

A Feral Year

I. Vanishing Point

“I have always kept ducks,” says a character in W.G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn*, “even as a child, and the colors of their plumage, in particular the dark green and snow white, seemed to me the only possible answers to the questions that are on my mind.”

In a novel of acrobatic diction and almost no dialogue, this sentence is a brief, fathomless one; a kind of Sebaldian haiku. Maybe that is why it chimes in my mind’s ear as I get out of the car in the early morning twilight and hang my camera over my shoulder. It’s early winter, 2020, and I shove a mask in my pocket.

At the trailhead, I put on a light jacket and knit cap even though the temperature has fallen into what my wife calls puffy-coat weather. This particular walk is a few days short of the solstice, but the whole year feels like one long night. A few weeks ago I came home after dark, chilled to the marrow, having found a great horned owl in an oak tree, which, once found, required my crouching on the hillside for an hour to marvel at the tapering of its feathers from horn to head, so much like a cat’s ears, until I could no longer see. And it’s lately this way, my pausing over something instead of getting on with it; always cold; sometimes tripping into near-fatal errors. Yet all these situations are of separate orders, never to breed sensible resolutions like wearing a warmer coat or avoiding a bush that growls, or not reading the comments.

The air is not much colder than during my earlier visits to the Marin Headlands, but

overnight, the humidity tumbled in from the Pacific and glassed the green metal gates in frost. I've been setting out for these nature walks an hour before dawn, going farther and farther for solitude. Ask and I'll say it's for the pictures—this morning, hope of seeing the coyotes that left a scabble of prints on the beach some weeks ago. But the camera at my hip is really just part of the question, with its faint magnetic pull to the matted scrim of grass along the maintenance road. It propels me away from certain unresolvable feelings: despair, for instance, and rage, and still others that don't have names. And I do ask myself why I keep coming back and what I'm looking for, but like two facing mirrors, the questions reflect to infinity with no answer but the temporary relief of meeting eyes with another creature through glass.

Why do people seem so rotten? What, really, is happening? How does it end?

I point the lens down the trail, turn up the ISO to compensate for the low light, and find a shutter speed just a hair faster than ruinous. With a shiver I start out for Tennessee Cove. Although the mask is still in my pocket, the drumming of everything else on my mind begins to dull under the crunch of my boot soles on gravel. Like the plumage of Sebald's mallards, answers beckon from beyond language, beyond even the frame of human reference.

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Step, step.

Archival silences—the gaps between the uneven footfalls of history—tend to hold many of the holes in the queer record too. It's partly a consequence of fear; there were and still are circumstances when representing one's life in art is a quick way to end it all. Less dramatically, though, it's often that the boundaries of one's available language create a muteness.

As a queer writer and book editor, I feel invested in finding the language and story structures for important experiences, though it might be silly to worry, in an age of social media

bombardment, that any whim or mental burp from these years might go unrecorded for digital posterity. So many people said as the pandemic began, “We’re living through history.” As if there is a special designation of linear time, a blue hour in which the mundane becomes significant. Yet if this is so true, so right, why does it make me sick? It encloses me in the same stale miasma as a cliché, the sort of soul-screaming aversion I used to feel at the thought of stuffing myself into a hetero marriage. What collective story, I had to wonder, are we all writing very badly for ourselves now? What pattern of silences should we be listening to, instead?

I’m not a skilled enough photographer for my images to convey a sense of tumbling out of the human world and into another (on the wings of green-and-white ducks, or otherwise). I think about how diseased my spirit feels everywhere but the trail. How quiet my heart goes as soon as my senses are steeped in a wider ecosystem. How, in my experience, this sense of inner expansion—the moment when the self is almost vanished from existence—is a good starting place for art, and possibly a direction our literature should follow further. Most storytelling structures available to me as a writer, however, speak a different language, centering the human protagonist on a classic arc toward redemption. Climactic stories of redemption seem to need a moral coherence, yet it is incoherence that feels most true about America’s shattered systems. The ending which this classic model demands is improbable beside so much brutality, selfishness, persistent bad-faith rhetoric, cynicism, and exhaustion: so many human vices and so few of our virtues that perhaps our way of storying ourselves in both formal storytelling and in secular life is a form of denial. When words are gutted of their meaning, day-to-day storytelling—our approaches to framing memory, taking the measure of ourselves and our world, and forming expectations for the future—starts to sound hollow too.

