

2009.04.12 Salmon: An Easter Story

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Scene I: The Nest

Egg 1: Where are we?

Egg 2: I don't know.

Egg 1: What are we?

Egg 2: I don't know that either.

Egg 1: And what are those things swimming around?

Egg 2: Swimming, what's swimming?

Egg 1: I don't know...it's what they're doing with their tails and fins

Egg 2: Tails? Fins? What are those?

Egg 1: How should I know?!

Egg 2: Well look you're the one who said it!

Egg 1: Wait a minute. What are they doing, now?

Egg 2: They're slowing down. They've stopped...what did you call it?

Egg 1: ...swimming...

Egg 2: Yes, swimming, and they're just floating away now, and coming apart, breaking down. Did one of them wave to us?

Egg 1: Maybe. It's kind of sad, don't you think? And why do I think I should know them?

Egg 2: I know what you mean. And I feel kind of lonely and yet happy at the same time. Don't you think that's strange?

Egg 1: Something's going to happen, I just know it...I just wonder what it is; and when?

Egg 1: Listen, Let's wait and see; O.K.? We'll keep looking and stay put here in this nest. At least it's cozy here.

Narrator: And there they rest, Chinook salmon eggs the size of buckshot, cradled in a nursery in the shade of red cedars above, and bathed in cold, slow moving fresh water; up to a thousand eggs in a single clean gravel nest, called a redd, for nearly three months, until on day...in early spring...infant salmon, called "alevin," emerge...

Alevin 1: Whoa! I've changed!

Alevin 2: So have I! We're not those round red things anymore.

A1: Yeah, we have tails and fins; but I can't swim

A2: Me too, all I can do is wriggle around...and what are these things hanging down?

Narrators: "Alevin"

N1: Yolk sacs, full of rich food which the alevin digest. Listen! Alevin is a word that comes from Latin, which literally means "a reared one."

N2: Reared by whom, by what? They look very much alone; no adult salmon around.

Look closer. Barely a centimeter long, the alevin are reared on the yolk left by their parent fish, in a nest built by a mother's tail, in creek water kept cool in the shade of the cedar tree.

N1: Fed, cared for, and bathed: parent, stream, and forest are mother to the salmon.

N2: After a month, the alevin shed the eaten the yolk, leave their redds, and begin to swim in schools of small salmon fry, quick and shy of light. They feed on insect larvae and the carcasses of spawned out adult fish.

Scene II: The Salmon Fry School

S1: This is strange kind of classroom!
Small Fry1: Isn't there supposed to be a teacher, or something?
Small Fry 2: Yeah, and bells and rules, and...
S1: And desks
S3: Desks? in a stream?
S2: Well, look smarty scales, how are we supposed to learn without desks, lining up in a row, teachers, books...stuff like that?
S3: I don't know yet. Maybe we can figure that out for ourselves.
Small Fry 3: Without a teacher?
S4: Well do you see any teachers around here? Any adult fish?
Small Fry 3: No.
Small Fry 4: We'll have to do it ourselves.
SF1: Right, what's a school for anyway?
SF2: Sticking together; that makes us a school!
SF3: That's right; we're the salmon fry school!
SF4: OK, but what's a school for?
SF1: Learning things.
SF2: Like what?
SF3: What do you think?
S1: I don't know. Hmm...Learning how to swim and float...
S2: Knowing what's good to eat and how to survive...
S3: How to grow, how to dive and leap, and flash our tails.
S4: Who's good, who's bad...
S3: How to get from here to there and back again.
SF1: From here to there and back again?
S2: From **here**...that's clear enough. But where's "**there**"? and **Back** to where?
S1: Where we came from; that quiet stream with the cedar trees over head; that nest, where it all began.
S3: She's right. We have to go back there someday. We all just know that.
SF2: From here to there and back again. How do we do that?
S4: Well let's think about; that's what a school is for, isn't it; for figuring things out.
S2: How do we get from here to there? What do we do...?

(Choir sings)

"How do we get from here to there song.

Swim swim swim swim swim swim swim...

How do we get from here to there? What do we do? Well if you are going to ask that question, this is my advice to you: we swim right down this stream, until we meet the sea; and that is how we get from here to there.

We flash our tails, and wave our fins.

We eat at dawn and then at dusk, a lot of bugs...

That's right! We must!

And that is how we get from here to there...

Swim.....

There's got to be more to it than that

Swim...

How do you get from here to there? What do we do?

Well if you are going to ask that question, this is my advice to you: we watch out for our foes, and swim the other way; and that is how we get from here to there.

Swim clear of gunk that humans spill, a pox on birds with pointy bills

And bears and spears and shiny hooks

Don't get too close, just take one look
Then flash our tails, and wave our fins
We swim downstream right to the sea
And that is how we get from here to there...
And that is how we get from here to there.

