

Journey to the Interior:
On Living and Working in Asheville

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At work we collect fortunes diners leave on their tables. Some we post next to the computer where we clock in and out, fortunes like “You laugh now, wait until you get home” or “He who waits is never as happy as he who is late”. Some we pocket to share with others. “Every cat is a good cat” or “Maybe you can live on the moon in the next century”. I take some home; tape them on my bedroom wall or in a notebook. “A book lover never goes to bed alone.” Why we do this I can’t say for sure. Some just because they amuse us, of course. But some for more than that, because they speak to us in some way. Not the fortunes themselves, even, but the fact that they were the fortunes of someone else. Once I saw a guy I sort of knew on a first date with a girl. After they were gone I was clearing their table when I picked up her fortune. “It could be better, but it’s good enough” it read. There was no second date, but I kept the fortune just because I knew the people and found it amusing, to imagine how the rest of that night went, the drinks they had afterwards, the conversation lapsing into silence as they are both distracted by other people around them, more desirable prospects. I think about that first/ last date every time I look at the fortune, or every time another diner gets the same.

I think also there’s a need for connection in all of this. I was at a Thai restaurant the other day, and why they give fortune cookies I have no idea, but a woman at a table far enough away that we shouldn’t have been able to hear her conversation got the fortune “Handsome is that handsome does” and spoke it loud enough for us to hear. I laughed, not because of her surprising volume, but because I have found that fortune many times and wondered at this, since the fortune cookies at the Thai restaurant were a different brand than those we use at Doc Chey’s. Is there some kind of main factory where the fortunes themselves are manufactured and then shipped to the factories which make the cookies, so that cookies from each different company may contain the same fortunes?

Or was this phrase which I had never heard before simply so popular that many different companies would use it? I once looked up a fortune I found in a cookie, “Hard words break no bones, fine words butter no parsnips”, the first half of which I was of course familiar with but the latter which I had never heard before. Within the top few searches was the question “What does my fortune mean?” and I wondered how many other thousands of people across the country, or perhaps the world, had also received this fortune.

I used to read the Craigslist missed connections for the same reasons. Some were funny, some dirty, but many were just that: a connection, human to human, someone saying “Thanks to the older gentleman who helped jump start my car on Patton yesterday” or “Thanks to the young woman who gave me a ride home when I was caught in the rain. I never did get your name.” Just to know that there are people out there who are helping each other, making that human connection.

Of course there is also that desire to be recognized, to find a description which could possibly be you somewhere in those missed connections, to know that a stranger in the city noticed you, was thinking of you enough to write this out and post it for anyone to see. I’ve never found one that was for me (that I know of) but I used to find a couple each month for other employees of Doc Chey’s, and the coffee bus next door. Recently someone I work with said she was talking with a girl in her physics class, a former employee of Hannah Flanagan’s, who said a friend of theirs went to Doc Chey’s at least once a week, partially because of a crush he had developed on the girl with the question mark heart tattoo. I must preface this by saying I’m in a very satisfying relationship at the moment, but I can’t help but speculate now every time I see a familiar face at the restaurant, who it might be harboring this crush. There is some pleasure in knowing and not knowing at the same time.

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There is a small and distinct pleasure that comes from being the first to make footprints in newly fallen snow, the pleasure of going for a hike on a hot summer day and finding a swimming hole no one else knows about, the pleasure of going for a walk at night and peering into strangers houses, the pleasure of having a secret.

I was not the first that morning, and as I walked I tried to match my stride with those before me, step by step, my foot in their prints, a small child dancing with her father, standing on his shoes. I tried to match the prints to their maker, those prints from two houses down; the girl I had class with last semester, the larger bootprints from Tommy, who earlier this morning made the same trip I made then to the noodle house we work at. A set of paw prints confused me for a moment; a soft line through the snow, the small black cat with the lame back leg.

Later up on Merrimon, another set of prints with an odd pattern, the man with the bum leg, his distinctive shuffle like a drunk waltzing home from the bar, a careful oom-pa-pa step-two-three right-left-left. Both man and cat set apart by their prints, visible and invisible at once.

The further into town I walked, the more prints I encountered, joining my path from side streets, cutting across parking lots. I don't encounter too many people on the route I take, or at least not too many going the same way I am. I do not think about all those who must take a similar path, all those who walk the same way I do at a different time of day. They are invisible until a day like that, when I saw the couple sets of prints on my street turn into half a dozen round the corner, and those turning into a couple dozen as I passed the neighborhood gas station, until I found hundreds of prints in the heart of downtown, tracks crossing tracks, foot after foot stepping in the same snow until it is made into a mass of gray slush. I was lost in the anonymity, not the first nor last to walk through the snow.

