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THE WAY AROUND: WALKING INTO REVOLUTION

By

NICHOLAS TAYLOR TRIOLO

B.A. International Relations, University of Redlands, Redlands, CA, 2005

Thesis

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Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Phil Condon, Chair
Department of Environmental Studies

Dan Spencer, Associate Professor
Department of Environmental Studies

Henriette Lowisch, Associate Professor
Department of Journalism

ABSTRACT

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The Way Around: Walking into Revolution

Chairperson: Phil Condon

The Way Around investigates revolution through personal accounts of pilgrimage, ecopsychology, and activism. For ten years (2006-2016), I engaged in various forms of circular travel across the world to understand the true shape of *revolution*—its etymology, its use throughout history, and if revolution might be some universal inertia that drives us all forward.

The journey begins in 2006, where I travel around the world for a year. I weave together discoveries of place and planet with a 500-year historical account of human circumnavigation. Returning to Portland, Oregon, I'm introduced to the practice of long-distance running through circling around several Pacific Northwest volcanoes on foot. This more localized form of circumnavigation further attunes me to the cyclical patterns of ecology, which pulls me into more political orbits of activism and civic engagement to protect these spaces. I get involved with Occupy Wall Street and one evening run for several hours around the Portland encampment, a kinesthetic revolution evolving into a meditation on political revolution.

After circling the globe, orbiting volcanoes, and budding as an activist, in 2014, I travel 7,000 miles to Western Tibet and circumambulate 21,778-foot Mount Kailash. Here, I find circumambulation functioning both as spiritual practice and cultural survival. This journey would direct me a year later back to Northern California, my birthplace, where, in 2015, I organize a fifty-year anniversary circumambulation of Mount Tamalpais, a tradition started in 1965, by poet Gary Snyder.

The aperture of my personal revolution through all of these experiences continues to focus locally inward, towards home. In my new home in Missoula, Montana, on the opening day of the 2015 COP21 climate negotiations in Paris, I hold a demonstration on the University of Montana campus and incorporate circular walking to represent the planet's six mass extinctions.

In the end, after a decade of circuitous experiences, each brought me closer and closer to home, closer to a shared tension of rootedness and curiosity for the whole. I discovered that transformation—personal, political, planetary—moves in sweeps of cycles, and *The Way Around* attempts to illustrate this revolutionary heritage we all carry with us, not just as humans but as expressions of a planet ever-revolving, ever-renewing, and constantly requiring overthrow to thrive.

Revolution, I found, is everywhere.

The Way Around:
Walking into Revolution

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Introduction

*I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.
I may not ever complete the last one,
but I give myself to it.*

*I circle around God, that primordial tower.
I have been circling for thousands of years,
and still I don't know: am I a falcon,
a storm, or a great song?*

- Rainer Maria Rilke, Book of Hours [I,2]

I peer into the center, into a core that holds everything together, where questions remain unanswered, where something solid shifts, and I settle into the unsettling notion that what rises before me is far too beautiful and terrifying to be of this planet. It can't be real, this massif I'd been circling on foot for days but hadn't yet seen close-up because of the storm. But I'm here now, a witness at dawn, and still I can't agree if what's before me is real.

But this mountain is real.

I'm camped in Western Tibet on the northern flank of Mount Kailash, an exposure that careens up toward pale-blue skies. I'd traveled 7,000 miles in search of one of the most revered mountain pilgrimages on the planet, six flights and eight jarring days of minibus travel, joined by a team of twenty—professors, scientists, and spiritual practitioners. I was the only one younger than forty, the only one without a graduate degree, and the only one up for sunrise this morning.

The half-oval of mountain before me resembles a 21,000-foot tombstone, or three million panels of corrugated iron brazed together and placed on end, or the underbelly of

a sinking ship. My eyeballs throb with the high elevation as they focus on the summit, four vertical miles above sea level. Its taper is final, a resolve perforating the sky to set everything below it into motion—waters drain, rocks erode, shadows dance. This speck of Earth remains untouched by human footprints, something rare these days.

My heart thwacks in, thwacks out like helicopter blades just as a hue of strawberry-colored light dabs the summit. In this moment I wish for quiet and seagull-flap my arms at the others to stake their rustling tent-flies, to postpone yawns.

Shhh. I think. Dammit, shhhh. Slow it all down. All of it. Don't you see?

Kailash is waking up.

The reveal plays with physics and seems to shift Earth's gravity from downward to lateral, where everything now revolves around Mount Kailash. *What would it be like to stand on that summit at first light?* Ice axe, puffy jacket, hypoxic but present for those firstborn slivers of sun to drip down my spine, beams fired ninety-million miles away to meet a chapped face as I peer down into the drainage below, into pollen-yellow tent clusters and encircling bodies.

Instead, I sit at 17,000 feet, at the mountain's base and watch the morning glow move from crown to slope. A cough comes from the Lha Chu River Valley to my right as four pilgrims stride along, the first of several hundred starting their walk around this mountain today, a tradition of circular walking called "circumambulation"—*kora* for Tibetans. Few peaks linger close, profiling Kailash as a loner, an anomaly with mystery etched into her core and eroding into new forms at every lap of the sun. My eyes track this transition out from shadow, just as I had moved further into the light over the past ten years in similar rotation, through my own personal orbits, my own revolutions.

Two days earlier, when I had first glimpsed Mount Kailash, I wept. Following a week of driving, I stumbled out of the minibus and walked to a bluff away from the group. Kailash rose in the far distance, a distant shark fin in seas of Himalayan foothill. I collapsed into tears as if I'd just looked into my niece's eyes for the first time. No mountain had ever triggered such a response. But what brought me to my knees wasn't just some mountain. What brought me here was a desperate need to witness restraint as ritual, to see cultural survival refracted in the flank of a mountain left alone and to see a home celebrated, honored, and protected.

Home. Home. Home. The words dribble out in shallow gasps as if I were chanting *Om. Om. Om.* For over two billion Buddhists, Hindu, Jain and Bon, this mountain represents the very contoured belonging to place, something I envied, something to which I didn't know how to begin cultivating myself. Growing up, I never felt this way about home. From the start, I always escaped my crib, impossible feats of liberation. My mother would later shove bars of Irish Spring soap into my ten-year-old mouth whenever she'd catch me sitting on the edge of my chair at the dinner table, one butt cheek off and ready to leave, ready to escape.

I had reason. Through my teen years, I watched as my mother dug further into her own aquifer of escape, into the dark swills of cheap wine and painkillers that would rip a marriage, a family, and a mother apart. Luckily, my escapist muscles had become well-defined by then. Home was to be tiptoed around, a minefield of eggshell uncertainty. It was always a guessing game. Home served my adolescence only until happy hour, when poison became priority.

It would've been easier if I didn't adore my mother. It wasn't her fault, as I would learn later. Early memories were normal: backpacking and birthdays, road trips and kick-the-can. Home should work the same as gravity, like some molten core, some algebraic constant whose rules never change. Home is supposed to keep us in place, grounded. But when that center is ruined, destabilized, caged and unable to be itself, the gravitational tug loosens. So I fled. Often. First to treehouses and books, then to sports and girls. International travel would later offer valid excuses to leave home. I was indeed curious what versions of home I could find elsewhere, just as I secretly wished to get away from mine.

Fffp. Fffp. Fffp. I snap three photos of Kailash to bring back to Northern California to my mother. She loves photography, always nostalgic for the moment as it once was. We once had a small darkroom in our family home for developing film. It quickly became a wine cellar. I'll never forget that vinegar waft of Chardonnay poured into a pint glass to disguise as water, perched next to my stack of two thousand five hundred prints I made to show her after I'd circumnavigated the globe as a twenty-one year old. I'd saved for years to complete this yearlong trip, which would set into motion a relationship with circuitous travel, with *revolution*. I discovered that by revolving around the planet I began to also revolve around my relationship with home. The entire planet was speckled in home, in community, countless flavors of it, and I found that life was at its best when rooted, not grazed through, buffet-style (Chapter I).

As I grew up distrusting home, these departures began to focus my attention back towards home, a centrifugal spin towards more local orbits. Relocating to Portland, Oregon, I became immersed in long-distance running, a practice started after circling

around Mount St. Helens in a day, thirty-four miles (Chapter II). These expeditions afoot would throw me into wider circles of identity, stitching each step into a political sphere that focused less on simple recreation in less-modified places and more towards protecting them. This would prime me for Occupy Wall Street (Chapter IV), and to an unusual evening visit to the Portland encampment.

After traveling around the planet, whirling around volcanoes, and running into political revolution, I found myself always returning right back to the place I started, different in unforeseen ways. Revolution was indeed the way around: a stubborn, ecological rule of cyclical overthrow and renewal that ushered life forward. “To understand is to perceive patterns,” said Latvian political theorist Isaiah Berlin. This pattern, I learned, was *revolution*—orbits, hurricane formation, the Coriolis effect, tidal cycles, soil regeneration, spirals and seasons, births and deaths, political insurrection and psychospiritual resurrection. Over the past ten years, I started to understand that revolution was everywhere, and that I, however painful or pleasurable, was no exception to the rule. *I was a revolutionary, just like everything else.*

Inside the mess tent, Tenzin prepares breakfast—lentil daal and flatbreads popping in safflower oil. The smell is familiar; we’d been eating this for weeks. I sit alone and I stare at Kailash. I can’t stop staring. I can’t stop looking wide-eyed into the mountain as if I were just given a free, ten-second viewing of Earth’s alloyed core. *Fight the burning eyes, Nick. Forget your throbbing head, your distended fingers and toes. Don’t you dare blink; you’ll regret it.*

For a decade, I've tracked patterns of revolution—in ecology, in political theory, in psychology, and religious practice. From Pacific Northwest volcanoes (Chapter II) to Occupy Wall Street (Chapter IV), from Mount Kailash (Chapter III) to Mount Tamalpais (Chapter V) and ending in subzero Montana (Chapter VI), the following stories parallel a circumspection of home, my own way around, returning again and again, each time as someone new facing something new, each lap eddying with failures and openings that spun me inwards towards attentiveness and outwards towards inclusion, an aperture focusing both on depth of field while trying to let as much light seep in.

Movement now overtakes Kailash's pin-drop hush: pilgrims first, then tent zippers, puffing kettles, and the *ting-ting* of hungry yaks. Our guide Tenzin shuffles toward me, his face flat and beautiful like Kailash. He holds two cups of tea gobbled with yak butter and hands me one. My first slurp burns the roof of my mouth, and he laughs.

“Patience!” he says.

We stand in silence, both fixated to this mountain, this unknowable mass we'd been circling for days, or perhaps, as Rilke said, *for thousands of years*. I stand on my two feet, grounded in front of a core that binds us all, and I wonder what's around the curve, what's driving this revolution.

I. Circumnavigation

*“Round the world! There is much in that sound to inspire proud feelings;
but whereto does all that circumnavigation conduct?”*

– Ishmael, *Moby Dick*.

I'd been here before. Right here, in this café, standing on this same slate-marble floor. The barista peered from behind the counter in full jurisdiction over my caffeine dependence. *I've seen worse*, she flickered with the flash of an eyelash. Everything about her tattoos and tortoise-shell, cat-eye glasses looked familiar.

“I'll take an Americano. Four shots,” I said.

Sunlight leaned through corner windows of Red Rock Café in Mountain View, California. The walls were maroon, a color matching handfuls of coffee cherries outstretched by a Honduran farmer in the wall photo. Lamps dangled on wires from the ceiling like roots needing soil.

“You in line?” a man asked me. I let him pass and noticed the slogan on his shirt as he did—*Go Daddy Web Hosting Services. Team Awesome.* Several urban technophiles queued up for their midday fix before heading back to work. Google's headquarters were around the corner. Facebook, only a few miles away. The could-have-been-me young professionals waited in line, dressed smart and flirting with their coworkers. Stable-looking. Well-fed. I was their inverse—skinny, unkempt, jobless and jetlagged. Locations and time zones had all changed too often recently. Finding the nearest table, I wedged between an old woman knitting and two teenagers on their laptops, the backs of their screens touching with an apocalyptic intimacy. The elder didn't flinch as her two colored lines of yarn fed into a half-completed glove.

Why the hell would this woman choose Red Rock? I thought. It was loud here. It was young. It was fast. It was A.D.D., some intellectual brothel for Silicon Valley minions. What I wanted was for this woman to see me seeing her, approving of her slower ways.

“Americano for Nick?” The girl’s tattoos were asking now, sharp-tipped and barbed, a question held limp as if I had already left or perhaps never arrived at all. *Get this fucking coffee off of my bar*, shot her glare as I picked it up and returned to my seat. Apparently I wasn’t moving fast enough. Needles and yarn now rested on the old woman’s table next to a cellophane-wrapped poppyseed muffin. She surveyed me as I pulled out a pocket calendar from my backpack, to figure out what day it was.

“Tuesday. February third. Two thousand and seven,” her voice gurgled. She smiled and rewarded herself with a bite of muffin, one crumb clinging to the side of her lips. “Saving it for another trip around the sun,” she said, referencing the food on her face.

Suddenly, everything came into focus. It was one year ago, exactly. One year ago I was here in this same café, served by the same barista. Same tattoo. Same attitude. I looked at my calendar. February 3rd, 2006. The date was circled in red ink, the same color as these café walls, as the coffee cherries.

“Funny you say that. I just got done with a trip around the world,” I said. The knitter looked confused. I went deeper. “Just finished a full year traveling by myself. Twelve months. Twelve countries. Got back yesterday.” Her eyes surveyed me up and down with a depth of experience much greater than mine. Her marbles for eyes swirled like grey-blue smoke tumbling over glass. In a flash I traveled through her life’s hallways, through dusty bookshelves full of memories, experiences, heartbreak.

“Now that sounds like a story,” she exclaimed without breaking weave. So, I began to tell her about February 3rd, 2006, the day one year ago that I started west

around the planet, alone, something I'd planned for years. At twenty-one years old, the global circuit threw me outwards as much as it would later draw me inwards.

And for all of this, I have George W. Bush to thank the most.

///

It started in 2004, during Bush's presidential re-election campaign, when I met an Israeli couple at a progressive fundraising event in San Francisco. In the midst of political disbelief, the two beamed a radiance others didn't. I had just started my last year at the University of Redlands in Southern California and had no idea what would happen next. The two had just returned from a seventeen-month around-the-world trip that took them through a dozen countries. *Around-the-world*. They held each other close, two bodies saltwater-scrubbed and buoyant from constant movement. They were suntanned except for two white stripes on their shoulders where their backpacks had rested.

This was the moment when something shifted. I didn't know it at the time, but there was something about the details of their trip and its magnitude, something about the possibility of going around the entire planet. At the time, many of my friends were getting recruited for professional positions, being pulled into an orbit of corporate ladders and 401k's.

I couldn't stop lobbing questions at the two Israelis. *Did you know other languages? How did you save up for this? Did the world actually feel round?*

And from this moment, I began to plan. Over the next two years, I spent my spare time at the University Library designing my own custom route. The criteria was threefold:

1. All the way around.
2. At least 365 days.
3. Alone.

I wished to feel the whole, to go west and return east, to plan and fund it all myself. Something about the solitude tugged at my sleeve. Going alone both terrified and seduced me—the idea of making my own path, on my time. I'd stay in the library until closing time studying maps, charting weather patterns, scanning travel forums. I took endless notes and stuffed them into a binder stolen from the library—yellow tab, Oceania; red tab, Asia, green tab, Europe.

After graduating college in 2005, I moved home to the Sierra Nevada foothills in Northern California. I cancelled my cell phone, biked everywhere, and spent nothing. I worked for whoever would hire me: digging trenches, framing houses, weed-whacking, pouring concrete, reading mathematical proofs to high school dropouts and persuading their parents to pay me for it. I poured burnt coffee for tip-weary retirees, sliced gelatinous balls of deli meat for soccer moms and raked pine needles dropped from every ponderosa in the county. When I wasn't working or sleeping I was planning—where to go, when to go, what mountains to climb, which farming opportunities to pursue. Music venues, culinary hotspots, UNESCO World Heritage sites. Finally, after an eight-month work blitz, I had done it. \$12,000, an amount completely foreign to me. Up until this moment, the trip lived entirely in margin scribbles. It lived in scrolling travel forums, in

books and maps. On February 3rd, 2006, I faced west, crossed through airport security, and set into motion a revolution of the planet that would fundamentally change everything.

///

The legacy of global circumnavigation reaches back hundreds of years. From the earliest attempts to sail giant boats around our planet's circumference to orbiting Earth in less than two hours via satellite, humans have always seemed to carry a curiosity for the whole. Beneath these near-impossible feats of early around-the-world expeditions, beginning with Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan in the early 1500s, there was something bigger than tea, bigger than spices and conquest. With all their bloodshed and exploitation, embedded in these journeys was a germinating seed of globalization, a movement later reinforced by the Industrial Revolution. Each circumnavigation illustrated a fierce desire for reaching greater perspectives on what it meant to be human in a wild, largely non-human world.

In 2012, Harvard historian Joyce Chaplin wrote *Round About the Earth*, a comprehensive historical account of circumnavigation. She viewed our 500-year old relationship with circumplanetary travel as a sort of "geodrama," complete with three acts—fear, confidence, and doubt. Within this framework, her questions proved bigger than travel: What lessons rise to the surface regarding our evolving relationship with this planet? What drives humans to encircle? What's to be unlocked with this new planetary

perspective? Is circumnavigation just the ironic tale of humans developing their planetary eyesight just in time to witness a planet on fire?

///

Breathe. Just breathe. He's not trying to kill her; just scare tactics. But why is he chasing Dona with an eight-inch bowie knife? He looks angry. Drunk, too. Beet-red forehead. Overalls slowing him down. She's fast in her skirt and flats. Run, Dona. Run.

It was in that hair-split moment, when a man with a knife chased Dona from around the back of the Australian roadhouse, that I knew it wasn't going to be good.

“Found this bloody wench in me backyard poppin’ a squat like a dog.” His knife was serrated like his tongue, designed to saw through flesh all the way to marrow. Sharp enough to disembowel rock. Dona ran right past Aubre, Pierre and me, straight into the campervan and past the sign that read:

Use toilets only after purchasing something. I mean it.

Just as I summoned my inner diplomat, a quad-trailer truck train wailed its horn and screamed past us on the highway, pluming terracotta-colored dirt everywhere. Highways in the Australian outback cut so straight that trucks are allowed to haul several trailers at once. Passing or being passed by these road serpents—sometimes over 150 feet long—verges on psychedelic.

After a first stop in Fiji and three months in lush New Zealand, living out of a rusted van with a stubborn transmission, Australia's center felt Martian, linear, and enormous. I'd been picking up several odd jobs along the way to help prolong my travels:

I poured concrete slabs in Christchurch, changed bedspreads in Kaikoura, drove shuttles in Nelson, restored antique pool tables in Sydney, bartended in a mangrove forest in Queensland. This time, I'd found a job relocating luxury rental vans, the ones with multiple beds, microwaves, and that little boomerang antenna I always wanted to rip off and throw against the wind. Families would rent these vans for road trips, then fly home from a different starting point, leaving them to be returned to the rental offices. That's where I came in.

I was returning a van from Darwin to Cairns, 2,000 miles—the distance from San Francisco to Kansas City. *\$300 in petrol and seven days to get it there*, the clerk said, dangling keys in my face, uncertain if they'd ever see me, or the van, again. I found that the more people I could cram into these vans, the less we'd all have to spend on travel, so three travelers joined me: Pierre, an itinerant Frenchman, and Dona and Aubre, a Belgian couple. Aubre was tall and lanky, while Dona was raspy-voiced and shorter. She only wore sundresses and offered more smiles than frowns, except when evading a fire-breathing roadhouse attendant.

“Whoa, man. Settle down. What's the deal?” I said, chest-puffed but terrified. The man's overalls were finger-striped with grease, his face stretched long like putty. Ichabod nose. Looping ears.

“Get the fuck off my property or I'll slice something from each of you right now. This is my home, not a fuckin' piss-pond.” He was right. We'd been driving for hours and pulled over for a quick bathroom stop in the middle of nowhere. Nothing looked open so Dona had walked behind the station for relief. The man forearmed his face to wipe off sweat, but the hatred stuck. The tirade that followed denigrated women, punted

outsiders, despised aboriginals, and slaughtered kangaroo jacks. His words left us speechless and fearful for our lives. This was *his* land, *his* home, *his* goddamn house and *his* goddamn yard and he could-if-he-would have us all drink the piss we left seeping into his soil. He stepped closer to me, three feet close now, knife still knuckled. Alcohol in his bloodstream, yes. I knew the look. I knew the smell, the eyes, the pain.

I was so close to leaving this continent unharmed. Many warned me that while New Zealand was a land absent of any deadly creatures, Australia bit. Australia had fangs, spines, spikes. Australia was a poisonous place to watch out for. Yet in all my wanderings, the only true threat I found here wasn't tiger sharks. It wasn't box jellyfish. I wasn't vampire bats or angry scorpions slumbering in my sleeping bag.

It was humans.

In this moment, in the flames smelting this man's soul, the interaction unshackled some ignorance in me, some childhood blanket quilted in naiveté. To call some place home, to protect it, was a complicated act. The land upon which *home* sits always comes layered in story and songline, pain and trauma. Home is complicated.

Finally, the dust settled. Dona hid in the R.V.'s shower cavity while Aubre hopped in to drive, hurling French expletives and middle fingers to the roadhouse owner after the engine started and our doors were locked. We sped off, first making sure no 150-foot truck trains were pummeling through. From the review mirror powdered in red earth, I saw a man standing there watching us, alone with his blade, alone with his hate, alone in his home.

///

Early Greek philosophers Pythagoras and Aristotle presented the earth as round, an unpopular notion in the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. Early Egyptians perceived Earth as if it were a flat plate floating in dishwater, while Hebrews experienced Earth like a snow globe-type film that separated our planet from the heavens above. With growing European empires came surges of maritime exploration and expansion during the 15th and 16th centuries, thus confirming the roundness of our home planet. Ferdinand Magellan was the most notable of these captains to pursue new global trade routes. In each expedition he sought economic hegemony, taming unknown places and people for resources. “The mark of empire was inscribed into the nature of circumnavigation.”

Many died in the process, including Magellan himself, the man oft-mistakenly cited for being the first around the world. While his body rotted from syphilis in the Philippines a year into the 1518 expedition, his Basque naval commander Juan Sebastian Elcano had forced mutiny upon Magellan and brought the remaining survivors—a meager 18 from the original 240—around the world and back to Portugal in 1522, over three years later. Sir Francis Drake would later become the first Englishman to sail around the planet a few decades after Elcano. The activity was so fringe that there wasn’t even a term for it. “Circumnavigation,” wouldn’t surface for nearly another century, in 1625, with *Mikrocosmos. A Little Description of the Great World*, by Englishman Peter Heylyn.

As these around-the-world travels grew from myth to possible, in 1543, Nicolas Copernicus published *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium (On Revolutions of the*

Heavenly Spheres), his earth-shattering counter to the prevailing concept that Earth was the center of the universe. Earth, according to his calculations, circumnavigated the Sun. Whether these first around-the-world expeditions had their own descriptors for what was happening, this much was certain: they remained bleak, unromantic, and laughably dangerous. Your chances of returning alive to your family after an around-the-world sailing trip hovered around six percent survival. The planet was perceived as untamable and formidable, a force that could easily gobble you up and shuck your boats to the side with the flick of a squall.

The world—flat or round—bore teeth.