Here’s a wild hope: Another kind of storytelling might save the world, if only it can

change the way we think about almost everything.

II. The Myth of an Ending

Months before I began walking, news reportage in 2020 had achieved the uncanny storytelling phenomenon of being all middle. The death charts, the testing kit shortages, the morgue trucks—every week, new tragedies and outrages—sustained a churning sense of suspense that demanded (*seemed to demand*) catharsis, justice, and resolution. But where had this unbearable expectation of relief come from in the first place?

Like so many others, I read, I watched, I clicked, I refreshed. The pandemic had such hooks in me. My wife is a healthcare provider in the military, and as can happen at this intersection of medicine and farce, an abstract news item entered our life with all the subtlety of a bright-orange helicopter: it began in March when infected cruise-ship passengers needed evacuation, and the rescue team members' health was her responsibility. They needed COVID-19 test supplies that were unconscionably scarce but which my wife had to somehow find, somewhere, by herself, anywhere in the Bay Area, while making recommendations to men higher up in her chain of command who generally ignored her, and who had no medical training but a great deal of confidence. In the weeks that followed, at odds with scientific reality, idiotic flowcharts abounded. People got sick, got others very sick. Was this comedy or tragedy? My wife would ultimately work 418 days in a row, gain a scar on her nose from an N95 mask, and argue almost every day with (forgive me) obtuse dick-swingers.

Meanwhile, people we loved died; we said goodbye on our computers.

By summer, the line between experience, witness, and mere interpretation warped. I cooked meals in the same pans we'd always used, woke up in our same bed to the alarm that still

sounded at 5:40 every morning, and limited myself to one primal scream of frustration a month. Yet what was there to do but go on? I listened, I clicked, I refreshed. Cities were on fire, and we were nobodies, all of us living in a collision of systems that were already broken when we got here, clicking buttons and having feelings while people with more agency than us let everything go to hell—yet the promise seemed to be that if we held ourselves together long enough, some kind of external justice would swoop in to make sense of it all, make it right. The sheer incompatibility of these two realities reminded me of a moment from the 2017 wildfires: running up- and downstairs, filling the car full of what we couldn't bear to lose, pausing to comfort our bewildered cat and then pausing again to clean up her vomit, hoping to save the carpet in case this rented home was still here next week, and not dispersing as black ash on the wind. That is, I was acting in two directions at once with equal intensity.

Idly, I found myself thinking during the pandemic of what it must be like to be a wild creature: to flee forest fires, to find shelter in our culverts, to return from a thousand-mile migration to find a seasonal habitat leveled into a baseball diamond, to discover the perils of human garbage, to exist under stress of relentless noise and pressure and proliferation. That summer and fall of 2020, I exercised daily, running past what used to be a fallow rectangle of mustard and oat grass hemmed by telephone wires and bordered on one side by a busy rural road. In the past, I loved the field because it attracted red-winged blackbirds, kestrels, and egrets who hunted bugs and gophers despite the traffic. But all that summer, crews leveled it off, scraped a grid of streets into being whose names all started with W, and by the time it was fire season in California again, the birds had been pushed elsewhere while men straddled rafters and shot nails into all these bank-owned homes, mostly for people who'd lost everything in one of the last three fires.

