



Spirited Horse II by Carla Trujillo
<http://carla65.wordpress.com/tag/printmaking/>

Night Studies

Maía

Night Studies -- Part One

By Maía

"In the daytime, everything shines with the light of the sun. But in the evening, things shine with their own light." *

Part One: All Through The Night

My acquaintance with the night began as a child ... put to bed at dusk, always the insomniac, forbidden to do anything but lie there hour after hour listening to luckier kids down the block playing kickball and tag until nine. After that, darkness and silence. If I pressed a radio to my ear or read with a flashlight under the covers—a jab of dread at every footstep—I was usually caught, radio and books confiscated, bike locked away. Or worse. Eventually I learned to give up and let my mind go spiraling free. Where this took me turned out to be more enticing than Beautiful Joe or The Inner Sanctum...

Brains, deprived of daylight worlds, spin nightworlds from imaginary straw. Exiled night after night in my curtained bedroom, I rode my winged horse bareback through a snowy mountain pass, got caught in ambush and escaped the shackles of bandits, put out wildfires with a rain dance, rescued human and non-human creatures, fell in love and out again.

When I'd had my fill of buccaneering, I drifted toward sleep, not quite reaching it. The black air of my room would fill with visions of another sort—psychedelic repeating patterns—pelagic green and luminous purple leaves like tiny scrolls, thousands of sandpits flickering with golden-red flames, drifting silver filigree scarves... I floated through these mindscapes, a living camera endlessly panning, without understanding or trying to concoct explanations, never mentioning them to my parents or anyone else, simply accepting the beauty and consolation they offered.

Keats called a knack for this sort of attitude *negative capability*—the capacity for “being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”.

Thanks to those long dark nights of the senses, wide-eyed while the world tossed and snored, I wandered into my vocation as a writer.

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Years ago in the seventies, still the night-owl, I became an avid fan of off-beat columnist, Michael Ventura, writing for an off-beat rag, the L. A. Weekly . After coming out in print, he would record and broadcast his musings between midnight and 6 am on progressive, listener-sponsored radio stations—he called them **Letters At 3 am** .

Right there, that tells you something.

The depth of night in which Ventura wrote prepared you for his dark topics—because of his juicy talent as writer, they could be jolting, even life-changing. His after-midnight mind tackled subjects nobody else would touch. In *The Queen of Cups*, he wrote “Freedom is beautiful and dangerous. You cannot separate its danger from its beauty, you cannot have one without the other”. This essay-memoir explored the way extremely creative and charismatic people often indulge in prohibited, even hurtful behaviors. He for one was willing to bear the shocks in order to taste the inspiration. The person he chose to illustrate this point just happened to be his mother...

I'll return to Ventura's night-writing later. First, let's back up a bit. Well, *quite a bit*, to, say, somewhere in the Mesozoic Era, about two hundred and fifty million years ago...

Biologists have suggested that fear's associations with darkness might be left-over from our mammalian evolution. We don't like admitting it, but humans were —occasionally still are—*prey* as well as *hunter*. Though we've virtually eliminated large non-human predators from this planet, skittishness, even terror, lingers. In other words, fear of night is... well, fear of being eaten.

Paradoxically, mammals likely began by taking *refuge* in darkness, as nocturnal shrew-like creatures busy keeping out of the jaws of hungry reptilians. Our eventual human talent for—and obsession with—thinking, speaking, and later, writing, might have developed out of a need for dim-sighted, nocturnal creatures to build up internal, non-visual “images” of their environment—sound- smell- taste- and touch-

maps— carried about in our tiny, shrew-like heads, the better to get on with the shrew-business of food and mates.

These maps, elaborated and constantly updated, might have provided neural circuitry for later use in more complex visual, and later still, verbal processing. At some point, there must have come a *leap* when the map could be surveyed by a freely-moving point of awareness— a very crude sense of self—internal exploration *before* and *after* navigating the actual physical, and very dangerous, territory. *Gonna check out that leaf-pile that smells like termites...maybe come around from behind, like this..*

Freedom to move about in an imaginary replica of the world, ignites a sense of time. Learning from past and predicting the future. *Oops, shouldn't have investigated that warm, smelly burrow. Won't do that again.*

Neat trick. Also the beginning of serious woes. Like suffering over what *could* happen. Like struggling with the past. Like knowing we are going to die.

We may have night and our tiny nocturnal ancestors to thank for the big, creative brains under our skulls. Or maybe we have them to curse? Either way, one unfortunate habit of a consciousness dominated by linear time and a "sense of self" in need of constant protection, is slicing the world up into *good* for me/mine vs *bad* for me/mine.

