of what the place used to be, but what you, too, used to be when it was part of you.

Glenn Albrecht, a philosopher and professor of sustainability at Murdoch University in Perth, Australia, has coined a term, *solastalgia*, to define the psychological impact on people when the world they know is damaged. Derived from the Latin word *solacium* (comfort) and the Greek root *algia* (pain), solastalgia means “the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault.”

We are victims of solastalgia not when we leave our home, Albrecht points out, but when our home leaves us. So what can a person do besides write letters to the editor and give money to the good guys who promise to do at least something to fix it? Turn the channel? Move? Suck it up and tell yourself that this is progress and inevitable? Rant to your friends, all the while believing yourself powerless to change anything? Or, perhaps, deliberately turn to that broken, wasted place and gaze at it.

UPON ENTERING THE CLEARCUT on Vancouver Island, we did not drive on to some prettier, greener place. We drove straight through the heart of it and stayed for several days.

On our first morning, we developed a routine and a question. The routine consisted of having breakfast together in the primitive campground at the end of the road, part of a forty-thousand-acre fragment of old-growth forest that lies at the western edge of the clearcut, where eight-hundred-year-old Sitka spruces and cedars tower over deep, soft moss and primeval ferns. Then we made our lunches and set off together up the dirt road where, just a quarter-mile from the campground, the forest ended abruptly and the land opened into thousands of square miles of clearcut. There we separated, each to spend the day alone in the logged area. In the evening we regathered in the campground, cooked and ate dinner, then made our way to a gigantic spruce, where we told the stories of what we had experienced during the day.

The question was this: what would happen if we simply settled into this damaged place observing the land and our own

responses to it? Our intention was to get to know this place that we had heartily wished to run from.

I chose to spend every day in the same spot, sitting on the same big stump. The waist-high debris was so thick and treacherous that it took ten minutes to negotiate the twenty-foot distance from the road, since I had to hold on to protruding limbs and step with care to avoid plunging three jagged feet down. Once I arrived, however, I had a place to sit and take it all in. On the first morning the bleak reality of the situation left room for no other reaction but sorrow, but gradually something else took over. You could call it fascination. Details of the place started emerging: the color of the bark, the pattern of the rings in the trunk I nested on. Almost immediately upon arriving on that first day I heard a bird singing close by and was momentarily amazed that a bird

could find something to sing about in such a place. Later I discovered that I could lie down on my tree stump and be supported from the top of my head down to my calves. I confess that at that moment I experienced what could only be described as glee. I began to wonder how long it actually took an eight-hundred-year-old tree to die. Perhaps it did not die all at once, as a person or animal would if its upper half were lopped off; perhaps

life ebbed slowly from a tree. I peered at insects eating through the wood and had to recognize their contentment at the state of things. Once, just sitting and gazing, I spotted a mother black bear and two cubs making their way as deftly as acrobats over the wreckage no more than thirty feet from my perch.

The practice of gazing on the wounded forest evoked a consciousness of brokenness in our personal lives. One woman was struck by how the land mirrored her own wasted youth, and the inescapability of the destruction all around enabled her to grieve for both the forest and her own past in a way that had never before seemed possible. She started making altars on the stumps, first for her own youth, then for the forest, and eventually for those she thought of as the destroyers—the loggers, the consumers, the people she had previously been unable to forgive. One of the men realized that the practice of sitting on a stump and gazing hour after hour at the wreckage of the forest was something he could bring back home to his troubled marriage. He saw that he was always looking for excuses to flee the house, instead of sitting down with his wife long enough to discuss their problems. He determined that, when he got back home, he would be present with her, and with the marriage,

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the way he was learning to be present with the forest.