I could not shake the thought that countless others shared the same path I do, strangers who take the same route, who know the familiar feel of pavement underneath their feet, the pressing forward of the body in a rhythmic trance. Walking home I imagined I could feel them before me, as if some presence had been left behind and, as I walked though the same place they had been minutes, hours earlier, our bodies were connected through time. A shared space.

Back on my street the sun had melted the snow away, and the footprints with it. We were lost again to the unyielding anonymity of the pavement.

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In the fifth grade I was an attendance monitor. Fancy name for a small job, for what I really did was collect attendance sheets from classes and run them up to the office during first period. My class was out in one of the trailers behind the school so that we walked past the dumpsters every day. One of the first classrooms I collected each day was another trailer, where the deaf kids were kept, all grades in one class because our school didn't have the resources for separate classes. At the time though, I didn't know that. All I knew was that every day I learned a little more sign language. First it was the letters of the alphabet, a new letter every day so I could sign my name. Then it was hello, a lazy salute, and good-bye, same as it is for everyone. Please, the right hand is rubbed over the heart, and thank you, like blowing a kiss.

Before I realized that there are different sign languages around the world I used to wonder why we didn't all learn it (it in this case it being ASL, which I was learning). Life would be so much easier if we all knew sign language, and if we only spoke with our bodies. Then my mom pointed out that people with physical disabilities would have a harder time doing this, and I abandoned the idea. But still I wonder sometimes why more people don't learn sign language. It's like learning a foreign language, but infinitely more useful. Whereas a foreign language may

only be used in certain places around the world, or with certain people who also know that language, sign language (ASL) is more universal. Dialects of ASL are used around the world, but if we taught everyone sign language in addition to their spoken language we would have such an easier time communicating with people, particularly with people from different cultures or people with disabilities.

I was reminded of this the other day when my first customer at work was deaf. He was dining alone, and while I suppose this must be an everyday sort of thing for him, interacting with people who don't know sign language, for me it was a shock, so much do I rely on language at work. We got along pretty well, if somewhat awkwardly, me stumbling my way through taking his order, actually speaking my questions out loud rather than just mouthing the words, so hard was the habit of speech to break.

We rely so much on the spoken word that I think sometimes we forget how important body language is to our lives. But we use it all the time, to gauge how others think of us, to indicate how we feel, to attract those we desire, to repel those we wish to avoid. I see it all the time walking to work, the tourists, often snow-birds, here for a weekend getaway, avoiding a panhandler or busker. They quicken their pace, avert their eyes, maybe cross the street or just walk as far away as they can while still on the same sidewalk, bodies almost flattened against storefronts. I know why, because they don't want to give money to someone they think will just spend it on a beer or a hit, but why won't they even look at a person, even acknowledge them when they say hello? There is some kind of fear, I think, to make oneself vulnerable, to speak with someone who is homeless, as if by associating with them some of that stigma may rub off on you, as if by simply speaking to this person you are "lowering yourself" to their level, as if they are less human than you.

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Next time you are walking uphill on Woodfin Avenue, in the small strip between Lexington and Merrimon, stop a little over halfway up, just past Chicken Alley, and admire the fairy doors. They were put there just for you.

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Back in the recesses of Montford, past Tod's Tasties and Nine Mile, past the community center and the cemetery and all the bed and breakfasts, off Pearson and down Tacoma there's a little street called Sylvan Avenue. The second house on the left is an old brick two-story number, with a small brown yard and a small stone porch and a big dead tree out front. This is where I lived, for some fifteen months, in a room the size of some walk-in closets, hardly wide enough for a full-sized bed but large enough for everything I owned.

I was prone to taking long walks at night during this time, usually down to the cemetery or the complex with the baseball field and the amphitheater, but sometimes all the way downtown where, once there, I would wander aimlessly, too young to get into most bars and lacking the interest to do so anyway. I found a lot of spots where one could go to be alone, though. The top of a certain parking deck, the courtyard of a particular church, but my favorite spot was down the street with the fire station where taking a right into a narrow alley put you out in the courtyard of the Diana Wortham Theater, where a yellow metal rhinoceros stands, an absurd challenge to the buildings around it. In the left flank is a gap, intentionally built, so that a small enough person may slip through and climb within the belly of the beast.

It was here I went on most of my walks, occasionally bringing someone else along to share this discovery with. There is nothing particularly special about it, except for the fact that

you would not expect it to be there, an urban jungle-gym for one, and I think this was precisely the reason I went so often, because its presence was a mystery, because I could pretend it was there just for me.

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Forsythia

In seventh grade we dissected frogs.

