

SIGHT LIKE A RIVER



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WRITTEN BY STEVE BUNK

A river rushes around each bend, scouring the rocks
in its path, sunlight flashing on its back. Fast and

fluid, touching everything. That's how our vision should be.

There's a pub in Hong Kong called the Old China Hand, known as a class act in its genre if you enjoy that sort of thing: funny slogans on the polished wood and knick-knacks in the crannies. Among the relics on the wall is a T-shirt emblazoned with an ancient, gnarled fist.

That T-shirt, poking gentle fun at the smugness of an old China hand (in China Coast lore, someone who is knowledgeable about the ways of the region), led this relative newcomer to wonder again about the benefits of experienced insight versus a fresh perception, the old eye versus the young. It's a familiar debate, one I've had ever since the road beckoned long ago, travel being one of those primal drives for me; like food and sleep; a lust in the heart, to borrow the poignancy of former US President Jimmy Carter's old, guilty admission on another topic altogether.

The best expression I know of how people should see new things came from an American Pacific Northwest poet whose name I forget, but I remember him saying that everyone should have "sight like a river". A river rushes around each bend, scouring the rocks in the bed, sunlight flashing on its back. Watergrasses bend and strain like pedestrians in a gale. Yes, that's the way our vision should be. Sight like a river. Fast and fluid, touching everything, giving it life.

My friend Gerhard, a Swedish photo-

can be. Under ideal circumstances I can gorge with the best, but Gerhard was in a position of power at that moment, and I remember nibbling like a novice.

"When we get to Xiamen, watch for the shoes of the People's Liberation Army," he said. "I'd like to do a photo essay on these shoes some day."

We didn't see any army personnel in the port city of Xiamen at first, but the nearby holiday island of Guliyang provided a few nonchalant marchers on weekend promenade. Many wore tennis

That's sight like a river, to look at people's feet in a strange town. The old eye could see that, and so could the young, but sometimes it's easier for one than the other.

In my case, a new eye is always fresher than an old one. For example, how I get from point A to B interests me because, if it's a new city, I take special interest in every step, signpost or landmark that might help to get me back to where I started, an essential goal if you happen to be the sort who can't seem to do anything requiring logic, numbers or sense of direction.

Yet, if it's a familiar locale, even a home-town, I'm more likely to get lost than if I'd never been to the place in my life. That's because my old eye grows lazy, I worry more about thoughts than perceptions, I go inward. I'm the type who ends up noticing people's shoes, not on purpose but because I'm muttering along to myself down some beautiful, ancient, exotic street in some place everybody else would give their eyeteeth to see, and I'm looking at the sidewalk.

Friends and I did that not long ago, strolled down the esplanade in Australia's Northern Territory capital of Darwin. The others were pointing out the trees and insects and flowers and I was constantly forced to come up out of a blind, internal reverie to have a look around at the physical world. Yep, I'd say, not too shabby, and get right back down into the grey realms.

The old eye versus the young, sight like a river, we all encounter it every day. It must have a lot to do with caring, and how we care about where we are. Some people get physical about our world, analysing what makes grass green and the stars burn. Others get philosophical, concentrating on why we're here and what it all means. Still others just get through it.

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In a new city I take an interest in every step,
signpost or landmark that might help me**



CHANDI ANDREWS/STOCK HOUSE

**get back to where I started. In my
hometown my old eye grows lazy,
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thoughts than perceptions.**

grapher based in Hong Kong, works at developing sight like a river, as do all good photographers, artists, poets and other visionaries. On my first trip to the Chinese mainland the Hong Kong airport was the first evidence I had of Gerhard's old-hand insight. In the airport cafeteria, he pointed out the newcomers to the big city, mostly waiters and waitresses.

"How can you tell they're not Hong Kong people?" I asked.

