



Fig 1: Petrie. 2021. *Westward, Door* [photograph]

On Yearning

Traversing the Untraversable: Musings

From the Edge of Impassable Vastness

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Falmouth University, 2021/22

On a cool autumn dusk in 2020, I ducked under a blackberry vine, hopped a spattering of mud, and emerged, finally, from a path between hedgerows. The sea spread before me, a quilt of the patterns of the wind. It was that time of year when evening accelerates; it was getting late so early now. A month prior, I would have had plenty of light for the walk home, but the sun, with grand momentum, was already lumbering down behind the trees to the west, and I was miles from bed.

I looked out at the dimming sea. The world was suspended in halcyon chill. A toenail moon hung far above in the eastern sky, framed by the magenta wisps of straggling clouds, and I was suddenly struck by profound desire. A desire for what, I was not sure. A desire to be *over there*, perhaps, although I could not have said where *over there* was. I was on the edge of the world, or so it felt, and I wanted to see beyond. It was a sort of nostalgia, but not for any real past. A nostalgia for the future, maybe, the future that can no longer be.

I first wrote about this feeling—what I will call the Yearning—soon after that walk, but I have been feeling it all my life: in the dimming clouds outside my window, in silhouettes of bare autumn trees against a deep blue sky, in a sudden glimpse of dolphin-back in the seething sea below, in the sparse wingbeats of lonely gulls soaring off into the gloaming.

Although I certainly tried, I struggled to describe this Yearning. In early 2021, I wrote that this abstract feeling is “a sort of achy longing, a tepid acceptance that things are ending, a yearning to go back in place and time, a not-entirely-lonely solitude.” While evocative, this definition only skims the surface, and only prompts more questions, several of which provide the framework for this exploration: Does an existing word or concept describe this Yearning? If not, what are its hallmarks and common components, when found in the real world, and what, at its core, does it communicate to—and about—us? Can it be defined, such that one can objectively identify it in art and media? And how does it differ across various mediums? Finally, why is the photograph—a medium rooted in truth and reality—perfectly suited to reproduce this Yearning?

First, what is the Yearning not? What sets it apart from similar existing concepts? While several words touch on its various facets, none describe it entirely. *Desiderium*, for example, an English noun characterised by desire and regret, approaches the Yearning by virtue of vagueness. Unlike the phrases below, it has no philosophy or psychology or history, but it is nonetheless an important word in typifying feelings of longing and nostalgia.

The German idea of *Sehnsucht* comes much closer to the specificity of the Yearning. Translated as “life longings,” or, simply, “desire,” *Sehnsucht* describes individual and collective feelings about unattainably utopian ideals of one’s life and society. (Baltes 2007). At the core of *Sehnsucht* is a fundamental dichotomy: a search for meaning and happiness against the struggles of coping with loss and unrealised dreams (Kotter-Grühn 2009). It approaches the Yearning in the unattainability of one’s desire,

but its focus on the psychology of ideals and the assumption that one's longings are fixed to reality stray from the mark. Another German word, *Fernweh*, compliments *Sehnsucht*. Literally "far pain" or, more palatably, "farsickness," *Fernweh* describes an aching desire for travel to new places (Garfinkle 2017). Many online dictionary definitions of *Fernweh* include photographs of planes leaving airports at dusk (Wiktionary 2021). Although the planes are leaving, bound for lands where the sun has not yet set, the photographer is stuck in the dusk at the edge of the airport. Although not a full encapsulation, *Fernweh* provides an important component of the broader Yearning: a feeling that one has been left behind (in this case, both by the plane and by the day).

Hiraeth, a Welsh concept, encompasses parts of both *Fernweh* and *Sehnsucht*. It is often translated as "distance pain," a combination of homesickness, grief, and nostalgia. It is a longing for a home which no longer exists, or perhaps never existed, and connotes the loss of "old Wales" and traditional Welsh culture (Petro 2012). It's a love and longing for a home in which one is deeply invested, often by birth; whatever that home's current state, however changed from its old ways, the *Hiraeth* remains untainted. The photographer Sally Mann used *Hiraeth* as a way to frame her connection to Rockbridge County, Virginia, the land that raised her. *Hiraeth*, for her, is "a near-umbilical attachment to a place, not just free-floating nostalgia or a droopy houndlike wistfulness or the longing we associate with romantic love" (Parks 2015). The Yearning's fundamental ambiguity is the antithesis to "near-umbilical attachment," but the feelings invoked by *Hiraeth*—the longing, especially for a place which does not and cannot exist—still inform its definition.

Portuguese claims the only close cognate of *Hiraeth* in *Saudade*, defined simply as "memory of something with a desire for it" (Menandro 2005). Like *Hiraeth*'s fundamental connection to old Wales, *Saudade* mourns the loss of Portugal as an empire, but it can also describe more personal longings: a distant relationship, an emigrant's homeland, or memories of carefree youth. The anthropologist and journalist Aubrey F. G. Bell described *Saudade* as a "vague and constant desire for something that does not and probably cannot exist, for something other than the present, a turning towards the past or towards the future; not an active discontent or poignant sadness but an indolent dreaming wistfulness" (Bell 1912: 7). *Saudade* is not caused by any real grief or loss; it is ever-present, a back-of-the-mind perspective. Again, while the Yearning has little to do with concrete memories of a homeland, family, or an idyllic past, the *Saudade* spurred by such memories has a similar emotional effect to the Yearning. The difference is that *Saudade*, along with *Hiraeth* and *Sehnsucht*, deals in reality, in absolutes, while the Yearning deals in fantasy and fiction.

Mono no aware, literally "the pathos of things," is a Japanese phrase which approaches the Yearning from a different angle. It evokes the "ephemeral nature of beauty—the quietly elated, bittersweet feeling of having been witness to the dazzling circus of life—knowing that none of it can last"

(Buchler 2019). The artist David Buchler, who wrote essays for *Ikigai and Other Japanese Words to Live By* (2018), describes *mono no aware* as “being both saddened and appreciative of transience... In Japan, there are four very distinct seasons, and you really become aware of life and mortality and transience. You become aware of how significant those moments are” (Buchler 2019). The bittersweet feeling of transience that comes from watching seasons change or suns set or clouds darken is a distinct part of the Yearning; *mono no aware*, a large concept in itself, helps to explain the facet of the Yearning that concerns time.