When my knife split her belly,

all the precision of a surgeon in those twelve-year old hands

(which had up til then cut only fruit)

so that the word scalpel, delicate precision,

seemed able to cut just in being thought.

I saw first fat bodies, little yellow hands

reaching out to warm the organs,

inseparable mass of blue and beige,

pink and gray, skin and veins.

But yellow remained,

long after the bodies were taken away,

tools rinsed, gloves tossed,

so that when the word “fat”

was said in my head I saw jaundice,

a jumble, egg yolks, buttercups,

sulphur and mustard.

Nine years later

I add another color to the list
when the forsythia bush waves her
little yellow fingers toward me.

I was thinking the other day, along the lines of what we miss when we drive rather than walk, that our cars are such personal spaces for us. Although we may be driving down the street, a very open, public place, we act as though we are at home. We eat, drink, smoke, put on makeup, listen to music, talk on the phone, sing out loud, take naps, dress/ undress, and do a number of other things as if our cars were private spaces, as if the fact that no one else is in there with us means that no one can see us either, as if there were curtains up. Walking is another matter entirely, every move open for scrutiny by those in storefronts, sitting in their cars or outside restaurants or on benches, those also walking along or those who live in the apartments above the businesses that line Lexington and Broadway/ Biltmore.

Walking may be performed in a public place, but my mental space as I walk is sometimes the most private I have all day. In classes I am continuously asked questions, asked to engage with the thoughts and ideas of others in a constant dialogue (What is our definition of democracy? How can we fight against systems of oppression even as we operate within them? How can we escape the system of binaries which categorizes and constrains our daily lives?) , and at work I must answer questions of a different sort (Can I get the Thai Basil with egg noodles instead of rice noodles? What's your favorite dish? Can I get this without any vegetables?) which obviously engage me at different levels but in either case I face a constant barrage of questions, ideas, articles, etc. Even with friends or roommates or my boyfriend, there is always the awareness of another person, their wants and needs and thoughts and my reactions

to those. I'm a very anxious person, so being around someone else takes a lot out of me (Are they having a good time? What are they thinking about? Should I ask them what they're thinking about or would that be weird? Oh great now I've been thinking about this instead of paying attention to what they were saying. Can they tell I wasn't paying attention?) even if nothing is being said or done. Walking alone is the one time I can turn off that part of myself that worries so much. Even when I'm alone at home doing homework or watching TV there is a constant internal dialogue I can't seem to turn off. I need to be active, need my body to be in motion to quiet the mind. There is something in the relentless step after step which gratifies me, and walking head down, hands in my pockets, I focus on the ground so hard it blurs a little, and my thoughts blur as well, just enough to take the sharpness out of them so that the internal stream becomes something like (Oh! A penny. Should I pick it up? Is it heads or tails? If tails should I flip it over so the next person finds a heads-up penny? Or do people even pick up pennies anymore? I'll just pick it up. Oh look another penny!)

Perhaps it is not so strange that in this most public of places I can exist in a private mental space, for there is almost no need for interaction during my walk. It is only if someone happens to approach me – a tourist asking for directions, a homeless man asking for change or a cigarette, or perhaps an acquaintance saying hello – that I am pulled from that interior space, somewhat reluctantly at times, the brain a little fuzzy on what to do, the mouth too slow for the words, the hands clumsy.

Funny, too, how I don't notice the size of Doc Chey's anymore. On a busy night, with bodies in every seat, we number 61. We can squeeze a few more in here and there, maybe up to 70 but it's a stretch. All this with a kitchen smaller than in most houses, a bar the size of a bathroom, and a dining space that might be the length of a school bus. I used to worry about this

a lot, about bumping into customers with my butt as I squeezed in between tables while they ate, about knocking people with my elbows as I tried to refill drinks. Now I've almost forgotten about it. I don't know if I stand in a funny way, but sometimes when I set plates down at tables my leg will brush against the bent knee of a customer. I think it's startling for most people, to suddenly have this often not-thought-of body part touched by a stranger. They might look up suddenly and I worry that they will think I'm trying to send them some sort of message. Or if I'm talking to a customer seated at the back counter and someone walks by with a load of dishes I may squeeze myself in between two chairs, closer than I would sit to a friend at a bar, and suddenly I feel as though I am intruding on their senses. At work the body becomes unimportant, desensitized, and I don't notice touch as much as I would, say, during class.

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"Is this all you do?" a man asked me once, as I refilled his water glass for the third time that night.

"Excuse me?" I wanted to say.

"Is this all I do?" as if, somehow, this wasn't enough.

As if catering to his every need, being at his beck and call, because, after all, the customer is always right, as if this was not enough.