All that, and I start to feel less outraged and more sympathetic to how much more the average person has in common with these creatures than with the humans who legislate the zoning, appoint the judges, give orders, sit on the utility companies' boards, own the insurance companies, and yes, run the nation. It is easy to tell angry stories about how, day to day, the ground is always moving underfoot because of them; and I used to believe the slogan, in my twenties, that if you're not outraged you're not paying attention. Yet my grandmothers participated in their lives well into their nineties and even past one hundred, and if I am given that many years, I do not see how it is possible to burn up at everything that's wrong for six more decades.

These feelings soon came to rest on a specific moment in late 2020 when the president of the United States was hospitalized for COVID-19. I would observe external circumstance tangle strangely with human expectation, because, besides a person receiving treatment for an illness, the circumstance also played out as a character on a public stage grappling with events before an audience. It was an occasion to wonder what was going on when people felt in their bones (still! somehow!) that there needed to be redemption and resolution and *justice*, as all the writing guides and workshops told us to expect when a figurehead villain with many pre-existing conditions finally catches COVID-19 and is rushed to the hospital. It also says something about the political tone of conversations I was hearing in my Bay Area town, but let us put aside the fiction of objectivity for a moment. Narratively speaking, that moment of October 2020 was so inevitable it was almost interesting, and ultimately, it was how the last, illusory barb of the hook holding me to rage/sadness/etc. finally vanished, setting me free from the belief that conventional storytelling had anything left to say about this shared experience of a pandemic in contemporary life.

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When the president went into the hospital, many people felt he had it coming.

Just as Mad Libs exploits the fun of syntax that shapes its content, like a cart leading its horse, the feeling seemed to have these unexplained tracks that led increasingly toward hardheartedness. The pandemic had cued up all the classic elements of a story, such that it seemed to be writing itself: in addition to the stakes (a deadly new virus on the loose), it also had change (When), antagonists (the president), suspense (hospital), and subjectivity (many people felt). The future seemed to approach with the urgency of a pitchfork-wielding mob, toward a deathbed scene full of suffering and regret: he had it coming. At least that's how it would happen in a movie, a dark children's story, or a particularly satisfying local anecdote that people in my small Pennsylvania hometown might have once shut off their lawnmowers or dawdled at the country store to hear—the almost-audible *thwack* of a shit-stirrer getting what they had coming.

This expectation has many roots in *Poetics*, the blueprint for so much of the Western dramatic tradition, where Aristotle took for granted that audiences seek satisfaction of a shared “moral sense”: a good ending required it. And since then, billions of pages of script and story have obliged, papering a groove for answers to questions like, *Why do people seem so rotten? What, really, is happening? How does it end?* Classical stories are coherent, tacit systems of connotation, cause, effect, and justification—and their complications rise to a crisis point, a structure that is timeless, no matter the ephemeral situation plugged into it. To see it repeated is soothing, which can be mistaken for a formal sense of rightness. Maybe the public imagination has gotten lazy, or maybe it is just exhausted, but the story-sense in its bones that October 2020 thought the outcome to the Walter Reed hospitalization was inevitable.

My wife and I exercised together, and we'd vent and spit and rail to rival the pundits—

but during the president's hospitalization, our potentiating diatribes opened into an uneasy silence. It felt like a familiar trajectory had flung us over an unexpected abyss: if the man died, chaos. But in listening to people's conversations during this time, the trajectory of these predictions had, it seemed, the inevitability of a familiar chord shape even as folks rushed to add a caveat that they didn't wish harm, not *really*. Dissected, the rotten meanness was overstuffed with all the junk of 2020, which itself was further stuffed with more junk, junk all the way down. It wasn't just the immortal narrative form asserting itself on a real-life situation, but something even deeper, I suspected, where the year had gotten its hooks in half a country.

That we were "living through history" was perhaps the most honest statement of what was happening, in fact, this flattening of how we got here into an eternal present tense. For example, in 2019, a surgical mask had been just a generic signifier of medical care in the United States, but in 2020 became a battle flag with elastic ear loops. That is, a form suddenly filled with connotations of care among one group and with connotations about cowardice among another, and ultimately, an identity marker, a sign of reason, or by its absence, a sign of mettle—all of it billowing with decades of political propaganda and prominent in the media coverage we depended on for news. In the language of 2020, a mask now seemed an indicator of a person's essential nature, who they'd been all along, and what, in a moral universe, they deserved.

