

## Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

*JW Burns*

### **Morning Walk**

SOME BIRDS SEEM TO RECALL THEIR DINOSAUR DAYS.

Picture them in motion not in the air but on the ground: rubber stick strut, head bobbing, chest heaving, legs stiff but not altogether committed to the same direction—much like those bipedal beasts ambling along in most of the movies channeling the Jurassic in one way or the other—seems to reinforce such a heritage although the subject of dinosaur ambulation still spawns debate among paleontologists not to mention animators. Probably just as well to assume that birds have some approximation of ancestral locomotion in their genes which is more or less expressed in their walk allowing of course for size and other influential differences.

One morning in the not too distant past I finished breakfast and anchored myself with synthetic shorts, a cotton T-shirt and rubber flip-flops for a stroll on the beach beside the Gulf of Mexico. It was a fine early morning, sum total of blue green water, clear sky, level sand making it possible to enjoy walking in the easy break at the surf's edge. Almost immediately joining me was a sandpiper, a willet to be precise, the two of us tracking side by side. At this hour I tend toward devotion to the external visual scenery without seriously internalizing what I'm observing. It's there. Accept it. No big deal about it as long as I'm basically not intruded upon. Nothing more is necessary for the moment anyway—let wander stuff wonder. At least that's the usual pattern.

The bird took the lead, legs in a bluish-gray quick zigzag into and out of the sluggish lapping break, head snapping here and there for aquatic insects, tiny worms and fish. Without an obvious lure it wedged into my thoughts between attraction to one last pale lavender streak of sunrise and recitation of the swollen repetition of surf in which I was following the twig-thin footprints of a dinosaur descendant, an abiding little monster in the family of the fearsome thunder lizards who would have bitten my head off without a second thought. Quick, twitchy, freakish, funny, always alert, the bird

weaved an erratic path through wave ends and yellowish foam, occasionally venturing into water which for a split second covered its legs but never the white underparts. No matter its frequent course deviations, a roughly two yard interval was maintained between us. Frequently the creature glanced back, maybe confirming the margin of distance between us, maybe just a nervous habit. Or was it guiding me onward to a place where the only mammals were very small insignificant creatures combing a forested floor for bugs, maybe wiggly wormy dirt feeders, a glistening fungus for dessert. How would I adapt to that existence, brain baby lima sized, clawing appendages, best friends with a snout-pronounced rodent—how would I survive and would I want to survive and why in hell was I pondering such a circumstance when following my walk I'd be relaxing in the A/C feet up sipping a refreshing beverage, munching something full of processed goodness and mercy.

Higher sun prompting both sky and water, expanses growing, deepening. The willet and I continued our forward progress, companionable for me, gathering nutrition and whatever else for the bird.. The beach was

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moderately busy with other coastal birds, terns, laughing gulls, skimmers, even one majestic blue heron but only the occasional human either walking, sunning or edging into the cool water. A middled couple launching a kayak lugged their craft into the sandpiper's path who immediately scampered up the beach past them before returning to the water's edge. I maintained my straight line walk, exchanging 'good mornings' and 'cold water' exclamations as I passed. Soon we were bopping along as before, ignoring introductions, aware of each the other's presence; why I had loosely bonded with this particular bird hadn't at this point reached the point of conscious reflection—I was taking my morning walk and would have done so birded or bird less. In fact I'd followed other shore birds while walking on the beach but only for brief intervals before with a single brisk departing cry they had flown away.

In a sense we were both feeding, the bird literally, me nibbling at the original world covered by the sea, a place so I've read we don't know that much about, vast, mysterious, largely uninhabitable. The first time I saw the sea the water came at me in successive monstrous chomps, the lips of a beast slowly folding back to reveal huge ashen teeth applying a twisted horizontal separation as the abbreviated head reared up, fell becoming all teeth, the upper dentition closing on the lower, the nonpareil noggin slamming on the beach with a final bite; each time the water finished each finish followed a few moments later by another chilling crunch followed by the next the next. Standing there just out of harm's reach, frozen, then numb and deafened by the wave's detention ending in a low-slung death wash.