So, out the other end of this figurative grab-bag of the language of nostalgic longing, we must now ask what the Yearning *is*. This is perhaps best approached through the three core elements which make up the Yearning: fading light and passing time, an uncrossable edge or boundary, and implications of another world. This is not a definitive checklist, but rather a sort of progression; fading light creates a sense of evanescence and loss, an uncrossable edge holds one back from seizing the moment, and implications of another world provide an object for Yearning.

The first, fading light, is a mark of transience and the passage of time. The Yearning most often strikes me during or after the golden hour of sunset, rarely during the day, and never at sunrise. In the context of the Yearning, sunrise and sunset are polar opposites. This is an important distinction. During the sunrise, the day is brightening, and any feelings of awe and beauty are smashed by the foggy hammer of early morning as the sun continues to rise and the day begins. The sunrise is a triumph, a shattering of the night, and with a full day ahead, there is no reason to be wistful. Everything you could ever want is right there, at the breaking of day. What is there to Yearn for? The sunset, however, is an ending.

Night is not a light switched off. It is a gradual receding, such that looking out across the horizon allows a view of not only a different place, but a different time of day. Like observing a faraway star through a tiny telescope, the bookends of the day offer windows into the future and past, respectively. While viewing the sunrise, one is looking out to a land where the future—the sun, the day—already exists. And, conversely, one’s view of the sunset is a glance into the past. Where one stands, watching, night is falling, and the sky behind is already dark; the land beneath the setting sun, however, has the same light one had five minutes ago. In this sense, watching the inevitable sunrise is an optimistic futurism, while watching the sunset is nostalgic romanticism. Only the latter contributes to the Yearning.

The second facet of the Yearning, an uncrossable edge, regards location. The sunset, a temporal threshold, creates a juxtaposition between where one is and where one could be; a physical threshold juxtaposes the same things. This could be a literal jagged edge between two landscapes—where the hedgerows of Cornwall meet the wild Atlantic, or where the great plains of North America run aground upon the Rocky Mountains—or a more abstract edge, like a bedroom window or one’s imagination in the context of reality.

Our evolution has always drawn us to the edges of landscapes. In his 1985 book *House*, the journalist Tracy Kidder writes that we like homes which straddle two landscapes, such as a field and a forest. “The edge of a woods is a definite place in the sense that an open field or the middle of a woods is not. Creatures congregate and flourish in edge habitats” (Tracy Kidder, *House*, 53-54). The versatility, diversity, and protection of edge habitats also attracted early humans; they gathered food in the woods, hunted in grasslands, and lived near rivers and wetlands (Bates 2016). Although we have outgrown our need for edges, and create with our cities new edge habitats of our own, we remain drawn to and comforted by their surety of place.

This draw and comfort lies in being able to cross between two habitats in order to utilise the benefits of both. When this innate, animal attraction to the edges of landscape meets the reality of our ill-equipped two little feet, when we are restricted by the nature of the edge, our curiosity, our desire to cross over, clashes with the physicality of the threshold, we Yearn. For example: walking along hedgerows for hours only to come to high cliffs overlooking the sea, one is confronted with a vastness, an incredible edge that one cannot cross. Journeying west through vast grassland for weeks or months and finding, suddenly and late in the day, an immeasurable crescendo of granite and glacier blocking the way creates a similar effect. Perhaps tomorrow the mountains can be tested, but this evening all one can do is gaze at their magnitude and sigh.

The final component of the Yearning relies on the specific, often fleeting details of its time and place to imply and inform an entirely new context, separate from reality. Looking out at a sunset or a vastness doesn’t create Yearning alone; confronted with the caveats of reality—night doesn’t really mean *end*, and very few thresholds remain uncrossable to the modern human—the Yearning cannot exist. After all, we live in the future; what is there to yearn for? Instead, the Yearning channels small, abstract slices of the greater landscape to escape those caveats. Synecdoche, the rhetorical device which identifies a whole by referring to one of its parts, is a useful way to frame this distinction. Through a small detail—the last scrap of orange light on a billow of cloud, or the fin of a distant whale—the Yearning synecdochically implies the existence of an adjacent yet inaccessible landscape: a sun-touched realm of clouds stretching far out of view, or the watery domain of dolphins and whales deep below the surface. In this way, after stumbling upon the Yearning, one is always at an uncrossable edge. Witness to a wonderful world but stuck at the window, all one can do is watch, and Yearn.

While the Yearning is often found through lived experience, it can also be revealed and cultivated in art. Bill Watterson’s acclaimed comic strip *Calvin & Hobbes*, for example, provides an approachable yet thorough depiction of the Yearning through Calvin’s imagined worlds. A six-year-old boy with an overactive imagination, Calvin uses fantasy to escape the tedium of everyday life. In this sense, he is always at the edge of another world. However, these worlds are finite; almost all of the strips in which

Calvin shifts into his imagination end with somebody—a parent, his teacher—yanking him back into the real world. He has the power to create vast worlds, but he can only ever skim their surfaces.

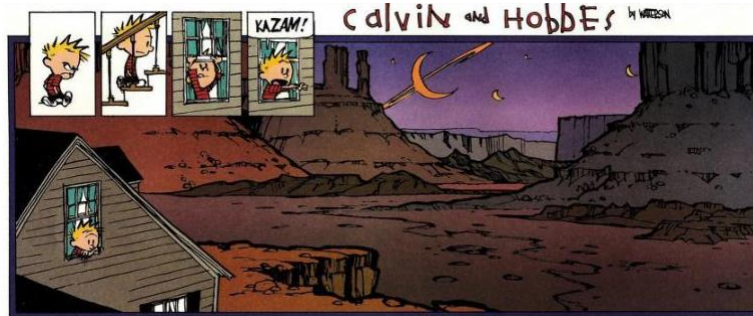


Fig. 2: Watterson 1993. *February 28th Sunday Strip* [comic]

In Watterson's strip for February 28th, 1993, Calvin is scolded by his parents (Fig. 2). Annoyed and bored and sent to his room, he opens the window and—kazam!—suddenly his boring view is transformed into a wild, alien landscape. He looks out at the sky and its darkening frame and sighs. Calvin is at the edge of a vast world, but he cannot explore it.