And therein is mythology's territory, the intersection of narrative, essence, and significance. In *Mythologies*, literary theorist Roland Barthes examines the making of secular meaning at this crossroads. I'd been reading his *Camera Lucida* in an attempt to understand my new infatuation with wildlife photography but found my way into his earlier writing. The kernel of *Mythologies* is that we are all everyday authors, whether we know it or not, reading our environment through a language of connotations and filling in the affective blanks. The ideas

were over sixty years old but seemed to capture just how coded, and how divided, the country's language for what was happening to itself had become. It seemed to explain how a virus could become partisan and the whole country could be talking about *masking* and *social distancing* and even the once-esoteric word *coronavirus*, but some people could say it with earnest solemnity and others sneer at all the government sheep. Same words, different ecosystems of meaning, minds that were difficult to change because each separate worldview not only made sense to its adherents, but was purified to a simple "eternal justification," a universal principle no matter how new.

It's human to seek meaning and coherence—to identify what conforms to our moral sense, and to react negatively to what doesn't. And though Barthesian semiotics is a hyper-specialized way of talking about cognitive biases, it enables some pathos: besides acknowledging that facts are irrelevant in emotional truth, it helps explain our departure points from one another. History molds us collectively, and its inflections are dynamic, but consciousness is seduced by this language-system—both its words and how its signs and narrative elements interact. We end up believing that those who think otherwise are permanently (and always have been) illegible, other, practically another species. No matter that there are acts of altruism, humility, kindness, and most important, *change*, happening every minute: the events of the pandemic settled into familiar grooves for both narrative structure and ideology, and like so many, I locked on to the "certainty" that the outrageous escalations of the past months and years had finally come to a reckoning. Not just through a sick president, but reckoning for broken norms, for the deaths of loved ones and a million strangers, my wife's emotional and physical exhaustion, the constant anger, and the seemingly sanity-saving retreat from people who clung to ideas that did not fit our ideas of the moral and medical parameters of proper care for others.

So when the president exited the hospital and infected his Secret Service agents with COVID-19 for a maskless photo op, reality reminded me one last time that life isn't art. It was such a little thing, that defiantly careless gesture that infected the car's other passengers—small alongside all else that was in the news at that time. But the gesture underscored there was no guarantee of catharsis, let alone rightness. The world was still on fire; the sky over our Northern California town was literally orange. I could keep feeling disillusioned and misanthropic, giving over to bitterness. Or I could release the forms I'd been clinging to, and which kept breaking anyway. Beginning to venture into the parks before dawn, and sometimes after dark, I undertook a sort of ritual estrangement that made it possible to set aside the fiction of moral coherence and admit to knowing almost nothing about what being a human in these years required of me. It was an ending that made it possible to begin again.

And this is what I'm getting to. Stories that reject unity, break form, or leave moral ambiguities unresolved are more difficult, less approachable. Alien, even. That kind of art, like literary fiction, may have a smaller audience as a result, but it is also one of a few places where radical experimentation can find readers willing to recognize that this, too, is a model of life. A model that speaks to a wider, and therefore queerer, interrelationship between everything on this planet. And in presenting other ways to find language for real order, and reckon with real disorder, it can change the way we see and relate to the world.

III. Reading the Ruins

Visibility is sharp along the trail to the cove. The bright sheen of frost makes the coyote tracks on the footbridge stand out like pencil on soft paper. Yet the blankets of blackberry canes that surround the creek won't yield their secrets, and so far the only mammals I've found this

cold morning are the pair of wet-legged deer on the hillside behind me.