///

A body. I think there's a body underneath my seat. A small lump. Maybe if I gently kick it, oh, yes—it just moved. Shouldn't have kicked it. Him? Her? What I thought was a backpack just turned into the back of a young child sleeping on a bed of wet newspaper. He looks oddly comfortable. Where the hell did he come from? Where are his parents? Does he have any? Is that me under there, little Nick hiding himself from the swirls of humanity that's been surging around him for weeks?

It wasn't until the sixteenth hour on the third-class train from Guangzhou, China, to Kunming that I noticed this fetal-curved body lying under my bench seat. Lights flickered through the night with every bump and bend of the track, to illuminate the thousands of passengers shuffling in and out, in and out. All day the train crawled

through Southern China's lush countryside: first industrial soups then terraced rice fields. First grey walls then green fields. Through the homes of millions. After six months arcing through Fiji, New Zealand and Australia, I'd finally traveled north to Hong Kong and into China for a month. Halfway into my around-the-world journey, I found that kept me a moving target, always on the go, difficult to pin down. Like most of my life, I never stayed anywhere long enough to cultivate a real sense of place. And yet, on this trip I constantly encountered locals enmeshed in home, and I began to envy it.

Contact lenses plastered to the back of my eyeballs when I awoke to a bag of bananas dangling from the luggage rack above, ready to fall at any moment.

Pssst-click.

Hydraulic doors opened and a janitor entered the cabin for her hourly sweep. *Flickering lights. Bobbing heads. Sleeping heads. Dreams. Nightmares.* Styrofoam bowls and water bottles littered the aisle; cigarette packet foils and newspaper crumpled everywhere like spilled popcorn, combined with indecisive smells of detergent, beef broth, and accumulating feces. The worker started her sweep. She passed me with her push broom and the trash-wave overtook the little body sleeping at my feet. He squirmed away the trash, after nearly being pushed along with her sweep. The woman next to me then waved her hand in the air as if she were flagging a taxi, gesturing that the body under our bench was her child. She grinned with a metal-capped front tooth, then slammed our window shut after completing the Four Golden Rules of Cantonese instant noodles:

First: Purchase.

Second: Slurp, loud as you're able.

Third: Fold Styrofoam bowl like a taco and poke through slit window.

Fourth: Watch it skip along the tracks.

The shock of China's density was palpable. *1.5 billion. 1.5 billion. 1.5 billion.*

The number bounced along with that ramen bowl like some post-apocalyptic mantra.

This soil had seen so much—so many dynasties, so many revolutions played with so many countless lives. The humus of civilization here sunk deep here; I could smell it.

But really what I smelled was diarrhea clogging the squat-hole bathroom paired with tobacco and mint tea. I rose from my seat, sandwiched between the metal-mouthed mother and her husband, and I fished out a pack of cigarettes from my pocket. Over 300 million Chinese smoke, making China the world's largest consumer and producer of tobacco—imagine every man, woman and child smoking in the United States.

Pssst-click.

Doors slid open and I joined ten men all dressed in grey coats, all smoking in the pivot between carriages. I shook out a crooked cigarette, the twenty-five cent kind I saw the fisherman puff. *Twenty-five cents to make your gums bleed.* Someone offered me a light. *Shay-Shay*, I said in floundering Mandarin. A pull of smoke, a stare through the window: into hill communities, into the homes of millions, billions.

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Popular interest in circumnavigation increased during the 19th and 20th centuries, mainly due to streamlined logistics—safer boats, efficient design, fresh foods, and creature comforts that mimicked conditions on land. Scurvy still lurked in the ballast shadows from accounts of previous round-the-world attempts, leaving little hope that our species cohered well to the sea. Many concluded that humans were simply not aquatic creatures, that we bipedals were designed for land and united by one thing—our “terrestriality.”

With each successive lap around the world, the planet quickly became crisscrossed with road and rail. The first American circumnavigation happened in 1787, a flexing of nationalist muscles from a newly established Union. Such voyages were contributing to a “definitive total knowledge of the world,” but completed largely by those in power, those dominant and resourced enough to travel to such lengths. The Grand Tour, for example, was famous for sending young white men with leisure time and firm groundings in Greek and Latin across Europe to admire the arts abroad. This kind of travel would evolve into around-the-world tours and eventually the rough-riding sailor grunts of around-the-world travel were replaced with domesticated wayfarers, pockets full of cash.

The Industrial Revolution would later cinch together global communication, commerce and, with it, curiosity. Our species had understood more than ever before about the planet, but this information and access consequently developed the infrastructure to exploit markets, unindustrialized people and places. Interestingly, one of the biggest proponents of this 19th century, European-led globalization was author Jules Verne.

Most portraits of Jules Verne look the same: wispy, white hair; a shapely beard; handsome and triumphant-looking, like someone who only makes important decisions and leaves menial tasks for servants and mistresses; stately but frayed around the edges, like Sigmund Freud in a barfight. The name Jules Verne wafts of salt spray at starboard. It whips the unwieldy swing of octopus tentacle. It evokes deep seas and deeper tunnels, oversized journeys and undersized crews all plumbing the world to its inky depths.

Born in Nantes, France, in 1829, Jules Gabriel Verne's success peaked during the 1860s, where he churned out most of his well-known novels: *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864), *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), *Twenty Thousands Leagues Under the Sea* (1870). Verne excelled with stories of adventure, the ups and downs and arounds, always with a certain hubris illustrating Europe's globalizing worldview. He was deemed the "Father of Science Fiction," which positioned him for huge success with *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873), a novel about circumnavigation that itself traveled around the world in more than eighty languages, making Verne the second-most translated author ever after Agatha Christie.

Written during the height of his literary career, *Around the World in Eighty Days* is a story of one aristocrat's bet, Phileas Fogg, to circumnavigate the planet in eighty days. The story was inspired by real-life U.S. railroad magnate George Francis Train, who twice attempted a similar trip around the planet. Train was an outspoken business tycoon, something that landed him in prison more than once. It's no wonder why Verne gravitated towards this eccentric man as inspiration for his novel's protagonist. The novel was deeply suggestive of the times, shedding light on what 19th century circumnavigation represented as a globalizing force, for better or worse.

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Backstreet Boys? No, Westlife. Embarrassed that I even know this music, these bands. How wouldn't I know these bands? The volunteer coordinators play them constantly. 6:00am. It's too early. And there's no coffee. Well, there's instant. Toast with jam that tastes like a cross between Jello and air freshener. Ooh, back is sore from sleeping on this bed of bamboo planks, wood that sticks to the back of my sweating legs. And apparently no matter how well you bug-proof your mosquito netting, those bastards still make it through. Hanoi? Not sure if I'm even in Hanoi or in some unknown sprawl of suburban outskirts. And why does it always smell like bleach here?

From China, my overland route drained south into Vietnam where I worked at a boarding school for Agent Orange orphans. Since the “American War,” tens of thousands of children had been labeled defective by their government after their parents were exposed to defoliant chemicals and gave birth to genetically scrambled offspring. The Friendship Village school was a ten-minute bike ride from my living quarters. I'd inquired after learning about the school's story: a U.S. veteran had returned to Vietnam after the war, horrified by the pain he had caused, and he'd started an organic garden to help feed these orphans. The children able-bodied enough to eat and walk were the lucky ones. Most of these babies arrived in heaps of body parts, mushed and mutated beyond belief.

“Neeeeck!”

Luan yelled as I pulled up on my bicycle. The young girl ran up to deliver a long embrace. The school's grounds were spread out, whitewashed walls with plenty of yard for playing. She took my hand and we walked toward the pond I'd been painting the perimeter wall. Except for her elongated forehead and bulging eyes, Luan appeared more "normal" than most. Every day I came to work, these students would greet my arrival, tug at my hand, pass me a badminton racquet or a paintbrush. This was their home; they wished to make it beautiful.

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Circumnavigation in the twentieth century veered away from dangerous trips of profit or leisure, and towards stunts and competition. Who could be the youngest, the oldest, the richest, the blindest? Who could drive around, bike around, sail around, or walk around the world the fastest? By 1887, the first global circumnavigation by bike was completed. In 1924, a team of eight U.S. naval officers took off in four planes from Seattle, Washington, and returned 175 days later, completing the first around-the-world flight. In 1964, Ohio pilot Geraldine Mock became the first female pilot to fly solo around the world, in a single-prop Cessna named "The Spirit of Columbus." On October 4, 1957, Russia's unmanned Sputnik 1 satellite orbited the planet for the first time. It took 108 minutes. Humans were put into orbit a few years later.

Stories of modern circumnavigation feats are endless, and some have nobler missions than others. For sailing, the 500-year legacy lives on with the aptly named Jules Verne Trophy. The current record is 45 days, 13 hours by Frenchman Loick Peyron. A traditional Hawaiian voyaging canoe, *Malama Honua* (To Care For our Earth) is

currently making its way around the world without using modern navigation tools. By stars and currents, the educational trip will stop to teach other countries about indigenous orienteering.

Circumglobal travel has also seen its fair share of walkers, runners, and cyclists, too. Only four people have officially run around the world, with a record set in 2015 by Englishman Kevin Carr. Averaging a marathon a day for 621 days, Carr pushed all his own equipment in a custom cart—imagine a souped-up baby stroller. Along the way, he confronted grizzly bears in Canada, was hit by a car in Australia, and had a shard of slate lodge into his retina while running across India. 16,300 miles later he returned from where he had left, arriving only a few hours ahead of the previous record.

Circumnavigation the skies began after World War One, but speed records have fallen considerably. The *Concorde*, before being decommissioned for safety reasons, was capable of circling the globe in a supersonic thirty-one hours, clocking speeds of 1,300 miles per hour. In 2013, the fastest non-supersonic jet, the Gulfstream G650, completed its 20,310 nautical-mile loop in 41 hours, stopping to refuel only three times. And the fastest nonstop, solo flight took 67 hours, completed in the VirginFlyer by businessman Steve Fossett. Ironically, he died the very next year. In a plane crash.

Currently the Solar Impulse Two is on its way to becoming the first fully solar-powered airplane to circumnavigate the planet. Started in March 2015 from Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., the European-led team was on schedule to return August 2015 but was grounded in Hawaii after frying its batteries while taking five days to cross the Pacific Ocean. With a 236-foot wingspan fully-covered in solar arrays, the Solar Impulse Two moves at a leisurely 87 mph, barely the flow of traffic on most California freeways.

So why do people continue to chase records around the globe? In 500 years of recorded circumnavigation, humans have gone from three-year seafaring death journeys to ninety-minute space orbit. Is it because every inch of land and sea has now been mapped, leaving some repressed colonizer within to recreate these old rhythms, these once dangerous and exploitative journeys?

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Dust. Singed rubber. Spices. Carts swooshing this way, rickshaws creaking that way. Organized anarchy. What's that through the breezeway? Looks like a rally, a protest. Hundreds of people joined together, striding in unity. Grab our bags and cross through the open passage. Ah, cool now. Shade. Less dust, less taxi horn-honk. Loud here. Getting closer, I realize it's not protest but prayer. Hundreds of people walk in circles around some giant stupa. They murmur. They pray. They walk. We join them.

A flight from Bangkok to Kathmandu, Nepal, brought me to my girlfriend, Courtney, who was researching Tibetan identity in a refugee camp west of Pokhara. After I arrived, she directed our taxi driver to an unmarked curb in the capital city. The street scene was full of moving parts, always rush hour. Through a breezeway lined with trinkets and hanging fabric, the path opened up into a stupa—Boudhanath. A central hub for Tibetan refugees, the plaza centered around a 118-foot structure, cementing me in my tracks. It pointed upwards like a rocket—strong, white, curved. A large pyramid sat at the top of the dome with a discerning pair of Buddha's eyes staring back at me.

I was floored not only by the commanding structure but the scene that unfolded around its base. Circling were hundreds of exiled Tibetans along with Nepalis and tourists walking clockwise together around the stupa like a human cyclone. Smells of incense and burning sage thickened the action. Leather-skinned elderly moved low to the ground while little tourist kiosks surrounded the structure like vultures. Though separated from their land base after the 1959 Chinese occupation of Tibet, many Tibetan refugees congregated here daily to walk, practice, and pray. Courtney and I joined in several orbits and were eventually flung outwards down an alley to our guesthouse. Little did I know, I would return to this practice later in life.

After Nepal, I returned to Southeast Asia for two final months of hitchhiking through Cambodia, Northern Laos, and Thailand. After being on my own for almost a year, two friends decided to fly out to join me. Having familiar faces around was a relief as I suffered from *itinerant fatigue*, a sort of anti-social un zest. For over three hundred days, I'd been living out of a pack, skipping from place to place, people to people. Whenever I arrived to a new place, I began creating community with smart, insightful travelers. But these friendships were brief. They would last for a day or a few weeks at most, followed by that inevitable goodbye. And for all of the beauty in this movement, no connections lasted very long and I never had enough time to get to know places, either. In this crept a friction that eventually seeded my skin with a lesson: the irreplaceable depth of home. I had spanned the entire globe for a year, developed a more multicultural perspective of humanity only to realize that what I really needed was to stay put. Bioregional poet Gary Snyder once said: "The most radical thing you can do is to stay home." I desired radical.

From Bangkok, I flew west through Oman to London. With this, I found my native tongue but had no interest in speaking it to anyone. I wished for home. My girlfriend. My car. My life. I wished to feel grounded again. England felt too easy. And dirty. Freezing rain met me the day my inbox delivered an email with “I’m Sorry” as its title. My girlfriend couldn’t wait for me any longer and had met someone else back home. I was weeks away from returning home and everything began to melt. In that moment, I was crushed. The full year of experiences, the dream circuit, the trip I had planned that day to Bath and Stonehenge, all of it vanished with this one, single message. Nothing mattered anymore but my hollowed out breath that could barely suck in the last cheap nicotine I smuggled from Thailand. When home abandons you because you abandoned home, the moment’s color is raven-black and it weighs six thousand tons.

I’d traveled over 25,000 miles—a dozen flights and countless trains, vans, buses, superbuses, motorcycles, fishing boats, sail boats, kayaks, dugout canoes, parachutes, grain carts, inner tubes, rusty bicycles, and blistered feet. I was finally returning to where I had left, opposite the direction I had come. It was a moment I fantasized about for months, a moment where I would be received by an ensemble of wailing trumpets or 365 balloons released into the air, or maybe a bottle of champagne popped at baggage claim. But none of this happened. Instead, my threadbare backpack and my unstitched heart short-circuited these final weeks I had planned in Ireland, and I returned home a pile of defeat. When I finally reached California, my pack circled the baggage claim carousel. I picked it up. It was wet and bulky and my skinny body void of an appetite could barely carry it anymore. I slung it over one shoulder, hopped into a friend’s car, and got my

wish. I was home.

The café had cleared out by the time I'd finished sharing my story with the elder knitter. By the end of the journey, I told her, I'd gained no great truths about humanity or about this giant rock I'd been working my way around for past year. Earth still didn't quite feel round. But a revolution had been at work all along. The friends. The walks. The guides. The lovers. The jobs. The never-ending trains. The journal sketches. The boredom. The awe of mountains and deserts and lake-sea-river meanderings had all begun working their way with me: carving, eroding, forming and folding their contours into mine. Transformation, I started learning, seems to hide in the shadows, in the margins, in Agent Orange disfigurement, in roadhouses and rail yards, in infidelity. Personal revolution also comes with contact, with interfacing snaggletoothed landscapes and the people, plants, and animals that inhabit them. During my circuit, I wrote and read, smoked and sped, swam and skydived, climbed and camped, planned and prayed, wept and slept, floated and flew and somehow left my signature in footprint, shallow and circular and leading me right back to where I set forth one year prior. Right here, to this overpriced café in Silicon Valley, California, a place focused on around-the-world connectivity of a different sort.

The elder's eyes looked into mine. An encouraging smile first, then fatigue, as if I had made her late for a scheduled nap. With a quarter-smile, she completed the final stitch of her glove and slowly gathered things to leave. As she shuffled away, a bouquet of near-blossomed, long-stem white roses sat on the coffee bar. I didn't see them when I walked in earlier. She plucked one as she left.

II. Circumambulation

“Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The sky is round, and I have heard that the Earth is round like a ball, and so are the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nest in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun come forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they are. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so is everything where power moves.”

- Black Elk.

All I could taste was silt, and all I could see were whales.

The trickle of water draining from Mount St. Helen's southwestern flank was a miracle. Its taste crossed between chalkboard dust and liquefied cardboard. Faceplanted into the shallow runoff, I began to experience hallucinations. Whales, specifically. I imagined baleen, that filtration system to keep unwanted substances out as some whales fed on krill and other desirable treats. Baleen envy was something new for me, and it arrived just as sand and minerals passed indiscriminately past my lips and into mouth. Salt caked my forehead and stung my eyes, but it didn't matter. It didn't matter because we hadn't seen water for over three hours.

July 2009. It was an unusual heat wave and my friend Joe Grant and I decided to run thirty-four miles around the base of Mount St. Helens in Washington. It was one of those days where the heat danced, vapor rising in blurred wave off the jet-black pumice boulders spread around us. While living in Portland, Oregon, this nearby route was my first introduction to long-distance running and already I had been inducted into the hall of hallucinatory fame. We followed the Loowit Trail skirting around this blown-out volcano, a route that typically took several days to backpack. We hoped to finish in several hours. But I'd never travelled this far on foot in a single day. Nothing even close. I arrived in basketball shorts, heavy shoes, a cotton t-shirt, and one peanut butter sandwich. Joe convinced me that I was ready, but his previous experience covering long distances muddied his judgment.

“You okay, man?” Joe barked from up the trail. His synthetic tone of optimism suggested he already knew how I felt.

“Yah, yah,” I choked on my lie. “Solid.” In truth, I’d never been so un-solid in my entire life. Cramps. Dried mouth. Bloody knees. Headache. Gasping for air, I returned to lapping the stream’s silty runoff, baleen or not. We had set forth around this mountain at sunrise with less gear than I would pack for a walk around the block. I played sports my whole life but had never run for fun, and certainly not thirty-four miles over technical terrain in one day. This was entirely new territory for me, and it all started here, circling volcanoes on foot. But something about it felt familiar. Just as I was summoned three years before to circle the world, long-distance foot travel found me revolving along a circuit, too. This time it was around a mountain, not a planet. It was in this moment, a facedown failure in the drainage—dehydrated, humiliated, dreaming of whales—that something new surfaced.

The last miles were a death march. We weren’t running anymore; I’d call it an honorable stumble. When Joe and I finally arrived to our car ten hours, I vomited twice and lost consciousness in a gas station bathroom on the drive home. When the dust and stomach finally settled, as painful as it was, something clicked. Maybe it was that humbling interview with my own mortality. Maybe it was that grandeur of Mount St. Helens screaming its raucous song into my sunken eye-sockets. Or maybe it was completing yet another grand circuit, a loop not of the entire globe but of one closer to home, one beginning with waterfalls and wildflowers and ending with lunar landscapes and several-hundred-foot deep washouts.

Whatever it was, I felt alive.

Don't be fooled—I love summits. I'd love to take all the mountaintops I've ever reached and arrange them into a tight bouquet next to my bed where I can smell them when I wake up. That's how mad I am for summits, those points defiant of erosion and fastidious in their service to plant and animal. Come visit, they whisper, but don't linger too long.

As we worked our way around that volcano, I had, without knowing it, begun a new ritual, this time on foot, and this time around backyard contours. After spending a full year traveling around the world, long-distance foot travel motioned me toward a new task, still rounded at the edges but intimately more local. In the years that followed, I made it a point to visit all the volcanoes that dotted the Pacific Northwest horizon. Mount Hood. Mount Adams. The Three Sisters. Rainier. Each peak shape-shifted into invitations for circuitous foot travel. They'd been there all along; it was me that needed to show up. I needed to see differently.

Beginning with the circuit around Mount St. Helens, I became entrenched in the strange world of long-distance mountain running. I ventured into longer distances: those thirty-four miles made it possible to consider fifty miles, sixty miles, and, eventually, one hundred miles in a day. I felt a grounded self-reliance with this new practice. During long wilderness runs, I felt rhythms of place more punctuated than ever. By covering dozens of dirt miles on foot in a single day, I unlocked some new intimate overland experience. By the end of these outings, I could sketch the entire shape of a run in my mind. I could follow the route's spine, its backbone, its valley-bottoms swerving north or south, down and up. These circumnavigations in particular revealed a mountain's full ecological

profile. Experiencing the mountain from every angle seemed to me a more respectful way, full, reverent and restrained from needing a summit to conquer.

My courtship with the Pacific Northwest began with encircling volcanoes, these symmetrical, fire-bellied gods arcing upwards and inwards and leaching awe from anyone who dared to gaze. I began to learn more circular foot travel, *circumambulation*. Often the stories weren't running but walking, walking with deep intention or spiritual motivation. To be certain, my earliest running circuits around the bases of mountains weren't in praise of any god, but I also didn't discount the unique power of circular motion afoot, of moving around massive hunks of untamable earth. I discovered later that the history of circumambulation predated my petty mountain circuits by tens of thousands of years, spanning across every inhabitable continent on the planet.

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The origins are fuzzy, its year zero a mystery. Some scholars suggest that the earliest accounts of circumambulation are founded in solar mimicry, a pedestrian circling to move in concert with the sun's perceived orbital motion. Many considered the Sun a God, an unparalleled life force that brought sight, safety, and sustenance. As far back as 3,000 B.C.E., in ancient Egypt there were accounts of worshiping the sun deity Ra by walking circuitously. In Bihar, Northern India, early temples were dedicated to the Hindu Sun-god Surya, where pilgrims allegedly circumambulated to atone for their sins. Freemasonry also originally incorporated circumambulation as a form of sun worship: "The emblem of the Blazing Star alludes to the Sun as a symbol of Deity. The rite of

Circumambulation has a direct solar allusion, as it was always performed from right to left, in imitation of the apparent course of the sun from East to West by way of the South.”

The poet Gary Snyder, after his first exposure to circumambulation among Zen Buddhist *yamabushi* in Japan in 1956, understood the beginnings of circular walking as “part of ancient Indo-European lore, Indo-Aryan lore, that probably goes back to central Asia, and which includes the Celts. Some of these people came down into India with these customs.” He describes the circling of burial mounds as some of the first known circumambulatory rituals. Though its origins aren’t fully understood, one thing is certain: humans are hardwired for imitation. Circumambulation, then, might be considered one of our earliest attempts at *biomimicry*, carbon-copied efforts to revolve on soil as our sun seemed to revolve in the sky, moving from east to west, clockwise when peering south.

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One early morning in August 2011, a group of seven arrived at Timberline Lodge on Mount Hood’s southern flank. I recognized Grand Slam record-holder Ian Sharman, second-place Hardrock 100-mile finisher and friend from Mt. St. Helens, Joe Grant, and top-10 Western States 100-mile finisher Yassine Diboun. The wind snapped and flailed hard enough to rip sunglasses off my face in the first mile. Below us, a sunrise glow blanketed the tumbling foothills—soft lavender fringed with gold.

Much like Mount St. Helens, this 42-mile circumnavigation felt complete, diverse. Mount Hood—Wy’East as named by the Multnomah tribe—felt temperamental.

As we made our way slowly around the 11,249-foot mountain, it was almost as if I were discovering a more honest version of a friend: the south-facing sections were fast to melt and revealed rocks and roots, while northern slopes hid introverted under snowpack. Wildflowers exploded with color and fragrance on the playful eastern exposures. For ten hours, we whirled counter-clockwise along the Timberline Trail, dropping into deep chasms, climbing up washouts with ropes, and making off-trail decisions through lingering snow. At one point near the end, I looked back at a particularly striking section where snow draped over the peak into wrinkled contours below. It appeared as if the mountain wore a flowing white dress that I had been dancing around all day, clinging playfully to her frills. Of course, it was mile 38 and I could've just been losing it.