Calvin's melancholy satisfies the three core components of the Yearning: fading light, an uncrossable edge, and hints of another world. First, not only is the imagined landscape dimming, but the night is drawing near. In Calvin's life, bedtime is always looming, and there's never enough time in the day. Second, he stands at the threshold of this wild world, this vastness of imagination, witness to its splendor but stuck in his window. Third, the grandeur of what he can see implies that this world is much bigger and much more alive than his limited view betrays, if only he could glimpse around the nearest spines of the land. This strip depicts the Yearning successfully because it shows us its effect through Calvin's eyes. The real, objective view from his window most likely inspired his imagined view, much like the momentary sight of distant clouds touched by last light might inspire thoughts of a magical world above. However, just as one who imagines a world implied by distant details in a landscape only perceives the details which contribute to that world, we do not see Calvin's landscape of reality; we only see his fantastical moonscape. We experience his Yearning from a first-person perspective, and thus Yearn ourselves.

Calvin & Hobbes would not succeed in this respect if it only depicted the Yearning; instead, it also induces the Yearning in its audience. After all, just portraying a feeling is secondary to the primary goal of art: to make the audience experience a feeling themselves. In *Calvin & Hobbes*, the Yearning experienced by the reader is a product of the Yearning experienced by Calvin. The components of the Yearning are contained within the strip: both the edge that Calvin cannot cross—between reality and his

imagination—and the glimpsed world outside his window are nested within the strip. More often, however, the uncrossable edge which sparks the Yearning is the edge between audience and art, the glimpsed world is the artwork itself.

This is possible because art, from science fiction to abstract painting, is fundamentally worldbuilding: the former creates, obviously, the speculative world depicted, while the latter, despite its lack of a clear narrative, creates a world informed by style and the feelings it conjures. Most mediums fall somewhere in between. Brian Eno, the musician who invented the concept of ambient music, sees worldbuilding as art's driving force. "I think that's kind of what artists do, they're always making worlds," he says in an interview with music producer Rick Rubin, "sometimes worlds they would just like to visit and look at, sometimes worlds they would like to spend time in" (Eno 2021: 16:05-16:05). An artist catches a glimpse of another world and implies its existence through art. And when the viewer of that artwork feels something, "what you feel is... Oh, that's a kind of world that could exist. Where those kinds of feelings happen, and are possible" (Eno 2021: 47:38-47:46). In this case, a world might be obvious, informed by the map behind the front cover of a fantasy novel, or more abstract, informed by the instruments used in an ambient track or the film grain in an old movie or the size of the brushstrokes of a painting. "It doesn't matter what it is that's being painted," says Eno. One clings to little stylistic details in artwork just like, when Yearning, one clings to little details in a landscape. "At that level, we start to get feelings for that work" (Eno 2021: 46:56-47:05). An artwork's aesthetics and style create a feeling, which cultivates an atmosphere, which builds, however abstractly, a world.

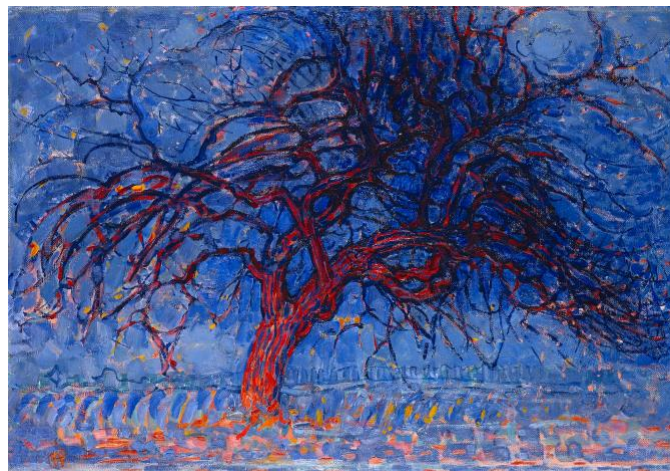


Fig. 3: Mondrian 1908-1910. *Avond; De Rode Boom* [painting].

As a child, Eno was fascinated by Piet Mondrian's post-impressionist landscapes. Incredibly evocative, they accomplished with primary colours and elegant form and bold style what detailed

classical landscapes could not (Fig. 3). “I loved the simplicity of his pictures,” Eno tells Rubin. “I kept thinking *how can something that is so simple, objectively, how can that have such an effect on me?* It was the closest thing to magic that I had ever seen” (Eno 2021: 17:38-18:08). Why does art that looks elegant and effortless and uncontrived, playful and almost childlike in its simplicity, compel the viewer? The landscape photographer and writer Robert Adams, in his essay *Beauty in Photography*, argues that “the apparent ease of its execution” is an important quality in art. Only artworks that “look as if they had been easily made can convincingly suggest that beauty is commonplace” (Adams 1989: 28-30). Or, put another way, art which appears uncontrived, whose perspective reveals elegant beauty in the mundane and elemental, creates a world filled with such perspectives. By distilling an artwork into raw form, colour, and style, the artist creates a world not via literal description but rather via synecdoche. The part represents, implies, and thus creates, the whole. “With Mondrian,” says Eno, “you didn’t really know where the art was being made. Was it in the picture? Or was it in you?” (Eno 2021: 19:24-19:38). The viewer extrapolates form, colour, and style, and the world behind the canvas is a collaboration.

Before he discovered music, Eno was a painter. Inspired by Mondrian, he was “always very drawn to this idea of doing as much as possible with as little as possible” (Eno 2021: 19:04-19:07). He loved combinations of blue and red which created rich, intense violets and mauves, and that “melancholy deep area of colour” compelled him to paint, over and over again, abstract explorations of that profoundly moving range. “I just got such a strong feeling from those [paintings], and it was a feeling about a kind of world I thought existed, but it was sort of intangible, and I couldn’t give a name to it,” he tells Rubin. “I had a way of touching the feeling of it. Through these experiments that I was doing with colours” (Eno 2021: 48:28-48:39). He didn’t have the words to describe the feeling as a child, and even now, he meanders around the abstraction of it, unsure of himself: “it’s sort of a nostalgia,” he says, “for other futures that could’ve happened but didn’t, if you see what I mean” (Eno 2021: 17:13-17:26). Is this the Yearning? The mauve-violet range evokes a fading sky as light pastels give way to deeper violets. And perhaps the younger Eno’s lack of words, his incomprehension, is an edge. The inability to understand a vast concept is not too different from the inability to explore a vast landscape. Most important, however: did his colour experiments hint at some larger world, just out of reach? Of course. According to Eno, all art is an exploration of an unknown and uncharted world. As an artist, “you find something that moves you and something in you that says, *What world is that telling you about?*” (Eno 2021: 48:28-48:41). The only way to answer that question is to skirt its world’s edge, to keep pushing the feeling’s catalyst. Painting was Eno’s only access to his melancholic world, and so he kept painting, forever grasping at a distant idea.

