

Benjamin Knepper

The Sunset Chaser

According to writer James Baldwin: an artist, having a moral responsibility, is someone who “helps you see reality again.” And yet, Mr. Baldwin, this implies that we already know what reality is.

What started off as a hobby became a passion. This sudden urge would arise once or twice a month, and he followed it. It led him to his 2007 grey Honda Accord, to the bustling 405 freeway, and finally to his destination where he would sit watching the horizon, as day and sea parted ways. Some call it a pursuit of happiness, others beautiful pain. But to him, it’s just sunset chasing.

For as long as he could remember, the chaser always liked looking at things. For instance, his mother could never quite figure out why he’d squint so intently at crumbs as they abandoned his morning toast and scattered randomly across the porcelain; or how he spent entire car rides peering at the moving scenery through a stationary window. Living in the city, you would think that there would be enough visual stimulation for him to eventually be satiated: buildings, pavement, construction, grass, streetlights, sidewalks, trees, fences, air planes, vehicles, storefronts, leaves, billboards. But he never ceased looking; it seemed as though there were too many options, or perhaps there were too few. Instead, he often looked upon the abstract landscape he had painted in elementary school, which hung above the foot of his mattress on the adjacent wall. The poor childish illustration, having been buried under his bed for many years, now leaned away from the scotch tape upholding it, stricken by the creases which deformed its laminate encasing. Although, the presentation did not matter as much to the chaser as what was being depicted. It was a setting obviously informed by his own, a city skyline with immaculate towers in the background and an arch bridge in the foreground, yet it also contained a hint of what might have been more desirable to him. Enveloping the familiar landmarks were strokes of thick water, reflecting the warm hue of an invigorated sky.

Even as an adult, the chaser kept looking. Other aspects of his childhood remained the same as well, and for one reason or another, he never left the city. Life kept trudging forward after he landed a steady job and moved into an apartment complex beside a church sign reading “See the Light! Embrace our Lord and Savior.” And so, he needed to scavenge non-banal sights to indulge his gaze. Among other phenomena, sunsets fascinated him, though, just like in so many other normalities of life, he could not help but notice the cliché. Nevertheless, the sunsets provided a distraction, or relief, from the glaring monotony of his plastered apartment walls (he had already scanned every inch within the first three days of moving in). So, he began his drives to Playa del Rey and developed one habitual spot atop a sleepy hill overlooking that so pacific ocean. Although the view nourished his pupils, the underlying separation between the chaser and the sunset, epitomized by the glass of his windshield, still lingered—that is, until one crisp April evening.

The drive began as normal as any other; the only conceivable oddity was the ease with which he found a parking spot on the hill road. However, he knew the atmosphere had shifted when he could suddenly feel the air. “There it is again,” he thought, with as few words as was necessary. “I had almost forgotten what it looked like.” He was a simple man, having nothing but his eyes and simply knowing the right vibrations. Sometimes it would take some effort to tune into them, but once he did, no one else could retract him; only then, as he no longer noticed the glass of his windshield, did he realize that neither could he. Up ahead, the sky-scraping palm trees, bent as if listening into the wind, ruffled their sprawled leaves. Below them, the waves, almost as fragile as the substance which held them together, wafted inwards. And if he stared at just the right spot, those ostensibly motionless clusters of condensation began to move, sliding ever so slightly with some steadfast purpose. The chaser’s eyes then moved back again to what they came there for, and you could almost tell what he saw by the orange glow which glazed over the white of his cornea.

Soon enough, before that glow faded and the white of his eyes returned, he did what was natural. Calmly clearing his throat then stepping out of the car, first his heels went and then toes as he started his ascent. Upon losing contact with the ground, the chaser felt weightless and rose high, high above the departed landscape. Up there, all that exists is color. Not only his eyes, but his whole body was now consumed by that orange glow of the horizon. It beamed, with its edges seeping into the crevices of curvature. And as the beam lowered, as if by some gentle nudge he was pulled towards it at the same speed, uncannily similar to that of the adjacent clouds. Meanwhile, down below the vibrating sea seemed engaged in its own pursuit towards the receding shore, upon which you could make out the small, distant dot of his apartment. And from this fervent chase, the glow never fell below his eyes.

Since that April evening, the light has never escaped his view. He comes down from time to time, once he has gotten close enough to the sun, to grab some food and take a shower. Consequently, he has landed in places all across the world—Tokyo, Delhi, Istanbul, Paris, New York—and finds things to look at during the day to pass the time of his stay. He always appreciates a sojourn at home, despite its normalities, so that he can take another drive down to Playa del Rey in the evening before he ascends again and resumes his sunset chasing.

And while to others it is obvious that the chase would never end, they still will never know exactly what he sees—exactly what he is chasing for.