

beach
poetry



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Burn It In

Once I was at a beach
off the west coast of Florida
it was New Year's eve
and the yellow moon hung over the gulf
like a swaying lantern.
And I was watching the waves crash in front of me
with a friend
and the wind picked up
and my friend just stared at that moon for a while
and then closed his eyes.
I asked him what he was thinking.
He said, "I wanted to look at this scene,
and memorize it, burn it into my brain,
record it in my mind, so I can call it up when I want to.
So I can have it with me always."

I too have my recorders.
I burn these things into my brain,
I burn these things onto pages.
I pick and choose what needs to be said,
what needs to be remembered.

david

I remember being in your car, driving back from Tiger Tail beach. My skin felt itchy from the salt. My feet were sticking out the window, pressed against the rear-view mirror. I think you were holding my hand.

This was after you told me you wanted me to marry you. You never asked me to marry you, but you told me that's what you wanted. You later even gave me an engagement ring, and emerald-cut emerald, but first said it was a Christmas present, apparently never willing to actually ask.

I remember thinking that we could never get along for any reasonable length of time. You didn't want to leave Canada; I didn't want to leave the States. You wanted to backpack around Europe; I wanted to get a job, an apartment, some security. Vacationing at the tip of this peninsula seemed to be the only way we could meet.

But even though my skin hissed from the salt and the sun, in that car with you I felt like we could go anywhere.



I Dreamt About You Last Night

*"I dreamt about you last night
and I fell out of bed twice
you can pin and mount me
like a butterfly"*

- Steven M.

They say that dreams are your
chance to think over the things
unresolved from your day. And
I keep dreaming about you.
Don't I think about you enough?

You're the one who died.
You're the one that left me.
Why are you coming back,
at night, when I let my defenses
down, slipping in through my
window and working your way
into my dreams?

I dreamt about you last night.
I was on a cruise ship, and you
were working as a waiter. You wore
one of those silly short jackets
in your uniform. It was a sea blue.
And every time I thought I saw you
you would turn away to do your
job on the boat.
All I ever caught were fleeting
glimpses of you, walking away.

All I keep thinking is that
my days are finally free of you
but they're not. I keep thinking
of you. And it isn't enough.
I still can't escape you at night.

coquinas

we would take boat rides off the coast
my parents and their friends to a tiny island

dad drinking beer
the women sitting together in the shade
worrying about their hair

i would sit at the front
sunglasses, swimsuit and sunburn
feeling the wind
slapping me in the face

docking at a shoreline
everyone jumping out
little bags in their hands

the women go looking for shells
the men go barbecue

after an hour or two
the sandwiches, potato chips eaten
the soda and beer almost gone

we turn around and head back

we have conquered

and I remember the coquinas
the little shells, you could find them alive
on the beaches north of the pier in Naples

going to the beach
I would look for a spot to find them

they burrowed their way into the sand
to avoid the light
worming their way away from me

I unearthed a group of coquinas once,
fascinated with their color of
their shells, the way they moved

before they could hide

I collected them into a jar,
took them home with me

what did you teach me
what have you taught me to do
is this it
is this what has become of me

and I took them home

I added salt water and sand
but I couldn't feed them
I realized soon that they
would die

so I let them

a child in the park

this was no ordinary park, mind you: there were no swings or children laughing; there were different children there.

People drove golf carts around in the park, or large tricycles, or older couples would walk together just as it was beginning to turn to dusk and long shadows from tree-tops criss-crossed in front of them. In the afternoons, the women would be in the water, wearing hats and sunglasses.

I spent hours at the water, playing imaginary games, pretending I was grown-up, feeding the birds, watching the fish swim around my feet, looking for turtles, listening to the wind.

And there was Ira and Betty Wiggins, who lived on the next street, Sand Drive, with a sign in front of their house that said, "The Wiggins' Wigwam." Once they saw me and asked if I wanted to catch a lion. They then went to the side of the road, and with a spoon pulled an ant lion from the top of a sand hill.

It was like another world there. The park was where I spent my Christmases, my Easters. I remember swimming in the water, a week shy of thirteen, when my parents told me I was an aunt. Actually, my sister had a son, so they told me I was an uncle. Now I talk to my sister on the phone, she asks me if I remember so-and-so from the park. The couple that had the snow shovel against their light post with the words "rust in peace" painted in white on the metal. Yes, I say, I remember them. Well, so-and-so passed away last week, she says. Heart attack. This is what it comes down to, I think, all these memories are slowly disappearing, like grains of sand in the wind at the beach. So many memories. Where there are palm trees everywhere. It was my other world, my other life, another lifestyle, another everything. This was not an ordinary park, but the children were so much wiser, and still so full of life. So much to teach. So little time.