Throughout the day, I felt strong at points and struggled in others. But this sort of psychophysical interplay was compelling, especially on circuitous routes. How I felt on one side of the mountain seemed to reflect the very behavior of the exposure itself—its contours, its trail conditions, its shade and water availability. I was beginning to discover that the shape of the route often determined the overall experience. Moving around something as opposed to simply conquering a summit, something writer-wanderer Nan Shepherd often spoke of. “I am on a plateau again,” she once wrote in *The Living Mountain*. “having gone round it like a dog in circles to see if it is a good place...I think it is, and I am to stay up here for a while.” She preferred to circumambulate her beloved Cairngorm mountains of Scotland. She found humility and restraint in the art of circling, of going into and across the mountain, not single-mindedly up. Writer Robert Macfarlane, in his introduction to Shepherd’s book, said: “The pilgrim contents herself

always with looking along and inwards to mystery, where the mountaineer longs to look own and outwards onto total knowledge.”

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As humans migrated across the planet, so too did the evolving practice of circumambulation. In the earliest years of Hindu tradition from the Vedic period (1750 BCE to 500 B.C.E.), early Hindu adepts incorporated what was called *pradakshina* or *parikrama*, circuitous clockwise walking around stupas, temples, and shrines. A prominent Hindu myth explains circumambulation’s beginnings. One day, Lord Shiva and his wife Parvati told their two children, Ganesh and Kartikeyan, to go out and explore the world. Kartikeyan took to the road for decades riding a peacock and traveling around the globe, while Ganesh decided to encircle his parents, walking around them and proclaiming that the world was contained right here, right now. Hindu devotees today will walk around shrines or deities—odd numbered laps around female deities, even numbers around male deities. Sikhism, a tradition born in the 15th century from northwest India’s Punjab region, also incorporates circumambulation as part of traditional wedding ceremonies.

When Buddhism surfaced out of India around 500 B.C.E., many of its practitioners borrowed rituals from Hindu tradition, including circumambulation. In Indonesia, for example, the world’s largest Buddhist monument is the ninth-century Borobudur Stupa in Central Java. This is the site of a popular circumambulation where you spiral up over 100 feet, three levels through engraved Buddhist cosmology: from a

world of desires below, to piercing the world of illusory form and eventually formlessness at its apex. On Japan's Shikoku Island, there exists a challenging 750-mile circumambulation that links together 88 different Buddhist shrines. In Zen Buddhism, a common walking practice is *kinhin*, a circular walk performed after hours of seated *zazen* meditation. The practice of *kinhin* is designed to fold in mindfulness from seated meditation with something as simple and everyday as walking.

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The beam of Joe Grant's headlamp confirmed that he was on the right path: The Wonderland Trail. This 93-mile circuit around Washington's Mount Rainier is the queen of all volcano routes in the Pacific Northwest, and Joe wished to set the F.K.T.—Fastest Known Time—fully unsupported. For most conventional backpacking expeditions, the trip takes a few weeks. Joe posted a photo the morning he started and his pack included one water bottle, a bag of granola bars and gel packs, an emergency blanket, a map, and a windbreaker. His goal? Finish in one day, twenty hours or less.

Joe had mentored me into the practice of long-distance running, and he became an unquenchable source of inspiration for me throughout my development. His simplicity, his philosophy, his grace on the trail and love for unmodified space was unmatched. I was Joe's grasshopper, his student in the art of mountain foot travel, and he too felt equally drawn to circumnavigation, more than just competition. "For me, circumnavigation is a mix of logic, aesthetics, and reverence to the mountain," he told

me. “Running around something offers a different type of relationship with the place over an ascent.”

As he began, the day opened up, the sun rose, and everything began to click. His body felt light, nimble, and free. No external conditions, no rough weather or poorly marked trail was stopping his attempt to be the fastest human to whip around this loaf of volcanic earth and rock. Up and down washouts, through river crossings, thousands of vertical climbing and descending. Eventually, night fell and Joe clicked his headlamp on. He’d been moving for over eighteen hours and was still running well, with ten miles to go before he'd shatter the previous record by a few hours. A pregnant moon above brought a silver sheen to an otherwise dark, dense forest.

Suddenly, from behind, a twig snapped.

Joe looked back to discover a full-grown cougar stalking him no more than twenty feet behind. In that moment, he looked into the large cat’s eyes and saw his own mortality looking right back at him. Joe threw sticks, yelled, roared, puffed his chest and walked backwards. Nothing worked. Just when he thought he had lost the cougar, the stalking feline would re-appear from the dark, his eyes burning with intrigue in the light of Joe’s headlamp. When he finally reached a campground, Joe woke a stranger in her tent and asked to sit in her truck. Terrified and fatigued, Joe pulled the plug on his attempt and hitchhiked back to his car, defeated and trembling. “The most difficult part was the feeling of helplessness,” he said. “Stalking is much more nerve-wracking than direct confrontation. I couldn't opt out of the situation.”

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The history of circling on foot extends to the world's 1.6 billion Muslims, as the practice of *tawaf*, is paramount to spiritual devotion. The pilgrimage to Mecca is the fifth pillar of Islam, following a declaration of faith, ritual prayer, obligatory alms, and the fast (Ramadan). For five days in early fall, an average of two million Muslims from 188 different countries around the world swarm the Hajj, overwhelming the city's capacity to house, feed, and tend to medical and safety concerns. Hotels burst at the seams, food and water are trucked in, 45,000 tents are set up, and 750,000 sheep are brought in for food and ceremony. There are 5,000 surveillance cameras and over 18,000 police officers on hand during the ritual. Watch a video of the Hajj and it's unclear if you're witnessing religious tradition or a time-lapse of the Milky Way.

The Hajj mirrors a more individual dance performance by Mevlevis, or Whirling Dervishes, part of an esoteric, mystic sect of Islam—the Sufis. During a traditional ceremony, the *Samazan*, with his traditional hat, *sikka*, and long flowing gown, *tannura*, takes off his jacket to begin his revolutions—his evolution—on the path of profound contemplation. The dancer begins turning around on his own axis, clockwise, in an entranced state. “Circling with the full devotion of his heart, he embraces all nations of the world, and all of creation, with the utmost love and respect.” The symbols of this circumambulation are many—the creation of humans; birth into this world; progress after the realization of servitude; a circular dance to bridge God and ground. This helps embody rapture for everything, from the smallest atoms to the largest celestial objects. The dancer eventually begins “abandoning personal identity and the self to become lost in God,” and, when they finish, the dancer becomes closer to their service of God. “To

die before actually dying, that's what important in this world. To kill your ego." A demand for more progressive spiritual responses in the Middle East came with the emergence of Bahai, established in Iran during the 1800s. The Bahai tradition is one of the fastest growing religions today and incorporates circumambulation as well. During important pilgrimages to Haifa and Bahji in Israel, Bahaimans will walk laps around the Shrines of Bab and Bahauallah in complete silence.

In Judeo-Christian tradition, circumambulation represents circuitous motion of reverence around the sacred, courting the interiority of God. In Jewish tradition, *hakafot* is a walk or dance around sacred objects completed at night and during *Sukkot*, the Jewish fasting holiday. This tradition is performed in large groups with participants carrying closed Torah scrolls in their hands, a symbolic and temporary dismissal of the intellect. Participants will dance for seven rounds, referencing a story in the Book of Joshua where Israelites walked around Jericho once a day for a week, then seven times on the final day, when, after shouting and blowing loud horns, the walls of Jericho fell and they were finally able to enter. In the Catholic Church, often a priest will encircle an altar of sacred objects depicting Jesus or Mary three times, to represent the Holy Trinity.

Swiss psychologist Carl Jung held strong Christian beliefs and once analyzed The Last Supper as a circular ingestion and incorporation of the Lord around a round table. "Ritual circumambulation often bases itself quite consciously on the cosmic picture of the starry heavens revolving, on the 'dance of the stars' equivalent to a mandala, symbolic of the self."

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Mountains aren't the only feature worth circling. Lakes, oceans, peninsulas, craters, ranges. Naturally, mountains provide intuitive contours to consider looping around their bases, something I've always been drawn to the shape. So when my friend Willie McBride told me he was planning to run the 200-mile circumference of Lake Tahoe in Northern California in less than three days, I needed to be there. First, the Sierra Nevada was my home range. Everytime I say the words, I smell warming pine needles. My mind skips up slabbed granite and peers into high meadows and lakes. I'd spent considerable time around this lake as a child.

I met with Willie a few days before to prepare, to look over maps, and make sure we had the route covered. It was part of an informal race, a few dozen foot travelers wishing to complete the circle in 100 hours or less.

The gun went off and Willie was off. I met him 12 hours into the race at mile 70, and ran with him until mile 100. We had met in the calm of night, after he'd been moving all day. He'd arrived into the aid station looking tired, so I guided him to his sleeping bag and set his timer for two hours later. He crawled into his pack muddy and salt-encrusted. Getting him up two hours later wasn't easy. His body rebelled. It needed more sleep, more recovery than two hours. Delirious, he eventually rose, put his shoes back on his blistered feet, and continued forward.

At sunrise, we took a break to watch the sun bleed into the pine forests and dash over the lakeshore. With its warmth came renewed hope and energy. After 70 hours of forward movement, and only four hours of total sleep, Willie finally finished the loop to the cheer of his family and crew. He wept. We all wept. The circle was complete. The journey unexpectedly brought up a lot in me. The totality of his experience. Its

completeness. All the work, all the preparations. I sat on Tahoe's lakeshore after the race while Willie slept and I traced my thumb along his unfathomable route, and I remembered my initial call to around-the-world travel. I floated back to that first painful but transformative loop around Mt. St. Helens that began my love affair with long-distance running. I drew a circle with my big toe in the lakeshore pebbles and uncovered this common thread. These routes were all circular. They were clean. And they were inherently ecological and cyclical, orbital and whole. Perhaps we're all drawn to certain patterns of this planet in different ways. For me, it seemed to first arrive in the shape of circuitous motion, that seasonal becoming and dissolving, that feeding-and-being-fed metabolism, of revolving, of genuine *revolution*.

Despite most of world's religious traditions adopting circumambulation as ritual, circling the sacred hasn't become relegated to one specific religion or part of the world. It's universal. It's shared. Its ubiquity I found reflects two primary, universal forces: *a way towards discovery and a way home*. The devout circles to court some inner, localized truth, while also surrendering to something greater. Mimicking the sun. Circling mountain gods. The churn of millions around Hajj's Black Stone. Whirling dervishes shaped like hurricanes. Life and death, weddings and funerals, all celebrated around the planet through circumambulation. To perform revolutions afoot is entirely human; it's a motion shared by billions. While I first learned more about circumambulation through the experience of circling volcanoes afoot, I had no idea what this practice would later have planned for me.

Chapter III: Kailash

“Chasing angels or fleeing demons, go to the mountains.” – Jeffrey Rasley

One Step Clockwise

A Chinese boy screamed as he wobbled off the ramp and into Lhasa International Airport. The terminal looked force-fed into modernity and scrambled together travelers and military recruits. The child stood alone amidst the shuffle. His crow-black hair was buzzed and his face red from crying, crimson like blood, like fury, like the color of his shirt, which read:

Big Brother Rules.

And the mountains surrounding Lhasa wore emeralds. Upper greens tapered to lower browns into the small townships that spread along valley bottoms. On arrival, I had seen the half-million people stuffed into Tibet's capital city. Once legendary for its isolation, Lhasa is now reachable in a few days by bus, train, and plane from anywhere in the world. Ten to fifteen million tourists visit Tibet each year, mostly Chinese. The city sits in the floodplains of the Kyi Chu River, which braids through a diffuse sprawl of bridges, greenhouses, and barley fields. The river is also a tributary to the greater Yarlung Tsangpo, a 1,765-mile ribbon running east the entire length of the Tibetan Plateau and beginning at the foot of Mount Kailash, where I was headed.

There are two things you can't miss when descending into Lhasa—power lines and prayer flags. Thick, high-voltage tendrils run over mountaintops, and it's not until you get closer that the prayer flags come into view. Less calculated, their multicolored cloth pivots from rock and monastery. But the power lines, they don't move. They're authoritative and purposed, with electricity racehorses through each cylinder of utility to spread the promise of progress.

At nearly 12,000 feet, Lhasa is one of the highest capital cities in the world. When I stepped onto the tarmac, my heart raced to counter thickening blood. Extremities gestured first—throbbing head, toes, and fingers. My expedition group congregated after security and I counted twenty-one, all much older than me. Two young Tibetan guides, Tashi and Tenzin, ushered us into shuttles and stood in for our main guide, author and explorer Ian Baker. Driving towards our guesthouse, I learned about some of the others I would be with for the next three weeks:

Uli, Switzerland—young and thick-thighed; smart glasses and sand-colored hair to her ears; worked in marketing; wore bright colors; an eruptive laugh, the kind leaving you awkward if you didn't laugh back.

Macy, Washington—small, fragile woman in her fifties; permanent smile and kind eyes; taught yoga to children in Seattle; toothpicks for legs, peach-fuzz mustache.

Martin and Ann, Switzerland—gorgeous pairing, like sauvignon blanc and scallops; stately and calculated. Martin, wire-glasses and muscled; alpha male; worked in financial sector. Ann, liberal amounts of makeup; sweet, charismatic, quiet.

Yvan and Nym, Thailand—two television personalities from Bangkok making travel documentary for Thai show. Yvan, videographer; British but living in Thailand; thin face, young-spirited; ring on finger. Nym, Thai woman, short with pig-tails and blue scarf; tight travel pants and jet-black Ray-bans; ring on finger; not married to Yvan, but same guestroom.

Ginny and Maddy, Maine—family to Ian Baker. Ginny, his mother, short, wore a seasoned explorer's hat; gray hair and big teeth; always asking for Ian; lived alone.

Maddy, Ian's cousin; middle-aged; high-elevation medical specialist; overly sarcastic; lived alone.

Pierre, Canada—French-Canadian language instructor; droopy, pale skin; thick accent; wore a red, oversized Montreal Canadiens hockey jersey.

Pierre was the first to speak to me after we settled into our rooms.

“Hey kid, you going to stir up some trouble?” he said. “Name's Pierre. I'm a crazy fucker obsessed with this place. Nice to meet another pilgrim of the depths.” I had no idea what that meant. Pierre's eyes scanned left and right before stepping close to tell a secret. His breath smelled like rotting apricots.

“You into hockey, kid?” The jersey made his opinion obvious. Pierre changed course. “Do you know that on top of Mount Kailash sits Shiva? You will see, man. This place is fucking something else. Something else.”

“Not your first time?” I asked.

Pierre smiled, exposing a rack of broken teeth. “Oh man. Been here before, yes. Fucking unreal. Came with a bunch of Hindus from India. Way different, kid.” Pierre closed his mouth to gurgled the memory. Though abrasive, he was the friendliest of the bunch so far, like a loving but half-psychotic uncle. Together we stepped into a street clogged with bicycles, cars, and rickshaws as they inched forward along Beijing Road. Smells of kalajeera cumin met cheap cologne and petroleum leaking into forgotten sewage, while monks and businessmen dodged street dogs and pink-cheeked children. Storefront women picked their teeth with packing wire.

The four military officers paid no attention to us as we slid our backpacks through a security checkpoint. In 1959 the Chinese invaded Tibet claiming it as part of China,

and, for the past half-century, police and military forces have saturated the country. The young soldiers dressed in green fatigues and held semi-automatic rifles and billy clubs. Our entrance into the Jokhang Monastery, the most revered in Tibet, wasn't nearly as important as their text messages. Tall, whitewashed walls marked the entrance, and hundreds of Tibetans folded their bodies in prostration under gold-fringed tapestries hung from the rafters. Built in the seventh century by Tibet's founding king, Songtsen Gampo, the Jokhang features thousand-meter murals, lavish courtyards, and the single most precious artifact in Tibet—a humble, four-foot statue of Buddha. One of the king's several wives allegedly brought it from China, a symbol marking the moment Buddhism entered Tibet.

Pierre and I stood at the Jokhang's front gate flanked by two towers of burning sage, or *sang*. A one-mile cobblestone path circled its perimeter while a steady flow of pilgrims circumambulated the path. My first experience with this peculiar walking practice had been almost a decade earlier, in Kathmandu, Nepal. But being in Tibet was different. Though I was now witnessed these footprints with updated eyes, I still felt like an outsider.

Tibetans refer to circumambulation as *kora*. Within the city limits, there are three main circuits: One encircles the entire city (*lingkhor*), the second encloses the Jokhang (*barkhor*), and the third follows a tight corridor inside the temple chambers (*nangkhor*). Tibetans conduct *kora* around anything—temples, homes, mountains, lakes, even other people. Their reasons are many: to embody the cyclical nature of reincarnation; to mimic the revolving Buddhist Wheel; to conduct a cleansing; to honor the dead or dying; to

acquire future merit and happiness. For others, *kora* is an easy way to see friends, catch up on gossip, and fit in exercise.

Outside Lhasa, the most important site for *kora* in the Buddhist, Bon, Hindu, and Jain world—over two billion people—is Mount Kailash. This 21,778-foot Himalayan massif in Western Tibet thrust upwards thirty million years ago and is the source to four major rivers—the Karnali, Indus, Sutlej, and Brahmaputra. Seven hundred fifty million people—a population double that of the U.S.—depend on freshwater from these four rivers alone. Because of Tibet’s 46,000 glaciers, many consider this plateau to be the planet’s “Third Pole,” the largest freshwater repository outside of its polar reserves.

Symmetrical and four-sided, Mount Kailash—*Kang Rinpoche* in Tibetan—is known as an *axis mundi*, a heart-center of the world, a tent pole propping up the cosmos, a conduit between heaven and earth, a navel upon which the whole Hindu-Buddhist cosmology lives. Because of this, the peak remains untouched by humans. Instead, thousands of pilgrims arrive each year to follow a thirty-two mile path clockwise around its base over several days. Some perform full prostrations, while others ambitiously complete 108 laps of the mountain, a number you see everywhere in the Buddhist-Hindu world, determined by early Vedic mathematicians to represent wholeness. Interestingly, it took Russia’s Sputnik 1 exactly 108 minutes to first orbit the Earth in 1957. Whether it’s one lap or 108 prostrations, each circuit is said to keep Kailash from flying away. Buddha was first to nail down this mountain with four of his own footprints in the cardinal directions, so the gods wouldn’t lift up Kailash and take off.

Recently, *kora* has become an act of resistance, a reclamation of sacred geographies. It’s become both a safeguard for protecting Tibetan identity, while shielding

future exploitation—ecologically, politically, and spiritually. British writer Colin Thurbon journeyed to Mount Kailash in 2009, following the death of his mother. In his travel memoir, *To a Mountain in Tibet*, he said: “Somewhere in these wilds they may whisper to the fierce mountain gods to bring back the Dalai Lama to Lhasa and drive the Chinese out.”

Pierre and I waited for an appropriate moment to enter the stream of pilgrims circling the Jokhang. Amid their mumbled prayers, we joined in their revolutions.

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A late morning sun drifted through the lobby curtains of our Lhasa guesthouse. Ian Baker, the main guide, slouched on the couch, his khaki vest buttoned over a white travel shirt. Not those fake shirts you find on sale at outdoor stores but the worn, threadbare kind that real explorers might wear. Ian’s black hair was a bun in the back and bald in the front, concealed with a large-brimmed hat. At nearly sixty years old, he appeared deceptively youthful. Indiana Jones, meet John Malkovich.

I had just graduated college in 2005 when I first encountered Ian Baker’s book *The Heart of the World*, documenting his harrowing trip through Tibet’s Pemako region in search of the Tsangpo Gorge and a hunt for a real Shangri-La. A British accent clung to a few syllables as he spoke to another traveler, residual from doctoral studies at Oxford and London College. In the morning glow, Baker’s eyes looked tired and slightly unfulfilled, the sort of gaze an explorer of the deep sea might have after too many days beneath the surface. I’d learn more about Ian later, mainly from his mother.

Waterproof duffle bags piled up to the lobby's ceiling, and Tashi and Tenzin struggled to stuff them all into two minibuses. Our two-week overland journey started today, its itinerary leading us through Shigatse, Tibet's second biggest city. We'd then camp along the road until Mount Kailash, where we would spend four days circumambulating the mountain. From there, we'd drive further west to explore the caves of Guge Kingdom before looping back to Lake Manasarovar, then back to Lhasa. Nineteen travelers piled into two minibuses, while the Swiss couple requested a Land Cruiser, their questions needing extra attention.

There's only major highway that crosses the Tibetan Plateau, and it follows the Yarlung Tsangpo River. This river flows east until it turns and falls off the high plateau, dropping south into India over 8,000 vertical feet, careening through some of the deepest gorges on the planet—the same canyons explored by Baker years ago. Some of these chasms are twice as deep as the Grand Canyon. The river's hairpin turn is called the "Great Bend," and it generates tremendous power. For some, adventure and intrigue. For others, power and profit.

The Chinese are currently building a megadam at the Great Bend that dwarves the infamous Three Gorges Dam, a controversial hydroelectric project that displaced 1.3 million people—comparable to kicking out Manhattan—and destroyed entire ecosystems. China is the biggest dam builder in the world by far, and Tibet possesses enormous hydroelectric potential. Imagine the plateau as a large, fragile plate full of water held high; tip the plate and you create serious kinetic potential. There are plans to build

twenty-eight cascading dams along this stretch of the Yarlung Tsangpo that would generate forty-four gigawatts, double the output of the Three Gorges Dam. By comparison, the most productive dam in the United States, the Grand Coulee, generates less than seven gigawatts.

Our westward convoy followed the river upstream towards Kailash. The sedated flow hadn't yet yielded to its downstream fate. Speed bumps signaled of an oncoming military checkpoint, where a Chinese soldier stood erect by the side of the road. The guard didn't face Kailash; he looked northeast, to Beijing. Our buses slowed but the soldier's posture held flawless. White helmet. White straps. White belt. All perfectly aligned and laundered. A rifle followed the seam of his right pant leg. Suddenly, our driver sped up and slurred under his breath. Getting closer, I noticed that this lone soldier didn't move. He was a statue. All along the highway, the Chinese government had placed hundreds of fake soldiers made of plaster and metal. Security scarecrows.

Ian Baker stared ahead, gripping the driver seat in front of him. He'd seen this ploy before. We began to discuss Mount Kailash, and I learned of his many experiences with pilgrimages in Tibet, India, and Bhutan. Ian believed that circumambulation was a process of depersonalizing. He told me that when a pilgrim performed *kora* around Mount Kailash, he could transcend ordinary consciousness if his motivation was pure. As the pilgrim circled the mountain and scaled over its high pass, his pain could be converted into a sort of detached discomfort.

"You no longer experience the hardship in a personalized way," he said. "You transcend the egoic consciousness to this more ecocentric view, where you're just part of a tremendous whole. In a sense of self, any kind of narrowing or limiting is just dissolved

into this movement, into this circling.” Ian’s eyes built from smolder to wildfire.

“Circling is what the planets do.” He tucked a rogue hair behind his ear. “To me, in the ultimate sense, that’s what *kora* becomes. It’s like we’re surrendering, we’re participating in a very voluntary and intentional way, in a kind of cosmic order, where planets rotate. The solar system rotates. The...”

Zheep! Zheep! Zheep!

