



Bearing



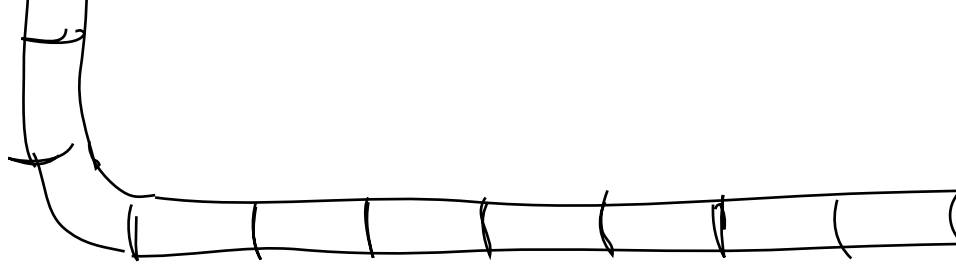
The author on Douglas Channel,
near Hartley Bay



What's really at stake in the Great Bear Rainforest?

Witness

BY CHRIS TURNER / PHOTO BY JULIAN MACQUEEN



Let's say you've never heard of the Great Bear Rainforest. I never had. Let's say it's a theory, a conjecture, a proper noun three words long and as real to you as fabled El Dorado or the moons of Jupiter. There it is in the subject line of a Facebook message: "invite to the great bear rainforest." A Facebook message, not even capitalized. Incidental. Marginal. A rumour of a place.

What would it take for you to care about it as much as anywhere else on earth? How long would it take to fall forever in love with the Great Bear Rainforest? It took me three days. I'll tell you how.

My afterthought Facebook message came from Tides Canada, a Vancouver environmental foundation sponsoring a documentary mission to the Great Bear Rainforest involving a handful of *National Geographic* photographers. The goal was "to raise awareness about this area, and the danger it faces from the tar sands, Enbridge pipeline and oil tanker traffic." I knew the name of the oil-and-gas pipeline developer Enbridge—I can see its downtown Calgary headquarters from my bedroom window—but I'd never before encountered the name *Great Bear Rainforest*. This would soon come to seem absurd, as if I'd reached adulthood without hearing tell of the Rocky Mountains or the Great Lakes or the Grand Banks.

I did some perfunctory research. The Great Bear Rainforest, I learned, was a protected wilderness on the remote northwest coast of British Columbia, comprising a quarter of the world's remaining intact coastal temperate rainforest. An organization called the International League of Conservation Photographers (ILCP), a charitable group formed by several of the world's most highly regarded wildlife photographers, was midway through its annual RAVE (Rapid Assessment Visual Expedition) in the rainforest. Every year, the ILCP chooses an ecosystem in peril to document for a week. In the case of Great Bear, the imminent peril was the arrival of Big Oil. Enbridge had applied to the federal government early in 2010 to build two pipelines from an oil terminal north-east of Edmonton across 1,170 kilometres of wilderness to the industrial town of

Kitimat. One pipeline would flow east with condensate (a petrochemical product that alters the viscosity of bitumen, allowing it to travel down pipelines); the other pipeline would flow west with the bitumen itself—oil, that is—at the rate of 525,000 barrels per day.

Kitimat sits at roughly the midway point of the Great Bear coast. To bring the pipeline's oil to markets around the Pacific Rim—China, in particular—mammoth supertankers would need to move in and out of a long, narrow passage known as Douglas Channel at the rate of two hundred or more per year. They would pass within a few hundred metres of the First Nations village of Hartley Bay and within a few kilometres of Princess Royal Island, home to the world's largest known population of kermode bears. The kermode is a rare subspecies of black bear with a recessive gene that renders its coat a ghostly white; locals call them "spirit bears," and they are the billboard icons of the Great Bear wilderness. The tankers would also pass by dozens of unnamed, barely explored salmon streams, the vital bio-diversifying arteries of an entire ecosystem.

The *National Geographic* photographers were in the rainforest to sound an international activist alarm against the Enbridge pipeline. If I could get myself to Vancouver International Airport by the morning of 11 September, I could catch a float plane to Hartley Bay and see their work firsthand.

I thought at first it might not be worth the trip. I'd long regarded climate change as the great black trump card in the conservation deck, the overarching crisis bearing down on us with such ferocious transformative power it will erase any act of regional conservation, however noble; keeping one pipeline's bitumen from reaching Kitimat, after all, would do nothing to keep out the carbon dioxide emissions released by an oil-hungry world. If an awareness campaign isn't aimed at ending the age of fossil fuels *in toto*, I tend to see it as an act of deck-chair feng shui on the biospheric Titanic.

Still: this was uncharted territory. *Here there be serpents*, at least on the mental map of my own experience. Float planes, coastal First Nations villages, temperate rainforest, spirit bears—this was an irresistible enticement. Thankfully so: there was much to learn about the spirit bear's iconic place in the global struggle to contain the climate crisis.

