

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

lawrence winkler

Tidal Pool Shark

Bamfield 1989

*'And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven;
And behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.'*
Genesis 28:12

He loomed over our dinner, shadow swallowing light. His fedora had attitude. The big oval electrum belt buckle kept his green shirt tucked into the jeans that fed his cowboy boots. He leaned on his stick.

"You want a game of pool?"

I didn't want a game of pool. I wanted to finish my halibut, and crash. We had paid for a mattress at the Bamfield Trails Motel to sleep. But this big Huu-ay-aht boy wanted to play.

Robyn and I had just finished the West Coast Trail, a 75-kilometre ribbon of ragged roots, boot-sucking mud, and slippery logs and ladders, clinging to the edge of Vancouver Island—a festival of suffering, the vertiginous drop in our bucket list.

The trail was built in 1907 to save souls, not destroy them, carved from the rainforest for survivors shipwrecked along the perilous coast called the Graveyard of the Pacific. From the early European fur trade, treacherous rocky reefs, tidal rips, shifting sandbars, and storms and fog had sunk hundreds of vessels. Salvage was a joke.

The maritime disaster that produced a solution arrived on the iron-hulled steamer Valencia in 1906. Passengers disliked the ship for being small, slow, and open to the elements. Her long bow reduced visibility from the bridge and ocean noise crippled crew communication.

On January 20th, the steamer left San Francisco with 65 crew and 108 passengers. Visibility dissolved into 'thick' weather next morning. Fierce winds blew up from the southeast. Without celestial observations, the officers relied on dead reckoning to navigate. Out of sight of land, Captain Johnson missed the Strait of Juan de Fuca. At midnight on January 22, he struck a reef eleven miles off Cape Beale.

A large wave lifted Valencia off the reef; the ocean poured into the hull gash, flushing engineers and everyone below onto the main deck. The surf rolled over them. To prevent his ship from sinking, Johnson ran it aground, back into the rocks.

Stranded in sight of the shore 100 yards away, passengers charged on deck and lowered all but one of the lifeboats. In their confusion and panic and undress, they cut away the canvas intended to keep out the breakers. Loaded with women and children, three flipped on descent, three more filled with water and capsized, and the last just disappeared. Smashed against the steamer's side and swept into the sea, most drowned.

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Nine men made it to shore and spent the night huddled among the rocks. At dawn, they scaled a 100-foot cliff and looked back to the poor souls on the submerged saloon deck, the inrolling sea spuming over and onto them, pounding the hull and threatening to break the wreck. A southeast gale roared through the rigging. Strung in the trees on the bluff, they discovered a telephone line they tracked through dense forest across swollen streams to a lineman's shack on the Darling River. They connected a telephone and contacted the Carmanah Lighthouse keeper, who contacted the outside world.

Three rescue vessels from Victoria arrived on the scene 36 hours later. Valencia launched the ship's two remaining life rafts, but most remained with the ship, hanging onto the rigging, the unsubmerged parts of the hull, and a misplaced faith in salvation. The rescuers could only stare, as Valencia's funnel collapsed. A gigantic wave swept the last gasps into white noise. More than 136 souls, including all the women and children, perished in the most horrible way.

The Canadian government responded to two forensic investigations with a coastal Dominion Lifesaving Trail for shipwrecked mariners. In 1973, it was renamed The West Coast Trail and, sixteen years later, Robyn and I set off to hike it.

We had prepared for the trek by humping our backpacks around Westwood Lake, in our Nanaimo back yard. Pedestrian and predictable, it was a 'walk in the park'. The West Coast version was a trial of topography.

The secret to survival was to 'pack light.' Robyn bought freeze-dried strawberries that cost more per gram than cocaine and chile con carne that tasted like Cream of Cardboard soup. Even the toilet paper was cored like an apple. Our only luxury was our cooking pot, a repurposed Chinese wok, sawed-off like a shotgun. The day before we left, we made one last hike around Westwood, weighted with gear and food. So excited to finish in second place, I celebrated my success with two hours of coma.

