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Tahiti (2011)

From Michael Collins' autobiography Carrying the Fire: An Astronaut's Journeys...

"He found truth in orbit, not down below in the streets of Calcutta or above in the monotonous black void. He was positioned in the cosmic arena, on the boundary between the conscious reality and the infinite subconscious."

—

Infinite Environments

At 9:15p, I found myself at the Massachusetts coast amidst a blustery November, under a tumultuous sky. Was I drawn to this boundary because of the ocean? Where there is water, there is hope, and life. Its cold, salty flow is a baptism through the pores, through the vessels, water in air merging with our watery selves, pausing our hysteria. Are we drawn to salty food as a pacifier?

From Moby Dick...

"The three mastheads are kept manned from sunrise to sunset; the seamen taking their regular turns (as at the helm), and relieving each other every two hours. In the serene weather of the tropics it is exceedingly pleasant the masthead; nay, to a dreamy meditative man it is delightful. There you stand, a hundred feet above the silent decks, striding along the deep, as if the masts were gigantic stilts, while beneath you and between your legs, as it were, swim the hugest monsters of the sea, even as ships once sailed between the boots of the famous Colossus at old Rhodes. There you stand, lost in the infinite series of the sea, with nothing ruffled but the waves. The tranced ship indolently rolls; the drowsy trade winds blow; everything resolves you into languor. For the most part, in this tropic whaling life, a sublime uneventfulness invests you; you hear no news; read no gazettes; extras with startling accounts of commonplaces never delude you into unnecessary excitements; you hear of no domestic afflictions; bankrupt securities; fall of stocks; are never troubled with the thought of what you shall have for dinner — for all your meals for three years and more are snugly stowed in casks, and your bill of fare is immutable."

Later that evening, as I watched video of the crew of Apollo 15 collecting rocks near Hadley rille, and the lunar dust being sifted through their gloves and returning to the surface for eternal solitude, I could feel my body exploding from the force of an environment whose time scale for change is greater than the earth's by orders of magnitude. Our bodies live in a system of change tied to minute scales of time, on a molecular spatial scale. In contrast, the Moon is a relatively infinite environment, completely devoid of biological events at any scale.

From Moby Dick...

"But what most puzzled and confounded you was a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the centre of the picture over three blue, dim, perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast. A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet was there a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvellous painting meant. Ever and anon a bright, but, alas, deceptive idea would dart you through – It's the Black Sea in a midnight gale – It's the unnatural combat of the four primal elements – It's a blasted heath – It's a Hyperborean winter scene – It's the breaking-up of the icebound stream of Time."

The Boundaries

At the boundary, facing the truth of the infinite, to which I am truly connected. That which understands through non-syntactical thought. Lit directly by a high-latitude sun, covered by shallow lakes, stretching from the edge of humanity to the edge of the earth.

At the boundary, I sense a resolve. Death looms less as an 'end'. It's like I've walked a thousand miles north to find where a singular individual resolves themselves, extinguishing all sirens for a free-floating bandit.

I have an affinity for high latitudes and oceanic boundaries - the boundary to the edge, as if that's where all of humanity resolves itself, simply by addressing its limits.

From Moby Dick...

"When I stand among these mighty Leviathan skeletons, skulls, tusks, jaws, ribs, and vertebrae, all characterized by partial resemblances to the existing breeds of sea-monsters; but at the same time bearing on the other hand similar affinities to the annihilated antichronical Leviathans, their incalculable seniors; I am, by a flood, borne back to that wondrous period, ere time itself can be said to have begun; for time began with man. Here Saturn's grey chaos rolls over me, and I obtain dim, shuddering glimpses into those Polar eternities; when wedged bastions of ice pressed hard upon what are now the Tropics; and in all the 25,000 miles of this world's circumference, not an inhabitable hand's breadth of land was visible. "

"There can be no hearts above the snow-line. Oh, ye frozen heavens! look down here."

Perhaps there is truth to this polar-coastal trajectory, to be found at the boundaries we find the most formidable.

From Moby Dick...

"Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.

Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!

Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm! Turn not thy back to the compass; accept the first hint of the hitching tiller; believe not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly. Tomorrow, in the natural sun, the skies will be bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames, the morn will show in far other, at least gentler, relief; the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp—all others but liars!

Nevertheless the sun hides not Virginia's Dismal Swamp, nor Rome's accursed Campagna, nor wide Sahara, nor all the millions of miles of deserts and of griefs beneath the moon. The sun hides not the ocean, which is the dark side of this earth, and which is two thirds of this earth. So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true—not true, or undeveloped. With books the same. The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books is Solomon's, and Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe. 'All is vanity.' ALL. This wilful world hath not got hold of unchristian Solomon's wisdom yet. But he who dodges hospitals and jails, and walks fast crossing graveyards, and would rather talk of operas than hell; calls Cowper, Young, Pascal, Rousseau, poor devils all of sick men; and throughout a care-free lifetime swears by Rabelais as passing wise, and therefore jolly; not that man is fitted to sit down on tomb-stones, and break the green damp mould with unfathomably wondrous Solomon.

But even Solomon, he says, 'the man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain' (I.E., even while living) 'in the congregation of the dead.' Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness. And there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar."

Perhaps "Tahiti" is the embodiment of what we lust (e.g. Melville's "Tahiti", and the "Tahiti" of Godard's *Pierrot Le Fou*, and Laurie Anderson), a false illusion, while the ocean is a vast embodiment of the harsh truth in life, and the frozen poles are the infinite regions where mankind cannot extend nor proliferate, where time does not exist for mankind.

The human race has been working to melt polar eternities since we began and since we discovered fire. Ice is the boundary between mankind and infinity. The further away we push the polar eternities, the more we can expand and proliferate, in hope of reaching Tahiti. We expand into areas once covered by ice because we can: ice is water, and water supports life.

We gaze at the boundaries between land and ocean, the tropics and the poles, light and dark, and Earth and space.

Somewhere on the Moon, there is a high ridgeline hundreds of miles long, beyond which everything is in a shadow lit only by stars millions of light-years away. Can you imagine climbing to the top of this ridge, with your back to the setting sun as you pass into the infinite darkness of the Moon's shadow?