

Midtown at Midlife

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I live on the thirtieth floor of a building on Fiftieth Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues in Manhattan, in a small apartment with views of the Hudson River, a thin slice of Central Park, tenement rooftops jerry-built as backyards and sun decks, and a gleaming new tower designed by Sir Norman Foster. The swath of Midtown below is known as Hell's Kitchen. I like this name and relish telling people where I live. Not the "Theater District," which also would be accurate, or "Clinton," as crafty real estate agents have begun to call my neighborhood, and certainly not the safely generic and unspecific "Midtown West." No. For me it is Hell's Kitchen, a name that makes me feel young, trail-blazing, edgy, and somehow apart from the workaday concerns that threaten to blunt my senses. In the 17th century the Dutch called this area "Bloemendael"—"Vale of Flowers"—for the idyllic pastures they found here, but three centuries later the district had become infested with gangs and criminals. Only a few years before I arrived, some New Yorkers still would not walk west past Eighth Avenue. A person only ventured there for drugs, pornography, prostitution, or perhaps on a dare to observe one of New York's underbellies.

That dicey Hell's Kitchen is now mostly folklore. At lunch in a supremely appointed Boston hotel, over lobster rolls, immaculate salad and crisp white wine, an ambitious businesswoman asks me, "So where do you live in New York?" I respond without pause, as if there could be no other answer: "Hell's Kitchen." She cocks her head slightly. Has she heard the warnings never to go there, the stories about its seedy, notorious past? On the contrary, she knows an experimental theater company located just a few blocks from my apartment and recommends that I see one of its productions as soon as I can.

During spring storms the lightning snaps its way across Midtown right outside my windows. Seeing the blue streaks and flashes for the first time, I thought that something was wrong: a burst of noxious

gases, gorgeous but deadly. In southern California, the lightning—on the rare occasions we saw it—was white and wispy. In New York I linger on my couch long past midnight, watching the sky until the tempest of light sweeps over Long Island. This is my favorite source of entertainment in the city. I have left more than a few plays at intermission, realizing that a superior show—not to mention a better seat—awaited me at home.

Every fall, my mother and father come to visit for two weeks. They happily take over my bedroom while I sleep on an air mattress in the nook-sized living room. Before bedtime my mother sits at the dining table awaiting the drink I am expected to make, spiced rum and a blend of sweet juices vigorously shaken with ice and poured into a large, chilled martini glass. Her chiffon nightgown—her cocktail gown—is pink and brushes the floor. My father, resting on the couch, marvels at the city lights; his one remaining kidney does not allow him to share the nightcap pleasure that his wife has discovered late in life. In their aging California suburb festooned with jacaranda trees, they watch television in the den or drive to the grocery store for milk and lettuce or shuttle from home to the dialysis center where my father must sit for hours, his swollen arm hooked up to a blood-cleansing machine. In New York I take them to swanky restaurants in Tribeca and Soho where we order creamy risottos and indecently rich desserts. After nine o'clock we shut off all the lights in the apartment. Midtown's glow is enough for us to see each other's faces. I pour the drinks. "Here's to New York," my mother says, lifting her glass to mine. "Here's to you."

For entire weekends I can stay indoors and sleep, read, order sushi or burritos for delivery, sprawl on the couch, sleep again, do little but wait for the city lights to blink on, for the Hudson to turn leaden and then disappear. I have many weekends like this now, with little desire to be outdoors. The wide-angle views from my windows, not depression, keep me homebound. Horace, in *Epistles*, said that it is reason and wisdom which take away cares, not places affording wide

views over the sea. But I am not so sure about that. On the thirtieth floor in Midtown, the views are uplifting and carry me away from worry. Yet I can look out and feel that I have tasted Manhattan at street level. On these days, the illusion of having gone outside is more satisfying than actually stepping into the electrifying avenues.

I know people who must leave the city once or twice a month or else they will, in their words, go crazy, implode, burn out; they will begin to hate New York. I tell them to stay inside for a day or a weekend and see how it feels, but they claim that self-confinement is impossible. Their apartments are too small, or too dark, or too noisy, or their friends call for drinks or a movie or a dinner or a walk in the park. The magnificent island tempts them from the hut. And once they are out, they must keep moving in the eternal flow that can drive them crazy. They cannot break this flow. Breaking the flow is taboo. They will be jostled or elbowed, tormented physically or mentally if the island rule is breached. So occasionally they must depart for the mainland and, once there, they wonder when life will begin again, wonder where they can eat a decent bagel, wonder where have all the villagers gone?

