



## Finnegan's Walk

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This summer, the walls of our San Diego apartment began to close in, and we beat a retreat to Paso Robles for two weeks. The small house on the hill may not be a villa in Fiesole, but it offered the chance to walk in the garden without a mask and maybe even read something challenging.

I decided to finally attempt Joyce's "Finnegans Wake." I'm still unsure if it is a challenge or a penance, but I'm certain it is a hair shirt for the brain. I optimistically stuffed the bulky 628-page tome into my carryall. Even if I fail to persevere, I reasoned, it can double as an added weight for squats.

"*A way a lone a last a loved a long ...*" Four days later I have barely ground my way through the first ten pages. My resolve and mental energy are seriously flagging. I need sugar. I know there are cookies in the closet by the washing machine, behind the five cans of Progresso soup and the stack of tuna. I push aside the plastic bag of panic-buy dried pinto beans. Do I have to boil them for 20 minutes before I get rid of the toxins? I should have asked. But the sack at the local La Reyna Market was open, and it was "buy-anything, add water, and pray for a *milagro*." I reach to the back of the closet and find nothing. The mirage of the Keebler fudge stripe cookies evaporates.

Isn't there a half bar of Trader Joes' milk chocolate behind the last two bottles of IPA on the second shelf in the fridge? I casually saunter past my wife toward the kitchen. She's on the sofa in the living room, working on the images for her fall lectures. I open the fridge. Nothing again. Then I remember. Yesterday, challenged with "*larrons o'tool clittering up and tombles a'buckets*," I panicked, ran to the fridge, and scooped it.

"I'm going for a walk," I shout to my wife as I mask up. I won't tell her I'm walking to the local store. Maybe she wouldn't let me in the house again. No, that would be me. I'd demand a head to foot Clorox spraying.

My wife is making the best of her shelter-in-place while I'm spending the Covid-ture writing, rewriting, and measuring out my life in coffee spoons. And, of course, reading Finnegan's Wake. It's the perfect time. I think of future dinner conversations—if there is such a thing as future. I recall that English snob telling our awed dinner table that Proust should only be read in French. If only I could have responded: "Interestingly that reminds me of a chapter in Finnegan's Wake."

I start on my odyssey to La Reyna. With luck it'll be empty. I could rush in, grab a pack of *Chokis* and be out before I could spell *Canelitas*. I plod down the hill. I think of the butt-crunching return fortified by chocolate. The house is at the edge of the town.

Olive trees, almond orchards, and the early-morning sun warming the cool air with fall's fragrant ... oh to hell with poesy. I get enough of that as I churn my way through Joyce's prose. But is it prose or is it poetry? I can't tell. Truth to tell, it reads like Swedish to me. I have a moment of panic. Maybe it is Swedish. Maybe Amazon accidentally mailed me the *Svenska* translation. I hear the Muppets' Swedish chef in my head. Perhaps if I read it like *Svenske kocken* I could understand it.

Oops! I sidestep a long brown tube of something decidedly unpleasant. It is not deer pebbles. What is that? Some delinquent neighbor taking advantage of Covid to break with dog poop etiquette.

"Hey," the guy from the house with the Marine flag walks toward me holding a shovel. "Did you see it too, neighbor?" I look blankly at him. "You think it's mountain lion scat?" He continues. "I reckon it is. Maybe bobcat." He gets closer. He is not wearing a mask. I step back. I've forgotten the rule. Am I to be six feet away? Or is it twelve? Maybe twenty, if the other guy isn't wearing a mask. With one scoop, he shovels up the scat. "I'll snap a photo and send it in to CalPoly." He holds it out for me to see.

"Uh, good idea." I manage.

I watch him disappear past his weathered Trump sign and stand motionless. A mountain lion. Really! La Reyna and its shelves of alluring delights suddenly seems like a bridge too far.

I turn and start up the hill. At least there's the comfort of Finnegans Wake. "Brékke Kékke Kékke Kékke!" Nope. I couldn't face the Swedish again. Maybe I'll watch Schitt's Creek, speaking of mountain lion scat.

