

equilibrium

by andrew p. phillips

Whenever the keeper feels close, upwelling memories impinge his quest, eyes drift opposite rising doubt to floorboards below and he's lost into the currents of polished wood grain. Shamed by faltering vigilance, judged as cowardice, he restores his outward gaze and hopes, just once, to keep the peripheral menaces at bay.

This is the keeper's pattern. Each time he continues his search, he reaches out through his gaze for an invisible line, wishing to touch it if only with his eyes. Each time he feels himself drawing near quiet panic sets in, eyes downcast until the threat passes.

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Each summer morning, lifeguards reappear and plant their flags — three thick bands stacked: blue, white and red. Three inch block letters span the white field bearing the cheery message 'welcome' but warning swimmers of the boundaries for their play.

Tethered to aluminum poles piercing the beach, the flags unfurl some distance to either side of upright, red-planked guard stands. Grits of sand, wedged by wind, accentuate seams. In the morning, before others arrive, deep fissures trace the route by which the stands have been drug forward from nightly rest prone at the foot of the dunes.

Some days the flags are set broadly; other days they are quite close. Arriving over the dune crest, laden with the day's beach junk, the ocean's mood is immediately known by the distance between flags.

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In a wind such as this, the flags would run straight out, fluttering toward the land, their greeting alternating forward and backward, up and down the coastline. In a wind such as this, they would warn the visitor back toward land, an admonishing finger pointing away from certain risk.

But in this starlight lacking a moon, there are no flags and all the lines are blurred. There are edges between land and water, water

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and sky, secure and dangerous, beginning and end. All are present, but none are legible.

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With feet buried in still warm sand, in a wind like tonight's, Peter can lean forward, hands in pockets, and stand so for hours. The rising tide, encouraged by the wind, pushes landward. Ten foot waves fall just off shore.

It's a late winter night but warm enough for sweatshirts. It had been a shirtsleeves day, a premature gift. Salty mist gradually covers Peter as morning frost coats blades of shadowed grass. Movement would mar the film so he strives for stasis. Here, planted on a continent's edge, is where he sometimes wishes to stand forever.

* * *

Each wave rolls in according to an invisible rhythm, the tempo morphing as the water wishes. It swells, echoing the dunes opposite, then hollows forward to a thin line arcing over, tipping right to left. There's a flash of foamy white, a forward crash, and the point chases the line right to left. Each wave follows this pattern, but none match. Each is, for a brief moment, the lone wave rising from the sea, celebrating frothy individuality and then imploding to rejoin the ocean's anonymous waters.

This could be the edge of heaven, this view from the beach into endless water and sky, the margin between two vastnesses. Their precise boundary is an untouchable line: thin but absolute, known but invisible. Between wet and dry, up and down, present and future. Sometimes closer, other times more distant, constantly teeming back and forth. And we, with it, striving — yearning. Only to succumb back into a formless mass filled with unspeakable creatures.

From any position, the edge is always further off. Advance, it recedes. Recede, it advances. The distance between circumstance and horizon never really changes.

* * *

The sand behind Peter is still pocked with impressions from his approaching footsteps but the path back is lost. The wind will soon

finish erasing these marks, blending them with the remaining stand ruts into a smooth, undulating palimpsest prepared for the next day's imprints.

His physical isolation will soon be rendered equal to his emotional reality: stranded. Knowing not what else to do, he leans into the wind, trying to find the point of balance hidden between force and thrust. He's certain that somewhere within this attempt at equilibrium lies the equation for weightlessness.

* * *

The rising sun found Peter still leaning into the wind, hands in pockets; an upright needle balanced by opposing forces while searching for a lost partner in the horizon.