"Their haircuts, for one. You see how the men's sideburns are long, and how they taper to a point? That's not a Hong Kong style these days. And just from the way they all look hesitant and move slowly, I can see they're not Hong Kong natives. There's a lot of that kind of hesitation around town nowadays. Anyway, the airport is a major employer of new arrivals from China, so I'm not really figuring out anything too subtle here." He wolfed a bite of his cafeteria burger, confident in his chewing as only the righteously informed

shoes with their khaki uniforms, some sported slightly more austere sandshoes, a few boasted brogues or boots, but whatever the configuration, two things were obvious: the People's Army shoes were not army issue, and everyone had made an attempt to polish, paint or lacquer their footwear to some semblance of People's Army Green.



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bright as sunlight, the sea and sky a brazen blue, while the beach umbrellas craned like plants into the afternoon.

In the water close to shore, I recall kids and parents splashing within the chain-mesh shark net and, beyond it, surfers lying on their boards as they waited for the right wave, bobbing like gulls in the swell. I plopped down on my undersized bath towel, rolled onto my back so my stomach would collapse and took my first dose of the insidious antipodean sun. It hit like sloe gin, lulling me into a false confidence that no suffering would succeed this pleasure.

To one side just behind the beach, parents dangled their toddlers in a rock-ribbed pool filled by the tide. Before me, a trio of young women in bulbous sunglasses and fishnet bikini bottoms luxuriated in their perfect forms. Two teenaged lifesavers clambered into a rubber ducky and motored into the surf, their triangular torsos jouncing with each wave. Shot through the squadrons of surfers were the sit-down paddlers on their wave skis, a stray kayaker or two and the then-new legions of boardsailers worrying the winds at the edges of the big boats' deep water domain.

I'm intuitive rather than visual. My dreams don't happen in colour or even in solid images but in ideas, conversations, vague impressions and, sometimes, strong feelings. Mind you, I constantly *try* to improve my visual strengths but it's always a desultory effort, and I soon slip back into glassy-eyed reflection.

I catch artist friends looking at me askance on occasion (sensing the moods of others is my forte), and I know they're wondering at my inability to recognise that species of tree by its bark, or remember the orange light dancing on the wave-tips during yesterday's sunset when we were at the beach together. How can I excuse myself merely by explaining that, for me, sight only scampers like a river when I'm an outsider, because then the images are indelible?

Take, for instance, my premier Australian images, which come from an undisturbing yet unforgettable first visit to a Sydney beach. I confess, my attention was caught right away by the fact that the females were virtually nothing. Young, middle-aged and even a few grandmas bared their breasts to the burning white eye overhead and to those sliding ones nearby. Then I noticed the men were in a similar state. I remember the sand being



The lifesavers returned, one at the prow bucking waves and the other astern, navigating an arc back to the beach, their reconnaissance complete. I remember rolling onto my stomach to survey the families picnicking on a grassy knoll beyond the sand. Near them, a kiosk did a brisk trade in cold drinks and fast food and next to it, people came and went from showers and changing rooms underneath the Surf-Lifesaving Association's second-floor headquarters.

A jogger in brief swimming costume and tennis shoes chuffed past, deeply aware of himself. An ancient lady in a flower-patterned dress and floppy hat sat on a bench, absorbed in a massive ice-cream cone. Next to her, a dark man in a vermilion suit took off his shoes, put his bare feet in the sand and sat smoking, staring out to sea.

I swam out beyond the breakers, where the bay was deep and uncluttered. Treading water, I looked toward shore, and the view from here was dominated by tall white houses with red roofs and verandahs that jutted from the green hills behind the beach. I floated on my back, the salt water buoying me, and subconsciously realised this suspension in blue would become, for me, the quintessential image of the island continent.

It is significant that these memories encompass some of the other four senses. Sight like a river means comprehensive perception and I do try, periodically, to exercise all my senses, even if, when I make a conscious effort to define and catalogue my impressions, it's often in hopes of better describing on paper, as a professional scribe, the place and people under observation.

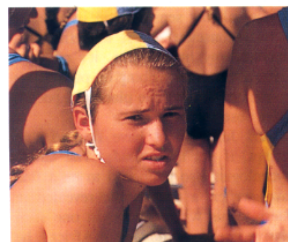
Carl Jung might have derided that attempt, if not the attitude. The famed psychologist also happened to be a fine travel writer, a talent often revealed in letters to his wife, Emma. In one such missive, sent from North Africa, he



wrote: "I shall try to share some of my impressions with you; actual description is impossible."

