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Gabriel Bugarin

Western Washington University, gabrielbugarin10@gmail.com

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**The Comic Way Towards the Universal Self: Socioecological Trauma and the Wounds Left
by Survival**

By

Gabriel Bugarin

Accepted in Partial Completion
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Dr. Kathryn Trueblood, Chair

Dr. Jane Wong

Dr. Chris Loar

GRADUATE SCHOOL

David L. Patrick, Dean

Master's Thesis

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Gabriel Bugarin

May 20th, 2021

**The Comic Way Towards the Universal Self: Socioecological Trauma and the Wounds Left
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A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

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May 2021

Abstract

Since its prominent emergence in the 21st century, speculative writing has become a popular genre amongst marginalized, disenfranchised, and oppressed peoples, largely due to its omission of westernized themes and tropes that have had a stranglehold on genres such as science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Some of the subgenres that have emerged out of this “counter literature” include spec. personal history, solarpunk, indigenous futurism, dystopian/utopian lit, spec. poetry, and many others. Using speculative writing, coupled with Garcia Lorca’s perspective on the *duende* and Joseph Meeker’s ideology of “The Comic Way,” I have started to excavate what the recent death of my father means for my truth. Consequently, I have also begun examining how my relationship with the land is linked to my relationship with my family and community; I have speculated conversations with my father, our ancestors, and with families the world over. What’s more, by looking to my family’s Mexica roots (more commonly known as the “Aztecs”) and pulling inspiration from my ancestor’s ways of knowing, my creative works strive to elicit change in my audiences’ relationship with the land and their own family and community so that solutions to our socioecological crises can be forged.

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Introduction

The Comic Way Towards the Universal Self: Socioecological Trauma and the Wounds Left by Survival

The Duende, a Play Ethic, and the Spontaneity of Creation

No recovery ever makes you entirely whole again, only as whole as you can become with the trauma you have faced. If you're still able to reflect on a wound – recall it, remember the pain of it first opening on your skin or your spirit – then it's still there. To be absent of the wound your mind would have to be empty. So, we “fight at the edge of the pit” proclaims Garcia Lorca, with the *duende*: the avatar of the Universe's creative exertions, exertions that cause wounds, “and in trying to heal that wound that never heals, lies the strangeness, the inventiveness of man's work” (“Theory and Play of the Duende,” 17).

To speak of Lorca's impact on my writing still feels slippery; I *feel* it but I'm still learning how to write about it. Lorca describes the mystique of poetry, and how the poem, when inhabited by the *duende*, bears regenerative properties: “with *duende* it is easier to love, to understand, and be certain of being loved, and being understood...” (17). All struggles arise out of the socioecological; all human suffering comes from how we have organized civilization on this earth. Through poetry, we can invent solutions to the struggles we face, we can learn to trust the love we give and receive to and from one another – if a poet can allow their work to be possessed by the *duende*, the wounds that never heal can become objects of meditation, from which alleviation of socioecological ache can be obtained.

Then, there's the path of the comic hero, who in opposition to his often-favored tragic hero counterpart, lives not to rise above suffering, but to be enmeshed in it and become resilient enough in the face of adversity to heal and find balance. The Greek demigod Comus,

whose name from which the word “comedy” is believed to be derived, lived by this practice: “Maintaining equilibrium among living things, and restoring it when it had been lost, were Comus’s special talents, and they are shared by the many comic characters who follow the god’s example,” so says literary ecologist Joseph Meeker in his book *The Comedy of Survival* (16). Comedy often lives in the unreal, the bizarre, the magical, and the speculative. In part, this stems from what comedy is working against; powerful structures and forces that hold dominion over the ebb and flow of a very real world, with very real consequences. For comedy to be successful, it must be nurtured in a landscape both within and outside of the real. Spaces familiar enough so that when they are imagined, they can be seen and felt by the reader, so that the seeds of change they bury in the unfamiliar can be transplanted into a tangible harvest.

My work has borrowed heavily from Lorca and Meeker’s teachings, not to falsely immunize myself from suffering – immunize myself from personal, environmental, social, and political trauma. I strive to respond critically: to find a way to maintain myself and the world around me, to have a socioecological response, to meditate on the wound that never heals. My work springs from this intention, so that I might provide alleviation – for myself and others – from the socioecological ache so many of us feel.

How I’m Surviving a Haunting

I write about this in my non-fiction essay as well, but I still want to mention it here. It would feel inauthentic to arrive at talking about my work after I’ve just spoken about the necessity of having my truth heard, and especially incongruous with my recent experiences and the freshness of wounds scored on my life, to not write about my father. And I need to be authentic because I need to love, to understand, and be certain of being loved, and being

understood. My dad died of a heart attack on January 9th, 2021, almost a month from the day that I'm writing this. His name was Louie and he died in Tijuana, Mexico. I still know so little about the event. I assume his wife was there with him but I'm not sure; I don't know if he died alone. I have very little contact with my dad's side of the family. I know that he was recently deported under the Trump administration, who aggressively sought to deport as many immigrants as they could. I know he had his guitar with him. I know that he loved me. I know I wanted to visit him after I graduated, to show him who his child has become, that the boy he sang songs to while strumming his nylon-stringed guitar has a child of his own. I wanted him to meet my daughter Violet and let him know I now understand parenting is immeasurably difficult.

The death of my father haunts my work. It may be most evident in my non-fiction essay, "The Comic Way Towards the Universal Self," but this happening has laid a shroud over my writing. Meeker taught me how central family is to my understanding of my environment, and how my environment is navigated; I walk a path that Meeker termed "The Comic Way." The Comic Way offers alleviation as well as joy. Yet it asks us to look at ourselves and inquire, "How will we continue to survive? And are we even meant to?" We, humans, won the evolutionary lottery, and we rigged the game against ourselves, along with all other sentient and insentient beings we share this planet with. The Comic Way asks us to create dreamscapes, stories that manifest futures shaped by our past and present. In hopes of starting a conversation about, or finding a solution for, the problems of today, speculative writing imagines worlds bent on experimenting with various "what-ifs." My family is one ingredient of my experimentation; any reader of my work will find familial fragments scattered throughout it all.

Meeker often uses the dichotomy of his grandfathers to speculate on how they've shaped his past, present, and future. My relationship with my father and my daughter, along with the role of being a father myself, have been a consistent lens through which I perceive my work. This ultimately leads me to look at my entire family and try to understand how well or unwell we are equipped to survive.

How Loss Demanded I Be Remade

What I wanted to write changed drastically as I moved throughout grad school. My work, or at least what I want my work to be, is the maintenance of equilibrium and the act of reclaiming that which is lost. I am becoming more and more comfortable with pushing myself into uncomfortable places. Still, I fear seeing myself in my work sometimes, because there are parts of me I fear to excavate: "What will my readers think of me when they read *this* eerie moment?" or "How will they feel about me when they see *that* wreckage is drifting along in my mind?" These are some of the thoughts that bring disquiet – sometimes it is persistent and I end up so vexed and exhausted by the noise, that I don't even attempt to write. But I'm trying to be braver. I'm trying to accept that people will understand my need to write, but they can only know this *if* I write. It is more apparent to me than ever that the act of writing will unsettle truths I need to face.

For a long period, the characters in my works of fiction were living in isolation. They were inhabited practically by a sole narrator with nigh to no contact with other entities, whether human or non-human. It was only until I sat closely with the works of other writers, such as Don DeLillo or even the poetry of Tracy K. Smith, that I realized all my characters were deeply alone. I was isolating them like I was myself, giving them no

friends, family, or community to help them know their worlds. The *duende* taught me a lesson on this matter as well, and while it is a deity so often associated with poetry, I could see the *duende* entering myfiction too, which demonstrates the wisdom each genre can impart onto the others. In time I learned the spirit of the *duende* is:

Through the empty archway... blowing insistently over the heads of the dead, in search of new landscapes and unknown accents: a wind with the odour of a child's saliva, crushed grass, and medusa's veil, announcing the endless baptism of freshly created things. (Lorca, 22-23)

It often takes looking into a pool of dark water or the mirrored face of the *duende* if you want to produce writing that matters to you. This approach to writing hasn't been easy for me. Even as I type this out, I hate that I'm letting it happen. It's disorienting. I don't always know where to start, which roughly sums up my relationship with my dad, un-strangely enough. I've begun worrying about death more than I used to, not for myself as much as for those around me. But the fear becomes less intense when I try to write about my father. While I cannot communicate with him in the physical realm, the literary realm offers several possibilities of doing so. The borders that separated us while he lived – the US-Mexico border, his drug and alcohol addiction border, both of our "I don't deserve love" borders – become more porous the more I write about him. I can personify him as the Cuervo ghost town in New Mexico and imagine the disheveled archways of his soul, where I go to embody a wanderer brave enough to tour his haunting gallery. The town holds its breath, while this exercise of writing offers me the chance to arrive at a period of healing.