Warning sounds interrupted his explanation. Plugged into the cigarette lighter, a speed governor issued by the Chinese chirped whenever our driver disobeyed the speed limit, which was often. Pierre convulsed into laughter from the backseat. No one sat with him anymore.

“If you look a bit deeper,” Ian continued, “we’re actually spinning in the cosmos right now at a tremendous speed. We’re both circumnavigating the sun and at the same time spinning on our own axis. Everything circles.”

“Then why is it so important for *kora* to be done with others?” I asked. “What makes it so special for it to be a shared effort?” Ian sat with this for a few seconds.

“Because you’re slipping into a stream, a current,” he said. “You’re part of a collective movement with a shared intentionality that, to a certain degree, is the same. In a certain sense, everyone is going around the mountain with the same intention—of reflecting and transforming their lives. Overcoming something that’s limiting and holding you back, to something where that limit is no longer there.” Ian failed to blink. The skin on his face pulled tight around a sharp nose, while his words flashed like a candle flickering in its own wax.

Zheep! Zheep! Zheep!

The Chinese-issued speed governor sounded off again. Pierre giggled and scratched himself. Ian muttered something chummy in Tibetan to the driver, who ignored him.

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After a week of driving, the group had grown weary. Our caravan covered over 1,000 miles and scaled several 16,000-foot nauseating passes. The checkpoints—I counted twenty-three—delayed us for hours. Yet, in every possible direction, tremendous oceans of grass and barley fields unfolded into foothills and striated rock that reached far back into deeper unknowns. This plateau was one enormous game of hide-and-seek, its contours shape-shifted by cloud shadow and riding the endless squalls of grassland to juggle both place and perception.

By the evening, we finally reached Darchen, gateway to Mount Kailash, a town offering little to soften the weariness. At over 15,000 feet, this once-sleepy post used to be a station for traveling nomads and herders. It's now become a Wild West sprawl where traders merge with unchecked commercialism and filth. Darchen's three bustling streets formed a trident layout, each prong tapering north towards the foul weather and foothills that concealed Mount Kailash.

A hard rain arrived when we did, driving the locals indoors. The guesthouse Ian reserved no longer existed, so we relocated to the only other available hotel. Tashi and Tenzin unloaded bags in the middle of the road, while some of the group started to

venture off on their own. Others sought shelter from the rain. After repeated attempts to keep the group together, Ian finally erupted.

“Stop!” he yelled. Only rain drops. “Stop exactly where you are.” With a face beet-red, he demanded that people follow his direction. The tension was palpable. The drizzle persisted.

Two Steps Clockwise

An unclaimed human tooth sat on the windowsill. Stained by plaque and pink blood, the tooth leaned to one side, dislodged like an evicted tenant left to fend for itself without gums or jawlines to call home. Next to the tooth, three flies laid belly-up in a quarter inch of dust and flaked skin from the guestroom’s unending stream of visitors. White cinderblock walls offered the illusion of cleanliness while five plywood cots clogged a room made for two. More beds. More people. More money.

Darchen, Western Tibet.

Except for the two psychedelic bears dueling on my pillowcase, I woke up alone. One bear was lime-green and played the flute, while the other, communist red, marched with an oversized drum. Chinese characters arched above them, leaving space in the middle where my head rested and I slept, barely. Perhaps I was restless because we now slept at above 15,000 feet. Perhaps it was the anticipation—today we’d begin our four-day walk around Kailash, a journey I’d been dreaming about for years. Or perhaps it was avoiding paint chips that fell from my ceiling when the Indian couple next door had rough sex for the third time at 3:15 a.m. and used our shared wall as a backboard.

We walked twelve miles the first day, all above 16,000 feet, the path flat and kind to unqualified lungs. Waterfalls tumbled from cliffs hundreds of feet high, into the Lha Chu River Valley we followed. Eroded rock troughed into the valleys to carve a natural way around. Still, I waited for some centrifugal force to make the *kora* to feel more circular. It remained linear. Maybe I was going too fast. “I stride along with calm, with eyes, with shoes, with fury, with forgetfulness.” Pablo Neruda walked with such resign.

A Tibetan family picnicked on the side of the trail. I was surprised to see few Tibetan pilgrims on the *kora*, especially during the Year of the Horse, which works on a twelve-year cycle. This year, 2014, marked the Year of the *Wood Horse*, a special year when Buddha was born. To visit Kailash during this year was to double down on karmic merit. We passed Tarboche, a famous ceremonial prayer pole, expecting to see hundreds of circling pilgrims. It was closed. Fenced off. Nobody. A security guard kept us from lingering. Ian later explained to me that the Chinese had felt a punctuated threat this year for large gatherings of Tibetans, so permits were restricted. There were also plans underway to cheapen Kailash into a major tourist destination, and engineers had begun to pave a road around the mountain for tour buses to encircle it in an air-conditioned afternoon.

A survey of litter along the trail:

instant noodle wrappers;

hundreds of plastic water bottles;

mini cans of Red Bull, gold-rimmed with two beasts, heads butting;

one, no two, bloody tampons;

toilet paper, soiled;

pink paper prayer squares looking purple and bruised;
corroded car battery, large;
manila envelope with official-looking address from the Chinese government;
grey cotton sweatshirt, ripped;
box of plastic syringes, one left.

The trash funneled into a drainage normally fed by glacial melt. Next to the trash, an overburdened barrel leaned with Tibetan, Chinese, and English translations:

Treasure the Environment, No Littering.

The Tibetan family rested on colored blankets as their youngest boy squatted near the stream of garbage. I assumed he was defecating but realized later he'd been poking the trash with a stick. The child flashed me a look, one I had seen before, nearly ten years ago.

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November 2006. An afternoon sun sagged over Himalayan foothills surrounding Jampaling Tibetan refugee camp near Pokhara, Nepal, where my girlfriend and I were conducting research. After the 1959 Chinese invasion of Tibet, there were three waves of exodus for Tibetans: the first was immediate; nearly 100,000 left along with the Dalai Lama. The second wave came in the mid-1980s, when the Chinese liberalized Tibet's travel and economic activities. Over 25,000 Tibetans fled to adjacent countries, mainly India and Nepal, through terrifying conditions. The third and current wave is bringing thousands of Tibetans each year into Dharamsala, where the Tibetan Government-in-

Exile operates. It's said that more than one million Tibetans are either dead or missing since the invasion. Quiet genocide.

The Tibetan administration let us stay in exchange for teaching English to their children each afternoon. I had just come down with food poisoning from vegetable stew contaminated by a feral cat I caught lapping from the pot earlier.

“Meesta Dhundup! Not that far. We go now!”

My students pleaded and giggled at the Tibetan name they gave me. Of all the days, this was the afternoon they chose to take me on a four-hour hike to a nearby shrine. My bowels protested, my head spun, but I couldn't pass up the opportunity. Outside, a mauve haze braided together smells of charred alder and stewed coriander. I followed my Tibetan troupe through the foothills, but all I could think of was getting back to my room, back to my sledgehammered hole for a toilet. We finally made it to a small cave converted into a beautiful Hindu shrine. Hindu or Buddhist, sacred was sacred to them.

On the return home, I lost two of the boys. It was getting dark and my stomach was gurgling louder. Collecting myself, I asked the group about the missing students. They all pointed up the trail. After retracing my steps, I spotted the two crouched by a stream. One of the kids held a small jar filled with murky liquid while the other watched. Upstream, a Nepali teenager stood ankle-deep in the water, fishing with a net.

“What are you two doing?” I asked the boys. “Can't you see we're all trying to get home before dark? We need to stick together!” I was on edge, my face the color of queasy. Finally, the kid with the jar stared into my eyes, and, with his finest English, replied:

“Meesta Dundhup, I felt bad about these fish being caught by that boy upstream. Too young. Too soon. So I bought the ones he’d caught, put them in this jar, walked downstream and released them. They’re free now, you see, Meesta Dundhup?”

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Dawn is the best time to witness the reveal of Himalayan high country. Mount Kailash’s northwestern face exposed a muscular wall of grey-brown granite shooting several thousand feet straight up. Snow accumulated at the summit, but this face was far too steep for any buildup. Nothing lingered there for long but passing shadow. And Shiva.

It was the second morning of the *kora*. The skies were navy-blue, the air cold as blades. Two lesser hills cradled Kailash as it erupted between their slopes. Imagine a “W” with these foothills edging towards Kailash in the pointed middle. A plume of snowdrift from last night’s storm blew off the summit. Chiseled into the mountain’s flank was an avalanche chute the width of a school bus, arcing a thousand feet down to the mountain’s base. Steam shucked from the mountain like a rocket on countdown; it could take off at any moment.

We camped near Dirapuk Monastery after the first day’s walk. Our group acclimatized here at 17,000 feet for a day before crossing the 18,500-foot Drolma-La Pass tomorrow. Dirapuk used to be the richest monastery built near Kailash. In the 13th century, Sage Gotsampa was the first to circumambulate this mountain, and he stopped at a cave here to rest. The rock chamber had remained empty for thousands of years,

undisturbed, eroding into new shapes, hollows and hanging rock gardens. After Gotsampa arrived, it became a refuge for visiting monks and weary pilgrims. Post-occupation, it's now neglected and falling apart.

This afternoon, the half-hinged door swung open and a peculiar man entered. Something in his jacket pocket bulged, something held close to his body, his heart. It was Pierre, the abrasive Canadian, the conniving know-it-all, the guy you avoid at a café because the last time you came in, he cornered you and spoke at you for an hour about fractal cosmic orderings and it made you late for work. Pierre, that synaptic bolt of nerves shaped like an ice cream cone.

Slowly, he shifted through the monastery. The chamber was clammy from the flicker of yak-butter candles. Suddenly, a current shifted. Flames stood erect. Pierre's movements appeared sharp and calculated now. Nothing distracted him, not the ancient paintings peeling from the walls, not the monk in the corner collecting meager Chinese *yuan* to continue the eroded legacy of his people. Pierre peered into a crack in the rock, the wall with indented fingerprints of Padmasambhava, known by Tibetans as the Second Buddha. Light from a tray of butter flames exposed Pierre's concentration as he pulled a small jar from his pocket. He twisted off the top, pulled out a pinch of something clay-like, and began to roll a blueberry-sized piece between thumb and forefinger. After kneading the pellet, Pierre squatted down and murmured something, eyes shut to let nothing out—not tears, not clues, nothing.

Whispering a prayer, he brought the clay to his chest, delivered a long bow, and placed it into the crack as tender as if he were rejoining a hummingbird's femur. Pierre's head dropped low enough that vertebrae stuck through the back of his shirt like chainsaw

teeth. He looked tired. After a moment or two or who knows how many lifetimes later, the door creaked behind him. Someone else was entering the monastery cave, into this capsule of rock passing through revolutions of time. Pierre pocketed his secret jar of purple, performed a prostration, and exited the chamber.

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“He was always curious, always interested in adventure,” Ginny told me about her son, Ian, posturing in confidence. The sun had set on Kailash on the eve of tomorrow’s bid for the 18,500-foot Droma-La Pass. I sipped tea with Ginny, who had joined the trip to spend more time with her son. Ian lived in Bangkok, so meeting in Tibet wasn’t much further from her Maine home. Ginny’s eyes were sweet, always attentive and pried open to the world. Like Ian, her skin was weathered in story. Ginny stirred a spoonful of honey into her cup, clanking the tinny edges with each swirl.

“The only two kinds of books he read growing up were comics and encyclopedias,” she whispered with a laugh, concerned Ian would hear her non-academic confession. Curious, he was. As a child, Ian Baker used to scrape old gum from the bottoms of park benches to sample. He once stole Valium from a sick dog to try it for himself. Ian’s later childhood melded the high-bar demands of New England boarding school with exploration. His father was kind and gentle, an architect who often hummed Pete Seeger folksongs and took the family sailing. Ginny would later divorce him and remarry a Norwegian man, someone who oriented young Ian towards big mountains and new languages. Baker’s later inquiries would bring him through graduate and doctorate

work in Middlebury College, Oxford and Columbia University. He promptly moved to Nepal and started leading expeditions. What interested him most were hidden lands, *beyuls*, and the esoteric practices of Himalayan tantra. After the explorations that led him to writing *The Heart of the World*, in 2001 National Geographic named him one of the seven explorers of the millennium.

From the undersides of park benches to the underworlds of Asia, Ian's curiosity finally began to pay off. While on a 2007 expedition in the remote Yangsang of Northern India, he spent several weeks with indigenous people there. "These tribes had been here, unchanged for generations," he told me. "They wore collars of tiger teeth and daggers that touched the floor. The shamans were all female. Fascinating. To celebrate foreigners—which never happened because there weren't ever any—the whole village went hunting for rats. We ate barbequed rats. They were very festive."

Such experience hasn't been without controversy. In 2008, Nepali authorities raided Ian's Kathmandu house, where he had been living for fourteen years, and found 121 artifacts—tiger skins, pelts, statues, thangkas, and other items. As a Fellow and guide for the National Geographic Society and Smithsonian Institute, Ian's reputation was compromised.

His explanation?

"Completely false." In an Outside Magazine article, Ian claimed he was protecting these sacred items from being destroyed, and that the Nepali bust was a last-ditch effort for the royal police to take what they could before losing power. "You see this great legacy of culture and wildlife just being allowed to rot, to go to waste. I was trying to prevent that." He escaped to Bangkok, where he lived today.

His unending drive for cultural preservation was obvious and impressive. And yet, despite being a leading scholar of comparative literature and a lifelong practitioner of Buddhism, despite having written several books—two in collaboration with His Holiness the Dalai Lama—Ian remained cynical. He detested China’s conquest of Tibet while criticizing Buddhism’s ineffective response to environmental and social concerns.

Ginny shared her son’s accolades with great animation. As she spoke, I stole glances of Ian’s movements through camp and the respect he gave the guides. Ian was himself a hidden land, a six-foot-two *beyul* full of erudition and grit but paired with an undercurrent of anguish. Our tea cooled as Kailash disappeared into an evening storm of snow-heavy secrets.

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The Chinese man’s breathing sounded labored, like a dying tractor. Light complexion. New outdoor gear. Round stomach. Trailing behind was an old Tibetan porter, short and hunched, wrinkled with dark straw for hair. In addition to the sixty-five pound pack on the porter’s back, he held an oxygen tank in the crook of his right arm. It was a tan cylinder and looked like a missile. Plastic tubes connected the tank to a mask fastened on the Chinese man’s face, who now sat by the side of the trail, head between his legs. The Tibetan man stopped, too. He didn’t complain. He didn’t comfort his client, either. He enjoyed the break, the oxygen tank resting on his thigh, and the path cresting ahead at Drolma La Pass—18,500 feet.

The porter’s eyes were dark as coal as he looked onwards towards something familiar. Nothing grew at this elevation, and prayer flags bucked in the wind to drape the

entire pass in colored flair. Above, Kailash's glaciers and rockslides overpowered everything. The Chinese man spat to signal onward and the two began staggering again. Four more steps. Break. Two more steps. Break. One more step. Break. The two remained umbilically connected, a dependence joined by plastic tubes shuttling oxygen to the client's soft body, keeping him alive.

The elevation slowed me to a slog. Hands pushed on my thighs as I concentrated on every step. For many, this high-elevation passage simulated a *bardo*, a transition from life to death, as if the passing pilgrim were surrendering to his mortal fate and the descent were steps towards something new. *Bardo* or not, I felt like I was dying. As I approached the saddle. I'd lost most of the group. Flurried in hypoxia and dizziness, nothing remained in focus. In the flail of prayer flags, I caught sight of Pierre, alone, kneeling by a boulder with something in his hand. I had to keep going; the pressure was too much. In Robert Macfarlane's book *The Old Ways*, the author traveled to Tibet to circumambulate a remote mountain east of Kailash, Minya Konka. There he described the mountain's high elevation as if it were some "medieval pain-helmet of pig-iron jammed down over the head." Bingo.

Everything throbbed in harmony with my heartbeat as I crested the pass along with a few other pilgrim-zombies. *Shared streams of intentionality. Detached discomfort.* There were stories of dead bodies left to rot on Drolma-La Pass, mainly older Indians coming unprepared for the effort and falling dead on the spot. Luckily, I saw no such horror. Instead, three turquoise lakes reflected a surrounding amphitheater of jagged granite, fluid portals to the mountain's interior. This place was for passage, not for lingering. I put my head down, chose my line, and shuffled through the steep descent

towards oxygen, towards life.

A flash. Then a deepening roar. Another flash, this time tumbling like rockslide. Rain and wind battered our yellow tents from all sides, like a dozen fried eggs in a tilting pan. Storm clouds blocked the moon. The cutbank nearby deflected a river raging towards millions downstream. Clicking on my headlamp revealed leaking seams and a saturated tent. Backpack? Wet. Sleeping bag? Wet. Camera? Damn. Wet. A charge of lightning surged through my teeth and gums. *There were still people out there*, I thought to myself. Yvan. Nym. Macy. They never arrived and the weather had been awful for hours. I jumped out of my tent and began to dig a trench around its perimeter with a flinted rock. Lightning, then thunder boomed much too close.

Hours later, the missing three arrived rattled and soaking. Yvan, the British filmmaker, collapsed in his tent. Maddy, the high-elevation specialist, provided him with supplemental oxygen through a facemask while Nym filmed everything. I ran into Macy, the children's yoga instructor from Seattle, outside in the storm. She appeared so small in this oversized landscape. With my headlamp I saw that Macy's left eye was swollen and filling with puss. She asked me to help her pry out a contact lens that had lodged into the back of her eye. Macy handed me soft-tipped calipers and I attempted an operation under the flailing mess tent, coming away unsuccessful. The clouds kept stacking on top of each other.

On the final morning, the river was back to babbling and the sky was clear again. Macy's eye had swollen shut, and, although Yvan responded well to the oxygen, he was

still short of breath. All our gear was soaked. We walked the last ten miles back to Darchen. The section was long, flat and exposed, and I found myself walking alone—fewer thoughts, more footprints. Something had ruptured last night and I surrendered to an acceptance of unknowing. If there had been some *bardo* passage, it was too early find anything newborn aboveground. A family of five Tibetans stopped for lunch and I passed them, raising my arm with the backside of my hand—a gesture I learned watching other pilgrims.

We finally completed the circuit, exhausted and worn. Returning to the Darchen guesthouse, the group finally unraveled. *We want a hot shower, they said. Bathrooms, not blood-splattered holes. Food, not yak-everything.* Martin and Ann, the Swiss couple, refused to stay at the guesthouse and demanded an immediate Land Cruiser back to Lhasa. Maddy joined them as she too was fed up with Ian's lack of organization and promised amenities. An afternoon storm closed in on Kailash again.

Three Steps Clockwise

“White Monkey!”

Uli's German accent ripped through the bus as she tugged at the window to take a photo. It had been two weeks into the journey and Mount Kailash was now behind us. With only two vans now, our convoy sped west towards the canyon country of Guge Kingdom, bordering Kashmir.

“Wild Donkey, you mean,” Tenzin corrected her, laughing hard enough for the hand-rolled cigarette wedged atop his ear to fall to the floor. Tenzin swiveled his cap backwards to pick it up, exposing a mosaic of American flags printed on the brim's

underside. At twenty-five years old, Tenzin's baby-blue V-neck shirt drooped low on his chest, and tufts of bleached orange hair stuck out from beneath his hat. Tenzin combusted with overconfidence and a two-second attention span. Across his cheek ran a long scar, like the thousand-foot chute on Kailash.

A hundred feet from the road, one wild donkey stood alert and stiff-legged. *Kiang*. His creamy-white underbelly faded into coffee-hued flanks ribbed and muscular, meeting paintbrush bristles finned along the spine. Native *kiang* prefer sweeping grasslands and they don't venture below 9,000 feet. This landscape works well for their species, so well that, when viewed from the side, their flanks map the very topography of Tibet—a white, lower abdomen of Himalayan glacier and peaks pushing north into a barrel-bodied expanse of earth browns and rock.

The wild donkey trotted past us, conjuring up stories I'd read about the mysterious *lung-gom-pa*, or Tibetan "trance walkers." These elusive monks were fabled to cover 200 miles on foot in a day by concentrating on fixed subjects—a star or mountaintop—to produce a hypnotic effect to run for hours. Their training included digging holes in the ground the depth of their own height and, from lotus position, bound out of the pit. This cultivated a lightness of body and mind that prepared them for limitless foot travel across these high-elevation grasslands.

There have only been a few recorded sightings of the hovering adepts. The earliest written account came from Alexandra David-Néel, a German woman who travelled in Tibet during the 1920s disguised as a begging yak herder. One image of her depicts a frumpy, stern foreigner with a rosary hung around her neck made from pieces of 108 different human skulls. A ceremonial trumpet carved from a human femur also

dangled from her hip. David-Néel's travels were unprecedented for Western women at the time. As the first European female to step foot in Lhasa, her journals and photos seemed to defy reality. In 1924, while traveling through Northern Tibet, she wrote: "I noticed...a moving black spot which my field-glasses showed to be a man." As her caravan got closer to the traveler, it appeared to be an entranced running monk, a leaping monk "seemed as if carried on wings."

Since the Chinese occupation, Tibetans no longer actively practice this form of moving meditation anymore. Along with circumambulation, these rituals were restricted after the invasion, a cultural quelling that mirrored a much larger ecological hush sweeping the plateau. Historically, Tibet rumbled with the octaves of superlative wildlife. The famous bar-headed geese, for example, were often seen to be flying level with Mount Everest at 29,500 feet, considered the most extreme migration on the planet. In some of the fourteenth Dalai Lama's earliest childhood recollections from the 1930s—before escaping to India—he remembers "immense herds of *kiang* and *drong* (wild yaks) freely roaming the plains." Robust populations of raptors, foxes, wolves, and bears of the plateau were quickly decimated by early Chinese settlement. Sixty percent of Tibet is grassland, traditional grazing habitat for a number of species. But due to warming climates, overuse and increased oil, gas, and mining projects, these nonhuman patterns are becoming fragmented at unprecedented levels. The Chinese wants to transform much of Tibet into National Reserves, but most regional activists see such plans as "paper parks," greenwashing cover-ups for future extraction and hydroelectric investment.

The same week I arrived into Lhasa, two Chinese men had chased down and hit a *kiang* with their sport utility van. One of the men, Chen Haishen, a Chinese railway

tycoon—allegedly the only man in Lhasa to own a Ferrari—got out and hacked the limping donkey to death, gutted it, and took it home. He posted images online of him, blue jeans and Ray-Bans, grinning with endangered animal blood up to his elbows.

I watched as this solitary animal—strong like an untamed mustang, like the *lung-gom-pa*—bolted across the plains, far away from us. *Crazy white monkeys*, I imagined him grumbling as the black spot melted into seas of unbroken grass.

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Tonight’s camp spread out upon yak-dung farmland surrounded by hundreds of Guge cave dwellings. They looked like eye sockets.

“I hope it’s getting better. Everything’s changing in China.”

Tashi’s words entered a breeze that bent the barley fields we walked through following a dinner of chapatti and lentils. The skies were the color of faraway. Guge Kingdom rose to prominence in the tenth century and was one of the most important trade stops along Asia’s Silk Road. But with growing populations, unreasonable resource demand and an uncongenial ruling family, the empire crumbled. What remained were haunting cliff dwellings and swaths of desert thirst. To the west, Kashmir. To the south, Northern India. And to the east, 2,000 unforgiving miles of the Tibetan Plateau. Tashi was the lead guide, a position confirmed by his up-collared windbreaker and cut-off gloves. We discussed Chinese corruption in Tibet.