Although he shifted from painting to music as a young adult, and eventually left that mauve melancholy behind, Eno found that his work always created the worlds he needed in his life. In his quiet

hometown in the English countryside, he made his loudest music; “I needed a bit of city, I needed some grit, some noise” (Eno 2021: 15:35-16:02). Making music in a big city had the opposite effect. “When I lived in New York, I lived on a very, very noisy corner,” he tells Rubin. “It was whilst I lived there that I made the quietest music I’ve ever made. And I’m sure what I was trying to do was to make the place in the music that I needed... as a relief from living in New York” (Eno 2021: 14:57-15:24). While the worlds which art creates are products of curiosity, as exemplified by Eno’s melancholy colour-studies, they can also be products of a necessity. Much like Calvin, Eno has spent his life creating worlds to fill the shortcomings of his reality.

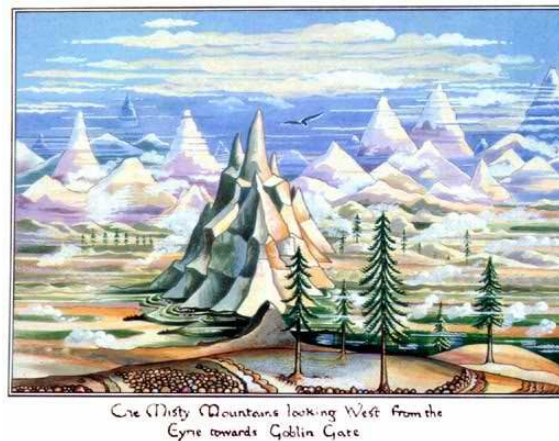


Fig. 4: Tolkien and Riddett 1976. *The Misty Mountains looking West from the Eyrie towards Goblin Gate*
[colored drawing]

J.R.R. Tolkien, whose fantasy epics are the polar narrative opposite of Eno’s and Mondrian’s abstractions, also fills the desires left by reality and, in this way, addresses the Yearning. One might assume that fantasy would rely heavily on a reader’s belief. However, in *On Fairy-Stories*, an essay regarding fantasy’s nature, mechanisms, and place in literature, Tolkien argues that it is not belief but rather desire which fuels our love of fantastical worlds. “At no time can I remember that the enjoyment of a story was dependent on belief that such things could happen, or had happened,” he writes. “Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability. If they awakened *desire*, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearable, they succeeded” (Tolkien 1965: 40). If one believed elves and dwarves were real, stories about them would have no greater effect on desire than stories of one’s neighbours down the road. It is an “enchantment of distance, especially of distant time,” which primes an audience to long for faraway places (Tolkien 1965: 13). This desire, says Tolkien, is not for those elves and dwarves to buy the house at the end of the block; it is for the window into their world—a book, in this case—to be just a little wider. “I desired dragons with a profound desire. Of course, I in my timid body

did not wish to have them in the neighbourhood... but the world that contained even the imagination” of fantastical things was, to Tolkien, far richer and more beautiful than one that did not. “The dweller in the quiet and fertile plains may hear of the tormented hills and the unharvested sea and long for them in his heart,” he writes. “For the heart is hard though the body be soft” (Tolkien 1965: 41). Fantasy does not affect one’s grounded desires—a new toy, a promotion at work; only one’s desires of the heart are easily stirred by fantasy. Although the dweller’s livelihood and prosperity and unbitten-by-dragons body is far better off in the fertile plains, she still desires the faraway places, still Yearns to glimpse beyond the edge of the woods.

In this sense, the desire to see these other worlds is not logical or practical; instead, it addresses a deep longing which cannot be met by anything real. Fantasy’s potency is derived not from the flavour of its world—in most fantasy, spells, swords, and gods replace technology, guns, and celebrities—but from what is unknown and, in some sense, unknowable. Wizards and dragons in the hazy world of faraway are much more potent, much more evocative of desire and longing, than wizards and dragons in New Jersey, not because New Jersey is not a magical place, but because one can visit. *The Lord of the Rings* is often described as tediously unambiguous: “every creature has its own origin story, script, or grammar,” writes New Yorker critic Adam Gopnik (Gopnik 2011). Despite the knowability inherent in explaining the history of every rock, Tolkien maintains “some mysterious element of wit or magic” which evokes the foggy half-knowledge of myth—it is never quite clear what the wizard Gandalf can and cannot do, for example—and his stories still induce wonder (Lane 2001). In *On Fairy-Stories*, he argues that wonder, product of that wit and magic, is a crucial element of fantasy. A visitor to a magical realm—the reader, perhaps—risks shattering his connection to the world when he seeks more information. “While he is there it is dangerous for him to ask too many questions, lest the gates should be shut and the keys be lost” (Tolkien 1965: 3). There is no magic in knowing. Too many questions answered, and the magic is lost. Just like Mondrian’s simple yet evocative forms, just like the worlds glimpsed by Yearning, the fantasy epic is a collaboration between its storyteller and its audience, and its success relies on it not explaining away the magic which draws the reader in the first place.

On Fairy-Stories ultimately suggests that the crux of all fantasy is a sudden, unexpected turn of joy. “It is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur,” Tolkien explains. “The joy has a little of that strange mythical fairy-story quality, greater than the event described... We get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart’s desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through” (Tolkien 1965: 8-70). It is a “sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth,” and it is not dissimilar to the sudden glimpse of something greater which one finds in the Yearning (Tolkien 1965: 71). At the end of a tale, deep in a faraway world, the reader strikes, suddenly and unexpectedly, in the face of all evil, an incredible joy, the kind which clutches one’s heart or brings

tears to one's eye. It denies that eventual, inexorable, universal defeat which it is the human condition to intimately know, and, for a moment, there is hope in the face of overwhelming odds. To experience this joy at the end of a tale is to, for a moment, halt the sunset; this, in essence, is what one Yearns for. When one gazes out at the darkening sea and longs to glimpse over the edges of red-rimmed clouds, one longs for a world that is fading. Tolkien's joy is a suspension of that fading, a defiance of the end. It is only temporary, for of course it must relent to inescapable time, but, in that brief and singular moment, there is hope.