Greek mythology, at the root of Western culture, tells us Night and Chaos gave birth to Day, and all the other warring opposites.

Unlike our sound and touch-centered ancestors, humans have become increasingly light-centered, night-avoiding creatures. Vision is closely allied to logic, to crisp categories of thinking, unlike the ear or skin's amorphous way of embracing experiences all at once. Vision-logic dominates modern human consciousness. The central dichotomy is light/life vs dark/death—everything else falls into one, and only one, of these good-against-bad realms.

But light and dark— male and female, yes and no, dead and alive — *could be* divided into *many shades between* the warring pair.

We *could* see dark/light as a gradually shifting cycle or circle of electromagnetic frequencies, beginning with earliest dawn, progressing through the hours into dusk, then darkness, and full night. For example, ancient Celtic peoples divided day-night into *four*: Dawn, Day, Dusk, Night.

Naming, ie language, does not create but guides and conditions our perceptions so constantly and thoroughly that we no longer *see* day and night in its uncountable shades. Four? Sixteen? Thirty-two? Numbers and names convince us there are real concrete borders between the things we have chosen to name.

What unnamed experiences lie between blue and green? Male and female? Life and death?

To perceive the actual seamless, living world, to see through language and cultural conditioning, requires an endangered species of attention—high-powered and flexible attention, dynamic *responsive* attention—now zooming in for close detail, now opening wide to embrace the whole.

Cultivating this kind of attention means sloooooowing doooooowwn. Putting down the cell phone, ipod, car keys. Turning off the television. Exploring earth and sky with the naked senses—eye ear nose tongue skin and mind.

A quick glance and we see what we expect to see. Miss what is fleeting and subtle. A long careful consideration —touch, taste, gaze, listen—reveals far more than we can ever predict or imagine...

Until next  
time, *Maia*

\* Quote below the title is uncertainly attributed to St. Augustine— too apt and beautiful to leave out, even if the source is mistaken.

## Night Studies -- Part Two

By Maía

“The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science.” Albert Einstein.

### Part Two : Exploring The Nightside

**Ordinary language divides the world into the clearest possible fragments...** and holds them still so that we can put them to work for our daily purposes. Can we open language up again, so that instead of reinforcing the dull clash of *either/or*s, it helps us recognize and feel the mysteriousness of life in all its lush variety?

Back for a moment to **Letters At 3 AM**. Beyond his gifts as a writer, part of the power of Michael Ventura’s radio broadcasts was *when* his words went flying over the airwaves—long after midnight. Have you ever wondered why what’s said—or done—in the “small hours” feels wilder ?

At fifteen, when I was finally allowed to go out with friends to The Harmony Ballroom, my father enforced a curfew—*midnight*—as though getting through the door before the “witching hour” guaranteed no erotic misbehavior. Like many young people, I simply learned to start misbehaving early...

What is it about darkness that turns us toward erotic— even violent—acts? Could it be that darkness reminds us Ventura’s *beautiful-and-dangerous* still exists—in spite of our frantic efforts to separate risk from freedom? Could it be whatever is shoved out of sight and denied, resonates with darkness and all its deeply ambiguous symbols? *Night* in the underworld of feeling, might be whatever is forbidden, sold cheap, abused, destroyed...come back to claim us.

The threat of night and its shady denizens, appears to vanish with the flip of a light switch, a scrap of daylight logic. But we are haunted by other times and places, other lives.

As a girl growing up in California in the 1950s, I was taught to fear and stay away from darkness—especially alone—in school yards and vacant lots, in

open fields, beaches, mountains. And so I *have* feared exactly those places I find most alluring. It’s been *in spite of* fear that I’ve refused to keep away from the nightside...

*where the cricket reads his love letter  
to the world... trembling all the reeds  
and waters on his way \**

From age seven, I hopped on my sailor-blue Schwinn for long rides through dusty bamboo and eucalyptus, to the half-abandoned rock quarry. When I was a teenager, I packed a sandwich, my paperback *Tree And Wildflower Key*, and hiked into the Azusa foothills, alone. Friday evenings, forced to wait in the car for my mother and dad to emerge from their back-to-back psychotherapy appointments, I tramped all over the residential districts of North Hollywood—scabby twelve-story apartment buildings, sprawling ranch houses on sloping streets. Catching glimpses. A black woman in a tiara, swaying over a keyboard. An agitated old white man, zigzagging his finger over the window glass. A cat perched in a lit window, still and alert as a great horned owl. Scents, scenes, gleams, voices—*other lives*—floating brilliant and warm in the night...

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But, if we clear-cut the night, light up cities and suburbs so bright barely a handful of stars can be found—most Americans have *never even seen* the Milkyway— the thing is, death comes anyway.