Narrators: "From Fry to Smolt, from Stream to Estuary and the Sea"

N1: Most salmon remain in lakes and streams for two years before they begin their epic migration to the sea. It's a time of great danger and change. Only the strongest fry survive predators like bigger fish and birds, and polluted rivers and streams. Of 100 eggs, only four or five young salmon make it down the river.

N2: In time, the fry grow from 2 centimeters to 20 centimeter long adolescents; and then change and grow some more to slivery sleek young adult salmon called smolts. From North Asia to the Fraser to the Columbia and further south the smolt run begins.

N1: Traveling by night, following the lead of a single larger smolt that seems to make decisions for the rest at rapids and barriers, the salmon race downriver. They swim hundreds of miles, and then gather in bays and estuaries where rivers and oceans meet, the threshold between one watery world and the next, where a unique transformation takes place.

Scene III: Smoltification

S1: O.K. So what are we waiting for? The ocean's just right out there. I want to swim in it; don't you?

S2: Yeah, but something's going on. It's not the same.

S1: Of course it isn't the same. Look where we came from back there: creek beds, winding rivers. We got choked by sewage and fertilizer runoff from cities and farms; and we were live bait for bigger fish and birds. It's a miracle we made it this far. I want the wide sea! I want to stretch and swim forever!

S2: So do I! We all do. But can't you feel it? Smell it? Taste it? The water's different. And I know it's an ocean and not a river, I'm not a dumb small fry anymore; none of us are. But there's something *really* different about the water.

S3: Like what? Who's going to swim out there and find out?

S2: I'll try it. (Starts choking) Yuck, the water's salty. I mean *really* salty. I could hardly breathe; and the taste! I mean, how can we swim in that? And the food? Shrimp, squid, krill, plankton, and crabs! Salt! Salt! Salt! It's disgusting. (spits)

S3: That's just great! We swim downstream for hundreds of miles just for this? Stuck treading water in an estuary? What a joke!

S2: No wait; there's got to be a reason for this. For all our swimming, all this journeying downstream.

S4: Look they're going back out into the sea.

S1: Well, it's different, that's for sure. But I think we can make it. It just takes some getting used to. And don't you feel like you have to do it? Swim out there free in the seas? Not staying in one place? Going through these changes to be our own kind of fish.

S2: Going through the master changes; that's us! From stupid eggs to fry to smolt and then to grow up, really, out there; from fresh water to the oceans and then leaping back up stream again.

S4: That's who we are; salmon: the leaping fish. We'll jump through the changes from here to there and back again, stream to sea and stream. Give us a challenge and we improvise.

S1: We're supple, not stuck. We'll smolt our way into the high seas and laugh as we flash our tails and speed away from this place.

S3: Listen to you! You're changing already. I can smell it. Ocean faring fish, that's who we'll be for as long as it takes. It's that or die treading water here.

S1: So who's for faring forth as sea going salmon?

All: !!! All of us!

S2: Then here we go!

Narrators: "Salmon and Mythic Powers"

N1: *Smoltification* an ugly word isn't it. But it means a suite of changes, an amazing transformation, where salmon bodies, their shape, their chemistry, their behaviour...all of it changes. All to produce one of the wonders of life: a land fish, creek born, river bred, breathing fresh water becomes a flashing creature of the salty deep and the bounding main. Such a change demands that a salmon goes through a new birth really. Creature of river and ocean, transformer, and master of changes; no wonder we mere humans have revered salmon from time immemorial.

N2: In Babylonian mythology, there was a figure, Oannes, who came from the sea dressed as a fish, like a salmon, to teach the people wisdom. In Salish mythology, the wife of Swanset, the creator spirit, was a sockeye salmon.

N1: It is said, that the Welsh hero, Mabon was once captured by a fiend; his wife Gwryhr consulted with all of the world's creatures, only to discover that it was the salmon alone who knew the secret of Mabon's whereabouts and who helped her secure her husband's freedom.

Scene IV: The Sacred Well, and the Journey to the Land Under the Sea

N2: Once upon a time there was a widow who had three sons and a daughter. One of the sons was a simple minded dunce; and the mother despaired of his future when she could no longer take care of him. She asked a wise woman what could be done.

N1: The witch told her of a "land under the waves" where the hazel-ringed, sacred well of knowledge and the salmon of wisdom reside. Each All Hallowed Eve the salmon rose through the waters of the well to eat the fruit as it falls from the hazel, and thus knows all things.

Witch "On this All Hallowed Eve, send your eldest son to the well for to bring back the hazel fruit of knowing which makes the salmon wise; one bite of that fruit will bring knowledge and wisdom to your simple minded boy; and then you will be content."