Then followed this prose: "At the crack of dawn, the grunting and groaning of camels, many running footsteps, sheep bleating, men shouting, then muffled drumbeats, the sky grows red in the East, mild, dry, still cool morning air, donkeys bray, dogs bark, the square in front of the 'Hotel' full of sitting camels, great numbers of black-bearded faces in snow-white burnouses, shouts echoing back and forth, round about golden-brown walls of mud bricks — 'houses'."

Much sound reverberates in this description but doesn't the prose wheel and burst? Aren't the scenes remembered so intimately that one suspects they must have been done from notes? Indeed, Jung writes elsewhere about this trip, "I had written down everything worth noting."



Well, I suppose observation depends on the observer. I recall some other author blithely declaring in a writers' magazine that *he* didn't bother with notes, because the images worth remembering stayed sharply focused in his mind (though I don't know what else he wrote besides that article).

My own mental catalogue of snapshots is not well-etched in a visual sense, although some of those faded pictures remain deeply evocative. I couldn't tell you the colour of the young school-mistress' hair in the playground at Dover,



Jung would have preserved every fleck and spot on the wing of that meandering butterfly. For me, all that remains is the



irony and frustration of being overtaken on my bicycle by a meandering lepidopteron.

where I witnessed my first cricket match. Instead, I recall standing with my bicycle on a grassy verge, watching as the children ran back and forth in a straight line, and feeling the sort of dull fascination one reserves for phenomena which might be understood with effort but not right now, thanks.

Of the teacher, who was playing with the kids, I can conjure now only grace of movement and being charmed by her beauty. Wellbeing suffuses that memory, because I was in the early stages of a solo bicycle trip from London through Western Europe.

The butterfly winking past me as I toiled against the wind along the hilly French coast has neither colour nor pattern left on its body now. Jung would probably have preserved in his mind's eye every fleck and spot on the wing of that

nonchalant insect, still as brilliantly-edged to him as the colours of an hallucination. For me, all that remains is the irony and frustration of being overtaken on my bicycle by a meandering lepidopteron.

Same thing with the other memories from France on that long-ago journey: the bliss of a flat stretch through tall farmlands (was it wheat growing? I don't know; it might have been yellow); the end-of-the-day reward of red wine, bread and cheese consumed in a darkening forest after 100 kilometres of pedalling; someone lacquering a handcart in the front yard of a country cottage in late afternoon; serious cyclists whizzing past me in black shorts and beanies, no doubt stopping around the corner for a breather after their macho display.

They're mostly feelings, aren't they,



such memories? Perhaps Jung was right; actual description is, finally, impossible. But the striving for it, obviously a part of his nature which would not be denied, is also the only method of choice for those who would truly wish to echo at journey's end what Jung wrote to his wife about North Africa: "I am having a shamelessly good time."

It's more than that, of course. Although not the final measure of a life or a journey well taken, a good time had can still be a guidepost, a sign that the voyager felt better for the experience, rather than beaten or bewildered by it. Sight and insight do have beneficial, even therapeutic effects, because they deepen appreciation, which deepens understanding, which leads to affinity.

Taking delight in new places and new experiences is taking delight in life. That's what connects us to our surroundings and makes us able to forgive life's many implacable ills.

Jung was an inveterate traveller throughout his life and those trips to America, Africa, India and Europe certainly helped him, even transformed him. "We always require an outside point to stand on, in order to apply the lever of criticism," he wrote. "How, for example, can we become conscious of national peculiarities if we have never had the opportunity to regard our nation from outside? Regarding it from outside means regarding it from the standpoint of another nation."

Perhaps the young eye and the old, sight and insight, can constantly be developed in each of us, just as small improvements can be made in our logic and intuition. There's probably no need to choose between the old eye and the young; we can have them both, if in varying degrees. Surely, that's what the poet meant by "sight like a river".



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