Though the last breath is breathed at any hour of the clock, the most common time for a heart to stop is 9 am on Monday morning. Forty thousand of us in this country are murdered by our cars each year—and yet “(though) less than 10 people are killed by all kinds of wild animals combined, and most of those in Alaska...wild animals evoke far more fear than cars.” (Sky And Telescope, June 2007).

If the root of fear is death, death’s domain, against all evidence, is *felt* to be night.

Demon-haunted night. In **Letters At 3 am**, Ventura explored this dark terrain of human terrors and despairs, erotic and spiritual fascinations, imaginative and visionary improbabilities—inklings of vaster realms beyond ordinary human concerns.

What if, instead of whiskey, sugar, Prozac, a fast drive on a rainy highway, instead of television or surfing the net, we *explore* the nightside...

*Wetlands moonrise,
perfume of rotting leaves and birdlime ***

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A chronic physical illness often keeps me from the wetlands preserve at the end of my street. When I can't step into the charms of planetary darkfall, I make excursions into unnamed tributaries, the *inner night* of everyday acts, of things right outside the door—or, when even that's too far, marvels to be found within arm's reach.

In *The Waiting Stones*, his July 1993 column, Ventura talked about rocks in such a transformational manner. Have you, he asked, ever noticed the way certain stones seem to call out to be touched? To be weighed in the hand? To be slipped into your pocket?

*If a stone sees you, it makes you stronger...unless it frightens you too much, that is.*

Replace Ventura's *stone* in the quote above with any object from the natural world—whatever comes to mind—and see what happens.

*If a crow sees you, it makes you stronger...unless it frightens you too much, that is.*

*If an empty seedpod sees you, it makes you stronger...*

*If a dustmote sees you...*

Now replace *stone* with any human-made object— If a cell phone, if a bank account, if a meal in a fast food restaurant, if a digital clock... If a toaster oven sees you, it makes you stronger.... Well. *No*.

But wait, let's try *this*. If a guitar sees you.....If a blank sheet of paper, if your dead father's beret, if a mirror your grandmother left you, if a lover's beaded earring, a green marble, a mother-of-pearl button, sees you..... *it makes you stronger.....unless it frightens you too much...*

What's at the heart of the difference between an

object that works with Ventura's quote and one that doesn't?

All cups do what cups are designed to—keep liquids from seeking their preferred, horizontal state. Some cups are plastic, come in three shadowless colors, spit out by the millions from a vast machine. Other cups belong to the night—thrown earth-and-water, shaped on a wheel by a woman's fingers—let's say her name is Marie Savirr...

Marie's cup is a little elliptical, drenched with mineral pigments shading one into another. The design, a traditional French Grapevine. She makes such cups for wonder. For friends and relations. Sells a few at swap meets. Well-worn, passed through the neighborhood, acquiring a few nicks, Marie's cups provoke murmurs, a story around the kitchen table. When you come upon one of her cups, empty, you can see its nature clearly—mud passed through fire—it radiates a fine lunar warmth.

Some things, like stones, call out and gaze at you...Sometimes you hear them, turn around and gaze back...

Until next time... and Night, Part Three...

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Notes: * from *The Opposite Of Time, The Spiritlife Of Birds*, Maia 2009

** from my personal journal, 2001

Night Studies -- Part Three

A Walk On The Nightside

By Maia

When darkness falls, when the sky plays its farthest blues, my pleasure is to walk on past the bright yellow sign— END ROAD— and step off asphalt onto old-fashioned dirt...

The place I enter has many names—Ellwood Shores, Goleta Wetlands Preserve, Mathilda Swale, Monarch Grove—as well as many graces. For more than 30 years in here in west Santa Barbara County, these swales, vernal pools, beaches, cypress stands, and untamed fields, have inspired me more than I can say.

North, behind me, runs the blue jagged heartline of the Santa Ynez Mountains. Ravines and cordilleras give way to soft brown foothills unfolding into the valley below, where earth flattens out into cityscape and pavement.

West lies the Monarch Butterfly Reserve where, fall through winter, tens of thousands of black and fire-orange butterflies cluster from twilight to dawn. Layers and layers of wings are suspended for the night, high in eucalyptus branches—they always return to same grove of trees. As morning sunlight touches them they drop into swirling flight. I've spent hours lying under these slow-motion blizzards. They will eat nothing during this stop-off on their long migration up from Mexico. They are urged by two imperatives—find a mate and rest. *Can you do both?*

East beyond the wind-break trees, lie flat eroded fields and the Ocean Meadows golf range. The owners of the course have agreed to allow a reedy channel of "wetland" to wind through the center of the long greens, interrupted by no more than a few simple wood-plank footbridges. This small branch of a once enormous slough, irrigated with municipal water, helps thirsty Redwing Blackbirds, Great Egrets, Mallards, Marsh Wrens, Yellow-throats, and many others, to survive Southern California drought years.

