

Protection Island Eucharist

By James L. Hayward

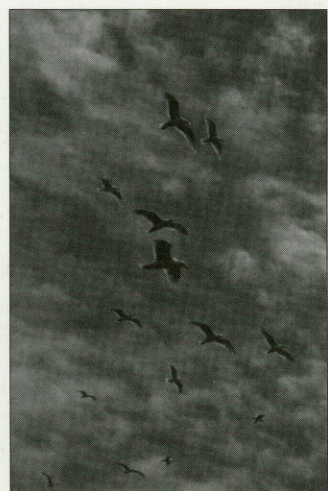
Photography by James L. Hayward

The night calls. I leave my colleagues in the cabin to plan tomorrow's work and step into the darkness gathering over Protection Island National Wildlife Refuge. I pause to glance at the sky where a half moon, draped in gossamer silk, slips free.

I secure my collar—warmth caresses my neck, a cold gust tussles my hair. The Olympic mountains and Vancouver Island are silhouetted against the fading horizon. I turn and walk east. A meteor falls earthward, splits, each half traces a separate ending—then darkness. My movement startles three deer. They bound across the path ahead. One stops, awaits my approach, snorts repeatedly. With each expletive it drops its head, paws the ground.

I hike to the edge of a steep bluff. The Strait of Juan de Fuca, placid this evening, separates this island from the San Juans to the north. Below and extending to the east, Violet Point provides a stage where ten thousand gulls worry, tend chicks, contest territory boundaries. To the west, Douglas firs, grand firs, and western red cedars occupy a small wood, the canopy of which stands high and serrated against the glow of the lingering day. Two bald eagles, still unsettled, call from the trees. To the south I hear the rapid flutter of wings—a stubby, fish-laden, rhinoceros auklet gracelessly returns to its burrow, hurtling, not flying; crashing, not landing. Oblivious to my presence, it emits its kazoo-like call.

Minutes pass. I absorb—am absorbed by—this expectant world. Time evaporates...muscles relax...





Seventeen summers ago, I came here to study glaucous-winged gulls—where they build their nests, why they move from here to there, how they say this and that. I also came to study bald eagles, great-horned owls, rhinoceros auklets, tufted puffins, pigeon guillemots, harbor seals, and elephant seals. I now see vastly more.

The creatures teach me uncensored things about life. The sea teaches me about contingency and vitality. The night sky teaches me about creation and eternity. No pretense here. Life and death occupy two sides of a razor-thin reality. Comedy and tragedy define existence and mold the passage of time.

Born of water and ice, the island's endless story merges with my own.

Place

Protection Island lies at the southeast corner of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, just north of Miller Peninsula and west of Quimper Peninsula. In 1792, British explorer George Vancouver gave it this name because it protects Discovery Bay, between the two peninsulas, from northwesterly winds. Here, from the top of an ancient sand dune, one can see the Olympic range, Mount Rainier, Mount Baker, Whidbey Island, Fidalgo Island, Vancouver Island, the San Juan islands, and Dungeness Spit.

Pay it but passing notice and the island shouts “story!” The low, gravel spits at each end; the high central island; the gentle, undulating surface of the upper plateau; the giant boulders poised above the south road cut; and, the steeply eroded cliffs above its northeast and northwest shores—layer upon layer of gravel, sand, silt, and peat with channel cuts, cross-bedding.... Here and there, a mammoth tooth, sometimes a tusk.

Annie Dillard writes that when we die, the last thing our minds register is the “dreaming memory of land as it lay this way and that.” For me, this will be Protection Island.



Color

I hike south across the prairie in front of the cabin to collect samples of a plant species found last week. I complete my task, then head east, parallel to and south of the old landing strip where I look for other plants. But a twenty-knot breeze makes searching and collecting difficult.

