

EILEEN NEFF

Mountain Drawing, 2017
Archival pigment on dibond, 24 x 29 in



COURTESY BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

CYNTHIA JATUL

Humor of the Wild

A memoir of moments
when nature showed its wit

Nature is no joke; it can kill you. You know your story. One of mine happened skiing back out from camping at Reflection Lakes below Mount Rainier. The snow was wet and falling heavily. I had trouble with snow caking up on my skis. The snow had melted into my clothes and I was getting wet. My friend got farther and farther ahead of me. In frustration, I would use a pole to jab off the caked snow from the base of my skis and then struggle on. I was carrying snowshoes in my bulky backpack, but damned if I wasn't going to ski out. This winter ski camping trip had been my idea. I looked down at my wet jacket and felt cold and was aghast that all the work I was doing wasn't warming me up.

Again I couldn't see my friend up ahead through the heavily falling snow. I was getting hypothermic. I began to feel apathetic about moving farther and lost interest in getting to the car. It was a strange, dreamlike feeling but some part of me was aware that I was in trouble. I managed to get my friend's attention. If she hadn't helped me lash on my snowshoes, I wouldn't have managed, as my hands had become useless cold blunt objects. Nature is no joke. You can die out there.

Where's the humor in nature? Is this a reasonable question to ask at this point in the Anthropocene? Can nature withstand our destructive onslaught? How many species will be losers? How many ecosystems will unravel, falter, and disintegrate? Our endless expansion, development, encroachment, removal, extraction, and emissions show little sign of abatement. Drought, burning forests, retreating glaciers, diminished salmon populations, and starving orcas bring me sorrow. There are times when being out in nature is an experience of mourning, of deep disturbance for the magnitude of what is unfolding. Take for example the recent comment of an experienced birder who said, "I hate to tell you, but there are less of them." As pollinators drop in numbers and show signs of falling out of sync with the plants that depend on them for seed production, I want to shout, "Where is the humor?" Is it a cruel, sadistic joke at the expense of the other wild regions and their multitude of life-forms? Out of reach, unknown, of little monetary value—these are the butt of our joke on nature? The question inevitably arises, "Who gets the last laugh?" Is nature's sense of humor the crashing and burning of human civilization? Our slide into violent desperation

expressed in conflicts over dwindling resources? Will our cellular relatives smirk and find amusement in humanity's descent into fighting, dying, and technological retreat? It can feel challenging to search for the humor in nature.

We were on a family camping trip through Montana one summer when the girls were of elementary school age. Rounding a bend in the foothills of Glacier National Park, I spotted a coyote. I pulled over and stopped the car. The coyote was stalking some prey. It was slouched low, moving with stealth toward a prairie dog that was standing above ground about fifty feet away.

Advancing, the coyote didn't appear to be on the radar of the prairie dog. We watched and couldn't help wonder if we shouldn't intervene. At the last second, the prairie dog gave a sharp, loud whistle and dove into its tunnel. In response, the coyote continued to the vacated tunnel mound, sniffed the ground, and then squatted directly over the prairie dog's tunnel and urinated. Afterward, the coyote walked off with its head held erect, in no hurry, and with no sign of shame. We had witnessed a trickster in action, a scene deeply reminiscent of coyote stories we were fond of reading aloud. We laughed and laughed and felt lucky to have observed a moment of animal humor, conducted not for a human audience, but for a mysterious intent known only to coyote.

Many years ago, when in my twenties and living in Colorado, I was up in the mountains, somewhere in the central Rockies, on a solo hike. I had decided to leave the trail and ascend a steep meadow to a rocky ridge. I made the ridge and took in the views, which I now imagine were free of human intrusion. A forested valley below rising to ridges and exposed peaks. It had been worth the additional effort. It was summer and I had worked up a sweat on the ascent. Satisfied by seeing what the ridge had to offer, I began my descent back to the trail some five hundred feet below. About halfway down the slope, I notice a group of six to eight mountain goats climbing toward me. Given their obvious climbing advantage and speed, there was no way to avoid an encounter. I sensed that they were specifically headed for me. It briefly crossed my mind that I should try to evade them, but whether ascending or descending, they would easily overtake me. So I decided to stop to see what they wanted. Within moments, I was surrounded. With little hesitation, they reached out their tongues and

began to lick my exposed skin. I was a human salt lick who had conveniently crossed their path. I was intrigued that they had sensed my sweat and wasted no time in availing themselves of the essential minerals glistening on the surface of my skin.