Artists and writers use fantastical worlds to get at the universal truths and emotions of reality, but they also use their own, real environment to create fantastical worlds. Tolkien drew on decades of appreciation for nature before he divined his own world, and decades of experience as a philologist before he created his own languages. Reality is an inspiration and a starting point for the other worlds of art, just as a glimpse of some real detail in the landscape is the impetus for the other worlds of the Yearning. "Fantasy is made out of the Primary World," Tolkien writes in *On Fairy-Stories*. "A good craftsman loves his material, and has a knowledge and feeling for clay, stone and wood which only the art of making can give" (Tolkien 1965: 59). Fantasy is not about creating something alien, but about lending gravitas to something familiar. It enunciates the details of reality beloved by its creator. Tolkien's description of "the realm of fairy-story" exemplifies this: "all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords" (Tolkien 1965: 3). None of these elements are inherently otherworldly. Beasts, seas, stars, beauty, peril, joy and sorrow are all very real things, very at home in reality. And yet, they are few and far between in Tolkien's roaring Anthropocentric reality. Fantasy, at its core, is not make-believe but elegy for the natural world, a hint of that which it is too late to save. Placed in the context of a faraway world at a distant time, juxtaposed against the racing progress of modernity, nature is magical, a vehicle for Yearning.

Maxfield Parrish is another artist who creates worlds out of the found components of reality. The brilliant cobalt skies and deep, rich shadows of his oneiric painted landscapes evoke hazy, faraway lands, as extraterrestrial as the dreamscapes of *Calvin & Hobbes* (Fig. 5). When he includes people in his paintings, they are often lithe, androgynous, and elfin, as much a part of the landscape as the trees and rocks. Even when his subjects are downtrodden, there is still a quality of magic, a gleam in their faces. A *Tramp's Dinner* (1905) depicts a destitute man with a can of beans, but there is no despair in his eyes. He looks to the sky, hopeful; one gets the sense that he knows he is part of a story. Throughout his work, from his faraway landscapes to his pillared pavilions to his fairytale portraits, Parrish used his unique style and perspective to cultivate a world.

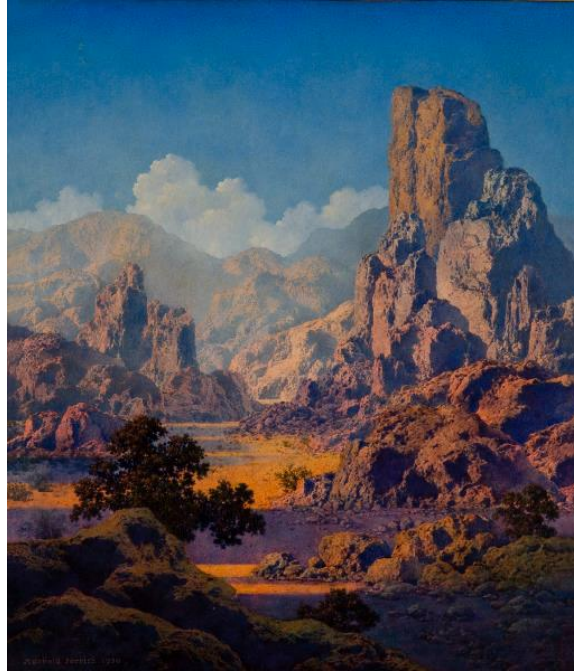


Fig. 5: Parrish 1950. *Arizona* [painting]

Parrish’s primary concern was to convey the feeling of being in nature. “Each and every picture,” he is quoted in his 1973 biography, “must represent one grand good place to be.” Landscapes are “windows on the world,” and if a picture does not capture “those qualities which delight us in nature—the sense of freedom, pure air and light, the magic of distance, and the saturated beauty of colour,” then it cannot achieve its purpose, to “take the beholder to the very spot” (Cutler 1995: 60; Ludwig 1973: 175). Painting, to Parrish, requires the dedication and honesty to accurately capture a landscape, but one look at any of his works shows that *accurate* does not mean *objective*. Adams, in the essay *Truth and Landscape*, writes that landscape art is not effective if it “does not imply something more enduring than a specific piece of terrain... we will probably prefer the place itself, which we can smell and feel and hear as well as see” (Adams 1989: 16). The trick to painting geography, then, is to capture more than the view—to include that “sense of freedom” and “pure air” and “magic of distance” as well as the shape of the landform. The aim of the landscape artist is to “help in discovering the significance of a place,” Adams writes. Most people would prefer half an hour with Edward Hopper’s paintings, for example, then with the streets he painted. “With Hopper’s vision we see more” (Adams 1989: 16). In this sense, “successful art rediscovers beauty for us” (Adams 1989: 27). It is Parrish’s perspective on the qualities of nature which touched him emotionally, rather than his literal view, which make his landscapes powerful. In his fantastical paintings, one finds an appreciation for nature’s grandeur which often goes unnoticed in nature itself.

Despite his paintings' otherworldliness, Parrish drew inspiration from his own backyard. "His true yearning," write Parrish scholars Judy and Laurence Cutler, was to get the "fantasy images" of his "fertile imagination" out of his head "as quickly as possible" (Cutler 1995: 67). He would notice small details in a rock or piece of wood which evoked some larger landscape, and, rather than sketching the scene, would construct it in miniature. At his home studio in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, Parrish "set up a completely equipped shop, turning out wooden urns, balusters, and columns as props for his pictures. He made miniature mountains, too, by splitting quartz rocks; an 'Arizona scene' that he had painted, he boasted to a friend, was made of materials from his own grounds" (Glueck 1970). His work is not a catalog of the views he found, but rather the views he constructed; they were "fantasy composites" (Cutler 1995: 60). He used his own world to create others, saw a glimpse of magic in his own backyard, and, in Yearning for that world, created it. Similarly, the viewer Yearns, too, for more than just a window into that world. Paintings are static and unreachable: one will never see beyond the background mountains. One can imagine that world, but they cannot experience it.

As with Eno and Tolkien and many others, Parrish used his own world to create others; here, however, the connection is much clearer. His paintings are not inspired by otherworldly details in worldly life; they *are* those details. This is the same sort of synecdoche which enables the Yearning: to Parrish, found materials imply entire worlds. When he longed for a landscape made of the quartz behind his house, he painted it. As such, one finds in his work some semblance of the worlds implied by one's own Yearning. All mediums, to some extent, take inspiration from our world, and can thus achieve this connection. Photography, however, is the most apt way to foster a viewer's Yearning. Because its inherent dichotomy between true representation and authorial perspective mirrors the Yearning's dichotomy between details of reality and the other worlds they imply, it is within the humble photograph that the Yearning truly thrives.

