

FOGBOUND

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OVERTURE: REAL THINGS

Gloucester, Massachusetts, late 1990s

“Are there really leprechauns in Ireland?” the child asks as he watches me packing for my short trip. “Can you take a picture and show me when you get back?”

“Oh yes there are,” the momma twinkles. “But they are tricky. They are tricksters. I will try!”

Fast-forward two weeks later. “Did you see one?”

“Indeed I did. I took a photo, like you asked. He was hiding in this hedge. Look...”

The child studies the photo, thoroughly. Turns it over. Turns it back. Furrowed brow. “Um, Mom? I don’t see him. I only see the leaves and branches.”

“What...?!” I take the photo back, peer at it. “Oh. Oh, that trickster! How did he not appear in this photo?”

Mother and child, perplexed.

Now, why did I do that to my child? Because his grannie, my own mother, and my grannie before her, often talked about the tricky leprechauns. I was passing on the tradition. There are real things that are hard to photograph. There are things that dodge your perception.

Like fog.

Here is a picture of fog.

NOVA SCOTIA ISLAND FOG

Freeport, Long Island, Nova Scotia

I am viewing fog now. On this late-summer morning, from on a high point on an island off the southwest corner of Nova Scotia. This is a rugged landscape of rocks, spruce forest, moors of spicy-scented bayberry and scrubby alders, few people and fewer buildings. As in San Francisco,

though, some recognizable items poke up above a blanket of fog. I see intermittent utility poles, treetops, the top half the lighthouse on the northernmost point of the next island over. The wind must be shifting, for as I watch, a great swatch of fog glides across like a caressing hand and loses itself in what might be the sea, might be the horizon. The foghorn sends out its insistent message: come home...

Fog is a constant in this remote place. It comes and goes, lightly and heavily and in ways I have not yet learned to predict. Sometimes the island is swathed in fog so thick that we drive with our headlights on, picking our way up the familiar two-lane road that seems to have no end but does end at the ferry landing, to go over to the mainland. There it falls away and we are restored to a three-dimensional world and warm, bountiful sunshine. But glance back across the water at the island left behind, and you can't see it. It's completely hidden.

The island is long and thin, about 15 km long and about 5 km wide at its widest. On the south side is the expanse of the Bay of Fundy, on the north, the shallow and narrow Baie St-Marie. The fog here is often moving, moving rapidly, wind-blown. I've sat here at this dining-room table and watched bolts of fog sift or hurtle across our yard, heading to the opposite body of water, often taking a ragged downhill journey as though gravity demands the fog come down to earth. Perhaps it does.

TRICKS OF THE LIGHT

Fog in motion plays tricks with light. Coming back from the mainland to the island and re-entering heavy fog, one passes through a transition zone. Clear skies above, fog below, which makes the world as we know it appear weirdly inverted. Wisps of blue-gray light pass through like overhead illumination in a monastery passage, or a sea cave.

Am I underwater? Is it light? What *is* the light source? Am I imagining these shapes? It's unsettling as well as beautiful.

WHAT IS FOG?

It's not mist. Mist is water droplets; you can see them. Mist is soft and penetrable, by light and by objects. Fog is also water droplets, but smaller. Also, fog obscures. It's more like thick smoke. It moves like smoke, sometimes, billowing or slinking. Scentless, though, so you don't react with alarm. Although...there are times...

It's so hard to describe something you can witness, but not touch. Feel but not hold.

Fog happens when the air is warmer than the water. We've all seen it settle in low spots in fields, or follow but hide the course of a river, scenes that always transform a landscape you thought you knew. You pause, squint, and wonder at it. Fog takes away detail and certainty, which can be

unnerving. Or, curiously calming. A heavy snow can do the same thing but snow is heavy and it stays—comes quickly, leaves slowly. Fog is substantial and, paradoxically, in motion. It is a shape-shifter. It can appear and disappear amazingly fast.