A bit queasy leaving my initial encounter with the sea, but recognizing that some sort of bond had been established. I knew before I learned that life had originated there. This intro to the salty wet world came in the face of one of the planet's mighty oceans. Later experience brought me in more prolonged contact with the Gulf and it was here that I realized an adhesive sticking to me on the sea; partially a back to the womb protective state for sure but merged with that an evolutionary promise that life could have taken other turns and turned out quite differently—not better, not worse, no value judgements involved, just different which I find entertaining on which to speculate. But not now.

I should point out that over more than a few years while I've directly engaged the sea by several means both on the surface and underneath my primary obliging contact comes from just being in its presence, walking beside it, relaxing in its proximity. I'm not a fish or a marine mammal or a shore bird so its enough to slosh my consciousness in the presence of the replicative stew; a boat ride's fine but I actually get more of a feel for the water by maintaining tactile association with terra firma. Also I relate much more openly to the water when the wind is under 40 miles an hour and the water itself is contained by the limits of a seawall or a beach. I've endured several hurricanes and tropical storms, some within the immediate range of driving rain, satanic wind and clawing surf; frightening, now one more supplicant to nature at its most powerful. Me timid, absolutely. Also wise enough to realize that evolution has largely hung me and my kind out to dry as far as survival is concerned.

Still, nice to interact with life in and around the water. Though many

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of their proper names allude me I do recognize and take particular notice when I come in close contact with fishes and other residents of the sea and shore. Maybe standing waist deep in the water watching the horizon when out of the blue a meandering manatee nudges me as it swims slowly by or feeling countless tiny shiners nibbling the dead skin off my legs or just sitting on a bench overlooking the water when a blue heron sways up to within a yard or so, both of us watching the water, me aware of the bird and I reckon the bird aware of me, this association lasting for a countless interval..

Reaching a downed half-submerged tree lying across the beach I stopped. This marked the roughly 2.5 mile mark of my walk and given the equal distance back, far enough. The willet continued up beach and around the collected sand in the tree roots, then back to the water's edge. I called goodbye.

The bird continued on.. I sat on the bleached wood, rested, not so much from immediate weariness as from longterm wear. The sea swirled around my bare feet, a scampering ghost crab stopped, froze, easily fitting in with shells and other debris. Eyes spot-set it seemed for a few moments to be linked to both the organic and inorganic aspects of this world, equally communicating with a lone puffy white cloud in the blue sky and a small sheepshead swimming in shallow water beyond the break. Then a sudden burst carried the crab into a hole.

The walk back forged through a gaggle of beachgoers accompanied by chairs, tents, dogs, umbrellas, blankets, coolers, towels corn-hole boards, various balls, tech devices, small shovels and buckets, plastic molds, large shovels and other digging implements and utensils and so forth. Most of them wore some kind of swimming/sunning attire, more varied among females than males—as a matter of fact some females wore almost nothing at all. As the morning widened the row of houses facing the beach pushed closer. Compounding the squeeze high tide peaked. The spell cast by sky, water, nonhuman life reduced its hold; the environment giveth, the environment taketh away.

So one can only walk a silver thread for so long; sooner or later depending on your natural passport you will lower your consciousness, become glued to your steps. On that particular day the rising sun put a counterfeit brightness in the sky, turned the water's gleam a mechanistic green. Adjusting to a robotized rhythm I stepped up the pace through sun worshippers, digital devotees and aquatic communicants and the rising heat daydreaming of lunch and perhaps a nap. Out of nowhere a loud sprawling screech pierced growing absence from the environment. Not far above were the widening black wings with the wide white streak of my willet, dipping close before soaring away in the sun's glare over the Gulf. My bird making sense of an organic journey from nowhere to nowhere. Shutting my eyes I walked on trusting for a timeless tick my place in the merger of sky, water, land and life. When I looked again there were three boys in their early teens tossing a peewee football. One lashed his arm in a giddy whirlwind resulting in an effort missing both of his potential receivers, the ball splashing down  $\frac{3}{4}$  feet from me. The boys stood standing like cold blooded monuments.

"Little help," one of them called.