N2: So on that night alone when worlds open each to each, the eldest son set forth and traveled to the "land under the waves." There he met the sea people who offered to help him on his quest. He accepted their hospitality, but then offended them deeply with his bragging ways. Knowing that one such was unworthy, the sea people turned him into a stone at the sacred well as the hazel berries fell and the salmon of wisdom rose to feed upon them.

N1: The same fate befell the second son next All Hallowed Eve; turned to stone at the well for his lazy and selfish character.

N2: One more year passed away, and the widow sank in despair; now two sons lost under the waves, with the third son fated never to grow a man in full possession of his wits.

N1: This time, the widow's daughter pled with her mother to undertake the quest. The mother refuses:

Daughter: "Please mother, let me go to the sacred salmon well; I know I can do it, and bring our brothers home."

Mother: "You're my only whole child now; I could not bear your loss."

N1: But on that sacred night, nonetheless, the brave lass stole away from hearth and home and journeyed to the "land under the waves." There, she too met the sea people, whom she impressed with her ready wit, courage, and good manners. So they guided her to the well where she caught the fruit before it fell to the rising salmon. That fish, with one look upon her fair, bright face knows there's wisdom in the making.

N2: The salmon tail flashes. And the young woman, enlightened by the touch of the hazel fruit and the blessing of the salmon, lifted the curse from her stone brothers and with them returned home, where with one bite of the hazel fruit, she cured the third brother of his simple mind.

N1: It seems the salmon favour the brave, the innocent, and the kind; and blesses all true transformations.

(End of the scene)

Narrators: "Species and Migrations"

N2: These are the names of the seven species of salmon which range and feed in the North Pacific, from the Bering Sea to the Pusan River in Korea to Monterey Bay:

- Chinook and Coho
- Sockeye and Pink
- Dog, Cherry, and Steelhead

N1: Now full-fledged ocean fish, North American salmon begin the great counter clockwise circular migration that takes them half-way across the Pacific and back. Some travel up to 16,000 kms during their ocean lives.

N2: In a circle, not to and fro, the enormous schools travel 15 kms a day until the spawning urge possesses them and they increase their speed to 50 kms a day until, once again, they approach the fresh water rivers from whence they came. Here they come!

Scene V: Predators

S1: Oh the things we've seen!! The flow of currents, great forests of kelp; sleek schools of us, salmon from North America and Asia past numbering!

S2: Imagine it! Families of orcas hot on our tails; fleets of dark hulking boats trailing their nets sweeping the seas like billowing clouds to swallow us up; and those glittering hooks...thousands of them... shining in the waves like stars dappling the skies.

S3: And how do we know our way back to the rivers down once we ran? Is it the unseen spark of electricity running through seawater currents generated by the earth's magnetic fields? Is it that spark coursing like voltage through our bodies guiding us home?

S4: A host of foes, predators of fin and fleet, they pursued us across the ocean; And now, look: they await for us a river's mouth where sea and land meet. Predators! Salmon eaters! With their boats and hooks, their wings and talons, their claws and sharp teeth.

N2: As they approach fresh water, the salmon have reached the peak of their physical and instinctual genius. Fat, shining and leaping, schools swarm restlessly at the mouths of rivers. They feed voraciously now, for they will not feed again once they enter fresh water. This is the time to take salmon for meat. Human, eagle, and bear—they await.

The Predators

Bear: Neighbour! Good day for fishing, don't you think?

Eagle: Neighbour. Fair enough, and my, haven't we been patient!

All: mmm

Bear: I'm starving! What about you?

Eagle: Indeed! And you, human?

Fisherman: Well, this reminds me of a song. I think we all know it, as we have the same thing in mind? Shall we?

Bear/Eagle: Oh let's!

Predators' Song

There is a nothing like a fish! Nothing in the world

Can you name another dish; that is anything like a fish?

You can...

(Interrupts) Wait!!

Above the rest, there's no contest, on this we can agree

Dried, fried, or rare, there's none compared

With one in stream or sea...

It's salmon!
The best fish of all is a salmon!
By talon, or by claw, on hook, or gaping maw
It's bliss!
It's salmon!
Say it loud and there's music playing
Say it soft—it reminds us we're preying!
(We're predators after all.)
It's salmon!
We love, how we love eating salmon

Put a salmon on the barby
Put a salmon in a roll
Pull a salmon from the river
On my claws they look so droll
Poach a salmon in a fine sauce
Or eat it on the go
What do we have?
The best meal we know!
Argh! Yah!

S1: We've not swum the seas, the thousands of miles, just to turn back now!
S2: Let's dash for it mates! Each to his and her own birth-stream. We'll be the parents now to the next generation.
S4: Allons mes amis! Pour nos enfants and le future de notre especes!
S3: What's he saying?
S2: Let's swim for our lives and for the future!

