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Dear Colleague:

The fall of totalitarian and authoritarian states has had one personal consequence for me: I am no longer able to relax over their glossy magazines--Soviet Life, China Reconstructs, Free China Review, etc.--with their pictures of fat babies, rich harvests and gleaming tractors, apple-cheeked young pioneers and toothy ethnics. In the post-1989 era, where these magazines or their reincarnations are still published, Western-style realism has crept in. My favorite American relaxants used to be Time magazine and the New Yorker. Time still serves my escapist needs, except for its necrophilia. Have you noticed? Hardly an issue passes without a close-up of a corpse. As for the New Yorker, I loved the old format's small-town chattiness, its interminable soporific essays, its genteel upper-middle-class cartoons. The new New Yorker is, alas for my taste, much too fond of penises--the different sizes and shapes that are available to female transvestites--and much too inclined to feature verbose political cartoons.

So, what to do? In desperation I subscribed to the National Geographic, hoping to find there pristine forests, bubbling streams, and hunters in red jackets. Sad to say, the National Geographic has also succumbed to the Zeitgeist for grizzliness. Consider the contents of the current issue (August 1994). Its cover story is "Lions of Darkness." When the hardy photographers witnessed the prolonged death throes of an elephant as the lions clamped their jaws onto its mouth and throat, they confessed to a certain queasiness. Nevertheless, they described the horrors in loving detail. Elsewhere they showed us other assortments of painful death in full color. As though readers might resent such light fare, the magazine's editors included another article called, "Deadly Jellyfish of Australia." Well, you say, what about the photo-essay, "England's Lake District"? Yes, I saved that for dessert. After all that realism, surely I deserve a sweet (as the English say). Guess what? Even in that essay, I can find only two classic landscape pictures, lost in the midst of pictures of the other kind--Windermere strangled by motorcars, bracken ferns that give off deadly toxins, close-up of a pop-eyed sheep being shorn by a pair of brutal-looking hands, a boy bent double in pain after a race, and so on.

What's wrong? Answer: we have all become so sophisticated that we live in fear of being caught saying anything good about God's creation. It takes someone with the academic and political credentials of a Stephen Jay Gould to write an essay called, "Ten Thousand Acts of Kindness," Natural History, Dec. 1988.

Best wishes,

*Yi-Fan*