“The government leaders—how do you say—they don’t mean to do something like that. But the people working under them just do something different anyway.” He

laughed. Tashi had faith in younger generations, like himself, to make change. “The younger people are stronger now, to protect our culture. They try to protect the language. I mean, there’s now Tibetan script for iPhones. That’s good!” I recalled controversy surrounding extraction of rare-earth metals in Tibet to produce such devices, but continued listening.

“If no language exists, then no nation exists,” he said.

“Then would you consider circumambulation a language?” I asked. “Is *kora* important for young people?”

“You make of it what you will,” Tashi said. “You see, we have a lot of holy mountains and we also have a lot of mines. The main reason why people started to circumambulate these mountains in the first place was to protect them. I find it interesting that the people that mine only seem to find their mines in holy mountains. Tibetans believe that, if you mine a holy mountain, you’ll have an unlucky life.” He stopped himself from getting too worked up, something he had to do often. Tashi and I followed the remaining rows of barley in silence until the cluster of tents came back into view.

Four Steps Clockwise

A light flashed from the lakeshore at two in the morning, and I fumbled for my glasses. Our group had stopped for a night along Lake Manasarovar before beginning the 1,000-mile drive back to Lhasa. This lake is one of the highest bodies of freshwater of its size on Earth and is considered the most sacred lake to a fifth of the world’s population. A fifty-four mile *kora* route follows the shore of this 200-square-mile surface, like an inland sea without life to animate the surface. To the immediate west is another lake—

Rakshas Tal. Smaller and sickle-shaped, Rakshas Tal is considered the psychically-evil twin to Manasarovar. From satellites, the two lakes appear as lungs giving breathe to Mount Kailash in the north. Stories of unexplainable phenomena surround this lake region, which is why my attention sharpened after finding intermittent beams pulsing from the shore.

Peering into the light, I found that it was actually Pierre blinking his flashlight into my eyes. I cursed under my breath and put on my jacket. Before going to bed, I was still feeling nauseous from the elevation when Pierre asked me for a favor:

“Hey kid, can you do something for me?”

“What do you want, Pierre?” I answered in monotone. I didn’t care anymore. For two weeks, we shared a minivan and I couldn’t take any more of him. I had enough. He was constantly lecturing Ian, Tenzin, and Tashi about Tibet, about his findings on Kailash and of Guru Rinpoche. *Gooo-Rooo*, he would say with sour breath. Few people spoke to him anymore, except for me.

“Can you wake me up at two in the morning?” he asked.

“What? No way. You’ve got an alarm clock.”

“Come on, mine just ran out of batteries and I need to wake up. I *need* to. The lake, it’s magic, man. Something else. Join me! We’ll sit and watch for serpents and crazy fucking shit. Greatest show on Earth.”

Reluctantly, I agreed. Pierre’s eyes looked desperate. His typical leaping and bounding of thoughts and know-it-all attitude shifted into a plea for help.

“Okay, Pierre. I’ll wake you up. I’ll join you, but only for a few minutes,” I said with hesitation. And this was why I was annoyed. Pierre was already up and now I was, too.

“Sorry, man. Couldn’t sleep. Shit’s too exciting,” he said as I shuffled towards him wearing my sleeping bag. Wind galloped across the lake’s nightmarish surface. I was about to scold Pierre for waking me up for his middle-of-the-night-magic tricks when something darted across the lake’s surface. A silver pyramid of light rippled toward us and started to grow, illuminating the two camping chairs Pierre had set up.

Moonrise.

Light pushed over the mountains to the east and fired across Manasarovar’s surface. To the north, Mount Kailash suffocated in clouds. To the south, jagged Gurla Mandhata stood at 25,243 feet, the highest mountain in the area. The balance of this moment, this place, this unexplainable land where a teetering moon above and a burrowing sun below held two lakes and two mountains reaching higher than most. The death of the sun brought the rise of the moon and to hold these two jewels within the same body seemed too large, too important. The moment needed nothing.

The display removed me from Pierre who squatted now by the lake, holding something in his right hand. It was that jar. That purple clay. Pierre was rolling it into a ball again. I’d had enough guessing. I needed to know. I approached as the lake swirled in clockwise whirlpools. Before I asked, Pierre expected my question:

“It’s for my daughter. It *is* my daughter.”

“I don’t understand.” I said.

“My daughter. She was fifteen when she died of cardiac arrhythmia. Fucking unfair. Such a smart, beautiful girl. Too young. Too soon.” I remembered my young Tibetan student’s jar of minnows set free years ago. Pierre hesitated and said: “Purple was her favorite color. Mixed some of her ashes up in the Playdoh. Been returning her back to these sacred sites—Jokhang, Dirapuk, Droma-La, Manasarovar—the most powerful sites I know.”

The silver pyramid grew.

“This place, this crazy fucking place.”

I caught a glimpse of tears. In his right hand, Pierre finished rolling the dough and I stepped back as he gave the ashes of his dead daughter a short, underhand toss into the lake. The ball sunk to the bottom, and we walked back together and sat in our camping chairs. I wrapped my sleeping bag close to my body. Pierre did the same. And together, the wind-gnarled spectacle of this temporary world burned before us.

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Hands clasped in prayer. Touch first to the head, second to the mouth, third to the heart. Kneel. Forehead to ground. Slide using padded gloves, deep abdominal stretch. Pray again in full-body extension. Stand. Three more steps. Repeat. Clasp hands to head, to mouth, to heart. Kneel. Forehead to ground. Slide. Pray. Stand. Three more steps.

A dime-sized smudge of blood marked the Tibetan’s forehead, mixed with bits of Chinese gravel. After each prayer, the man walked to where his hands had been and started again, inchworm body folds. Two young Tibetans followed, all prostrating west

together and following the highway shoulder. A support van crawled behind with water, food, and shelter. *They're younger than I am*, I thought as we pulled up. We just started our three-day drive back to Lhasa. The men's clothes appeared as burlap—tattered and earthen. Each man wore kneepads and aprons to shield them from the repetitive impact.

I had spotted them from miles away, like that security scarecrow, and that wild *kiang*. I learned that the three were prostrating from Lhasa to Mount Kailash—over 1,000 miles—six miles a day at best. What took us a few weeks will take them several months to approach and encircle the mountain, prostrating every inch. I wondered what depth of monotony they inhabited, like my evening orbits around Portland's Occupy Wall Street encampment three years ago. My laps now felt contrived as I sunk back to watch in disbelief.

Yvan and Nym got out to film, and others loaded their cameras. I boiled with the insensitivity. This sort of devotion wasn't to be recorded. It wasn't for framing on your wall, for some evening special hosted by Richard Gere and sponsored by IKEA. Tibet was too often juggled by the West as humanitarian flavor-of-the-week. It made me ill. This wasn't a spectacle; this was survival. Real survival. Their land base was stolen and with it, their identity. I'd intellectualized this braid of geoculture for years, but it now made sense. Conviction was grounded in these three bodies—my age, my size—to contort political, to fold their limbs in colonial defiance as a superhuman response to subhuman occupation. Tibet recently ranked the second least-free country in the world; only Syria scored worse.

The three men never flinched. No smiles. No complaining. No groaning. Their complexions were ash-dark and leather-tough. What propelled them forward didn't

appear entirely spiritual like the *lung-gom-pa*. What moved these men was something more immediate, something urgent, something *now*—to celebrate what remained of their people, their home.

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An oversized prayer wheel stood alone and it did not spin. *Mani khorlo*, they are called in Tibetan. *Mani*—jewel. *Khorlo*—circle or cycle. A wheel of jeweled prayer. They're used in Tibet and around the world as ritual, like *kora*, to gain merit, symbolic of an ever-revolving cosmos. Often lining monasteries and temples, each wheel is usually covered in sheet metal and embossed with Sanskrit prayer. Passing devotees spin these small wooden barrels skewered upright on an axle like rotisserie. To lubricate them, monks will pour warm rapeseed oil down the shaft, leaving a dark pool at its base. It can sometimes look like blood. But this one prayer wheel, this outlier, was different. At over three feet tall, the Sanskrit-inscribed cylinder was bolted to a storefront wall, too high for a person to spin. Its decorative trim was beet-red and new.

On the final evening in Tibet, I stood with Pierre at the entrance to the Jokhang Temple, again, while dusk triggered familiar wafts of sage. After three weeks together, Ian Baker had organized a farewell dinner, then disappeared with his mother trailing close behind, back to his hidden lands, back to his *beyuls*. The rest of the group scattered to prepare for the long flight home. Macy's eye eventually healed. Yvan and Nym caught the first taxi they could for some last minute filming and flirting. Uli from Switzerland

stayed in to pack her bags and upload photos. Tashi and Tenzin stayed around until the very end, smiling and laughing though it all.

Three old Tibetan women passed through the checkpoint before entering the Jokhang to start their evening orbits, their quiet revolutions. Satchels and handheld prayer wheels slid through the x-ray. The soldiers barely moved. Scarecrows. One officer held a semiautomatic rifle in one arm and a “butterfly catcher” in the other. This tool was a metal hoop affixed to a pole, to contain Tibetan self-immolators who lighted themselves on fire in protest. The tool reminded me of these clothes hanger hoops I used to make with my father growing up. We would untwist wire hangers, assemble the hoops, then dip them in soapy water and wave them in the air to create giant bubbles. Each airborne blob would float green-purple like the breast of a starling. Or spilled oil.

When lighting yourself on fire, you go through a few phases. First, douse your entire body in gasoline. This will sting, but don't miss an inch. Second, strike fire to your body. Initial burning commences and you've entered the most painful part. Fight, fight, fight through this. You must. This is because your vital tissue is dying, your body's front line response team signaling your brain to stop. This is the point where tissue burns, flakes, bubbles and cracks, and has been marked as some of the most excruciating pain imaginable. If you're lucky, you'll reach the deep burn phase, that third-degree type where all of your nerves have singed. The difficult phase is over now and you can thank asphyxiation for shutting your system down. Lung tissues have likely been burned and you'll most likely die from suffocation. Finally comes the fourth degree burns. These reach through tendon to bone. If you're still conscious, pray that no one puts out your fire

and saves you because that would mean living the rest of your life in agony, grossly disfigured and confined to a prison cell. But you know this happens. The authorities have tools to stop you, like these “butterfly catchers.” Chinese military has procedures to stop self-immolators like you during and even before the act, fining monasteries and families that support these demonstrations.

But you do it anyway. Sixty to ninety seconds and you’re dead.

There have been over 130 self-immolations in Tibet and China since 2009, two of which happened right on the path where I stood. In 2013, two Tibetan men went up in flames in front of the Jokhang. One was reduced to bone and ash, while the other was caught. First stop, hospital. Second stop, jail. The whole scene was erased from the streets in fifteen minutes. The last three requests left by a recent young self-immolator to his family were:

Be united.

Study Tibetan culture.

On fire I burn.

The streets of the Barkhor neighborhood glistened from an afternoon rain. In my left pocket I could smell the sandalwood mala beads Tenzin had given me on the bus earlier. The gift surprised me. His red, white, and blue hat brim dipped again as he shoved the beads into my hand and held them there for a minute. Tenzin looked into my eyes with his flat and beautiful face, then swiveled back to the road. The next day, I took his hand, faced his palm upwards, and gave him my buck knife. Tenzin’s grinned. I showed him how to engage the safety lock and he opened it right there on the swerving

bus. He never fought me for the gift, never postured like I did about not being able to receive his gift. He never said “thank you,” and I didn’t need it.

The old women walked around the temple crouched and quiet. Mantra escaped from chapped mouths as the alleys fell silent. Silent like the grasslands. Silent like Kailash at dawn. Silent like Playdoh, like the lake-bottom. Their cadence was fast and bobbed right to left, right to left like a buoy. Prayer beads dangled from their left hands, each pea-sized bead rubbed then passed along by the thumb in circuitous motion. In the right hand, a handheld *mani khorlo* spun with great force, clockwise like *kora*, like the way of the sun. One of the elders wore white tennis shoes that squeaked at every step. A Tibetan boy split between them in a hurried jog, perhaps a modern *lung-gom-pa*, his black Misfits shirt and pot-leaf ball cap contrasting the indigenous weave of the women’s aprons.

Pierre and I joined them as evening fell and the sage burned low to ash. The surrounding Barkhor neighborhood slept. I tried giving myself to each footstep and eventually found myself alone. Pierre had melted into the evening and I never saw him again. *Pierre the Know-it-all. Pierre the Father. Pierre the Teacher.* I was left alone to orbit this mystery with a heart cleaved open, for all the horror and beauty, the prisons and wilds, the sheer mountain faces and the scarecrows. It was Pierre I’d been circumambulating this whole time. I’d circled his abrasiveness, his secret, and, eventually, his truth. And it was Pierre’s purple secret that shattered me through to the fragility of this plateau, and how *kora* held Tibetans firmly to their home.

I continued circling and circling alone, thirteen revolutions, 108 minutes exactly.

And that lone prayer wheel stared. It stared because inside the bowels of that wheel rested not divine emptiness or germinating prayer or any perpetuation of karmic merit or cosmic order. Inside that prayer wheel there was a camera, cold and black and humming with footage from the streets below, of a sacred circuit providing orientation for so many Tibetans. The machine blinked its red eye every fifteen seconds, a feature hardly noticeable against the backdrop of its red trim.

But beyond the surveillance, beyond the superstructure of occupation, beyond that unmoving prayer wheel, there was indeed movement. Beyond the Johkang, one thousand miles west, three young Tibetan prostrators were cresting that last ridge to finally glimpse Mount Kailash for the first time—that blade of snow and ice, that all-commanding expression of unshakable beauty. Perhaps the three men squinted or pinched off a tear. Their paddled hands pressed together; mantra grew louder with Kailash now as witness. With blood caked to their foreheads, with skin chafed after months of prostration and months still to go, the young Tibetans were still moving. They hadn't stopped. Their efforts took them closer and closer to that gravitational core: their people, their home, and themselves.

IV: Revolution

“Life itself is revolutionary, because it constantly strives to surpass itself.”
- Thomas Merton

I'm now convinced that machines can make eyes bleed.

It was Friday night, I had just left work and suffered from a serious case of the DigiEye. It's that stinging retinal glaze after a nine-hour staring contest with your computer. I spilled into the streets of downtown Portland, Oregon, and peered back at my thirty-four-story office building, a Jenga stack of brick and glass. For a moment I scramble to remember how to function in this outside world.

I told myself I wouldn't do this.

I told myself to defy the square, the cubicle trap.

I told myself to slash with a hatchet any beige-colored office partition that got in my way. But it got me. A nonprofit intercultural education organization had created a position just for me and I couldn't resist. They were doing important work and I was desperate for stability, anything to keep me in one place and doing something generative.

So, I said yes to the beige.

Pale streetlights illuminated a bus stop on the corner. A smell of days-old urine, more whiskey than water, mixed with perfume trailing a stilettoed businesswoman click-clacking back from a Nordstrom's Christmas sale. *Number 20 Bus, now approaching.* I stepped on and sat next to an elderly man dressed entirely in browns, sleeping and snoring and using crumpled newspaper for a pillow. The seats were lipstick red and plastic, which made the sticker visible in the seat in front of me. The image was a coiled snake with one word in Soviet-era block print:

“STRIKE!”

December 2011. Occupy Wall Street had just been beaten to a pulp, the largest uprising in the U.S. against unchecked capitalism and predatory financial institutions. The movement sparked in February 2011 when Canadian anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters* put out the call for a “Million Man March on Wall Street,” which later shifted into an eighty-two-country occupation on September 17, 2011. This followed the Arab Spring earlier that year, an uprising that erupted from Tunisia and spread into the greater Middle East. At the time, America’s top one percent carried 288 times the wealth as the median American household, a gap more than doubled since 1962.

Remnants of this cultural rupture still haunted the Portland streets. It was still fresh. The encampment here was one of the largest outside Manhattan, and it swept many people into its activities. For others, Occupy barely registered as effective. If it did, its goals were seen as unclear, unfocused, utopian. For me, the movement was a bucket of ice water to the face. Before, I wasn’t a committed activist and didn’t have many friends who were. I always admired the bleeding-heart types, those chained to redwoods or filling mining truck fuel lines with sand. I remember attending my first Occupy General Assembly and afterwards having to look up the word “subversive.” At the time I had fallen in love with a beautiful activist, Nina. Nina the artist. Nina the anarchist. Nina that sensual idealist who spent her morning making patches with hand-drawn fists, whose skin was dark like her hair, like her eyes full of fury and gentleness. We made love often, and together we fell in love with Occupy. We joined an “affinity” group, a small gathering of activists that got together over food to discuss social change. Everyone would bring one large pot of food and a bag of mason jars, and we would all walk away with food for the week, from everyone’s different creations. It was magic, a communal

togetherness I hadn't ever felt. The deeper in love I fell for Nina, the deeper into this new possible world we imagined. We helped to plan marches. We had signs for every cause. One day, Nina created a hundred-foot banner and I dressed in black, ran up a ten-story parking garage, lassoed it to a railing, and unfurled the giant message, just as thousands were marching down Broadway Avenue.

It snagged, only half-unrolled.

Arriving to my apartment after work, I held anxiety in my clavicle and needed out. I needed to move, to cut through wind, to shuck off the week's sludge. Demands were clear: Outdoors. Solitude. Movement. So I decided to go for a run. I'd swing past the old Occupy site downtown at Chapman Square. It had only been a few weeks since the hundreds of riot police uprooted the last remaining occupiers, and I was curious what the square looked like now. How did the place feel? Had the grass grown back? Were there any resident ghosts lingering?

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We hear the word exchanged in cafés and on the streets. We see it volleyed in political rhetoric and profiteering doublespeak, flashed in advertisements for Levi's and Chevy commercials, galvanizing consumers to join the movement. *The President Calls for a Retail Revolution. A Revolution in Shaping Jeans. Chevy: An American Revolution. Revolution Speed.* It's that sexy term that stirs a hornet's nest inside us whenever we read it, type it, sing it, or tack it onto things like Industrial, Sexual, or Digital.

Revolution conjures a lineup of the usual suspects—a scraggly-bearded Che, Bob Dylan’s whine, Aung San Suu Kyi’s flower pinned in her hair, or Martin Luther King, Jr’s oratory fire. Its syllables etch into Gandhi’s flank during his hunger strikes. They’re woven into Trotsky’s furrowed rage, or Marx’s beard. It *swooshes* with head-lobbing guillotines during the French Revolution, in the crates of British tea bobbing in the Boston Harbor, tannins of dissent from the American Revolution. The word saturates all corners of human life—from propaganda to personal development, ecology to economy. Often co-opted for profit, *revolution* has been a powerful force for millennia, something spoken across all cultures and party lines. Revolution is everywhere.

Today, it seems that modern society is experiencing lurching spasms in all systems of economic and ecological exchange. The health of our democratic institutions and the leaders that represent them seem to have in their palms a corroded moral compass calibrated for commerce. This isn’t news. For decades, neoliberal economic decisions have only perpetuated the benefit of the hyper-wealthy at the expense of innumerable lives impoverished and subservient, and it’s in such imbalance that we’ve thrown an entire planet out of equilibrium. And that’s not an easy thing to do. We live in what many have defined as a moment of truth for the planet, *the Anthropocene*, a moment that many demand a systemic revolution the size of which the world has never seen. But what does that look like? What must happen for any lasting preservation of diverse life?

Perhaps a revolution.

In 1985, Harvard historian Bernard Cohen’s book *Revolutions in Science* investigated the major defining scientific breakthroughs throughout history, and he started his study through exploring the term *revolution* and its use through time. First

sprouted up through Latin soil, *revolution* derives from *re-volvere*, which means “to roll back” or “return to” a previous state. The actual word wouldn’t surface until the 1400s. Polybius, a famous historian during the Hellenistic Period (323 B.C.E. - 31 B.C.E), was one of the first to refer to the motion of political change as cyclical: first, you have a tyrannical kingship which spirals into an aristocracy, then oligarchy, then democracy, mob rule, and eventually, anarchy. Sure, governing bodies held their ground for a while, but they would all erode and eventually “return to the point from which they started.”

Romans didn’t give breath to the term either. The closest analog was *novae res*, which meant “new things” or “innovations.” Roman philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero agreed with Polybius’ cyclical conception of governance, but chose to tweak the wording by describing political change more as an “orbis” (wheel, circle, sphere, cycle). In some of his writings, Cicero used the word *convertere*, which described a “turning on an axis or of rotating.”

The actual term “revolution” began to first circulate somewhere in 14th century and its references primarily astrological. The orbiting planets and stars above were being voraciously recorded during this time, following Nicolas Copernicus’ seminal paper *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* (1543). As the European Renaissance began, so did the term *revolution*, to describe not only political change but a more general phenomenon of going through a set of temporal stages, spinning around the “Great Wheel of Time.” Even the rise and fall of civilizations was being referred to as *revolution*.

Still, the word clung to its primary astrological meaning, still woven into the stars, into God and the celestial above. Bernard Cohen noted that, whenever *revolution* was employed during these years, it almost always implied a force beyond human will.

Revolution was something driven by Spirit, “whether by astrological causes or simply by the laws of cyclical succession. Human events and the course of history would follow the same inexorable and fixed schedules as the motions of the stars, suns, moon, planets, alterable by the direct intervention of God. A revolution could arise by man’s intervention, transcending or momentarily replacing the inexorable sequence determined by the revolutions of stars.” Revolution was a game much bigger than mere human quibbling. Early revolutionaries didn’t wear red bandanas. They didn’t brandish rifles. Instead, our first revolutionaries were cut from the night sky—arcing stars, lobbing moonlight, and planetary orbit.

At the end of the Renaissance, *revolution* wiggled out from under its Latin soil and speared upwards. Around the 1600s, its usage forked in two directions: the first maintained cyclical form. Nostalgia came along with this conception, *revolution* as “returning back to better times.” The second emerging use referenced something more singular, a big political event of change or alteration. In 1688, references to the Glorious Revolution arrive in England. This linguistic fork was a critical one—on one hand, *revolution* was a cycle that returned us to better times, while, on the other, *revolution* was a singular change of authority that moved humanity forward.

In 1775, the American Revolution sparked. A decade later, the French Revolution. The once celestial orbit of “revolution” became quickly eclipsed by popular references and rhetoric to overthrow tyranny. Earlier in John Locke’s famous *Second Treatise* (1689). While only referencing *revolution* twice, Locke spoke to the difficulties of true revolution. He argued that “the slowness and aversion in the People to quit their Old Constitutions,” ends up bringing us “back to, our old Legislative of King, Lords, and

Commons.” In other words, revolution wasn’t something simple, sudden, and all-inclusive. It didn’t happen overnight. Revolution was long, complicated, and most of us aren’t comfortable with it. Our cultivated, long-standing relationships with old traditions makes it difficult to change everything.

During 19th and 20th centuries, a growing idea of “permanent revolution” arose, that revolution was always upon us rather than some punctuated succession or overthrow. In the 1990s, a string of major and minor upheavals increased this embrace of revolution as a regular feature in political, social, and economic change. The Russian Revolution of 1917. The Chinese Revolution from 1927-1949. In a single calendar year, 1960, seventeen countries in post-colonial Africa gained their independence. The Iranian and Nicaraguan Revolutions in the 1970s and 1980s. The 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall. The list goes on.

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Lap 1.

Portland’s Chapman Square was quiet when I arrived. For forty days, the occupation site became a collective brainstorm for ideas, food sharing, and education. At the time, I had been summoned for grand jury duty, and listened all day as police officers testified for drug felonies, only to come face-to-face with the same officers in riot gear at evening protests. On November 13th, 2011, police arrived to the camp by the dozens,

looking prepared for chemical warfare. Ten thousand citizens came out to protect the camp's eviction, which proved successful for a few days. Shortly after, hundreds more police reinforcements came and quickly reduced the camp to rubble.

