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HORIZON'S LENS

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HORIZON'S LENS

My Time on the Turning World

ELIZABETH DODD

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS • LINCOLN AND LONDON

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Designed by Nathan Putens.

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You've got to write it all down.

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INTRODUCTION

SOLSTITIAL

I find myself counting down. Less than a week until the year's ebb, and I notice by midmorning that *a certain slant of light* has found its way inside the house and falls on the limestone chimney behind the woodstove. A small square of glass in the front door, diary-sized, right at eye height, lets light splash against the pale rock in a tilted facsimile of a window. *Window*: wind's eye, etymologically, but the door is closed against the blast that finally drives down from places farther north, shoving leaves across the lawn and bringing an end to the mild days of shirt-sleeved weather that lasted deep into November.

How intimate this moment seems, the sunlight pausing, just inside the threshold, with its lowered gaze as if about to turn away.

As the year spins down through late autumn into the final days before the winter solstice, I find myself feeling restless, ill at ease. What is the source of this vague anxiety, this spiritual unbalance? Lover of sunlight, I think it must be due to the squeezing of the

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day, the distant angle of the sun at any hour, the dimming light. But the social calendar has undergone a major shift as well, and that's just as likely a cause for my disquiet. I teach at a state university in eastern Kansas, and the last weeks of the fall term have kept me indoors, desk- and meeting-bound for long hours each day. But now the semester's work is over, the students are gone, and the days are suddenly emptied of punctual responsibility; I wake to the possibility of desire instead of duty. And what is it, I wonder, that desire is nudging me toward, right now?

My partner, Dave, and I decide we need a small adventure. After breakfast we drag the spotting scope and camera equipment from the closet and drive to a dry-dust road near the tiny community of Delavar, Kansas. A snowy owl has been reported in the region for the past few days, and now, at last, we have time to search it out. We creep along a graded trace with only a number for a name, scanning both pasture and plowed field along the road, but we see no bird — only a white plastic bag, nodding in the wind as though it's breathing. Then the ranch owner pulls up in a large front loader and steps out to ask us what we're looking for.

"Oh, yeah," he nods. He's dressed in the dull gold canvas of winter work clothes and gestures slightly with the folded lunchmeat sandwich in his hand. "I saw that bird this morning, setting right up behind my place. At first I thought it was an albino hawk, but the profile wasn't right. Are they migrating or something?"

But migration's not quite the right word for this bird's journey. It's not a regular lifeway for the species to leave the arctic tundra country and blow down into the central plains to hunt in the ragged texture of mixed-grass prairie and broken-stalked wheat fields. (Today there's plenty of competition for whatever mice are lurking in the dry grass: we've seen three kinds of hawks already, working just this one small acreage.) The owls nest in distant, deadly sounding places like Baffin and Ellesmere Island. Usually they winter throughout Canada; they rarely venture this far south. This bird might do all right here, if he's lucky, but most likely he will never make it back

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home. He doesn't know it yet, Dave says, but he's probably traveled all this way to die in exile before the winter is over. His time is running out. Dave smiles, and his face wrinkles in a mixture of emotion: sorrow, interest, and pleasure in just being here. I feel the same way.

The rancher tells us to go ahead and check out his cattle lot past the house; a few hours ago the owl was there. We say thanks and wave good-bye as he heads down to the pond, toward whatever task he had in mind before he stopped to talk. As I get back in the car, the dusty roadside grass traces patterns on my jeans, and when Dave turns around, we drive through a powdered swirl. We circle the stock pens, circle back to the road, circle yet again, ever wider. But we never find the snowy owl, crouching in the grass like a misplaced winter moonrise.

I also range across the earth in my own modest perambulations. Whether in my own home range in Kansas tallgrass country or much farther afield, I make human-sized journeys, tethered to earth by both attention and desire. Mine are irregular epicycles, nothing that can offer predictive regularity, except as I intersect the paths of other travelers in temporal patterns. That's the impulse behind the personal almanac: to test and register one's self through these conjunctions with otherness. There's something deeply pleasing about keeping a list — the record of birds who visit the yard, the daily pulse of temperature's highs and lows in the place one lives, the hour and minute of sunrise or sunset. Our lives are interstitial: each of us moves in the limited realm where atmosphere meets lithosphere — air slowly etching rock — and we ourselves are uplift and subduction of whatever forces shape our individual awareness. Here, among the material presences of all that is, is a human mind — mine, yours — brightening with delight or darkening with sorrow, quickening with the synaptic spark of recognition across whatever inner space we each contain. I think I'm in the middle of my life, but the blur of middle age is hard to calibrate. And that's a good thing, too — it's hard enough to live deliberately without the

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constant count of the days all geared toward the death that will be, one day, your own.

I want to turn outward, to attend to the horizon's ring that daily, nightly, seems to place us at the center of things, though we know that isn't really true. And I want to turn inward, to see the self more clearly as one point in history, with time's galactic spiral unwinding as I turn and turn again. Each way, the horizon's lens provides the focus — aligning the figurative light of our attention, the literal light that enables our gaze. I want to look at time itself. Our ideation of its passing is both a biological legacy from our evolution on a planet that rotates around a sun and a social concept that we spin and knit. We are such brief biotic instances, blossoms of brevity. We want — we need — to feel the pulse of our existence synchronize with deeper cycles, longer frequencies.