Jack Gladney of Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* is one character who taught me an unexpected lesson on healing, even if I feel like it's a lesson Jack didn't quite learn himself. He

struggles throughout the novel to reconcile with his ideals of grandeur or to feel any sense of wholeness and true belonging. The novel is littered with interfering messaging from radio and television broadcasts, sound, and images bringing either comfort or discomfort to the story's characters. Often, it's where most of the concrete personality is, in the advertisements and marketing. The characters are shallow. Jack, his wife Babette, and their four kids seem to bear little concern for anything beyond consumerism and social status. Their willful ignorance offersthem a false sense of security:

The family is the cradle of the world's misinformation. There must be something in family life that generates factual error. Over-closeness, the noise and heat of being. Perhaps even something deeper like the need to survive. Murray says we are fragile creatures surrounded by a world of hostile facts. Facts threaten our happiness and security. The deeper we delve into things, the looser our structure may seem to become. (DeLillo, 81)

Murray Jay Siskind is a work colleague of Jack's, who is obsessed with semiotics and their usage in American media. These signs and symbols of his obsession are the facts that threaten stability. Human individualism has plagued the non-fictitious modern soul with tunnel vision on pure self-preservation without familial, communal, or planetary preservation as part of that solution. It has blocked even the periphery of the universal self. Western civilization (both the real and the unreal one portrayed in this book) is imbued with solipsistic desires, which cannot ever be sated without aggressive competition between human beings: "The tragic view also persuaded us that we could rise above nature and control our own destiny by the power of character and individual will" (Meeker, 105). One must be willing to delve into the hostile facts, and perhaps in doing so, feel unhappy for a while. It was only after Jack loosened his

control over his family and his environment that he began to see the unsustainability of such a will – that control did not equate with an understanding of, or a solution to, his problems. And it was only after I had surrendered to the truth that only my father’s body is gone – that he lives on in his son and his writing, and in his community and the land he inhabited, despite the state questioning the legality of his habitation.

As mentioned earlier, another work that has helped transmute my grief into something tangible is Tracy K. Smith's book of poems, *Life on Mars*. Much like I'm learning to do, Smith uses her poems to understand the passing of her father, to empty herself onto the page and see what the *duende* makes of it. In her poem, “My God, It’s Full of Stars,” Smith speculates what the dead experience as they pass. She wonders if another life in our Universe is revealed to them during their transition from life to death: “Maybe the dead know, their eyes widening at last, / Seeing the high beams of a million galaxies flick on / At twilight” (10). She goes on to detail the dead person’s whole life, along with the lifespan of the Universe itself, distilling into a singular moment. He lived “As if he were weightless, perfectly at ease in the never-ending / Night of space,” and so Smith sees her father in the sky and the stars, merged with the part of the natural world he once so passionately admired. I have started to see my father in the land, partially to sate a need to be as close as possible to the child who trekked across the border at eight years old, which is what gave rise to my poem, “A Desert Crossed on Nylon Strings.” I want to walk alongside him, to understand the choices he made and why he made them – the choices of a father, a son, a brother, an immigrant. What’s more, making peace with the land of Colorado and simultaneously with my father (as expressed in my non-fiction essay), and making my own trek from one corner of the continent to the other, from Florida to Washington, revealed to me the way my father endures. While his body is gone, he dwells inside my

thoughts, my DNA, and in my relationship with the rest of my family. And frequently for me, his presence is most felt in the written word.

The Ghosts Persist with a Lesson to Be Taught

The *duende* and the Comic Way have both entered my literary pantheon, as well as becoming a part of my writerly practice. While the work I ended up producing wasn't the work I set out to write when going into grad school, it has been the work that's been the most freeing: "I know in my heart and mind that play and comedy are somewhere near the center of what it means to be a free animal on this planet" (Meeker, 82). Play is a revolutionary act yet is too often made to be a competition. To play is to resist the notion that our losses – whether they be individual, communal, or global – should not be shared, heard, or felt. I believe it is impossible to be free without a play ethic and to play with words is how I am trying to be freed from the ache of death, whether it's my father's or the one our planet is facing. Even if this is a utopian ideal, for the sake of constructing my inland empire – the stability of my inner-peace – it is better to chase after a radical "guiding star," because it leaves room for growth without end; a reminder of the wound that never heals but constantly needs maintenance if not to be torn open. I will continue to sift through the history of my father under the guiding light of the stars in the night sky. And I feel myself standing at the edge of creation with the *duende*. Part of me wants to wrestle the *duende* into my work, part of me just wants to let it assume control.

Right now, this body of mine doesn't have conventional hands, nor does it float along weightlessly in the womblike embrace of the dark as Lorca suggests (10). Yet the hands of something stronger seem to be pulling me along, tugging at my imagination, where love and

understanding carry me towards “Dark sounds, behind which in tender intimacy exist volcanoes, ants, zephyrs, and the vast night pressing its waist against the Milky Way” (Lorca, 22). The *duende* likes to play, and if I want to hear the tender and transformative tune of the *duende*, I must surrender myself to its strangeness and ceaselessly tend to the wound that never heals. Because sewn into these wounds rest the memories of my father, from whom I know ghosts can witness galaxies flicker into being. Within these wounds, my family endures.

Fiction

The Family is One of Nature's Masterpieces

I crouched like a gopnik in a summer-shower shed that let in the occasional streams of moonlight. Hunching over a cold pail of water, I slowly picked out chernozem, splinters, and uncalloused skin mixed with blood from my hands. The pail already developed a thin translucent layer of gray ice. Unlike my current hygienic endeavors, I had been trying to temper myself for the past month by dumping a bucket of ice-cold water over my head every morning. I was still clacking like a Halloween skeleton. Slavic remedies never succeed.

I fished out a plastic dipper from the adjacent pail of hot water and made a half-and-half mixture with the ice water. I awkwardly placed my hands in the small dipper and this resulted in spilling the water. Then I tried to do a one-handed pour from one hand to the other but I was trembling too much to keep a steady flow. Lastly, I leveraged the dipper in my mouth but this resulted in me pouring it over my lap. They don't teach you how to take a "shower" in the dead of winter at the Russian-American Bible School in California before they rush you to the "ripe fields" of the former Soviet states.

Turns out the water was more like $\frac{2}{3}$ steaming hot and $\frac{1}{3}$ ice cold—in that order. My bits had shriveled down to the size of an acorn. And although my bits welcomed the heat, I slipped when contact was made and knocked over the pail of ice-water, losing over half the liquid. "Damn the green on fir trees," I cursed loudly as I heard an antiphonal shuffling response outside. Thinking quickly, I took the steaming water pail and filled up the half-ish-empty bucket. Then I filled up my dipper, curled up into a ball, and precariously poured the perfectly warm water over my head, allowing the water to trickle down my body. I cried as the heat cascaded down the front of me.

And I cried because the brackish tears warm the face and don't freeze like the water that follows. I couldn't even weep like a normal person in a normal shower with pressurized waterflow—yes!— that sweet, sweet hot pressurized water to comfort me. I looked like those orphans in the streets of Kiev or Moscow. They would sit on their haunches hugging their legs with their left hands and outstretch their open right hands to the passerby's. Hell, now they were all paid for—tourists be damned—and no longer had to sniff glue out of brown lunch bags and sleep on the hot gas pipes underneath the city streets like they did during the perestroika.

I remember my mom showing us informational-orphan videos as children. You thought Sarah McLachlan's campaigns about the dumb dogs were effective? She had nothing on a group of little kids with nose-bleeds and dirty faces asking you and the cameraman if you can be their papa or mama, or for a pack of smokes. In fact, if you go a week without seeing a dead dog in a ditch or hear one killed, you would consider yourself fortunate (they would pile up the corpses in a locked cellar and bury them in the spring.) God, they're effective. The pastor on that video would ask all the "blessed" brothers-and-sisters-in-Christ who "left" for the land-of-milk-and-honey in America—the "i" always a long e sound—to send them money and aid.

My mom would send out packages back home to her brother, the pastor, to help at the local church and orphanage. She would also send some to her younger sister to help with her growing family, which included most of my 4th generation yard-sale-hand-me-downs from my older siblings. Imagine my surprise when I finally did go back and visit her, in the late prepubescent years of the 2000s, and saw her with the newest model of Motorola, a condo with euro-remodeling, and a Japanese car! I had assumed everyone just stayed poor. It's a big thing there, you know, euro-remodeling—well, that and credit.

When my mom visited her sister for the last time, it was for some miracle Chinese-massage therapy. Last-ditch effort after a Charismaniac from Europe told her he had a vision and her faith was enough to make her well (provided she used it correctly.) However, my mother thought it was a shared effort and told all her kids, if we don't pray hard enough, "God will take your mommy away."

#

I didn't cry at the funeral. I was too angry at the green plastic tarp they put over the wood box where her body lay.

I heard the door slam—the last of the guests. Must be Ivan Ivanovich. I tried to lather myself in the shower, but all I could think of are the day's events. He was always making jokes, drunk or sober. Was he ever sober?—so the joke goes. Even now as he was "walking" up the path, he was probably singing about his precious Kalinka. It was pretty funny, I mean, digging through six feet of chernozem was easy in the summer, but when you hit the frozen ground in the winter, you needed to get creative and you took what help you can get. Some other men from around town came to help me bury the body. A funeral was customarily a collective event—one often laden with drinking. The wind was picking up. Either my movements or the water from my shower draining down to the pile of pig shit began attracting rodents. It almost sounded like they were trying to escape their warm little places in the pigpens. I could hear soft thuds and scratching—it was the pigs. I'd forgotten to feed 'em their dinner slosh. I was still adjusting to life back on the family farm, but the Slavic way of living is never far from the body, and the mind catches up quickly. My mom had moved back here

when she'd sensed the end of her life was near. She'd always said she would die in the heart of some brutal winter.