That the landscape around us would mirror the landscape within was not surprising to our group. Each of us had been involved with wilderness rites of passage programs, either as guides or participants. We knew that when a person spends time alone in a wild place, allowing aspects of the land to provoke fascination, desire, grief, or repulsion then probing his own responses, a subtle but illuminating dialogue begins. Perceiving how the natural world feeds, flees, dies, lets go, puts out thorns, and manifests countless other ways of prevailing, we are inspired not just by the tenacity of nature, but by the way that such tactics seem applicable to our own lives and circumstances. We see nature more clearly, but we also notice new things about ourselves. However, these sorts of journeys typically occur in unspoiled mountains, deserts, and canyons. Deliberately seeking out a damaged place was something else entirely.

Slowly, we came to realize that our practice of purposefully seeking meaning and beauty in the wounded was teaching us important lessons about wholeness. We saw how life survived in this forest of stumps. We realized that the denizens of the place did not consider their habitat wounded; they merely coped and adapted. We understood on a visceral level that what is ugly, broken, and decaying is part of the whole. That truth granted us more acceptance of the broken, ugly, decaying aspects of ourselves. The clearcut also opened new reserves of compassion in each of us. When we first arrived, we regarded as villains the lumberjacks who had toppled these ancient and venerable trees. Before long we realized that they, and even the corporations they worked for, were merely supplying all of us members of the consumer culture with the products we constantly demanded, from toilet paper to airline boarding passes to some critically acclaimed new book about climate change. We saw that we were all part of the problem and that we were all victims of a process much larger than ourselves.

Gazing at the clearcut enabled an exchange between people and place. We brought our attention, curiosity, and openness to the place, and it, in turn, provided us with inspiration, compassion, and, yes, beauty. We discovered that what we had feared would be too painful to bear was not. Gradually, by practicing the art of gazing, we got to know this broken forest. And then, so slowly we hardly recognized what was happening, we began to love the place. There is no other way to say this. Willingness to look turned

into curiosity, which turned into acceptance, which turned into compassion, and that turned into love. By the end of the week, none of us wanted to leave.

BUDDHISTS CALL THE PRACTICE of looking fixedly at something “sustaining the gaze.” When one sustains the gaze during meditation, she regards a thing, whether outside or within herself, with emotional detachment, open to what it might reveal about itself, her, or the world. Her intention in such gazing is to bypass ordinary ways of looking, which are weighted with critical judgment, predatory appraisal (*how can this feed me, how can I use it?*), or fracturing through the need to categorize (*where shall I file this in my mind?*). The model gazers in Buddhist iconography are the Buddha himself and the goddess Kuan Yin. They gaze at the human condition, taking in what is

there in all its thorny complexity, while maintaining a smooth, openhearted compassion.

Sustaining the gaze, the mediator looks without trying to fix. That’s hard, maybe especially hard for Americans, since our cultural mythos is grounded in our can-do attitude, our conviction that “if you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything.” Can we merely absorb devastation, even for a few minutes,

offering acceptance and compassion, or is that un-American? Aren’t you supposed to repair what’s broken? Or, failing to repair, shouldn’t you get right back up on the horse that threw you and gallop once more into the fray? A man who heads one of the country’s leading environmental organizations told me recently that when the massive efforts of one of his teams fail to pay off, when they aren’t able to save a forest or canyon, or species of tree or fish after putting their hearts, time, and energy into the project for months and even years, there is no recourse for expressing regret or sorrow. Instead, “We pretty much turn our backs on it and put all our energy into the next project,” he said. “We can’t wallow.”

But when you consider all the loved places, plants, and animals that vanish, more and more every year, don’t you feel you owe them something? Maybe you can’t save them—you can’t reconstruct those mountaintops or green the gray, ragged forests or seed the twilight sky with bats—but isn’t some kind of acknowledgment of their current state only right? You don’t abandon a friend when he gets sick. You go to his bedside, hold his hand, and accept what has befallen him, even though you wish so badly that things were otherwise it almost breaks your heart. Above all, you

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keep loving him. So, too, must we continue to love those places, trees, and animals, for we have a relationship with them as well. They're not the places we remember, but they are still alive, and they can still offer us beauty, refuge, and delight. They infuse us with amazement for a world bigger and more mysterious than the human, and they remind us that we, too, are part of that mystery.