ATTACHED TO THE FLOAT PLANE TERMINAL at the airport is a welcoming bar and grill called the Flying Beaver. It's got a patio out back, an unassuming oasis jutting out over the placid little bay of Pacific water that serves as the runway for the float planes. It's a tucked-away corner of a tucked-away corner of the main airport, and I was seated there with the dregs of a coffee when I heard the buzz of propeller engines for the third time that morning and watched an odd, boxy little airplane that looked like something Howard Hughes might've owned come down and down into the bay.

There were no floats protruding from its hull. It bellyfopped onto the water and seemed to disappear under the wake it raised, and I had an involuntary adrenal jolt as I waited for it to resurface. It came up the ramp next to the patio and crossed the access road onto the tarmac in front of the float-plane hangar, and a few minutes later its pilot came into the bar and grill and introduced himself to me as Julian MacQueen.

I'd traded emails with MacQueen, but I knew nothing else about him except that he was flying the 630 kilometres up the coast to Hartley Bay that morning. I'd imagined a plaid-jacketed adventurer type, maybe a bush pilot who ran supplies into logging camps. Instead, I climbed into the cockpit of a beautifully restored Grumman G-44 Widgeon and sat next to an affable business executive with the soft, elegant accent of Alabama gentry. MacQueen is a born-and-bred Southerner married to a Canadian, and they keep a summer home on Saltspring Island. The rest of the year, he is a hotelier, the



largest single owner of resort properties on Pensacola Beach in Florida. He'd let his neighbours on Saltspring know he was open to errands of mercy, which is how he'd come to volunteer to ferry journalists and photographers in and out of the Great Bear Rainforest.

Most modern float planes are aircraft on pontoon stilts, but MacQueen's Grumman G-44 Widgeon is more like a boat with wings. As we taxied out into the bay, the water lapped against the windows at chin level. When MacQueen leaned down on the throttle, the plane's nose perked up like a motorboat's. The whole vessel rose up to skim the surface, he pulled back on

Somehow MacQueen got the thing to England, where he had it meticulously restored. It was an exquisite vessel now, a handcrafted airborne sailboat, all teak wood and analog dials and brass-coloured fittings. He called the plane his "time machine"—not because it was a throwback but because of the way it could skip from lake to harbour to welcoming bay across the continent, compressing space to the point where no place seemed far away. The Widgeon was a device to conquer time.

Below us, the landscape had grown wilder in bands, like a graded map of civilization. The sprawling holiday homes of the southern Gulf Islands had given way

altered scale—this tiny plane among giants—and MacQueen and I returned to our small talk. I soon realized he didn't know anything about the pipeline or the spirit bear or any other aspect of our trip. As I filled him in, his face came alive with the shock of recognition. He dug through the bag between our seats and produced an iPad.

"I've got to show you," he said, "what I've been doing the last few months."

At the start of the summer of 2010 (this was the story he told as he scrolled through photo albums on his iPad) oil from BP's massive blowout in the Gulf of Mexico began to wash ashore along the

The kermode is a rare subspecies of black bear with a recessive gene that renders its coat a ghostly white.

the wheel, and we were airborne. Through mixed cloud and drizzle, we banked north and chugged past the Georgia Strait's inhabited islands, a patchwork of cabins and grand rural estates that grew more sporadic as it gave way to wilderness. We exchanged small talk that quickly turned meaningful, and I was reminded that dramatic characterization and deep irony were not inventions of literature but reflections of reality, such as the one inhabited just now behind the controls of a Grumman Widgeon by Julian MacQueen of Pensacola, Florida.

MacQueen loved to talk about the Widgeon, which was a smaller version of the more famous Grumman Goose. Only a few hundred Widgeons were ever made, all of them in the nineteen-forties and early nineteen-fifties, and MacQueen had hunted for one for years until he found one left chained to a tree in rural Nigeria.

Why, I wondered, would someone abandon a vintage float plane in the backwoods of Nigeria?

Oh, you know, the oil business—this was his response. Some drilling project must've finished, and the flight home was more trouble than it was worth. The world was just full of the oil industry's junk, wasn't it?

to knots of more modest settlements, logging towns and native villages, and then the blanket of forest and dark water was broken only by a derelict cannery or the industrial gridwork of a salmon farm. The landscape below looked wild, but still it was not truly remote. The coarse hand of industry had scrawled its history across the steep forested peaks and blackwater inlets, telling a gruff tale of extraction, exploitation, exhaustion: Clearcuts of varied vintage like patches of diseased flesh, the age of the infection told in the height of the low monocrop trees slowly filling in the pocked land. Fishing boats splitting the water in slow surgical swoops of wake. Barges moving slow under the weight of logs. A shuttered pulp town. Fish, trees, stumps, barges, nets.