On a steamy summer day I leave my apartment and walk down Ninth Avenue to the ATM center for some money. I swipe my card in the slot but the door doesn't open. The little light remains red. The humidity, even at nine o'clock in the morning, is oppressive. I swipe my card again and again, trying this way and that, but the red light persists and no one inside has exited, so the door stays locked. I try one more time—nothing. I turn around and find eight people behind me, eight New Yorkers who have had their flow broken, eight New Yorkers who look as though they have not been out of New York in a very long time, all of them glaring at me. One now pushes me aside and swipes his own card. The light turns green. All of New York, it seems, marches through the door.

I have broken the flow. I have violated a fundamental law of nature. I tell myself that I will never, ever break the flow again.

Los Angeles, London, Tokyo, Boston, San Francisco. I have lived in each and in Midtown I have returned to them all. I had never planned on such a reunion. Nostalgia often brought these cities together in a torrent of memories regardless of where I found myself in the world, but I never expected to have the locales of so many past lives rolled into one and presented to me in the form of Manhattan. When I was twelve my grandfather gave me an atlas bound in red and gold. Flipping through the pages, I used a ballpoint pen to place blue dots next to the cities that I dreamed about visiting. I knew little about them except their names: Munich, London, Paris, Tokyo, San Francisco, Boston, New York, Rome, Cairo, Zurich, Shanghai. And why on earth Shanghai? The answer is simple: like all the rest, it sounded exotic and alluring. (Had there been a detailed fold-out of New York, I would have circled and starred "Hell's Kitchen.") While unpacking boxes in Midtown, I found my atlas and reviewed the dots. I had lived in five of the marked cities and visited four others. The map of my dreams had become a map of my life.

When I moved to New York, I arrived at JFK on a rainy Sunday night in May. I was forty-one. At forty-one, a one-way ticket is a bewildering thing; it injects a blurring speed into a journey's trajectory. Of course you can buy a ticket in the other direction, of course you can decide not to stay, of course nothing is forever. As a taxi transported me over the slicked roads into Midtown, I did not let myself believe that I was forty-one and that in a month I would be forty-two. I did not yet understand the meaning of a New York minute or the utter resolve behind a one-way ticket. I did not know that I would find portions of my past in a city I barely knew. And the moment I stepped out into the street near my hotel that evening, I could not tell you clearly how I got there. I could barely remember the events leading up to my departure: packing my belongings, negotiating with the movers, routing my mail, saying goodbye to everyone.

Times Square is not exactly like Shibuya in Tokyo or Piccadilly in London, but while walking from my apartment to the ever-lit core I see those destinations of long ago, when I thought I would spend my

life living in a different country every year. San Francisco is curvy, elegant and tranquil under the scrim of Pacific fog and I find a dose of that feminine city while walking in New York's Chinatown, where I can step off the curb and become confused: which Chinatown am I in? Confused but not disoriented, for I am at home in either one. I spent years working with immigrants in the Chinatown of Old Golden Mountain, which is what the Chinese call San Francisco, golden not because of the bridge painted, in fact, orange vermilion, but because of the way the late afternoon sun bathes her hills in shimmering light.

On my first trip to Boston in the twenty years since living there, I did not recognize anything, not the skyline or the harbor or the streets downtown. The strangeness, the unexpected foreignness, alarmed me. I thought I would be overcome by vivid memories of the place, when in fact I remembered only certain internal struggles associated with that period: how would I earn a living, where would I go next, why was I so far away from everyone I knew? Boston the place now eluded me. Had I not lived there at all? In that one year I went to a single movie, ate one decent meal out, walked across Boston Common twice, once in fresh snow, did not eat crab or lobster or New England clam chowder, and I made no lasting friends. I observed a man slamming a receiver against the public telephone over and over again because his call would not go through. On the Red Line I saw a woman who was sitting alone suddenly begin to sob. But that's all I remembered of Boston, and on my return—or is it a return at all, if I cannot recall the place?—I have no fond recollections, no cohesive and complete sense of having *lived* there. I lost that year, and the loss frightens me. During the cab ride from the airport back into Midtown, I felt as if I had been nowhere but had come home again.

