Why I Walk

Imagining the Maquis

The sight of a burned maquis is enough to make a man fancy he has been transported into midwinter in some northern clime, and the contrast between the barrenness of the ground over which the flames have passed, with the luxuriant vegetation around it, heightens this appearance of sadness and desolation.

Prosper Mérimée, Colomba

I had never seen a burned maquis, but back in 1991, from our south San Francisco cottage, my partner, Jeff, and I could see the Oakland Hills blaze away. We were having a party in the garden, and it was too late to call it off on account of bad taste, so we all stood among the gerber daisies, nasturtium, Mexican sage, agapanthas, hydrangeas, and calla lilies (perhaps we should have called off the party for
bad taste!) and watched the sky turn orange, hazy with smoke. There’s nothing like a wildfire to kill off cocktail conversation: we turned up the radio and listened to woeful interviews with stumped firemen, and reports of people hosing down their siding (hoping to keep their homes from becoming tinder) and of the mass exodus of wildlife scampering into the roads (out of the frying pan, into the line of fire).

And once the sky turned from orange to green, that’s when the ashes, wafted over the bay, began to snow into our drinks. And that’s when I saw, no kidding, a large flaky sheath of ash that I could just make out as it rested on some paving stones, a chiaroscuro of glossy black on flat black, “Apex #32 Roofing Supply.” It wasn’t very cold that day, but I’m sure I shivered a bit.

But conflagration has never made people like me steer away from prime real estate. Soon after, Jeff found himself well-employed as a carpenter and electrician rebuilding all those incinerated homes on Grizzly Peak, which kept us in cheesecakes and rent money throughout the winter. The color of the garden hydrangea changed from blue to red after all the soot changed the nutrients in the soil.

And ten years later, even though I had read that some portion of the Corsican maquis was constantly on fire nearly every month of the year, I bought a ticket and packed my backpack and made my plans to walk across the island, over mountains and through the maquis. I needed to get out.

I consider myself to be, like certain Sherwin-Williams paints, an indoor-outdoor kind of guy. I am both city mouse and country mouse, prefer the extremes of urban living and the wilds of open terrain, the asphalt jungle and the, uh, jungle. Equal easy access to the felicities of espresso beans and blue curaçao and to the austerities of mountainside coffee plantations and the blue waters around Curaçao. I want trails to the lonesome pine and rare books; quick wit and cricket chirp.
But at the moment I know I’m going to be gone, when the back-
pack is packed and the shuttle to the airport has been arranged, I
begin to feel unglued, a label peeling from its bottle. The mail is cut
off, the message on the answering machine wards off any friendly
callers, and all the friendly callers think I’m already gone. I have time
to take the dog out for one last round before taking her over to the
friends who watch her.

I moved from San Francisco to Chicago two years ago, yet an-
other choice I’ve made that brought my sanity under scrutiny, but
that is no country for old men. I live now, quite happily, across from
Winnemac, a midsized park flanked by a grade school and a high
school. There are more than half a dozen baseball diamonds and a
football field, and when my window is open I get the sound of urban
domesticity—ringing tardy bells, players chanting “hey batteh-
batteh-batteh,” cheerleaders taunting, “Wegot spirit, howbout
choo?” In the spring, birds don’t sing so much as scream—oh, how
the robin insists on that same refrain from his favorite Gilbert and
Sullivan operetta: “Cheerily! Merrily! Cheerily! Merrily!” We’re in
the flight pattern of O’Hare airport, and overhead you can always
see a handful of planes begin to extend their landing gear, too high
to generate noise pollution. Even now, in late summer, there’s salsa
music on a jerry-rigged stage. In recent years, under the Green
Mayor, the Chicago Park District set aside huge tracts to native
grasslands and plants, and while I’ve heard the occasional neighbor
grumble about such a lot of money thrown at the cultivation of
weeds, I, for one, am overjoyed. They call the stuff “prairie grasses.”

