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In the Shadow of Tintern Abbey

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On a bike trip cycling the length of the United Kingdom, my mind was always churning, my legs in constant motion. It was a zone of perpetual striving but at the same time a still point. The constraint that this was all I had to do eliminated choice and decision-making. The day I made it to Tintern Abbey I had ridden seventy-three miles. When I finally turned a corner and saw the gray stone ribs of the ruined monastery, I knew I could rest.

Tintern, with a population of 750, is not a town—more a hamlet on the southeastern Welsh border in a valley that is old, as old as

civilization. Ten minutes after closing, without the tourist crowds and parking lots full of cars and motor coaches, there was just me and a pasture with cows beside the abbey. Evening was settling, and I felt the loneliness around me. In the distance, way up on a hill is St. Mary's, the church where William Wordsworth sat composing his "Lines Written (or Composed) a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798." I could barely make out the structure; overgrown with ivy, it, too, was abandoned. Ruins tend to make me melancholy.

It is a meditative poem, a poem of memory, of lingering over the past, anticipating the future before coming back to the present, the scene of broken walls, windowless windows, roofless space open to the sky, a sky softening into a hazy twilight. I snapped pictures while at the same time scoping out a possible stealth camping spot. After the few dog walkers vacated the pea-gravel path beside the river, I ducked into a clump of woods in search of level ground.

I was not the first person to use this spot. There were crushed beer cans, condom wrappers, wadded up toilet paper, a foil emergency blanket. I swept all this aside with a stick and unfurled my tent. There was just enough room for me to crawl in and out of the zippered opening. The Wye River, sluggish within its muddy banks, shimmered silver as the sun set.

As Wordsworth sat there in 1798, ruminating, he was no longer a rambling youth. He'd already suffered the loss of his mother and father, the separation from his first love—and the child that affair had produced. He might have felt himself on the cusp. His first book of poems had been published; with an inheritance and funds finally recovered after his late father's death, he could establish himself as a poet.

One part of me could imagine Wordsworth surveying the valley, the spot I occupied. Very little seemed changed. Cows and rocks, the bones of the abbey sliding into darkness, the thatched roof houses clustered at a bend in the river. Yet into this bucolic reverie was inserted the sporadic hum of vehicle traffic on the A466 that paralleled the river and the steep wooded hills on the other side. The backdoor to the Anchor Inn, a café and pub, slammed, and a worker emerged for a smoke. A sliver of moon was beginning to sharpen.

In the two weeks preceding my trip, a woman crossing the street in front of Uptown Baptist Church in my neighborhood of Chicago was shot and killed. A few days later a man walking in front of my building was gunned down. Then a week before I left a good friend's husband suddenly died. She heard a thump in the bathroom and that was it. At the same time I was dealing with the end of my marriage; thirty years of togetherness was unraveling. I wasn't quite sure who I was anymore.

It was just me and the ruins of Tintern Abbey, and the ghost of Wordsworth. I wanted to soak in the sublime, breathe in the restorative power of nature, the peace that comes from surrender. If only I could live in this place forever.

I changed clothes in the claustrophobic tent and walked over to the Anchor Inn for a meal and to charge my phone. By the time I left the tavern, the thumb-nail moon was fully up, washing the abbey with pale woolly light. Standing in the parking lot, I sensed I was already forgetting what I longed to forever remember. I wanted this fulcrum-moment to remain with me always.

*Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain-winds be free
To blow against thee: and, in after years,
When these wild ecstasies
shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place*
—Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey"