From 1925 to 1968, my block in Hell's Kitchen was home to the third incarnation of Madison Square Garden, site of the only indoor bout in the career of boxer Jack Dempsey. After it was torn down and the new, current Garden was built on Thirty-third Street, developers proposed to build the world's tallest skyscraper on the empty space

on Fiftieth Street. A community battle squashed that idea and for years the block remained a parking lot. My building and its colossal sister pierced the sky in 1989. Spanning the two structures at ground level is an urban plaza with Japanese zelkova and honeylocust trees, a fountain, patio tables and chairs, and two restaurants. In the warm months, people drink their morning coffee in the plaza, eat a light meal or sit long past midnight, talking and cooling down from the daytime's brutal humidity. Directly below the plaza, a sleek subterranean complex with five theatres features off-Broadway productions. On a muggy June evening, neighborhood locals relax on the plaza while strapping actors take to one of the underground stages for a performance of "Naked Boys Singing," an unintended, ironic twist on the carnal focus of yesterday's Hell's Kitchen—and a wink-and-a-wave to the gay men who have helped restyle it.

A famed boxing ring is razed, the handsome condo building rises, and a person boards a plane with a one-way ticket. The old block is transformed. The younger self is layered over. The foundation remains intact but, like the strata below, it exists mostly in the imagination, beyond view, or in books and picture albums that excavate fertile memory. A day older in a new place, a year older, five years older. The plaza hasn't changed, not yet. Underground, the actors and scenes are replaced by slightly younger actors and different scenes, but meanwhile you become a New Yorker or a Parisian or an Angeleno. You walk more quickly or more slowly; you get a car or give one away, as I did before I moved to Hell's Kitchen. Though it is bounded by the same streets and avenues, the earlier block is unrecognizable. Though you have the same skin and hair, albeit dulled by time, you're no longer the person who never expected to find himself in the capital of the fleeting present.

Next door, near the entrance of the corporate high-rise, a man has gone naked at five-thirty in the afternoon. He's chanting and doing a wild dance next to his pile of clothes. Six police officers have surrounded the man but they have not tried to apprehend him, or clothe him, for that matter. I stop to observe the scene—how could I

not?—but more shocking than the naked man himself is the number of people who do not stop. At five-thirty on a weekday in Midtown, the flow forges on, unbroken. A naked man dancing does not break the flow.

John Jay Chapman, a writer and lawyer who was born in Manhattan in 1862, asserted that the present in New York is so powerful that the past is lost. He neglected to say that present becomes the past more quickly here than anywhere else. Whatever is now, whatever is *au courant*, exists at immediate risk of extinction or steep devaluation. Yesterday is last season. The New York minute, clocking in at less than sixty seconds, clips the day and breeds fast walkers. The New York flow presses toward the next present, which is already tagged for the past. Or is it simply the midlife experience of time regardless of where you pass it? Often I feel compelled to leave the city to see if the hours can be stretched. Perhaps I've remained in my apartment for whole days not for the commanding views but for an attempt to elongate time—staying home as a way to insert a dam in the flow.

My own past does not seem lost here, maybe because I arrived after more than forty years spent in other places, many of them mighty in their own right. Tokyo, frenetic and blistering bright, at twenty-three; London, thrilling and sublime, at twenty; a humble and insular home in southern California for eighteen years. My past—and I suppose the specific topic is my youth—clings to me in New York. The calmness I attempt to muster in the streets below has its source in a big backyard thousands of miles away, and in a tiny apartment in Setagaya-ku with straw mat floors and no furniture except a futon. The past is so magnetic that I've decided to adopt a fixed self-perception of my age: I am twenty-eight, no longer an agitated boy but not yet a settled soul, if there is such a thing. Twenty-eight, the age that Thoreau went to Walden Pond and built himself a cabin. Pegging oneself at a permanent self-perceived age might seem a ridiculous charade, even a grave error, but the deception boosts my energy, helps me stride out into the staggering life.

In Hell's Kitchen I miss the woods of Michigan, where I was born, and the woods of Northern California, where I lived in a one-room converted garret surrounded by eucalyptus and pine trees swaying in mint-scented air. At the northern end of Central Park, past 105th Street, I walk through the "Northwoods," where few tourists go and where it is generally not safe to be found alone in the quiet hours. The terrain looks like lush virgin forest, timeless, improbable, startling. I stand still and try to listen for the traffic along Central Park West or Fifth Avenue, but all that noise is filtered out. In the Northwoods, you can imagine that you are far from New York, from all cities, their din and grime. A walk here seems that it will end at a streamside cottage, with someone waiting for you inside.