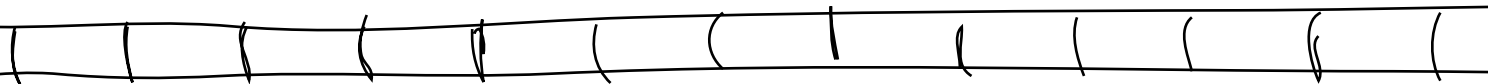
It was a map of Canadian history in miniature, a tale told most emphatically in the seizure of its natural resources, the story of a country founded by fishermen and fur trappers.

Beyond the northern tip of Vancouver Island, the clouds closed in and the land became fully wild. Steep black peaks loomed in the mist and spilled down into the darker black of the ocean. A vertiginous sense of departure swallowed the plane, a foreboding born of drastically

Florida panhandle. One of the first places it arrived was the beach in front of MacQueen's row of resort hotels on Pensacola Beach. Summer is the peak tourist season in Pensacola, the ninety days that sustain the business for the other 275, and the summer of 2010 slid away on an oil slick.

MacQueen showed me pictures of Gulf waves gone deep purple with spilled crude and golden sand covered in inky brown tar. Legally forbidden from disposing of it himself, he'd spent weeks documenting his losses for BP's lawyers, and then he'd cashed his first compensation cheque and headed to Salt Spring to unwind from the ordeal. He had 700 employees, a vibrant business twenty-five years in the making, a million dollars in insurance paid out every year to guard against potential disasters. "The last thing on anyone's list was an oil spill," he told me.

The skies began to clear. A few kilometres south of Hartley Bay, MacQueen spied a couple of black shapes in the water below and banked the Widgeon around and down for a closer look. They were humpback whales, the Great Bear Rainforest's sentinels, signaling our arrival in a world far away from Pensacola Beach and Vancouver airport, a place that could legitimately claim to be outside that world,



perhaps, were it not for the exigencies of overseas oil shipping.

My notes from this point on grew steadily more sporadic, staccato, episodic. I carried a notebook, but chose to keep my digital recorder in my bag. I had to decide whether it was more important to report on Great Bear or absorb it.

HARTLEY BAY IS A KNOT OF MODEST HOMES

gathered on the shore of a small bay at the end of a rugged Great Bear promontory, accessible only by boat or float plane. There are no cars on its narrow lanes, and many of the homes are connected to each other only by elevated wooden boardwalks. There's a community centre, a church, and a small marina. It's home to a population of 160, all of them members of the Gitga'at First Nation. They are the only permanent inhabitants at the mouth of Douglas Channel, the proposed thoroughfare for the oil supertankers which are to be fed at the rate of nearly one a day by Enbridge's planned pipeline.

The Widgeon circled into the bay like a bird of prey, belly flopped, and then chugged toward the pier. A young man trotted out to meet us. Norm Hann is a wilderness guide and part-time teacher at the Hartley Bay school who was assisting with the photo expedition. He was a story himself; in the spring, he'd paddleboarded the 400 kilometres from Kitimat to Bella Bella to bring attention to the threat posed by oil-tanker traffic.

Once MacQueen had docked his plane, Hann led us through the village to a handsome modern house set into the last broad ledge before the face of the hill grew too steep for habitation. He explained that it was the home of Cam and Eva Hill, a Gitga'at couple who'd adopted him as his Hartley Bay family. Inside, two young children were watching *Hannah Montana* on a flat-screen TV, and we settled into the spacious kitchen for rolls and coffee. MacQueen dug out his air navigation map, and Hann traced the proposed supertanker route. He pointed out the dramatic S-curve around nearby Gil Island, just across the water from Hartley Bay, whose rocky shoals had sunk the British Columbia government ferry *Queen of the North* in 2006. Hann ran these channels

and bays often on his paddle board, and he knew the local microclimates at the scale of a single paddlestroke. Douglas Channel—the narrow inlet leading from the proposed oil terminal at Kitimat—is a natural wind tunnel, with vicious crosswinds up and down its length. Hecate Strait, the wide passage separating the Great Bear coast from Haida Gwai'i—which oil tankers would traverse once they'd navigated through the tightly clustered islands of the Inland Passage—is even worse, a maelstrom of howling hurricane-force winds and shallow, choppy seas. It is, says Hann, “one of the most teacherous, narrow bodies of water anywhere in the world.”

As we were leaving, I scanned framed photos of the happy Hill family on the walls. There was Cam Hill struggling proudly under the weight of prized salmon and halibut catches, pictures of orca pods and a Hawaiian vacation. An aquarium stood by the front door, home to a single brilliantly coloured prawn. The ocean, its bounty and mystery, was everywhere. Outside, clouds hung low over the village, the incidental lives of people reduced to a delicate, transient band between sea spray and falling mist so thin it was barely there at all.

KING PACIFIC LODGE IS A LUXURY RESORT

situated in a cozy bay on Princess Royal Island, just a few kilometres south of Hartley Bay. The main building is a handsome three-storey structure made from local pine, cedar, Sitka spruce and stone, with broad balconies and the faintly Victorian air of a paddlewheel steamer. Rack rates for a three-night stay in one of its seventeen rooms run from \$4,900 for a standard to \$12,685 for the Princess Royal Suite; it has been named the best resort in Canada in the *Condé Nast Traveler* readers' poll the last four years running.