"No" I should have said.

"No, sir, this is not all I do."

"Filling your water glass is not the sole purpose of my life. Filling your water glass is a means to an end, money in my pocket and food in my belly and the ten percent tip you'll probably leave is another three bucks towards my degree."

"No," I should have said.

“This is not all I do.”

As if writing and reading are meaningless endeavors, as if the hour spent when I get home from work after a long walk on weary feet is an hour lost, or misspent.

As if sewing is a hobby the way collecting coins is, and I make aprons just to wear around the house, not to work in.

As if buying groceries on a budget my size isn't a feat in and of itself, and cooking meals from what's on sale isn't considered a skill.

“No,” I should have said.

“This is not all I do.”

As if being a friend isn't a full time job.

As if my hands, arms, legs, feet aren't bruised, burnt, cut and calloused from the work I do.

“No, sir, this is not all I do.”

As if being on my feet for five, six, seven hours a day counts as doing nothing.

As if spending half my time and most of my money in school doesn't take as much from me as a 9-5 would, and classrooms and cubicles aren't interchangeable.

As if the endless cycle of class and work, class and work, class and work doesn't take its toll on a body.

As if a day off from work and a day off from school are ever the same day.

As if making ends meet is something that happens, instead of something that I do.

As if I don't get out of bed every morning knowing I'll have to deal with people like you.

“No,” I should have said.

“This is not all I do.”

“Why, is this all you do?”

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Tuesday, February 11th, another slow night at the noodle house. I returned yesterday from Florida, there three days for the wedding of two people I had never met before. It was strange for me to be in a place where it was difficult to get around on foot, or where people are so unused to it. At my hotel I asked for an area map so I get to a nearby restaurant (nearby in this case meaning about a mile or so away) and it took four people to find one, so rare was it that someone would ask in this day and age of GPS and googlemaps. I was, of course, in Orlando, and so it is large and sprawling, disconnected from the individual. That's the thing about Asheville. I am easily tired by how small it is, how hard it can be to be alone sometimes, to avoid people I don't want to see. Yet I miss it as soon as I am away, miss the small town feel, the way people will remember me because of my hair, or because of a particular tattoo, the way a person I see at work will turn up again as I do laundry at Bar of Soap, and again when I am buying beer at Bruising Ales, and if I lived in a bigger city I'm sure I'd attribute this to some coincidence of the universe, half-believing our lives were meant to intersect. But here it is almost unavoidable, so many people in such a small place, all living and working right next to each other.

Florida reminded me too of the seasons. I had never been there, and although I knew it would be hot I wasn't prepared for the reality of it, heat that lingers long after the sun has disappeared, pressing upon you, slowing your feet, your thoughts and words. I was in awe of the lushness of the landscape, a humid jungle in the middle of winter, dozens of plants I knew and dozens more I didn't, cypress trees with shawls of pale green Spanish moss, the palm trees swaying in the breeze. I went to bed the first night imagining those trees as a child, how I

would've fallen asleep afraid of the shadows their long limbs made on the wall of the bedroom in which I slept.

I walked barefoot on the thick green blades of St. Augustine grass, which was merely grass to me until my boyfriend gave it a name, St. Augustine, and the name rang true, no other would fit. It reminded me of North Carolina, our own particular things, like the red clay that takes the place of dirt, freezes solid and comes up in crumbs and clumps as we dig our graves, uproot trees, build houses. It was so strange to wear shorts again, to feel the wind on my bare skin and not be shivering. I don't think I could live somewhere without seasons, without that direction from the sun, telling us what time of year it is, whether to plant or harvest, live or die.

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Beside Greenlife there is a small wooded area, complete with small stone benches, which I cut through on my walk. Past that, a small parking area sits behind the businesses that line Merrimon. Two dumpsters sit, tip to tip, in the corner of the lot. In the space between the dumpsters someone has put a couch, faded beige and worn around the edges, the kind of couch you would expect to see by the side of the road. A hammock was strung above the couch, a low hanging ceiling for this small public living room. The hammock wasn't rope but one of those green-and-white striped numbers, the kind you might think of when you hear the word "cabana" or imagine a beach resort. A small TV shared the space, although without electricity in this living room there seemed no point to it. The first time I saw the TV I thought, for just a second, that a picture had been taped to it for I saw a flash of color, a glimpse of something. How strange, I thought, the lengths to which we will go to create an image of normalcy, the living room by the dumpsters, the last remnants of a life. The next day I looked for the picture and didn't see it. I doubted it had been there at all, just a trick of the light, a glare from the grocery.

