

Three Roads
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What does Dongshan teach?

The dark way, the bird path, and the open hand.

1

At the edge of the sea, the rumble and roll of the waters pull on some deep memory of our first, floating home, when we were diaphanous, barely matter, aeons before the empires of thought and industry were built upon the land. Wind pours through the coastal forest, joining the boom of the waves, and the world is a unity of impersonal and completely consoling roar.

This is always going on, whether anyone is here to see it : The waves flow into shore, around and over rocks, through beds of kelp swaying now one way, now the other. Breezes ride the waves, moonlight turns them to silver. Sometimes fog rolls in, and the world disappears. This has always been going on.

The edge of the rocky world erodes and slides, changing shape in reply. The air absorbs the sea, becoming a substance, moist and thick. A person living in the roar notices that, in a slow and unrelenting way like delicate fingers peeling back something delicate, layer by layer, the ocean is looking for itself in her.

2

On the shore of the Pacific Ocean, you're living along one of the world's great seams. Of course, wherever we are is a place the world can fall open, but this is a fine spot for a slow-witted creature who needs it spelled out plain. It's a place of mixing, tide pools and trees bent by the wind, ebb and flow of vast and particular, something immense as the ocean and vivid as an osprey sailing the air above it.

It's like a reverse event horizon, where emptiness emerges, moment after moment, into the visible world : This wave of all that is, this shattering warmth, rolling over the small territory of your heart.

One day I'm gazing idly at the large rocks along my bluff, and suddenly they seem to get up and walk around. It takes a moment to realize that deer, the same color as the rocks in the hazy light, have been grazing among them. Another time, the sky lowers with clouds on a stormy day. The rain pauses, and all at once shards of the sky, white and grey like the clouds, seem to

burst into particularity and take flight. It's gulls, heading out of the bay toward the open ocean, sunlight glinting on their wings.

When Cornish sailors are out at night or in a fog and lose sight of land, they listen for the sing of the shore — the sound the waves make depending on whether they're sussurating over sand or pebbles, pounding against reefs or cliffs — to tell them where they are. How alive the world is, even in the dark, and how intimate we are with it.

3

Inland from here, the alchemical opposite : Wildfires, swift and violent, ripping through forests and towns. The dead, the missing, the homeless — and a thick sea of smoke blanketing most of Northern California. For millions of people, it has become dangerous to breathe.

What happens if we don't attend to the shimmering membrane that connects us? What is the sing of the shore when the flames reach the beach? We who are so busy dividing ourselves from each other will be united anyway, by air becoming smoke, floods submerging the distinctions between things, droughts turning the variegated world to dust. The oneness of things is no cliché, and it will claim us one way or the other. Will the poets ten generations from now name the roar of the vastness consoling, or pitiless?

Even now, at the edge of too late, the world opens its hand to us. Each life, each heart-mind, unfurls the fingers of its longing : Like the ocean, they hope to find themselves in us, to find that we do remember who we are and where we live, on a planet home floating in the largest sea of all.