Freedom just past the Fence

After working for the Army
for years on repairing jet engines

I ended up being stationed
in Pennsylvania one summer
repairing air conditioners
and refrigerators.

I'd only do a little work
and then have nothing to do
for a day or two.

But the thing I remember
is that at the time Cubans
were defecting to the United States
by boat.

They'd sail to Florida,
most of them dehydrated
and all of them malnourished.

The U.S. government
didn't want them spreading diseases
in our country,

so when the Cubans would appear
off the coast of Miami,
the military would be waiting
to make sure they were healthy.

Well, all I knew
was that they got all these Cubans
into trucks we called "cattle cars"
with only a few benches
and trucked them up to Pennsylvania,
where I was,
and the military them some shots
to make sure they weren't dying.

So these people, after
escaping their country
in a shoddy wooden boat
were taken by the U.S. military,
herded into a boxed-in truck
and shipped up the country
so they could be given shots
and detained.

These Cubans,
who came here wanting freedom,
now had to wait
in a fenced-in area
until they were tested
and given food.

And it was my job
to make sure that
their fridge and
air conditioner was working.

So I sat there for
a day or two at a time,
drinking cans of beer,
and looking out my window.
I had a view of the razor wire fence
and all I remember
was seeing all of these Cubans
leaning on the chain-link fence,
wondering if this was what it was like
to be free,
holding on to the metal,
looking out to what they were sure
was freedom.

in the air

Over Phoenix, preparing for another descent at 8:50 p.m., but it's usually fifteen minutes late, as it is now, I'm getting used to the schedule now. The mountains look like the little mountains you see on topographically correct globes, little ridges, as if they're made of sand, if you just lean your head down a little bit, your exhaling can make them all blow away in the breeze.

I love the city lights from above at night. Have you ever thought of how much power it takes to light all those buildings? All that energy. And every time I look, look out that little window with rounded corners, what i see are strings of yellow Italian Christmas lights strung across the ground.

Fly in the air from somewhere
warm and dry
to somewhere
warm and humid...

Over Fort Myers, the city always looks different from any other place, all those palm trees, the marshes. Like you've just landed somewhere foreign, and pretty soon the big tour will begin. You can feel the heat, the humidity sticking your shirt to your back between your shoulder blades, and your neck, sticking to your neck too, from inside your cabin, before you even land.

in the air (continued)

I like the window seat in an airplane,
I like to look out the window. Clouds look like
cotton balls when you're above them,
and when you're landing cars look like
little ants, on a mission, bringing food
back to their hill. Little soldiers, back
and forth, back and forth. And the
streets look like veins, capillaries in some
massive, monstrous body. And the
farmland looks like little squares of colors.
I wonder why each plot of land is a
different color, what's growing there
that makes them different. Or maybe
some of them are turning shades of red
and brown because some of them are dying.

And it always seems that you're stuck
sitting next to someone that is either
too wide for their seat, or is a businessman
with their newspaper stretched out
and their lap top computer on their little
fold out table. Or behind you is a little kid,
bawling their eyes out on half the flight,
kicking your chair the other half.

Once, when I was on a
flight back from D. C., a flight attendant
walked by, stack of magazines in her
hand, Time, Newsweek, Businessweek,
and I stopped her, asking what magazines
she had. And she replied, "Oh, these
magazines are for men." This is a true
story. And I asked her again what she
had. I had already read Time, so I took
Newsweek.

age

Sometimes, when I get behind the wheel of a car, I feel like I'm at Six Flags Great America Amusement Park In Gurnee, Illinois again and I'm thirteen years old and I'm able to drive one of the bumper cars. And it's such a thrill -- because, I mean, I'm thirteen years old and I can't drive, and I'm now in control of this huge piece of machinery. Granted, there's this wire sticking up from the car that gets electricity from the ceiling, but for once I feel free, that I can just go, go faster than I ever could by running, or even if I used my roller skates or my bicycle.

And when I get that feeling and I'm behind the wheel of my car I want to drive really really fast out on an abandoned road, blare some rock music, roll down my window, and turn up the heat, since it's the middle of winter.

