

The World at Its Gravest and Best

Nancy Hanks Baird

On the edge of a western city, a canyon fissures up along a river and eventually opens into a succession of frozen peaks that rise to the east. I run in these mountains, this canyon, almost every day. The canyon is not particularly beautiful as it leaves the smoking city streets—the trees are cracked and common, and the yellow stone pocked and shaled, as though its confidence were shaken being so close to the grittiness of the city. But as it twists and rises, the canyon hardens in strength and mystery—the river lays down ice, trees thicken and whistle, living things rustle beneath the snow and brush. Some mornings I have seen herds of elk. Having threaded their way through the eastern pass, they tip over the lip of the canyon, driving the deer before them—grandeur and sweetness moving silently in the bitter air. This is where I come, where I have always come, to be alone, to learn to wait for grace, and to worship.

In this mountain place, I am learning; learning that deer never speak—that you must follow the quick blackness of their eyes, the scrape of rock and dusky ripple of leg as they leap the river, to hear what they are saying. The deer are cautious and curious, but I have seen and been awed by their disdain for fear. One morning a mountain lion paced the road—hungry, looking for something to kill. Down in the orchard, where the road flattens, not far from the lion, the deer coolly snuffed under the leaves. They were unafraid, their mouths full of peaches, their eyes soft with pleasure.

I am learning to listen to the ripples of thought in the silence, and to the wind. When the wind rests in these mountains, the silence in the winter canyon is brittle and secret. Beneath the snow layers, I know there is life quivering, but on the road by the water, the quiet is profound; there is only a crackling of river ice, a breathing in the trees, the slap of my shoes. It is a solitary place, a natural room emptied of softness; in its winter harshness, it is clean and uncorrupted, a room of truth and nakedness.

But when the wind moves in the tunnel of rock, it is merciless—too often full of ice and anger. The wind claps the mountain oak against the yellow walls, whips the river, roars as a hundred freight trains. When you run through the door of such an engine, your body is lifted and flung as loosened sheet metal, your knees stiff, shoes banging against themselves. I have thrown up my arms these mornings and exulted to the voice in the tumult: I hear you! And the earth wakes, it bellows, and we are hurtled, pushed together, undone by the wind.



The world is full of such summons to praise. “The whole earth is full of his glory,” cried Isaiah’s seraphim (Isa. 6:3). “Holy! Holy! Holy!” shouted William Blake on seeing a sunrise.¹ In these unearthly moments, we hear the Creator’s voice as a crackling in the wild oak, a “going in the . . . mulberry trees” (2 Sam. 5:24). We see his mind in the simple weeds, swinging and stiff with gold, in the intricate wings of a common dragonfly fallen to the pavement, for nothing is too small or insignificant to be ravishingly beautiful. These pieces of his kingdom race by us like jet streams, there for anyone to notice.

And the wisdom, the awe of his kingdom whispers from our blood. For who can tell the power of ancient voices that runs in our veins? Is there a race memory, an often unrecognized, but powerful, genetic knowledge by which we are all connected? I have always felt the deep primitivism of ancient Judaism thundering inside me. But only recently have I woken to my connection with the clans of Scotland to which I belong through birth and to which I have joined through marriage—like two knife cuts bleeding wrist to wrist. If I were to seek an explanation for my nature, perhaps these connections of blood are reason enough for a willful, melancholy spirit, a combative manner, and hunger for freedom. And for a passion for movement and worship.



The Highland clans of Scotland were known through the centuries for their fierceness, bravery, and unyielding spirit. Even the lowest clansman knew in his heart he had as much right to sit at his chief’s table as any laird (lord). Both common man and ruler were bound by loyalties and obligations of respect. When the clansman was needed to fight for his chief, he was ready; when the common man needed help or revenge, his chief was bound to defend him. Every Scot with every breath valued freedom more highly than peace and wealth.

Do all people need freedom blowing like a silver horn inside them? Does everyone flinch at authority and want to tear into battle at the slightest provocation?

