

“In Search of the Dark Watchers” with the subtitle Landscapes and Lore of Big Sur. The field sketches and paintings are by Benjamin Brode. The field notes are by Thomas Steinbeck, son of John Steinbeck. This book was published in 2014 by Steinbeck Press.

The particulars of the account of the Dark Watchers had been told to Steinbeck as a child and authenticated by such credible sources as his grandmother, Olive Hamilton, and Billy Post, descendent of *El Sur Grande*, ranchers and, at that time, the resident sage of the Post Ranch Inn; the Inn being named after the family. The Big Sur sketches and oil paintings by Brode are mysterious in nature and capture some of the Dark Watchers territory and appeal to their sensibilities.

Jumping to page 22 I read: Locals have often said that if one possessed the curiosity, patience, and self-discipline, and really wanted the creatures to loiter if spotted, strict guidelines must be observed.

First of all, if noticed, it is imperative never to look directly at the Watchers, or even stare in their general direction. It is advisable to glimpse them out of the corner of the eye, and pretend to see nothing unusual at all.

One should never make overt gestures, like pointing, or waving, or even speaking in exclamations, as these signs will indicate you are aware they are nearby. And if for a brief moment they entertain the least suspicion that this is the case, they will literally evaporate in front of your eyes like the fog.

There is another interesting fact that has held true since the Spanish presence in the Big Sur. It states that attempting to follow *Los Vigilantes Oscuros* is, at best, a fool’s errand. They make no tracks, and not even hunting dogs can follow their sent for more than a few yards before becoming confused and disoriented.

A rational question at this point might be why have I gone to such pains to describe details concerning these elusive beings, whose very existence can't be verified one way or another? Well, believe it or not, I do have a semi-rational explanation.

I have a dear friend who is a most remarkable landscape painter. His name is Ben Brode, and I have collected a number of his works over the years. In the past he has often mentioned a deep affection for the Big Sur, as well as an abiding artistic interest in the vistas.

Since I have always considered that part of the coast my spiritual home, I found that Ben and I had much in common, and we eventually took a road trip up the Big Sur coast to the Post Ranch Inn.

The first two days were magnificent, but then the weather turned foggy, cold, and sour. Nonetheless, the food was excellent, and the potables plentiful and exotic, so we resolved our small discomforts with a grand time telling stories around a well-fueled fireplace in Bill and Luci Post's cozy home on the South-facing flank of the Post Ranch Inn.

At some point during the evening I happened to mention the quaint legends surrounding the elusive Dark Watchers. Ben suddenly seemed more than just a marginally intrigued, and asked me to tell him as much as I knew about the subject in detail. Being happy to oblige, I went about describing every particular I could think of, just as I have explained it here.

On another occasion some months later he confessed that he wasn't really returning to Big Sur to paint landscapes, he was going in search of the Dark Watchers. Then he laughed once again and hung up the phone. After all I had never seen one of the Dark Watchers for myself, so it was just an interesting story as far as I was concerned. But now Ben was off, like the artist he is, to find and conjugate the invisible one more time. I couldn't help but wonder how it would all turn out in the end.

It should therefore come as no surprise that after perhaps thousands of years of purposeful evasion, the Dark Watchers have developed and perfected many unusual skills of avoidance, all of them calibrated to help secure their total freedom of movement. It has often been noted that they can blend in with virtually any environment they choose, and accomplish this to an incredibly accurate degree. These skills certainly assure the clans many clear and obvious advantages.

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And, though I fain to mention it, within my own historical past, my father's mother, Olive Hamilton Steinbeck of King City, Salinas, and Pacific Grove, California, claimed to have had a unique experience in this regard. My grandmother was a local girl, but a bred-in-the-bone Scotch-Irish lass with a spine of steel sturdy

enough to saddle up, strap on iron and work as a circuit-riding school teacher on the wild trails and distant ranches of the Big Sur.

Olive was a dynamically self-possessed and strong-willed woman, who lacked even the least hint of a sense of humor. And if she couldn't see it, read it, hear it, touch it, or taste it... It didn't exist. I can't help but wonder how she worked this into her Scotch-Irish Episcopalian philosophy.

Now my no-nonsense grandmother Olive not only swore she had seen the Dark Watchers on several occasions, but also claimed to have traded fruit, flowers, and walnuts with them every now and then. And according to Olive, she received the most beautiful feathers, perfect seashells, and sweet pinenuts in return. According to grandmother Olive, the bounty was always exchanged at a shaded alcove just east of the coast trail near Mule Deer Canyon. She would leave off modest gifts in a small basket (in the same arbor) on the long ride south. And then, on the trail back home at the end of her tour, she would dismount at Mule Deer Canyon, go to the alcove, and retrieve her portion of the trade. She said it was like having a simple, civilized conversation with people who were millions of years older than anyone else, yet beyond the reach of everything except their selfless gestures of generosity. According to my father, all her life his mother swore that every jot of this story was gospel. And since Olive was ironbound concerning strict honesty, people appeared willing to believe her every word, principally because it was well-known that Olive Steinbeck would never swear to anything, without just cause. Also, as my father liked to recall, there was never anyone present with the courage to openly discount or disparage anything Olive said, regardless of topic or plausibility.

It has long been said that the Dark Watchers are migratory in the extreme; sometimes changing their encampment every day, or every other day depending upon the availability of food and the proximity of strangers. They possess incredible hearing and impeccable eyesight.

According to all accounts the Watchers never use fire for warmth, or even to cook. Like all the other creatures they have ever observed, they eat their food raw, and waste nothing including bones and shells. They seem physically inured to both heat and cold, since they wear minimal clothing made of an unknown material.

Supposedly these people have the most remarkable olfactory capabilities, and have their very highly developed sense of smell, it is said they can identify all large animals, particularly humans, at great distances, especially if the wind is flowing in their favor.

It is known that the Watchers maintain their own unique paths through the wilderness, but since they never displace the local vegetation in their migrations, their trails are all but impossible to discover, and they obviously prefer it this way. Returning once more to their exceptionally heightened sensitivity to foreign odors, has been noted over the last decades that the Watchers have developed a sensitivity to the odors of chemically created synthetic materials, especially industrial plastics, weatherproof coatings that emanate from all modern technology such as binoculars, cameras, recording devices, and camping gear, and they can sense these odors at considerable distances. Like crows, they can also smell the presence of gun oil and usually evacuate any territory where hunters are on the prowl.

It has also become apparent that people purposely looking for the Dark Watchers, and there seem to be a few, are now using camouflaged game cameras and other remotely-tripped recording devices of almost every description. But because these articles are also made of the same odorous plastics, the searchers have come up with virtually nothing to validate their efforts. It doesn't occur to them that their quarry can smell their cars, their gear, their campfires, their food, their plastics, and especially their toilets. So naturally, the Watchers move away at once.