That's why, when the media was broadcasting all those images of suffering wildlife in the Gulf, I knew I had to look. It seemed the least I could do. Unlike a Buddhist, I didn't seek detachment. Just the opposite: I was aiming to connect, the way I had in the clearcut. I wanted to absorb, as best I could, both the sight before me and my own response to it, and to take up a bit of the burden. So, every time I encountered a photo or video, I made a practice of choosing to gaze at it. And, frankly, nearly every first glance brought a kick of revulsion. In the clearcut, we had confronted a place that was already destroyed; the oil-smothered beings in these images still had blood, brains, mobility, intent. This gull, plastered in black oil, sprawled on a beach, oil dripping off its head and wings, webbed feet slicked and splayed, its bright eye still filled with enough life to peer at the human with his camera, who has come closer than the bird would ever allow if it could resist, but cannot resist because it is dying: I did not want to encounter it. Step one, committing to the gaze, never got easier.

After a moment, though, the revulsion melted enough to expose rough sorrow just below. The sorrow lasted longer. Like a spotlight, it fixed first on that particular bird and then spread, gathering into its beam all the lives now being spoiled by this surge of oil into water—the microorganisms obligingly eating the poison before them, the marsh grass drooping in the bayous, the turtles, the fishermen with their beached boats, unable to fish, the fish. The families who relied on the fish for their suppers. I sat there encased in despair the way that bird was encased in oil. Then, as had happened regularly in the clearcut, my mind would up and decide it had had enough. I'd start thinking about a phone call that hadn't gone well, or how I was going to end a certain piece of writing, and then, urgently, I'd conclude that this exercise was done. Every time I resisted the urge to quit, however, and made the choice to keep looking, what I met with felt a little less caustic, a little more familiar. *Hello, bird, I'm back.*

Sometimes, unpredictably, through the sorrow pierced a shaft of joy. Outrageous, to be sure, but it was joy, no doubt about it. Joy burst forth through the pervading gloom like life determined to prevail. Life was in the eye of that gull that, despite imminent death, maintained its own fierce gaze. Life was in the pelican struggling to lift its oil-drenched wings and fly. Life was in people you kept hearing about in the news, reaching beyond their desperation to help others. I, by committing to the gaze, became both part of the predicament and part of

life's tenacious drive to hold on as long and fiercely as possible.

But whether joy arrived at the end of a spell of looking or not, a change always occurred, and it went something like this: I had ventured into a place I had preferred to avoid, and in the journey encountered the monsters of revulsion, avoidance, and despair. They had not destroyed me, though. For a few moments, I had abided with them in a reality too big to change, but too pressing to ignore, and eventually, as happens to every monster in myth and fairy tale, they had transformed into something beautiful. 🦆

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Salt Water Ducks

The tide ignores its limits, all last night
climbing over the railing, battering the door.
White spume flew its ghost against the glass.
The bay's in its third day of outrage,
but the ducks have to eat. The white-winged scoter
keeps me at the window, three sleek ones.
I count the in and out of their pristine heads—
bodies down for improbable minutes
before coming back up, black and white
against the white-capped black water shoving
against the row of stone pilings that mark the tide's high rise.
By 8 a.m. I've seen enough
as the rocks submerge and the overwrought current,
something like a boxer pounding and pounding,
slams the ducks diving there— I've seen enough

to know what I'll find tomorrow on the wasted beach:
a washed-up duck, still intact,
limp sack beneath the flawless design
of its feathers, nothing odd except the crumpled pose.
Audubon propped them up on wires, a scaffold of bird—
no other way to capture life than to show it dead.
Brutality not part of art's equation, we like to think.
Meanwhile, the birds are all instinct
in the moment. This life in a wild wind
is only the din they live in. I doubt they even hear it.

— Cleopatra Mathis