One of her final demands was to be buried next to the pigs, so that when her children looked onto them, we would be reminded of the sustenance our mama provided us in life—that we would have succumbed to gangrene and our hands would have fallen off, were it not for the meat from the pigs, and were it not for our mother's constant care.

Have you ever had to dig a grave by hand? It's like being buried alive; the dirt doesn't stay out. Six feet. Same over there too. Well, two meters really, but who's counting? Actually, we had to count 'em, but stopped as the cliché rain clouds decided to roll-in prematurely. We thought because the grave didn't need to be as long, we would have enough time. We didn't. Meter-n-half. It was long enough for a half-man. Luckily, no dogs would come out digging in this cold weather, even if they were desperate. Now that I think about it, the dogs ran away shortly after the clouds rolled in.

I heard a loud crack but I was too mesmerized by the warm water that the rain gives. Ivan Ivanovich tripped over the fence as he danced in the rain. He gives the Russian adage about drunks under the fence a new meaning. Wait. Was it under a ditch? American maybe? It was all getting confusing because I wanted my mom to sleep. That's what really got me. It was those same damn empty eyes. Striking, but empty. Half-open. I had seen many dead eyes before. But who's counting? Or so they whispered a couple of hours ago during the wake. The priest certainly gave off that notion. He was like a fast-food drive-thru server and offered little in sentiments. Only in ceremony did he offer condolences, only after the first shot of vodka and plates of Zakuski, of which the remains were left scattered in the fresh sleet.

They say you can tell the difference between rain and snow clouds. Doesn't matter

much to me, as the outcome's the same with -40°C weather. The hell does that even mean? They don't teach you why cold is measured the way it is. But who's measuring when your balls are this shriveled? Ivan Ivanovich stumbled over to me and mumbled something about how, "those tits aren't gonna milk themselves," pointing towards the swollen sow in the pen. Others whispered about how her most recent litter was born with disfigured limbs—likely the effects of contaminants in the water. They couldn't sit up right to breastfeed properly, so her breasts remained swollen with milk long after they died.

The sow ran as Ivan approached her. "She shouldn't be selfish. Others are in need," he said. I grabbed him by the back of his jacket's collar, and he twisted like an off-balanced dreidel to face me. "Don't you understand this is my mother's funeral, you damn drunk?" His unfocused eyes wandered from the sow to my mother's coffin, and then back to me. "The dead have done what needed being done. Shouldn't the living continue their labor if we want to one day die peacefully also?"

My face slacked as I stared into his dilated pupils, the black pools slightly shaking in their basins. "Take only what is needed," I said. Ivan Ivanovich seemed to steady in that moment. He placed a strong hand on my shoulder, his black pools stabilizing as he looked to me, "Good, good," he said, then resumed his pursuit of the pig and her swollen breasts.

I headed inside to try to warm up a bit. I tapped the -60°C thermostat. Either it was at the very bottom or the mercury had bled out. I heard more shuffling and a growl. Must be the dogs.

Wait, I thought they had run off? I opened the door and looked toward the back of the field. Ivan Ivanovich and the rest were too far away to notice the wolf and her pups, and probably too drunk to care. Ivan would be gone soon anyways, home to chop off a chicken's head and make some hot soup to warm his body, drained of energy from drunken rants and

stumblings—damned old man. The frigid air forced my bits to revert to their shrunken state, which seemed to offer some sort of advantage in sprinting; without the sway of flesh between my legs I felt lighter. I felt like a God. Adrenaline fueled me as I yelled at the top of my lungs, running towards the mother wolf, who backed up with a start of panic at my sortie. Her hasty movements forced one of her little ones to fall in a nearby ditch, but she narrowly caught the other one before it slid down to meet its sibling. She must've been six feet long, skeleton-thin, black as storm clouds absent of lighting, with yellow eyes hotter than seared steel. She growled with her hair rising on her back, dropping her little one on the small corpse that was missing an arm and a head. The damned wolf had begun eating the corpse with surprising tact, the flesh ripped cleanly across where body parts had once been attached. I felt bad for the wolf. Honestly, there wasn't much to go around.

She narrowed her eyes on me and swooped up her little one off the corpse, started to back away, hiding the pup in her mouth in the dark woods beside the field. Moments later, she was back for the second one stuck down in the tiny ditch, but I was already there to meet her. Ignoring me, she jumped into the dirt, and I along with her.

I was halfway into my leap when she slipped on the loose dirt, lost her balance, and quickly directed her body towards me, nicking my front thigh with her razor claws. She drew blood but inched backward to regain her balance before going in for another attack. I landed with a soft thud beside the anxious pup in the ditch.

I lifted myself from the dirt, and I imagined myself as a holy knight with a pulsating sword of light in my hand, and from that vision in mind, I lunged at her hard with the shovel, plucking a yellow light from her head and I reveled in the liquid that poured out from her skull. I was like a blacksmith who had just beaten his molten steel, fortifying it by plunging it

into ice-cold water—steam rising from the weapon after contact. I yelled a barbaric victory yawp as she growlingly backed up. My victory dance was premature. She still had fight in her. Distracted by the fervent pup nipping at my heel, I miscalculated her movements to claim her child and she successfully ambled her way up the walls of the ditch.

I started towards her again, slipping over the loose dirt and got out just as she turned on me and bit at me with a Polyphemus hatred. I landed belly-down and the wind left my body in my attempt to scare her and get out of the ditch simultaneously. I turned my face to see her now dragging away the corpse with its torso in her mouth, the decrepit legs dangling behind. I vainly lunged forward with my main digging hand, trying to grab at the little frail legs, but the wolf mother shifted towards me and I rolled to avoid her. Then, with a Jashobeam strength, I stood up and launched my shovel with miraculous precision—it not only tore her flesh but entered the she-wolf's body with a satisfying crunch. The type of crunch more delicious than stepping into the first snow of the winter. The tip of the shovel had entered into the skull right above the mother's steaming mouth, a deluge of blood hid the rage that must've been behind her eyes. I headed in the direction of the protected pup nestled in the foliage but couldn't find it. I turned my attention to my own mother instead, picking up the bits and pieces of mangled corpse, piling what I could back into the coffin.

I threw in three-fistfuls of dirt among the dead flesh, then thought better to throw in three additional fistfuls. I crossed myself six times, grabbed the shovel, kissed the air, and dug the grave while deafening my ears to the whimpers of the wolf mother dying behind me. Both wolf pups had now congregated around her, downcast eyes and noses examining her wounds. The pile of dirt around me continued to grow. It was only when I sat in a half-fetal position next to my mother's grave I'd noticed the muffled whimpers hadn't ceased. But who was

listening?

Ivan Ivanovich came into view, his warbling gate making it difficult to focus on him as my body sought equilibrium again. He knelt beside me, the musky stench of sweat and vodka coming off of him like heat from a radiator. “You look a little fucked,” he said.

“Need help?”

“No, I’m fine. Some wild hound was getting into my mom’s coffin. She’s dead now,” I said, weakly lifting my hand with a pointed finger to show Ivan Ivanovich the direction of the slain wolf-mother’s corpse.

“That’s no good.” He began to do a sort of hunched-over crawl toward the two pups so I wouldn’t scare them off. The siblings were still crying with noses buried in their mother’s fur, yet they took to Ivan Ivanovich quickly enough as he neared them, as he scooped up a handful of wolf pup into each hand. He held them close to his chest while he shooshed them gently, still on his haunches low to the ground. “Let’s get ‘em fed. They’ll be good guard dogs, you know, if you train ‘em and feed ‘em right.”

With that, he erected himself into his typical slouched posture and began heading toward the pig pen.

“What the hell are you going to feed them,” I called after Ivan Ivanovich, his feet unevenly navigating the muddy terrain. “They’ve lost a mother but we’ve got another here. And one with plenty of milk for two skinny pups as these. They’ll take only what they need.”

In Quiet Waters, Devils Dwell

In order to pay for my keep during the past winter (they send fresh missionaries to stay with families, who collaborate with the local churches), I had to feed the swine every single morning for my landlords, just before the chilled air was removed by the unruly sun. I had a distinct disgust when I first started this task. Once out of bed, I would dress in my work clothes, fighting off the cold shivers racking my body (the house would cool down by sunrise), and make my way outside. Like all good men, I had a particular spot to piss at; I dubbed it the “pissing post.” Well, it’s not really a post, it’s more like a large rectangular square—oblong I suppose. It had a literal moat around it. It was about a half-foot deep and 15 centimeters across. There was a trench coming down into it from the pigpens. The trench was used to channel the piss that slithered down to the post’s moat. The post looked something like a straw effigy. I was taught that, to create a good pissing post, you would lay the first layer with some straw and dirt. Then, when you were through cleaning the pig pens (you would clean them by tossing a bunch of straw in the pig pen and shovel up the shit into a wheelbarrow), you would pile it neatly in a rectangularish square. Each daily layer would then dry/freeze over and serve like a mortar for the next layer. It always reminded me of Moses, from the movie, *Ten Commandments*, one of the few movies I was allowed to watch as a kid. There’s this one scene where Moses is in the mud pit doing his thing in the straw and the mud, watching people get killed all around him, being visited by beautiful a Egyptian princess, and other godly things. But, I didn’t have it quite like him. I had my pigs. Plus, not too many princesses to impress in Ukraine.

