

Steve Quinn

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The Hunt

I am hunting for agates. It is early morning. The beach ahead is untrodden since the cycling of the tide; behind me wanders the dimpled path of impermanence left by my crooked gait. The sand is smooth, swept to perfection by ten-thousand monks in wave-like robes the color of backlit jade. They are resting now, quiet as the fog, preparing to lift its curtain upon a new day.

I glance down as I walk, marking the precession of constellations of stones, still sparkling from the ebb. The agate hunt is a casual affair, affording plenty of time to gaze at scoters in the surf or the raven on the dune-line silhouetted in the rising light. Gulls note my passing, unimpressed. If there is an agate at my feet, it will need to announce itself or I will miss it in my reverie.

I do not fish, but I have friends that do. Perhaps they will understand something of what I say. I have respect for the fisherfolk, and as an agater I pretend to appreciate something of their pursuit, the rhythm and pull of a casual obsession. I imagine that fishing is a bit like the hunt I am on: a thinly-veiled excuse to launch into the world, focused and reflective; an opportunity to glide through unreckoned time, unburdened by chit-chat or the list-making of chores neglected; a chance to feel the tide in one's veins. Even the measures of success may align between fishing and the hunt for wave-washed gems on the beach: not in the size of the catch or even having a catch, but in the depths navigated and moments encountered, the breathing out and in of it all.

There, two paces ahead: a shard of moonlight encased in stone, resting among scattered grey pebbles and bleached-white pieces of shell. The agate is rough as a walnut but miniscule, small as my granddaughter's wee toes the first time her east-coast feet wiggled in Pacific sand a dozen years ago. Moonlight and memories. Not much bigger than the blood clot that earned her grandmother, my wife, a helicopter ride to Portland and made her something of a miracle these days, laughing and bright as she rides her new bicycle through the neighborhood. Moonlight and memories and miracles, all encased in a pea-sized stone.

People who hunt for agates do not ask why, but others sometimes do: What do you do with them all? They may count as gemstones, but ones we neither polish nor even possess, except in pockets, worried to help other worries fall away. One might as well ask a fisher whyfor they fish, and be met with that gaze probing an unfathomed distance; the wrinkled brow and patient, pursed lips withholding words that never quite can explain.

This stone I place in my jeans, feeling its still-cool weight wend its way to the bottom of the pocket, into a yester layer of sand that never quite washes out. Where I live, fisherfolk are famous for two things: for the devoted trailering of their multifarious, pampered boats to-and-fro past our cabin at the margins of the day; and for tall tales told with a sparkle of eye and a lilt of voice at every possible occasion over coffee, black and hot.

I have no boat to tow about, only my sandals and saltwater socks. But I have this stone in my pocket, this shard of glowing promise, and when I put it in Ann's hand, I can tell her a fisherman's yarn, an agate-hunter's tale of fog so thick and rising breeze, looming shadows of driftwood and swirls of low-gliding gulls, gathering to greet the tide. And if I tell it well, that will be the measure of the hunt, for in the eyes of my beloved will reflect that glow of moonlight, stir of memory, and gratitude for the miracles that fill our days.