A strong and sustained gust of wind surges in from the northwest, drives hard against my back as I face a vast ocean of tall grass. Stems dance this way and that, bending, quivering, undulating. Billows roll along the surface of the grassy sea. Greens, yellows, and browns ripple, shift, and quake. I lose my balance. For one insane, chaotic moment I comprehend through the eyes of Vincent Van Gogh.

I laugh, throw myself down, and raise a grateful prayer toward a blue expanse framed by bouncing heads of grain.

Boundary

Fog enshrouds us often during this El Niño summer. The misty layers roll in from the west to form a trinity of superimposed seas—water, fog, sky of blue. Once enveloped, the island pokes through the top of the middle sea.

By compass, I take a colleague through the whiteness toward the mainland. We approach the beach. I cut the ignition, tilt the prop, and ease the bow onto Diamond Point. My colleague leaps ashore. I pass him his gear, he pushes me off.

I point the boat back toward the island and see that the blanket has slid to the east. Its lagging edge forms a receding white wall off starboard.

I angle toward the fog, which teases me to define its boundary. Several meters distant the edge looks real; upon approach it diffuses, phantom-like, to mist. In and out I work the boat, attempting to draw together two realities.

Might as well try stitching sky to sea.

Music

After fifteen hours of counting birds and seals, I pack my gear and head to the cabin. I haven't felt well—I made two urgent trips back along the path earlier today.

As I trudge back this third time, mercifully with less exigency, a nearly full moon illuminates the way ahead. Olympic peaks loom in bold relief against a darkening sky festooned by high clouds.

A steady westerly breeze wooshes with a high-pitched rustle through the tall grass from the south, and whirs with a bass sound from the north as it curls the tops of firs and cedars.

I approach the cabin threshold and pause to hear a third sound of this ensemble—the dull whistle of hurried air striking sharp corners and penetrating uncaulked cracks in thin walls. I turn the latch, push open the door, feel the warmth.





Kin

I sit at breakfast. Outside a doe stands, statuesque, wading in a shallow sea of purple-flowered vetch against the Olympic backdrop, tawny coat gleaming in the morning sun, head down. She now lifts her head as she chews a mouthful of flowers, stems, and seeds. Her facial muscles flex and ripple

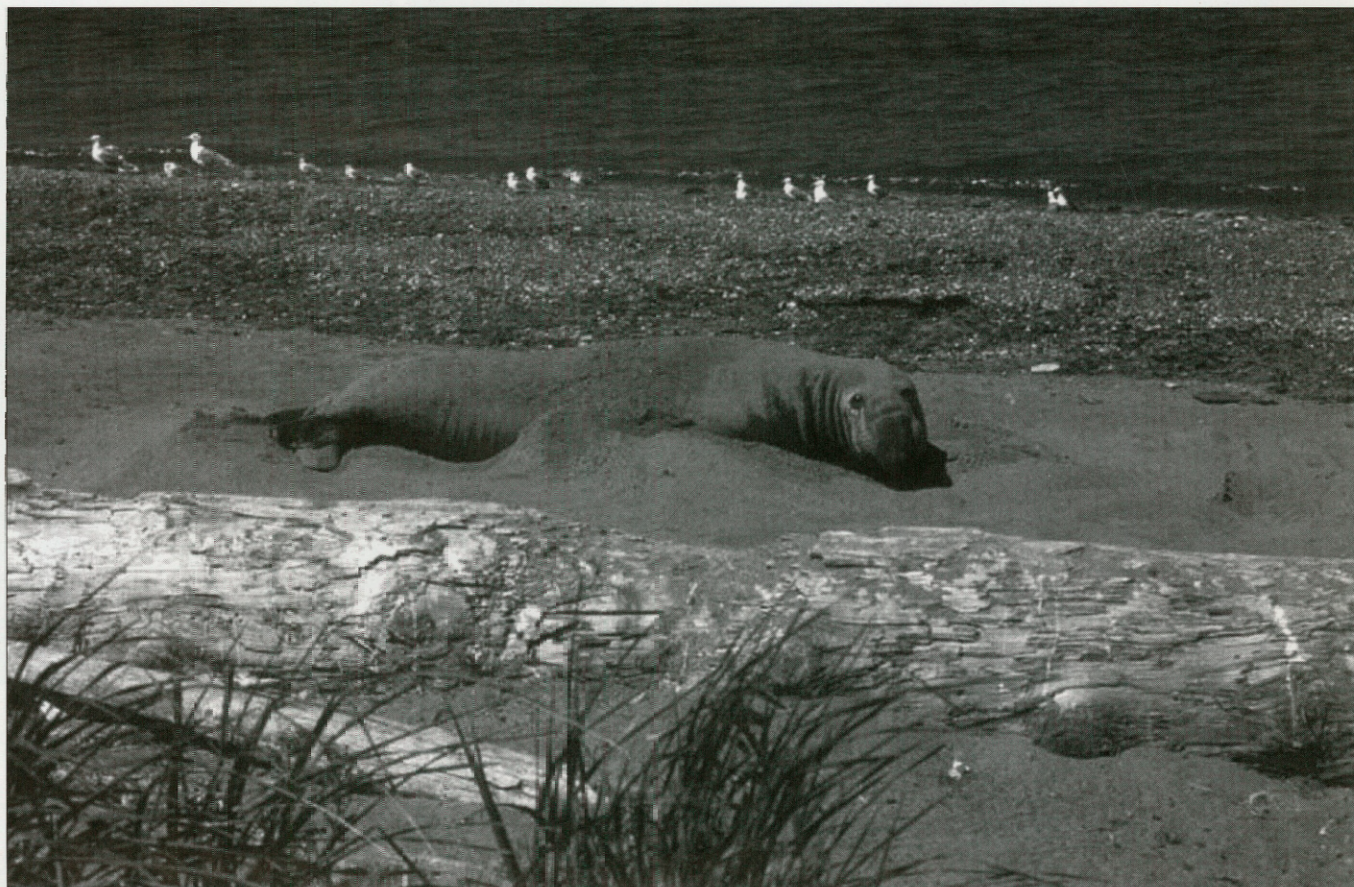
As I stare, I become aware that she and I chew in common cadence. Mammalian siblings.

A faint smile plays across my face.

Lust

During June and early July, the omnipresent chorus of mewling, choking, yelping, and long-calling pulses with the lusty sounds of male gulls, copulating. The randy roosters stand atop their hens, who twist their heads and necks approvingly back toward their mates. The males, in turn, twist their hindquarters around and try to transfer their gamete-laden semen. With no organ of intromission, mating is like fueling a car from a spoutless can.

Strewn throughout the colony are fetid gull corpses. Carrion beetles hump within the gulls' ruptured loins, turned on by the putrefying masses. On the feathered outer surfaces, blow flies couple, lay cream-colored eggs around the margins of the stilled eyes, bills, and vents.



On the north beach a bull elephant seal lines up with his cow, his ventral surface aimed in her direction. He reaches out to her with his right front flipper and tenderly pats her side. Soon his stiffened, foot-long phallus reaches out to her as well.

Fireworks

20:32. In the nursery area along the north beach, a female harbor seal seems uncomfortable. She raises her head, anxiously looks side-to-side, flexes her body as she holds her hindquarters high. She presses her hind flippers together as in prayer. During contractions, she spreads her flippers to reveal pinkish, swollen vulva, dilated several centimeters. Now she lies on her left side. Another contraction. Once again she covers the opening with her flippers and short tail.

20:45. She reorients along the beach, tries to get comfortable. Three other pregnant females lie nearby.

20:48. She raises her tail and forms a protective circle around the birth opening by touching the tips of her flexed flippers.

21:10. She's now at the water's edge. Another contraction. A protrusion. She snaps at a seal nearby.

21:15. The pup is quickly expelled into the shallows. Its arrival is announced by a red burst that spreads through the sea like fireworks, then disappears. The mother noses, pokes, and gently nips the pup. The two then swim and roll together in surf.

Baptism

A fledgling rhinoceros auklet has tucked itself beneath the tall grass by the marina. Until today it was safe within its burrow high along the bluff. Perhaps it ventured out too early, unable to fly. Or perhaps it could fly, but not far enough to reach the water.

I bend down to snatch the dark form from certain dehydration, starvation, and death. Instinctively it pushes deeper into the grass. I wrap my fingers around the stout body. Once lifted, the form does not struggle. Instead, it scans its enlarged vista. I carry it to the end of the pier. As I walk, it bobs in countercadence to my stride.



I kneel, open my hands, and it takes its first dive. Head down, legs kicking, it disappears.

Seconds later it emerges ten meters away, turns, swims toward me. Sensing error, it dives again, this time for a longer immersion.

Born of land, naive creature of the sea comes of age.

Apparitions

Dusk closes in as I trudge along a deer trail, hoping to learn what I can from the gathering darkness. A doe, startled to find me walking along her path, veers cross-country down the hill at a rapid clip. Clouds shelter the tallest peaks of the Olympics and when the sun has set, their pinkness deepens to a crimson flush.

A stirring of grass makes me look to where the trail disappears over the slope. A second doe, spotted twins in tow, moves down the trail from which I've just come. She does not sense my presence.

I work my way down the slope. Two great-horned owl fledglings glide from a small tree to the middle of the path between me and the sunset. Each bird is enclosed within a diffuse corona of down.

The fledglings bounce kitten-like, one over the



other, and attack make-believe prey along the path. Their wings spread and flap silently against the still gray air. Apparitions of the dusk.

Pups

A young, gray elephant seal emerges from the water's edge like a biblical leviathan. Stopping repeatedly to catch its breath, it heaves its way up the north beach toward a larger, brown male. Upon arrival, it raises its burly head, mouth wide open revealing a red and gleaming buccal cavern protected by formidable ivories. The larger animal responds by rearing up, and coming down on the smaller animal's head and neck.

Over and over, this cycle repeats itself. Each time the huge opposing forequarters rise upward at seemingly impossible angles. Then, as if responding to some invisible signal, they move forward and downward in unison. Massive necks and chins collide, a ponderous mingling of flesh. A bout of jawing and biting—necks and backs taking most of the abuse—follows. Brobdingnagian pups at play.

Breach

20:30. A female harbor seal lies high on the beach. She seems restless, agitated. She turns from side-to-side, glancing here and there. She lifts her hindquarters stiffly.

Contractions. The hindquarters of a pup protrude. She rests.

20:45. Another bout of contractions. She circles, twists her head back and around. Protruding mammae show her readiness to nurse. She lifts her hindquarters and pushes.

20:57. Gulls, ever nosy, stand close by. One walks behind mother and pecks at the emerging pup.

20:59. The pup now extends out to midsection. The mother pushes hard.

21:00. The pup is nearly out. The mother swings her body around and the pup is finally free. But it does not move. The mother turns toward the pup, puts her front flipper over its body. No response.

21:04. The mother, with birth blood covering her neck and chest, attacks another pup, snapping, nipping at the head. She lunges at the pup's mother. Both move away.

21:06. She now attacks a second pup and its mother. Her own pup continues to lie still on cobbles.

21:08. The mother is agitated. A gull eyes the pup.

21:10. The mother sniffs the head of her pup, then moves away.

21:11. The gull walks toward the pup, but the mother chases it away. She snaps at other gulls.

21:15. The mother continues to chase gulls. She comes around to the back of the pup, puts her front flipper over it as she passes. Her body pushes against it; it jiggles passively.

21:25. An adult bald eagle lands by the pup. The mother and other seals disappear into water.

21:26. A juvenile eagle lands and begins to feed on the afterbirth.

21:27. Another adult and two more juveniles land, making a total of five. They fight over the afterbirth. During the mayhem, one of the juveniles tumbles into the water.