Sometimes, when I go out on a new date, I feel like I'm sixteen again, and I'll rifle through my closet, deciding I have absolutely nothing to wear. And he'll pick me up, and we'll go to a restaurant with deer heads on the walls, and we'll have whiskey sours, and we'll struggle with the lettuce leaves in the salads because they're too big and you're not supposed to use your knife, and when we're done with dinner we'll go to a bar that's so crowded and so loud that we won't be able to talk to each other, but we'll have to stand real close.

And then he'll take me home and I'll invite him in, he'll sit on the chair, I'll sit on the couch, and he'll ask for a glass of water. When we can't think of any more small talk, and the clock says 3:12 a.m., I'll see him to the door, he'll kiss me good-bye, and I'll lock the door after he leaves. And when I'm sure he can't see me through the window, I'll turn on the stereo and dance in my living room before I go to bed.

Sometimes, when I get home after 10 o'clock from working overtime on the computers, I just want to retire, to quit the work, to stop it all. I see my parents, after a life of working at the construction site and raising five children, now beginning to relax, buying a small home in Southwest Florida, playing tennis in the morning, playing cards in the afternoon, drinking with other retired couples in the evening. Sometimes another couple invites them out for a boat ride off of Marco Island, where they smoke cigarettes, drink a few beers, and drive slow enough to make no wake when they're by the pier.

Sometimes I look at the computer screen I work at and remember how computers used to mean video games. I remember when I was eight and I would sit with my best friend in the upstairs den on the floor in front of the old television set and play table tennis on our Atari. Times change, I suppose, and I reflect on the beaches, and the boats to Marco Island, and the sand between my toes, and that feeling that there's so much left to love in life.

Clay

so I was at this bar, on the coast of florida -- the west coast, the gulf side, you know. it was this place called lana kai, and my friend gave me a ride all the way from naples, which is a good forty-five minutes south of the place. and so we were sitting there at the bar, which is half indoors and half on the beach, and all these old men kept staring at my friend's chest. a couple guys bought us beer and one guy asked me to dance. I was surprised he asked me to dance, and not my friend -- men were usually more attracted to her.

but the guys were jerks anyway -- one looked like a marine with that haircut and must have been high on something, one looked like he decided to forgo hygiene, another was twice my age. it's not as if I try to pick up men in bars anyway. so after a while I couldn't stand being at the bar, next to the reggae band that was playing, so I begged my friend to come walk with me on the beach.

christ, I felt like a ten-year-old with a bucket and shovel when I kicked off my black suede shoes and ran into the water. I always loved the feel of sand when it's drenched in water. it feels like clay as it seeps around my toes, pulling me into the ground.

so there I was, splashing in the water, wearing a black sequin dress, throwing my purse to the shore, taking a swig from my can of miller lite. this was life, I thought. pure and simple. an army couldn't have dragged me out of the water.

so my friend found some guy to hit on, as she usually does, and she wanted me to hit on his friend. I found the guy ugly as all sin, and impossible to talk to. I told him that one of the rafts on the shore was mine, and instead of driving to the bar I sailed. and he believed me. I told my friend flat out that I wouldn't go with him. she was pissed that I didn't find him good-looking.

so then He strolled up from the bar to the beach, an intriguing stranger, and He walked up right next to me in the water, still wearing his shoes, seeming to know that I needed to be saved. as most knights in shining armor would.

and He said hello to me, and He started talking to me, and He cracked a few jokes, and He made me laugh. and okay, I'll admit it -- he was good-looking, really good looking. I remember at one point, looking at him made me think of a greek statue, He had this curly blonde hair, this sharp chin, these strong cheek bones. but those greek statues could never talk to me, they have no color, they don't come alive. they're made of stone.

His name was Clay. and when we talked He crept into my pores, the way the sand made it's way between my toes. His voice tunneled into me, boring me

hollow, making me anxiously wait to be filled with more and more of His words. my friend disappeared with her new-found monosyllabic lover, for hours, until long after the bar closed, leaving me stranded. there I was, forty-five miles north of my home at 2:20 in the morning with no means of transportation. it could have been worse, I could have been somewhere other than on the beach, I could have been sober, and I might not have had a knight in shining armor named Clay to save me.

and as He drove me home (an hour and a half out of his way), I couldn't help but run my fingers through his hair, it was an uncontrollable impulse, like the urge to drag your fingers deep into the wet sand. I told Him I was just trying to keep Him awake for the drive.

it's almost better if I never see Him again. then I can always think of Him this way.


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