

## ERIKA PERLOFF

*Morning Veils*, 2014  
Pastel on Paper, 12 x 9 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## EVA SAULITIS

# Listening and Seeing With All That I Am

On Being a  
Scientist-Poet

**T**wo imaginative channels—the scientific, the artistic—carved their way through me simultaneously when I was in my early twenties, a marine biology graduate student living in a wall tent and following whales in a small boat for four months at a time. My primitive camp sat above a rocky shore on an otherwise uninhabited island in a remote corner of Prince William Sound, Alaska. That part of the sound, with its intricate geography of islands, islets, fjords, bays, and narrow passageways, became my imaginative whetstone, both as a scientist and as a writer. The whales I studied traced the contours of islands as they hunted harbor seals, and I followed in my boat, my field assistant perched on the bow, watching for rocks; I eventually learned that geography by heart. The sound revealed itself slowly in this way, over seasons.

Often thwarted from whale research by weather and the unseaworthiness of my boat, we hiked barefoot through fens and bogs and old growth collecting edible plants, and swam in frigid ponds on dares. The sound is a place of hiddenness, secrets within secrets. The bay where we anchored the boat during storms, for instance, we named Cove of Coves. Such intricacy shelters stories: a cove might contain a raft of sea otters, a shipwreck, a flock of harlequin ducks, a bear carcass, a cabin ruin, boulders shaped like extinct sea cows, or a trio of orcas feeding on a seal, gulls shrieking and diving all around them. The islands, mostly uninhabited now, in the earlier twentieth century bustled with herring salteries, canneries, and fox farms; and before that, indigenous fish camps and villages. The sound now feels haunted by stories of human failure, displacement, and abandonment, the most significant in my lifetime being the story of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, twenty-five years ago this March 24.

To be a field biologist conducting long-term research is to have one's imagination shaped not only by one's study animal, but also by a place—the animal's habitat, which is inseparable from its life and its ecology—and by one's perception of that place. I think of Lorine Niedecker's poem "Paean to Place," how the title opens into this epigraph: *And the place/was water*. Mid-poem, she writes: "I grew in green/slide and slant/of shore and shade/Child-time—wade/thru weeds." At the same time as I had to grow up, to buck up to the responsibilities inherent in my field work