Fog comes and goes according to major doings in nature. Water temperature. Seasons. Weather near or far. Landforms. Rocks and islands. Currents in water and currents in air that we can barely guess at.

SEA FOG VS. LAND FOG

Fog is less disconcerting near or upon the ocean because the water is also constantly moving, with patterns seen and unseen and of course randomness. Thus sea fog has greater agency than land fog, I think. It appears to work with or meld with the water—no melding or cooperation inland.

My experience of sea-fog is that of a land-dweller. I've stood on what I thought was solid ground and lost my bearings. I've hiked along rugged coastline where all I could see was the path I was taking and some sea-bashed rocks just below me. Such a scene provides the illusion that the scale is intimate, when in fact it is not at all intimate. The great expanse of heaving, deep sea looms just out of view and the land stretches behind.

FOGHORNS

When I lived in a seaport, Gloucester, north of Boston, fog was a fall and spring event, which makes sense—air and water temperatures contrast more during the shoulder seasons. Generally foghorns are positioned adjacent to or even attached to a lighthouse, so when visibility is smothered, sound kicks in. Either way, sailors have a stationary, known beacon to guide them back to port. The area, technically a cape, was served by a number of lighthouses and their foghorns.

One autumn, a Gloucester fisherman told me that the two-tone call of the Eastern Point foghorn, the one at the harbor's entrance, was "come ... home, come ... home."

CALIFORNIA FOG

I've gaped in amazement at fog in the San Francisco area when massive rolling white blankets of it roll and spill down the brown hills and obscure everything—the bridges over the bay, the highways, all the human-built sprawl. It's impressive, all the more so when you think how much how much stuff and how many people lurk underneath. An iconic photo visitors like to take at these times is a fragment of the Golden Gate Bridge poking up through the dense blanket of fog. It looks like the bridge is floating, unattached to anything.

Californians will bemoan the fog, but they also know how to escape it. Drive inland. Get away from the coast. Sometimes it's literally a line of fog a mile or more wide, damp and oppressive, dripping off the sickle-shaped leaves of the towering eucalyptus trees as you navigate the curves and heavy traffic on Highway 1 from Monterey heading south. When you get to Carmel Valley Road, turn east...you will literally scoot out from under the fog (and away from the traffic) and enter a normal sunny day. It's dramatic and it makes you feel giddy.

A longtime resident of Monterey told me that the fog there was caused when hot inland air moves over the colder ocean air. This causes evaporation of the ocean, moisture that is then trapped between the two layers, resulting in fog. The only part of this process we can see with our eyes is the results. We can also experience the oppression, or rather the suppression, of light by the fog.

LITTLE CAT FEET

Growing up in coastal California, we would often welcome the cooling, moist gusts of fog, relief from the long dry days of bright heat. My mother would remark, "here it comes, on little cat feet!" which conjured up a sense that fog was soft and gentle. And stealthy. It would sneak into our world and tamp down details and sounds. Time for a nap?

It wasn't till I was grown that I learned that she hadn't made up that phrase. It's from a poem by the late great American poet Carl Sandburg:

"The fog comes
On little cat feet.

It sits looking
Over harbor and city
On silent haunches
And then moves on."

LOST IN THE FOG

I got lost in the fog on this island one night—it was a scary experience. I'd taken Kagan the puppy for an off-leash walk down to the cove below the house. Evening coming on, but visibility wasn't too bad and we set off confidently, walking an unpaved gravel road we both know well. But the fog slunk in around us, the light grew spooky, and the foghorn on the next island began calling into the gathering grayness. Discomfited, I wanted to "come ... home." So we turned around.

But then the dog and I got separated in the fog. He vanished up a trail as though behind a curtain. Well, I knew the trail went to the home of some friends; our dogs are friends, too. So I followed.

But the meadow seemed to go on too long and visibility got worse. The fog swallowed my calls. Trees startled me. My heart thudded with anxiety. I should have come around their barn and been in their backyard by now. Except now I seemed to be on another path...heading where? I didn't recognize where I was, even though logic dictated that I had to be close to my goal. This is not a big place. This is not wilderness. Yet I was in a void where lights and sight were tangled and sound was lost. Even the foghorn's call seemed to move around.