It was actually kind of fun doing this during the winter because after you fed the pigs and watered them, they would pee. They would pee gallons of urine; the divers tributaries would

trace into a slowly surging steaming stream of piss all the way to the post. Leaning against my pitchfork, I looked like the American Gothic, ready to clean the estuary right where the river meets the mouth of the moat—you didn't want it to get choked full of piss.

It reminded me of when I was a kid and voluntarily cleaned out the stream (made from cement) running behind our first home in red-clad Tennessee. We lived in this little ghetto at the back-side of town that had the little man-made brook running between our apartments for flood control. My cousins were in the valley, with the little stream running in-between, and my family was on the hill right across from it overlooking the scene. I would try to clean the canal with a stick so that the water would have a direct flow and wouldn't dam up. My siblings and cousins made fun of me for cleaning out the little creek because they said it would just get clogged up the next time we would have heavy rain or that inevitably a bunch of garbage would get thrown in it.

On one bold day, I followed the canal to the very end and discovered the mossy mouth of the cement stream. It actually ran under the train station and its mouth had large, rusted iron bars, which looked like whale teeth that prevented large animals and trash from going through. I was too big to fit in-between the teeth and there was too much large trash for me to unclog so I stopped my vain philanthropy. So I took up to new adventuring and would place pieces of straw on the soft current and watch them go down the trickling stream. It was fun to watch them maneuver through the trench turns like little straw sailboats. I would pretend the rising steam, infused with elven magic, gave it special powers to survive the tumultuous torrents ahead and arrive safely to its destination—it never did.

When I had taken over the duties in mid-winter, the pissing post was about to my shoulder and when I left it a few months later, it was about my height. In the springtime, during

the earth's cyclical splitting (for they never let it rest), the landlords would use the pissing post as fertilizer for their fields. I thought it would be more interesting if lightning struck and burned it to the ground.

Here were my daily duties: I would grab one bucket from the kitchen and another bucket from the summer kitchen and make my way out yonder into the cold. I would make a pit stop at the pissing post and add my own fuel into it before heading down to the milling shed. I would write things out or do dumb designs in the snow and try to guess the temperature by how fast my pee would freeze, but my freezing hands found little comfort in this ritual and exacerbated by the cold, sought after some kind of comfort to warm themselves. They would look longingly at the hot steaming stream begging to be washed and warmed—they were always cold during the morning ceremony, even my favored left hand. But I would take courage and resume my duties. I would go back a little further to the milling shed and take the two pails with me. One contained what was left over from last night's dinner, which included, but wasn't limited to: unfinished food scraps, spoiled milk and meat, potato peels, and any other uneatable thing. The other pail contained used dishwater. I may have, on occasion, fished out a piece of bread from the former pail. My grandfather had always taught us eating stale moldy bread won't kill you. He always ate last and ate whatever was leftover because he said no food should go to waste. I recall my dad telling us an old Soviet joke about a wife complaining to her husband about her being the one to finish all the leftovers. The husband retorted back about getting her a pig. She, exacerbated at such a dumb idea, scornfully replied, "And what, eat the pig's leftovers too?"

At the milling shed, I would cut up sweet white sugar beets into smaller eatable slices using a hand-powered cylindrical slicer. The beets were as large as newborn babies; seriously, these things were massive. The Ukrainian soil is so fertile that this particular beet grows to

goliath proportions. They are so potent, in fact, they normally sell them to the sugar factory or make sweet-smelling vodka from them. There were also two large sacks in the shed; one contained imported meal (it's a specially mixed meal that helps bloat up pigs) and the other a mix of various and sundry grains. I would use a massive blue mill to grind the grains down every morning. This particular mill was a surprisingly good piece of machinery, all things considered, but that's because it was made in Germany. If you were to buy a locally manufactured mill, you would need to buy spare parts right alongside the new product. I would go to the well, get two pails of ice-cold water, and put large electric heating coils into them (I made the mistake, on one occasion, to warm my hands in the water...with the coils still on). Twenty minutes later, I would mix the hot water with the meal and grain flour to create a very heavy porridge (it tasted like straw mixed with grass). Then I would season it with salt, dishwater, and leftovers. The garnishments for the pig picnic, the chunks of beets, would be carefully thrown into the empty and warm water pails. I would take two pails in each hand with less weight on my left arm, that contained the beets and like Samson carrying the gates, I would ascend with a morning song, up to the den of pigs.

When I would arrive at my little bay, the squealing started to get louder; it sounded like an explosion about to give way. When I would open the door and flip the light switch, I would be met with loud shuffling and with the thick warm moist smell of pig piss and pig shit. Their appetites were so aroused at this time of morning that they fought one another with terrible screeches, as if they, having wallowed for a score, demanded to satiate their appetites once more.

In fact, since they were temporarily blinded by the surprisingly bright lights, they rammed headfirst into the troughs, walls, each other, and the gates. They gnawed the gate and

left big teeth marks. The landlord once told me he replaced the doors annually. The first time I ever entered their little abode, I thought I would be mauled by them and it felt like my nose hairs burned off—in fact, I really think they did. But after a couple of weeks, I quickly grew accustomed to the smell and the ferociousness of the beasts. I learned to be careful when pouring their porridge because they will take the bucket and your hand from you if it's within the range of their mouths. More often than not, I stood on my tippy toes, despite my height, and poured the food at a high angle. Sometimes, the slop fell on their faces and backs, but I don't think they minded it all that much. I recall when the sow gave birth that winter; the landlord was laying with his pig, stroking her gently, hand feeding her, and speaking lovingly to her while his wife attended to the midwifery duties; all survived but the second one out of the baker's dozen. We kept the swaddled piglets inside the warm kitchen, which had to be stoked throughout the night. They ran around leaving their filth and we fed them from a bottle for about a month or so.

After they were put back, the only warmth to be found early in the morning was in the peaceful pigpens. But the peace was quickly broken by a call to duty I had received that day.

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We arrived late in the evening just as the sun was setting, myself and the Village Head. Hiding amidst the full clouds' downpour, the sun smeared its red and gray colors and refused the spring's arrival. The rain stopped its deluge just as the Village Head knocked quietly with a dripping hand at the green door—and just to our luck, for we got to catch a glimpse of the sun before it was swallowed up by the underworld's gate. We were soaked through and

through without boots stilettoed with mud and our coats drenched as if they had been dipped in a pool of dark liquid. When the door opened, the distinct odor of warm milk mixed with unwashed bodies, and stale clothes, assaulted my senses and hinted at something – something that teased at my memory, then, even more so, the overpowering smell of the Wise Woman.

She appeared, talismans and other bits of jewelry hung over her neck, wrists, and around her fingers. They looked like little bones she might gnaw on during supper. Heavy bracelets chained her wrists, rings bound her fingers, and bones dangled from both bracelets and rings.

When she moved those bones gave off an unsettling chime. Oh, and her hair. If ever there was a silver thread to be lusted after by the queens of the North, the South, the East, and the West, it was her silver hair. It flowed like something out of a fairy tale. Her regal poise undermined her uncomfortably normal clothes, which befit her age. She wore a gray woolen skirt, a dark green blouse, and a gray shawl thrown over her shoulders. And that persisting smell. We stared at each other until she asked, “Where is the Father?” Her emerald eyes never left my own. The Village Head replied, “Enough with the ceremonies, here is your Father.” After yet another moment of looking me up and down with her jeweled eyes, she said, “Well come on then, young man.”

Passing through the narthex and not bothering to shed our outer coats, we quickly made our way into the main room heated by the stove. The bouquet of smells sharply hit our senses and I looked at the soviet single pane glass window wondering if the Wise Woman got the memo about euro-remodeling windows’ ability to open and close with simple ease. My attention shifted from the window to the cry of a child, accompanied by wretched whimpers. Facing us but with a bowed head as if in a prayerful vigil, sat an exposed wet nurse. She didn’t notice our

entering. She had the source of the cries in her arms and it was trying to latch it onto her large brown pap. She was surprised when she saw my shadow from the stove light (the dangling bulb's weak light overhead made it hard to see) and she quickly covered her exposed breast, taking up a small nappy from her lap with a jeweled hand. The quick movement caused it to start wailing louder. She looked at the Wise Woman questioningly, who answered, "Young Father."

"Blessed Father," she said, and quickly extended it to my arms with both hands, eyes looking down. I took its bare body into my arms, so as not to soak it entirely at my own chest, nestled it on the fold of my right arm, and supported its body with my left. It continued to cry so I kissed it on the temple—this didn't help. Nor did kissing its cheeks—it only got fussier. So I held it out and feigned to eat its exposed little white belly—it wasn't amused. Finally, I folded its arms on its own little chest, covered them with my left hand, allowed my thumb and forefinger to balance its head as my right hand balanced it from its bottom, and its cries began to diminish.

The wet nurse mumbled something under her breath, then looked wistfully towards the left end of the room, and asked seemingly to herself, "But what about the woman?" I glanced around the kitchen in the same direction and located the other doorway of the room. I looked at the wet nurse and she nodded. The Wise Woman, not missing a beat, walked ahead and escorted me to the other room. Her scent grew stronger. As we left, the Village Head sat across the table from the wet nurse and they began chatting about their firstborns. The last sounds I heard were the excited clatter of the kettle and the cups.

