

of avoiding catastrophe, is a rational choice, and a viable one if we can recover the necessary political sanity. Of course it makes sense to consider alternative energy sources, provided *they* make sense. But also we will have to reexamine the economic structures of our lives, and conform them to the tolerances and limits of our earthly places. Where there is no more, our one choice is to make the most and the best of what we have.

BRIAN DOYLE

The Greatest Nature Essay Ever

FROM *Orion*

... WOULD BEGIN WITH an image so startling and lovely and wondrous that you would stop riffling through the rest of the mail, take your jacket off, sit down at the table, adjust your spectacles, tell the dog to lie *down*, tell the kids to make their *own* sandwiches for heavensake, that's why God gave you *hands*, and read straight through the piece, marveling that you had indeed seen or smelled or heard *exactly* that, but never quite articulated it that way, or seen or heard it articulated that way, and you think, *Man, this is why I read nature essays, to be startled and moved like that, wow.*

The next two paragraphs would smoothly and gently move you into a story, seemingly a small story, a light tale, easily accessed, something personal but not self-indulgent or self-absorbed on the writer's part, just sort of a cheerful nutty everyday story maybe starring an elk or a mink or a child, but then there would suddenly be a sharp sentence where the dagger enters your heart and the essay spins on a dime like a skater, and you are plunged into waaay deeper water, you didn't see it coming at *all*, and you actually shiver, your whole body shimmers, and much later, maybe when you are in bed with someone you love and you are trying to evade his or her icy feet, you think, *My God, stories do have roaring power, stories are the most crucial and necessary food, how come we never hardly say that out loud?*

The next three paragraphs then walk inexorably toward a line of explosive Conclusions on the horizon like inky alps. Probably the sentences get shorter, more staccato. Terser. Blunter. Shards of sentences. But there's no opinion or commentary, just one line

fitting into another, each one making plain inarguable sense, a goat or even a senator could easily understand the sentences and their implications, and there's no shouting, no persuasion, no eloquent pirouetting, no pronouncements and accusations, no sermons or homilies, just calm clear statements one after another, fitting together like people holding hands.

Then an odd paragraph, this is a most unusual and peculiar essay, for right here where you would normally expect those alpine Conclusions, some Advice, some Stern Instructions & Directions, there's only the quiet murmur of the writer tiptoeing back to the story he or she was telling you in the second and third paragraphs. The story slips back into view gently, a little shy, holding its hat, nothing melodramatic, in fact it offers a few gnomic questions without answers, and then it gently slides away off the page and off the stage, it almost evanesces or dissolves, and it's only later, after you have read the essay three times with mounting amazement, that you see quite how the writer managed the stagecraft there, but that's the stuff of another essay for another time.

And finally the last paragraph. It turns out that the perfect nature essay is quite short, it's a lean taut thing, an arrow and not a cannon, and here at the end there's a flash of humor, and a hint or tone or subtext of sadness, a touch of rue, you can't quite put your finger on it but it's there, a dark thread in the fabric, and there's also a shot of espresso hope, hope against all odds and sense, but rivetingly there's no call to arms, no clarion brassy trumpet blast, no website to which you are directed, no hint that you, yes you, should be ashamed of how much water you use or the car you drive or the fact that you just turned the thermostat up to seventy, or that you actually have not voted in the past two elections despite what you told the kids and the goat. Nor is there a rimshot ending, a bang, a last twist of the dagger. Oddly, sweetly, the essay just ends with a feeling eerily like a warm hand brushed against your cheek, and you sit there, near tears, smiling, and then you stand up. Changed.

DAVID JAMES DUNCAN

Cherish This Ecstasy

FROM *The Sun*

THE PEREGRINE FALCON was brought back from the brink of extinction by a ban on DDT, but also by a peregrine falcon mating hat invented by an ornithologist at Cornell University. If you can't buy this, Google it. Female falcons had grown dangerously scarce. A few wistful males nevertheless maintained a sort of sexual loitering ground. The hat was imagined, constructed, then forthrightly worn by the ornithologist as he patrolled this loitering ground, singing *Chee-up! Chee-up!* and bowing like an overpolite Japanese Buddhist trying to tell somebody goodbye. For reasons neither scientists nor fashion designers entirely understand, this inspired the occasional male falcon to dive onto the ornithologist's head, fuck the hat, and fire endangered sperm into the hat's hidden rubber receptacle. The last few females were then artificially inseminated so that their chicks could be raised in DDT-free captivity. The young produced in this way saved the peregrine from extinction — a success story from the annals of human meddling, one as rare as debacles like DDT are common.

The same year that I was researching a novel about birds entering extinction while my first marriage was doing the same, I wrote a long, intimate letter to the Cornell ornithologist. That he was a stranger perhaps explains the intimacy, strangers being preferable to friends when things as personal as marriages are falling to ruin. That he'd managed to save a species explains my blind trust. It's been decades since I wrote the letter, and I didn't keep a copy. Memory fixates on times of intense passage, but also mythologizes them. Allowing for this paradox, here is everything I remember about my letter to the ornithologist: