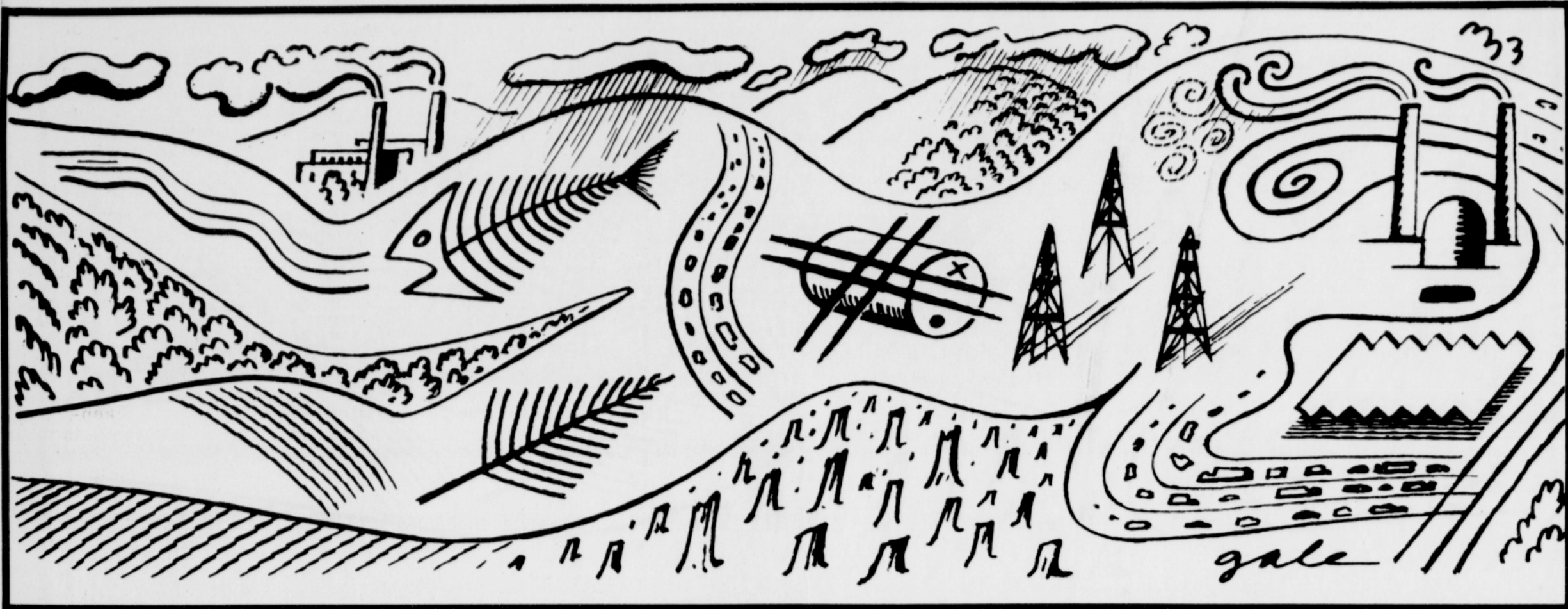




BOB GALE

death that goes on to this day with no sign of letup. It's the death of nature.

We began with the easiest pickings, following the rule of thumb that anything worth doing was worth overdoing, until the only land left for agriculture was poor and difficult to work, the only trees left were far up in the mountains, the only fish were far out in the ocean. They are all "things," "put there" for our use. So we took them. As our numbers and our needs grew we developed ways to find those hard-to-get last whales, forests, pools of oil hidden under arctic waters. Nearly everything we touch contributes to the death of nature. It's all around us now and so the need to coo and croon lullabies has grown incessant. Those who want to continue exploiting nature are forced to make token concessions: "Look, we're not gonna kill those last whales, and here's some trees that we won't cut..." Look, here's another bug in a bottle. And we buy it. Increasingly, our perception of the world becomes indistinguishable from the images on TV. And in the acceptance of those images, to paraphrase Bill Moyers, lies the silent death of nature.