King Pacific has its own bakery in the basement and a pantry overflowing with house-made condiments and preserves. The water supply is drawn from a local creek, the laundry is phosphate-free, and the greywater in the septic system is scrubbed naturally by bacteria before being expelled back into the ocean. The menu skews hard toward local and fresh, and the lodge employs a number of Gitga'at through a training program in Hartley Bay.

The entire resort is built on top of a salvaged U.S. Army barge, a great slab of floating steel that is towed to Prince Rupert every fall to pass the winter in drydock. Aside from the slumbering diesel generator, King Pacific Lodge leaves no trace of itself behind.

The island behind the lodge is the quintessential Great Bear landscape. It is laced with trickling creeks and rushing salmon streams, providing home and sustenance to the largest permanent population of spirit bears anywhere. In the summer of 2009, a pod of humpbacks settled into the harbour off the front deck for three weeks, often breaching to greet newly arrived guests with a friendly spout of blow-hole spray.

The daily life of the lodge revolves around the vaulted central great room. When I arrived with MacQueen and Hann, the great room's couches and easy chairs were populated with *National Geographic* photographers and a documentary film crew waiting on a helicopter ride.

Hann led us into a small reading room off the great room for an introductory slideshow. There were a few details about the lodge itself, but mainly he talked about Great Bear: About the Cetacealab research facility on nearby Gil Island, which has been tracking the extraordinary return of humpback whales to the Great Bear's waters in recent years—almost 200 of them now, five times the number seen a generation ago, when the memory of whaling boats still haunted these waters. About the more tentative but no less exciting return of the fin whales. About Great Bear's unique coastal wolves, a subspecies of timberwolf genetically distinct from their inland cousins. About the black bears and grizzlies and beloved spirit bears of Princess Royal and beyond, their numbers swelling as the salmon streams filled each year with thicker runs. About the salmon as keystone species, the extraordinary ecological bounty of the salmon runs—“the miracle of life, really,” is how Hann put it—and how they provide food for more than 200 species in the rainforest, from bears and wolves to trees and ferns. About the Gitga'at, their traditional fishing camps and smokehouses, the way they tell time by the fishing seasons.

About a world in exquisite balance.

JULIAN MACQUEEN AND I WERE BUNKING ON A trimaran docked at Hartley Bay, and by the time we made it back it was evening and we were on the slightly dizzy side of hungry. The boat's owner, Ian McAllister, founder of a conservation group called Pacific Wild, was hunkered over the small galley stove, pan-frying halibut steaks as thick as a Melville novel. The fish had been swimming in a Great Bear channel that morning; you could tell because the meat of the steaks curled just a bit in the pan. The aroma was intoxicating. There was wine already open. We settled around the trimaran's cozy kitchen and feasted. I knew three bites in that I'd be telling people about the incomparable taste of fresh-caught halibut in Hartley Bay for years to come.

McAllister had been working and exploring in Great Bear for years. He has published two books of photographs of the rainforest and its inhabitants, and his Pacific Wild organization, co-founded with his wife, Karen, had helped organize the ILCP photography blitz. He was serving as its all-in-one project manager, logistics coordinator and communications chief.

After dinner, he took us to a fishing boat that had just returned to Hartley Bay after ferrying photographers through the wildest stretches of Great Bear. A couple of *National Geographic* photographers were seated around the boat's small kitchen table alongside the vessel's husband-and-wife owners, looking through their best shots on a laptop. They showed us pictures of sea otters, birds of prey, humpback and fin whales, a wolf trotting along a rocky coastline with a fat salmon in its jaws. One picture captured a pink salmon as it flung itself bodily from a steep coastal stream, seemingly suspended in midair perpendicular to the water in a feat of physical strength so implausible it looked photoshopped.

When we returned to the trimaran, McAllister and I stood on the dock chatting. He reckoned Hartley Bay was a last stand. All or nothing. There would be a pipeline or there would be spirit bears. This, I sensed, was the project his whole working life had been building toward, maybe even a chance to shape the course of

history. Jane Goodall had her chimpanzees and Cousteau his aquatic adventures, and Ian McAllister would define his career by the security of the rainforest's spirit bears.

I told him I was beginning to think that this went far beyond one pipeline and one wilderness, however vast and vital. There were two grand narratives of what Canada was and what it wanted to become—two ways forward for the whole overheating, over-exploited world, really—and they were grinding hard against each other in Hartley Bay. Everything Canada had long been was aligned on one side of the battlefield: the forces of resource extraction and global trade, oil money and the insatiable self-interest of corporate profit, exploitation, and colonial domination. On the other side was a more recent vision of Canada, one that saw itself as a responsible steward of the country's extraordinary ecological wealth, that respected indigenous rights, that sought reconciliation and balance. The Canada of the Hudson's Bay Company, the Grand Banks collapse, the Indian Act, MacMillan Bloedel and now Enbridge stood against the Canada defined by the national parks, Greenpeace, Nunavut, the Montreal Protocol and the Canadian Boreal Forest Agreement.