As I made my way downtown, the city was buzzing. Young urbanites circled around cheap beer and pizza to decompress from a stressful week. After running stop-and-go through traffic lights, I approached Chapman Square and noticed a high, chain-link fence around the park's perimeter. To look for an opening in the fence, I ran one lap around the square and passed two security guards walking the fence line in orange vests.

"Passing on your left," I announced, approaching them from behind. No response.

As I peered through the fences, I remembered the communal kitchen and the People's Library where workshops happened. I floated above the hundreds of tents and tarps, the crazy eyes, the animated conversations. I caught phantom wafts of the filth, the mud, the panhandling parade of grime. And the rats. I never slept a night at the camp but found myself oddly homesick for it.

As I ran around the three blocks, I passed an old couple strolling home after a holiday performance at Shnitzer Hall. They held each other close as the venue's warmth escaped from their coats. I wondered how they viewed the state of things today, what their hearts had already navigated: the Great Depression, World Wars, Nazis, nuclear deployment, Korean War, Vietnam War, Khmer Rouge, the civil rights and environmental movements. Two minutes later and a full loop around Chapman Square, I began a second. Then another. Then another. I wondered how 99 laps would feel tonight, a private tribute to the 99%, those masses overshadowed by a tiny global elite.

The laps continued.

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Revolution is fever.

This was Crane Brinton's approach, a historian and political theorist who outlined a recipe for revolution in his famous book, *The Anatomy of Revolution*. Originally published in 1938 at the dawn of World War II, the book was later revised in 1965 at the beginning of the Vietnam War. Crane Brinton was born and raised in New England and entered Harvard in 1915. There he was a Rhodes scholar and made it to Oxford to pursue a doctorate of philosophy. He would later return to Harvard and teach history there for the remainder of his life. In the years leading up to his death in 1968, Professor Brinton attracted the highest single class enrollment Harvard had ever seen, though he was notorious for being a demanding, nit-picky grader. He was so popular that, on the night of his last class, hundreds of students packed into his lecture hall to give a standing ovation that lasted so long he eventually had to put on his coat and exit the room.

In *The Anatomy of Revolution*, Brinton compared political revolution to a fever, as prodromal signs of a major illness. He employed these conceptual themes of pathology “as symptoms of disease, crisis, delirium, and transformation in some way” (16). Brinton's main aim was this: to review four of the most significant revolutions of our time—the English, American, French, and Russian Revolutions—and tease out any consistencies. He wanted to know if there was a recipe for revolt (7). After holding revolution under the microscope, What Brinton discovered was that it didn't follow a strict, uniform process. There were themes, however, and Brinton outlined five major pre-conditions, or symptoms, of revolution.

First, there must be discontent among social classes, mainly from those with money, to provide friction against the privileged, ruling class (250). There must be an intolerable gap of expectations between what citizens want and what they get. Second, a successful revolution needs unified solidarity to oppose a tiny, discredited power elite. Each revolution Brinton studied erupted in the name of freedom—free from tyranny of the few for freedom of the many. Delegitimizing older avenues to power was critical. Third, the press and intellectual classes must start defending the actions of the new, unified resistance. This was the single most consistent indicator of revolution, when academics started to transfer allegiance away from the old governing system. Fourth, the old government can no longer adequately respond to the most basic needs of its citizens. Their machinery is slow and the infrastructure is old, cobwebbed, and clunky. They're unable to upgrade and adapt to the changing needs and demographics of the populace. And fifth, at a certain point the power elite loses their ability to rule and they begin distrusting themselves. When such revolutionary fervor bubbles over and the old rule employs brute force to quell, in all four revolutions this happened and in all four examples the old regimes lost their power (252). When the old regime's military finally switches sides, it's game over.

When visualizing the transformation that follows any major revolution, Brinton viewed it not as a complete overhaul but more as a game of patchwork replacement. Governance should be imagined as a “central nervous system, an immense complicated gridwork of electrical communication, woven together by interactions, fixed and hardened by habit. You cut out and splice some pieces, but the whole network is never really being altered suddenly and radically.” After any major political transformation,

there comes in its wake a predictable period of convalesce, where equilibrium is slowly, eventually restored. “New and useful tracks of interactions have been created, while old and inconvenient ones have been eliminated” (259).

Brinton finishes his analysis by addressing the “Paradox of Revolution,” that revolution is at once a strengthening development—getting over a fever—but also a sign of perpetual incompleteness, a fatal flaw in man, some asymmetry in the way humans organize and exchange. Revolution, according to Brinton, is both a sign of democratic health and vitality, and a red flag that something isn’t fundamentally right by constantly needing to revolt. In Brinton’s epilogue of *The Anatomy of Revolution*, the historian saw the last few centuries as being one sustained revolution of industrial modernization, “revolutions of rising expectations.” This was something he was more concerned about, something that we’re incapable of stopping. According to Brinton, it will be the Industrial or Technological Revolutions that will make bigger, more lasting and unforeseen changes than any political revolution.

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Lap 10.

The urban circuits around Chapman Square were uninspiring, but I couldn’t stop. Moving repetitively around this quarter-mile of unforgiving cement was less demanding on the body than on the mind. There was something special about propelling forward simply for the sake of moving. I thought of Sri Chimnoy’s ten-day transcendent foot races, Satish Kumar’s 34,000-mile walk to protest nuclear proliferation, Native American

transcontinental walks. As I settled into my unexpected orbit around Chapman Square, I began to understand the magic in the monotony, the movement in *Movements*.

To remember my number of laps, I paired each circuit with the corresponding year of my life. On lap twelve, I reviewed age twelve—my family moved to the Sierra Nevada foothills, I won a skate competition, and what little I knew of my government, I trusted. After reaching my age of twenty-seven, I imagined on each following lap what these future years might look like for the planet. On the thirty-third circuit, I would stop, reverse my direction and start running and counting again.

Lap 35.

I had to pee. I took this opportunity to visit the candlelight vigil at City Hall across the street, and asked a cluster of protestors where they relieved themselves. The vigil was the last flame remaining from the occupation: an old man sat shivering and silent, waiting patiently for change, while five street kids—dogs, bandanas, face tattoos—leaned on their canvas backpacks and smoked hand-rolled cigarettes.

“Any of you know of a public bathroom around here?” I asked.

“Yah, there’s one in the parking garage,” the larger one responded. “Probably closed though. Honestly, I would just whip ‘er out in them bushes right there.” His greasy index finger pointed towards hedges across the street. He quickly retreated behind wire-glasses and rested his head on a dog’s flank. I struck up conversation with the others and mentioned my idea of circling Chapman Square 99 times. They were hardly intrigued. Minutes later, as though my words had to first ricochet off nearby buildings to reach their ears, one guy responded:

“99 laps? Shit, I may be able to run 99 feet!”

The boys all laughed and coughed and twitched. The old man didn't move a muscle. They wished me luck, promising to call 9-1-1 if they looked over and saw someone crawling on the pavement. I thanked them for their crude blessings, crossed the road, and urinated on the dying urban flora.

Lap 52.

After two hours of circling city blocks, I watched as fog infiltrated the city to cloak the surrounding skyscrapers. A green light atop the Wells Fargo Building created a laser beam effect that sliced through the evening, an authoritative eye scanning its subjects. The two orange-vested policemen returned to their post after a break, and this time I was running straight towards them. I caught one officer taking a discerning glance at me. *Finally*, I think to myself. *It's only taken fifty laps to get some attention*. Excited at the prospect for dialogue, I began to formulate a response to their interrogations, but after passing three more times, I realized they still had no interest in me.

I, however, developed a keen interest in them. In each passing, I tapped into their conversations, dominated by two topics—girls and hiphop. One of the guards held up an iPhone that blared gangster rap. As I passed them a dozen more times, I learned that the other officer was experiencing sexual challenges with his “manic” girlfriend, Trinity. Despite our different trajectories, the three of us moved through this damp December night together, inhabiting shared states of monotony.

Lap 66.

It was past midnight, and my legs moved like stone pillars after hours of repetitive pounding. Policemen filtered out of Central Precinct for their night shifts dangling shotguns, zip ties, and riot gear. The police were not the problem, I realized. They, too, were good-natured humans, full of veins and brains, blood and guts. They too had families and histories of abuse, high cholesterol, car payments, and subprime mortgages. They too could be full of love or empty of it entirely. And they too were part of the 99%. Returning to breath, I continued.

Lap 80.

I was tired of this shit, this cold, boring loop. I wanted to go home. I wondered why I even decided to do this in the first place. Who cared? No one. Nothing changed because of this. I checked my reasons for being here and was reminded of the discomfort during any major transformation—traveling from womb to world; growing pains; confronting an enemy; moving past old relationships; quitting a job to pursue a passion; accepting death; waking up to a system that’s required your submission and saying: “Nope. No way. Not anymore.” There’s an implicit endurance in the struggle for justice, and one must trudge forth through a necessary defeat. I gathered this kindling and set it ablaze, regaining control of a smoldering fire still burning inside.

Lap 99.

Deep into the fourth hour of running, I finally reached the 99th lap. I imagined something tripping me, a police officer coming to foil my plan on the last circuit. Nothing

so dramatic unfolded as I rounded the four familiar lefts and returned to my starting point.

Then I stopped moving.

But with little hesitation, I found myself running again, hobbling but destined to complete one final loop. I understood that no one is left out of this ecological endgame. No one could escape today's challenges. Whether I like it or not, I was in this together with greedy CEOs and child sex offenders. I was in this together with lovers and loathers, bodhisattvas and border patrol. I was in this together with devastating earthquakes and radiant sunsets, great blue herons and barrel-bodied armadillos. To think of my mind and heart as separate from anyone and everything was perhaps my biggest failure, my greatest illusion. And to revolve around something as innocuous as three city blocks brought forth something deeper, an inherent revolution in everything. If we're all in this together, then it must be true that such centrifugal force reflects within us a shared cycle of growth, of transformation, and of unavoidable, inescapable *revolution*. Surrendering to this thought, the last lap felt like the first.

V: Tamalpais

"This is the last place. There is nowhere else to go.

Human movements,
but for a few,
are Westerly.
Man follows the Sun.

This is the last place. There is nowhere else to go.

Or follows what he thinks to be the
movement of the Sun.

It is hard to feel it, as a rider,
on a spinning ball.

This is the last place. There is nowhere else to go...

- Lew Welch, Beginning of "The Song Mt. Tamalpais Sings."

The small group formed a circle by Redwood Creek, silent.

It's fabled that Coho salmon the size of baseball bats used to wiggle up this drainage to spawn, one of the last native strongholds in California. These days, the creek is so low a pair of tired feet wouldn't be able to soak in these shallow waters. The state is currently experiencing its worst drought in 1,200 years.

Meander down Redwood Creek and you reach Muir Woods National Monument where a cluster of Coast redwoods grows, some over 250 feet tall and eight centuries old,

emerging during the time of the Crusades. Among these Marin Headlands, the conifers lived alongside indigenous Coast Miwok, as well as grizzly bears and condors with ten-foot wingspans. All this rests at the foot of 2,572-foot Mount Tamalpais, the highest mountain in the area, twenty miles north of what's now San Francisco. From the summit, 360-degree views sweep across the Bay Area estuary to the south, lakes to the north, and Pacific Ocean to the west. While Tamalpais' gentle eastern slope resembles the grace of Mount Fuji, its western ridges are a more complicated jumble of rock and erosion.

But what surrounds a mountain is only as revealing as what is underneath. Mount Tamalpais clings to a tectonic cliff along the North American Plate as it grinds along the Pacific Plate. Here, the San Andreas Fault creates a geomorphic bending and folding of rock up to the surface. Older layers cracking through new ones. These plates crinkle earth into hill, hill into valley, valley into stream. And at once we have a mountain, a convergence point, and the site of a most peculiar human tradition.

Station One: Redwood Creek

I stood along the creek's edge with eighteen others, all mixed in age, gender, and shape. Some wore jeans and cotton; others, polypropylene and synthetics. Charcoal skies combined smells of bay laurel musk and bluegum eucalyptus. The *whoosh* of a crow made me look up at his threading of the alder canopy. A few others noticed, but most had their eyes closed. They were ready.

The walk was about to begin.

A long-tailed wrenit landed on my backpack, his eyes snappy and curious.

Provisions inside my pack were modest for the day's fifteen-mile walk:

Glass jar of mint tea, cold;

Jack cheese and avocado sandwich;

Bottle of water;

Bag of dates;

Bar of chocolate, darkest I could find;

Tamalpais map, poorly folded;

Top-flipping notepad;

Book of poetry, Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers without End*.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning poet had written this epic over the course of forty years, from 1954 to 1994, one of the great achievements in modern poetry. In it, Snyder included a piece called "The Circumambulation of Mount Tamalpais," about a memorable day in 1965 around this mountain.

Born May 8, 1930, Gary Snyder was raised on small farms in the Pacific Northwest. As a boy, he spent a lot of time in the wilderness backpacking and climbing. He would later go on to study Far Eastern languages while oscillating between schools—Reed College, Indiana University, U.C. Berkeley—and work—lumberjack, trail crewman, fire-lookout ranger. His curiosity for the Asian aesthetic grew, bringing him to Japan in the 1950s where he studied language and practiced Buddhism. There, he learned about walking meditation around Mount Hiei near Kyoto and spent considerable time with the *yamabushi* ascetics, the mountain monks. One of their primary methods for meditation was afoot, something he already loved as a kid. Snyder noted that the

yamabushi would sometimes walk circuitously around mountains or temples. He later traveled to India with poet Allen Ginsberg and his wife Joanne Kyger, where circumambulation was common. “I made a little note to myself to see if we couldn’t find a way to do that elsewhere.” Snyder returned to California with these memories and settled into Mill Valley, a then-humble town at the foot a still-humble mountain—Mount Tamalpais.

On October 22, 1965, Snyder joined Ginsberg and Philip Whalen to conduct a fifteen-mile circumambulation around the mountain, starting at Redwood Creek and spiraling clockwise to East Peak, patching together several different trails, then back to the start. They stopped ten times for chanting, thereby “opening the mountain,” a formal recognition of its sanctity. Others wished to join so they organized a public walk the following year. More people heard of the ritual, and more would show up. One man, however, took an unusually strong interest.

His name was Matthew Davis.

One photo from February 1967 shows the twenty-three year-old Davis sitting beside Allen Ginsberg as the unshaven Beat hunches over shirtless and chants. Davis wears a plain white t-shirt, eyeglasses, and a scrappy beard. Something sets him apart, as if he’s listening to the cries of wolves. This moment would be the start of Matthew Davis’ lifelong love affair with Tamalpais. He lived nearby in Homestead Valley, where he raised a family and lived for over fifty years. While working at the local framing shop, he developed a strong relationship with the mountain, volunteering, hiking, and biking it daily.

Davis began to lead the circumambulation four times a year, every solstice and equinox. For over four decades, he would arrive here at Redwood Creek and walk with whoever showed up. A group of regulars started joining Davis, though his pace was quick and hard to follow. Gary Snyder considered Davis the *acharya* of Tamalpais, literally the “one who teaches by conduct.” The tradition seemed unshakable, until things for Matthew soured in 2014.

Over the course of a few months, Davis was diagnosed with leukemia and suffered a terrible bicycle accident, fracturing his hip while biking to work one morning. For the next year his health deteriorated, and he was forced to stop leading the Tamalpais walks.

On August 3rd, 2015, Matthew passed away.

One of the last photos of Davis on the mountain showed him leading a chant with a red bandana around his neck. His favorite Tamalpais Conservation Club shirt was tucked into corduroy pants and covered by a white jacket matching the color of his hair and goatee. Matthew looked healthy, strong, at ease in that moment and in that place, doing what he loved most.

Today, exactly fifty years after the first October 1965 circumambulation, we would follow the twelve stations in Snyder’s footsteps, to honor this mountain tradition and remember the life of Matthew Davis. His son, Oren, welcomed everyone, read some passages and began the chanting—*Mantra to Purify the Site, Dharani of Removing Disasters, Heart Sutra*. The singing felt awkward to me, out-of-tune, and I tucked in behind other voices. After, we stood in silence, waiting for someone to commence the walk. Laura Pettibone, a veteran circumambulator, finally broke the silence:

“Are you wearing your father’s t-shirt?” she asked Oren.

“Um,” he said, fumbling. “It’s from him, but it’s *my* shirt.”

“He used to always wear that shirt,” Laura said, never looking into Oren’s eyes.

Station Two: Tree Out of Rock

There is only one rule for the walk—silence until the summit. As the group crossed Redwood Creek and began up the Dipsea Trail, its first mile quieted everyone with the steep grade. Six trail runners passed us all dressed in neon, colors that matched their swift pace. Humans move in speeds bracketed by our own animal architecture; our bodies can only go so fast or slow. Whether running or walking, distinct advantages come with every pace, some potential for insight. Every human gear proves valid then, and it’s the mind of the mover rather than the speed of movement that truly governs experience.

A live oak exploded from a cluster of boulders to the right of the trail, and the group rested under its Gaudí twists. This was the site where Snyder, Ginsberg, and Whalen established their first stop along the way for mantra. Lichen ornamented the oak with lime-green tufts, and we sat together to chant.

Station Three: Ocean View

After an hour, the trail opened up to reveal sweeping views of the Pacific Ocean, water shimmering like a body of buffed quartz. Just beyond the break, two plates collided. A raven croaked and triggered the indigo slice of a Steller’s Jay across my path. Sarah, a young woman with purple hair and an origami bird dangling from her pack next

to a button—“Tofu: The Other White Meat”—squawked back to the raven. No answer. Beat poet Lew Welch’s words rode along the onshore thermals: *“Praises Gentle Tamalpais / Perfect in Wisdom and Beauty of the / sweetest water / and the soaring birds / great seas at the feet of thy cliffs.”* Here, Matthew Davis would often extend prayers across the Pacific. He always wanted to recognize Tibetan people here, to send his voice across the ocean. I mumbled my own self-conscious attempts at prayer to my Tibetan friends walking around Kailash.

I noticed some of the other circumambulators, while others remained strangers. A college friend, Nick, and his father stood together. Meri and Mark Gonnermann, two academics from San Jose, were already breathing hard. And then there was Laura Pettibone. She was the last to arrive, assuming the role of “sweep,” to ensure no one got lost. Her red-gray hair didn’t quite reach shoulder-length, covered by a large sunhat. Laura’s skin was pale, wrinkled in parts and taut in others. At over six feet tall, her trekking poles offered leverage for this early ascent.

To know Laura Pettibone is understand her infatuation with Mount Tamalpais. The fifty-two-year-old woman had completed this circumambulation 89 times this would be her 90th lap around, more than anyone else alive. If she finished, that is. In 2010, Laura discovered a 6.7-centimeter tumor—the diameter of a big league baseball—fastened to her brain. Up until that point, she’d been joining the walk consistently for over two decades. Four times a year, every year, without fail.

“I’m pretty obsessed with it,” she told me a few days earlier. I had met Laura in San Francisco and offered to drive her to a therapy session after her treatment. She dressed professional, appearing slightly androgynous with a half-smile and piercing eyes.

Every move felt calculated. “It’s the main thing in my life, besides, you know, business and home stuff. I consider the circumambulation my going to church. I’m not religious but I am spiritual, and I carry out much of my spiritual life on Tam. It’s my community.”

Laura was introduced to the tradition in 1988 by a coworker, while working as a naturalist educator for the Headlands Institute. The invitation came during a rough patch in her life; Laura had just opened up about her homosexuality to a staunchly conservative family, and her first dabbling into dating women crashed and burned.

“At that point, I really just needed to belong to something. To somewhere.”

And that somewhere became Mount Tamalpais. Since her diagnosis, Laura had to stop attending the circumambulations to work on regaining her strength. She’d hike up and down the vertiginous avenues of San Francisco near her Mission District apartment shared with her wife, Anne. In 2012, Laura finally returned to Tamalpais for her first walk since the diagnosis. She was back, but barely. Seizures and other complications plagued her recovery. She doubted finishing the loop today, as last week’s chemo had stolen all of her energy. But to finish her 90th walk on the 50th anniversary of this tradition would be her greatest accomplishment, while also honoring Matthew Davis’ life—she considered him a father figure.

Station Four: Lone Tree Spring

Under the shade of a giant redwood, Oren recited the four cardinal directions as we swiveled clockwise to face them. Afterwards, he rushed ahead in his bright shirt, the same one his dad always wore. It was tucked into blue jeans, the expensive kind with elaborate stitching. Oren moved fast, as if wanting to finish early.

Nearly fifty years old, Oren Davis was raised here in Marin County. His first trip around Tamalpais was at age nine. A rebel teen growing up in a hippie household, he'd only occasionally join his father for the walks, when he wasn't busy or hungover. "I'd drive back after partying all night," he told me. "It was easy then. My dad would just put out lunches and all I had to do was stumble out of the car." As Oren got older, Tamalpais became less of a priority. Now, he lives four hours north in Mendocino County with a sixteen-year-old son and a second wife, Willow. His days are busy as a landscape foreman, not organizing Tamalpais walks.

From here, the route cut inland along the Old Mine Trail to Pan Toll Ranger Station. Madrones spiraled out of the ground and I found their smooth, burgundy curves strangely sensual. As we approached, the campground parking lot churned with weekend warrior recreationists. Our trail's quiet dissipated with all the bustling activity. A hedgehog-haired boy in sweatpants wheeled his Spiderman suitcase across the path and nearly clipped my toes.

Station Five: Bay Tree Glade

"To first peoples who ventured from Asia by land and sea. Some came here, becoming Miwoks, thriving thousands of years on these lands and waters."

Oren read this under a shaded cluster of wind-stuck oaks. Nearly 850 Coast Miwok sites remain around Mount Tamalpais. Before the first Spanish explored the west coast in the 1500s, there were estimates of 200,000 to 500,000 Native Americans living in California, with 7,000 in the Bay Area. The 1849 California Gold Rush transformed the estuary into a major urban center. By 1860, the population of San Francisco exploded

with 50,000 people. Today, over seven million people reside in the greater San Francisco Bay Area.

The name *Tamalpais* is most likely of Coast Miwok origin. *Tamal-* roughly translates to “coastal” or “west,” and *-pais*, refers to “hill” or “mountain.” *Tamalpais*—*Coast Mountain*. Like Mount Kailash in Tibet, the Coast Miwok never visited the mountain’s summit, believing Coyote spirit lived there and it was to be left alone. Though first seen on the early Spanish arrivals to the Bay, it wasn’t until the early 1800s that the first recorded humans made it to the top, to the dismay of the Coast Miwok. Sometime in the 1830s, San Francisco trader Jacob Leese went to Tamalpais—known then simply as “The Mountain”—to add a survey point at the summit. Chief Marin traveled with him, the legendary Coast Miwok leader for whom Marin County was named. At first, Chief Marin wouldn’t go to the top, so Leese ascended alone. He summited and marked the top with a Christian cross made of branches. Chief Marin eventually decided to go. Though terrified, he eventually made it to the summit and hung his shirt from the cross, making it appear as if it were bleeding.

Grey skies lifted with the warming temperatures to expose views of the Farallon Islands to the west. Smells of crisping sage drifted across the trail as I walked with Laura Pettibone in the back. Laura was convinced that the heat would determine whether she completed her 90th Tamalpais walk today.

“You’re moving strong,” I whispered.

