

ially the younger people. I accepted a challenge from a man whom I met when he was a cab driver. We stood outside Peter's house on the back porch which faced west. A sickle moon lay above the horizon saluted by a few bright planets. "This where we'll see the comet?" the former cabby asked. The other side of the house, I said. Find it, he dared. I walked through a warm kitchen, around a front room cluttered with musical instruments (piano, drums) and out onto the front porch. I found Comet Hyakutake instantly, like a stain on a shirt, above dark silhouettes of house roofs across the street, framed by thickets of bamboo on both sides of the porch's steep wooden stairway. Four year old Isaac thought there were two comets because he saw it from separate areas of the porch which bisects due to a large bush. I tried to show him that distant objects seem to go along with a moving person but he would not have it, convinced he was right about two comets. "The other one is over there," he pointed northward across the river and over the mountains, already past us; history. And convinced by his own inescapable logic he spoke no more about comets.

The presence of the comet orbits me to my Paleolithic predecessors who stared up at it last time. I rummage through a pile of pulp shoved under a brick and board bookcase which is stacked almost to the ceiling with books searching for a large Life magazine book, *The Epic of Man*. Text is good and not entirely obsolete 30 years later. The paintings are the book's magnet, 20th century artists depicting their prehistoric ancestors (composite paintings attempting to portray a hundred thousand years of human development; I like especially a painting of Ice Age men painting brightly colored bison on cave walls crowded with illustrations of animals). I think Mother Nature would have preferred that human development go no farther than the early ice ages. But we must race ahead or perish. Even though it is significantly evident we are rushing to suicide, we have no other choice to escape biocide from decay. Death and despair propel us into the future where they wait to ambush us.

The next time Comet Hyakutake passes this planet its current reigning species might be extinct or scattered through the cosmos. Our gawking at it this visit would probably seem as primitive to the future as the first known watchers, our planet-locked civilization scarcely advanced from chipping flints.

My first sighting of Comet Hyakutake tonight is at 9:30. It is far inside the Big Dipper and appears to be part of Orion's Belt. I wonder if this is the last night I will be able to see the comet from the spruce grove that surrounds my house. Tomorrow it might be blocked by the trees.

I roust my neighbors and landlords the McCaffertys outside to see the comet for their first time. Jim loans me a pair of binoculars for the rest of the night.

The comet seems headed into the top of a tall spruce tree. It is visible from my front porch again tonight. Through the lens it looks like a glowing iceball ringed by an atmosphere of fog. Its dusty tail arcs over my roof. I lay across the tops of porch steps staring through the binoculars. It is a cold night. I wear jeans, shirt and sweater covered by a bathrobe. Last night I sat on the porch with a heavy quilt wrapped around me. It is an old quilt, white with tassels on three sides, a gift from an 80 year old woman who lived in an apartment above mine in a Bond St. house built in 1900, which burned in April 1989 (a month from today, seven years ago). A man died, incinerated by a cigarette that caused the first of his two cremations. The old woman and I, plus two other tenants were displaced by the fire.

In the lens of the binoculars the comet seems isolated in space. Without them it is part of a large skyscape framed by spiky spruce trees. Looking at the sky is like staring up from the bottom of a well.

I get cold and warm up inside the house, a routine I follow for a couple of hours. A clanging sound of hammering steel on an anchored ship in the river mixes with a throaty boat motor, perhaps a tug straining against a heavy barge or a herd of logs. A large ship passes Astoria. Seals chorus for awhile from underneath waterfront piers. Carlights on Irving Avenue below my hillside perch warp my observation. The sky is quiet, empty of noisy flying machines. Moonlight droops as the waxing crescent drops. Comet Hyakutake's icy core brightens.

The comet disturbs the nighttime sky. Its soft fuzziness is so completely different from the hard glint of stars. It seems targeted like a missile, its northbound ellipse contrary to the polar rotation of *Ursa Major*. At midnight the Big Dipper circles to the south of the comet. Perhaps before dawn the sauceman will be far enough north to catch it. It would be interesting to see a meteor flare out near the comet.

The binoculars reveal two stars flanking the comet like wings in the darker sky. They are the outer stars of Orion's Belt which points stiffly east as it winds around the comet like a propeller blade. The comet seems far enough away from Earth in its trajectory that if it breaks apart its pieces will crash against some other planet closer to the sun.

My final perch on the porch the sky has shifted westward. The comet is still aimed at the treetop but from its other side. I think about the spin of earth that puts every part of it half of every day opposite the sunny side, facing deep space and millions of years into the past. Only the passing comet seems in real time.