For almost half a century, environmentalists, natives and loggers had fought pitched battles over their perceived self-interests among the towering trees of British Columbia, only to realize almost too late that the long-term health of the forests were in everyone's interest. As we sat there in the cool, clear night, just the two of us leaning on a trimaran, I wondered if the little village of Hartley Bay and some aching beautiful photos taken by *National Geographic* photographers could teach the global oil industry the same lesson.

EARLY MORNING, THE CLOUDS LOW AND FOGGY amid the rainforest trees, and Ian McAllister was at the helm of his trimaran, chugging steadily across the black water of the bay, bound for a salmon stream on Gribbell Island. A few days earlier he'd set up a "camera trap" there—a camera paired with a motion sensor used to

gather images of the Great Bear's more reluctant celebrities—and he wanted to see if he'd caught anything with it yet. He'd brought Julian MacQueen and I along to get our first taste of the real Great Bear wilderness.

I was out on deck, watching the cloud cover burn slow and steady off the water. I turned back to watch Hartley Bay recede in the distance. The dark hills had emerged from cloud, hunched around the black bay in a semicircle like great ageless sages. The village below was still mostly shrouded, a few square whitewashed facades peaking out, an arrangement of children's playthings at the feet of the ancient mountains. McAllister joined me on the deck and followed my gaze. "You've got every major oil company in the world and the world's second-largest oil reserve looking to diversify its markets," he said, "and the only thing in the way is that little community."

We crossed a wide channel of open water and came an hour or so later to a small cove on the far shore. The shallow water was lush with fat purple starfish and clams. McAllister stepped up onto the prow and let loose a long keening howl. He'd been hoping to get some photos of coastal wolves feasting on salmon, and he was checking to see if any were still around. The only reply came from the stream mouth as coho by the score hurried away from the sound, rippling the water. He dropped anchor and we took a zodiac to shore. He checked his camera—no significant visitors yet—and then led us on a hike upstream.

The banks of the stream were spongy like peat and so thick with foliage they seemed to exhale when you stepped on them. Grasses and underbrush were shoulder-high, taller, a Jurassic landscape of ancient, mammoth plants. And then we were in shadow, lost among the true giants. The forest was towering, majestic, impossibly alive. Moss and lichen hung from every branch and crawled across every stump and rock. The tops of the cedar and Sitka spruce around us were mere hypotheses somewhere far over our heads. The creek's

trickle became a steady growl as we moved further inland. The air grew so thick and fragrant it was less like hiking than pressing through a membrane.

The stream's banks were like an emperor's dining hall in the aftermath of some frenzied bacchanal. Every few meters, we came upon salmon carcasses. Some were bloody smears of gut and skin—the remains of a bear's feast—but most were decapitated with almost surgical precision and otherwise fully intact. The wolves came first to the salmon runs, while the bears were still gorging on berries further inland. For reasons not precisely known—possibly to avoid some parasite or other pathogen in the salmon's bellies—the coastal wolves mostly eat only the heads of the salmon.

McAllister waded into the stream like he was stepping onto his back deck and then led us tromping and sopping up the far bank. He stopped at a heaping mound of dung just a couple of hues shy of grape Kool-Aid. "One hundred percent berry-fed bear scat," he explained. Further along, he pointed out a smaller pile of scat, bending down close to study its contents. "Wolves spent some time hanging out here. There's river otter in their scat."

He led us back toward the stream's mouth, pausing as we emerged from the trees to admire the proportions: the band of golden grass giving way to rocky shore, the tidy semicircle of coast, steep black rocky banks and dark water and the hills of other islands on the horizon. "It's a beautiful scene as it is," he said, "but imagine a pack of wolves down there, feasting on salmon." He paused. "It could be pretty powerful."

He was sizing it up not as a Group of Seven landscape but as a propaganda poster. *Look at this—aren't you awed?* He wanted me to wonder whether there could be anything more incongruous than a supertanker the length of thirty school buses chugging past. Could you imagine, he was asking, what this might look like gone thick with black sludge? Black like the surf in front of Julian MacQueen's Pen-sacola hotel?

WE WENT TO ANOTHER STREAM UP THE Gribbell Island coast, one McAllister knew was a favourite bear haunt. A boat carrying a few of the ILCP photographers had met up with us in the cove, and a CBC radio reporter had left them to accompany us to this second creek. My "waterproof" hiking boots started to fail about ten strides into the hike up the stream bed, and now I was hunched behind a log at the water's edge with McAllister, MacQueen and the CBC reporter, waiting on the predators.