I followed the ever-intensifying smell, ducked my head to avoid the doorframe, and came through a yellowish lace curtain, similar to the color of the light coming from the bulbs. The lace curtain opened into a doorless, small, and poorly lit room. The smell was so terrible I

nearly doubled over. What kept my bowels in their place was the sinister smell of sickliness. The mother had remained here a number of days, huddled by herself a couple of feet from the corner of the room. She refused to let go. I had been called from the neighboring village, which had a temple. But the messenger child was a lout (he was nicknamed “Onion” by his mother the wet nurse) and, of course, lost his way. Probably chasing an arrow (for he was fond of the bow) and was separated from his mission, in some underbrush no doubt, so his mother went after him, shortly after I entered the room—or so I was told.

The sickly woman refused food, water, comfort, and even sleep. She was on the floor at the far end of the room a few feet away from the corner. An icon of Saint Georgiy’s battle, which perched over her head, peered brazenly from behind the butt of his missile, seemingly indifferent to the woman’s plight. She had long black hair, white blotches of skin showing here and there. The woman was breathing quietly, and her slightly closed eyes were bloodshot. At her exposed breast, she clutched the naked corpse of her child whose arms and dirty open palms dangled lazily towards the floor. Its motionless mouth and blank eyes gazed in wonder at the whitewashed ceiling lined with soot, while fluids shined from every orifice of the tiny body. One of the mother’s arms lay across the chest of the baby and the other rested haplessly by her unguarded side. The half-fold of three fingers complimented the mother’s unadorned right Holodomorian anemic wrist—weak life gave the limb a limp tension to her failed gesture. Her index finger extended ever so slightly—doing its namesake’s duty and the thumb—hinged her attempt to form a circle.

She heard us enter and gaped at us with a blank panic. Near the entrance to the room laid a wiggling bundle of blanket, which I quickly surmised to be the surviving twin. I squatted down to pick up the swaddled infant. His eyes were unwilling to open to the dim

light, as he haphazardly threw his arms and legs around. His mother's quickening breath betrayed her still swollen abdomen. It gave her the appearance she was having a contraction and was going into labor. Her clasp on the child tightened as we moved a little closer. As the woman wriggled, the Wise Woman covered her face with her kerchief and I looked at her sternly. The collected stench made my eyes water. She began walking out when I told her to take "my burden" with her. After the exchange, she left with the boy, crying loudly. Its cries restarted the metronomic oscillations of the mourning woman's movements full of moaning, rocking, and rehidng her child in her bare arms. Her moans were like dry angry coughs. Her tears refused to well up in her eyes, and yet they sparkled like a sunshower. Her eyebrows were oddly relaxed, suspended in a dispassionate pose. Her entire body shook as I inched closer. She rocked and moaned and, in her moaning, she rocked her child back and forth. Her arms were covered in scratches. Her limbs seemed to stiffen as I drew near, as if I heralded the dayless winter. She tried to tell me. She tried to warn me. She tried to speak. I inched closer and the woman began scooting away from me back into the shelter of Saint Georgiy's corner, her black nest, made from her hair, broke its form in her rushed movements. Brown streaks smeared the floor and the trail glistened black with blood as she kicked her legs at me. The odor was once again sharp in my nose from her movements, and yet somehow, I remembered the elusive thought that had evaded me when I first opened the little green door. The incense smell brought nostalgia; it reminded me how I felt when I was little as I gazed at the icon of Saint John the Baptizer, during a cold and lengthy liturgy.

She tried to plead and yell as if I were kidnapping her children or raping her but all that came out were those moans and dry heavings. Her eyes were sunken and swollen all at once. They were gazeless yet demanded some kind of knowledge from me. I sat down like a

Tibetan monk in front of her and she, with maimed feet, struggled to push me back, her face expressionless, moaning—always that same moaning. After a few moments, she finally conceded and let me sit in front of her. We sat face-to-face and stared at each other with wonder, as if we had just seen each other's naked bodies for the first time on our nuptial bed, neither one knowing what to do nor what to say, both afraid to reach out into the empty space and touch each other's face and body. The woman was clutching her daughter so hard I thought she would pop. She had black eyes. Or brown. I couldn't tell with the dim light overhead and my shadow did not help either. The light bulb was caked with a summer full of content flies.

Perhaps one was brown and the other black? I cannot recall. Because each eye had looked like it held something different from the other or maybe something against its dark twin; information not shared with its sibling; one pleaded with me and the other bore down on me. I began telling her about my grandfather. About how he was a pastor. About how he was imprisoned for preaching the gospel. About how he had to clean out-houses while he was in prison. I told her how he was tossed into one of them on his first day there. The KGB agent handling his case ensured the prison officers would spread a foul rumor about him, thus giving the officers full right to throw him into the septic. The prisoners were forced to stand guard over the pit to ensure he wouldn't get out—he was threatened with hanging if he got out. They didn't give him food or water. He would pray for the prisoners who guarded him. He would preach the gospel to them. Nobody listened. They all said that if he didn't bear a cross on his breast, how could he claim to be a priest? He was Moses without two tables. He tried to tell them he was a Baptist (unregistered of course) but every time he would tell them, he would receive a prison baptism.

A day later, an actual priest was tossed into prison. For some strange reason, they left him unmolested. For everyone's mutual amusement, they had the priest stand guard over him that night. He had somehow smuggled a bible into the prison yard and gave it and some water to my grandpa. The next day, when the prisoners saw he had a bible, they let him out, despite the command of the jailers. Since he wasn't allowed to wash, they gave him his own cot and he became the untouchable one. He said the years he spent in prison were the easiest years of his life. He felt guilty because his wife had to feed 12 children without him—my mother being one of them. In fact, he had 13 total but one of them died when he was in prison—I think he never talked about that one. He would have bible studies with the priest and a Pentecostal who was tossed in a few months later. They would pray together and call each other brothers. Then one day, the priest went missing and his body was found in the pit. My grandpa jumped in thinking to rescue him, but it was too late. He wasn't allowed to take him out of the pit. Word spread about how some information was uncovered showing the priest doing something that priests weren't allowed to do.

I told her the gospel was like listening to someone preach from a septic pool. Nobody comes near it. Nobody wants to listen to it. Nobody wants to be baptized by it. Someday, we all will end up in the pool, but the question remains, how do we get out? The man in the septic says there is only one way out but we jeer at him and piss on him. We sat together in our solitary quietness for some time. Then, I began singing one of my grandpa's favorite songs, a dirge he sang to himself throughout his life: You Are my Holy God, I Aspire to You, For I Know: There Is Peace in You. When I got to the refrain, she began to weep, wet bitter tears. My shoulders tensed as I inched closer and embraced her body. She cried in half-moans, half-mumbles, and rested her head partially against my body. I continued singing and at the last

stanza her grasp finally loosened from the dead and it slowly fell to the ground beside us. With renewed vigor, she clasped my shirt, buried her face deep into me, and shrieked with loud apologetic cries, “I don’t know what happened!” She cried harder and with quick hoarse whispers began repeating her own refrain, “save and protect save and protect save and protect save and protect save and protect us” over and over again. She trailed off, her fists beating my chest as she further collapsed into my arms and gave a final loud shriek. Blood, mixed with hot mucus, flowed from her nose and she quelled her moans into me until her childlike spasms ended with soft even breathing. My firm embrace on her left residual white on my coat that now enveloped her—she fell into a deep sleep as though dead. Soon, we both slouched in a pool of liquids, which had formed beneath us, and fell fast asleep in each other’s arms. We were awakened with the end of a familiar seasonal greeting, “...risen.” In the doorway stood the Wise Woman, the Village Head, and the Priest, in his sagacious attire, who after concluding his greeting, crossed us. Half asleep, I noticed the crying child in the arms of the wet nurse. The Wise Woman, with careful measured movements, took the crying baby’s dead sister into her arms and walked out with it calling to the wet nurse and her lad. The Priest’s face grimaced as she walked by. When she was out of sight, he bowed his forehead to the ground, leaning over his cane. The woman, still in my arms, finally relaxed and with outstretched arms held them out for her son. Her sleepy eyes filled with new tears as she took the child to her breast and began repeating to herself the antiphonal response with smiles and light laughter, “risen, risen, risen indeed.”

I heard the wet nurse whisper something inaudible as she crossed herself and thought she spoke about the child, who appeared to be having issues keeping a firm clasp on his mama’s pap; I bent over and showed the little one how to suckle. The taste of lukewarm milk

brought my thoughts back to the summer when my family visited Russia after our emigration just six years before. That was when I first saw my grandfather. When I first felt the soil of my forefathers between my feet. When I first smelled the green meadows. When I first drank greedily from the mossy spring at my father's village. When I first heard the service. I was only ten, and my father and I had climbed up the hill overlooking our family's country house, the two of us sitting under a birch tree while we took draughts from a glass jug overflowing with warm milk and ate moldy black bread as our chase. I recall asking him, as I wiped my chin, why the milk smelled funny and tasted so heavy unlike the plastic gallons in America. He replied with a smile as he caressed my face, "so full of wonder as ever," and I snapped back to the situation at present, the son suddenly extended his opening fist upwards, latched onto the mother's other pap.

I looked to the lively boy and my thoughts jumped to his dead sibling being prepared for a grave in the other room. I knew the ground outside would be near as hard as stone right now, thanks to the increasingly brutal winter so far. Not to mention, the graveyard was running short on space for burials. Then I thought of the pigpen and their tenants back at the place I called home, and the blended heavy porridge I made for them. And of the barbarity they came at their food, it'd be nigh-impossible for them to notice any change to my typical recipe. And the powerful German mill would make quick work of a body so little and fragile. I rose to my feet to plead my case to the Wise Woman.