“Eh, feeling pretty weak,” she responded. “Yesterday I felt horrible, but I woke up today feeling good.” She adjusted the rock cairn necklace dangling from her neck.

“Let’s see who wins.”

Station Six: Serpentine Power Point

Considered halfway, this spot was named for two reasons: First, *Serpentine* is everywhere, a mottled, green-blue mineral. Second, *Power Point* comes after a visiting Hopi elder found this spot to be the region’s energetic fulcrum. The outcropping appeared prehistoric, a spine of iridescent scales wedging upwards to bedazzle the dry hillside. I set down my backpack to take a sip of mint tea and found a four-foot garter snake coiled up next to my ankle, his cautionary tongue waving me off. *Serpentine*.

From here, the route turned inland from the coast towards East Peak, four miles away. Unlike traditional circumambulations, the track corkscrewed up and around to the summit. The trail widened into forest road as we skirted past a clearing—Potrero Meadows. Nearby, a family picnicked together. The youngest daughter pranced through dying grasses, giggling and balancing on her toes like a ballerina.

In Jack Kerouac’s famous 1958 novel, *The Dharma Bums*, the narrator, Ray, writes obsessively about his mentor, Japhy Ryder, a fictitious Gary Snyder. In real life, Kerouac and Snyder were dear friends. In the book, Japhy plans to conduct a circular walk of the mountain:

“I’m goin to Marin County in a few weeks,” said Japhy, “go walk a hunnerd times around Tamalpais and help purify the atmosphere and accustom the local spirits to the sound of sutra.”

After three days of wild parties, Ray and Japhy wandered off to Tamalpais and slept in the dirt here in Potrero Meadows. I could almost smell the burn of their cigarettes

across the meadow, the ends glowing suspended like fireflies around a smoldering pit. I visualized a bear sniffing through these fields, too. Before Westerners arrived, over 10,000 grizzly bears roamed California, some occupying these Bay Area lowlands. There were accounts of grizzlies being shot here and sold for steak in San Francisco.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the San Francisco Bay Area was quickly becoming an epicenter for social and cultural disruption. Beat poets were put on the literary map in 1955 after Allen Ginsberg's famous Six Gallery reading of "Howl," followed by Gary Snyder's equally impressive "A Berry Feast." Philip Whalen, Ann Charters, Jack Kerouac, Kenneth Rexroth, and others were also present. They followed in the footsteps of an earlier legacy of Northern California bohemians Ida Coolbrith, Mark Twain, and Bret Harte. Avant-garde aesthetics, literary experimentalism, civil rights, and sexual freedoms all began percolating along this continental cliff, a mark of cultural revolution.

In May 1960, an era of student protest began in San Francisco with "Black Friday," when a congressional hearing on union-busters was disrupted by students who were later attacked with fire hoses, hit "like trees in a hurricane" by 400 angry policemen. Ken Kesey and the Merry Prankster's famous acid tests would soon spread across the country. The 1966 Trips Festival at the city's Longshoremen's Hall summoned over 10,000 young people, where The Grateful Dead played to one of the first choreographed light shows to a crowd of several thousand, all tripping on LSD-punch. The Black Panther Party was founded later that year, across the bay in Oakland. And in January 1967, a Human Be-In held at Golden Gate Park kicked off the "Summer of Love," and made Haight-Ashbury the country's countercultural hub, an incubator for later anti-Vietnam demonstrations. Thirty thousand people attended the event while Timothy

Leary, Ram Dass, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder all helped to lead the festival. The city had caught revolutionary fire, one that decried violence, sought community and unbridled expression. Snyder was one of the ringleaders, and the first 1965 Tamalpais walk fell right in the middle of this countercultural rupture.

Station Seven: Serpentine Cairn

At 1:30pm, the group broke silence to lunch at Rifle Camp. Picnic tables rested in the shade, while hikers unpacked their meals. Oren and Laura sat on opposite sides of the campsite, creating two separate pockets of hikers. I toggled between the two, circulating my bar of dark chocolate. Mike Scott's bushy mustache clung to a few crumbs as he spoke in Laura's corner:

“*Kora*. It's nice and sweet, but you know, my mouth and tongue and lips really like *cir-cum-amb-ul-ation*. It's worth a lot to me sensually.” Scott laughed, a retired professor and co-author with Matthew Davis of *Opening the Mountain*, the only book dedicated to this Tamalpais circumambulation. Mike had completed the walk more times than he could remember. Laura quickly responded:

“You just like that word because it brings your mustache to life.” The group broke out into laughter. “I mean if you just say *kora*, it doesn't do anything. Saying *circumambulation*, your mustache does this sort of dance.” Laura wiggled her hips, jesting at Mike's unkempt facial hair. They both roared, two friends sewn together by Tamalpais and lighthearted humor.

After lunch, we continued onwards to the seventh station, arriving at a large rock cairn. Oren had to dig out the chant sheet as he forgot the custom, while Laura began the

chant by heart. With a stone in hand, each of us completed a lap around the three-foot-tall mound, clockwise, to offer a rock, a prayer.

I sent mine to my mother.

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My reasons for organizing this 50th year circumambulation were twofold:

Poetry and cancer.

I wished to first honor Gary Snyder, one of my favorite writers. It was Tamalpais where Snyder first experienced his major convergences of ecology, spirituality, and social responsibility. Tamalpais was where his writing life and wilderness ethic grew in concert with spiritual and activist sensibilities. Snyder sought radical attentiveness—to live local, fight global, and write focal during a post-World War II collective trauma that left America pursuing homogenous suburbia and globalizing economies fed on cheap fuel. He countered these trends in his poetry, personal inquiry, and deep respect for indigenous and ecological ways. To me, Snyder's 1965 circumambulation represented all of these priorities in one single mountain loop, and that was something I wished to preserve.

The second was subtle and had nothing to do with the mountain. I was here because of cancer. In my early research of Tamalpais, Laura Pettibone's name kept surfacing. After befriending her, I learned about Laura's fight with brain cancer, and I wanted for this 50th year anniversary walk to be her 90th circumambulation, to give her confidence as she fought. But I was learning about her illness alongside my own mother's

discovery of breast cancer. Both Laura and my mother had chemicals circulating in their bloodstream. As I learned more about Laura's ailments and her lifelong commitment to Tamalpais, I secretly wished for my mother to have an equivalent love, something that kept her strong-willed and alive. My mother didn't have a beloved mountain to wrap herself around. Laura did. And it was through Laura's recovery that I was beginning to learn about my own mother's capacity to heal.

Station Eight: Colier Spring

OM OM KRING KRING SVARUPE.

OM TARE TU TARE TURE SVAHA. TARE TARE TARE.

The chants began to feel less strange, an opportunity to share sound for a moment with the others. The shaded Northside trail traversed east along Tamalpais. A spring trickled from the ground and a grove of redwoods huddled by its moisture. I kneeled, cupped my hands for a taste, then sat next to Laura who appeared in deep fatigue. She slugged some water and took a breath, just as two day hikers arrived, red-faced, sweating, and disoriented:

“Do you know where the mountain is?” asked one of them.

“*You're on it.*” Laura responded, slightly defensive. She leaned over and whispered:

“Now there's a philosophical question, “where exactly *is* the mountain?”

A few months before the walk, after taking my mother to chemo treatment one morning, I hopped on a San Francisco-bound train to visit Laura at her Mission District apartment. We grabbed two vegetarian burritos from El Farolito, her favorite taqueria a

few blocks away. Laura's apartment was lived-in and narrow, with plenty of light. Outside, elm branches scratched the windows with any subtle breeze. It was classic San Franciscan—a tight hallway appended by small rooms. In her bedroom, a painting of Tamalpais hung on baby-blue walls above a bed unmade. In the kitchen, dozens of dark-orange vials lined the countertops, all filled with herbs and strange tinctures. A single postcard image of an unpeopled dock hung from a magnet on the refrigerator. Above the doorway draped in Virgin de Guadalupe beads, a slip of paper read:

THIS IS IT.

We sat at the dining room table and ate our burritos using sun-bleached New York Times papers for placemats. Three pieces of fruit lounged in a frond-thatched bowl, not yet rotten but close. Birds and rugged coastlines took up most of the wall art—a crane dipping its watercolored neck, ocean waves crashing in pastels. Her office was organized chaos: a wooden desk tattered and covered in papers; jars stuffed with feathers; unlabeled cardboard boxes. One wall was fully covered in Mount Tamalpais memorabilia. The only non-Tamalpais image was the well-known photo of two women dancing atop a sheer cliff.

“That picture has a story,” she told me.

Laura explained how a friend had gifted it to her after coming out about her sexuality and failing in the first attempts to date women. To meet people, she started to swing dance, often with other women.

“I was a really strong lead,” she told me with a side-mouthed chuckle. Swing dancing and circumambulating offered both community and confidence for Laura, something her childhood didn't provide. When Laura was two years old, her mother was

crushed in a car accident. The convertible Laura's father had bought her flipped, killing her instantly. He was never the same again. Neither was Laura. "I was mad at him because he took my mom away from me," she explained. "My father was a broken man. He made some choices that were enraging if you were his red-headed daughter."

After going to school in Santa Barbara and the University of Oregon, Laura moved to the Bay Area for work and was twenty-three when she first met Matthew Davis in 1988. Over the years and dozens of circumambulations later, the two became close, like father-daughter. They sent handwritten trip reports to each other after every hike, to share their mutual love for Tamalpais. One particular winter solstice in 2012 solidified their trust. Horizontal sheets of rain kept everyone but Laura and Matthew from walking that day. Along the north side, they encountered streams at thigh-level. At one point, Matthew slipped and fell, and Laura was the only one to help him back on his feet. The accident prompted Matthew to ask Laura if she'd be interested in leading the Tamalpais walks in the future. Laura was ecstatic. So was Matthew.

But their informal torch-passing agreement disappeared into a cascade of health problems that followed. Laura's reaction to chemo worsened and she could no longer make the full hike. Matthew's leukemia and broken hip made him stop leading the circumambulations. Oren assumed the role of leader, but he proved unreliable, as he no longer lived full-time in the area. His life bounced him from city-to-city, job-to-job, and marriage-to-marriage.

"Oren is the Prodigal Son!" Laura said in an epiphanous gust. "He used to go on the hike as a little teeny-bopper twenty-year old, showing up every once in a while. But every year I was going, going, going, thinking about the leadership very seriously. Then

Matthew suddenly couldn't do it anymore and Oren slipped in and has been leading it ever since." I wasn't versed in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, so Laura explained.

In the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke, a father lives with his two sons. The younger son is full of wanderlust and asks the father to give him his share of the estate. He leaves with the riches to squander it on booze and prostitutes. The older son stays close to home and learns the craft of his father. One day, the young Dionysian returns home broke and aimless, begging for his father's forgiveness. He wants to be taken in and treated like a servant if he must. Instead of rejecting the younger son, the father wraps a robe around him, delivers a kiss, and celebrates his homecoming. "Everything I have is yours," he tells him, to the dismay of the older son who had spent his whole life by his father's side. The father responds to the older son's frustrations. "My son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours....the brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and was found" (Luke 15:11-32).

The Prodigal Son story is also found in Buddhist and Hindu texts. In fact, the parable is woven into early Hindu foundations of circumambulation, where Kartikeya and Ganesha were sent one day by their parents Shiva and Parvati to explore the world. Kartikeya traveled around the world riding a peacock, while Ganesha circled around the two parents, exclaiming they were his world. There's also a longer, rags-to-riches Buddhist version where a wealthy father courts his estranged son back into believing they are related, after the son loses all of his inherited riches.

A more psychological reading explains the two sons as representations of the conscious (older) and the unconscious (younger) halves of the human psyche, with the Father being the whole Self. The unconscious half appears unruly and unbridled, while

the conscious half is positioned more as rational, hard-working, and obedient. A balance must be struck between these two forces, something psychologist Carl Jung termed “the transcendent function.” This midpoint between our conscious and unconscious is the sweet spot to become fully “in-dividual,” an undivided embodiment of both Father and Mother.

As we walked the hallway, Laura looked frustrated with her Prodigal Son confession about Oren. After all of these decades, after almost ninety laps around the mountain, it was Oren who was left to continue the tradition, something Laura dreamt about for years but her health was keeping her from. As I left, one last photo caught my eye. Wedged front-and-center into a picture frame was a small, black-and-white image of Laura and Matthew, together on one of the many circumambulations they shared. They almost looked related.

Station Nine: Inspiration Rock

Gary Snyder once told me in a letter: “circumambulation is truly one of the great practices.” In Tom Killion’s elegant book *Tamalpais Walking*, he said that circumambulation is “a way to see the mountain with gratitude and attention in all seasons; in a steady circuit which is never the same twice...no longer just a playground or getaway, but a temple and a teacher, a helper and a friend.”

With East Peak now in full view and five hundred vertical feet ahead, there was only one last push to the summit. Laura remained fatigued and announced that she would split from the group and take an alternative, more gentle approach to the peak, forgoing the steep section ahead—“Manzanita Mangle.” A few joined her, while Oren stood atop the pancake-flat rock, anxious to begin the chanting. From the perch, Lake Lagunitas and Lake Alpine glistened with fresh water, appearing as siblings—like Tibet’s Lake Manasarovar and Rakshas Tal—taunted by the vast ocean a mile west.

“We just keep spiraling our way up!” Oren said as we bushwhacked through a steep path overgrown to the brow. I plucked a Manzanita berry from a branch and rolled it between thumb and forefinger like a prayer bead, like a secret.

Station Ten: East Peak

The lookout tower balanced atop Mount Tamalpais like an inverted cradle wrapped in barbed wire and surveillance cameras. To the south, the bay was rimmed with busyness—ports and boats, highways and traffic. Rush hour. City skyscrapers poked through the haze like splintered wood. Snyder’s poetry bounced in my backpack, his words echoing from this perch exactly fifty years ago: *“All about the bay, such smog and sense of heat. May the whole / planet not get like this.”*

“Hey baby! I just wanted to call you from the top,” a well-dressed man barked into his cellphone as fifteen of us approached the top. Somewhere behind a rock, a child cried. After reaching the summit, everyone huddled behind a large slab of rock to escape the wind. Laura struggled with the last climb but eventually made it.

“Shall we chant?” Oren said, before Laura could even sit down.

“Sure. We doing the same one?” she responded, out of breath. The two quibbled back and forth for a minute about which chant to perform. Oren murmured something jabby under his breath. Laura didn’t respond.

“Just pulling your leg,” said Oren.

OM A RA BATSA NA DE DE DE DE.

After the summit, everyone snacked and adjusted their backpack straps to prepare for the downward scramble. As Oren passed Laura to leave, she reached out her hand for him to help her up. I recalled the story of Laura helping Matthew Davis up after his fall a few years ago. Oren was moving too quickly and missed the gesture entirely.

I helped her up and asked how she was doing. There was a long pause. After taking a pull from her canteen, Laura leaned close to me, patted her salt-caked temple with a handkerchief, and said softly:

“I got this.”

To the west, a horizon blurred sea and sky with encroaching weather. A fog crested over the Santa Cruz Mountains to the south. I remember growing up in the Bay Area and imagining this as a giant tsunami overtaking the city, crashing into the bay and filling it up.

Station Eleven: Mountain Home

The route tumbled south off the peak through Fern Canyon to Mountain Home, a small ridgeline community. Some had only planned to walk until East Peak, so our group was reduced to ten—Laura in sweep. Hashed with railroad ties for stairs, the trail descended fast. I passed a water tower with ferns growing from its overflowing ceiling. In the soft afternoon light, a hummingbird arrived to stick her beak into the cascading water.

Coast Miwok considered the hummingbird an important creature, as she was sent one day to fetch fire from the Sun. The nimble bird risked her life but returned home successful, a spark held beneath her chin. As the others passed, I sat at the water tower to wait for Laura.

“She should be here by now,” Oren said as he passed. He was convinced that Laura had given up and turned around at the peak to catch a ride with the others. The hummingbird zipped away. *Laura was sweep, I thought, but she never fell this far behind.* I was concerned she’d pushed too much, that she wanted her 90th trip around her beloved mountain to be today, at any cost. She too wished to carry fire, but had she taken enough from the Sun?

As we reached Mountain Home, Oren launched into the Four Vows for Spiral Walkers, my favorite of the day:

Sentient beings are numberless; I vow to save them.

Consuming desires are endless; I vow to the end them.

Bio-relations are intricate; I vow to honor them.

Nature’s way is beautiful; I vow to become it.

Station Twelve: Redwood Creek

After moving for over ten hours, I walked surrendered and calm, an advantage at this slow and deliberate pace. Busy-bee self-drama had persisted all day, but at a point it became uninteresting and the noise dissolved, stripping me to raw movement. Fugitive sunlight escaped through musty redwoods as we got closer to Muir Woods. Oren and I

walked for the last mile together, talking about his father's commitment to living on Mount Tamalpais his whole life.

“That was the whole generation. You settle down. Work one job. Now we're in kind of a renaissance, where you might work ten jobs. I'm on my fourth career change now.” Soft-spoken and kind-eyed, it was clear he loved his father and Tamalpais. “I find it very interesting, the crossroads of the east and west here on the Pacific Rim. Here we're on the 50th anniversary, but there's been circumambulations in Asia for centuries.” I asked him if he was interested in carrying the torch forward for this tradition. “I'm not in a position to do multiple years,” he told me. “I know Laura is runner-up, but she has such incredible health issues. I think I'll just have to put the leadership materials in some central location, so that whoever leads can just pick them up.” It was to be collaboration.

Our footsteps began to stir up dust. It was clear that Oren didn't want the full responsibility. In a time of cheap-fuelled mobility and job-chasing, I realized that it wasn't just him. To dedicate one's life to a fifty-year-long ritual like circumambulating Mount Tamalpais four times a year required the now-radical courage to stay put. San Francisco writer Rebecca Solnit put it perfectly: “The word *radical* comes from the Latin word for root. Perhaps the most radical thing you can do in our time is to start turning over the soil, loosening it up for the crops to settle in, and then stay home to tend them.”

At Redwood Creek we circled up just as the last bits of light retreated through the alders. The group had now been whittled to seven, all returning to the beginning different in subtle, unrevealed ways. This is the trick of inner revolution, not to be over-intellectualized but rooted firmly to the soil. Each footprint guided us towards newer and

newer versions of ourselves, forever in step with the storied landscapes upon which they strode.

Oren led one final chant, *the Heart Sutra*, its monotone delivery reverberating off evening shadow. I looked around. No Laura. The person I wanted so badly to finish, to complete her 90th revolution, hadn't shown. A Tibetan prayer flag, framed by Matthew, rested next to one single hawk feather upon the creek bed, grounded.

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The next morning, I woke up sore and bleary-eyed. I recalled a dream where Tamalpais spoke, saying something like: "Finally, I'm the center of attention."

Ping! A text message. It was Laura.

"Got to the parking lot at 6:25pm. A few of the others were going very slow."

Confused, I wrote back.

"So you finished?" Long pause. *Ping!*

"I did. 90! Sore legs, happy heart."

Laura hadn't given up. A few others struggled on the final descent and she stuck with them until the end. Her trekking poles had helped, but Laura's determination brought her around, that and her love for this mountain, this community, and its role in her healing.

Revolution of place. Revolution of self. Revolution through revolution.

As I steeped in Laura's triumph, my mother called. She wanted to take me to breakfast and give her ratty little dog a bath at the pet store. *Punch card was full*, she told

me, excited. *Free wash*. Perhaps I was my mother's Tamalpais, something she had to revolve around to keep loving, to keep living.

“Yes, Momma. Let's.” I told her how much I loved her, how proud I was of her strength. Hanging up, I peered outside, north towards the city, towards Laura, towards Oren, and towards Tamalpais. *Coast Mountain*, teetering from a tectonic cliff. Overnight, the giant wave of fog had breached the mountains. The bay was full again.

VI: Thaw

*We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.*

- Robert Frost

A nagging bladder causes the Congolese delegate to squirm. He tries to shift focus away from his midsection and redirect it upward, towards his head. Jetlagged from recent travels, his exquisite attire covers up the fatigue: shiny, pointed shoes; socks embroidered with little shapes of wildlife; white cuffs poking a quarter inch from under a black designer suit; a platinum watch at the hinge of his wrist. The delegate's legs reorganize from spread to crossed as he props his head up with a single index finger, trying to

concentrate.

November 30th, 2015. 2:45 P.M.

La Charante Conference Hall. Le Bourget. Paris, France.

The temperature outside flirts into the sixties, atypical for winter's eve in the City of Light. It's day one of the United Nations Climate Change Conference, the Conference of Parties, COP21, a twelve-day event attracting 38,000 participants from 190 countries to confront what many believe to be the most pressing issue of our time: a runaway climate. The delegates converged in Paris to broker a deal for acceptable global temperature rise and emission controls.

Fastened atop the conference is an enormous hardhat of security, its layers woven in Kevlar and barbed wire. The 120,000 policemen and gendarmes on duty nearly match the numbers summoned for the 1944 allied invasion of Normandy. In a way, our own bodies should be the first to accept these precautions, as they too are designed for defense: ribcage for the heart, skull for the brain, and twenty square feet of skin to keep it all from spilling onto the sidewalk.

But COP21 security is different. It's exhaustive, with reinforced walls and rooms guarded by thousands, all watching, listening and sniffing, while still tasting the metallic tang of vengeance following recent terrorist attacks in Paris that left 130 dead only two weeks ago. COP21 enters its first day as a janitor crew at the Bataclan Concert Hall still wire-scrubs purple bloodstains from General Admission. High above this cleaning crew, thin-nosed drones fly by with their rotating cameras, while anti-aircraft missiles point in all directions. And beyond the drones, satellites hover stationary like caddisflies at dusk to watch every movement from space. The surveilled include not only COP21 delegates

but the thousands of climate activists nearby, recently informed of France's State of Emergency, that all public demonstrations were prohibited.

Despite this prohibition, the world marched. Over the past two days, three quarters of a million people in 175 countries marched in 2,300 events. In London, 50,000. In Sydney, 45,000. In Madrid, 20,000. A teacher from the Marshall Islands, a South Pacific nation disappearing from sea level rise, walked on stage in London to read a poem for her daughter in front of thousands. In Nanyuki, Laikipa, Kenya, hundreds of citizens marched along the equator. In Chile, a group walked across a glacier near the country's southern tip.

Paris had been muzzled, but the world hadn't.

A fractured sun drops behind the city's *arrondissements*, the twenty districts that spiral numerically clockwise out from the city's geographic navel—the Louvre. Light bounces off high-rise windows from the financial district to the north, its modern skyscrapers peering into the diagonal cuts and curls of Paris' Hausmannian architecture so revered by the romantic, the revolutionary, and the poet.

But COP21 isn't poetic. If it's attempting to be, the stanzas don't work. The metaphors don't pop; they read clunky and synthetic. Most delegates don't exude the kind of passion Parisian lovers might. They don't smell of cognac and cigarettes but more of dry-cleaning and hand sanitizer. Plastered along these conference hallways is a different type of poetry, the sharp-fonted edge of corporate song. BNP Paribas, a French multinational bank and one of the largest in the world, has billions of investment dollars in coal-fired plants. Another, Engie, is Europe's largest importer of natural gas. Other sponsors include Coca-Cola, BMW, and Dow Chemicals. It's as if Budweiser and Coors

were sponsoring a Mother's Against Drunk Driving convention.

The Congolese man leaves and returns to his seat holding a hot beverage. His shoes squeak at each step. A few heads swivel. Perhaps he doesn't worry about his brief absence because there are 300 other colleagues from the Democratic Republic of Congo in attendance, all focusing on piped-in translations of the current speaker on stage.