To understand the strange connection between photography, a medium of truth, and the Yearning, a longing for what cannot be, one must first understand the nature of photography itself, and how it differs from other visual mediums. In *On Photography*, the critic Susan Sontag distinguishes the difference between painting and photography: "the painter constructs, the photographer discloses" (Sontag 1990: 92). Images are inherently grounded in reality. While most artists have the liberty of creating from scratch, photographers must create their art from found subjects. Roland Barthes, the theorist and essayist, writes in *Camera Lucida* that a photograph has two components, "the windowpane and the landscape," which are inherently linked and "cannot be separated" (Barthes 1994: 6). The photograph cannot exist without its subject, which must have existed in reality at some point, and yet the subject cannot be seen without its window. The landforms of a landscape photograph exist a priori, but they cannot be captured without the perspective of the photographer. "Photographs are evidence," writes Sontag, "not only of

what's there, but what an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation of the world" (Sontag 1990: 88). Simply composing an image infuses it with perspective. While a camera might semi-objectively capture a subject in a studio, "it can never cover a whole landscape," argues Adams in *Truth and Landscape*; the compositions of successful landscape images are "built from the local geography but still and clarifying" (Adams 1989: 17). They reveal simple truths about a landscape which one might struggle to notice in person. Like gardens—"sanctuaries not from but of truth"—landscape photographs cultivate the essence of nature by "discovering and revealing meaning from within the confusing detail of life" (Adams 1989: 16, 84). Built from the contents of objective reality, Adams writes, the photograph uses perspective to create "illusions in the service of truth" (Adams 1989: 86). It distills the feeling of a landscape and presents it simply. Photography, says Sontag, asks us to "think—or rather feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way;" photographs are "invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy" (Sontag 1990: 23). Like most art, a successful landscape photograph conveys the feelings often missed in real experience. The photograph, however, implies truthfulness in the way a constructed painting never can.

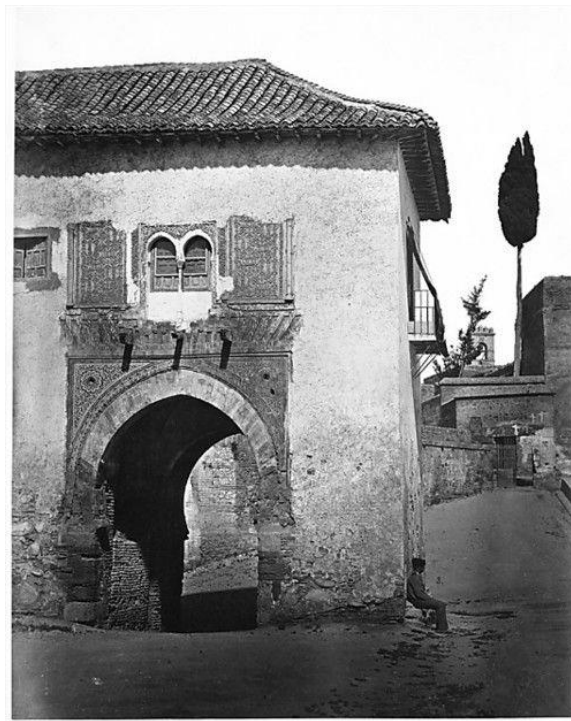


Fig. 6: Clifford 1862. *The Alhambra (Grenada)* [photograph]

How does this assumption of truthfulness allow photography to create Yearning? An example: in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes muses over Charles Clifford's *The Alhambra (Grenada)*, a photograph which

moves him in a way he cannot quite describe (Fig. 6). “This old photograph touches me,” he writes. “It is quite simply *there* that I should like to live” (Barthes: 1994 38). It is a simple photograph—an old arched alleyway, a man sitting alone against a wall, a feather-duster tree—but it affects him profoundly. His “longing to inhabit” this place is “fantasmatic, deriving from a kind of second sight which seems to bear me forward to a utopian time, or to carry me back to somewhere in myself... It is as if *I were certain* of having been there or of going there” (Barthes 1994: 40). He Yearns for this distant, unknown land not for any logical reason, but because it makes him feel a certain way. The same view from the street would most likely not induce the same feeling. Like Hopper’s subjects, the street, experienced firsthand, would not live up to its depiction. Unlike a painting, however, a photograph of a place implies distance; it is a “neat slice of time” (Sontag 1990: 17). To photograph a place is to participate in its “mortality, vulnerability, and mutability,” writes Sontag, “precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it” (Sontag 1990: 15). The photograph for which Barthes Yearns is not a depiction of a place but a sort of memento mori; the second it was taken, its subject no longer existed. The man got up, tiles fell off the roof; eventually, the subjects of all photographs age and decay. Photographs actively promote loss and nostalgia because, while true, they are never current. “Distant landscapes and faraway cities of the vanished past,” Sontag writes, are especially vulnerable to this effect. “The sense of the unattainable that can be evoked by photographs feeds... a feeling both sentimental and implicitly magical: they are attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality” (Sontag 1990: 16). Paintings do not imply that their subject ever existed; photographs, however, inherently convey both truth and transience. The moment it is taken, a photograph creates a rift between the frozen past and what has changed, and, knowing this intuitively, the viewer Yearns for that past.

This implied transience and loss is especially relevant with photographs which depict wilderness, an ever-slimming slice of the planet Earth. In an essay regarding their exhibition *Longing for Landscape - Photography in the Anthropocene*, Curatorial Concepts Berlin writes that “photographs of landscapes have the power to induce yearning. An image of a distant wooded mountain or a shot of a rugged coastline make us pause and wonder” (CUCO 2018). Old growth forests are few and far between, mining and drilling scar the wilderness, plastic litters beaches from Svalbard to Samoa, and air pollution clouds even the furthest reaches of the globe. Wilderness photographs of long ago are memento mori for what is already lost, and we long to experience the world they depict. In modern landscape photography, however, the purity of natural beauty clashes with the Anthropocene. Thus, writes Adams, recent photographs of wilderness, those which attempt to capture primordial beauty, are inherently false. “Unspoiled places sadden us because they are, in an important sense, no longer true” (Adams 1989: 14). A modern wilderness photograph, one which tells the story of purity and old beauty, must avoid the all-too-present traces of humanity—other photographers, tree stumps, garbage—and thus, is a deception.

Nowadays, in the depths of the Anthropocene, the only way to honestly depict the wilderness is by depicting the fictional worlds implied by Yearning.