I remember a particular winter night some thirty years ago, which I can recall today through efforts of will and wish. The fact that the yard still glitters with last week's snowfall and a "Friend" has posted a note on the clean, white "Wall" that rises in the imaginary space in my computer — "dusted off the x-country skis and took them out for a spin," she writes — both make the time seem propitious for memory.

I was getting ready for bed when the neighbors who lived across the hollow came knocking on the door. The late afternoon's snowfall had stopped, and shadow-casting moonlight spilled from the clearing sky. Voices sounded in the cold air; no traffic grumbled on the country road. So I pulled wool onto both head and feet, then waxed the skis for powdery snow. It was my first winter skiing, and these were very athletic neighbors, so as we moved together in the southeast Ohio woods, I spent the next hour or so trying hard to keep up, telling myself, stride, *glide*, stride, *glide*.

The moonlight I remember as a kind of sensory whisper, a visible chill. I don't recall ever stopping to stare upward, though I must have, to frame that distant disk against the two-toned tree limbs,

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white above and black beneath. Instead, what I remember most is the effort simply to keep in motion, to establish a rhythm that would let me move over the snow's bright surface. We skied down a trail cleared through the woods, then headed across former pasture, a gentler, snow-muffled slope where broken grass stalks stood like sailless masts, dangling tackle. In the open we continued in single file, our shadows slipping across that frozen meadow as if no one had ever been there. The wax, the slender shape of the skis, the way we stayed as precisely as we could in one another's tracks — it seems to me now we were doing our best not just to minimize friction but to shake ourselves free from gravity's pull. I was so young then — seventeen — and often felt I was a very insubstantial being.

Shlisshh, shlissh. We slipped, flesh turned shadows, along the new snow.

This memory comes back, coaxed by tonight's bright conjunction of moonlight and snow and my own ruminations on motion and time. "Posted December 9, 9:50 a.m." says the computer screen, pegging the personal-present against the ongoing "feed" that scrolls a linear facsimile, announcing each individualized moment within the social network. And yet it's "p.m.," post meridiem, when I log in to join that virtual communion of posts. The software-enforced third-person narration seems odd — a narrative technique backlit with omniscience that has fallen out of literary fashion. One post from another "Friend" this evening tries to elide the grammatical stance altogether: "Sore, everywhere, even after two days. But skiing is fun!" Charlie wrote this fifty minutes ago; now fifty-two. How do we make out the trail of memory, drawn up before attention so thoroughly that the feed disappears and I recall, across the decades, the precise pitch of someone's laughter when I slip and fall, push myself back upright to rejoin our circuit across the snowy meadow? Suddenly, here I am in the present tense again, caught in the moment, in motion. That's the scroll-feed of the daybook, the diary, refigured by the social network in the online world. Then I turn back to the blank facsimile pages I imagine as paper — a sheaf, a ream, a book.

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This is my almanac. As always, the word itself knows more than I do, though its etymological footprints have been swept and spoiled as if the hem of its robe had dragged along the way. "Thine almanac," wrote Chaucer, who is (of course!) the first author to use the term in written English. (Actually, he wrote "thin Almenak," and though it looks as though "thin" could refer to the slender nature of the volume itself, we know to pronounce the *i* long, in the voice of acquaintance and possession.) The volume was a kind of handbook or textbook on how to use an astrolabe, describing "A table of the verray Moeuyng of the Mone from howre to howre, every day and in every sign." It was a guide intended for young Lewis, the son or godson Chaucer addressed. An astrolabe, "star taker" in Greek, was a little flat planisphere with moving parts that allowed you to see the patterns made by visible celestial bodies at any given hour. A clock, a calendar, a survey tool — the workings of time, held in your hand.

In the medieval world, science itself was a textual matter, reading the thoughts and observations of the ancients. How delightful, the fact that Chaucer wrote a textbook participating in this tradition. Mostly, it's a translation from the Latin, and it includes a nice defense of writing in "Englissh": the "trewe conclusions" of the text's subject will, he says, suffice just as well in his vernacular as in any of the other languages through which astronomical knowledge has passed. "God woot that in alle these langages and in many moo han these conclusions ben suffisantly lerned and taught, and yit by diverse reules; righte as diverse pathes leden diverse folk the righte way to Rome," he observes. Chaucer shows no anxiety about the imperfections of referentiality nor of loss in translation. At the dawn of modernity, he strides out confidently, language laid out like a map across the landscape.

Time and language: two of the great mysteries. It seems to me that we float in both, buoyed up by forces so utterly transcendent of the personal that the specificities of *self* and *now* are eclipsed by abstraction's textureless disk. Buoyed up, carried along. "Time's glacial pace" — I read the familiar phrase somewhere and suddenly

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imagine language as conceptual snowshoes that give us traction atop abstract drifts and depths. But it's an imperfect metaphor, especially since the real pair I've bought online are not hand-me-downs but sparkling pink-and-chrome things with no history of use. And I'm looking for history. I'm keeping company with wielders of language from other times and places — philosophers and scientists, tellers of tales and writers of books — so the social network I feel I inhabit spans centuries and continents.

We all want clarity and specificity, sure, the sense that each day quickens with circumstance. I want that traction, to feel the weight of my own presence in the world. But we also want the glimpse of something larger, unpricked by our own particulars, undimmed by self-referential veil or shade. Traction and glide. These conflicting desires, so often at the heart of epiphany — mystical or aesthetic — have such powerful pull. They take us out of ourselves and then, even more deeply, take us back in.

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