

Tara Shepersky
Star Songs & Water Rituals

Before I close the blinds for sleep, I always look out the window. By now I've been indoors a couple of hours, more in winter. Pleased with my friend-sewn blanket and warm wool slippers, I'm committed to roosting. Yet some essential precursor is missing. I cannot put a day to bed without first greeting the night.

Mostly I see a mess of orange clouds -- the underbelly of daytime grey turned into Vegas by night. Or Sauron's eye, when my mood is bleak, of late. Tonight I'm later than Cinderella to bed, and outside it's...stars. My upstairs window is none too clean, and I have to double-check it's not reflections. But there's Orion practically shouting at me, and I race downstairs into the night.

It's not unfriendly, for all it's January in Oregon. I'm standing out here in jeans and a medium-warm plaid shirt, scenting the Willamette River and listening to a street still busy at this hour. And if this deep-blue night isn't velvet, but more like clammy silk, well, it's wrapping me up all the same. And it *is* deep blue -- small miracles -- like the sea where the continental shelf drops all the way off.

And maybe it's singing Orion's up to, not shouting. He and the other constellations my father taught me are *sparkling*, popping against the night like pewter buttons newly shined. They move around a little bit, like the giant person who sewed them on is up there breathing, admiring her beautiful glinting fasteners.

There's more to the constellations, I know: I've seen their pointillist density, their curious feathered shadows. But there's too much light in metro Portland to see all the millions of milky stars the sky washes up. Orion here is an outline of himself, his shoulder ruby-lit, a frozen fire.

No wind tonight. If I wish the road away, I can almost hear silence rippling into the void. Our neighboring douglas-fir muscles up next to the Hunter, ocean green on darkest blue, the rich and pleasing colors of the unclouded globe from space. A strange comparison. I think in terms of rivers and trees, the local osprey pair's migration months. I do not want to imagine a need to leave this world.

I have this perfect place that I go in moments like this. It's my front porch: wide and deep, with beautiful Craftsman detail in the raised molding that marches all around with a pleasing mathematical authority. There's an Adirondack chair pulled up next to the railing on the lefthand side. I can wrap myself in wool plaid and sink into it, indulging both my day's-end body, and my need to drink the stars.

This is a perfect place because it is a made-up place. I see this porch in my mind's eye every day, but that doesn't make it any more attached to my house. It's clear as the stars tonight, when I'm ready for sleep but unwilling to surrender. Half-frozen sublimity, or the frankly boring pleasure of a warm, soft bed? I'm craving a liminal zone.

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I'd watch birds from this porch, in daylight: beeping nuthatches and five-alarm woodpeckers; bushtits by the bushel, and chattering masses of chickadees. Birds by day and stars by night: how essential. I'd come out for sunrise from this porch, and sing to the wind rippling on river, lake, or sea. Hell, why not sleep here, listen to the wind and catch the sunrise that way?

I'd be perfectly happy, too, if I had this porch. I actually think this, fairly often. That it is false does not quench the ember cupped in my jealous heart. I want privacy, and birds -- and quiet and stars and my heart's home, whatever that is -- more than I want a higher income, time to read, or the honey-gold hair I took for granted in my youth. I rushed out with joy to see the stars tonight, but here I am coveting a different life instead. Restlessness is the enemy of contentment.

I've acquired several diversions for this frustrating visitor, who is always right but never very wise. I can offer them a walk, which they tend to decline. (Sometimes they let me go alone, and lie in wait for my return.) I can open certain books, dropping in wherever they will have me. Jane Austen is about the best for this purpose, with her deceptive mannerly dialogue and her observations like knives, sharpened in secret behind expensively upholstered chairs.

Or I can run a bath. How has it never occurred to me to do this at midnight? Summery with rose-scented soap, the water's irresistible. I've been reading about sea swimming. Slipping in, I try to imagine wanting that breath-stealing embrace, that shocking strength unallied to my body.

I've lit candles, to preserve the dark and still read about the sea swimming. Amy Liptrot in her memoir *The Outrun* is describing the fear and trembling, the painful clarity, the vague familiar freedom of floating on the living deep.

My eyes float closed, and I realize this water is not only tame, but dumb and purposeless. It doesn't speak, as water should, much less toss stones between wave crests, or surprise me with soul-eyed seals. It's hotspring-warm, but without the secretive currents and whiffs of the infernal you'd find not so far from here, at the margins of the Clackamas River. In its bleak bathtub sojourn, this water has forgotten that it's coming from or going anywhere.

Within ten minutes I'm contemplating a trip across the street to the Willamette. But I won't get past the imagining stage tonight. I'm so far these days from compassing anything more extreme than going out front in a blanket to sip the stars.

I used to run in rainstorms for fun, didn't I? I used to swim at night in my home river, an inward-curving teenager desperate for communion, terrified that someone would find out. No one did, until now, and that's for the best. There weren't words, then; there was only river.

Candlemas morning: the world tipping over into light. I'm not brave enough to swim, but I'll dip my fingers in the frigid Willamette, trace my personal signs on my cheeks and forehead. Our local mountain, the moon, my heart's own river. It's like saying my name to myself. My wordless

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name, my dedication to something more than me, inside of which I move and matter.

I do this reflexively: catching sight of alpenglow, or opening my eyes to greet the moon in my window. Staring at a clearcut, summoning a better way. Rushing out to the glorious gift of stars.

I also do it intentionally, in the nearest body of water, marking every seasonal shift by the ancient calendar of cross-quarter, solstice, and equinox. The turning year speaks to me, more than any particular season or sight. It slows me down to wonder and give thanks. My pagan naming ritual gives me a hold on that old belonging. It also reminds me of my baptism. Sometimes I cross myself with water, too. We need all the belonging we can get: fingers dug into the sand, eyes lifted up to the hills.

Last night, in the hours between enchantment and awakening, a restless wind erased the stars. Pendant branches on a line of empty birch trees lash like rain this morning, thin and black against a greying sky. Crows and cormorants greet each other in the name of the crisp cold wind. Bald eagles are circling low to the river, loosing the curious fluting squeaks I hear only in winter.

How I've settled into these past few days of calm and stars. This morning everything is on alert. Another storm is coming. It rises from the north and west, and it has not yet reached to reel in the dawn.

Reflected in riverpath, the sun is rising. It looks delicate against the massing western cloudwall, immanently breakable by force of rain and wind straight off the ocean. I walk out on the spit where the river meets the creek, to witness.

It's pushing right into those clouds, painting them with strokes too quick to swallow, until sky and storm and the river and my face are radiantly, defiantly striped, in the rainbow name of an abalone's secret shell. Take *that* into the night.