On those days and nights when I've sequestered myself, I leaf through magazines with names like "Adirondack Life" and "Maine Living," and guides to building log cabins. I'm looking for acreage: thoroughly wooded, preferably on a pond or creek, with the promise of idyllic seclusion, maximum privacy, a slice of heaven, paradise found—these explicit, earnest selling points of the rural realtor. I've scanned the Canadian provinces on the Internet. Land is cheaper there; it freezes seven months a year, but it is ravishing and cheap and, for the time being, abundant. I try convincing myself that it will be equally captivating to look out at nothing but a dense stand of trees or a sparkling pond. Out there, I will read, chop loads of wood for the fire, read some more, nap, and listen to recorded lectures about history and art. In other words, I will step aside from the flow and subject myself to a test: could I be content and fulfilled at a distance from Midtown, removed from the exalted center, or would the move be a wrong-headed regression, or a disastrous, under-financed early retirement? Five years into my Midtown life, I have not budged from my perch.

One evening I found a website with an aerial photograph showing the exact plot of land in Northern Michigan where my great-grandmother had a pine log cabin on a horseshoe-shaped lake. How many summers did we travel back and forth from California to that cabin, how often do I dream about it in my Midtown apartment? My

great-grandmother's land belongs to another family now, and I've heard that the cabin itself has been renovated, resurfaced, built-over—transformed as completely as my Hell's Kitchen neighborhood—and would not be recognizable to me. Sooner or later all blocks become unfamiliar, even when you firmly insist that nothing has changed. Still, I fantasize about reclaiming the cabin, restoring it to its raffish simplicity and moving back to a place that no longer exists.

The lady at my Hell's Kitchen dry cleaner not only knows my name and uses it, she screams at me when I haven't picked up my clothes on the very day they're ready. "Where have you been!" she yells. It's an affectionate scream, her way of declaring that she has missed me. Surely my ten or fifteen dollars won't determine whether she eats; her business is flourishing. If she hasn't seen me as scheduled, then certainly something is wrong: I'm sick, I've fled the isle, I've been kidnapped. She is my surrogate aunt who watches over me for mutually beneficial reasons: to validate our existence, to ensure that neither one of us is forgotten. As she writes up my pink slip—the claim check for my laundry and for the neighborly validation—she says, "See you in a few days, right?" She repeats it again as I walk out the door, as if a mysterious peril might prevent my return. The peril is, of course, the competition. At least five other dry cleaners thrive within a block of my building. I could easily patronize any of them. Their prices are virtually the same and each can iron and fold my tee-shirts into neat stacks sealed in plastic. I have chosen the screamer, however, because she was quick to use my name and, besides, I like it when she scolds me for vanishing without notice.

The essayist Edward Hoagland, born in New York City and raised in rural Connecticut, says that we reach for where we come from. Standing in my living room, I peer beyond the Hudson and the Jersey palisades, thrusting my head out the window for the westward view, toward California and my youth. I search for my meandering path to Hell's Kitchen, its trailhead saturated in sub-tropical light. The word disorientation literally means having lost our sense of the east. With

my back to the East River and my face blushing in the cold autumn air, I have no sense of lost direction, no feeling of disequilibrium, no disorientation that I can detect. My legs tingle and shake from the fear of falling to the sidewalk below, but that is another matter altogether. We reach for where we came from but should we go back? There are points along the way that I would not revisit—the cold moneyless year in Boston, my heartless years in law school—but I crave the beginnings, the sun-warmed peaches from our backyard, the bougainvillea ablaze: these have me sliding the windows open during a winter storm, the upper half of my body leaning into the icy squall, all but the nearest buildings obliterated by blowing snow. The legs quiver, my face is stung. I look out to look back.

Too much has happened. You cannot go back. The flow cannot be broken.

The kids from far uptown, from Washington Heights and the Bronx, are kissing each other. On their way to school, they gather in the Hell's Kitchen café where I drink coffee and read every morning. A peck on the cheek is how they greet their friends, girl to girl, girl to boy, boy to girl, but not, of course, boy to boy; amongst themselves, the boys perform elaborate handshakes, choreographed to impress.