South, directly in front of me, a rutted dirt path slopes up toward the sea where a stretch of Ellwood seashore is cordoned off for the protection of nesting

plovers. From nearly a mile away it shakes you, the boom of surf.

If the ocean, when you are alone at night, speaks to you...

Streetlight and barbeque smoke left behind, I enter the sway of eucalyptus and oak, following the lay of the land into oncoming dark. Moon or no moon, I'm forced to let go of day-brain noise, make my way less by eye, more by tilt and slide, down through lakes of dense cold air, sulphurous, mud-brown odors.

(An ironic note here: as I was writing this essay, I went off on one of my evening walks, only to discover that some night-phobic walkers had installed eerie green "guide-lights" high up in the eucalyptus trees. A couple of walks later, I was overjoyed to discover that night-loving raiders had "uninstalled" these intrusive nightlights.)

Combustion engines, television-talk almost undetectable here, the slightest tick and flutter in bulrush or dockweed—raccoon, opossum, skunk, mouse?—triggers a burst of pure awareness, curiosity, wonder.

Walking's not just tonic for the body, but the spirit too. A steady rolling amble, one leg in front of the other, mind floating free—a slow-dance rhythm that attracts the muses.

Little Brown Bats peel off branches into loopy flight. A Barn Owl streaks by less than a foot above me—I whirl and follow with my eye.

Somewhere down in the grove where the owl vanishes, a pair of American Kestrels bicker like teenagers. Just off the footpath a Black-tailed Jackrabbit freezes at the sight of me—I freeze too and we play *who's going to disappear first??*

At the top of the trail, trees give way to a wide-open mesa, a few sparse fountains of pampas grass, squat bush olive, poison oak. I drink in the sweep of land criss-crossed by animal and human foot-trails, and look up into the sky where Orion's three-starred belt appears...

Until next time, Maia

Night Studies -- Part Four

A Walk On The Nightside...continued

By Maía

...and then I'm startled by uncanny voices—the whinny of horses? I turn in circles, trying to locate the source. Wild, joyful voices shaking the darkness. I prick up my ears and listen hard. Mystified...

Suddenly those neighing ponies metamorphose into a troupe of comic-opera tenors—falsetto, vibrato, tremolo, swoop...

...and again night falls silent around me. A waning moon scuds over my shoulder, a two-legged shadow vibrates from the soles of my boots, ripples over the ground...

Finally the mystery-choir breaks up into yaps and yodels—a band of coyotes! I laugh out loud. They really had me going.

Coyotes are feared, even loathed, for their habit of moving into suburban neighborhoods, picking off cats and small dogs for their dinners. To some, their cackling yips resemble taunts. Others hear *threat* or *gloat* in that night-music. As more and more of their habitat is taken over by human projects, they refuse to go quietly. Instead, like crows and raccoons and a few other hardy species, they've figured out how to thrive in our unwelcoming proximity. But long before showing up in suburban fields and devouring pets, Coyote carried the shadow of night and death. Like wolves, their canine cousins, coyotes have been relentlessly persecuted, trapped and poisoned since the arrival of Europeans.

A field mouse or vole is Coyote's favorite meal — though like us they are capable of enjoying almost anything, including a little *junkfood*— a rotting berry, a half-eaten bagel, a snail. As I listen to their morphing chorus, then the echoing silence of their departure, a disorienting reversal strikes me. *I hear with coyote-ears*— a handful of young people coming down from the beach, shouting into cell phones, gossiping through the trees swinging flashlights, blaring rap— and in my bones I know an animal dread.

Something similar happened to me another evening, listening to "Borders", an album by Lila Downs who usually sings in Spanish. Suddenly she switched into West Coast-English, and for a few instants I could actually *hear my own native tongue as a foreign language*— weird staccato sing-song, incomprehensible rattle .

I savor such altering moments that like Michael Ventura's bi-directional senses—like night itself— reveal the alien inside the familiar.

The familiar also hides heartbreak.

I cross the mesa to the cliffs overlooking the Pacific and the Channel Islands, and stand among the old California Fan Palms guarding the edge. From yards above the breakers, the tumbling seascape at night is breathtaking. Even those oil platforms floating on inky seawater, rigging strung with lights, resemble fairy boats. But only my eye is fooled. And only for a moment.

"The sea is in almost every culture a realm belonging to the divine because it is absolutely beyond our power to predict or control." *

But not to harm.