Tuesday, 3/26

An Associated Press story in the Daily Astorian reports that millions of people across the United States (and most of the top half of Earth) saw Comet Hyakutake Sunday night. A woman in Florida said the comet is "so long, so clear and beautiful." An Everett (Washington) "stargazer" said the northbound fuzball "hits you right between the eyes." "It's the first comet you can see from downtown Baltimore with the naked eyes," says an astronomy professor at Johns Hopkins. The "Comet of the Century," someone enthuses; although next year's appearance of Hal-Bop already has its enthusiasts a year before its emergence from the void out beyond Pluto through which prowls an estimated 100 billion comets (as many as stars in the Milky Way). Hyakutake comes from there but scientists say a previous trip around the sun "cooked" its dust and gases into the luminous coma. A Georgia observer said, "We don't often have an opportunity to see something this close and moving this fast." Speed is a problem. A NASA telescope operator says the comet is moving so fast that the Hubble Space Telescope cameras will have to "point somewhere in the sky and just guess." (Comet finder charts are available on the World Wide Web.) "When someone sees it, they call five or six neighbors, then everyone runs out to look," a Whidby Island (Washington) woman says. The comet is being called a "fuzzy snowball," an "automobile headlamp shining through the fog" and to those with binoculars, "a candle in mist."

Today is overcast with drizzle but clears at dusk. I first notice Comet Hyakutake just before 9 p.m. It is already west of the tree it was pointed at last night and not much farther away. I thought it might be much lower in the sky tonight but its trajectory over earth seems like watching a vessel leave shore. You don't see it move; it gets smaller instead.

The comet is not quite as bright because the moon is bigger and later in the sky tonight, glistening through the forest



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on the hill above my house. The comet's head seems pointed steeply northwest; its tail dusts off to the southeast, faintly glowing like slug slime.

Clouds come up from the ocean at 9:30. A tall skinny cloud moves toward the comet like a ballplayer fielding a fly. It skirts the comet's rim and seems to dissipate among the tops of spruce trees. Other clouds, thin and flat, resembling billows of cigarette smoke, briefly obscure the comet. They also dissipate into wisps.

Just after 10 p.m. moonlit clouds fill the sky like cream poured into coffee. I watch through McCafferty's binoculars as the comet is blotted out. Fifteen minutes later it emerges to float on a small clear lake. A few minutes before 11 p.m. the sky around the comet is clear, though in front of it is a large white wall that towers over the spruce trees. By 11:30 it is encircled by clouds that resemble an atmospheric estuary of ponds and puddles. The comet disappears and reappears. At midnight the sky is a blanket. All lights are out.

Wednesday, 3/27

My insistent kidneys usually wake me two or more times a night. I drink much tea while awake and not as often any more, red wine. And lately a lot of ramen noodle soup. So I trot to the bathroom. And so I am able to see Comet Hyakutake from my bed on the floor underneath a large window this morning at 4:30. It is surrounded by a swirl of clouds and soon enveloped, but clears again. Back from discharging my bladder I step outside onto the porch, bare-legged, a long nightshirt over my trunk and genitals, naked to the galaxy. A large hole in the clouds over my grove, stars bright and glittering; a different set of stars than at midnight. The comet seems to be falling into the large tree it had been aimed toward, but lower down its branches, and its tail shifts to the southwest.

It is awesome that I can lay in bed covered up against the cold night in a human shelter and stare out a window at a comet that last was seen in these skies 200 centuries ago. The ancestors of the Chinook tribes (of which one was the Clatsop, for whom this county is named) might have just discovered this stormy coast and massive river now named Columbia. Perhaps one of them looked up from a sleeping place on the ground my house now occupies and observed the comet as a miracle or an omen. Of course these hills above the river were thickly forested, trees hundreds or thousands of years old that were probably impenetrable and blocked out the sky. Local Paleolithics might have seen Comet Hyakutake from the river, from one of the sturdy boats the people who lived here until recently built and rowed out onto the ocean for fish and travel.

Tonight I show 5 year old Will Violette Comet Hyakutake. At first we look too far north. He and his family live just above Young's Bay and I assumed we would see the comet somewhere near the area of sky I watched it last night at my house, several blocks up the hill to the east. A huge cloud the shape and size of North America covered the region. After several minutes I express disappointment to young Will and start toward the house. I glance east and see a dim fuzzy orb, virtually blindsided by a bright fattening moon just emerging from the continental sized cloud. "Will," I shout as he reaches the top stair of the porch to his house. "I found the comet."

He hops down the stairs at a speed that causes arrhythmia to adults watching anyone young, and standing next to me, spots it instantly, though not particularly impressed. I suggest we go over to the dark side of the house which might block the moon's light. It does, but the comet is visible only



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through a break in the foliage of some sort of bushy conifer. I lift him up and he sees the comet. The last ordeal I put him through for this momentous moment he might someday relate to his descendants ("I saw a comet that hasn't been here for 20,000 years and won't be back for another 20,000 years," I imagine him like an ancient talespinner in front of a fire transferring tribal lore to his sprouts) is to go out into a street next to a garage where we are able to see the comet plainer despite a few streetlights. Two teenaged girls emerge from a converted World War II military housing now civilian apartment complex. Off to some adolescent excitement they stop a moment in immersion of eternity then flare back into the flame of their meteoric green-stick lives.

Later Will's father drives me toward home. I ask him to stop at a house, a lovely and lovingly cared for house built in the last century. Its owner recently installed two interesting metal sculptures in the front yard. One is two sharp spheres rising to the sky like arms yet vaginal in their arch, cleanly abstract and inscrutable, celestially unpassioned, rooted solidly to the hillside turf with feet as incongruous as cartoon 'Goofy' shoes stuck into a concrete slab. I stop by the sculpture almost every day and think of it as "Infinity", not so different from the movie version of H.G. Wells' *Time Machine* in which eons race past its stationary position, or the 5,000 year old Sphinx buried under desert sand for centuries.