Vessels for Secrets and Sustenance

People in small towns, much more than in cities, share a destiny. – Richard Russo

You see people often enough and you become capable of knowing exactly how they're feeling the second you lay eyes on them. You see it in the prominence of the wrinkles on their forehead; less noticeable when they're at ease, more so if they're stressed or dissatisfied. You hear it in the melody of the way they say hello; tinged with joy at times and hued with anxiety at others. When seeing people is something so routine, to take the mundanity out of it, you must commit yourself to become supernaturally attached to them to have any semblance of connection. Then, you become capable of seeing them even when they're not there.

I'm a milkman, though the title doesn't encompass the significance of my position. From one end of my town to the other, I drive my truck to deliver milk, cream, and pop. The call to this profession had come to me early in life, as I've always found the sound of bottles clanking together mesmerizing, as well as their capacity to hold meaning. Yet it has more to do with how reliant people are on me for essential substances, and the dynamics formed out of this sort of relationship—one between giver and receiver. Not to mention the intimacies my position allows me to observe in various peoples' lives. There's little comparable to the joy of knocking on a door and the smells of bacon or mixed-berry pie or a freshly cleaned house washing over me, accompanied by folks who are grateful for the gifts you'd bring. They greet me with a smile or a handshake or the occasional hug. Some children might not be able to hold their bodies still when they see you have their favorite fizzy drink in your cargo. And of course, there are everyday conversations.

“Hiya Mrs. Larson, Tadd fly anywhere interesting recently?” She stood out in front of her house with a tin watering can, nourishing the flower beds that slept on either side of the Larson’s porch. She’d turn towards the sidewalk the second she heard the sweet sound of clanking milk bottles.

“No, no. A couple of trips to Tulsa. One to Houston. The man spends more time sleeping in airports than he does in his own bed.”

“At least he’s staying safe. I’ve never been much of a flyer myself. But I knew a guy whosurvived jumping out of a plane once—until he hit the ground.”

Mrs. Larson laughed and I could see those pearly teeth in her mouth as her red lips pulled back to let out the infectious sound of her laughter. Her teeth shined in the afternoon sun and looked like they could bite straight through a man’s finger in one bite; I know the milk is responsible for such a dazzling set of chompers.

“Well, I better get the rest of these magic potions to the rest of the folks on my route. But you tell Tadd I said hello, and it looks like we’ll be saying hello to little Donna any day now,” I said as I patted her full-moon-shaped belly.

“Oh well she’ll grow big and strong thanks to this,” and she held up proudly the carrier of milk bottles I had delivered to her in the air.

But the real magic happens while the bottles go to live in these peoples’ homes like ghosts in a haunt, always present though not always noticed. The bottles make a home in my clients’ kitchens, living rooms, and bedrooms. They satiate families as they sit down to dinner, they exist as nigh-invisible company when they’re having conversations with their neighbors. And when I return to pick up the bottles, I can sense all these experiences. When I touch them and focus only on them, I become enveloped in eidetic memories: I can see folks like Tadd and

Nancy dancing wildly to Chuck Berry; I can see the reflection of Mr. Jones' smiling face as they fill up their cat's empty dish; I can see the Cassidy's arguing over Truman vs. Dewey for president. One of my favorite moments is when Larson's decided on artificial insemination after Tadd's test results from the doctor showed he is sterile; the doctor suspected the cause to be a product of Tadd's job, as airline crew members spend prolonged periods of exposure to cosmic radiation way up there in the earth's atmosphere. I felt so close to such an intimate moment in their lives.

I can see anything the bottles see. Every detail comes alive in my mind's eye and activates my sensoria. The bottles float over the ripples of their temporary hosts' lives, and eventually, they're carried to the shores of doorsteps, where I go to collect them and siphon their secrets. Occasionally, I take the bottles home with me to keep them forever. Maybe more than occasionally.

Seated in the front seat of my truck, I pull one of the emptied bottles from the Larson's crate. I see Tadd hug Nancy from behind as she rinses the bottles at the kitchen sink. The room smells like cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg. An orange sun sets on the horizon just outside the kitchen window. My ears begin to ring.

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It is like any other day. Nothing unremarkable, just the same old magic and wonder of my job. I was recollecting on a bottle tapping from earlier, a sweet view of the Stadnicki's celebrating their son Brandon's 8th birthday. His grandparents even came into town to celebrate; they had bought him a Radar Robot toy, just like he had asked for.

I can still see remnants of the event in my mind as I drive my truck, like undeveloped film, a carbon copy of the event I had seen so alive when I had caressed the Stadnicki's bottles. And as quick as a lightning strike, a small body dashes across the road, and I am forced to wrench the steering wheel to the right, sending my truck into an adjacent ditch. The stars and streetlights blink out of view as the truck veers into the ditch, and the next thing I hear sirens blaring and see lights blazing. Though I saw the child only briefly as they made a run to cross the street, I am certain I must know them. I know everybody in this town. How would I look onto my townspeople's faces after this? How could anybody recover from hurting—or killing—one of them? My body feels broken.

Glass bottle fragments lie scattered all around me. I'm soaked in spots all over my body and my vision is still too darkened to know if it's milk or my own blood.

#

There are bottles on the windowsill, on the shelves bolted to the wall. Where the titles of books should be visible on their spines, there are nameless bottles. They have been empty for a good while now. In a single night, I am ripped from my profession. These bottles were, at times, filled with liquid, often repurposed or reused to hold round treats or even crawly bugs with spindly legs and twitchy feelers captured by children, but all they capture now are the rays from sun and moon and star and streetlamp. I watch as the light from these sources pirouettes through the glass bodies of my friends, turning their empty bodies into swimming fires. Some of them are slim with wide, thick tops. Others are modeled after the female figure. No matter the shape, they collect the same light—they share the same light. Just because a

tall fat square bottle is standing next to a tiny round one, the former never desires to withhold the outside light for themselves. No, each glass being is allowed their time in the same glow. The purpose of a bottle is to relinquish something to another soul, and that purpose has not been altered despite their contents having changed. And I am grateful for each of them, because eventhough I no longer can take them to potential hosts, I am still their shepherd, and I can still evoke the memories they hold.

A knock suddenly arrives at my door. At first, I thought I'd been tapping into some vision, but my hands were bottle-less at the moment. I grab my walker and ambled towards the front door. When I open the door, I am greeted by Tadd's beaming smile. He is still in his pilot's uniform and his arms were full with some UFO-shaped object veiled with a white cloth.

The second the door opened and he sees me, I can tell it takes everything in him to keep his smile on his face. My face is still bandaged. I haven't bathed in at least four or five days. I try to use my body as a shield so he can't see the state of my home, yet I can see his eyes attempt to look beyond my outline.

"Hiya Jerry, I'd heard from my pal Herbert, who works as a janitor down at St. Peter's hospital—"

"Oh yes, yes I know Herbert. Excellent hunter. Has a beautiful buck's head mounted over his fireplace? And he almost sounds like Bing Crosby when he sings. Have you heard him sing?"

"Herbert? Sing? Huh, never. He's normally pretty quiet. But yeah, the buck. A few of us get together every Wednesday to play poker at his place. Beautiful, yeah."

Tadd can't keep himself focused. He kept scanning my face and my broken body. There is pity in his eyes and I hated him for it.

“Well, anyways. Herbert told me about the accident you were in. You’ve done so much for this town, and Nancy wanted to send a gift your way as a thank you for all the years of being the best-damned milkman around.”

He pulled back the cloth to reveal a beautiful apple pie, with some of the finest lacing I have ever seen.

“Oh wow. Tadd, thank you. Thanks so much. This is incredible.” I took the pie from his arms.

“The only thing it’s missing is a glass of milk! But unfortunately, the new milkman broke all the damned bottles bringing them up to our porch this last delivery, otherwise, I would have brought you some.”

Rage surged through me to think some idiot is providing sustenance for all my families—and he can’t even do the job properly. I had never broken a bottle a single day on the job. I can feel my body beginning to shake like an overloaded washing machine.

“Hey Jerry, I gotta get going. Got a flight to Denver leaving in an hour or so. But enjoy the pie. We’ll be in touch!”

And that was the last time I saw one of my former patrons.

#

One afternoon the same as any other, the bottles began filling up with noise. They popped and crooned as their innards changed, took on too many shapes for me to count, and finally filled the room with a flash of aurora lights unlike anything I had seen before. The calamity arrives as quickly as it goes. Something about the event didn’t strike me as abnormal

as one might expect—if I were anybody but me, perhaps. Perhaps it has something to do with all these years of tapping into bottles. Though I'm still a little scrambled, I am enlivened by this unexpected commotion. I collect myself and jump straight into an investigation.

The investigation went as fruitful as one might imagine trying to track down the origins of an anomaly might go. Eventually I phone a physics professor at the community college in the town over, and he told me to stop hitting the bottle if I want an answer to my problem. Later in the day, I reach out to a local mystic who makes house calls for aura readings and exorcisms.

She tells me there is a vengeful spirit inhabiting my home, and the specter is using dark magic to make me hallucinate myself into madness. Neither of these people is helpful because I know what they say isn't the truth of the matter. I sit for a long time the next day, contemplating what to do until the only reasonable thing comes floating to the surface of my thoughts.