We take our turn, in no hurry here at the end, for my dog, Grace,
is, like me, a walker, not a runner. We run into Eileen, who, with her
rheumatoid arthritis, is not likely to run, either. She recognizes me,
that crazy guy with a poky dog on a bootless leash, the ones who
wander in the weeds with a little green Audubon Field Guide to North
American Wildflowers, trying to identify the glorious quotidian:
brome, rye, flax, mallow, yarrow, coneflower, hawkweed, quackgrass, bachelor’s button, Johnny Jump-Up, and don’t forget forget-me-nots. No more the garish gerber or the fickle hydrangea; I’ve traded those for the plain jane of Black-Eyed Susan and Queen Anne’s lace. In the evening, evening primrose, the gold in goldenrod, crimson clover, over and over.

At the Mezquite of Cordoba, historically, you entered through an orchard of orange trees planted at the same intervals as the many hundreds of columns of the mosque, so that you didn’t know at what point you had moved from the outdoors indoors. So it goes with my little patch of wild: there are, all around Grace and me, great brick chimneys, remnants of the industrial era, preserved and smokeless; in fact, one of them has a tree growing out of the top of it, and the one toot-tooting from the high school shelters a family of barn owls. Their upright strength stands in my line of vision, along with the sycamores and oaks lining the prairie plot. My backbone straightens accordingly.

“I thought you were already gone,” says Eileen. Her scruffy old bear of a dog, Cleo, sniffs Grace, and they acknowledge each other, two golden girls among packs of dogs from Dawson’s Creek.

In my peeling-label state, hours before a many-legged flight connecting Chicago to Paris and Paris to Marseilles, I already miss where I already am. I linger until dusk, until fireflies rise up out of the prairie. On evenings like this, when everything is at some sort of central turning point, when night is falling but everything else is going up, up, birds and fireflies and smokestacks and sycamores and heat, there also rises a specific scent, a combination of all those native grasses. Eileen says goodbye again, “no, really,” and moseys to her brick two-flat. And then it gets dark, and the scent disperses, and something else seems lost, and I’m just a little alone, a little depressed.
My friend Michael has dealt with depression since before Prozac was even born. He hates, as any sane person would, to be filled with all those medicines, although he knows they help, but he’s been able to supplement a less-lethal dose by taking up a number of soothing cottage industries. When we visit, he may be finishing the knitting on the sleeve of a sweater, or checking the glaze on some ceramics. Michael has, as well, a small candle-making business, and invented his own line of special scents. I love the combinations he’s come up with: the tame “Pear Butter” (pear and vanilla extracts) and “Easter Parade” (malt and bubble gum and the softened whiffs of jelly beans and sugar); there are other, rowdier scents like “Father Figure,” with its bold cedar odor punched up by tobacco, patchouli, leather, and just a touch of CK-One; and “Mom’s Purse,” based on Father’s leather and tobacco but bolstered with spearmint and peppermint.

Sometimes when Michael busies himself knitting and purling, I rummage around in his tackle box full of little brown bottles in which he’s captured all sorts of smells. I pull out swizzle-stick-shaped cardboard paddles, write down the names of the scents, then dip them into various extracts: orange, musk, magnolia, pine, balsam, bergamot, ginger. Sometimes companies manufacture blends and give them their own suggestive names, like “snow” and “rain” and “ocean spray.” I’d rather get my own hit of a hot driveway, thunderstorm-doused, the hissing wet that brings the earthworms up on asphalt: petrichor on a paddle; I’ll mix attar and earth and lily of the valley, of all things, for that flower has a scent as close to spring rain as I have found. I want to approximate, somehow, the native grasslands patch in the park. There’s no brown bottle labeled quackgrass or mallow, but “daisies” will work for Black-Eyed Susans, and I can always pretend there’s some “lupine” out in my patch, although I haven’t seen it.