The river around us was mildly pitched, growing steeper by the yard and so thick with salmon in their final spawning death dance that sometimes

The air grew so thick and fragrant it was less like hiking than pressing through a membrane.

they bumped our boots. I would select one swimming in the nearby water and focus on it, watching its body wriggle furiously as it waited beneath the next rocky rise in the stream for some unseen cue. And then suddenly the water would erupt, there would be a sense more than a sight of movement, and the fish I'd been watching was gone further upstream. A trace memory of motion and then nothing. It was like observing a Rapture. And it was here, in the roaring silence of the churning stream, that I experienced the rainforest's singular *satori*.

I was outside of time, vanished from the landscape.

The world belonged to the rainforest, to the trees and bears and flailing salmon. I was there only insofar as I was observing it.

Our recorded Western history seems incidental and transient here. Great Bear is ancient beyond our reckoning. The frontier's final end. I had no business being here, brought by float plane and trimaran, carried on a flood of gasoline, hurtled by oil to this rush of water and fish canopied by dinosaur trees. There was a perfect balance, so rich with emergent life it seemed volcanic, and I could not hope but lessen it.

This is the transcendence of Great Bear, its first and most pointed lesson: We are too small to play among these

giants. We know not what we do here. It can only end badly.

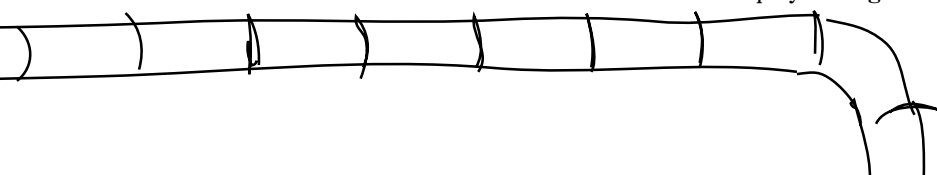
THE BEAR EMERGED FROM THE FOREST TO OUR right maybe ten metres in front of us, a black bear of standard hue, moseying like something in a cartoon. Everyone's sudden snap to full alert shook me from my reverie. If the bear saw us, he paid us no mind whatsoever. He stopped mid-stream and rooted for a moment or two among the salmon, but came up empty. He tried once more, grew bored with it, and sauntered on.

When the bear was gone, McAllister told us they rarely bothered with the salmon while berries were still plentiful. In a

few weeks, though, they'd be down here gorging, drunk with fish, so stupified by their feast, he said, that you could step right up to them and practically knock them over and they'd do nothing but fix you with a sleepy stare in return. I couldn't tell how much he was exaggerating.

Our attention turned again to the water. There were mostly pink salmon in this stream. They were all around us, fighting with all their strength to move another body length upstream, their scales falling away to reveal raw flesh as the struggle exhausted them to death from the outside in. Yet it was strangely tranquil for all the commotion, a ritual whose intent was so singular and self-contained it felt far away even as you stood in the middle of it.

McAllister explained how little of this we really understand. For a very long time we'd presumed this was a crude endurance match, a survival-of-the-fittest contest, with the salmon that dodged the snouts and claws of bear and wolf and made it the furthest upstream rewarded with safer spots to lay their eggs. Now that we could tag and track individual salmon, though, we'd come to realize that the fish are actually following some guidance system far beyond our reckoning, fighting to lay their eggs and then die not just close by but within mere metres of the spot where they themselves had hatched.



McAllister bent down and poked the streambed with an extended forefinger, and when he pulled it from the water it was topped with a tiny pink-white sphere the size of a peppercorn. A salmon egg. He was standing in a small eddy of clear water, and you could see the eggs scattered like confetti among the cedar-bark debris at his feet, each of them placed there by a dying fish that had only ever known the place as an infant, and which had then travelled thousands of kilometers across the years and then returned to this exact spot—improbably, presposterously, *miraculously*—to complete life’s cycle.

These are just words. We talk about the cycle of life as if we invented it by naming it, not as if it were as unknowable as the cosmos or the Judaic god’s true name. Formerly, I knew *salmon* primarily as a piece of common meat on a plate, a lifeless pink quadrilateral almost impossible to reconcile with the power of the fish racing upstream in cold autumn water in the Great Bear Rainforest, where *wild* is not a sales pitch but a way of being.

I don’t think I’ve ever felt as irrelevant as I did standing in the middle of that salmon run.

LATE AFTERNOON ON THE DECK OF IAN McAllister’s trimaran under clear skies, the light magical, the landscape ancient and immutable. The mouth of Douglas Channel in particular is a postcard of wild Canadian majesty, a flawless arrangement of flat black sea and low forested hills set against glacier-capped peaks on the horizon.

Now, place a modern supertanker in the foreground, and wonder at what it adds to the scene.

