Brian Doyle’s ferocious attention

Doyle’s exuberant writing praised particular things in rich detail. It cut to the pulsing heart of life.

by Jonathan Hiskes in the July 5, 2017 issue

Brian Doyle at the *Christian Century*'s November 2015 annual event. Photo by the *Christian Century*.

When the writer Brian Doyle was diagnosed with an advanced brain tumor in November, a flood of support poured in from readers. When he was asked what well-

wishers could do, he said, “Hear all laughter. Be tender to each other. Be more tender than you were yesterday, that’s what I would like. You want to help me? Be tender and laugh.”

Those words—spirited, playful, somehow both wordy and direct—were a characteristic invitation from Doyle, who died at age 60 on May 27 at his home near Portland, Oregon, with his wife Mary and three children at his side.

In Doyle’s hand, every experience became literature. A boat ride wasn’t a boat ride but “this voyage, this particular jaunt, this epic adventure, this bedraggled expedition, this foolish flight, this sea-shamble, this muddled maundering, this aimless amble on the glee of the sea . . . ” Doyle indulged a rabid showboating streak, beginning essays with impish openings like “Speaking of badgers . . .” or “And while we are talking about fourth grade . . .” He laughed in the face of Strunk & White’s dictum to “omit needless words,” instead unspooling flamboyant strings of modifiers like the “sinuous quicksilver geometry of basketball” or the “bright redolent funk of gymnasiums.”

Doyle’s torrent of language did not cheapen his writing, however, but instead gave it a unique power. It served his determination to cut to the pulsing heart of life in quiet domestic moments or crescendoing epiphanies. He returned to these moments over and over in stories that blurred the lines between poetry, essay, and fiction. In *Spirited Men* (2004) he called writing “the attempt to stare God in the eye.” That phrase hints at the audacity of his work, a mystical project born of both joy and desperation.

To encounter Doyle in recent years, you had only to open an issue of the *Christian Century, Orion, The Sun, First Things, Sojourners*, or Australia’s *Eureka Street*—there was always a fair chance of finding his byline. Or you could turn to *Portland*, the magazine that he edited at the University of Portland. He took the modest form of an alumni magazine and turned it into a channel of vigorous spiritual inquiry, publishing essays by writers like Annie Dillard, David James Duncan, and Pico Iyer.

He wrote books at an astounding rate. In the last eight years, he published eight books of fiction, five essay collections, and four books of poetry. It’s his novels that best captured his outsized ambition.

Mink River, perhaps his best-known book, presented an ensemble cast in a town “not big not small” on the drizzly Oregon coast. The plot drifts and swirls,

disappearing out to sea and sweeping back in like coastal mist. We meet a Puccini-loving cop and a pair of teenagers sneaking off to a cabin for an afternoon tryst. We meet a sculptor in her studio, her husband surrounded by junk in his repair shop, and a pair of mewling bear cubs. (Doyle's interests were not confined to one species.)

In a strange but typical passage, a crow gives a speech against eagles, offended at being mistaken for one. Says Moses the crow:

> The clan of raptor is a mean clan. Their minds are small. Their horizons are meat. They take pride in their violence. They tear and shred each other with no regret or compunction. Their hearts are limited. They have no sense of time. They have no perspective. They have no past and no future. They are never sad, having no past to mourn and no future to fear, but they are never happy. They glower and snarl. They live for blood. What kind of life is that? They glory in power. What kind of life is that? They have no humor and their affection for their children is measured out in meat. What kind of life is that?

Moses goes on to praise his own species: "We are brilliant and stupid. We are lonely and livid. We lie, we laugh." In a roundabout way, Doyle is celebrating the motley chaos of human culture. Delivering the passage through an articulate crow in an otherwise realistic novel is his way of jarring the reader to pay attention.

Elsewhere we meet Grace, a young woman patching tires on a tractor and amusing her younger brothers with her inventive cursing. She learned her vulgarity from her father, a failed farmer who beat his children until the oldest son grew large enough to return his threats. This is no sanitized fairytale land. The children's mother abandoned them years back, dragging a suitcase out the front door:

> The suitcase was enormous. It was far too big for her to carry. The sound of it being dragged down the gravel driveway will stay with Grace and her brothers forever and ever and ever.

After lulling the reader with poetic rumination, Doyle hurls this jagged detail like a spear out of the mist. Well into the book's second half a dramatic plot emerges that's as gripping as a supermarket thriller. You wonder why Doyle didn't deploy it

sooner, yet there's something lifelike in the way the story plods and meanders before arriving at the brief moment of frenzy.

Another character, a man in his sixties named Cedar, tells his niece that he's fought the "black dog" of depression with "a certain ferocious attention to things." He gestures at a red-necked grebe on the water. "There's a story in everything," he says, "and the more stories I hear the less sad I am."

Doyle is fascinated with the life-giving power of stories. Stories are food, according to one character, a survivor of Irish famine: "You can eat stories if you have to."

In his next novel, *The Plover*, Doyle demonstrated his self-appointed license to write about whatever he wanted. It's a seafaring adventure novel in the tradition of Robert Louis Stevenson, one of his heroes. The book takes its departure from Declan, a young man who disappeared in *Mink River*, sailing his fishing trawler off the edge of the horizon. Readers kept asking Doyle what happened to Declan, so he wrote a book as an answer.