21:28. A juvenile pecks at the pup. It's displaced by another juvenile, who hops atop the pup. An adult also attempts to stand on the pup, but is displaced by the juvenile.

21:32. Starting around the eye, one of the juveniles begins to work on pup's head. It tugs hard.

21:47. A food fight ensues. Much flapping about and tugging on the pup.

22:45. The eagles are still feeding but it's too dark to see more.





Redemption

I approach the intersection by the water tower at sunset. Blimp-bodied June beetles zoom erratically above the marram grass. Here and there on the ground, pairs clasp, bump, and grind toward genetic redemption. But there is more to this spectacle than reproductive exigency. Topsy-turvy beetle corpses, thoraxes picked clean, litter the ground. Some retain just enough muscle to shadow-box on their backs. Others lie still, piecemeal.

Ahead, three shadowy forms appear—one pounces on an escaping beetle, another hawks a beetle in flight, a third pecks a downed corpse. *Turdus migratorius*. American robins. Any sex-crazed beetle that encounters one of these feathered dinos is knocked silly by sharp blows to the body, flight muscles ripped from its middle.

I nudge a copulating beetle pair. Hssssssss! Their size alone would discourage many predators. I wonder why the dinos fail to devour their bulbous abdomens, so I slit a dead one open. Dry, meatless, sham.

Conversion

Gulls fly up just northeast of the marina. An adult eagle circles, hovers, then drops, talons extended, toward the colony surface.

A gull chick, maybe two weeks old, is carried in golden clasp high above its home. Midair, the eagle brings its grasp forward, reaches down with hooked bill, dispatches the chick.

Two juvenile eagles materialize to pursue the adult in an attempt to steal the prey. The adult lands again and again along the beach. Each time it is displaced. Finally, prey still in grasp, it flaps unimpeded to the south beach, where it alights atop the tangled roots of a beach log. The late afternoon sun illuminates predator and prey without the distorting heat waves that impeded my view earlier today. I switch from binoculars to spotting scope, rest my hand on the cold metal barrel, zoom in.

The eagle arranges the limp carcass on a root branch, then plucks out gray feathers that join the stiff breeze. The corpse is opened. Beaks full of warm chick are ripped away, chomped down. The breeze ruffles the brown covert feathers of the back and belly of the predator, exposing white down.



Intermittently the feeding process is halted while the eagle attends to an annoyance under its left wing—a mite, perhaps, making its own dinner. The softer meat now gone, the eagle attacks the tough connective tissue. Soon, everything is gone. An elaborate honing process begins—beak twisting this way and that against the wooden perch.

Erstwhile chick fast becomes eagle.

Venom

It's early afternoon. I'm sitting by the sliding glass door cleaning my camera. A movement catches my eye. Outside the glass, a crane fly flutters ineffectually while it dangles from a nearly invisible line, a half meter long. The fly swings to and fro like a pendulum gone wrong.

I look more closely. A tiny zebra spider has embedded its chelicerae in the left side of the fly's thorax, close to where it joins the head. The fly is hooked to the spider, the spider to the thread, the thread to the casing at the top of the door.

The fly ceases its struggle. The predator climbs backward several centimeters, up its silken line. The fly once again commences to struggle, stopping the spider. But soon the swings, less pronounced, dampen to zero. The spider, once again, backs up the thread, fly in tow.

This alternating pattern—prey struggling, predator hauling—continues for fifteen minutes until the spider's hind legs contact the door casing. The spider drags its much larger prey up the vertical side of the casing, and backs over the top to a narrow, horizontal surface. With some difficulty, it hauls the fly over the cliff edge. The fly continues to move—antennae and legs flex and extend—but with little vigor. The poison is taking effect.

Now the spider—part predator, part angler, part buckaroo—backs up to the wooden siding and waits.

Minutes pass. The fly moves no more. The spider hauls the stilled form five or six centimeters higher and stops, its chelicerae still embedded and sucking venom-digested nutrients from the spindly prey.

