

Vigil

Elizabeth Ayres

I waited. High up in the Smokies, where mist curls from the treetops like steam in a hot green cauldron. Where clouds stack up like mountains, and mountains roll away like clouds, rippling to the horizon in an undulating current of hill and vale, high and low, a pulse as regular as wingbeats, up and down, a vertical in-ing and out-ing, like the tide.

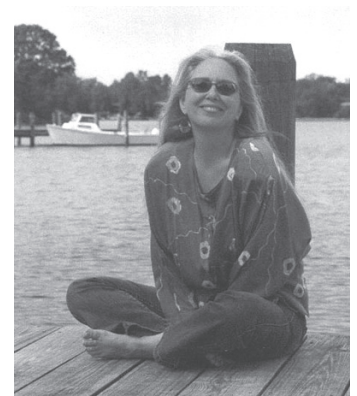
I waited. On the first night, dark blue cloud-tongs opened briefly, letting fall to Earth a glowing ember of sun, but I saw no stars. On the second night, the clabbered clouds parted long enough to reveal a pearl white moon on a nacreous chip of pink sky-shell, but I saw no stars. On the third night, I rose at midnight, peering past black lace leaves onto an unfurling bolt of ebony velvet. From tree to tree I heard the antiphonal chant of crickets and frogs, but I saw no stars.

Six nights I waited. Flesh of my flesh, I thought, bone of my bones. Elemental ovens, where carbon, nitrogen and oxygen were synthesized, released, refashioned, relinquished, formed all over again, then set free to make all the planets and every manner of thing inhabiting them. Billions of years up and down, infinity's wingbeats, billions of years in and out, a cosmic tide. How I longed to see them, my ancestors, my companions, my guides. Six nights I waited, and on the seventh day, it was time to come home, where artificial light has long since replaced starshine in the nighttime sky.

The word "vigil" means "awake, alert, watchful." There are formal times set aside for such watchfulness—on the eve of special festivals or holy days. There are times when life makes spontaneous demands of alertness from us at the bedside of a sick child, a dying friend. On the eve of Yom Kippur, the Jewish holy day celebrated in Autumn, the congregation prays, "May all the people of Israel be forgiven, including the strangers who live in their midst, for all the people are at fault."

When I was in North Carolina, I kept my evening vigils, praying to see the stars. By day I drove on steep narrow roads through a thick cloth woven from sunlight and shade, embroidered with the sounds of birds and insects. I drove through the V-shaped folds, up and down, in and out, thinking of the Cherokee people who had lived in those mountains for 10,000 years, until, coveting what belonged to others by virtue of ancestral gift, the strangers living in their midst claimed the land as their own. Back into the thick cloth that is Southern Maryland, my pen stitches the names of the people who lived here for 10,000 years—Patuxents, Piscataways, Nanjemoy, Mattapanys, Wicomicoes, Portopacos, Mattawomans, Chapticos—until we took the land they lived on, and their inheritance became ours.

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Guided by the stars, Columbus made his voyage of discovery and stumbled on this continent. The stars guide us still, for tomorrow's new world is today being synthesized in the elemental ovens of all the peoples' hearts. Flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone, we are learning to say to each other, to Earth, "Everyone is at fault, everyone forgiven, everyone set free to begin a new voyage of discovery that will take us, not out, but in."

Shall we acknowledge that life on this planet is making a spontaneous demand of alertness from us? Shall we begin our vigil now? In the great cycles of day and night, there is a light appropriate to every work: the sun for growing up, the moon and stars for growing down.

Tonight, as our eyes flutter closed and darkness covers the waters of our sleep. As all thinking and desiring melt away. Let us pray for something deeper than thought or desire: that Earth's own wanting will take hold of us, that Earth's own dream for herself will take shape within us. So that tomorrow, as our eyes flutter open, we can say, "Let there be light." And begin, in this new cycle called Ecozoic, the Great Work entrusted to us by Thomas Berry.