I do not believe my father studied the Scottish way. It is, however, the truth that he has lived by, borne on his back, suffered for—still suffers for. He is a fighter: fierce, unyielding, without fear. He has tried to defend the weak—has sat at the table of the laird and withered the arrogance of the

impudent and the imprudent with the power of his spirit. For this he has drawn love and enemies. I have never known a kinder heart nor more healing hands, but his Highland battle cries are still gathering troops.

Helen Duff was his grandmother, my great-grandmother. In Glasgow she joined the American Mormon church, foreign to her parents, and kept it secret, knowing they would not approve. When she married, she revealed her membership in the new church and was grimly cut away by her family. Helen was beautiful, beloved, and proud; she was as unyielding as her parents. Soon after marrying, she left Scotland—to return only once. In her fifties—small, brown-haired, wearing lace and wool—she returned to Aberdeen. Leaving her trunk in the rented buggy at the end of the lane, she walked through the mud and ruts to her childhood home. Her father, past ninety, his white hair blowing in the wind, stood at the corner of the pasture, looking away from her. When she approached him with her fierce courage and said, “Father,” he turned, and the heather slid by, the sky unfolded and opened, and the words flew with blessing from his lips, “Oh, Ellen, my Ellen.”

The thought of these two proud people reconciling their broken hearts has been a gift to me, a window of grace from the past, a connection of devotion. These windows, or radiant moments in a life, when the sky spills undeserved blessings, are rare. They do happen, but they are never what you listen for or think to praise.

Out running in the canyon one Christmas, I was stopped by a morning friend and his Rottweiler. People who go out regularly, usually in the morning hours, know the camaraderie that grows between inmates of the earth at such times. I barely know this man, but we are intimates of dust and sky and of the beginnings of many days. As usual, his dog murmured loudly in recognition and gave me his nose. This quiet morning as light drew the darkness, my friend put into my hands a small, velvet drawstring bag—soft and black, containing a circlet of silver, light as leaves. “It is nothing,” he said. “Because we are friends.” Should I accept such gifts? Oh yes! Because moments like these are rare—they are gifts of grace, unexpected, often undeserved, containing seeds of joy.

There are other blessings I have received on these mornings, different gifts of grace. I have, on occasion, been given the gift of a day of clarity. For one day, I have stood anchored in the middle of the universe, felt it shift and pour light into me until I was weighted down as with stones of fire. This is the gift of sight, and it does not come accompanied only by beauty, for I have often seen death on the mountain roads, unexplained, irrational—a severed doe’s foot; a headless rattler; a deer left to die, its soul in its eyes. I have many times brought rage and grief to the canyon and spilled them there. At such junctures of beauty and pain, the world is at its gravest

and best: wrenching, halfway between matter and spirit. What can one do at these times but rise in battle or worship? What else is there to do?

This morning a late winter storm slid across the western sky—a thick, growing blackness boiling down from the north. Steaming clouds full of gloom and water emptied on the city for hours, as if choosing to rid themselves of some disease. My runs in the mountains have always come with a jumbled torrent of astonishment, self-knowledge, and memory. I have often brooded over my Jewish heart, my Scottish blood. Today in the storm, I thought of David, king of Judah.



David, his mind festering with the murder of Uriah, tried through his great gifts of music and worship to empty the dregs of corruption and misery out of his heart. When still a boy, he had gifted Saul with Goliath's bloody head, hung dripping by the hair from his simple leather belt. David had stood upon the still-heaving chest, taking the head with the giant's own jeweled sword. His victory had come from utter fearlessness, a blessing bestowed for being willing to believe. I do not forget the blood on David's sword; this he paid for with the lives of his sons, with deception and murder in his house, with the honor of building the temple withdrawn. What I remember most is David bringing home the ark.

He was determined to return it to Jerusalem, the City of David, the seat of kings. There was a false start. The oxen carrying the precious burden stumbled, Uzzah put out his hand to save the ark and was struck dead for this presumption. David, awestruck and terrified, paused for months, then resumed the journey. He brought the ark to the gates—brought home the small, golden room of holiness and thunder carried by the priests. When they saw it, the people sang, played their harps and pipes, blew their trumpets. And David danced. Like any Scottish laird, he shed his clothes, leapt and laughed, and in that incredible scene, whirled in wild, ancient glory.