As I gaze down on the fanning tideline, I know the sea everywhere is groaning with losses—90% of large fish like tuna and cod *gone*. Three-quarters of kelp forests *gone*, along with most of the world's pristine coral reefs. Almost half of all albatross chicks die from a belly-full of plastic trash. Fed by sewage, by chemical-runoff from lawns and farms, the fastest growing ocean-creatures now are the simple, angry forms—pathogenic bacteria, jelly fish, toxic "fireweed" and poisonous blooms of "algae"...

*"Off the coast of Sweden each summer, blooms of cyanobacteria turn the Baltic Sea into a stinking, yellow-brown slush that locals call "rhubarb soup." Dead fish bob in the surf. If people get too close, their eyes burn and they have trouble breathing." ***

I sit and brood a long time on the sea ruffling back and forth below. The ancient Greek philosopher Thales admired water as the *mothering* element

giving rise to all the others because water has the power to exist in all phases at once, the power to turn the wheel of biological existence. *Round and round she goes...*

Here in these salty waves, as far as anyone knows, Life first arose, spread out onto land and flourished—ginkgo, bonobo, pomegranate, honeybee, cougar, snake—until now— when the youngest of all, the ironically self-named homo sapiens, *we ourselves*, are rapidly, ungratefully, ruining this very sea.

A Tibetan Buddhist teacher I know likes to say that when you are Awake, when you are fully present to a place, a being, a world, you don't get to choose what you experience.
You get to choose *how you respond*.

Until next time, Maía

Notes:

* from *The Impossibility Of Dolphins*, William Bryant Logan, in *OAK: The Frame Of Civilization*

** from the LA Times, Pulitzer Prize winning series, *Altered Oceans*, by Kenneth Weiss

Night Studies -- Part Five**If A Star Sees You****or My Night In The Garden****By Maía**

“Sleeping on the ground (earth) was once practiced as a way of receiving oracular dreams” Diane Kafe

I've been roaming daylight fields and foothills alone since I was seven, but my *night-studies* began in earnest about twelve years ago, when I made a vow to sleep outside at least one night of each month for an entire calendar year. Aside from the mundane obstacles of cold, rain and mosquitoes, there was the problem of *where?* Most Americans assume only homeless people sleep outside—because they have no choice—that anyone who *can* choose, aside from “camping trips”, sleeps under a roof. Where I live now, a person can be arrested for lying down and dreaming unless they own a piece of land to lie down on. Thus the need for declaring my intention ahead of time and out loud to friends and family. In spite of risks, I'd be forced to find a way— and a *where* — January through December.

Since then, my daughter and I have curled into sleeping bags on the bare bluffs above the Pacific Ocean. I've slept in beds of Nasturtium and inside a tangle of Purple Vetch. Behind a gigantic passionflower at the community gardens. In a mossy, hedge-maze. On grassy hillsides.

December, the last month of my formal sleeping-out-year, I bedded down on the manicured lawn of my mother's backyard under a Crape Myrtle tree. The obstacle in this case was my mother's incredulity. *Why on earth?* I explained my vow as well as I could. My father's death this year, after a two-year struggle with brain cancer the summer before, made it even more important for me to keep my vow. My grief, chronic pain and illness, I told her, could be eased by the wonder of the night sky. My mother all her life had feared the outdoors but loved the sky-work of van Gogh and so I threw Starry Night into the argument, reminding her of the mystery and grandeur of that nightscape. Sleeping and dreaming under stars, I told her, is part of a long tradition of

inspiration and healing among many cultures older and more attuned to natural forces than ours—suffering and sickness was believed to be absorbed by Earth directly under your backbone. Which only puzzled my her further. Finally, after exaggerating my allergic responses to her little dog, Missy, I managed to convince her that fresh air all night would do me good—and she consented.

But most sleeping-out nights of my vow-year were spent in a ramshackle garden across the street from a vernal-pool habitat, within shouting-distance of the sea, in the one-square-mile university town of Isla Vista. Which by the way has one of the largest homeless populations in the state.

Let me tell you about a typical night in that garden. Before sundown, I'd find the outcast broom, sweep my patch of dirt free of sticks and pebbles. Float down a tarp for a groundcloth. Then spend several hours with my gardener friend—Brazilian or African music, making homemade nectarine or apple juice on an ancient Champion machine, laughing at equally homemade jokes—sometimes crying over the latest environmental defeats—all in his tiny illegally converted garage. To pay the bills, he kept books for the local park district. To satisfy his large spirit, he volunteered for things like leading the men's discussion circle while crowds of women carried candles through dark streets, shouting *Women, Take Back The Night!*

At the end of our evening, I'd step outside with my bundle—including a roll of toilet paper and a vial of citronella—laying everything out in strict order, each item instantly at hand, no need to shatter darkness with a flashlight.