The bottles' contents vary more wildly than I first realized. Some are reminiscent of a sort of fizzy soda pop, and others hold liquid sludgy like swamp water. Yet other bottles are possessed by solids that challenge the integrity of their keeper's glass walls. My admiration and obsession send me into an anxious fit, to think there had been deeper magic lying dormant in these bottles; the thought fills me with terror and awe of the radical changes within my familiar surroundings. The only way I would know what is happening here is to consume the contents of the bottles. And I know I must consume all of them.

Some of the substances slide down my throat to my belly with ease, appearing eager to meet my stomach acid. Others slog along slowly, tentatively approaching their forever home. Some bottles, I come to find, that I thought weren't filled with anything at all, are

filled with invisible gases. I only discover there's anything in them in the moments I bring their openings to my lips, and I taste flavors like pumpkin, or what I can only describe as what I imagine asphalt to taste like. But the response of my body and mind doesn't stop there. Rage, inspiration, arousal, dread, and every emotion I've known possess me in waves, pushing my hips to move to soundless music and my hands to contort around invisible bodies—I shake hands with spirits and I embrace others in familial hugs, the vestiges of people I'd spent years bestowing glass treasure to.

“I knew you'd been here this whole time,” I said to my spectral friends. “There was just something in my madness, something fermenting in these empty bottles, I knew you'd show yourselves when you were ready. I knew you couldn't just be memories.” As entrenched as I am in the moment, I can't keep track of everything going on. My senses are being overworked. But I don't question any of it. I let myself be consumed by unreal happiness; happiness tinged with fearless hysteria.

#

The world lies dark for a while. Something creaks beneath me; the noise rises from a cold surface. My limbs feel fuzzy. I try moving them to shake off the sensation. But they're weak. I count each limb in my head: one...two...three...four. They're all there. At least the number sounds right. A red hue begins to take over my visual landscape, and then my eyes slowly open.

My eyes only make it to half-mast before a bright burning threatens them and they return to rest. After a moment of reconciliation, I'm able to pry them open. The ceiling above me is speckled with dried marks of pooled water. Its vault is sunken in some places, the

barrelled stalactites making the slummy cave appear hungry for collapse. The room is lit solely by the of day, a narrow glimmer of its rays dancing into the room from some unknown origin. My hands rise from the chilled field of wood stiffly. The dancing light catches them during their ascension, revealing pale hands dusted with the room's moltings. My arms begin to shake. I laythere for a moment and run through the entirety of my body with my mind's eye. After I do a full scan I decide I'm capable of sitting up.

The walls mirror the neglect of the ceiling. I digest the contents of the room until my eyes catch onto the source of the light: a window with no siblings. I see the bottles back in placeon their shelves and I realize I'm in my living room still. Or some place that mirrors it in most ways.

My legs wobble when I try to stand so I decide to crawl to the nearest wall. I lean all myweight against the wall, shuffling my feet while my hands scramble along the surface of it like crippled spiders.

When I arrive at the window I lean softly against the glass; the cold decorates my skin ingoosebumps. Outside the window is a place I don't recognize at first. Then I realize, like my living room, the place below me—which I once sat level with—is some disheveled copy of the town where I live. There doesn't seem to be much around and while I know it's meant to look like my town, the perspective is disorienting, and I have no clue where I'm positioned at all. A few buildings are erected around the one I reside in. From my view I can see their sun washed rooftops. Cracked roadways lie between the ruined structures. A fog hangs low over the crackedstreets. A few cars lay rusted and discarded here and there. I'm not sure if it's the fog skewing my view of them, but I all of them look like milk trucks from up here. The sidewalks don't carryany footsteps. The silence is as thick as the fog.

I watch for a while before hunger pangs come. I look around the room once again, praying that there was a bottle left with something solid in it to ease my stomach's grumbles, but the space remains empty. When my eyes return to the window, the scene has changed somewhat: a lone girl stands on the sidewalk below. The fog spills towards her but never reaches her, like her body somehow repels the mist.

Her skin lies on the other spectrum of mine—the color of a blackboard or the space between stars. She's holding onto the string of a large yellow balloon and a small satchel rests at her side. She reaches into her satchel and ties something to the end of her balloon and let's go of it. The balloon quickly rises my way, so I reach for the bottom of the window and begin trying to pry it up its rusted tracks. The window slides up its frame slowly and jaggedly, and I lean out and snatch the string from the air just in time. The item attached to it is a small bottle I don't recognize. Inside are a small pill and a whistle that matches the oranges in the setting sky. The mouth of the bottle is wide enough for both items to slide out with a little shaking of the bottle to orient the objects correctly. I've trusted the contents of bottles so far and now didn't seem like the time to question them. I toss the pill into my dry mouth and it goes down roughly, but my hunger and thirst dissolve shortly after. My hands eagerly bring the whistle to my lips and I blow. The soft sharp noise makes my cracked lips form into a smile. The sound is reminiscent of summer days, where children ran wildly in the streets playing their games. I lick my lips and blow once more. I go to show my thanks to the girl, but she has vanished from view.

#

Every day the girl returns. At least, she starts out as the girl. She morphs into someone

else; the mist seems to siphon memories from me and morph the being into people I know. All people from the town. Tadd, Mary, Brandon, Herbert, and all the others. And the girl is still one of the being's shapes; that's the form she starts and ends or meetings with. She's familiar like the people from town too. But I can't put a name to her.

Every day I get a pill and my hunger and thirst are sated, accompanied by gifts connected to the person she's morphed into: Tadd's winged pin, for instance, or a miniature version of Brandon's Radar Robot. Today she sent me a toy truck with the words "Mark Miller's Home Repair" scrawled in black ink on both sides. The clone looks on at me with a dead gaze, just like all the others. I kneel to the floor and zip the truck in between the scattered chunks of wall and ceiling, occasionally crashing the truck into some of the pieces and sending them flying across the room.

A breeze from the outside chills the space, so I rise to shut the window. Even before I get to the mouth of my room, I can sense her down below. And there she stands, peering up at my place in the sky with Mark's dark green eyes. We stare at each other for a moment.

"Why are you doing this? Where is this? Who are you?" I yell down at her, but she gives no clue she hears what I'm saying. Hurriedly I snap up the little orange whistle that'd belonged to Ruth Parnell, the local elementary school's most praised crossing guard. I bring my lips together and blow, and I blow hard and angrily. The fog shifts like a living thing around the shapeshifter. The fog is tinged by the soft glow of the setting sun and writhes like a snake around the figure. I look to the girl, Mark, in the eyes and give them a wretched smile. She pulls a bottle from the bag at her side and extracts a bubble wand from it. She brings the wand to her lips and blows. I watch on as tiny translucent orbs bobble skywards. She's already walking away as I shout my questions at her again. I watch the back of her head grow smaller

until she pops out of view altogether. My insides feel as hallow as the bottles on the shelves but I'm not hungry or thirsty thanks to the pills. I go to tap the bottles and nothing happens. The sun begins descending below the horizon.

#

She begins to linger after every balloon impartment. I try the whistle and every other sound and bodily movement I can to get her attention. Yet she just stands there and looks unblinkingly up at me, no matter which person she's shapeshifted into today. There's an unmovable space between us and it is empty of any connection. My hands resist closing the window until finally, they snap it shut. I begin to feel angry again. I watch just long enough to see the buildings swallow her as she walks away out of view. Sitting on the floor, I fly a plastic replica of Jim Pasko's pet parakeet he had fluttering around his barbershop. Yet the air around the fake bird is silent, its flapless soaring met by no obstruction.

Sleep comes and I dream about the accident. I shoot up out of sleep to see I've rolled over and crushed my parakeet. "Can you come back now?" I beg beneath the bottles on the shelves. "Don't you remember how much care I gave you? I cleaned you and whispered thankfulness into the spaces where your souls rested. I cherished you day after day. And even when you became full of substances I thought might kill me, I unhesitantly made you a part of me. Why did you leave me after all this time together?"

Silence sets in the room like a thick fog after a day of heavy rain. My bones ache as I crawl towards my birthplace in this room. These empty bottles are my soulless watchers, they are my only company. And they are empty. The spot I first rose from has a thin veil of dust

over it now, yet the outline of my body could still be made out on the dusty floorboards, etched into a thick layer of surrounding grime. I lay my body down on the spot and match my limbs, my head, my body, and even my fingers asbest as I can into my dusted womb. My eyes snap shut. I think about how I might begin to save the balloons instead of the bottles and the meaningless gifts. Maybe with enough of them, I can bind myself to them and rise into the sky. My hands uncurl to reveal the tiny sunset-colored whistle. I bring it to my lips and blow.

An Unbecoming Sequitur

The chamber air is thick with murmurs. In the crusty red pews of the Church of the Frozen Prison Crystals sit hundreds of Dying Ash Men with their hollow, burning eyes. Scattered among the Dying Ash Men sit a dozen or so Cooperatives, eagerly awaiting ascension. Beside one Cooperative, a hulking brute called Epicurus, sits his pale and emaciated brother Henry, the sole Uncooperative in attendance. Henry's skinny arms are appropriately shackled, and in contrast to the black robes of his brother and the grey of the Dying Ash Men, he is adorned with nothing but shameful nakedness, the uniform of the scorned Uncooperatives.