A typical supertanker—specifically a very large crude carrier (VLCC) or ultra large crude carrier (ULCC) of the sort that would depart the proposed oil terminal in Kitimat almost every day—is at least 300 metres long, maxing out north of 400. A thousand feet long, half or long as Hartley Bay’s coastal hills are tall. At its broadest point, its beam measures more than fifty metres, wider than half a football field’s length. The largest ULCCs can carry more than two million

barrels of oil. A floating colossus, a self-propelled city block, a mobile reservoir: the scale is at the outside edge of most people’s imaginations.

I tried to picture it, huge and vulnerable, as I sat on the deck of the trimaran, eavesdropping on an interview the CBC reporter was conducting with Julian MacQueen. They were talking about the

Hecate Strait, the wide passage separating the Great Bear coast from Haida Gwai’i, is a maelstrom of howling hurricane-force winds and shallow, choppy seas.

BP spill. “I spent 25 years building up a business,” MacQueen was saying, “and overnight it was gone. It was one of those gutwrenching, heartstopping events that you just don’t see coming.” There was a pause, another question I didn’t quite catch, and then he said, “I can’t tell you the feeling of helplessness that I felt.”

Far on the horizon, with a timing that verged on punctuation, a plume of mist rose up out of the dark water, and then another. The water was backlit by the setting sun, the light dancing against the exhalations of a pod of humpback whales. They swam alongside us for a spell, breaching and rolling, their great pale bellies gleaming. I had to wonder how they’d greet a vessel twenty-five times the size of our trimaran, whether they’d still feel welcome in a place that was home to such leviathans.

IN THE EVENING, NORM HANN TOOK JULIAN MacQueen and I to meet Helen Clifton, a revered village elder. She lived in a tidy home up the hill from the harbour. In her foyer, a glass case held old-fashioned China dolls of native girls. She was dressed in a smart red sweater, mocassins and pearls. Ceremonial masks hung from the sloped ceiling of her living room above a flatscreen TV.

Hann called her Granny (as does everybody in Hartley Bay), and as we sat down to talk a steady stream of grandchildren and great-grandchildren came through to say good night. Clifton is a gifted storyteller, and after the kids were gone, she told us stories. She talked about the night the *Queen of the North* went

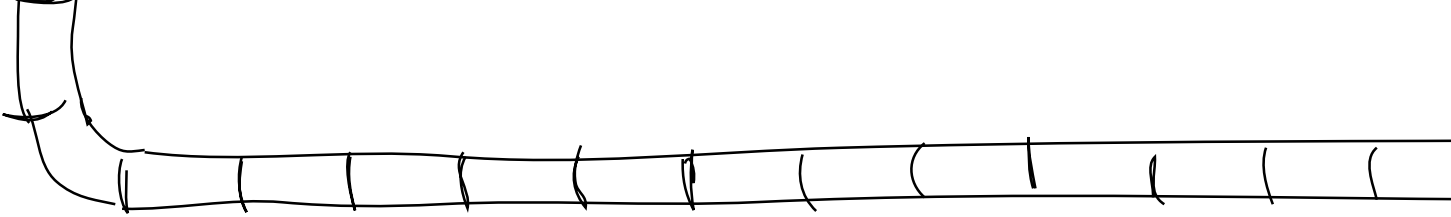
down across the bay, about the months afterward waiting in vain for its toxic wreckage to be removed. She recounted a long history of mistreatment and mistrust from the Indian Act to a recent visit from a pair of Enbridge representatives, with their “mumbo-jumbo talk” of *consultation* and *reconciliation*. She talked about her own childhood in Prince Rupert, the daughter

of an English immigrant tailor and a coastal native woman, the kids at school teasing her, calling her “half-breed.”

Clifton worked in a Prince Rupert cannery as a young woman, and then she’d met a Gitga’at man and married him, and the rest of her life had been lived in Hartley Bay. She was interested to hear about new developments in clean energy, to talk about eco-tourism and other new avenues of training for the young people in the village. She wasn’t against change; she was opposed to exploitation. She explained her stance with a sort of parable, a story about her late husband out on a hunt.

“My husband was a hunter, you know, he was trained from a little guy that there’s no way that an animal would suffer, just had to shoot them in the head. And so I guess his father had told him about the white bear on Princess Royal. And because he hadn’t seen it, he thought his father’s just telling him this story about this bear that looks like a ghost that’s in the woods – just to make him be more careful as a hunter.

“When he was about in his early fifties, he went out deer hunting, and there was this bear. And it stood up on its hind legs, and my husband said it seemed to just grow and grow until it was seven or eight feet tall. And being a hunter, he just, he brought his gun up and shot at it. And then it wiped the blood off its shoulder and it just hollered. And he just, you know, he just choked right up, because this was real. ‘What my father told me — it is real. And I didn’t believe my father.’



“And this bear hollered out crying, like a human. He said it was just like a woman had screeched out in hurt. And brushed at its shoulder. ‘What have I done? I wasn’t hunting that animal. I wasn’t here for that. We have to go follow it, because if I’ve wounded it, then I have to kill it.’ They followed it, and there wasn’t the drops of blood that a badly wounded bear would have.