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Zipped into my bag, crashing breakers vibrate up and down my spine. By the faint light from neighboring windows, I follow tiny bursts of activity back and forth between the bougainvillea spilling off the roof and a tall rosemary bush— it's the grape-sized Box Spider, an orb weaver, taking down and eating her *fishing net*, as she does each evening, recycling the high-quality protein of her silk. At dawn she'll weave a new web, from the first drag-line to the final tug on each radius to test its strength.

Journal notes: ... At sunrise she was clinging head-down, to a swaying branch, spinnerets aloft, letting the wind draw out the first line of silk. Even the Fates are subject to Luck. If the thread catches and holds, a bridge to the center is founded. If not, the strand's reeled in and devoured. Nothing wasted.Some nights she's late dismantling her handiwork. The moon trembles in her silks.

No moon tonight, here in the garden—stars wriggle in the orb weaver's net. Above the roofline, I gaze south, deep into the constellation Sagittarius—half horse half human—into the central belly of our spiral-armed galaxy, rumored to conceal a gigantic black hole.

Our galaxy has many names—*Long Blue Cloud-eating Shark (Polynesian), Silty Water Stirred Up By Turtle Swimming Along The Bottom Of The Sky (Ottawa)*...Many modern Western humans have never *seen* this river of glittering light-dust in which our planet swims— city and suburban lights drown out all but the greatest magnitude stars and two of the planets, Jupiter and Venus.

Earth swings around the sun, the sun around the Milky Way. Unlike the other galaxies speeding away from us, Andromeda —our nearest neighbor at about 4 light-years—races along *with* us toward the constellation Virgo, The Virgin....herself swooping fast towards The Great Attractor , a giant region of space mysteriously exerting a pull equal to tens of thousands of Milky Ways. Lying very still under the night sky, I *feel* these tides churning through me. Bone and muscle seem to thin out, becoming a flow of imagination, becoming *conscious space* rippling with cross-currents.

In the deepening dark, I lose color and clarity. I gain peripheral and night vision. Looking off to the side of a tiny light-speck or blurry nebula brings it into sharper focus. When you're far-sighted like I am, the longer you're out in the dark, the closer and brighter the stars become.

*I am rich, I have the night's
Black and white cornucopia*

Oddities invented by my excited brain strike me now.
The most awesome

is a sudden re-organization of *all the stars in the sky*— wherever I look, instantaneously they array themselves around an invisible centerpoint.

Stars are eye-like—drops of lively, concentrated brightness. Pre-scientific people believed that eyes were also *star-like*, not only *receiving* light, but throwing light *onto* things, enabling them to be perceived. Throughout our existence, humans have experienced the startling sensation that stars *observe the observer*. Outside at night, it's easy to see how eyes and stars became spiritually interchangeable.

The first eyes—light-sensitive, light-transforming organs—were chloroplasts—literally, *green-makers*—specialized plant cells that gather and convert sunlight (star light) into edible information. This amazing trick is called photosynthesis. Water (H₂O) plus carbon dioxide (CO₂) plus sunlight = Carbon-Hydrogen-Oxygen chains, or the simple carbohydrate *sugar*. During photosynthesis, molecules of oxygen gas (O₂) are released as a “waste product”. A good thing for us oxygen-breathing, carbon-dioxide releasers. Carbon—the black of toasted bread and charred bones— is essential for life here on planet Earth. Carbon and oxygen and all the heavy ingredients of complex life, as well as rocks, water and atmosphere, came from ancient super-novas, stars that blew apart before our sun was ever born. From the ash of stars, from light-sugar, all plants, all animals— and all humans— are spun.

...to be continued next time...when Night Studies will conclude with Part 6: If A Star Sees You—or My Night In The Garden”.

Maia

Night Studies -- Part Six**If A Star Sees You***or, My Night In The Garden, continued...***By Maía**

The newborn universe before the galaxies formed, was extremely simple. It contained only two lightest-of-all elements: hydrogen and helium. In such a universe, life as we know it is not possible. Next, huge, first-generation hydrogen-helium stars formed and ignited. As their gases burned away, they cooked-up combinations of heavier and heavier elements, such as carbon and oxygen, but also iron, silicon, sodium, magnesium... Eventually, fuel spent, these collapsing giants simultaneously *imploded* (creating black holes) and *exploded*, seeding the inter-galactic reaches with complex material for ordinary suns—like ours—capable of birthing planets with magnetic cores, stable enough to support our sort of life.