I grew up in a family of hunters. It occurs to me, except for the guns, I have taken almost everything I know about walking in nature from this: a way of stilling the breath, softening the footstep, pausing often to dissolve outward. Animal senses are keener, but there's a fantasy that if you try hard enough you can disappear. And moving this way makes an art of patience—to forget about my beach plan and stop *here*. To let the field of startled silence around my body wear off and be punctured, gradually, by the rustle of a song sparrow and careening flutter of a chickadee. A woodpecker resumes its knocking.

As the deer browse, grass and chaparral hiss against their chests. They're too far away and brown-against-brown for a good portrait, but I gaze at them through the camera lens. The larger doe's face is straight-on, all eyelashes, a brush of white fur in each swiveling ear. The dark patch between her eyes seems to me to be both stern and curious, like a furrowed brow. I look back at her "long and long" as Walt Whitman puts it, as if trying to decipher a word almost legible, until the taut cord of attention between us goes slack and she dips her head into the thicket.

I take a picture anyway. Cameras pull the living subject out of time, a sort of metaphysical death, but what I'm doing could not be more different from hunting. The camera in nature, unlike the gun, engages with the chasm between the known and unknown without pulling anything purposefully across; to try to understand any purpose for taking this photograph is to come up against a lack (or at least *my* lack) of language. Here, at the boundary between myself and the rest of the natural world, the camera seems to mark only a wish to see into the plane of another species' consciousness, a search—the developing of a perspective that can story the world in a different way.

I can't explain, really. Only that taking pictures of animals has to do with the obliterating power of awe, and that relearning the language for this curiosity has the potential to carry us along a different intuition of how life moves.

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Here at the outer orbit of my estrangement, I'd begun W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*. Writers in my MFA program had read it together, and they'd talked about its odd black-and-white images; also about walking among ruins in the English countryside, the narrator's mental breakdown that precedes the telling and is never satisfactorily clarified, the sickly men of history, and oh, the meandering sentences, their hypotactic commas, the erudition and information and readerly grit required to traverse pages-long passages on haddock fishing and silkworms and Joseph Conrad and trains. But nobody talked to me of Sebald's animals.

His is a lonely novel full of ruined landscapes and devastated populations, so perhaps it's no wonder that points of life stand out. Yet this is the same narrator who flees in dread at the sight of lovers copulating on the beach, who does not seek out company. Animals are a site of particular emotion: pity and tenderness and brief awe, devoid of sentimentality. It's an unusual treatment in literature—avoiding anthropomorphism, avoiding extreme cruelty or melodramatic tragedy. I've always found uncritical animal sacrifices to be careless writing, even among novels shortlisted for the big awards, a device for channeling outsize emotions onto the page without violating the story's (strictly human) emotional scale. The tactic exploits the human/nonhuman divide by projecting our shadows onto animal targets. Sebald's narrator speculates similarly about the parable of the Gadarene, in which the Lord commanded the evil spirits possessing a maniac to inhabit a herd of swine that were feeding in a high meadow, and then drove them off the cliff to their deaths; Sebald's narrator wonders whether “human reasoning, diseased as it is,

needs to seize on some other kind that it can take to be inferior and thus deserving of annihilation.”

Sebald’s creatures, on the other hand, seem animated by their own agency: not just the green-and-white ducks, but the mallard in the Vondelpark rain, the rabbit on the trail, the caged quail, “evidently in a state of dementia, running to and fro along the edge of the cage,” a state mirroring the narrator’s recent hospitalization in an asylum. The novel’s bestiary does not read as a device, but as a series of brief but full encounters in which animals are given the same respect and quality of attention the narrator directs to human others; there is no human/nonhuman divide, simply cohabitation in a damaged ecology. This is exactly how it feels on the trail when meeting the deer or passing a promontory under the gaze of a ruffled hawk drying her feathers. The divide between my consciousness and theirs, at this moment, is no more or less confounding than the one between mine and that of my own species. Even this park is evidence of humans’ refusal to understand one another, being, before it was public land, military land, and before that private land, and before that, just simply land. It kept the Coast Miwok people alive for eight thousand years before Western intrusions added all but a few to the countless millions of Indigenous peoples to have been annihilated by settler colonialism and disease. Sebald knows that almost anywhere humans walk is a ruin, and it’s a kind of insanity that we mostly go about our days without heeding how our habits push everything else toward extinction—including ourselves, since we are part of the ecosystem. His narrator’s perspective is a corrective to this heedlessness, even if it triggers a mental breakdown.