The more I work and sniff, however, the less sensitive my nose becomes. It’s all one big perfume in the room, and I lose my aromatic way. Even after shutting down the olfactory factory for the rest of
the day, I get the occasional whiff now and then, some suggestion of something lost right under my nose.

When you Google the word “maquis,” the first listings are from a bunch of Star Trek fans devoted to a group of defiant rebels that never liked the peace treaty between the Federation and the Cardas-
sians. Trekkies borrowed the word, I’ll guess, from the actual Résis-
tance of World War II, “the Maquis,” the French patriots who fought against the Nazi-controlled Vichy government. They, in turn, took their name from Corsica, for a “Maquisard” was one of the “honor-
able bandits” who hid in the unmappable scrub of the island, hiding from authorities after committing what they considered crimes of nobility. The maquis is, for bandits and patriots, nothing but a boon.

And the maquis that concerns me is, reportedly, a bane to walk-
ers, made up of low, spiny scrub that grows quickly over any trail you might blaze. The maquis is the ultimate indoor-outdoor stuff; it provides firewood to Corsicans and shelter to its honorable bandits as well as to wild boar, a favorite dish. But it is also impenetrable and flammable. Hikers are often trapped for days because of maquis burns.

Corsicans say you can smell the maquis wafting over the Mediter-
ranean when you approach the island in a boat. Napoleon, in exile in a prison on Elba, said he could catch wafts of it from his cell, fifty-
some miles to the west, and the perfume of it brought him to tears.

Every guidebook about Corsica describes a different combina-
tion of plants that constitute the maquis. “Myrtle, thyme, rock rose, rosemary,” claims one. “Juniper, lavender, and heather,” another. Chestnuts, strawberry trees, wild marjoram, bay. The wrinkled pink flower called cistus is common, too, and is the source of myrrh, that ancient oil. Corsicans usually get their myrrh by harvesting it off the beards of their goats.
Certainly, if one were to make a “maquis” perfume with Michael’s aroma collection, store-bought myrrh would do the trick. But can one imitate the funk of the sort of myrrh gleaned from the beard of a goat? Could we add a crumb of chevre cheese? Honey is not simply honey, after all; bees that produce localized honeys are trained to gather only the right sorts of clover, or chestnuts, or wildflowers. And what of the hottentot fig, which grows on Corsica and may not be the main ingredient of the maquis but certainly has its role in the scentsual makeup, tiny and necessary, like homeopathy or a pinch of cumin?

I’m reminded of stories of Italian matriarchies that, generation after generation, pass down their spaghetti sauce recipes but leave one item out, putting it to the children to revitalize the sauce with something new or to let it thin out, die out. But the metaphor doesn’t quite work because, as of now, the now of this chapter, I have never smelled, first-hand, the maquis. It’s all theoretical. I have a Rashomon potpourri of conflicting accounts, and when I try to add them all together, I get soup. “India is not a mystery,” said E. M. Forster, “it is a muddle.”

I am romanticizing the maquis, trying to make it a mystery rather than the muddle it is. In a similar way, writers of the nineteenth century romanticized the maquis, the maquisard, and many things Corsican, like the honorable bandits that committed murder through the tradition of vendetta and ran into the flammable wilderness. Writers like Dumas and Mérimée came looking for those outlaws, made up torrid stories about their adventures that come off far more dramatic and exciting than the actual life of a maquisard. But then, the maquisard read these tarted-up stories and reimagined themselves and the maquis they hid in, and ironically set a new standard—a code of bandit honor. The legends fed on the facts, and the facts, legends.
The previous year, on the eve of my departure for a foot pilgrimage to Santiago that took me eight hundred miles across France and Spain, Michael stopped by to wish me a good journey. My backpack was packed, my passport in order, my dog with the family she stays with so often that she showed up in their holiday card photo. I had only three forlorn Pepsi Ones in the fridge, so we drank two. The air conditioner was off and I had the window open, so we could both smell the prairie grasses in the early summer heat.