Tonight I wish to frame Comet Hyakutake within the sharp spheres of "Infinity". Unfortunately, at least for me, the house is emblazoned with lights, of course a wise awareness of humanity's vileness; but it is difficult to raise an ancient ceremonial metaphor about "Infinity" and comet. At least I am able to conjure them together and might in future make something metaphorical of it, as our long ago ancestors did about such things, humanizing the extraordinary and inexplicable into our species' first grasps at knowledge, though at the time these sorts of manifestations and omens probably terrorized them. Some ancient incantation might form words in my prehistorical brain. Maybe I will see through the veils for a second; grasp timelessness and realize my short life is on par with the comet's though it might last a billion more years. And perhaps consecrate sentiency despite its accompanying awareness of death, because I know of my passage through space and time.

At home I sit on my porch again for awhile and stare up at the comet. It is more west and farther down the sky from last night's observation from this familiar site. I wonder how it might appear from the deck of a vessel on the ocean. I was aboard an albacore tuna fish boat about 200 miles west of the USA when the first human walked on the moon. I listened to marine radio and stared at the moon (I remember it as full that night; everybody probably does) as Armstrong's recorded voice claimed a "giant step for mankind." (I liked Buzz Aldren's "magnificent desolation" a few minutes later.) At the time I felt like a smaller planet adrift on an ocean of a larger planet, itself adrift on the periphery of a billion stars, a few of which, also adrift in a galaxy roaming through a universe, provide direction for earthly mariners. The word *planet*, a gift from our exalted Greek ancestors, means "wanderer." And what else is a comet as it suddenly appears like a race horse coming up from behind and swiftly spurts past us, its orbit around our life-giver star much broader, more grandiose than our pinched and unvarying ellipse.

Very soon Comet Hyakutake will speed back into the dark spatial desert beyond planet Pluto (which might not be a planet), its real home for several thousand years before again orbiting back into the neon lights of our small-town solar system.

From my porch at midnight the comet seems to be a projectile catapulted toward a palisade of spruce trees which cluster on a hill above the river, a sight besieged ancestors must have experienced in terror. My angst envisions it as what a nuclear missile might look like as it reenters near space and unswervingly arrows toward its target of megadeath.

Tonight might be the last I am able to see Comet Hyakutake from my porch. Tomorrow night a homerun, the comet over the fence of spruce trees and out of sight, or rain-clouds predicted for the rest of the week will drown it out. I will probably try to track it until it disappears into moon or sunlight. Not chasing a friend going out of my life but final farewell to a co-citizen of a small neighborhood I never will know enough about or have a chance to explore. A fellow celestial has visited from out of the past and is swiftly gone into the future. I stand on my porch somewhat exalted and a little emptier than six nights ago when I first became acquainted with my cosmic neighbor Comet Hyakutake.

Tuesday, 4/2

Tonight I search for Comet Hyakutake two hours after dark but trees, streetlights, moonlight and spreading clouds foil me. I stumble through a deserted yard next to an abandoned house and trip over roots, branches and for all I know organic remains. But I am unable to see any sign of the comet which should be down around Perseus tonight.

The comet has been out of sight since last Wednesday. Rainclouds moved into Astoria the next day. Tonight is the first night stars are visible. I had hoped today's clear blue sky might augur comet sighting tonight.

I ought to be content that I have seen the comet and let it go. Instead I try for a sight from another position a couple of hours later. I creep up a neighbor's driveway and look over the river. A threadbare layer of clouds obscures the northwest sky. I give up for the night.

Wednesday, 4/3

I wake up early, a couple of hours before dawn. I go outside on my porch. Stars overhead. Big Dipper rolling over like a puppy. I dress and walk down a steep driveway from my house, cross a street and up a neighbor's driveway which looks over the closest field. I look toward the northwest, down in the sky around Perseus. A thin sheet of clouds veils the sky. A full moon illuminates it. The moon was eclipsed earlier tonight. No one in the far west got to see it. The eclipse was over when Luna popped its gleaming face into our sky.

It seems foolish to persist looking for the comet. I have been lucky to see as much of it as I have. Next year Hal-Bop will be here. Also in March and April. But Hal-Bop is predicted. The oracles of the stary heavens have been startled by Comet Hyakutake. It flies at us from nowhere. The excitement is that it has put on a good show as it drives past us on a near lane of our freeway around the sun, which excites millions of terrestrials in the northern hemisphere. I discovered its bonding potential when the comet was visible over Astoria. Every day last week I asked whoever I encountered if they had seen it. Nearly everyone had and each expressed being affected by its appearance.

We have been shown evidence of a far greater story than our own. The comet makes x-rays of each of us. We see each other for who we are. Fragile creatures of glass and paper. Scarcely enough time to make oneself at home on the planet before we are evicted. *Is this the only appearance we make as ourselves in the universe?*

The comet speeds away, forever to us here and now.