Abundance

Dense fog envelops the island. Huge numbers of dew-dappled spider webs are spread among the prairie grasses. I stretch a 100-meter line and randomly select 10 points along the line. At each point I place a 1-meter-squared rectangle over the grass and count the webs within. Average number of webs per square = 33.

Multiply 33 by the size of the island. Or by the size of the world.

Eucharist

The island caretakers have invited me over to watch *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*. She makes coffee. He begins the movie.

Unaware that he is terminally ill, a young Anglican vicar moves to a remote Indian village north of Vancouver, B.C. Full of idealism, he sets out to bring God—and Anglo culture—to the villagers. Much to his surprise, he discovers that their view of life encompasses more than his. The vicar was assigned to this village to learn about life. This he has done. But when informed of his fate he refuses to believe—until, that is, the owl calls his name. This, to the villagers, signals an approaching end. Having embraced the fullness of life, he now accepts impending death.

We briefly discuss the simple charm and rich meaning of the story, then say good night. I drive slowly back along the winding road to the cabin. I park and step into the night, walk onto the prairie under the star-spangled sky, lie on my back.

Drooping grasses frame the heavenly dome. The Milky Way arches over my stretched form. Imagining this galactic disc horizontal—the trees, cabin, vehicle, ships, island, and sea itself—my world clings vertically, like woodpeckers, to the earth. Or, more precisely, the earth clings to them . . . tugs coolly against my back. Chilled, I rise, trudge to the cabin, throw open the window, wrap myself in down . . . drift off . . .

...A predawn glow registers on my half-open eyes.



A pleasing, somber rhythm—the call of a great-horned owl—wafts through an open window. But just as mental cobwebs dissolve, the call grows silent...I remember the vicar's story. I strain to hear the call again. Only silence. I strain to recall the intonation, the inflection, the rhythm. What had it said?

I stand cold and naked in the front room. The low, early morning light illumines two abandoned cabins to the west, one rectangular, the other octagonal. The rectangular housed a caretaker, the octagonal, a contractor. Accident claimed her, cancer him.

I live in the third cabin along the island's north side.

Someday, with clear intonation, certain inflection, and precise rhythm, I will hear the owl call my name.

At the end of my vegetation transect, a circle of dark brown auklet feathers, mostly curved coverts, are sprawled over the bindweed. A detached leg rests to one side. A pair of carrion beetles, black with gaudy red stripes, couples shamelessly where tibiotarsus joins tarsometatarsus. A third beetle scrounges below. Two types of flies crawl sluggishly about the remaining corpse in the cooling air. The head and wings are gone, perhaps removed by crows. Among the carnage a brown-and-tan feather, dropped from the wing of an owl, tells the story.

I hike out onto Violet Point to collect samples of the local beach grass. A graduate student emerges from his blind.

"A few minutes ago a juvenile eagle flew into the tall grass over there. I saw something white in its beak."

We walk to the site. An adult gull—a female, judging by the size of the bill and the shape of the head—sits a meter away atop a matted bed of beach grass. She rests motionless, eyes wide open. The feathers along her once gray back are now red. She stares into a future she cannot comprehend. Nor can we.

Out of respect we turn away. Slowly and quietly, life will drain from her form.

Next day I return to find a circle of white feathers surrounding her disarticulated head, wings, legs. Eagle leftovers.

Take eat; this is my body.

This is my blood; drink ye all of it.

Blessing

A last walk to the bluff. I pause, look up at a brilliant Jupiter and sprawling Milky Way. A lunar crescent describes its slow path across the crystal dome. I see and feel so much, but I understand so little.

Perhaps . . . just perhaps . . . in the vastness of it all, things will be okay.

I raise my arms, spread my fingers, and receive the blessing of the stars.

James L. Hayward is a professor of biology at Andrews University, where he and his colleagues are studying the feeding ecology of bald eagles and developing mathematical models to predict habitat occupancy by marine birds and mammals.