At 3:22 p.m. sharp, the E&N Dayliner (all one car of it) pulled into Nanaimo station. We swung a seat around to enjoy the next three hours of views—the superb span of the Koksilah River Trestle, the Malahat summit, and the unintended surgical removal of the ladder on a chimney sweep's van. Old friends Colin and Sue welcomed us to Victoria with a last supper and a fireplace gabfest which took us long into the night.

After predawn croissants and coffee, Colin chauffeured us through the twilight to Port Renfrew and wished us luck. We would start at the more difficult south trailhead—an exceptionally rugged section of heartbeats and masochistic metres per hour.

A young park ranger asked if we were ready.

"Ready?"

"The West Coast Trail is the most difficult multi-day hike in North America." She said. "Success requires preparation, mental fortitude, and physical stamina. There are countless wooden ladders, makeshift bridges, mud bogs, unstable log crossings, cable cars, boulder fields, and soft-sand beach trudging. Many fit hikers get stranded by ignoring tide tables, drown jumping over surge channels with their backpacks, fall through

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rotten sections of the boardwalks, or just give up. Seventy-five sustain injuries serious enough to require an expensive rescue every year.”

Today it costs over three hundred dollars in reservation fees, national park entry fees, overnight use permits, and ferry fees. Back in 1989, we didn’t even need a reservation.

“You can buy a map for four dollars.” She entered our names in her logbook.

“It’s a straight line, isn’t it?”

“Have fun. Try not to die.” She pointed to the barge that would ferry us across the Gordon River. On the other side, it began to rain. No, the sky opened and fell into the river, drowning our vision and drenching our knapsacks. Robyn and I stumbled towards the first of seventy long ladders. This one was wet and fifty feet high. Our boots tried hard to slide out from the slimy rungs under them. We ascended slowly, daring not lean back for fear that our loaded packs would drag us screaming into the rocks below.

At the top of the ladder was another one, and we climbed puffing and sweating, until there was another, straight down the other side of the ridge. It could have been a circus event if the aerial acrobatics had been less demanding. Between ladders, we slid along protruding roots and around thick quagmires of mud and logs projecting in every angle from the thick underbrush. Our legs burned, and then cramped, and then gave way to involuntary spasms. The dead donkey engine halfway to our first campsite was a sign we had two more hours of climbing another half kilometre into the sky. The rain cleared to fog to mist to an ephemeral view of the distant Olympic Mountains in Washington, before it changed its mind and washed them away. It was never a question of if it would rain, but if it would ever stop.

Fifty stories above Thrasher Cove we hit the down button. The only muscles I could still move were the ones in my fingers I needed to pitch the Gore-Tex tent I had bought in Seattle ten years earlier to travel the world. ‘Diogenes’ would accommodate the destiny I had found.

Too exhausted to fire up the stove, we ate our dinner cold and snuggled into our sleeping bags. I ached in places other primates didn’t even have places. Just before I fell asleep, I muttered something about Jacob’s ladder.

“What’s that?” Robyn asked.

“The ‘bridge’ between Heaven and Earth in Genesis.” I said. “Child’s play.”

The storm had soaked everything we repacked next morning.

“Welcome to the Wet Coast Trail.” Robyn said. The only way out was straight up the ladders we had descended the previous afternoon. The stunning raw beauty of our surroundings was surreal — ancient trees shot through the rainforest canopy, sword fern understory as tall as we were, Spanish moss and a United Nations of other peat and sphagnum, and fungi of every shape, size and hue. Banana slugs ranged from yellow to black, like their fruity facsimiles in the fridge. The musical gronk gronk

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of ravens, mixed with the sweet chirping of squirrels and bald eagles, pierced the crashing crescendo of the surf below.