“I envy you,” Michael sighed, “being able to just pick up and go like this.”

It’s nice to be envied, although not everything about my life is enviable. I told him so. I also told him, or at least I hope I told him, that I envied his ability to sit still, a quality valued by monks, mothers, and barbers, three admirable professions.

He pulled out a paper sack and offered it to me. He had made three votive candles to bring to the cathedral in Santiago, all scented with “Mom’s Purse,” or a minor variation that included a little rosemary, too, the symbol of gypsy peregrination.

I carried those three votives at the bottom of my pack, along with the other things I wouldn’t need very often—the winter fleece, powdered meals in packets, condoms. The thing is, as I plunged deeper and deeper into the pilgrimage, surrounded by an ever-growing entourage of fellow pilgrims, it became more and more difficult to stay clean. Mildew grows on T-shirts that never quite dry after washing, pig and cow crap get kicked into socks along the trail, and you contend with sweat and mud and smelly cheese you packed for a lunch in a field. All the pilgrims keep to themselves because only other pilgrims can tolerate their stench. A goat would be a better sleeping companion, at least one that were myrrh-made.

But I, oddly enough, did not smell (as) bad. Michael’s candles kept my backpack anointed, and there was a touch of the suspicious among the other walkers. Is this guy a pretender? A fake pilgrim? I
had a hard time explaining why my pack was as fresh as your mother’s pocketbook as she clicked it open at the clasp and offered you a stick of Wrigley’s Doublemint.

Too bad, then, that at the end of the journey, I learned that the cathedral of Santiago did not allow live flame. Because it caters to daily rounds of thousands of fanatical faithful, it makes sense to ban candles, though Santiago could have benefited from the domesticating influence of Michael’s good scents. I ended up lighting the three votives at a street corner shrine to the Virgin Mary, but that’s another good story, and stories, like aromas, don’t always belong in the mix.

Travelers Destroy What They Seek. A few years ago, I saw a bumper sticker with this slogan. I hated reading it, the way I hated hearing that there might not really be a God the first time somebody said it. It’s a punch to the solar plexus. But then I suspected the source, after spending some time with callow youth, youth being that period when one actually fixes bumper stickers to bumpers and buttons to backpacks. That period when one confuses solemnity with profundity, prefers drama to intimacy, and mistakes brutality for honesty. Nevertheless, there was a scorching idea at the bottom, and once I got past its mean-spirited bitchery, I recognized its truth. Here I am, wondering how to extract scents. I am able to see the irony of bringing back the smell of the maquis, as opposed to lab-created fragrances like “Mom’s Purse.” Corsica is tough and attracts tough customers. I have in my possession a little monograph called The Scented Isle: A Parallel Between Corsica and the Scottish Highlands by Joseph Chiari. Printed for a flinty Glasgow audience, Chiari’s favorite parallels are the rather macho ones, a familiarity bred by mutual contempt, for its bandits and wars and the grouchy, taciturn nature of the people. He compares the maquis to his native heather and waxes poetic: “I shall not die in a bedroom / With a
priest and a lawyer beside me / I shall perish in a terrible ravine / With a mass of wild ivy to hide me.” “Terrible ravine” is Glaswegian for “ditch,” I wager, and my mother always warned me about ending up in a ditch. Ditches, I had thought, were bad.

I find it odd that the mass of wild ivy is fragrant and florid, and Corsica’s one capitulation to weakness. But Corsicans and their admirers don’t dwell on the scent. They prefer to discuss the thornier issues, for only the wily can dwell among the spines of Br’er Rabbit’s briar patch.

And every account of the maquis is yet another tank of fuel for my imagination. I’m going to Corsica, not with Michael’s Mom’s Purse votives but with a jar of oil in which I will collect up specimens of the maquis. My friend has taught me how to extract the scents from flowers, and I am going to be a new kind of bandit in the maquis, pillaging Corsica the way the Vandals and Etruscans and Aragonese have done before me, destroying what I seek.