N2: Salmo: the Romans called them, "the leaping fish"; Oncorhynchus: the hook nose, so-named by the Greeks. All salmon of the two oceans, Pacific and Atlantic, are anadromous fish, ana: meaning up; and dromos, running.

N1: Salmon is the leaping fish that runs up back home. For Pacific salmon, it is a journey made only once; homing in on their birth place with uncanny accuracy; less than 0.1% stray from their home to spawn.

Scene VI: Returning Home

S2: I can smell it! Don't you?
S3: Do you mean home? Yes. It's perfectly clear to me.
S1: And to me; but mine's not the same as yours.
S4: No, up there, somewhere up river, we split up, don't we; and then we each go to spawn in the same place where it all began.
S2: It seems so long ago and far away.
S3: Do you remember when we were alevins, with those yolk sacs...
S1: And that small fry school?
All: (pick up the song) "how do we get from here to there, what do we do...?"
All: (laugh)

N1: The trip upstream is an enormous effort. Man-made obstacles on the rivers, the strong current itself, and rapids, cataracts and waterfalls. All must be faced, swum through, and leapt over and over again.

N2: Once they start swimming upstream in fresh water, they will not eat again. Their bodies go through striking changes: they grow humps, long sharp teeth, and hooked upper jaws; the body of the sockeye turns fresh blood red, its head an olive green. The organism begins to consume itself.

N1: In spite of all, they travel up river and stream 60 kms a day, until they reach the spawning ground, the place of their own birth.

S1: Well... This is goodbye.

S2: We had a good run of it, didn't we?

S3: Yes, who would have believed what we've been, and seen?

S4: Who would have believed what we look like now?

S1: Humpbacked.

S2: Hook nose

S3: Olive head

S4: Body red.

S1: One change after another.

S2: Birth and rebirth.

S3: Mistresses, Masters of change. That's us.

S4: It was worth every minute!

S1: Fresh and Salty.

S2: Red roe and smolt

S1: down the river to the sea

S3: Back and forth

S4: Silver threads on earth's loom... makes a circle.

S1: one more pass left on the loom

S2: weft and woof

S3: before it's over

S4: and begins again,

S2: it makes a circle. Life.

S1 and 2: Farewell!

S3 and 4: Good bye! (1&2 separate from 3&4)

Scene VII: Back to the Nest

S2: let's swim together this one last time; I can smell the creek, just over there...

S1: and the cedar tree overhead, look, I remember!

S2: So do I.

S2: I feel so beat and old

S1: hungry, too...

S2: It's good to come home,
after all we've been through.

S1: The rivulet of our birth

S2: the beginning of changes

S1: the temperature just right,
clean water and bright..

S2: This gravel here will make a good redd;
and look! the cedar overhead.

N1: the salmon hen builds the nest with her tail; inches deep and twice her length

N2: the male salmon nudges and darts away, and returns.

N1: She hovers over the redd.

N2: He curves his body against hers.

N1: And then together, eggs and sperm, like a cloud fill the nest.

S2: let's just cover it now; we've done our part.

S1: I feel so tired...

S2: for as long as we can...we'll keep watch

N1: Countless thousands of years

N2: binding forest and sea

N1: Salmon, silver thread on earth's loom

N2: The leaping fish returns home...

Scene VIII: And Life Again

Egg 1: Where are we?

Egg 2: I don't know.

Egg 1: What are we?

Egg 2: I don't know that either.

Egg 1: And what are those things swimming around?

Egg 2: Swimming, what's swimming?

Egg 1: I don't know...it's what they're doing with their tails and fins

Egg 2: Tails? Fins? What are those?

Egg 1: How should I know?!

Egg 2: Well look you're the one who said it!

Egg 1: Wait a minute. What are they doing, now?

Egg 2: They're slowing down. They've stopped...what did you call it?

Egg 1: ...swimming...

Egg 2: Yes, swimming, and they're just floating away now, and coming apart, breaking down. Did one of them wave to us?

Egg 1: Maybe. It's kind of sad, don't you think? And why do I think I should know them?

Egg 2: I know what you mean. And I feel kind of lonely and yet happy at the same time. Don't you think that's strange?

Egg 1: Something's going to happen, I just know it...I just wonder what it is...

Chorus Finale

Swim down to the river

Out to the sea

...We don't know about you,

But for us it is true...

Life is a circle

From redd to red

Sockeye and coho

Through water they've sped

Mistresses of birth

Masters of change

...We don't know about you

But for us it is true...

Life is a circle

On earth's great loom

Fish thread of silver

Binding it true

See the wheel

As it turns

From night to day

Seasons come and they go

Feel the earth play

Come join the circle

On this glad day

Humans and salmon

Mistresses of birth

Masters of change.

Birth and death

And life again...