A kiss for best friends, a kiss for comrades and alliances, a kiss for assurances. Like any place, New York can be lonely. The kiss, for the moment, dissolves loneliness. The kiss protects. When I was their age no one kissed in this demi-European fashion, lips pressed to one cheek, never two, a very cool and quick singular placement. A kiss against anonymity, a seal of belonging, a hello in a city where people on the street do not look at one another in the eyes. I try not to stare at the kissers but the temptation is too great. As my envy compels me to watch, I wonder: if I befriended the girls, if I somehow entered their circle of intimacy, would I earn the privilege of a kiss?

The longer I look, the more things change. Five new condominium and apartment high-rises have gone up since I moved into

my building; two have obstructed most of the Hudson. The newest, not yet finished, will soon block my view of the fabled Mutual of New York building with its time and temperature indicator at the apex. I have depended on that dual clock/thermometer every day since moving here, dressing according to its morning report of cold or heat, reading at night until eleven twenty-nine became eleven thirty. When he visits, my father is mesmerized by watching for the temperature to change, if only by one degree, and he seems amazed to witness our Midtown minutes pass one by one. Before his next visit the view will be gone and we will both lament the loss of flashing time.

"New York is about change," a real estate agent once said to me. "If you can't handle that, then get out."

One day before I bought my apartment in Hell's Kitchen, I went to several open houses in the East Forties, in a neighborhood called Turtle Bay. The East Side always seems darker than the West Side. Heavily shadowed, gloomy, corporate, cold. On the East Side I inevitably feel disoriented, farther away from my youth and disconnected from myself, but I attended the open houses anyway because there were several apartments for sale in a single large building and at relatively reasonable prices (perhaps, I thought, because the neighborhood is heavily shadowed, gloomy, corporate, cold).

After looking at three apartments, I ring the bell of a studio and a woman who appears to be about fifty opens the door. "Well, hello!" she says, as if I'm a long-expected friend. She is slim and has long brown hair and a pretty face. She tells me that she is the owner and that she is selling her place without a realtor. Her small apartment has a narrow balcony and atrium-like windows that curve slightly at the ceiling. On the walls hang large oil paintings, all signed by the same person, the artist's name written in large, neat letters. They are still-lives and landscapes in bold colors, the work of an amateur who enjoys her art. Walking around the studio, I notice it is not in the best condition. The bathroom and kitchen look run down, the walls thirst for fresh paint, and although southern light streams through the

windows, dreariness abounds. The woman, who watches me carefully, trying to gauge my interest, says, "I'm moving up to a one-bedroom on the twenty-fourth floor."

I have seen her before; I have heard the voice. My memory cannot yet lock on the moment or the circumstance. I figure that she is the artist of the paintings. Could they be the clue?

Wandering back into the main room, I say, "You look familiar."

"I get that all the time," she says.

"Are you famous?"

"I'm an actress."

"Will you tell me who are you?"

"I'll tell you if you buy the apartment."

But I will not have to buy the apartment to find out. My youth has rushed back to help me, a fast-forward flow of unlocked memory. More than thirty years had passed since I last saw her, thirty years since I watched the starlet playing a starlet stranded with a bevy of other castaways on an unnamed South Pacific island. I resided in her fictional paradise-prison once a week for years. She now lived in the far-from-tropical Turtle Bay, two of us anchored on opposite sides of Manhattan Island, six cross-town blocks between us. She was not lost in an obscure locus on the high seas. She was swimming, as I was, in ineluctable time.

When I met her she was, in fact, sixty-nine. In the pale light of her studio, she looked twenty years younger. I was forty-two and felt that I had stepped back into carefree television nights after homework was finished and the dishes were washed and my father was not yet home from work. Before leaving the studio, I notice a small black and white picture of its owner on a shelf, a studio shot of the glamorous actress, her long hair draped over bare shoulders. She is young there and my father is bringing home chocolate bars or ice cream, if it is not too late.

On late afternoons, especially in spring and fall, the skyline outside my windows is awash in lambent violet and ochre, softening

Manhattan into a peaceable kingdom. I have changed plans, come home early, and delayed leaving the apartment because of this particular light, which my mother has photographed on four consecutive autumn visits and still she cannot believe that such light is possible, or that it will ever be seen again. To stay in my apartment for a twenty-four hour period, in any season, is to watch eons of shifting illumination.