During my late twenties and until I was thirty-eight, I lived in Boston. I had moved to the city for graduate school and had planned to move out west once I had finished my nurse practitioner training. But then I fell in love with the mountains of Vermont and New Hampshire and spent as much time there as possible hiking, backpacking, and Nordic skiing. On one short backpacking trip to an area of granite ledges, perhaps Carter Ledge, the weather turned on our small group. I had organized the trip and was carrying the fixings for a pancake breakfast. The ledges were wonderful to explore. Smooth white rock that one could walk over, interspersed with small islands of diminutive trees and blueberry bushes. It was the right season for berries and we picked them by the fistful, plenty to add to our breakfast feast. The sky darkened and the winds picked up. The signs were obvious. The potential for bad weather had materialized. It seemed that the smarter people had opted out of the trip, which accounted for our group's small size. As we topped the ledges and entered the forest, the rain was steady. There was an old lean-to just off the trail. The roof low enough to force occupants to sit or lie down. We crawled in, happy for the dry space. Now we had a decision to make. Continue with our overnight plans or bag it and hike out. What was the rush? Nature had provided us an abundance of delicious ripe blueberries and I had pancake mix, oil, and maple syrup. I rustled through my backpack and hauled out my Svea stove and cook set. In no time, I was flipping pancakes and serving them up oozing with hot sweet berries. How happy we soon became. We hiked out in the rain, perhaps just making the trailhead by nightfall; it's hard to remember if we needed our headlamps or not. What's memorable is the friendships that blossomed in that tiny lean-to, in the small dry spot that allowed us to delight in summer's mountain fruits. For many years afterward we referenced our salvaging of a rained-out trip. Cooking pancakes in the rain? Who would want to waste such fine berries?

On a more distant excursion from Boston, I went up to Baxter Park in Maine to backpack and hike up Mount

Katahdin. The place felt so distant and the trails held few hikers. That was the way it once was if you were willing to go Maine and hike into the mountains for a few miles. I would make other trips to Baxter, once in winter to reascend Katahdin, but this was a summer trip and my first time in moose country. I was excited about the opportunity to see the mighty herbivores. While hiking with my partner of that time, I came across a weathered branch that bore a striking resemblance to a moose in profile. The piece was only about ten to twelve inches in length and easily carried. I held it and proceeded through the forest, allowing my imagination to see it as a good sign. One of us said it was a moose effigy, the other an analogy. This sparked a spirited discussion about which was a more apt term for the moose-shaped branch. What type of representation was it? Did it hold spiritual power or was it more aptly a fitting natural resemblance? Engrossed in our discussion, each thought oneself to be undoubtedly the most clever. As we talked, the trail went around a bend. Suddenly, before us stood a large bull moose. We both froze. I was in the lead and made eye contact with the majestic animal. It stood staring at me as if to say, "Effigy or analogy, it doesn't matter, for here I stand in the middle of the trail." We stepped back out of deference to the real thing, our feelings of cleverness quickly dissipated. Of all times to see other people, a man and a boy suddenly came up the trail behind us. The man, who appeared to be the father, advanced on the moose. We were shocked. There were a few tense moments as the animal sized up the human standing before him. Then, in a moment of grace, the moose stepped off the trail. The man and his son hiked on. I stood watching the moose. It dipped and turned its head in order to weave its massive antlers between the closely spaced deciduous trees. This was an obvious inconvenience. No wonder it had been walking the trail. Now back to our discussion. Was my branch best thought of as effigy or analogy, and how great had been the luck of the man that the moose stepped off the trail?

In my late thirties, I did a volunteer stint providing health care in the town of Zumbahua, perched at twelve thousand feet in a remote area of Ecuador. I was with some other health care providers from Boston, and our focus was to assist in tracking people with TB and ensuring that they received treatment. The others were there for two weeks,

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but I had made arrangements to spend three months at the small hospital and fell into a routine of seeing patients with a local nurse-midwife. From the windows of the small facility, one could look out into a cemetery. I recall being struck by the continuity of seeing pregnant women in the unadorned exam room, while on the other side of the wall rested the community's ancestors. On the Day of the Dead, families spent the day in the cemetery. Food was brought, the graves were tended, and the crosses were decorated with flowers and boughs. At intervals, bells were rung. The next day, as we saw patients, I glanced out the window and saw goats wandering through the cemetery, nibbling on the vegetative decorations on the crosses and graves. No one ran out shouting at the goats. They went on calmly munching, honoring the fact that in order to live, one needs to eat.

Toward the end of my time in Zumbahua, I connected with a climbing club in Quito and was able to make arrangements to join a climbing trip to Chimborazo. I met up with what turned out to be a large group headed up to mark the one-year anniversary of club members' deaths on the mountain. We arrived at the *refugio* at sixteen thousand

