

The Far Gaze

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Bruce Chatwin is long dead, but I keep coming across his photograph and his writing in old magazines, like postcards delayed and finally delivered when the traveler himself has gone on. Then I found Chatwin's posthumous book, *What Am I Doing Here*, his ironic echo from the other side of the Styx. I never met Chatwin, although I would have liked to, and would have one day probably screwed enough courage together to write him, but that was years ago, and how many wishes travel and never arrive.

Once a director at Sotheby's, Chatwin later became simply a traveler, this man whose eyes gave out scrutinizing the modern visual representation of the world and one day woke up blind. Woke up blind. He was told by the eye specialist to swap his close work for the horizon, the long horizon. This is the sort of revelatory metaphor we dream about but rarely experience (nor he, we might guess). Chatwin began looking at the long horizon, in Africa, in Arabia, in Patagonia, in Russia, in Australia, and he began writing about it.

I was born in Italy under the auspices of the military the year Chatwin began traveling under the banner of the long horizon, the tent, and the Moleskin notebook. By the time I caught up with Chatwin, in a bookstore landlocked in the prairie, and saw his light-shattered eyes in the dust jacket photograph, he had already contracted the rare Chinese fungus of the bone marrow that would kill him, that, or he died of AIDS, either way another revelatory metaphor, like Rilke's rose thorn death. Then I kept coming across him, in words and photos. Here Chatwin sits in the shade, on the steps in Donnini a year before dying in Nice, his tanned feet dry and dusty in sandals. I look at his feet, beautiful as the feet of a Bernini saint, and maybe as hard. He wears a watch and clothes the faded blue denim of the sky, and he is less stern here than on the jackets of his books which praise his prose and name the countries and literary prizes that are his.

Sometimes I measure myself in years against the writers I admire. Albert Camus published his first collection of essays at twenty-three. At that age I had one essay in an obscure literary journal published in a state on the edge of the American consciousness: North Dakota. But on the edge of my own consciousness is the male measuring stick, be it Camus

or Chatwin, by which I measure my own life and call it short. Chatwin was born twenty years before me, but it is not time that separates us, but what is possible in time, in my time, in my place. What I admire Chatwin for is exactly what I myself cannot do—travel freely and fearlessly, welcomed even, because men appear to be free and fearless and welcome the world over and women, as solo nomads, are prey to all the danger their anatomy and experience are heir to. This is the oldest story, a story men belittle and that women know is all too true. What is ignored by men is inescapable for women.

When I was eighteen I went with my boyfriend to a jazz concert in Telluride, in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado. My brand new Minolta slung around my neck, I wanted to take a photo of the rushing water, which meant crossing the creek, perching on slick rock, and getting the shot. I lost my footing and plunged into the freezing water. Holding my camera aloft and scrambling up the creek bank, I began peeling off my sweater. From the shore three men started shouting, "Take it off, take it all off!" I could see the smoke of their cooking fire, their leering faces, and did not stop running until I got back to our tent at the National Forest campsite. On the surface, I was uninjured, but the housing for my camera lens was dented and my confidence was shattered. Later I would choose language instead of photography because the page seemed to be physically safer ground.

A decade later I went to the same concert with a friend sixteen years my senior. Walking back from the early evening set, I saw a man grinding his way into a woman who could scarcely stand up in the recessed doorway, she was that far gone. I had never seen such naked lust in public. My breath seized, but my companion noticed nothing. We walked on, more is my shame. I should have pulled him off her, but I didn't. How this haunts me now.

One of my closest friends has a black belt in Aikido because she was assaulted on her college campus when she was twenty. I love the idea that she could flip a man three times her size and break his back if she chose to. I want the same for any of us who feel threatened, male or female, young or old, here or abroad. I want all of us to be able to walk freely in the world. I remember reading the firsthand account of the woman who crossed the Australian Outback by camel to swim in the Indian Ocean—how some days she walked naked, menstrual fluid dry on her legs, and how the National Geographic photographer who came periodically to take pictures complicated her solitude with sex. I don't think men understand what the sheer physical freedom this woman possessed, naked, bleeding, uncaring out there in the desert, could mean to women who travel on paper, who fall for the far gaze and the ease and grace of strangers, who long to travel alone, but are afraid to.