Fig.78: Koublis ca. 2015. *Berenices* [photograph]

A photograph cannot factually capture the splendor of a wide, vast wilderness. It can, however, capture small details in the landscape which hint at just-out-of-reach unspoiled places. In other words, it can capture the object of Yearning; it turns an untruth, wilderness, into deep emotion, a depiction of desire, essentially through worldbuilding and fiction. The landscape photographer Petros Koublis, whose elegiac, otherworldly landscapes feel more at home in myth than in reality, is a master of this concept. *Berenices*, for example, shows a wind-gnarled tree on a grassy dune (Fig. 7). While its landscape seems pure and unspoiled, the image provides no context. It makes no claim on objective truth. And it shouldn't: Koublis makes most of his landscapes just outside of Athens, one of the longest-inhabited cities on Earth. Any assumption that his landscapes are wilderness is false. However, none of them actually depict real wilderness. Their ambiguity—this tree could be anywhere in the world, anywhere in *any* world—is what makes them fiction rather than lies. Koublis understands this. “I capture the subtle imprint that the world leaves on our senses,” he writes. “My images don't provide proofs. They are sensuous objects that show how I don't care so much what the world looks like, but rather how it feels” (Manatakis 2017). It is no coincidence that “image” and “imagine” are such similar words. *Berenices* is not a testament to the wildness of the outskirts of Athens, but instead an abstract world built from the scraps of wilderness found in those outskirts. Koublis uses photography to strip his reality of context in order to amplify details in the landscape into a world of their own, one for which the viewer Yearns.

Barthes' concept of *studium* and *punctum* provides a framework for understanding these details. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes defines *studium* as everything objective about a photograph, all of its background context and historical, journalistic, and cultural significance. *Punctum*, its counterpart, is that little detail which breaks through the *studium* of the image into the heart of the viewer. Not dissimilar to Tolkien's piercing and impossible joy, *punctum* "holds me," writes Barthes, "though I cannot say why" (Barthes 1994: 51). This sudden bolt of *something else* triggers a deep and undeniable emotional response in the viewer, provokes shock and awe and a sudden glimpse beyond the borders of the image. "However lightning-like it may be, the *punctum*," Barthes says, has "a power of expansion. This power is often metonymic" (Barthes 1994: 45). Metonymy, like synecdoche, is a rhetorical device which points to a larger idea using one of its parts; this reveals the role of *punctum*. In many cases, the metonymic jolt of *punctum* is that detail which implies something beyond the image itself. In a photograph for which the viewer Yearns, the *punctum* is that detail which prompts or implies an imagined other world. For Barthes, it is the *punctum* in Clifford's *The Alhambra (Grenada)*—the man against the wall, crumbling tiles, whatever it is—which makes him desire that image's world. Barthes uses the *studium/punctum* dichotomy to understand photographs, but the framework can be used to understand the details which spur the Yearning in real life. When a modern wilderness photographer finds a detail to photograph, they are, in effect, finding *punctum* within the larger landscape. Koublis's images of tiny wildernesses at the edge of Athens are enunciations of these details; in a sense, they are constructions of pure *punctum*.

If the details which invoke Yearning and imply other worlds can be understood as a sort of real-life *punctum*, then photographs which capture these details in context capture Yearning itself. When one Yearns for Tolkien's *Middle-Earth* or for the worlds of Parrish's and Mondrian's and Koublis's simple, stylistic landscapes, one Yearns after a contrived fiction. The uncrossable edge is the canvas or the page. A photograph, however, has the power to portray Yearning much closer to how it is experienced in real life. The photograph creates an edge—it is a window into a landscape—but it also captures an edge; it can reproduce in full the details in a landscape which cultivate the Yearning along with the context which makes those details potent. A photograph of glowing clouds, a detail in the greater evening landscape which might induce Yearning, does not capture only the glowing clouds. A successful photograph of Yearning must include the real-world edge: in this case, the edge between the still-glowing clouds high above and the dimming evening on the inescapable ground. While other mediums can also achieve this—Watterson's strip of Calvin looking out his window, for example—they fall short. Because photography implies truth and existence in a way that other mediums cannot, the gap between Yearned-for worlds and their context is much larger.

Several other photographic techniques, alongside abstraction and framing, help foster Yearning in an image. Colour is perhaps the most visceral: In *Beauty in Photography*, Adams argues that colour

photography is very similar to free verse, “both being close to what occurs naturally” (Adams 1989: 8). Colour images approach a truer depiction of reality, and have the capacity to be deeply emotional; like free verse, they are closer to how humans—as opposed to cameras—experience the world. Images with stylised colour palettes suggest a world full of that style; this suggestion is not unlike the suggested worlds of Yearning. On the other hand, a lack of colour can suggest age or distance, as if part of a photograph is lost to time. A black-and-white image cuts colour in favor of composition and abstract form, which, similar to stylised colours, cultivate the certain ambiguity on which the Yearning thrives. Both colour and black-and-white images can imply other worlds built on their stylised perspective, but their execution is nonetheless critical in evoking emotion and creating Yearning.

Aspect ratio is another factor which can contribute to the Yearning. No single ratio best achieves this; they each have different effects and suit different subjects. The most common aspect ratio, 3:2, evokes documentary photography and the medium’s implications of truth. It gives a subject a sense of having been observed, and can be used to balance a very stylised image. Square photographs evoke stability and strength, and accentuate abstract forms. The square crop vignettes an image, making it succinct, and the order they impose on a landscape can cause the viewer to Yearn for a landscape full of such raw form and order. Near-square aspect ratios, such as 5:4 and 4:3, are reminiscent of old art: the former of large format landscape photography, and the latter of early cinema (Nugent 2015). In my own work, I have found that panoramic aspect ratios, such as 2:1, are often effective in the cultivation of Yearning because they closely simulate how we, as humans, take in landscapes. The horizon, mountain ranges, the edges of forests, and even cloudscape almost always extend horizontally, and a photograph much wider than it is tall captures these immensities. Yearning is, at its core, a desire to traverse the untraversable, and there is no better way to evoke this feeling than enunciating the vastness of a landscape which, due to the nature of the medium, is unreachable.