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Things that may be lost:

your wallet (or passport, or license, or savings)

your way (in a foreign city, or in your neighbor's backyard when you are drunk and decide to be an explorer, and also your direction in life)

your virginity (lost, or given away? Why do we say "lost"? it has a negative connotation)

your mind

your sense of security (when you are harassed on the street, when your neighbor's house is broken into, etc.)

your home

your job

your pets (when they run away, when someone runs them over)

your friends and loved ones (in a breakup, in moving away, in losing touch, in death)

your innocence (the much discussed and written about "fall from innocence")

your memories

your youth (and in some cases as we age, control over our bodies)

Things I have lost:

My mother's engagement ring, taken off to bake cookies for a girl I was taking care of and never seen again, although I searched their house and yard for hours

Other rings as well, including one that I saw fall off my finger but was somehow unable to locate it in the parking lot

Many earrings (most recently a rabbit, before that a silhouette of a cat in a window, an octopus, a star, a cameo of a woman, more before that)

An umbrella I had since kindergarten (blue and red panels with a picture of Arthur the aardvark from the kid's show)

Numerous pens and pencils, some which fell from the holes in my old backpack, some which may have been taken by customers

A pair of sunglasses, just the other day, which may yet be found again

A pair of sunglasses before then, left at a hotel in Florida

A pair before those, red cat-eye glasses left at Papa's and Beer on Tunnel

Before those a pair left at a house I do not wish to return to

Coffee mugs, most memorably a beige mug with a blue snail painted on the side, the word "escargot" underneath, my mother's mug

A memory card from a camera, left in the drive of a computer at school

I was thinking as I made this list about those things which I've lost, many of them inconsequential in their value, either financial or emotional, but a few of which were significant items. My umbrella, fifteen years old and the first I ever had to call my own, was a hard thing to lose. How silly it seems, to say out loud. A small thing, hardly big enough to keep me dry, and fraying at the edges so the metal tips poked through the cheap plastic fabric, but somehow so important to my happiness on a rainy day, the chunky yellow plastic handle, scratched and rough in one patch where I scraped it against some concrete wall perhaps, or the pavement in a parking lot. But I felt so colorful and childish when I used it, as if was okay that it was raining out because I had this old friend to keep me company.

My mother's engagement ring was another difficult thing to lose. It wasn't really an engagement ring per se, since she was never married, but rather a ring her partner gave her to

symbolize their commitment, finely wrought silver in the shape of roots from two trees intertwining with each other. After she and her partner split up she didn't wear it anymore but couldn't bring herself to sell it. It was perfect for me, a delicate reminder of my connection with my mother. I took it off one afternoon while baking cookies with the daughter of a friend and placed in a pocket of my knapsack which, unbeknownst to me at the time, had a small hole at the bottom. I was convinced it had fallen out in their yard as had I rushed to my car, late for work, but hours of searching on my hands and knees through the tall grasses yielded no results.

Almost a year later I still have not told my mother, so afraid I am to tell her I have lost a thing she may not even remember giving to me in the first place. I think perhaps it meant more to me by the end than it did to her, and I'm sure, even if she is upset or disappointed, it won't last for long.

The escargot mug is the same way. It was one of a pair, the other featuring a picture of a turtle and the word "tortuga" underneath, but so long has it been in my possession, away at college, that she may not even think of it as her own. Perhaps then it is okay that I have lost it, as I am the only one who carries the burden of that knowledge.

I comfort myself in the thought that the people who have found these things enjoy them as much as I did. The escargot mug in particular, since it was not lost so much as taken from my kitchen, likely during one of the numerous parties which occurred at my old residence, a dilapidated two-story house at the end of Montford, huge and drafty and perfect for college parties because no one, not even those of us living there, cared about the place. I think the mug was taken on one of those nights, perhaps not even purposefully. I like to think it was the kind of night you wake up from missing your shoes but with someone else's watch on, the kind of night where someone could have walked off with my mug without meaning to, an accidental theft.

Although who knows, it was probably intentional. But that's how I comfort myself, with the umbrella and the sunglasses and the earrings. My mother's engagement ring is a harder one to convince myself of, but perhaps some neighbor girl found it, or it will be washed down the drains and into the sewers, eventually making its way to the sea only to wash up on a shore some day. I think this too is why I like collecting things, especially things I know once belonged to someone else. Because then it has a purpose, isn't just some piece of trash on the street, but rather something lost and found again.

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“Beauty in its various forms appeals to you.” OR “I Spy; Lost and Found Edition”

A penny, a potato, a dragonfly barrette.

A button, a banana, two blackened birthday candles.

A small fortune in loose change,
pence and pesos, cordobas and centavos.

Cowboy boots and fabric scraps,
snow-covered socks on a cold day.

