The Feasting

Alison Hawthorne Deming

The sun hangs low over Race Point at the far tip of Cape Cod, sunlight thick and yellow turning the rippled sand into a patchwork of slate blue shadows and buttery highlights. Each ankle-high ridge and valley of windblown sand becomes a painterly study in color contrast. There is no gray zone at this late hour of day. The tide is receding. It has left a heap of tiny fish behind, like a row of hay raked up in a farmer's meadow. The fish look like little plastic snakes or gummy worms, their bodies glistening clear as spring water. They look like glass, except that the bodies twitch and flip a moment before falling still. The tiny fish are piled up several inches deep, and the row extends down the beach as far as I can see—at least a quarter mile.

When the hidden struggle of living shows itself this way—the wild ones living their dying in plain sight—the shock to human eyes has two sides. One is abundance and one is grief. The water boils as fish leap for safety, and the huge mouths of striped bass stab the surface in pursuit. Thousands upon thousands of fish are cast up and dying. The alewife have bodies clear all the way through, marked only with one silky black line running the creature's length and a piercing black eye hurled toward the sky. The mackerel have a cord of shiny blue tissue

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running through the clear flesh, so that it seems the fish skin grows within this cocoon of liquid glass. Some show a dim stain of red near the gills where blood has seeped. Thousands upon thousands lie dead in the waves' wake. They are mostly two inches in length. A few have grown to three-inch length and have the iridescent blue skin of adult mackerel. I scoop up some specimens in my hand, turning them just so in the sunlight, and a lilac-colored patch near the gill illuminates.

The striped bass are making their seasonal journey along the Atlantic shore. Fierce feeders, they come within a foot of the shore, their leaping gape through all of this forage, ecstatic. They jump nearly out of their bodies in the feasting. This is the dance they are made for. Perhaps the bass have schooled this close to shore in flight from larger predators. The spectacle is a feast or a terror, depending on whose story you're telling. They remind me, these thousands of fish dying on the beach, of those mindful suicides—like the poet Anne Sexton with her "awful rowing towards God"—suicides who end it because they cannot bear living another day with the knowledge that they will have to die, curing themselves of death's threat by making a preemptive strike. I know the analogy has nothing to do with the instinct that drives the tiny fish to leap to their deaths, yet the paradox of that desperation, whether a mindless or mindful act, stirs up a sense of tenderness toward life and the difficult terms it sets.

I have faith in natural process, in the intricate systems of reciprocity that keep nature from tilting out of balance. I may belong to the last generation for a very long time to feel this faith. Life is tough and resilient. Life overdoes it. Consider the seeds of the dandelion weed, the tadpoles of a frog, and the sperm production of the human male. There are so many more gametes than needed for a species to survive. The system is biased toward continuity. As for the alewife and mackerel beaching at Race Point on a sunny afternoon in May, this event is a random catastrophe of nature, nothing out of the ordinary. How many more thousands or millions of hatchlings are schooling lustily offshore, escaping the stripers' mouths to fatten into their own maturity? There is no malice and no grief in the actions of predator or prey, only the spectacle of muscular effort, the shine of wet skin.

I have been trying to wrap my head around the scale of violence

erupting in human homes, tribes, nations, and against our mothering planet in all its intricate wholeness. No one can explain or justify the breadth and depth of human cruelty. Malice and grief abound. The facts come home to us in the triple crown of climate chaos, crashing biodiversity, and ceaseless genocidal war. How terribly ironic it is that we, the animals who brought ethical principles into the equation of living with others, have turned out to be the most heavy-handed lugs on Earth. There is no point denying this: study air, water, oceans, amphibian or mammal conditions. Memorize the names of places where anthropogenic human suffering makes everyone want to forget: Auschwitz, Darfur, Rwanda, the Lower Ninth Ward, Aceh, Baghdad, Bethlehem. Open the mind to anguish at the start of the twenty-first century, and the tsunami will rise. It's no wonder people cover their ears. Who can bear to carry the weight of so much grief?

