WALDEN WEST: II (Excerpts)

By AUGUST DERLETH

No nocturnal voice seems lonelier than the whippoorwill’s. Perhaps it is that somewhere in the past it represented something unattainable to me, as it still does, something only a little way ahead, something in the dark, out of sight but never quite out of hearing, to be reached for but never to be found, something ineffably lonely, something utterly desirable, something apart and lost, belonging to me, but never to be grasped. Like childhood or youth, accounting for the nostalgia I hear in the song.

I know that the psychiatrists, those glib and entertaining gentlemen, would say that the urge to go home again, back to youth, to carefree childhood, to the womb, might account for this kind of magic, but this to me is a concept related not to the self nearly so much as to the desire of the self to be merged with the universe, not in death, as in the psychiatrists’ death-wish, but in a spiritual oneness which is akin to the eternal quest for unity with God or with that omnipotence which is represented in the concept of God.

Long ago, when I was still a child, I used to go visiting every summer at the hilltop farm home of my Aunt Annie. For two or three weeks I remained with my mother, grandmother, and sister among my cousins there at the farm midway between Spring Green and Plain, a place which offered a lovely vista of hill slopes looking down a green and wooded valley toward Lone Rock. The boys who were my cousins were either too young or too old to be companionable, and the girls had nothing to offer after a day or two. By the end of the first week, the novelty of the farm had worn off, and I grew progressively more homesick for the Wisconsin and its islands, for the sloughs and the familiar hills, and some days I would climb into an apple tree at the corner of the orchard and spend hours just sitting there alone, looking into the distance that was Sac Prairie. And in those nights, early to bed, I used to be awakened by the crying of the whippoorwills in the darkness of the hills and valleys. Perhaps it was that somehow the whippoorwills came to represent the unattainable desire of that youthful heart, the longing for home, but home as more than a haven for the body among familiar places.

However it may be, the song of the whippoorwill surpasses all other nocturnal sounds in my mind and memory. This is the culminating sound of all the springs; once it has begun, to be heard all summer long, the spring is done, and once it has sounded, all other voices are second to it. I listen to it night after night, and it brings into my thoughts everything that ever was or could be, it brings all of joy and all of sadness where it sounds out of the dark hills, and it seems above all other things to answer the very heartbeat within.

How this came to be, I cannot say. It became to give pleasure and sadness, joy and melancholy, I do not know. I can understand how the whistling of a locomotive at night may sound lonely, how it may stand for flight, escape, but I cannot say how the crying of the whippoorwill came to represent all the lost hopes, all the dreams, how it stirs the visions and longings of a boy and man, as if it were not a bird at all, but the disembodied voice of night itself, of the very earth brooding in the
darkness, the changed and the changeless, the living and the dead, time past and coming time, the boy who was and the man who is, forever one.

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Walk along a country road and smell the grass of a summer night. It rises from the drying seedheads as well as from second growth below; it fills the air with an unimaginable fragrance which has a seasonal counterpart, however different, only in the smell of growing things in spring, of leaves in autumn, in the fresh wonder of falling snow in winter. Men commonly take it for granted, and it is doubtful if most of them are aware of it, or, being aware, know its source. The smell of the grass is the country air in summer nights; there is a kind of basic fragrance in it, as of the earth itself—of rock and soil and stone—not just the grass growing upon it, a kind of exhalation which is sweet because it is so fundamental to existence and to man's being, too, though he may not be cognizant of what he speaks when he says that the air "is good to breathe." It persists in dry weather or wet, a fragrance akin to that of drying hay, but more tenuous, not so concentrated and not so dry, lying in the still air or riding the winds—and the summer's winds are almost always from the west, tawny and aromatic—like something alive within itself, not belonging to man at all, but willing to be shared by him, knowing it has a greater vitality and immortality than man.

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In evening, when the sun is low and the lavender dusk has already begun to drift in from the east, lying sentimentally in the groves and glades, the woodthrush begins to sing, a song of liquid notes, alternately ascending and descending the scale. His song is pensive, not melancholy as the pewee's sometimes seems, but thoughtful and very melodious, far more so, I think, than the reedier song of the hermit thrush. He is like the voice of the evening woods itself, brooding, contemplative, a sound that echoes a long time in mind and heart. The wood-thrush is more truly a habitant of dusk, singing after sundown and before sunrise, than any other bird. The only other voice which speaks so eloquently for the woods is that of the pewee, abidingly about, pensive too, almost sad, but not alone a nocturnal voice, for it sounds through every hour of the spring day, at noon as well as at midnight, keeping the company of caroling robins as readily as of the cold brrrrch population of the wood. The wood-thrush keeps no company but his own, and he is sparing of his song.

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In addition to all the well-known sounds of night, there are a host of sounds scarcely audible or so seldom repeated as to go all too often unheard—the low, cooing hoot of a long-eared swamp owl, the conversation of teal, the bell-like song of the saw-whet owl, for example—as to exist only on the very rim of awareness. Who, even among solitary nightwalkers, commonly hears the quirting of whippoorwills, the mewing talk of muskrats, the voices of voles and meadow mice? Yet these sounds are everywhere of any spring or summer evening in Wisconsin, lost among the more numerous songsters, or so subdued and muted as to be audible only to the waiting ear.
There are, too, the occasional unidentifiable sounds, the strange voices of uncommon birds or animals—of a migrant bird not native to the Sac Prairie country, stopping briefly overnight, or an animal long alien to this place, passing through under cover of darkness, or the infinite small variations in the songs of little known warblers or frogs which lend a tantalizing strangeness to the evening and the night, rising out of the dusk and darkness of the wood, and announcing that briefly, briefly an unknown visitor has paused in this familiar place, and will be gone again ere the inquiring eye can find him. Such voices fill the evening with strangeness, haunt the night with something alien, and are yet not apart from the night-held wood itself, for was not a dark wood forever the heart of mystery, the source of the unknown from the beginning of man's consciousness, since it stood for the tangible foe of man, the earth itself arrayed against his small fire and the multitude of his fears.

The night speaks with a thousand voices, in the thousand tongues of earth, not all known to the listening ear; each shouts its triumph in life into the enclosing womb of dark, under the moons and stars and sums of this one infinitesimal galaxy in the cosmos; each throbs in harmony with the pulse in the veins of the night-walker passing by, the night-walker of whom the habitants of the dark and darkening wood are often less aware than he of them. He does not know whence these voices come; he might be astonished to realize that the fluted piping making a choir of an April night in the meadow rises from a creature so small as to take three or four of them to cover the face of his watch, that the least breath of sound may come from the sleek, magnificent otter, a creature of size and power.

The night is filled with voices, the sounds of gnawing, the songs of mating, the scattering of passage, the screams of death constantly and forever, just as the night-walking solitary with each passing step marks off another moment of his allotted time before he returns to dust which he will share in common with all the strange habitants of the wood around him, all in due, inexorable time, and the hyla choir no less than the whippoorwill's song, the rabbit's death scream no less than the beaver's insatiable gnawing, the rustling of passing mice no less than the weasel's remorseless pursuit, the love song of the woodcock no less than the proud scream of the hunting hawk are all integral in the pattern of life and death, which is indistinguishable by night as well as day.

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