But the trail required presence of mind every step of the way. Balance was survival. It wasn't if you'd fall, but how hard; it wasn't the fall that hurt you, but what you landed on. Robyn's slow-motion pirouette off a large log caused her to scrape a rib. My luck was less salubrious. After nine kilometres of creeks and gullies and ravines on intricate bridges and fallen trees and a final crazy cable car suspended in space, I had twisted my ankle, sheared the skin off my right shin, lost two inches in height from the pack pile-driving my vertebrae, and ripped back muscles from their insertions trying to stay upright. Campers Cove was a welcome sight.

I reassembled Diogenes, dragged our sawed-off shotgun wok onto glowing coals, and stir-fried a salt pan of salami and eggs. From the cove, sea spray whooshed into a clearing sky, unveiling a pod of migrating fifty-foot-long gray whales, roaring south to their Mexican calving grounds, great ocean souls restoring light, and purpose, and peaceful sleep.

In fresh morning air, we retaped our blisters and climbed back into the spruce stratosphere of mushrooms and mud. The trail veered inland to avoid dangerous surge channels and impassable promontories, where cliffs dropped into the sea. A boardwalk took us through a marshland bog. Warped timber planks ran away from each other in places of disrepair. Sun overhead, we stopped for cream cheese and salami sandwiches, and the curiosity of a lone Canada goose. Back in the forest, we crossed Cul-lite Creek in an exhilarating slow cable car suspended animation. Late afternoon, Robyn and I spilled onto the wild secluded beach at Walbran Creek. We set up Diogenes, built a campfire, and ran into the cold ocean, dive-bombed by hundreds of seagulls. The naked swim was a Baptism. We were no longer on the trail; we were from and of the trail. After Robyn cooked Beef Bourguignon in our shotgun wok, and we sat on a log to watch the sun sag into the Pacific, an unexpected squad of British marines came out of nowhere, running in formation. They greeted us with waves and huzzahs.

"Aren't you stopping for the night?" Robyn asked.

"No." One of them volunteered. "Doing the trail in 75 hours." We could only wonder why.

By next morning, Robyn and I had hit our groove. Life on the trail had boiled down to routine, anchored by the necessities of survival—fuel, hydration, and rest in our shelter, assembled each evening and broken down next dawn.

Instead of humping the heights of absurdity, we walked the beach—around headlands and massive boulders on shelves of rock exposed by the low tide, and luxuriant tidal pools teeming with colourful sea anemones, starfish, fish, mussels, and barnacles. Sea lions lolled about, barking and grunting as we passed.

We arrived at Carmanah lighthouse in time to beat the tide. A forest trail took us 'the clearest way into the universe.' After arranging our muddy boots around a fire and a delicious soy burger dinner in our next campsite at Cribbs Creek, we invited new companions. Andy, Darren

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and Scott to join us for lemon zinger tea. Beneath a firmament of dancing constellations, we tortured each other with food-cravings of sushi, steaks, and ice-cold mango smoothies. Parting in the awe and gratitude of what the trail had provided instead, we fell asleep, pegged into the soft sands of paradise.

Next morning, a ten-kilometre coastal tramp took us to the second barge crossing at Nitnat Narrows. A Ditidaht native ferryman took us across the fast-moving river to the northern shore to an afternoon of divine bush-walking. We emerged onto a seascape of colossal driftwood logs scattered on a sandy beach, surrounding a majestic waterfall cascading over a wide sandstone bonsai bluff into a large pool that flowed in an ever-changing channel to the ocean. We kindled our evening campfire a proper distance from our campsite in the partitioned privacy of the driftwood backdrop. After a Tsusiat Falls shower and a dip in its pool, the evening took on a rosy hue. Robyn cooked up a shotgun wok-full of fried rice. After our tea, we took a final walk along the pebbled beach and then, before it got too cold, nuzzled into our sleeping bags. Waterfalls whispered in our dreams.