Sunglasses and safety pins and all that lies between.

A stroller in a park and one sole blue bead.

A pair of pants, a box of food.

A catalog of losses.

Newspapers and ticket stubs, pictures drawn on napkins.

Grocery lists, receipts, and riddles.

Remember, the fortune says, “idleness is the holiday of fools.”

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There is an urge I feel sometimes, sudden and incalculable, a biological yearning of sorts, to keep walking. To walk past work, past the red double decker coffee bus on the corner and across the street, past the new hotel and the wine store, Mamacitas, Wicked Weed, the Orange Peel and keep walking, destination unknown. Where this urge comes from I do not know. An instinct, like baby turtles making their way to the water, I too have an instinct to move towards something else.

You could say I share that instinct towards the ocean, not because I don't love it here, nestled in these ancient mountains, but because I was born there, by the cold waters of the Pacific Ocean, northern California. My mother used to say I learned to swim before I could walk. An exaggeration, I'm sure, but not by much. There are photos of the time, faded Polaroids and grainy Kodak images, my mother when her hair was still dark and curly, me in diapers and colorful hand-me-down sweaters on the windy beaches of San Francisco. I don't remember those years, my supposed early love of the ocean. The earliest memories I have of that are sitting in my mother's lap as hundreds of tiny crabs, the size of silver dollars, scuttled by us. I remember swimming in the ocean at night, the horizon of sky and ocean joined as one, losing myself to the darkness. The size and mystery of the ocean, like the night sky, reminds me of how insignificant we are, comforting in a way to know that I am too small to affect these grand forces, life on a large scale. Floating in the ocean at night is a pleasure akin to walking, for I sometimes get the feeling that I could go on forever, that if I allowed the currents to take me I could continue floating indefinitely, just as I could walk on past work and go forever.

It's not just San Francisco that draws me. It's Portland, Seattle, New Orleans, Boston, port cities to the north and west and south. There's nothing in particular about these cities, just the fact that they are somewhere else, somewhere away from the place I've lived for seventeen years. I want to pack up my car with my clothes and books, all that I need, and drive to these places, living day-to-day, not knowing when the urge to leave might strike me again. There is, too, a simplicity to life lived in this manner, a simplicity which I envy. Life to me seems too complicated at times, too many "go here"s and "do this"es. With my life packed up and ready to go I could leave when the fancy struck me, be in the middle of a particularly boring conversation and decide it's time to go, be walking to work one afternoon, perhaps the first clear day after a few rainy ones, and decide it's time to keep walking.

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I was thinking today of how much we miss when we drive, how it distorts our perception of both time and distance, disrupts our mental maps. They say (although who this they is I'm not sure – the all-knowing they we refer to so we don't have to take credit for the words ourselves) that getting lost is the best way to get to know a place. I don't know if is true or not. I tend to believe it isn't, but that may be because I dislike being lost, not having a sense of direction. That is, I'm fine with not knowing where I'm going, as long as I know where I am in the here and now. But in driving we lose so much of the detail of the world around us.

For the first year I lived in Asheville I didn't have a car. That is, I had a car but had to leave it at home due to the school's policy against freshmen having cars. They fed us some bullshit spiel about building a community on campus and getting to know the people around you, but in reality the school just doesn't have enough parking space to accommodate all of its students. In any case, I got to know the town very well on foot, but I was awful with street

names. I could tell you how to get almost anywhere you needed to go, but if you asked me what street it was on I was a complete blank. Even now it's hard sometimes, and when a customer asks how to get to, say True Confections from Doc Chey's, I know it's down the street and left at the corner then a right, left, another right and you're there, but I just confuse people when I try to tell them how far it is (five minutes, five hundred steps, who's to say?).

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I used to work at the library at UNCA, from the second semester of my freshmen year through the summer between my sophomore and junior years. It was the perfect job at first; I worked from late evening to early morning (7 pm to 1 am, or 2 am during exam week) shelving books. I was very industrious at first, shelving entire carts of books (some 200 titles) in a matter of thirty or forty minutes. I soon realized, however, that this system couldn't last long, as I would finish shelving all the carts halfway through my shift and spend the next few hours searching for something to occupy myself with. My favorite occupation when all the books were shelving was to find "lost books", books that were turned in but the next time someone requested one it was nowhere to be found. I discovered accidentally that most of these "lost books" had fallen in between the bookcases. The bookcases in the UNCA library are not single units, but rather two bookcases back-to-back, so that when you walk from one row to the other side you are not looking at two sides of the same bookcase but rather two separate bookcases. There were books that had fallen, either in between the rows themselves so they laid on their backs, collecting dust, and books which had fallen in the gap between shelves and now hid at the bottom of the bookcase, unnoticed behind the mass of other books. I made it a game to find lost books, clearing enough space off a shelf so that I could stick my head through the gap and peer into that hidden space between bookcases. I found dozen of books this way, some of which had

been lost for so long they were removed from the catalog. It was almost a matter of pride, finding these lost books, restoring them to their former positions, returning them to the people. It was a very silly thing to be proud of, but I've always liked finding lost things.