That's the world I grew up in. We got older, rode bikes to the farm, and down the lane and past the stumps where the woods used to be. For a while a small creek pitched over the bank in a small waterfall where we learned to swim. And then, the falls disappeared. A culvert took it somewhere and sprayed it on a cornfield and the lane became a road. My friend Alan cut his foot on a broken beer bottle in the creek. And then one summer day they drove a bulldozer down the creek to make it a like a ditch so it wouldn't flood the field. With the trees gone the banks began to erode, so they cemented the banks in place. A rock crusher went in upstream. The mud killed the trout and smothered the spawning beds of the salmon. And then the agricultural revolution swept in. Blitzed by the pesticides, fungicides, miticides, the bugs and quail and pheasants, the flocks of mourning doves and even the blackbirds thinned and bluebirds disappeared. It's our blind-spot. For more centuries than we can count, us civilized folk grew up witnessing but not seeing the death of nature.

Of course I know now that this "lost worlds" melancholy is partly the cost of growing up. Like Christopher Robin, I grieve the loss of the magic years. I will admit with only a touch of reluctance that the Willamette Valley, where I grew up, is still a beautiful place. Zoning and awareness have given some pro-

tection to rivers and the land. A modern, efficient egg-production plant is still a chicken hell, but to the passer-by the long steel building looks quite peaceful. A lane may lead yet to a river gliding past, but my feelings are different now. The valley is zoned and tame, licensed and managed, tabulated, regulated. . . Well, what's wrong with that? If a butterfly flying free on a breeze can symbolize freedom, why not this one in a bottle?

There could be secret passageways that lead to unowned land where we could explore creeks that have no name, walk trails not made by men. They could be near. It won't do to know that a corner of Borneo remains or that there are valleys in the Andes where forests survive intact. Whether or not we see ourselves as adventurers, somewhere in us is the need to know that right outside our doors the path goes as far as imagination, as knowable as mystery, as alive as nature. I don't think that is a romantic notion. I think that we must live next door to eternity, to stare into that fathomless depth or something essentially human in us begins to die. At some point in our lives we must go on our quest into that mystery or our lives become increasingly hollow, until we won't know life from death.

We need places that are just there — not managed, studied, multiple-used, or even wisely cared for — but left alone. Our efforts to "improve on nature" tend to be a fork in the path that ultimately leads to the death of nature.

None of us knows how to make more or better fish than a river. It has been estimated that Japan, which has the most intensive system of hatcheries in the world, has about a tenth of the salmon that its rivers produced in their natural state. Natural fish are genetically richer, more resistant to disease and predation and have better survival behaviors. We've known this for years. Hatchery fish are another bug in a bottle.

There are no experts who can grow a better forest than nature. We can't even produce anything even remotely as clever as a gnat, much less a whole living forest. We have only small remnants of real forests left.

We used to have 200-million acres of estuaries. Half are gone, and they go at a rate of 300,000 to 450,000 acres a year. The U. S. Environmental Protection Agency allows this to go on because it has a policy that says converted wetlands can be offset by the creation or restoration of wetlands elsewhere. Do we really think we can create or restore an estuary? Have we gone completely mad?

I'm afraid the whole of nature will end up like a bug in a bottle. We will have good intentions. We will put in grass and twigs and a piece of our favorite lunchmeat. There will be a short time for self-congratulation, but eventually we will wonder why it isn't moving. We will feel bad, but then console ourselves with the thought that we didn't really need it anyway.

In an age when "experiencing nature" is confused with watching "Wild America" on TV, the phrases "live next door to serenity" and "walk trails not made by men" are likely to be misconstrued. The people who want to continue the death of nature with minimum interference are as expert at exploiting our confusion as they are our resources. Coming from a religious and philosophical tradition that ascribes no rights to any living thing except to be used by humans, we have grown used to such droll retorts as "We've already got X acres in wilderness areas. How much nature do they need?" Or the anticipated quip by David Quammen ("Natural Acts: Animals Rights and Beyond"), "Women's rights, gay rights, now for Christ sake they want ANIMAL rights!" It's that blind spot again, in the unexamined assumption that the activities of man and nature are mutually exclusive; the way to protect nature is to isolate pieces of it.

There are many ways we could allow nature to grow into our lives. We could have a system of trails from coast to coast, healthy rivers with runs of native fish, tracts of land where we cooperate with nature, not only to heal the damage but to take what we truly need. There are many ways to come to realistic goals and ways to accomplish them. The six percent of us who own half of the wealth in this country will resist and object. We will hear such crooning and hypnotic persuasion that it may seem they truly represent the will of God, but in the end even they must know that this earth must truly become our home. In the end, if we are to survive, we will do it because we will know when we see an eagle flying or a storm pushing rollers up the river that we are a part of all this, together.

Jack Scharbach lives in Nahcotta, Washington.

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