*If a star sees you, it makes you stronger...
...unless it frightens you too much that is.*

In a 2007 Sky And Telescope article called Fear And Astronomy, Tony Flanders wrote “I’ve had a number of people tell me that the stars scare them. Frankly, I can sympathize with that sentiment. The stars are utterly alien, completely and forever beyond our control. Awe and fear are intimately related. And there’s nothing wrong with that. Fear isn’t the end of the world unless you run away from it.”

For me, *awe and consolation* have always been “intimately related”. Maybe that’s why I don’t recoil at light-years, yawning black spaces—they enlarge and inspire me. Though I admit, a few times, after attempting to mentally *feel* the distance light travels every second, the *millions of years of distance* starlight has crossed to reach my eye— a sensation similar to an earthquake shook me... *no ground anywhere! Earth is a floating stone in the middle of a bottomless darkness. How did I come to be here? Where is here, anyway?!* Yet that earthquake sensation, that boundlessness, is something I actively seek out... because such strong wonder is the energy of renewal and creativity.

As for natural forces “completely and forever beyond our control”, I find incredible relief in knowing we humans *cannot* get our hands on the stars—on Life’s springs and sources. Though some astrophysicists and others are determined to do so. Exactly because they are safe from our ambitions and ruinous projects, stars console me.

There *are* real social and personal consequences of sleeping outside—being arrested, seen as a bit mad or extremely eccentric, getting robbed or beaten up—but I put my full trust in darkness itself.

*Night, like snow, veils one world
and reveals a new one*

~

As night revolves, too exhilarated to sleep, I sip from a quart jar of water, chew a few raw almonds, like a woman in a dark theatre engrossed by an award-winning film . At that moment a mockingbird breaks into rapturous triplets and quatrains.

Spring and summer nights, I wake to hear you like a small sun rising in the middle of the dark, stealing for your repertoire blackbird’s gurgle, meadowlark’s lilt— mimus Polyglottos, many-voiced mimic— unrolling notes from Canada to Mexico, from the Arizona desert to the magnolia groves of Georgia where the original band of Cherokees named you Four-hundred Tongues...

On other nights under a solid roof, the mockingbird’s exuberant compositions have lifted me out of despair. The play of that voice now in the dark is like the voice of Earth itself. *I’m here, I’m here, I’m here! Awake! Wide awake! Alive!*

~

From this old fashioned garden where I lie, come fragrances of cilantro, thyme, tomato, spring onions and garlic. Tonight I flavor my water jar with blue, cucumber-tasting Borage flowers pinched off the stem and dropped in to brew. Other nights I’ll sip Pink Jasmine or Lemon Verbena. Each flower-taste matches a mood of mine.

Visitors amble by. Like me, for a taste of flowers, or for insects that thrive here— a skunk paws the onion bed, wades through honeysuckle near my bag and pauses briefly to sniff

the curious odor of my hair. As he leaves, I catch sight of his tail voluminous as a second body, a *livelier* body, a dancer mimicking, counter-point, every careful step he takes.

Other drop-ins find my presence more useful—a possum investigates my backpack for snacks, tree frogs use my head as a springboard down from the quince branches into lettuce beds thick with sow bugs and earthworms.

The most dependable nocturnal foragers are raccoons young and old. My gardener friend and I have worked for decades to gain the trust of these particular neighbors, persuading a few to accept a handful of dry cat food. If we keep still, they allow us some nights to observe them only inches away—a few have come to know us by voice and even by sight. We delight in watching them pluck kibble-bits with their clever hands—they cannot accurately be called *paws*—and shovel them in, crunching loudly, jaws agape.

*When I first caught sight of her, she fled. Softly I rattled the bag of food to reassure her. She stopped and, turned to look back at me over her shoulder. I could hardly believe my eyes. It was twelve noon. Raccoons never forage by daylight. Ears down, hands curled, she shivered—meal or betrayal?—then she ran. I called **raccoooooo-ooooon**. She literally did a double-take, flipped a U, and came a few steps toward me. Clearly she was starving. Had she understood the meaning of my high soft croon? I saw the answer in her body, saw it in her posture and yes, her expression, her face, which moved me deeply. A face expecting harshness, receiving the surprise of kindness. She and I now have a single word in common—**raccoooooo-ooooon**. A song really. Invented decades ago by my friend, the gardener here— and my life-companion— Charlie, who first spoke this word to her great great great grandmother. . .*

~

A visitor here in this garden, I'm surrounded by creatures who claim it as home ground. Sleeping upright like minute horses, more than a hundred young mantises have taken up their hunting blinds here. Days ago I watched them chew their way out of a homely egg case into stunning sunlight. Just before she died last winter, their mother glued that case, a

dollop of dirty meringue, onto a branch of the guava tree.