I recently dreamed a war scene. Kurds wearing head wraps and draped cloth were tending to the wounded after a battle. The man I love lay on the sand, an ancient place that looked biblical, as I recall the exotic photographs from a children's book of religious stories. The man had been so wounded he could not move. His enemies wrapped him in a papyrus mat and loaded him, like a spool of carpet, onto another Kurd's back, who promised to carry his adversary to refuge. He did so because he knew that if he could not bear the weight, the burden would crush him.

The dream came at a time of many losses in my life. I have been caring for my mother, who at age ninety-nine does not want to live any longer. Each visit to her apartment has exercised my compassion, as, clear-minded, she describes the latest physical indignities, the pain of a collapsing skeleton, the logistics of drug regimens, the boredom of aimless days without a desire even for television, the daily wish to go to sleep and not wake up. "Maybe I can kill myself with boredom," she jokes. But the body has a mind of its own, and hers is not yet finished with life. I have also struggled with losses endured by my partner of the past eight years, a rugged western man who suffered a severe ankle injury while rock climbing as a young man that led to an amputation in his sixties, followed by an ocular stroke that took away the sight in one eye and scattered a cascade of tiny occlusions over his brain. No textbook or essay can offer words adequate to the

task of describing what happens to a person whose brain labors to reconfigure after such events. The struggle was more difficult than either of us imagined. It cost us our relationship. The gradual loss of these loved ones is, too, an ordinary catastrophe, though it may sound callous to say so. Death and diminishment are the price of entry. Grief either swallows you whole or spits you out to feel compassion for the grief of others.

For several years I have been writing about animals, looking at how important they have been as characters in the human drama from very early in our history, at how much joy and texture and mystery they bring into our lives. These too have become stories of grief, as the news gets bleaker about the animals' fate in a biologically impoverished world. Fifty percent of the world's animals are in decline. One-quarter of the world's mammals face extinction. That includes the elephant, humpback whale, gorilla, orangutan, spider monkey, cheetah, tiger, and polar bear. Imagine a world in which these creatures are merely imaginary, as the dinosaurs and woolly mammoths are to us today. Imagine the loss of wonder and excitement, the growing fear and sorrow as the continuity between human beings and the others tatters. Some of the threatened ones will survive in captive breeding programs, and for this stark generosity, one must give thanks. But the world we leave to the future will be brutally impoverished. Earth's gorgeous palette is fading, and there is no ark for our fellow creatures but us.

I often question why I am writing about animals at a time when I am suffering much more intimate losses. I'm not sure if studying animals is a way to avoid the pain closer to home or a way to console myself that things are not really that bad for my kind. I suppose both motivations make sense. I need to see the beauty of the lavender stain in a dying mackerel's gills, to feel the lurch of the predator in its raucous feasting joy, to honor the struggle each living creature mounts against the threat of annihilation. I need to write so that words may do their part in building the ark; or, if it is too late for ark building, then at least I can help extend the moral imagination so that it reaches beyond personal loss.

It is difficult to believe that our companion creatures are imperiled. The sensuous thrill of life can lead one to the sense of wonder,

but it cannot tell you, for example, that there are dead zones in the oceans, a hole in the sky, and a tincture of industro-agro-pharmaceuticals flowing into rivers and oceans, turning them into chemistry sets brewing a monstrous future. Frogs growing extra legs. Striped bass sipping antidepressants, then hanging vertically in the water like wallpaper. Newborn males of our species arriving with alarming genital abnormalities. To know such bad news takes science. It will take science and public policy and invention to gentle our impact on the planet. It will take poetry, stories, songs, paintings, and theater to bear witness to the unpredictable world we are shaping and its impact on our spirits.

My intention is to live by the doctrine of grief, to savor sadness as its own dark memo of instruction from the moral imagination. "Up again, old heart!—it seems to say—there is victory yet for all justice," as Emerson once urged. Feast your spirit on the beauty that remains.