I have traveled a little on my own and it was dangerous, because nothing is as attractive as unattended youth with all its arrogance and

naiveté. How easily my physical space was threatened while I was waiting for the night train to Copenhagen: the Hamburg station deserted and a man who thought nothing of sitting right beside me on the bench and asking me back to his apartment. I shudder to imagine what such men think of women that they can assume a proximity and intimacy in seconds.

Men perhaps harassed Chatwin traveling alone, struck by his fairness and singleness. Perhaps women were also drawn by the exotic and salty foreigner, with his oilskin notebooks bought in Paris, and his observant and accommodating charm. When I look at the slim and almost smiling Chatwin sitting on the shaded steps, with his perfect saint-shaped well-traveled feet, I envy the easiness with which he crossed borders and cultures, his maleness carrying him like a breeze, welcome in the desert, in the jungle, and on the Russian Steppe.

Women have to go a long way to be alone, safely alone. To the Outback, with camels, a lonely, scorched place filled with distance and crisscrossed by invisible aboriginal song lines. I was alone once in a high meadow in Norway, with cattle grazing around me and bees humming in the clover and a finger of the Sognefjorden glittering in the distance. I took my shirt off and dozed in the sun and height, but was never lulled entirely. I was alone again on the west coast of Achill Island where the cliffs fall a thousand feet to the Atlantic. Here was the edge of the earth and I felt like Adam, the first man, not Eve, the first woman, because here was a high, sharp, inviolable place, a place men have occupied for millennia. I had no desire to take my clothes off, instead I ran on the edge of the cliff, shouting, as though in possession of more than the view, the whole of everything. Dominion is exultant. Men know this. I wore knee high rubber boots to protect me from the sodden bogland and a sweater knit for a woman's son but given to me in a spontaneous fit of generosity. I felt untouchable and unbearably happy. I considered climbing the brown shoulders of the mountain Croaghann to see what lay to the north of the island. When I came down from the cliffs, starved and ecstatic, I could hardly talk. I know such emotion is not simply the province of men, but is it the province of women, and do we have to go to remote and inaccessible landscapes to feel this fearless, this happy?

I do not know if Chatwin traveled without fear or that travel brought him happiness. I do not know how he afforded to travel, even cheaply. I only know that he did travel and for all the years of my life. To weigh the chosen anchor of marriage, children, debt, career, and go. Even should I choose not to marry or have children or incur debt or pursue a career, I would not have a fraction of this man's freedom and safety the world over. It is a terrible thing, this little caution, this tenth sense, like a doe scenting danger, when men are near. It does not matter that not a hair on my head be touched; still the hair on the nape of my neck prickles, and I wonder how fast I can run, and I have run very fast before, away from men.

I admire Bruce Chatwin, the prose and the man, and I imagine he was not a violent man, because surely a violent man would not have lasted twenty odd years on the road without someone beating his skull in. And if I am not violent myself, it is because I am small-boned and fast and female and I remember the story of the princess who strangled the man she was forced to marry on their wedding night, strangled him with her hair. This anecdote is reassuring on a curious, vengeful level, a level readily exhausted by reflection and ambulation.

Solvitur ambulando, it is solved by walking—blindness, rage, loneliness—Chatwin believed this. If I admire his far gaze, his eyes fractured with light like the eyes of the blind, and his clear, fair prose, I admire most his walking and the sacramental example it sets, which has been set time and time again, by the Buddha, by Muhammad, by Jesus and the Disciples, all walking, walking. And I wonder how far our violent automated culture would have to walk to exhaust itself. A long way, farther than Chatwin in all his travels and all the holy men and women in theirs.

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