At least this is how I imagine it all going.

This is how I imagine the conference from 5,000 miles away in Missoula, Montana. This is how I imagine the single most important convergence of world leaders and activists to agree on solutions for a livable planet, the same planet I'm sitting on now, alone, cross-legged and overtaken by an uncontrollable shiver in this pre-dawn, subzero dark.

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If a physician were to check the University of Montana's heartbeat, she would place her stethoscope right where I sit, in the middle of the Oval, a bullseye around which all campus revolves. The bell tower in front of me strikes seven bells, a hollow, brass-to-mallet chime marking 7:00 A.M. The bells trail off, followed by nothing. It's two degrees below zero.

Paris. It must be warmer there. The thousands of delegates. The media. The fiery eyes. The tired eyes. The vultures. The busy footsteps, thousands of footsteps. The laptops and blank pieces of paper. The possibilities. The compostable coffee cups made of responsible fibers like bamboo or palm fronds, for good measure. And why did I

imagine the Congolese? Perhaps his country represented equatorial warmth. Or perhaps I found it odd that his country adds virtually no CO₂ to the earth's atmosphere and yet his 300-person delegation is forced to settle on carbon reductions. I pivot my mind back to the thick layers of security, the commercial storytelling lining hallways and bathroom stalls loaded with *sustainable's*, *resiliency's*, and *we're-all-in-this-together's*. Sapphire. Cyan. Cobalt. Periwinkle. Lichen. Emerald. Teal. Pistachio. Corporate color spectrums, all borrowed from nature without asking.

My friend Will arrives on his bicycle all puffed in warm clothing. A backcountry trail worker in his early thirties, I smell coffee on his ginger beard as we hug. Will's fogged glasses are Seventies-era and look as though he'd borrowed them from a retired librarian. Together, we look like two circumpolar explorers, mislaid and near-frostbitten.

The drones and dogs and tanks and officers continue to wrap around Paris, while I cinch my own protection tight—a forest-green scarf my mother gave me. Survival tactics. Despite all known science, despite the obvious differences of climate and weather, I still sometimes find it hard to accept a rapidly warming world when you can't feel your toes.

I spread a brown tarp out on the snow-rimmed concrete, and Will inflates a sleeping pad for us to sit on for insulation. A sleeping bag wraps around my legs and I cover it with a Mexican blanket. Will settles in beside me and props up a small timer—fifty minutes, preset. After exchanging a few words, We drop into silence, a refrain that will hopefully envelop us for the next ten hours.

As the sun sets on Paris, our Montana sun considers its rise.

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The idea haunted me for months. I had wished to join the Paris talks, somehow. The thought of this critical moment passing unnoticed by anyone seemed unacceptable. I was certain our world leaders wouldn't act radically enough, so it was up to global citizen pressure from below to demand they act as boldly as possible. I also needed to feel again. I had become numb from recent developments. The drone of Donald Trump. The terrorist attacks in Paris. The weekly, no daily, mass shootings. My nation's racial blindspots, black bodies too often becoming casualties at the hands of fear-triggered police. And, in the background of all this, I'd become numb to that quiet, uninterrupted Keeling Curve, that creeping of atmospheric CO2 rise.

I'd also become a weary activist, amateur at best. After Occupy Wall Street, I was involved in a successful campaign against Nestlé in Oregon, and later organized an international action to stop open-pit gold mining in Mexico. In 2013, I was arrested in Helena, Montana, for sitting on train tracks to delay coal export. I spoke at divestment rallies, gave speeches, fundraised, passed out flyers, photographed, wrote op-eds. But this time, I wished to act spontaneously. No meetings. No communication plans. No social media. No large signs. No call to the police, newspapers, or campus security asking for necessary permits. I just wanted to feel something again. Anything. I needed to thaw. So did Will.

The night before, I sent him a message:

Been thinking about doing an all-day silent sit on the University Oval tomorrow as a demonstration for COP21. Interested?

Silence. Then, a response:

That sounds insane. I'm caffeinated right now and that still sounds insane. I think I'm in, though. Send details.

I wrote back five thoughts:

1. *Start at sunrise (7a). End at sunset (5p).*
2. *Middle of Oval.*
3. *No talking, no eating (an expression of human restraint).*
4. *Every hour, we walk around the site six times, to represent our planet's six extinctions, the current one triggered by (duh) humans.*
5. *Bring warm clothes, sleeping bag. Low of -2. Shit.*

I waited for ten minutes. No response. Then, a reply:

Fuggity fug. I'm into it. See you tomorrow.

As Will and I begin our experiment, I still can't feel much, not only from the arctic freeze but from all the compounding despair, the endless barrage of darkness, the bleak forecasts of a planet on fire and my species—the arson—becoming increasingly selfish, fearful, and armed.

There go my toes.

There go my fingers.

There goes my planet.

Sunrise.

We settle into the first hour. Every two minutes I wiggle my extremities, unsure if

frostbite is a serious concern and not wanting to find out. The flash of tomorrow's headlines:

"A Bitter-Cold Irony: Activist Gets Frostbite in Fight Against Global Warming."

I reach for my water bottle. Frozen solid. It's only been fifteen minutes. To the north, Mount Jumbo transitions from the shadows into a bruised color of lavender. Starting tomorrow, the city closes this local mountain to humans for three months for migrating elk. An annual reminder of human restraint. As I admire Jumbo's quiet rise, two loud trucks approach us and circle our location. I fear my plans have been foiled and that campus police would kick us out within the first hour. I slump cowardly and clamp my eyes shut to escape the oncoming defeat. A truck moves closer. I can smell its exhaust. Finally, a door opens. Footsteps only a few feet away now. I wait for an officer to ask us to move on. Nothing. Instead, I open my eyes to see a groundsman checking a frozen sprinkler head. The other truck is sanding the sidewalk fifty yards away. The acoustics here bring sounds much closer than they actually are.

Bip! Bip! Bip!

Will's alarm sounds off. We rise, stretch our legs, and take a quick bathroom break. As my frozen toes kick a path through the snow-crust to the nearest building, doubt creeps in: *Why the hell am I doing this? Nine more hours? This is fully absurd. Really. No one even knows I'm here.* The bathroom mirror exposes frozen eyelashes, quick to melt. For a moment, they look like tears. We return to the site and begin the first round of six circuits.

In Elizabeth Kolbert's Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, Kolbert journeys through earth's major cycles of destruction and

renewal. Planetary revolutions. In the planet's 4.5 billion-year history, there have been five previous mass die-offs. The first occurred 250 million years ago, likely from an asteroid or comet. This was the most catastrophic, with 90% of all species ripped from the planet. The next three were from periods of glacial freezing and thawing. The fifth was sixty-five million years ago, when an asteroid the size of Manhattan slammed near the Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico. It was responsible for the demise of the dinosaurs.

Our sixth and current round of extinction is different, though. It's the single fastest known extinction ever recorded—over 10,000 times faster than normal rates—and the first to be caused by a single species: us. The knockout punch of anthropogenic climate change has caused ecological imbalances, followed with all the indicators: sea-level rise, ocean acidification, plummeting biodiversity. “It is estimated that one-third of all reef-building corals, a third of all fresh-water mollusks, a third of sharks and rays, a quarter of all mammals, a fifth of all reptiles, and a sixth of all birds are headed toward oblivion.” From fungal infections in Panamanian golden frogs to calving glaciers in Antarctica, Kolbert hacks through ambiguity to make a clearing in the noise, a view that reveals much, unsettling as it is.

Each of our six circumambulations mimic Earth's revolving cycles of extinction. With each lap, I count exactly one hundred paces. The temperature is on the rise, but it still hangs below five degrees. The walking generates body heat, but not much. It's wet duff thrown on a fistful of dying embers. I link my gloved index fingers behind my back and try to walk more deliberate. The Tibetan porters I saw around Mount Kailash walked like this, slow and balanced, often with forty pounds on their backs.

With the increasing torque of crises, many concerned citizens and activists fall

victim to the frantic speed of frantic response. This causes burnout—unfocused actions, folded relationships, and overstretched schedules. Walking forces us to breathe deep, think long, and go slow. This may be counterintuitive when confronting a cascading catastrophe, but it might be the one of the most subversive ways to combat today's distracting, amphetamine-speed demands. From Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*: "I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour. If this is so, then modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought, or thoughtfulness."

As I walk, I imagine these versions of Earth before me, and how all six of them somehow brought me here to Missoula, Montana, walking six circles at the bottom of a prehistoric glacial lakebed. Here we walk, mimicking some impossibly large process of life-giving through life-taking, the billions of years of planetary revolution that somehow gifted us these feet, these eyes, these brains, and these hearts.

At 9:45am, the sun crests over the eastern ridges. Returning from Thanksgiving break, 15,000 students here are in their final weeks of the semester: revising portfolios, late-night cramming sessions fueled on lattes and Adderall. Our demonstration sits along the most-walked path on campus, between the cafeteria and University Center. Students begin to stroll past us, and some of their heads turn. *What's this all about? Yo, check it. Are they meditating? They must be straight frozen.* An iPhone camera clicks, and I open my eyes to find a young girl squatting in front of us.

"Are you here for a cause of some sort?" she asks in a high-pitched voice.

Without any large signs or placards, her question is valid. We had set out small leaflets to explain our demonstration, and I point to one. The girl picks it up and reads silently. A brown bear roars on the front of the her maroon jacket, The grizzly is the

school's mascot, a species brought to the cliff-edge of extinction in the 1800s, down to two percent of its pre-European populations. The student is young, ambitious-looking, with a backpack weighted with books and binders. Her mug wafts the comforting smells of chocolate and nutmeg.

“Thank you,” she exclaims, nodding her head. She hurries to class, footsteps trailing off.

The day warms and our routine remains structured: fifty-minute sit; *bip! bip! bip!* Rise and stretch; bathroom break; return for six circumambulations; start again. At one point, the sound of my own footsteps slips me into one of the 10,000 pairs of shoes placed yesterday in Paris' Place de République in response to the COP21 protest ban. Among them were pairs sent by Pope Francis and UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon. As I walk I join their march, the callused bottoms of my feet regaining sensation.

Eleven strikes of the bell tower mark the end of morning classes and a surge of students enter the Oval. Thousands of footsteps stampede around us. This audible space is a storm's eye of sound. Footsteps coming, footsteps going. Thousands of them, all with their own unique signature: a *click-clack* followed by a *schook-schook*. In the distance, a mile-and-a-half long coal train slithers in from eastern Montana, its goods destined for Washington ports to be shipped to Asian markets. Montana harbors the largest recoverable coal reserves of any state in the U.S.—about 120 billion tons. As students follow their regular routes from classroom to cafeteria, these trains do too, from mine to port. The train changes tracks just as we swivel our position to follow the sun. The sky has now turned to a deep, lake-bottom blue.

Full Sun.

On a Monday morning, June 22, 1965, Gary Snyder and Dick Baker decided to sit down, lotus position, in front of the Oakland Army Terminal in Northern California, to begin an all-day, nonviolent protest sit against the Vietnam War. They sat in *zazen* meditation for twenty-five minute intervals, with breaks for lunch and stretching. Twice they performed *samu*, a working meditation where they picked up trash along the fence line. Several others, including Philip Whalen, joined them. Eventually there were eight protestors sitting in silence outside the army base. “While we sat,” said Philip Whalen, “some of the people who drove past...laughed or yelled insults or jokes. No one seemed to know what it was we were doing, except for the Police & Military Authorities who had been informed in advance.” Gary Snyder particularly enjoyed the *samu*. “There was junk all over the place, little bits of trash that nobody ever picked up...workers from inside the army terminal, from the warehouses, came out and looked at us, so they knew what we were doing. And then we left it all cleaned. That was great.” The event gained significant media attention, adding to a rising tide of anti-war demonstrations that would soon bubble to the surface. Exactly four months later, Snyder and Whalen would join Allen Ginsberg for their historic circumambulation of Mount Tamalpais.

The sun halos overhead now but is passing quickly west. We’ve now rotated a full 180 degrees and point southwest, our faces still tracing the sun. My stomach pangs empty, the outer skinfolds wet now with perspiration. Though I’m overheating in thick clothing, my extremities remain frozen. On the hour, thousands of students purge from pent-up lecture halls, their tidal ebbing and flowing of footsteps sounding louder and

more pronounced now. Many pass us, and many stop. Our leaflets invite people to join our circumambulations. Once, I catch a student walking in circles, her eyes closed, her every step known. Another student snaps photos and whispers to us that the images were sent to a journalist inside COP21. The thaw has begun. Feeling is coming back.

By now, world leaders in Paris have all dispersed for the evening, leaving Le Bourget for dinner reservations somewhere private. I imagine them sipping wine overpriced but French, perhaps a rosé or a flute of grower champagne followed by aged cheese needing to be untied, all in candlelit comfort and watched by security forces. Such aristocratic pleasantries feel worlds away as I sit here, starving outside in Montana, surrounded by thousands of students making their way in the world. Each of their steps begin representing the future, the rush of billions queued up long after I'm gone. At our current rate, one million new lives are added to the planet every four days. That's one million screaming, bloody bodies with hearts beating and mouths feeding. No matter the ecological outcome, my allegiance is to them, the future ones. Aching back? Tolerable. Frozen toes? Temporary. Dry mouth? Quenchable. I shove my worries to the backburner and wiggle into posture. Will hasn't budged.

Suddenly, I catch something running to my left, a quick gallop. Peering into the sun, a large husky strides towards us off leash. His paws crunch in the snow as the dog vaults forward, picking up speed. Closer. Faster. Bigger. His eyes blink of an attack, teeth white and hungry and sharp. I shut my eyes and brace myself, just as he reaches us.

Instead, a sandpapery tongue rolls warm across my face, then Will's. The husky's breath is gamey and the tongue's saliva soothes my sunburned cheeks. We lock momentary eyes; his reflect the color of arctic shallows. Immediately, the dog turns in

circles and urinates in the snow next to us. Canines often walk in circles before defecating because they're sensitive to magnetic fields and prefer facing north or south while doing their business. They'll also walk in circles before sleeping, a practice inherited from their wolf progenitors. Wolves will prepare a sleeping area by first walking circles to mat down the area and ward off any creatures.

Circumambulation is apparently a shared nonhuman practice, too.

Sunset.

“What the *fuck* are you guys doing?”

With one hour until sunset, I find the young man's voice arrogant and sharp. Will and I are hungry, tired, and sore. For nine hours we'd sat in absolute silence without one critical voice or policeman telling us to leave. I had expected some backlash. Opening my eyes, a student stands in front of us—muscular thighs, buzzed hair, leather-tan jacket, blue jeans, and dirt-worn worker boots. His fingertips tuck into front pockets while a can of tobacco indents the back pocket. I point to our leaflets and prepare to be harangued by the visitor. He picks up the paper and begins to read. I watch his eyes shift, his confident, chest-puffed posture, and his weight leaning to one meaty leg. He lets out the occasional smirk, chased by eyebrows that curl like question marks.

“What the *hell?*” he says, leaning back as if to begin his own encyclical on how climate change is a myth, how we're all a bunch of hippie nutbags that need to return to whatever hole we came from. My guard surfaces like steel-tipped thorns, protections from the man's projections. It's coming, I just don't know when. Finally, he rubs his crew-cut hair, takes one long look at us both, exhales, and says:

“That’s tiiiiight.”

Waving the leaflet in the air, he gives us a thumbs-up in support and walks away smiling, rereading it as he goes. The thaw has commenced.

With fifteen minutes to go until sunset, the campus has grown quiet again. A mother and her young child walk up behind us. The three-year old girl waddles along the ice and wears a bubblegum-pink beanie with fruit-juice stained all over her face.

“Mommy, what are they doing?” she says, turning to her mother for a hand. Survival tactics, I get it. Like the 120,000 policemen watching Paris right now, like the high-flying drones, like the six layers of clothing I hide behind. The mother picks up a leaflet and explains to the child something about us sitting for the future. The kid’s little eyes survey us. Then, she looks me square in the face, as if to whisper: *keep going*. I start to tear up, but have concerns they might freeze my eyelids shut so I hold back. *This is for you*, I try responding through my gaze. *I’m here because I’ve forgotten. I forget a lot. I’m sorry. But I’m trying to remember that this is for you. I’m trying.* I shut my eyes as the child walks away, clasping her mother’s mitten.

The thaw is complete.

And with five strikes of the bell tower, it’s over.

Will and I break posture, stand, and embrace. We close our time with six final walking revolutions around the Oval. The cold is biting again. Students have all gone home. Mount Jumbo tucks back under its blanket of lavender bruise to rest the night before welcoming elk, not humans, tomorrow. We made it through our revolutions. During our sixth and final lap, I am neither surrendered to extinction nor hope-drunk that our climate problem is entirely solvable. It’s not the climate. It’s us. The crisis is local. So

is its cure.

These last steps join the growing thump of footprints around the world calling for humility and restraint. The last circuit both celebrates the ecological rule of the road—*revolution*—while calling forth some bigger planetary imagination to do the work necessary for reparations so that, on this sixth round, at least we tried. This initial spark must be internal, not just shopping local but acting local, tending to the locality of Self. And this interior, focal revolution can now be shared on a global scale never before seen.

The revolution is local.

Epilogue

You entered this world an appendage of your parents, connected by a bloody lifeline to those who grew you into this world. Then, in a flash of sharp metal, you're plucked. Harvested. Detached. With a bloody clip, you've begun to sail on your own, tethered to some newfound thread: this animate world, this landscape of shapes made possible only by those lives and deaths previous to it—your parents and their parents and all the animal-plant-food cycles that fed, housed, and clothed them. The pattern goes back further than you could ever imagine.

Each day another lap, each month another moon's lap, each year a sun's orbit. You come and go and you continue growing into each day with this movement. There's no slowing down; you're whipping now, into upgraded versions of self defined by your surroundings and mentors—human and nonhuman. With every loop you get taller. You get fatter. You learn symbol and word and smell and sound. You begin to move in more regular communication with this exterior, crawling then walking then running then skipping then waltzing through, while sprouting from your attuned suite of senses to lick-sniff-rip-roar into this world. Weave it in, traveler, tighter into your fabric with every revolution, every grapefruit sunrise, every full sun overhead, every blood-crimson sunrise to magpie-blue to black sky.

These cycles are in you, around you and of you, and they continue to churn. Days, weeks, months, years. Lifetimes. Every day, a slightly updated version of you awakens, rubs your eyes, tosses your hair and *whaps* the alarm clock to begin another orbit full of lists and coffee and web searches and status updates, body-lengthening sun salutes and trail walks. You try to use your pulsing sentience to do something today on this one trip

around: to take action, to fight for what's good, to be present. Or not. Or you sleep in, treat someone poorly, put things off, stick life in safe-mode, binge-watch something on the B-list. Regardless, seasons blossom and wilt. This day-to-day orbit remains mysterious, each year carrying with it days previous, accrued baggage from earlier revolutions. *Transcend and include*, says integral philosopher Ken Wilbur. Transcend what's been done and take with you only what serves the updraft. Keep it light and shuck the rest like snakeskin.

It's during this larger investigation, with enough orbits and interest and inquiry, that each lap gets bigger, wider, and longer. You ask questions. You're skeptical. You observe your Self and its elusive boundaries—it's not quite what you thought it was. You begin not only to identify as an appendage of your mother, father or biological family, but discover kinship in forms beyond the human. That human-first attitude, the me-me-screw-the-rest vision makes you yawn. It dries and cracks and scales off from earlier orbits. This invites you to hear a greater call of the world from a much wider spectrum of identity that helps inform this expanding Self, this understanding of your own upgrading system, your system of overthrow. *You calibrate to revolution.*

So you fire outwards, collect data and stories from afar, from other towns, other states or countries. Not just stories from your family or community but stories from other places, other cultural experiences, other Gods. This human desire has been popularly expressed today in the arc of technological and communication developments, the Internet, video chatting, social media, what paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once called the "noosphere."

Through circumnavigating these greater and greater spheres, your circles of identity widen. Each orbit gets bigger and it takes this exploration outwards to realize that the center you are courting remains still throughout. The greatest mysteries in life don't all exist thousands of miles away, in the fjords of New Zealand or a summit in Western Tibet. The revolution, you begin to learn, is local. Local in geographic community and local in the Self. The only sustaining revolution is guided by the same elemental rules that compose you and move you along your trajectory towards adulthood, towards becoming revolutionary.

Because every chapter, every regime up until this point has been necessary. Each lap seems engineered with perfect imperfection, small rivulets where new scaffolding fits to reach higher and more profound heights. Every stage leaves in its wake an inbuilt oppression, some pressure than you can only endure to a point. Eventually you hit a ceiling. Toes scrunch at the ends of your slippers and your task now is to begin searching for new containers in which to grow. How much can you fit into your widening circles?

Revolution isn't easy. Often your trajectories whirl out of control in a world dependent on this emergence and dissolution, on living and dying. Too often people awaken to this fierce composting of life and it's just too much to bear. This is when your widening circles begin to slow. Your upgrade system slows when there are only *unrevolutionary* cultures around you. The process coagulates, congeals, and thickens. You haven't quite made it to the outer orbits that provide real sustenance, the tools of inquiry and humility. So you stop.

You stop revolting to your adolescent ways, the ways that keep you safe. Instead, you gladly inhabit atrophy. You choose to live with this inbound pressure. Damned river.

Arterial clog. You've blocked circulation. You deny the revolution, and, in this, you suffer. You live with daily mass shootings. You turn away from unprecedented CO2 level-rise in our atmosphere. You identify this as inevitable and continue living, business-as-usual.

This is revolution paralyzed. This is petrified revolt.

If attuned to revolution, to the cyclical patterns of nonlinear phenomena, your final laps come in deeper textures of responsibility. They come with years of experience, decades of refinement—of shedding, of surrender, of going out, coming in, building up, tearing down. And with this responsibility comes a valuable form of human capital, scaffolding set high enough for others to climb up after you're gone. It's as if you've been painting a thousand-foot mural. You peer up at your nearly-completed masterpiece above and around you, and what unfolds is a dome curving towards some mighty center. You've been painting and painting and filling and erasing for years, decades, lifetimes.

Finally, as you reach that final moment where your paintbrush strokes the center of the painting, that keystone, that storm's eye or God or Mystery, you let out a deep laugh, exaltation that echoes and flurries a pair of white birds. You laugh because your hopes of identifying with something larger have all finally been realized through the body, the feet, the heart, the local. That locality of Self you began forming the day those cold, metal clippers came out has vanished and you've become nothing but pattern, large circular strokes. That Self developed through fumbling life's riddles, through relationships and empathy and selfishness and humility and failing a thousand different ways. That Self was developed through cultivating skills, only to give them away. And that Self laughs now because all that's left is one sweeping, unfinished painting curving

inwards and extended outwards, conceived not just by you but by everything and everyone else.

And it's in this moment where all the forces that once drew you into this hurricane of sentience now whirls in to lift you beyond your life's work, beyond your own scaffolding, just as it forces your body downward. By traveling both inwards and outwards, you realize that the ecology of revolution indeed arcs toward wholeness.

With that, the cycle begins again.

Resurrection never moves in the linear. It's driven by seasons and sunlight, nests and caves, tides and tracks, compost and cosmos. Your revolution must guarantee life. They must thrive off of fecundity to secure onward travel into the future. This is the ultimate way around, the one that embraces revolution as necessary, as a cyclical movement for posterity, for the future ones. This is the force binds you to a pattern of recycled life, of dirt and chemicals and revolting star bones.

You are a story circular. You are revolution.

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