“And so he comes back home, and he says, ‘Guess what I saw.’ And he said, ‘You’ll find it hard to believe. Because,’ he said, ‘I never believed it all my life.’ And he told me about this experience with a bear. ‘Oh, why didn’t you kill it,’ I said, ‘We would’ve had this white bear fur.’ And he said, ‘You foolish woman, that’s your white blood talking.’ So we both had to laugh. He didn’t say that in an insulting way, just because, he said, ‘It was only meant for me to see that it was real. Now I have to do something about it to protect it.’ And so he told his people they are not to shoot that animal no matter what. ‘It’s there. I saw it. And nobody is to hunt it. We don’t need it for nothing.’”

The spirit bear, Clifton reckoned, had visited her husband to teach him—to teach all the Gitga’at—that the bears were not there for the taking, that the spirit bear itself was the master of this place. Her husband did not stop hunting—he never doubted that the Gitga’at and everyone else needed to draw on nature’s bounty to live—but he understood there were limits. You couldn’t take *everything*.

When she finished the story, MacQueen introduced himself as the pilot of the float plane down at the marina. He told her about his hotels in Pensacola, about the BP spill and the decimated economy left in its wake. He wanted her to know that the Gitga’at would not stand alone in their opposition to the pipeline. “It’s not just your battle to fight,” he told her. “Here I am fighting it in Pensacola, Florida, and I’m up here. I mean, there’s a momentum that’s building up against this sort of thing. And I think there is hope, that these kind of things can be stopped.”

“I try to be optimistic,” Clifton replied, “and that has to be every day. Every day I have to say to myself, you know, that there’s hope.”

JULIAN MACQUEEN’S TIME MACHINE WAS crowded for the flight back to Vancouver. There was a press conference about the ILCP event scheduled for that afternoon, and Ian McAllister had brought along Norm Hann and a young Gitga’at wilderness tour operator named Marven Robinson. The three of them were guiding MacQueen across Princess Royal, buzzing low past dozens of streams, marvelling at a place they knew intimately, transformed by the Widgeon into something wondrous and new.

We were all wearing headsets so we could talk over the Widgeon’s growling engines, and the chatter was steady and gripping, a narration of the scene below as skilled as any nature documentary’s soundtrack.

“This lake is larger than I thought,” Robinson said, looking down at the flawless mirrored surface of a lake tucked amid the summit peaks of Princess Royal. The lake reflected back the Great Bear tricolour of deep green forest, golden grass and grey stone, a flag of liberation for the sovereign wilderness below. McAllister pointed out a small waterfall, and Robinson said he’d once seen five spirit bears feeding there. They traded tales of Great Bear wildlife like they were talking about their neighbours.

Just south of Bella Bella, McAllister directed MacQueen up a long, narrow tidal estuary. It was protected wilderness, the site of Pacific Wild’s first successful campaign. They’d been selling hot dogs to raise the money to buy the land ahead of the logging companies when one of Warren Buffett’s sons kicked in \$1.5 million and secured the deal. There were a couple of humpbacks swimming up the estuary as we headed back down toward open water.

As we banked again south, Hann, McAllister and Robinson took turns pointing out the sights. A pod of humpbacks. A pale red cloud of krill in the waves. A clear cut. A salmon farm sprawled across the

mouth of several wild salmon streams. A huge grey whale breaching over and over off the pristine powder-sand beach of an island off the northern tip of Vancouver Island.

MacQueen turned the Widgeon back around for another look at the grey whale, and then another and another.

“You can see wolf tracks down there,” McAllister said, pointing to the beach.

“Oh, man, this is amazing,” Robinson said.

“This is really, amazing,” Hann said.

We all said it or something like it. *Wow. Whoa. Oh man.* What else could you say when the land and sea made the limits of language—of the human imagination itself—so clear?

I’D SCHEDULED MY FLIGHT HOME TO CALGARY too early to make the press conference, so I said my goodbyes on the tarmac at the float plane terminal. In parting, Marven Robinson told me about a conversation he’d overheard between his mother-in-law and Helen Clifton, both of them in the twilight of their lives, both vowing to make the campaign to block Enbridge’s pipeline their “last fight.” They told one another that they needed to teach us all one final lesson, the one the spirit bear had taught the Gitga’at years ago: *You can’t take everything*.

Canada is an improbable country in many ways, and sometimes this makes our nation all the more powerful and wondrous. But it can also seem ridiculous, absurd. No: outrageous. It’s outrageous that a legislature on the other end of a vast continent from the Great Bear Rainforest—in another world, really, another age—assumes the authority to decide its fate. What do they know in Ottawa of salmon or spirit bears? I spent three days in the Great Bear Rainforest, and it was long enough to know that we can presume to have no such authority, that it is not for us to decide, ever, what Great Bear is *for*.

“We have to win this one.” This is what Marven Robinson’s mother-in-law had told Clifton.

It’s what Robinson told me in parting.

It’s what I’m telling you now. ■