"A man is like an onion, is he not, a layered and reeking thing?" *The Plover* asks, and we have our theme: peeling and examining the layers of a wounded young man who sails the South Pacific to flee the pain of his home.

Declan takes on passengers both willingly and unwillingly. He clashes with modern-day pirates and ruminates on albatrosses—extensively. Stories within stories appear and disappear, providing the promised "muddled maundering." The pace lags at times. Doyle didn't bring the same familiarity to Pacific islands that he brought to his best storytelling, which was often rooted in the Pacific Northwest or in the subcultures of American Catholicism. The tropical setting of *The Plover* often feels less like a real place than a springboard for the imagination.

That's not all bad, though. Through a minor character, the minister for fisheries and foreign affairs of a tiny island nation, Doyle imagines the islands of the Pacific casting off their colonial boundaries and uniting as a new nation serving the good of its people. There are 30,000 islands in the Pacific, the minister says. He envisions a nation "in which the human residents do not view themselves as kings and conquerors, and indeed cease to war and compete with each other, but instead apply creative thought and energetic imagination to providing food, shelter, safety, cultural stimulus, laughter, spiritual depth, interspecious respect, a general compassion, and freshwater to all residents."

“That’s . . . ambitious,” Declan responds.

Here we get a window into Doyle’s theology, into a deeply imaginative sensibility that yearned for simple decency among creatures and was marked by both spiritual and material flourishing. (Doyle wrote an entire book about a Willamette Valley pinot noir.) Describing visions of a utopian Pacifica, however fanciful, can be an act of hopefulness that helps others imagine such possibilities.

In *Martin Marten,* Doyle returned to more familiar ground in the Pacific Northwest. The setting is the flanks of Oregon’s Mt. Hood and a settlement that isn’t sure if it’s a hamlet, village, crossroads, or something else. The lead characters are Dave, a 14-year-old boy, and Martin, an adolescent marten—a sleek furry creature larger than a weasel, smaller than a fox, unseen to all but the most watchful forest-dwellers.

Among the chief delights of this gentle novel is the chance to follow the habits of an obscure woodland mammal. We see Martin grow into an agile, independent carnivore that roves the forest pursuing food, safety, sex, and adventure. Following him is like seeing an extraordinary camera open new views inches from the forest floor while Martin darts into the cedar-and-fir canopy, flees predators and chases lunch. It’s more three-dimensional wilderness than you can get from hiking a trail.

Martin learns to track the movements of predators and prey, like the tiny prints of mice and voles and the tinier marks left by their trailing tails.

“The more he paid attention, the more he noticed,” says the narrator.

In Doyle’s world, attention is the essential survival skill, both in the wilderness, with its sharp-toothed dangers, and in human civilization, with its dangers of stultifying boredom and complacency.

One of the strongest characters is Dave’s younger sister, Maria, a reckless and deeply curious girl who imagines elaborate “narrative mapping” projects on her iPad. She dreams of creating multilayered maps of insect populations, otter movement patterns, and the musical, political, criminal, geological, and other dimensions of the mountain. After class one day she shows these plans to her teacher, who gapes in astonishment.

It is a tender little scene in which Doyle riffs on the nature of astonishment, one of his favorite conditions. It suggests why this subject, quiet lives intersecting on a

particular patch of earth, served the author so well. For Doyle, what might be merely charming became a means of bearing witness to a world as vast and mysterious as an old-growth forest.

What I admire most about Doyle's work is his allegiance to praising particular things: children, wildness, the delight of language, and the sacred worth of individual creatures. Over and over he circled around these themes, effusing. In a culture in which men are rarely allowed to show emotion beyond anger, in a media landscape filled with so much forced and fake enthusiasm ("17 Marten Facts That Will Make You Weep with Joy"), Doyle treated enthusiasm as a discipline. He treated praise not only as spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, but also as a craft to be learned.

That holds true in his essays too, whether he's probing family life or the quiet graces and struggles of churches. They reveal worlds no less dramatic than Pacific atolls or alpine wilderness. In "Two Hearts," from the essay collection *Leaping* (2003), Doyle described the heart defect that threatened one of his twin sons in their infancy:

> I would kill the god who sentenced him to such awful pain . . . . I would shove my fury in his face like a fist, but I know in my own broken heart that this same god made my magic boys, shaped their apple faces and coyote eyes, put joy in the eager suck of their mouths. So it is that my hands are not clenched in anger but clasped in confused and merry and bitter prayer.

Confused and bitter prayers are fitting enough as we mourn Doyle's death, but "merry" belongs there as well. He knew that laughter and humor are means of staring God in the eye, even amid suffering.

Doyle's exuberant style was not ornamental to his work but essential to it. The whirling adjectives, aphorisms, metaphors, and paradoxes were his method of using every tool he could to excavate the rich seams of the examined life.

He wanted more than to stare God in the eye. He wanted to tell God a few things, and listen too. I picture him as a songwriter-king dancing before his Lord, pouring out words, intermingling praise, grief, fury, and laughter. The audacity makes me cringe. Then it draws me in.

A version of this article appears in the July 5 print edition under the title "A ferocious attention."