My intention is to comfort the future me, the one who will return from Corsica, the one you’ll meet in the final chapter. The intention of taking souvenirs is to aid memory. What, then, is the opposite of memory? How am I approximating the smell of the maquis here, now? Through the guidebooks, yes, and oddly enough, the prairie grasses flowering in the park across the street. But I really don’t know what a hottentot fig smells like (okay—figlike, but still). And besides, it may not even be the smell of the maquis that I will remember most. My memory will probably dwell on the part where I get lost in it, or cut myself on it, or watch it burn and rain ashes down upon me, leaving behind a field of white soot, like snow.

My friends never think I’m foolish to go on these treks, although they’re puzzled about why one would crap outdoors or forego basic cable. Many people do think I’m foolish, or have nothing but disdain
for the arduous sweaty act of carrying all of one’s belongings over a lumpy terrain and calling it a vacation, or enjoyment. Vacation means beaches for most, or shopping in Paris, maybe, or having The Help bring food and bath salts to a luxury hotel room. All of these I have done myself, but I am soon bored. While my friends baste under a hot sun, I pace the beach, and usually step on broken glass or a sea urchin’s spine half-buried in the sand. “Want to go camping?” I asked a new friend one time. He nervously said that he probably might manage that.

“You don’t really want to go,” I said, letting him off the hook.

“Well,” he said, with some relief, “where would I put my contact lenses?”

Risking one’s life, generating bodily discomfort, courting disaster—these are hard to justify. The nagging bothersome question of the bumper-sticker reproach is: What exactly is it that I seek and wish to destroy? Something genuine? Something earned through suffering? It is difficult for me to find a succinct answer when somebody mocks the “high adventure” hikes I make, for they don’t seem to make any sense at all; I can’t give such people the canned responses (exercise, proof of courage, encouragement of deep existential thought, chicks dig scars), for they’re not useful or true for me. So each time I go off, I find myself stumbling along the piste, asking this question over and over again, because the answer is different with every journey, and until I stumble upon the answer, I’m feeling foolish when I’m not feeling completely unselved by the experience.

Some might call me foolish to walk in the park at night; this is the big bad city, after all, full of another kind of wild animal. But when nature calls, a dog must walk, and by dog, I mean Grace, my dog. The police cruiser always passes me by no matter what o’clock in the morning it is, as long as I’ve got a dog with me—a dog in a park is
carte blanche. I will not say I haven’t seen any trouble there, because I’ve come across drug paraphernalia and, just a few months ago, a fellow dog-walker showed me a zipper of stitches along the inside of her arm where some unrestrained pit bull took a bite out of her.

But sometimes I’ll look out my window and see four or five pre-teen baggy-pants’d boys who have decided, the way my friends used to decide to put on a play in the garage, to start a gang; I watch them practice hand signals, and even I know that they are doing the signals wrong, and if they can’t get the hand signals right, then they aren’t really capable of, say, leveling the World Trade Center or wrecking the economy. In light of this, I don’t fret too much, since I am a forty-year-old man and accompanied by a dog and have seen more of the dark hearts of people than they can ever hope to generate.

Okay, true: the night before I left for Corsica, I was walking late and my heart leaped to find another shadowy figure in the high prairie grass. His face aglow from the sulfur lights of the high school, he said, even before “Hello,” “Can I ask you something?” and I thought for sure my luck had run out, and I was about to be beaten and robbed. But then he said, “Where is a good place to have a bachelor party?” I told him I didn’t know. “I just proposed to my best friend’s sister, and I’m gonna buy her a ring. I love her more than anything ever in my life,” he rambled, in the way only drunks and bad poets can, “and she wants a bouquet of her birth flower. She says her birth flower grows here. Do you know which one it is?” Not knowing the horoscope or birth flowers, I told him I couldn’t help him. He let me walk away but kept proclaiming his love, and his wish to make her happy, and his hopes to hold down his job with the city so that he could get her a ring, and so forth.