One August day, New York City and much of the Northeast were plunged into a blackout. No one ever thought about the power grid until we were suddenly denied its voltage. On the year's hottest afternoon, computer screens went dark, air conditioners ceased their soothing currents, subways halted in tunnels, cash registers refused to open, tourists could not enter their hotel rooms, elevators stopped between floors, and Times Square, along with all Manhattan Island, blinked off. With a civilized throng of New Yorkers, I walked thirty-five blocks up Eighth Avenue toward my building in Midtown and entered the lobby to find the doorman and handymen handing out lit candles to groups of four or five residents who then climbed up the stairwell to their apartments. Among those in my group, I lived on the highest floor and continued alone for the last few flights of stairs. Even with lit candle in hand it was difficult to see anything, and when I emerged from the stairwell into the dark corridor, it took me awhile to gain my bearings and find my apartment. My clothes were drenched in sweat. I told myself that I would shower and stay home until the electricity flowed again and the lights came on and normal life resumed. But when I turned on the faucets in my bathroom, I got nothing. The pipes were dry. The pumps that usually brought water to my floor had been rendered powerless.

The blackout, and the heat and the humidity, continued into the night. I opened my living room windows and stood looking at the fully realized darkness. Midtown had become a barely perceptible silhouette, a charcoal sketch on black construction paper. All was dark and still and quiet, except for the occasional howl from a human being below. There were no cars in the streets; without traffic lights, it was

too dangerous to drive, and even the daredevil yellow cabs had pulled aside. The kingdom, and perhaps time itself, had been forced into a deep rest. In windows across the way, I could see candlelight. I lit several votive candles and placed them around the apartment, hoping that someone would see my candlelight, too. Manhattan now seemed more like an equatorial isle with its stirring jungle, softly glowing lanterns, and inhabitants staying in for a long, long evening.

Gazing out my windows, I saw the black hole that gave birth to Manhattan or the terrible void that it could become.

By morning everything had changed again.

If you can't stand the change, then get out.

We are visiting the Rose Planetarium on the Upper West Side, my mother, my father, and I, on a drizzly October day. What a strange word: planetarium, like aquarium, one a container for planets and the other for water. All of Manhattan, the universal city, the cosmopolitan city, could be deemed a planetarium, the island on which images of all galactic spheres have been projected. At the Rose, we have exited from the dome where the deep, fertile voice of Maya Angelou has explained how Earth and man have evolved from the Big Bang. We walk down a ramp designed to illustrate the history of the universe, stopping at mini-exhibits illustrating the significance of events that occurred five hundred millions years ago, a billion years ago. My mother and father stand close to the signs, reading the narratives carefully, as if they held important messages for their future instead of fascinating information about the past. I have never seen them read anything so closely, and with such apparent enjoyment. They are not avid readers. My father goes through the newspaper daily and my mother skims it, but they do not, as a habit, read books. At the planetarium, I am far more interested in watching my mother and father with their faces held close to the theories of the universe, reading about the birth of stars and planets, quasars, black holes, ethereal gases. "A billion years," my mother says. "Now I don't feel so old." She is not yet sixty-five. My father is seventy three. My mother and I have been middle-aged

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together. We could add up the ages of everyone in the building that morning and the sum would be an insignificant number on the timeline we're following along the ramp.

And while my parents, like diligent students, have concentrated on every word along the way, I've read only the following sentence: "The farther out in space we look, the farther back in time we see." I take a pen from my pocket and jot those words on a planetarium guide. I read my notes twice, and since then I've read them many times; on each occasion the sentence transports me to the window of my thirtieth floor apartment, looking skyward or westward, across a strip of the Hudson, or up past the vastness of the Bronx, surveying a dimension that is not just space but life itself. I have spent more time in that apartment looking than pursuing any other activity in New York. Perched at the window, sipping coffee at the window, drinking cocktails with my mother, gazing. In daylight and darkness, through snow or fog, the uncontrollable impulse is a force of memory, of reaching.

The farther out in space I look the farther back in time I see. In Midtown at midlife, I seem to stand at a quintessential center. To leave is to go nowhere except back to familiar places or to a new place forever seen through the afterglow of a flickering planetarium. At the center you can see the beginning, the end, and the urgent flow between the two, and that, in part, is the significance of midlife.

I slide the windows open and angle my face to the wind.