While wide aspect ratios accentuate the size of a landscape, grain, haze, and blur accentuate the distance between that landscape and its viewer. Much like black-and-white images or antiquated aspect ratios, grain suggests age. Information is lost in noise, and otherworldly vagueness overshadows the busy specifics of small details. Used as such, haze and blur also distance an image from reality by removing the subject’s objective context. In this sense, grainy, hazy, and blurry images mimic memory: they are quite real, and yet shrouded in a sort of ethereal fog, faded and unplaceable. The grain and imperfections of Clifford’s *The Alhambra (Grenada)* allow Barthes to complete the image himself, to add colour and detail and life. He Yearns in part because he will never experience that which he imagines. Similarly, Koublis’s work, which is often clouded in soft grey haze, provides a sort of blank canvas for the viewer to imagine the rest of the landscape, to Yearn for the rest of that world. Against photography’s ethos of truth, this

grainy, hazy obfuscation seems to say, *this world existed, somewhere, far and long ago, and you're looking at its last remains.*



Fig. 8: Levitt 2017. *Humpback Whale* [photograph]

Jonathan Levitt's photobook *Echo Mask* exemplifies this idea (Levitt 2019). W. Scott Olsen, the photographer and critic for LensCulture, writes that the photographs within "evoke old memories, both real and desired" It is a scattered collection, linked not by narrative but by tone and feeling. "The images are evocations more the representations," Olsen says, "an attempt to capture the mood of a place; the feeling we get when we try to explain not what a place was, but what it was like" (Olsen 2019). A preface of the book describes Levitt's perspective as a "primordial view of the natural world as a place alive and enchanted." Perusing *Echo Mask* is like perusing the dreams of a stranger: an alien world, certainly, but with hints of familiarity (Levitt 2019). The book as a whole is a lesson in capturing the Yearning as it appears in life, through, as Olsen writes, "tone-moments," but one image stands out as a perfect example: Levitt's photograph of a humpback whale's solitary tail in the wide and misty Atlantic (Fig. 8). It depicts the cold ocean's surface, through which no light can penetrate; this is an edge. The tail serves as a hint of another world as well as a mark of transience. The rest of the whale is implied, and so is the whale's impending retreat into the depths. In a single image, one sees one's own dead-end position, at the edge of the vast and the deep; certain evidence that another, inaccessible world exists just out of reach, the playground of dolphins and whales and octopuses; and the looming recession of that world's window, the sorrowful knowledge that the tails of whales do not remain above water for long. This experience is not specific to the photograph; Levitt experienced these details in person. In this most abstract evocation of experiential truth, the image is not a barrier but rather a window, through which the viewer can feel what

Levitt felt. The viewer can Yearn as Levitt Yearned. Other mediums, while they can induce it, cannot capture the Yearning; this is the true strength of the photograph.

The details which spur the Yearning are like the tips of icebergs (or the tails of whales), but they need not be obvious to be successfully photographed. As with other mediums, photography evokes feeling through simplicity and universality; the dizzying busyness of a complicated image favours information over truth. An extremely specific image leaves nothing to be desired, nothing to be wondered at. “Art simplifies,” says Adams. “It is never exactly equal to life” (Adams 1989: 25). Through style and composition, the image reveals form and beauty; viewing a simple photograph is like viewing the world through carefully crafted stained glass. The image is still a window into a real landscape, but that window directs and uncovers. Like Mondrian’s evocative yet objectively false landscapes, simple photographs become collaborations, first between the raw materials of the world and the composition of the photographer, and then between the window and the viewer. If the photographer does not contribute composition or style in the service of evocative ambiguity, then the photograph is just documentation, and there is nothing for the viewer to add or, more importantly, to feel. Minor White, the photographer and theoretician, understood this, arguing that “the objectivity of the camera, used wrongly, is the very devil... The literal image is the ultimate illusion” (Adams 91-92). A solely documentary photograph is seeing without feeling; the successful image blends the grounded context of reality with composition and style to allow the viewer to fill in the gaps, to explore for themselves the world behind the image, and to feel, and perhaps even Yearn, along with the photographer.



Fig. 9: White 1948. *Pacific, Devil's Slide* [photograph]

In an essay about the power of White's California seascapes, Adams argues that the ocean is a perfect subject for his semi-abstract evocations. "The ocean, by virtue of its size and apparent emptiness, invites attention outward from our petty landscapes, away from ourselves," he writes. "The sea is too vast to understand and too awesome to avoid; it attracts us as it offers a final liberation from human scale" (Adams 1989: 92). The ocean is an expanse, the shore an uncrossable edge. One cannot comprehend its vastness, but that doesn't stop one from Yearning to understand. White's *Pacific, Devil's Slide* (Fig. 9) is a simple image, bereft of all but the horizon and the clouds and faint waves below, but it conveys an unmistakable awe, a "calm defined through metaphor: oceanic scale is the scale of eternity," writes Adams. "Such a testament is itself baffling, but we are encouraged to try to understand it by its provision of a place to begin" (Adams 1989: 98). The photograph has no answers—if it did, it would leave nothing for the viewer. It is a prompt for wonder. We cannot learn anything from the photograph, cannot glimpse beyond the horizon or above the clouds or below the waves. We can only, "as White did, walk the shore" (Adams 1989: 98).

Yearning is, in essence, walking the shore. Caught at the edge of a dimming reality, one siphons little hints of life from the vastness beyond. One cannot explore, one cannot *know*, that for which they Yearn. It is a glance from afar and a world imagined, made sorrowful by distance and evanescence. It is desire and acceptance at once, both a deep longing for what could have been and a gratitude for having been witness: how lucky to have had even the briefest glimpse. There is sadness in knowing an unreachable world exists, but there is also consolation. What is life, after all, without dreams?



Fig 10: Petrie. 2021. *Gloaming, Door* [photograph]

The sky glowed deep cerulean as I walked home through town. No stars yet freckled the vast above, but the streets were dark, and the skeletal limbs of sidewalk trees cut black scars across the blue of the night. It was a sort of limbo, that still-vivid sky almost defiant against the growing evidence of darkness. There was nobody around.

My path took me past the beach. I turned a corner, crossed the street, and sure enough, there was the sea, a seething blackness just beyond reach. It was properly dark, now, and I could not see the water as much as feel it, out there, an unmistakable vastness. I felt how I imagine lonely asteroids feel at the edge of immense, celestial gravity.

What made me pause, however, were the lights on the horizon. A cargo ship, hull as black as the sea, slid across the distant night, masthead pulsing an amber glow. Its bridge was outlined in the lights of cabin windows, a monochrome pointillism against the darkness. I had, to my knowledge, no desire to work on a cargo ship, nor was I dreading getting home, and yet I still Yearned to be aboard. It was out there, plying across the vastness, and I was just here, bound to the soles of my two little feet. I wondered if its crew saw the streetlamps above me and Yearned to be on shore. Eventually, I turned and walked home.

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