It’s not that animals escape *The Rings of Saturn* unscathed. Earlier in this essay I talked about endings, that classic structure demands catharsis and a showing of the author’s moral sensibility. Usually this is expressed in plot, via some sort of redemption or revelation of justice

centered on a single human character, but Sebald doesn't really have other characters who bring competing agendas that drive a plot. And for that matter, what plot? Instead, the narrator's movements through time—physical, intellectual, and in memory—create propulsion sustained by repeating imagery. Repetition, in this context, is not merely soothing duplication of outside forms, but rather a means to create significance, a way of interpreting the narrator's experience. The novel's ending, then, is an intensification, a breathtaking concatenation, of a mythology he has constructed of these motifs all along. Silkworms are primary among them (Sebald's name is rooted in silk production), and in the final chapter he sweeps the reader along an alignment of dates throughout history that encompass many of his other images, culminating in Nazi schoolchildren steaming silkworms to death as a class project. It brings us to the author's own connection to the material: behind his writing is the horror of indirect complicity stemming from his father's role as an administrator in the Nazi Wehrmacht, and the devastation accompanying the projection of human designs on other lives.

The Rings of Saturn's project is to explore a specific mass death: the Holocaust, the gravitational center that must be orbited carefully, glancingly, lest it swallow all language. And to do so, it practices another kind of meaning-making through rigorous adherence to certain images and emotions as if to mimic the narrator's omnipresent sense of horror and claustrophobia (his entrapping "echospace," as described by critic Andrea Köhler). But those repetitions also order the text, and just as important, serve to construct a worldview which the audience learns to access and gradually gains fluency in, expanding the novel's project beyond the author-narrator's personal entry point. It holds the narrator and us in affective relation to history, industry, war, extinction, and the current landscape. Creating this manic interconnection forestalls traditional notions of a central protagonist, antagonist, plot, resolution, and storytelling

itself. Yet recurrence and repetition come to feel, in the end, more like a natural consciousness than the orchestration of external events that the classic narrative arc usually forces into being.

Sebald said he wrote prose, not fiction. I'm not arguing that this is the only direction for storytelling—the wonderful thing about queering a form is that it means doing something unconventional and inclusive. I'm interested in resolutions that seek beauty, release, equipoise, and openness to something new; endings that do not embitter. The solutions to the world's problems do not exist in any novel, but novels can be practice for thinking and feeling differently. Here on the edge of our time's own perils, queer, decentralized, experimental forms of storytelling can shift how we receive and understand our environment, and find our way in it.

IV. Half-Step

I don't know how to resolve the situation of two people looking at the same thing and having violently opposing interpretations; or a cure for the problem of people talking right past one another. But I want to have faith in anything that makes people give more weight to the questions of *why* and *what else*, instead of whipping us toward unstable answers; to have faith in stillness rather than recognition, so as not to confuse truth with what's merely familiar.

This morning in the park, I find myself pulled away from the valley trail and instead climb, scrambling up, following a switchback past a shoulder of evergreens until I am actually above the hawk, looking down on her hunched form and cap of feathers, as she views the valley and cove. No telling what she sees. I don't have eyes for the great ultraviolet contours in the horizon, those magnetic currents powered by the Earth's core that guide her north and south each year. They're invisible to me but not imaginary, exerting their influence on everything from bird migrations to plant growth. What human eyes can see here, on the last solid step of a cliff where

I am braced against gravity, is limited; while to the raptor, gravity is just another current of the wind and the magnetic fields are a map of the sky.

Citations

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