

story-making self. To wonder and to watch. Data collection and awe. To hunt and to love. Observation and imagination. Science and art. No division but in the human mind.

And then it is divided, the way we butcher a cow. Split into parts. Classrooms. Periods. Texts. And then, at least for me, a life of putting the self, the whole self, back together again. Ceasing to believe I have to choose only one way of knowing at the exclusion of others. Ceasing to believe that writing poetry and prose and speaking out politically lessen my credibility as a scientist.

The rage for order is the passion of the scientist as well as the poet, who seeks some kind of form to contain language, image, thought. The scientist seeks patterns, order—and the animal continually breaks patterns, creates disorder. The poem, as well, pushes hard against whatever form we use. I come up against my limits time and again—of seeing, of language, of form, of imagination.

Together with poetry, the indigenous perspective of orcas in Alaska shows me ways to break out of given forms of understanding. It forces me to imagine my study animal from the perspective of a culture that believed humans and animals spoke the same language, the one poet W.S. Merwin refers to when he writes: “I want to tell what the forests/were like//I will have to speak/in a forgotten language.” The one Alaskan poet Peggy Shumaker refers to when she writes: “In a language lost to us/God is singing.” The humans and orcas that once spoke that common language could transform into one another and back, zipping in and out of their skins.

Wendell Berry writes that “To create is to involve oneself as fully, as consciously and imaginatively, as possible in the creation, to be immersed in the world.” That is the work of both science and art. I know now that it’s entirely possible to honor both the means and methods of science and the means and methods of art, and to live a life exploring the ecotone of their overlap. It’s entirely possible for me as a scientist to do solid research work, and to advocate politically for the animals I study and for their habitat. To research them, and to love them, and to imagine myself into them, and to grieve when they are injured. For me, a fragile hope resides within these intersections—the hope of healing the rift that divides our culture and threatens our planet.

At the end of each field season, my mentor, the late

great walrus biologist Bud Fay, would send me a stern letter, which would take many days to arrive by float plane at a fish hatchery ten miles from my field camp. “Eva, it’s high time for you to get back to Fairbanks. It’s time to get down to brass tacks.” Enough wandering the sound, gathering data, and filling journals with sentences and yellow Rite in the Rain field books with notes.

Time to figure out what it all might mean.

But to this day it’s hard for me to leave that place where I am whole. Where “I am listening with all I am,” in the words of poet Christian Wiman. *That’s* the brass tacks. That’s the stance of the poet, the scientist, how they are the same. There is the gathering. There is the wondering, the pondering. There is the weaving our findings into a larger story that stretches out before us and after us. There is the admiration for other life forms, what we learn about them, and what remains hidden, unknowable.

When I write a poem, I am listening with all I am. When I observe a pod of orcas, I am listening and looking with all I am. If I am doing my work, I am zipping in and out of my own skin, my own mind, to accomplish that total listening.

Eva Saulitis is the author of *Leaving Resurrection* (essays), *Into Great Silence* (memoir, forthcoming from Beacon Press), and *Many Ways to Say It* (poetry). A new poetry collection, *Prayer in Wind*, is forthcoming in 2015. She teaches creative writing in the low-residency MFA program at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

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Between Tides, 2014
Pastel on Paper, 18 x 12 in