The lost-and-found box was a treasure trove for me. There was an informal rule which perhaps I should not discuss, that what was not claimed by the end of the semester was up for grabs. This included, but was not limited to: flashdrives, rainboots, umbrellas, cardigans, coats, sweaters, books and notebooks, mugs, sunglasses, keychains, scarves, mittens/ gloves and things I am likely forgetting. I'll include a disclaimer on this, which was that obviously we tried to reunite people with their important belongings. If I ever found a OneCard or wallet I'd email that student to let them know that they could come by the library and pick it up. Outside of that, though, I helped myself at the end of the semester, particularly to books and mugs. I have a particular affinity for mugs that I can't quite explain, but I think what we chose to eat and drink from, just as what we choose to eat/ not eat, is an interesting marker of who we are. I got a beautiful white mug with a blue rim and a delicate floral design also in blue, a Starbucks brand 12 ounce "Tall" mug, a green cardigan that was slightly too small for me, as well as a pair of cheap plastic sunglasses and a few small notebooks. It's funny, I don't know where that cardigan is and I know I've lost the sunglasses but I still have that mug with the blue flowers on it. The Starbucks mug isn't one I really care for, but I saw a roommate of mine bring it to class the other day. It's funny how attached we get to these things that have no real value. These were two lost mugs when I found them, abandoned in the stacks of the library, but now they are somebody's favorite. In that big house I used to live in with all the roommates we had so many mugs, a mug that looked like a ghost, a mug with Seurat's "Sunday at La Grande Jette" (a side note that my internet is out so I'm sure this is spelled incorrectly but I don't know how to spell

it), a mug with Ron Swanson's face stenciled on, a Waffle House mug, my "tortuga" and "escargot" mugs, Monet mugs, mugs with profiles of the Appalachian mountains painted on, mugs made by my roommate's aunt, more mugs than we have anything else. And everyone had their favorite, that one mug that made their day, so that on the mornings when they could not find it there was nothing to be done, the whole day was a loss.

I found things inside of books too, bits of paper left behind by the last person who checked it out. Grocery lists were common (what are you planning on making with that cauliflower and cumin stranger, and may I have your recipe?) as were receipts (what were those oil paints from Michaels for? A gift? An art project?) but occasionally I found more personal items (I say more personal but what can be more personal than a grocery list, a litany of hunger? I know what a complete stranger bought to eat, perhaps can even imagine what they cooked with it, and the last book they read, maybe even as they ate that meal) like a small strip of yellow lined paper, the kind from those Steno notepads, which simply said "Feed Your Head". So simple and so personal, obviously placed there for the next reader to find but intercepted by me and taken as a treasure of sorts. I found a riddle once too, and whether or not this is true I imagined it as part of an elaborate treasure hunt of sorts, and left it for its intended recipient to find.

At Doc Chey's we do not have the policy with regards to the lost-and-found box, and I imagine some things have been living in that box above the bar for years. Mostly they are clothes, single mittens who have lost their mate, jackets and hats and scarves and the like. It's always distressing to find something when I'm cleaning off a table, particularly if it was a table I happened to be waiting on. In those instances I try to reunite patrons with their belongings, particularly if they have left within the last minute and I have a chance of finding them outside,

perhaps walking up towards Pack Square or down towards the Orange Peel. Once a man, in a rush to make the 7:20 showing at the Fine Arts Theater, left his credit card on the check presenter. I rushed over to return it to him, but the movie had already begun so I gave it to the front desk, hoping they could reunite him with the card after the show. It was the first time I had ever been inside the Fine Arts Theater, being the kind of person who sees movies at the Brew and View on weeknights at 10 when they are a dollar for students, instead of \$9.75 each, and I was immediately aware of this as I entered.