In the palace rooms above the gate, David's wife sat watching as he worshipped. What bitterness, what coldness propelled her to despise and taunt him from her window. But her scorn rolled off his back like beads of sweat in Judah's sun. She would not receive the coals of glory laid across her lips. And so she lost her place.

David knew all about the contradictions of life—how to love and murder on the same day, how to grieve and worship in the same breath. He did not need his wife's approval, did not need the refuge of a canyon or a room to reveal his inner devotion and joy. But here is a story of another worship room.

In a field outside of Newburg, Scotland, the remains of the Cross Macduff stand on the Ochil Hills. This Celtic cross once marked the northwest boundary of the ancient “kingdom” of Fife, clan home of Macduff, thane of Fife. The cross was a “girth,” a sanctuary, or place of refuge from trouble, ordained and protected by charter of the king of Scotland. Macduff, to whom the cross was given, helped overthrow MacBeth, bringing Malcolm to the throne of Scotland. Malcolm rewarded Macduff with the cross and thus with sanctuary, an ancient law of the Jews and other Middle Eastern tribes. Anyone related to Macduff to the ninth degree could flee here to receive refuge from the law if they had been found guilty of unpremeditated slaughter. After coming, if they then washed nine times for ablution (there are springs nearby) and gave “nine kye an’ a colpendach” (nine cows plus a cow that has not been calved), they could go free.²

Only the base of this ancient cross remains, but it is enough; one can see how it would have risen on its high hill, majestic, stark, its carved face looking east. An inscription on the cross at one time read:

An altar for those whom law pursues, a hall for those whom strife pursues to thee this paction becomes a harbour. But there is hope only when the murder has been committed by those born of my grandson. I free the accused, a fine of a thousand drachmas from his lands. On account of Magridin and his offering take once for all the cleansing of my heirs beneath this stone filled with water.³

This is the fierce tale told about the cross: the lairds of Pitarrow, Mathers, Arbuthnot, and Lauriston were fleeing for the cross, the bagpipes wailing. It was 1412, the rivers Tay and Earn lay behind them; the Cairngorm and Grampian Mountains rose ahead like judges. A certain Sir John Melville of Glenbervie had been their sheriff in the country, a man who “bore his faculties harshly.”⁴ He had become an irritating problem for the lairds and for the king. In a foolish moment, the king is said to have remarked, “Sorrow gin the Sheriff wer sodden and supped in broo!” Heeding his suggestion, the four lairds lured the sheriff to a hill under pretense of hunting with him. They heated water in a caldron over a fire and then boiled the annoying sheriff in the pot. After he was cooked (or “sodden,” as the king said), the barons drank the soup (the “broo”), then ran for refuge to the cross.⁵



The world is a troublesome place. No doubt the sheriff wanted to live. And who deserves such a death? But there on a cold hill, in a ferocious land, stands a token of power, a “hall for those whom strife pursues,” a monument

of mercy, even for the wicked. What more can we hope for in our blind passage on this beautiful, but fearsome, earth than to find a place of refuge and then leap in praise? The canyon where I run is my girth and glass through which I strain to see; my worship room, my manuscript of grace. The moving water and melting trees, the silence full of ancient voices have become my absolution and wealth. When the deer step from behind the blasted trees and fix me with their sober, fathomless eyes, my wits fail me; I hover between earth and heaven.

It is said that the one thing for which the devil has the most regret in his frozen banishment is the trumpets—Judah's horns blazing from the temple, Israel's melancholy, joyful trumpets! Perhaps. I rather think it is the bagpipes, the intoxicating suspension of air between sound and silence; the cry of battle, the call to worship.

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1. Yitta Halberstam and Judith Leventhal, *Small Miracles: Extraordinary Coincidences from Everyday Life* (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1997), x.
2. Jim Wotherspoon, "The Sanctuary of Macduff Cross," *The Highlander: The Magazine of Scottish Heritage* 34, no. 3 (May/June 1996): 33–35.
3. Wotherspoon, "The Sanctuary of Macduff Cross," 33.
4. Sir Walter Scott, quoted in Wotherspoon, "The Sanctuary of Macduff Cross," 34.
5. Wotherspoon, "The Sanctuary of Macduff Cross," 35.