

Beyond

The hardly defined path ahead looks ancient. It might have been made by nomadic peoples during migrations many centuries ago; travels to increase food supplies by tribes living before agriculture developed, living by gathering and hunting as did their ancestors.

For most of an hour, rolling with the coastal ridge's rhythms, the path has traced the worn top of a seemingly endless high mesa, a cliff with a precipitous, vertical edge, as steeply chopped as that along Cabo de São Vicente at Sagres "chin" of Portugal's profile. The sea, boiling white where it carved at the rock, is far enough below the rim to carry only faintly its constant sounds to my ear. It swirls endlessly with terrible energy, almost as silent as a muted video. Trying, I cannot recall how I got here—or where I have left my wife.

From this height, looking like an easy three hundred feet above the sea, there is little organic green that colors the ridge rock. Landward, below the ridge, all is tumbled rock within the visible distance. No tree or shrub shadows bus-sized stones. The curve of sky fills a hemisphere unbroken in all directions, with a few clouds mostly on the northern, landed horizon.

Overhead, against a pale, cobalt sky two ever-hungry Man-o'-War birds as black as charcoal soar in tandem. With fully extended wings spanning almost eight feet, the fork-tailed Frigatebirds soar, wasting no energy. They follow the cliff edge in the buoying air of "ridge lift," taking advantage of the breeze rising from the steep wall. They are the most efficient 'sailplanes.' Frigatebirds make glider pilots envious.

No other movement catches my eye. The only close by sound I hear besides my footsteps on loose gravel is the low sighing of this midday's light wind.

My awareness focuses on my reasons for being here and after a mind search, no answers appear. This landscape which I had accepted as "usual" I now realize is strange. At first, it seemed as if I knew it—as if I were still on Mexico's west coast, or familiar from films shot in the Andean ridges of Chile, documentaries tracing early Inca communication roads. So many elements here seem like places in the past. I begin to realize that I am combing several of them into one place, this locale I've never visited.

No sense of caution or danger, no tingle of dread has penetrated the heady sense of wonder that propels me along the path. My sharp eyes light on an unnatural shape and I stoop to examine. At the edge of the path is a stone spear point, blackish, chipped into symmetrical edges smoothed with time, and a thick, rearward tab shaped for lashing to a shaft. This bit of sure handed technology must go back to the time before metal tools appeared in this area. Maybe as far back as stone age *Sapiens*.

My pace suddenly quickens, with no apparent input from intent. Momentum is increasing without my knowing why. I am impelled forward. I feel as if I'd rather be doing nothing else but covering more ground. I'm running pretty fast now and I see the cliff trail ahead abruptly stopped by a steep notch in the ridge. I don't slow down and it occurs to me that I don't have to. Approaching, it looks like I can leap it, if I get my speed up. I'll clear this yawning gorge to the other side with no risk.

The rock surface underfoot finally stops as if chopped with a felling axe and, unhesitating, I fling myself over the edge out into deep space, my legs bicycling furiously. If I concentrate my will on speed, if I focus it on reaching, it will be no harder than running along the worn rock bed. Ideas of gravity, or the terminal velocity a body experiences in a free fall do not intrude. No. I am navigating a perfectly reasonable surface. I will it as if a solid bridge spanning exactly the gulf between the opposing rock outcrops.

My body feels no falling, no sense of change from all of the trail I've traveled. I see the sea boiling below my churning feet. The stony path

is there, translucent in the sunlit air of free space under a generous sky. The Frigatebirds are distant—now looking like two black dash lines, their rigid wings still stretched just above the far cliff's face.

The airy roadbed is tilting up making me run harder to maintain speed. I hear myself breathing faster, shallower. Pulse beats at my temples; my head nods with its rhythm. I'm aware that my faster breathing is welcome, is necessary. The arching path seems narrower and, peering over its edges, the gorge's millennia-scoured rock faces fall sharply.

The rising wind brings singsong sounds, music of the sort found in psycho films, an invasion of strangeness that seems out of place in this brilliantly sunny day. Working hard, I realize that I'm still alone. Except for the soaring birds, I have encountered not a single living thing since beginning my walk.

And when, my mind asks, did I begin this excursion? What did starting out look like? Did I say goodbye to Ros when I left her? None of these questions are completed with answers, and yet none bothers or deters my forward motion.

I remember taking an open-cockpit biplane plane north along the million fingers of land, peninsulas glaciers had thrust into Maine's Casco Bay. Then, sunlight sparkling from spray dashed at light-bleached rock ringed islands contrasted with the blackish-green of state spruce, girdled at the land-water junction with wave heaped bands of mustard yellow drying rockweed.

That rich picture from low altitude provided an immediate awareness of wonder, of unmolested Nature 'undeveloped' by relentless humans. That delight aloft returns to mind with my efforts over this steep passage, the sense of elation from seeing again the marvels of Earth from the vantage of altitude.

Carefree, I'm excited being here, refreshed as if made brand new by a cathartic swim in the angry, cold water swirling below. The effort required to maintain headway now seems to require less energy with no loss of height. The opposite cliff seems no nearer than when I leaped,

but I care not about that strangeness. The elation that sustains me knows that I am at that exact place about which old pilots dream—of being aloft, setting a course, and never having to land.

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