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feet after endless switchbacks on a dirt road crossing the barren lower flanks of Chimborazo. The *refugio* was engulfed in clouds. A table was set up and a somber religious ceremony ensued. It was a sobering initiation for my first Andean peak climb. We began our ascent in the pitch dark at 2:00 A.M., almost immediately ascending through steep snow. At some point we formed rope teams, and as it worked out, it was just a club leader, Diego, and me on a rope. We broke through the clouds. Glaciers stretched out around us like endless sand dunes. We came upon an exhausted team of North American men from our group who had bolted ahead at the onset. Diego and I plodded on. As the day wore on, we became the only team on the upper glaciers. Sidestepping a blue crevasse, I wondered at the sanity of the situation. If Diego went in, how would I perform a solo rescue? The air was too thin for much thought beyond trying to keep my feet moving, the ambition to summit a fire in my belly. The snow got deeper and deeper and we began to intermittently post-hole to mid thigh. It was grueling to pull my leg up out of the snow to continue. The summit was visible above a broad slope of whiteness. I decided to crawl. If I went on all fours, the distribution of my weight allowed me to stay on the snow's surface. This was much better. Diego looked back at me, and I steeled myself for a command to get up. Instead, a smile crossed his face and he dropped to his knees as well. We advanced like that, two people crawling, roped together up the final curved dome. I no longer felt human. I turned my head

side to side and growled. It was a ridiculous way to climb, but it was working. In another thirty minutes, we were standing on the summit, alone on the ridge of the cordillera. The clouds had drifted apart and we could see the glaciers, the broad barren base of the volcano, and then the endless undulations of the green land stretched out to the horizon. Years later, I read Andrea Wulf's *The Invention of Nature*, about the life, explorations, and scientific contributions of Alexander von Humboldt. His climb of Chimborazo had provided an epiphany to his emerging understanding of ecology. From such heights he observed the ordered stratifications of ecological zones from forests to altiplanos to barren scrub and finally alpine glaciers. It was a stunning place to stand with the only other person to summit that day, Diego and me the comical bear crawlers.

In the summer of 2018, Tahlequah, a southern resident orca, carried her dead calf on her back, keeping the small black-and-white body above water for seventeen days. Day after day, for over a thousand miles, she swam the waters of the Salish Sea. Another year in which there were no surviving calves for this population of orcas. We observed her as stories and images flooded the media. Where was the humor? Tahlequah's behavior indicated visceral grief. Anyone who could laugh or question the pain was out of touch. An absence of humor was evident. Besides her grief, was she also showing us her species's anger? Was she protesting our desecration of her territory? It brought me pain.

Years earlier, I had found myself temporally stranded on a cove at high tide on the Washington coast. There was sufficient beach to assuage concern of being inundated by the incoming tide. But the headlands of steep rock and vegetation in either direction appeared insurmountable. Waiting was the simplest solution. As the tide rose, an otter appeared on the waves. It dove and surfed, swam back out again, and repeated its antics the whole time the waves were at their strongest. We were both alone. I doubt the otter observed me sitting on the beach watching it play. Did I see the humor? It was unmistakable. While I was trapped, the otter was free to find joy tumbling in the breakers. I felt the uplift.

The Methow River, a tributary of the Columbia, was a winding ribbon of shifting hues on the last day of the year. At moments blue, then gray, then interrupted by brilliant white rapids. Five of us were packed in our Subaru.

College-age daughters, my cane-wielding mother, my partner, and our deaf cattle dog, Sage. So packed was the car that Sage had to ride high on the luggage, crouched sphinx-like, keeping an eye on the strange four-wheeled creatures that followed or sped past us. The dry hills on either side of the river were earth-pottery brown. Individual slopes were snow covered to a ridgeline, then abruptly returned to earth tones. The absence of trees and the alternating layers of snow and soil revealed textures composed of furrows, undulations, and water lines. Above us, a raven swooped low. It suddenly pitched and rolled in a jest of frivolity, causing my mom to ask, "Did you see that?" Nearby stood scorched trees from the previous year's massive wildfires.

Humor hasn't replaced my pain. Grief has repeatedly welled up in me with the rising of Tahlequah, the filling of western skies with acrid smoke, in response to the repeated assaults on our wild spaces, national monuments, refuges, and lands adjacent to our grand parks. Humor can't abate the anger over the unjust impacts of environmental racism exhibited post-Hurricanes Katrina, Sandy, Maria, and Harvey, to name but a few examples. Out of fairness, one must ask, whose land and communities have already been devastated or are slowly tortured by toxins? Humor isn't my antidote to consciousness. It can vanish when life hangs in the balance or when painful realities arise. Not to see the humor nature exhibits, though, would involve a closing of the senses, a withdrawal from observation, a stubborn refusal to enjoy. Openness to nature's wit offers a path, a handhold, a rope to the other incomprehensible wild soul, the ocean around us, the blood within us at once crying and singing an ancient song.

Cynthia Jatul is a high school biology teacher who lives in Seattle, Washington. She grew up on a dead-end street in New Jersey that afforded her access to a brook, woods, and fields. Always drawn to nature, she made her college decision based on Colorado State University's location close to the Rocky Mountains. The mountains have been a place of calling, inspiration, and refuge. She explored the northern Appalachian Mountains in all seasons while living in Boston and began writing nature-centered poetry. Her personal account of traversing the White Mountains in winter was published in *Appalachia*. She moved to Seattle in 1995 and has been exploring the mountains and West Coast ever since. Her writing is not only inspired by nature, but is also driven by concern for our species and the ecosystems that support us.