

Walking Around

Sometime last summer I took to walking around the block when the evening fell cool and heavy on the harbor and the streetlights stood, halo-clad, like pennies in the palm of the night.

I'd head out after dinner with the excuse of the need for an after-dinner-stroll. Really, it was just to be inside the cool cocoon of the nighttime and the allure of being enveloped in seaside airiness, which felt so much like a kiss to your skin after such hot days.

After I fumbled down the stairwell of our upper apartment (we never did replace the light bulb once it burned out) to find the cool ground beneath my naked feet and to inhale the first breath of such distinct saltiness, I would mosey past the garden where the fuzzy lupine pods poked in all directions in the lateness of July.

This was a pleasant time.

Emerging into the night.

Letting go of the story of the daytime.

This was the time that the song of myself would fade out like the dissolving boarders and corners of the neighborhood, until I stood -- undefined, a witness.

If I made it to the street past the tenants who lived below with a pleasant "hello" to where they often sat smoking their cigarettes beneath the prayer flags and the porch light, and if I decided to turn left, and not right, I would be facing the breath of incoming ocean air -- and that would almost always recall a memory.

Perhaps it was the smell of the kayak trip up the coast of Maine: paddling the mornings blessed with a hazy calm that blotted out the horizon, or beholding the world

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from an island caught in between the blackness of an oncoming storm. The colors of the disappearing sun painted the sky in shades I'd yet seen.

Perhaps it was the smell of the many evening strolls on the beach near my childhood home with my childhood friend when we would lean into the tug of turning tides and together work out what was turning in our minds.

Perhaps it would smell of the other coast. The one I hardly met but remember well. With the tide so low disorientation made the whole expanse of beach other-worldly and with the whole moon so big and full you could see all the details in our sweaters... Yes, that night and us, emerging out of the redwoods and falling onto the beach. That night on that coast that I have met only once but remember so well.

Or, perhaps -- and often this is the case -- the smell would recall something less distinct. The smell-memory would be like the dawning of an ancestral dream. Always it would be fleeting. Always it would catch in my lungs and the memory would inspire me like remembering air and what it is to breathe... and then it would respire into the night atmosphere to catch in another's lungs. All I would be left with was the urge to smile and to nod toward the world unfolding before me, "Yes, yes I *do* know. I *do* understand."

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Soon enough I'd hit Main St. with the pennies shining so brightly. Here I often watched the people in the windows of the restaurants and the shops, and I'd wonder about their lives and the strange paradox of me watching and wondering about their lives as they lived them.

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If the night were warm and wet, I'd peer into puddles and revel in the alternation of the world hanging upside down at my feet. A whole universe contained there within the concave of pavement!

If the night were compelling and people were milling I might sit on the bench with the lion heads for arms and rest my elbows on these perfect stoic replicas of the vision of fiery flames I had once in the Arizona desert. And the animal in me would heat my belly... and I'd almost let out a roar.

But the candor of the Southwest seems so long ago now...

Nearly as long ago as the one night I walked a ways behind a curious older couple. They crossed the street to the Inn and he reached his hand out to touch her shoulders from behind for fear of an oncoming car; then, in safety, his fingers remembered how good it felt to be there on her cotton blouse and so close to the warmth of her skin. And his hand gave her neck a squeeze and his eyes smiled at the familiar shape of the woman he was remembering. And I smiled for having witnessed it.

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Back on Main St., on the corner near the YMCA and the baseball field, the streetlights faded out and Acadia showed her stars. If I had made it this far and still felt too much a part of myself, I might wander into the field, past the bleachers and the pitcher's mound to the outfield and look up to where the tree line cut the night sky like a filigree stencil. If I was lucky the moon was rising. If I was lucky the stars were out and wild, rolling in their galaxies. If I was lucky this would be the end of me as I would stare straight up spinning as fast as I could until I fell into clammy grass and became the twisting, turning universe at last.