From the far end of the garden above the shed, a persistent click and murmur—the dead pine tree has kept its voice though all its needles are lost and whiskey-red sap has gone to crystal in its veins. Soon it will be felled and hauled away by the landlord who does not value *snags* where crows nest and hummingbirds scrape their cactus-spine bills. Pine branches writhe against the sky, thin black flames. Under the slow kaleidoscope of stars, I wake and doze uncountable times. A perfect stranger. Utterly at home. Jotting dreams and thoughts by feel in the notebook always beside me.

Just before dark, some passing songbird flings a piercing firework of notes— a bird, a song, I never heard before but instantly loved. I whistled the phrase again and again in order to know it by heart. So I could sing it to you...

Woke late, overcome with wonder at the star-studded sky, suddenly positive this universe must be graced by more than a single inhabited planet...

Immaculate clouds swell out of the void. Luminous with erotic and spiritual presence—like Rousseau's clouds in Carnival Night. Clouds pregnant with creeks and pools and mud puddles...*

~

On foggy nights, sea-clouds drift inland, dragging plumes of mist. High-tension wires crackle, my hair and clothes are drenched in salt-dew. Whatever the weather, I'm often chilly, no matter that my bag is rated for zero degrees and I top it off with a blanket or two. It's no cliché what they say about being coldest just before dawn. Close to admitting defeat and slinking inside, gratitude warms me as I discover the eastern sky whitening—the sun on its way to rescue me.

One dawn like this one, a swarm of sharp-winged birds gathered above me—they soared, they spun on the long axis of their backbone, free-falling, larking about, all the while creaking a dry, humorous song. *Ceremony Of The Swallows*, I wrote in my notebook. Delirious exhibition of skill and freedom. Later I found out that each dawn and twilight, Barn Swallows indulge in this festival for no purpose but the joy of it, before they settle into sleep, and again at

sunrise before the sober business of harvesting mosquitoes begins.

This particular morning, a traveler with tales to tell, lazily I sketch and take notes on the earliest risers: glossy black robber bees with twice the heft of European honeybees, slit the throats of flowering trumpets, purloining a drop of nectar through the back door. This behavior breaks the unwritten contract between *nectar-brewers*—flowers that require fertility services—and *nectar lovers* who need that liquid light to power their reproductive cycles. Bold splashes of color often mark legitimate glide-paths to the nectaries. Some species add exclusive “dots and dashes” humans can’t see without the aid of instruments—their petals “... inscribed with ultraviolet runways visible only to particular bees.”** In still other flowering plants, architecturally unavoidable exit-passages douse nectar-sated visitors with pollen, or clip tiny packets of it to their heads, as they leave.

I look up to find the Box Spider beginning the labor of re-constructing her web.

Liquid silk shoots from her spinnerets, dries instantaneously. When the fly-wire catches, she balances, tightrope artist, back and forth, laying down the sturdiest thread first. She drops down on a safety-line to the imaginary center, drawing out and attaching spokes at precise intervals, measuring them off by the length and rhythm of a natural stride. Next, a spiral's basted in with a finer gauge of silk, and wound again clockwise back to the start...

Later when she retreats to her hide-out for the day, she'll drag one thread along with her for transmitting the death-throes of Horsefly and Tiger Moth—prey juicy enough to risk the javelin of a swallow's beak, for whom this spider-goddess is merely breakfast.

Her web complete, never leaving the hub, she tests each radius with a single slow revolution. If all is to her satisfaction, she arranges her eight legs in iconic repose—a dark irregular star. Finally, before it all begins, the orb-weaver rests.

In from the east, a sudden undulation of pelicans. They glide, about twenty of them, over a pearling strip of ocean visible as I get to my feet, delighted. One eye shut, all distance between us disappears and,

as they pass, my hands slip in blessing over their ancient aerodynamic backs ...

... just as my friend the gardener pops his head around the corner. A slightly puzzled smile tilts his lips as he stares at my hands floating there in the air. He doesn't ask, knows I'll tell him later, folds his legs to sit beside me on the ground, and hands me a cup of freshly-brewed, fair-trade organic coffee. Gratefully I sip the luscious bitter stuff—grown in a mulch of its own shed leaves and creamy white flowers—remembering the carbon in this dark drink and in our bones, was cooked in the hearth of a star...

“So,” he asks, *how did you sleep?*

Notes:

* **Carnival Night:** is a luminous nightscape in which two clowns stroll under glowing with the light of stars and moon.

** **Richard Powers:** a quote from one of his several “near-future” novels filled with real science. Unfortunately, I've forgotten which one.

End of Night Studies.

Thanks for joining me, Maia