Excerpt from “False Idyll” - J.B. MacKinnon

Link to Full Text: <https://orionmagazine.org/article/false-idyll/>

Of all the FEELINGS said to sweep over us in wild places — awe, peace, a sense of the divine — there are a few that rarely get mentioned. My last two-week trip into the woods, for example, was frankly depressing. The year had been a cold one, and the forest was not its usual refulgent self. A black bear was hanging around, skinny and sickly from the bad berry crop and probably bound for death by starvation in its winter den. Pink salmon had just begun to spawn in a nearby creek, where their battered bodies were a reminder of the grand cycle of life, yes, but were also an intimately dismal spectacle. Then I discovered a colony of bats, the year’s pups just learning to fly. Not a lot is known about the mortality rate of bats in this fledgling period, but I am inclined to predict it is high. The little ones peeped fearfully before their maiden flights, and with good reason — I watched several crash into the tall grass, unlikely ever to make it home again. They might, at least, make easy meals for the garter snake I saw that had somehow lost half its face.

All of this took place in a valley that, blessed with steep slopes, icy winters, wet summers, and remoteness from the world’s stock exchanges, has somehow retained the full complement of predators, including wolves, grizzly bears, and mountain lions. I do indeed feel awe in that place, but not much peace. By day I carry pepper spray, and by night I sleep with a twelve-gauge shotgun close at hand, because a couple of years ago a bear tried to break into my “cabin” — a ninety-year-old homestead shack that can’t even keep out the rain — in the first light of dawn. If a god is in charge of the area, he is surely of the mercurial, Old Testament variety.

The idea that nature is a bittersweet and sometimes forbidding place is not, as they say, currently trending. More prevalent is the view reflected in a recent caution from the Chicago Manual of Style editors that capital-N “Nature” is to be used only to denote “a goddess dressed in a flowing garment and flinging fruit and flowers everywhere.” The comment is tongue-in-cheek, but the point is well taken. The natural world is increasingly seen as a gentle and giving realm of the spirit. In some cases, this view is actively religious or quasireligious, whether we are speaking of the biosphere as the provident Earth Mother, the being-of-beings that is James Lovelock’s Gaia, or simply the handiwork of one or another god. But above all else, the actual experience of being in nature seems to affirm its essential holiness. The natural world feels like a spiritual respite: a literal sanctum, where we are safe to reconnect to what is larger than ourselves. Compared to the cosmic rhythms of mountain, sea, and sky, it is ordinary daily life — driving at rush hour, punching security codes, navigating a shape-shifting digital culture — that seems hostile.

Yet there is a serious problem with our idea of sacred nature, and that is that the idol is a false one. If we experience the natural world as a place of succor and comfort, it is in large part because we have made it so. Only 20 percent of the earth’s terrestrial surface is still home to all the large mammals it held five hundred years ago, and even across those refugia they are drastically reduced in abundance. The seas have lost an estimated 90 percent of their biggest fish. For decades there were almost no wolves, grizzly bears, or even bald eagles in the lower 48, and modern recovery projects have brought them back to only a small fraction of their former ranges. Scientists speak of an “ecology of fear” that once guided the movements and behavior of animals that shared land- and seascapes with toothy predators — an anxiety that humans once shared. In much of what’s left of the wild, that dread no longer applies even to deer or rabbits, let alone us. The sheer abundance and variety of the living world, its endless chaos of killing and starving and rutting and suffering, its routine horrors of mass death and infanticide and parasites and drought have faded from sight and mind. We have rendered nature an easy god to worship.