

STALKING DARKNESS

There's great pleasure to be found on an evening walk

The night begins moonless. It's raining softly, more mist than downpour. The beach at Seaview appears deserted to the unwary eye. Golden grasses — sedges — have devalued into silver. They poke from the sand dunes like a bevy of porcupine quills. The year is 1966, and I am a teenager.

Nearly 45 years later, I'm walking a similar path. While I walk, I'm recollecting my past, my youth. I'm remembering walking the trail that led from my parents' house, westerly, to the beach in Seaview. I'm remembering how I stalked darkness on many a night. How I would hunker into the beach grasses, a natural nest, and watch the waves leapfrog for shore.

One's eyes acclimate at night. Darkness lightens. On certain nights a full moon rises, throws vaulted ivory rays over the beach, paints wave tops, face and hands. A thought occurs to me that this is a form of prayer, or perhaps a small epiphany. Call it what you may, but anyone can see how special the moment is.

So tonight I leave my own house. It is dusk, nearly nightfall. I travel a new path much like the old one. The ocean calls my name. It calls and calls like an insistent mistral, a stealthy wind tangling in the trees, into treetops and tree limbs, into the soul. I wade through tall yellow grasses. "Go West, young man." Old words echo. The wind is cold and nor'westerly. The tall grasses seem to sigh gently, as if they have a voice of their own. I'm nearing the edge of Terra Firma, a land mass called Turtle Island by the

people who lived here long before.

And now I'm upon it: the surf, the crashing waves, the soft silver sliding edge of a tidal surge. Let's call it the flood tide. And the flood tide seems to have finger tips. And the nails are gnawing at the sandy beach. As I mentioned, it is dusk, a half-hour before that wonderful thick blanket of darkness that smothers Turtle Island, at least this part of the continent we call home, here on the North Coast.

I've come a bit early — early enough to take photos. Early enough to catch the fleeting fickle light. To watch the transformation of color: cranberry and crimson; to silver, to pewter, and finally the darkest shades of gray: noir. I turn south and traverse my solitary path toward Beard's Hollow. There is absolutely no person, no man nor woman, on the beach. Behind me, my path is scrubbed clean by the tide. Vociferous: the cackle, strum, the timpani, a symphony of waves and water. The harkening of ocean trumpets. In the Darkland, all seems magnified. Is it fair to say that under the cover of night, our senses are set free? Released like a bird of prey, one, broken-winged and then healed. Free. Free to fly away.

In sensory confusion, I cover another mile. Then two. It's dark now, but a full-faced moon breaks through scudding clouds, illuminating the fishing rocks at Beard's Hollow. Igneous rock faces thrust from the sea, appear like ancient tombs or tells or monuments to sea gods, ominous, in the half-light of nightfall.

At the southern end of the Long Beach Peninsula, beach sands are abruptly dominated by tall rocky cliffs and igneous domes, headlands and islands shaped by molten magma. I stand in the small cove listen-

ing to other sounds: the mewing of gulls, mostly. There is a family of songbirds behind me, in the spruce trees that line the tall cliffs. Their tiny songs sound like the tinkle of remote bells, far away but clear, illuminating. There are animals here too: deer, bear, coyotes, an occasional porcupine, beaver and possum. Mostly, one hears them, rather than sees. They are wary, but less so at night. They feel protected by the darkness, and so do I. Back in 1966, I realized that I was invisible, nestled there in my dune haven. If I sat still enough, nobody could see me. There was security in that observation.

And I'm struck by one further revelation. There is now but one sound here, one song, and that is the voice of the ocean. All else succumbs to it. The sound of breakers or waves or surf is so dominating that other sounds transform into a kind of silence, a silence onto itself.

That one sound transforms itself into an ocean chant. Into the great universal Om.

Walking here, now under the stars, under one particularly bright evening star — is that Venus? — one becomes caught up in mood or meditation. Into something that seems bigger even than the ocean before me, bigger than this force we call the great sea. Let's call it "The Great She." And let's find great pleasure on an evening walk where quicksilver and moonlight and moondance surround us until we are moonstruck or oceanstruck or starstruck, when a particular and invigorating delight overwhelms us.

And through this wonderland I walk home only to be greeted by my lovely wife who has just taken out of the oven the most tender and flavorful sugar biscuits to which she adds several scoops of Oregon strawberries and a mound of whipping cream and hands me a cup of fresh brewed decaf coffee served in a delicate demi-tasse porcelain cup with just a touch of brandy, and the world is suddenly perfect, for at least one night.



Just before sunset, the author set out from Beard's Hollow for a walk along the beach to Seaview.

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Rocks form interesting shapes and contrast against the setting sun in the evening at Beard's Hollow.

Coastal Life

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