It can seem very wild there, in that contained space; sometimes the prairie rye is pressed down, as if wild animals had been sleeping in it. I doubt that anything like feral boars would ever find their
way to my park, but it was a phenomenon unexpected by the Chicago Park District when killdeer, that prairie bird that, for lack of branches, learned to nest on the ground and protect its young by standing between the nest and a predator (my very urban Grace, for example) and drag its wing as if it were wounded in order to lead the danger away. Dogs are their only foes, I’d guess, unless a barn cat found its way in; mostly, they’re tormented by oversexed teenagers who are, no doubt, the ones who roll in the hay like rutting boars and restless fawns.

Michael gave me one more gift: a leather-bound journal, because, for all of his homebound preferences, he knows exactly what to pack for a long trip. “What are you going to write about?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, “I don’t yet know what is going to go wrong.” The pages of the journal will be perfect, too, for pressing the leaves and blooms of the plants in the maquis.

I am going out to conquer Corsica, overcome it in some way, the traveler destroying what he seeks by removing its mystery. Or perhaps not. There are infinite ways of construing the world, and the land is ever shifting. What might be true now won’t be so in a month or year. We lose a key ingredient to mom’s spaghetti sauce. The bee goes to a different glade to make his honey. Even maps become outdated.

For one thing, I am traveling in the off season, something I try to do as often as I can. Of course, it’s cheap in August, as Graham Greene puts it, but it’s not just savings I’m after. I once chose to stay on the nearby island of Burano when visiting Venice and found, on the vaporetto trip home, that all the locals had come out in the evening, after hiding all day from the hoards with cameras and guidebooks. I got a chance to pretend, if only for an hour or two as the light failed, that I was part of the landscape, having a chance to see
the *real* Venice. I am attracted to travel that is unfashionable, risking bad weather and closed facilities in exchange for the way a place will return to its true self when not faking out the tourists, for the spooky, abandoned way towns look after the party is over, like a closed-down carnival.

The problem, of course, is when I come back and try to recommend my travels to people, people who tend to go when the place is at high season, my travels are nothing like theirs. One would seem to need a different map, a different guide. Can anything—a place, a people, even a scent (especially a scent!)—be captured and specified?

It was only recently that I came into an area of my park’s prairie-grass area where suspicious teenagers had been doing a bit of lazy damage; a bundle of ox-eye daisies had been tied off with stalks of wheat but still remained planted, tipped. It was the first time it ever came into my head that these wildflowers might be plucked and put into a vase of my dining room table. Not only did I quickly dismiss the possibility (I thought of all the bugs crawling out of the leaves), but I felt dirty, obscene, for having such a thought.

In the maquis, the bandits have gone, but there are still a handful of dangers. Fire, beasties, scratches gone septic. There are occasional reports of Corsican nationalists kidnapping tourists for a little publicity. On the other hand, I think of Winnemac Park and the dangers it can offer. At night, sometimes, I’ll hear a rustling in some thicket, and even the insects will stop their deathless burr, startled, preferring to hide. It still smells like the familiar perfume of the mesic prairie grasses. But other smells come out with the critters of the night: the gunpowder from old bottle rockets, the fermenting tang of overripe unpicked mulberries, the last beer at the bottom of a can, piss pong and dog doo. Even these emblems of our crafty indoor culture run wild again when spilled on the open prairie. Run wild, or are reclaimed: “Apex #32 Roofing Supply.” And every once in a while, of
an evening, I’ll bend down, stretch over, and reach my hand into the
dark, mysterious cricket-black place that is not, for a moment, my
safe home. That’s where the imagination can’t always lead the way.
That’s reason enough for going to Corsica, at least for the moment.