On the beginning of the sixth day, we pulled ourselves in another cable car over the Klanawa River. Three kilometres along the coast to Trestle Creek, we climbed onto a jagged west coast cliff edge with breathtaking views of the ocean's fury. The rollers broke onshore, churning the beach sand where solid rock once stood. The saltwater wave train held us spellbound. Green kelp beds discharged islands of broken blades. Seaweed stipes and floats and fronds rode the roller coaster, driven by the star that would have shone on the bay, but for a blanket of sullen clouds.

Robyn and I climbed silent stone sentinels covered in a few firs and cedars striving upward, eagles perched in quarantine above it all. We surfaced onto 100-foot-high Valencia Bluffs. The tangled wreckage sat on rocks in four fathoms of water below, rusting into eternity. Four kilometres later, across the outlets from Billy Goat to Orange Juice Creeks, we emerged onto a beach at the mouth of the Darling River.

Beside our last campfire, the epiphany kicked in. In six days, Robyn and I had walked a wilderness world of big trees, rocks, waves, waterfalls, and piles of mud, across great swaths of unspoiled beaches and tidal pools swirling with marine life, through celebrations of thundering surf, enchanted water-carved caves, and isolated swimming holes, and spectacular sunrises and sunsets. We had forged new friendships with kindred souls. We knew how to carry everything we needed on our backs and conquer our fears rung by rung and step by step, thankful for both our strength and smallness in this vast beautiful world. The West Coast Trail was a rite of passage, and a consummation of our love affair with Vancouver Island.

The last day was a 14-kilometre cakewalk of foreshore and forest to the Pachena Bay trailhead and the last cabin, a mirror image of the one in Port Renfrew seven days earlier. One of the best things about hiking the West Coast Trail was finishing the West Coast Trail.

Here, at 9 p.m. Pacific Time, on January 26, 1700, a magnitude 9 Cascadia megathrust earthquake ripped open the earth's zipper as long as

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California, or Japan's island of Honshu, devastating both coastlines. The tsunami obliterated the sleeping Huu-ay-aht village. First Nations cultures depict the event as a great battle between a thunderbird and a whale. Cascadian megaquakes occur every 500 years; American experts predict the next one. Our operating assumption is that everything west of Interstate 5 will be toast.

But not that day. From Pachena Bay, it was still another seven kilometres to the west coast village of Bamfield. The driver of the first vehicle we had seen in a week offered us a ride in his pickup.

"You could walk it if you prefer." He said. We didn't prefer.

I'd always loved Bamfield. It was a wonderful Barkley Sound base for fishing and camping and mushroom foraging. I dreamt of a small cabin overlooking the wild Pacific, a perfect writing refuge. But I never had enough money, or time.

Which brings us to where this story started, hustled by the big Huu-ay-aht boy in the restaurant of the Bamfield Trails motel.

"You want a game of pool?" He asked.

"No." I said. "But my wife will give you a game." He scowled at Robyn.

"I don't play with girls." What our young native friend couldn't know was that, in an ocean of ferocious pool sharks, Robyn was a great white maneater. When she came to meet my parents, my father gave her a tour of the house. He saw her fascination with the regulation size pool table in the basement.

"You play?" He asked, and when she nodded, he asked if she wanted a game. The bloodshed that followed was hard to watch. Always the gentleman, my father insisted she break the triangle. He didn't get in a shot before Robyn ran the table.

"You should play this girl." I said. "She's pretty good." Big boy suspected something, but not what happened after he nodded. His friends began to pay attention.

"You go first." He said. And with that, Robyn chalked her cue and proceeded to clear the table. The hustler spoke nine words to me, on his way out the door.

"That women of yours." He said. "She sure can play pool."

In January 2007, intense storms severely damaged the West Coast Trail, downing 3,000 trees, destroying a bridge and cable car, and causing a serious landslide. The cleanup cost a half million dollars. But in the coastal conditions punish these structures, the trees still fall and the boardwalks get slippery. And there's an earthquake on the way.