There are things I don't try to return, things left because they are no longer wanted or needed. These include newspapers (I like to take these for the crosswords, and also to see if anything has been circled by the person who left it, as if this would give me some insight into their life), fortune cookies (the latest treasure "Hard words break no bones, fine words butter no parsnips", drawings (a flying pig, a volcano in tribute to my nickname "Lava", once a very quiet girl at one of my tables drew a picture on her napkin with colored pencils. I was hoping they would leave it – I would have taken it in place of a tip – but she ripped the napkin in half and took it with her), a papier-mâché banana (I remember nothing about the people who left this), ticket stubs (mostly from the Fine Arts Theater but some from the Biltmore Estate, marking those who leave them as tourists), pamphlets (believe it or not, there are really those people out there who leave religious propaganda in place of a tip, as Jesus can pay not only for my sins but for my rent as well), toys (a disclaimer here, that I would never take an obviously important toy left by a child but I do have a small pinkish-orange dinosaur, the kind that sit in the nickel bins by the counter so that you might impulsively add it to your purchase), coupons/vouchers (I have received a coupon for a free appetizer at the restaurant in the Asheville airport as well as a voucher for a free ticket at the Fine Arts Theater) and other miscellanea (a wallet-size card with

the sign language alphabet, another wallet-size card with Wilmington area cab company numbers on one side and a chart for determining your blood alcohol content based on body weight, sex, and the number of drinks you've consumed, a couple of business cards and who knows what else). I've also received a few phone numbers along the way, and although I went on a few dates with those who left them, nothing ever came of it, and in fact some of them were very bad and have led to awkward encounters in work since then. Perhaps I should stick to imagining the lives of those strangers rather than actually trying to engage with them.

This fascination with things left behind extends beyond my job and into life outside. On the walk to and from work I've found a button with a long-haired man pictured (someone said it was Freddie Mercury, someone Jerry Garcia – I think they were both wrong but it's hard to say now since I've lost the button, perhaps around the same place I found it), a pair of mismatched socks (I didn't take them, but rather watched over the weeks as they originally appeared on the sidewalk, were transferred by some concerned individual to a wire fence which bordered the sidewalk, then covered with inches of snow which slowly melted away, days later revealing the two mismatched socks, one solid black and one with grey-and-black stripes, still waiting for their person), a small fortune in loose change (some American, some not – I now have money from Canada, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Mexico, and England, as well as tokens from several arcades), two birthday candles (a 2 and a 0, the wicks slightly blackened but otherwise in fine condition), rings (once in elementary school I found a heart-shaped mood ring on the playground and wore it every day for over a year, which I think was the beginning of my affinity for found jewelry), earrings (single earrings are great for necklace pendants), a pair of pants (I wasn't curious enough to investigate but another passer-by was and I took advantage of their intrepid behavior), a box of food (perhaps, I wondered, put down as someone loaded their car and then forgotten?

Or intentionally left out?), and so on and so forth. Some people might think it dirty or gross to collect that which others have left behind, but I like the small pleasure from finding something lost, in giving it a new home, and the connection I have with strangers because of these things, like walking through the space where someone else has been, this connection through time with someone I don't know makes me less alone.

* * *

In the compilation of Matsuo Basho's works *Narrow Road to the Interior and Other Writings*, translator and editor Sam Hamill writes of Basho "His journey is a pilgrimage; it is a journey into the interior of the self as much as a travelogue, a vision quest that concludes in insight. But there is no conclusion. The journey itself is home. The means is the end, just as it is the beginning. Each step is the first step, each step the last." (page xx) Reading these words filled me with such excitement, as I felt in some ways that what I was doing was exactly the same, an urban travelogue of sorts, a journey not only through the complex maze of Asheville, all avenues and alleys, dead ends and one-ways, but simultaneously through the complex and convoluted memory map of my mind, each step towards work or home another step towards the person I am becoming.

Walking to work, or home from work, is much like walking a labyrinth, the steps laid out not in sand or in a garden but on pavement, feet guiding the movement of my body so the mind can wander as well, taking in each thought as it comes and then allowing it to leave or linger as it may. The walk is as much a means to reach my destination as it is a means to calm myself, retrieving those bits of the mind which lay scattered throughout, lost during the day.

The rigors of waiting tables are so different from those of academia, I suspect sometimes that if not for this walk in between, the separating of the self not only in distance but in time, I might go somewhat mad switching so often as I do between one world and the other. The pressures at work are so small and immediate, a customer asks a question and you must supply it immediately, or at least in a timely manner, as opposed to school where an entire class might be spent exploring one question, left open wide at the end, a standing invitation for further consideration.

Your Lucky Numbers Are

Maybe you can live on the moon

In the next century.

Pray for what you want.

The only evil, ignorance.

In the next century

The only good is knowledge,

the only evil ignorance.

You are working hard.

The only good is knowledge

Idleness is the holiday of fools

You are working hard,

handsome is that handsome does

Idleness is the holiday of fools.

God has given you one face,

handsome is that handsome does

and you make yourselves another.

God has given you one face,

pray for what you want,

and you make yourselves another.

Maybe you can live on the moon.