Eventually I found myself back on a road, surprisingly a good kilometer off-course of where I thought I should have been. Sighing and fretting about the pup, I took the long way around to the neighbor's driveway. Hiking up it, I could hardly see their house and outbuildings and soon found that they were not there, both cars gone, their lonely dog barking inside. Kagan—whew!—emerged from a spot on their porch.

We made our way back home together. But that night my dreams were limned with anxiety. I swam in the sky and walked on the ocean, nobody heard my cries and I was alone and small. Fogged in.

FOG BOWS

Among the strange things that happen in the trickster fog is a colorless rainbow, known as a "fog bow." It arches over sea or land, lingering until light or wind disperses it.

Because of the tiny size of the fog water droplets, the colors are "very weak," I learn from an internet search, "with a red outer edge and a bluish inner edge." I peer at a fog bow but can't even make out those nuances. "When droplets forming it are almost all the same size, a fog bow can have multiple inner rings," the scientific article continues. I think I can discern that. But who can be sure of what fog does and does not show?

HOW FOG FEELS

Step outdoors into the foggy day, keeping your feet on the ground and your head held high. Does it have a scent? Not really. It has a feel, though. Droplets may settle in your hair but disappear when you go back indoors. It is damp and soothing on your skin. Soft. An old woman looks young again. Honestly, people who've spent years or a lifetime in a foggy environment like this don't look their age. They seem preserved by fog.

"THE MISTS OF AVALON"

Once the ferry leaves the mainland for our island, I like to step out of our car and stand on the deck, peering eagerly into the gray, trying to make out our destination. On days like that, the top of the lighthouse at the eastern end of the island may be visible, but more often it's obscured and we hear only the call of its foghorn companion as the water trawls purposefully along the boat's sides.

I have nonetheless raised my hands and prayed to get through it to my island home. I gained this reflex from a novel called *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley—a feminist retelling of the Arthurian legends. The island of Avalon was located in a mist-shrouded lake. It featured a haven for women, priestesses of the older nature-based religion. One got there on a barge, but to travel through the gray and reach the shores of Avalon required powerful magic. Not everyone could get through. And by the book’s end, as a compelling metaphor for the fading of the old ways and the ascendance of Christianity, Avalon and its residents retreated from this world, swallowed by the mists and receding from importance and influence. An excerpt:

Vivienne reminded herself that she had done this almost every day of her adult life and by now it was so natural to her that she could have done it in her sleep or if she were dying. She stood still, rigid, locked into the tension of the magic, then stretched out her arms, extending them full length, raising them high above her head, palms toward the sky. Then, with a swiftly exhaled breath, she brought them down.

The boat began to glide through the mists. Swiftly and surely, [it] poled through the thick, clinging damp; Viviane felt the fog on her hair and eyebrows, soaking through her woolen shawl. Then, like a curtain being pulled back, the mist vanished, and before them lay Avalon’s sunlit stretch of water and a green shore...

As for what is and is not real, I credit fog with teaching me not to always trust my eyes and not to always be so sure. Arriving, or even merely recognizing familiar sights, feels like a miracle or a triumph.

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

Somewhere mist drifts, cobweblike, over water. Somewhere steam rises off a meadow. Water joins the air.

Out here, thick sea fog comes and endures for days and days, till you don’t know if the sun will ever return. It causes us to lose our bearings, to question all the things we agree upon: what’s up, what’s down, what’s morning, what’s evening, what’s land, what’s horizon, what’s earth, what’s sky. It deprives us of the sun and the stars. On fogbound days, I curl into myself, too close to my field of vision, neither here nor there, not quite awake nor asleep.

When the fog departs, often suddenly, I blink and try to remember. I stand up and carefully walk outside, restored to the fragile world.

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