

Conversations with the Night

BY DANA COPPERNOLL-HOUSTON

About two years ago, I decided to beachcomb the late night and early morning surf. I suppose I wanted the beach to myself, as if it was a thing that I could own. I desired to be among the few who braved the cold night and came back triumphantly clutching a treasure of my own. So my brother and I made a pact to steal down to the surf at midnight.

During the day, Seaside's beach is long enough to stretch into the foggy distance. The dry sand lays for half the beach before the stealthy soaking of seawater creates a cold, packed floor. It was here, where the ocean and the land meet, dubiously sharing a space they each claimed for themselves, that I longed to search.

Midnight. As we stumbled down the path to the water's edge, increasingly relying on the lights of our cellphones, I became aware of the absolute darkness in front of me. We topped the dunes and scrambled down to the dry, loose sand. Standing in the chill of night, sand having yet again found its way into my sandals, I was confronted with the Pacific Ocean.

On the moonless coast at midnight, the only light comes from streetlamps and houses behind the scratchy dune grass. This close to civilization, the city and all its humanity blots out even the stars. Looking west across the Pacific only reveals the occasional blurry white wave crest; not even the horizon is visible in the black. Instead, the transition from sea to sky is muddy and indistinct, as if, far out into the surf, I might suddenly find my ship floating into the heavens by some accident of fate. The endless expanse of ocean is merely suggested by the thunderous crashing of the waves, a sound somehow muted during the day, but terrifying in its vastness at night. There is no way of telling where the black waters meet the shore until cold waves bite suddenly numb feet. The only greeting is an invisible wall of sound.

I was always taught to treat the ocean with a mix of respect and fear. The water is painfully cold, even under the summer sun. Rip currents running along the coast claim experienced swimmers every year. The great waves

toss entire trees onto the land that savage storms ripped out by their roots. This ocean is no friend of mine. An uncaring deity, it swallows everything it is offered.

That night, I could not bring myself to look at the ocean. Every time I tried to conquer the darkness and roar of the waves, it crashed over me with merciless ferocity. The lessons of my childhood burned bright in my mind that night—never turn your back on the ocean. I could not turn away but I could not face the black in front of me either. I was a small speck of sand on the shore, a footprint to be washed away at high tide.

My brother felt the same frightening spirit that night as I did. We managed to stay only a few minutes, dragging our leaden feet to the beginning of the wet sand before abandoning any thought of beachcombing. We turned our backs on the ocean and scrambled home.

Another summer, another night. This time I turned my wheels east, not west. No crashing waves in my ears or salt spray in my face but dusty sun and rolling hills instead. I drove into central Oregon with a friend to see the stars above the Painted Hills. The high desert is almost an ocean in itself. The hills are velvet, undulating quietly under a harsh sun. Long-dead lake beds dot the landscape, marked by ranger stations and informative signs warning visitors not to remove the ancient fossils from their final resting place.

During the day, we enjoyed the quiet orange, brilliant blue, and rusty brown of the desert. At night, we drove from our campsite down the mountain to our stargazing spot and stretched out on top of our van's metal roof. The plains stretched out in front of us, invisible in the darkness. But our gazes turned not towards the far-off horizon, but upwards to the heavens.

In our hemisphere, the Milky Way is often visible during summer nights, although few ever see it. Only the brightest of distant suns show in the busy, congested metropolises of the modern age; no one takes the time to look up for a handful of dying fireflies. Out away from the orange-tinted blur all cities emit into the night, however, the wide, twirling swath of stars stretches starkly across an ocean of black, seemingly forever.

The deep ocean of the universe hung over my head, made weightless by the flickers of billions of dust motes. Every point of light had a hundred siblings, seemingly within arm's reach. Every blank spot on the canvas was composed of smaller and fainter dots. Punctuating the starry sky was the occasional streak of white ink, as driftwood from an ancient comet ended its long journey in a brief, unintentional scribble on the canvas.

Though the surrounding hills sat solid and no crashing waves sounded in the darkness, I was still unnerved by other sounds. Every cricket, owl, and rodent in a ten-mile radius seemed to be chirping, screeching, and shrieking at the still-moonless sky. At first I was hemmed in by the sounds, paralyzed. If I sat up on the van, my position seemed precarious; I could fall at any moment into the night around me. My solace was the stars. They were my grounding wire to drown out the sounds of the night. The sky held me down to the earth. We watched the stars peacefully until the biting cold desert forced us to retreat back up the mountain to our campsite.

I feel small and large, peaceful and afraid in the darkness. I seem to find a new truth every time I walk into the night, yet still I leave in wonder. Something inexplicable draws me to dark places, these bastions of sounds and silences, but the same mysterious force pushes me away until, despite the beauty and mystery of the night, or perhaps because of it, I turn my back to run home.