Henry's eyes are glazed with fear, rolling wildly in their sockets, avoiding the disapproving scowls of the Dying Ash Men. He whimpers and Epicurus silences him with a heavy blow to the chest. The murmuring disperses. Antlered, mirror-eyed and robed in white, the New Law Saint approaches the pulpit. It is accompanied, as always, by the President of RatSecrets, her face a rough mask of pus and scabs. The congregation stiffens in reverence. Vomitsilently runs down Henry's chin, and Epicurus delivers another blow. The President of Rat Secrets whispers into the New Law Saint's aural cavity.

"Once," rasps the New Law Saint, its sharp teeth clicking, "there was a member of Congress who had a BLAST playing with his friends."

"When he got home his wife batted a perfect game," reply the Dying Ash Men unison.

"Then," continues the New Law Saint, its voice rising steadily, "the mechanic and the gators and the grievances of an ancient Egyptian army were born to a single maddening Ursula. Ursula could not afford to pay for college—"

"—so she ASKED her friends if they wanted to GIVE HER SOME MONEY AND

POWEROF ATTORNEY,” comes the response.

The Cooperatives stand. “THIS IS WHERE IT GETS DARK: Halloween party at work,” they rumble, then sit.

The President of Rat Secrets whispers to the New Law Saint, and The New Law Saint points a jagged claw at Epicurus and Henry. Herodotus stands and yanks a gibbering Henry to his feet. The other Cooperatives look on with envy, and The New Law Saint screeches as the brothers approach: “The clouds over the world are going out for dinner with their families, but the CONGRESSMAN from the ORIGINAL MESSAGE is sent home from school for being a BAD LITTLE BOY.”

Epicurus kneels before the New Law Saint. Henry remains standing, facing the congregation. He looks up at the vast, craggy ceiling of the Church of the Frozen Prison Crystalsand trembles.

The President of Rat Secrets peels a dripping scab from her face and hands it to the New Law Saint. The New Law Saint holds it high for the congregation to see, clear fluid speckled red streaming down its wrist.

“Ursula and the Congressman’s wife were made to pay for his crew to travel to Iraq, where a SUBMARINE was. The mechanic and the gators didn't even notice that the Conan O'Brien people were INJURED BY BEARS.” The Dying Ash Men rise and stomp their feet: “FOR SOME REASON THIS IS PROPRIETARY INFORMATION.” They sit.

Epicurus looks up into the eyes of the New Law Saint, and seeing his distorted reflections, speaks softly: “Mick Foley and my dad just went crazy. But Ursula knew what was going to happen.” He sticks out his tongue, upon which the New Law Saint places the scab. The New Law Saint points at Henry.

“The Fingers of God smell like fish and chips.”

Henry convulses and shrieks. The Dying Ash men stomp their feet and roar. The other Cooperatives sit still as stones and hold their breath. Epicurus consumes the scab.

“Yeah, that'sright,” he says, rising to his feet.

The congregation goes quiet. Henry whimpers, his eyes refusing to leave the ceiling. Epicurus smiles and assumes his place beside the President of Rat Secrets, whose fresh blood has already scabbed over. His black robes slowly lighten to grey. The New Law Saint claws at the air and howls:

“THE CLOUDS DEVELOPED A REPUTATION AS THE MAYOR OF HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA. Burt Reynolds was also RELEASED FROM PRISON for beautiful women to destroy. PERJURY isn't a problem in this country. The Congressman's wifethreatened to kill a thieving Enron Executive.”

“Bradley Cooper wrote a book about his relationship with bus drivers. It was a terrorist attack against his former NFL football team. NO ONE could stop believing this. PRESIDENT JOHN MCCAIN ORDERED HIS CREW TO MAKE MONEY ONLINE EASILY. URSULA freaked out and bought a pair of socks from the past. This was a mistake! Dave Matthews was PLANNING to take care of BIRDS. He said he wanted to do it in the showerwith Bradley Cooper.”

“Part of Ty Cobb's imagination got very upset and moody and antisocial. And then clickfraud prevention programs were BORN UNDER A ROCK. The Congressional Democrats were not able to sleep now that GHOSTS were identified as being IN CONTROL OF THE WORLD.”

Henry collapses.

The congregation erupts: “Barry Goldwater asked if he could take Ursula to his native

city of Los Angeles, California because he knew that someone else was also featured in several episodes of American Idol. YES, AMERICANS HAVE BEEN ON THE INTERNET FOR MANY DECADES OF ONLINE EDUCATION.”

The President of Rat Secrets whispers to the New Law Saint. It nods and crouches beside Henry. It brings Its fangs close to Henry’s ear and coos, its voice as gentle as a drop of dew on a spider web. “Mick Foley put together the first half of the puzzle... But when would Bradley Cooper be nice to Hungarian people?”

Henry tries to mumble a response. The New Law Saint snaps a tiny prong from its antlers and uses it to unlock Henry’s shackles. It carefully helps Henry get to his feet and places the shard on his tongue. Henry chews absently as black smoke drifts from the ceiling of the Church of the Frozen Prison Crystals and enshrouds his skeletal frame. Epicurus the Dying Ash Man beams with pride.

Henry the Cooperative emerges from the cloud, adorned in black robes. He addresses the congregation, his voice flatly confident: “Bradley Cooper ALWAYS makes fun of people who ain't got no money or cable television shows such as American Idol on DVD.” “Ursula criticized him for not understanding as Henry does,” respond the Dying Ash Men, bowing their heads.

Non-Fiction

Meditations on Loss: Waves of Grief and Building a Network of Healing

Conversations with Those Acquainted with Death

I'm a stranger in these woods. I don't know the name of the trees or the insects or the animals. If I wander too far I will get lost. I wonder what has been built here if perhaps there was once a Lummi village here, or what could be built here to alleviate social stresses in my community. What has been lost to time and domination, and what could exist if creation and imagination could flourish here? Pine needles fall all around me as I try to weigh the history and purpose of the land. They do little dances on the fallen logs they land on. Little movements I can't replicate. I wonder if the pine needles know where they're going or if they're as lost as I am. I wonder if they dance in mockery of my meditations.

What's to be said about being an animal (humans are inarguably animals) and not knowing practically anything about how to survive in the environment I reside in? There were personal efforts I've tried to make so I don't feel so helpless in the woods around my studio. I've learned that some of the mushrooms around here are chanterelle. They're edible. There are many of them. But I haven't eaten them yet because I have food inside my studio. They grow well here in this rain forest of ours. Over millions of years, a near-ideal ecosystem has been created for them; countless mechanisms put into motion to help these mushrooms thrive. One such phenomenon is called "needle drip." When fog passes through the coniferous trees, the needles collect moisture from the fog. When a needle's held-droplets grow heavy enough it begins to fall like rain on the forest floor. Even if it's not raining.

And the mushrooms appreciate that it seems. All the things on the forest floor appreciate the extra drink. But particularly the mushrooms. Mushrooms need between 80-90% humidity. Mushrooms do not have skin or bark so they lose moisture fast, which makes

me wonder if I could survive without my skin if I was constantly being humidified. The answer is of course no, but I still wonder. I still imagine my skinless-self attempting to survive in some dark forest, though I haven't evolved that way, the way of mushrooms.

Mushrooms thrive on death. They're nature's little recyclists – but they're not all so little as the one's around my studio. The largest living organism on Earth is the honey fungus or the armillaria mushroom. The largest one discovered thus far measures 2.4 miles in length. It lives in the Blue Mountains of Oregon, and most of its body exists beneath the ground. Its underground network of tubular filaments is the home of its mycelium, or its vegetative colony.

While the mushroom eagerly eats the trees around it, the trees also communicate to one another through the network the fungus has created; the “woodwide web,” as German forester Peter Wohlleben has called it. It makes me wish I could talk to the trees. I wish I could dig my feet into the earth and let the tubular filaments of mushrooms latch onto me, and maybe then I could talk to the trees. Or maybe it just comes down to eating the mushrooms: if I eat enough of them, perhaps, will I learn the speech of trees? There's something to this, I think. There are hallucinogenic mushrooms, after all. Many users of psilocybin, the most common “magic mushroom,” have experienced a greater sense of wholeness in nature while under the influence of these mushrooms. Is that why I don't trust to eat things off the ground, out on the floor of the woods surrounding my studio? Am I afraid to talk to trees, to see God, to become a Buddha? Which begs the question: what part of me does the mushroom destroy so I can undergo this rebirth?

Preserved in Salt and Paper

Salt Lake City. That's where I grew up. For 13 years of my life, I called it home, and for a few years in my early twenties as well. I remember learning in the 4th grade why the lake has such a high salinity level: the prehistoric lake, Lake Bonneville, once spanned most of western Utah, but it began to shrink. Much of the giant lake's salt became trapped in the basin where the Great Salt Lake now resides. Because of the formation of land, the lake became endorheic, which means it has no outlets; the water can't leave the lake, save for evaporation, which means all the minerals – salt included – get left behind. The lake is often referred to as “America's Dead Sea.” Nothing can survive in its waters but tiny brine shrimp, though it does serve as a habit for millions of shorebirds, waterfowl, and all sorts of avian kind. In a way, the Great Salt Lake represents a gateway to the dead. Salt is used in the preservation of foodstuffs, after all.

Who's to say the memories of the dead aren't preserved in the lake, that the salt and the water don't hold memories? What would it be like to see the histories of all the lives that inhabited this space or passed by it? Do you think the memories would make you want to drown yourself in its waters or float serenely on its surface?

Mormons have a way of shifting time away from the present; I have seen women, men, and children cling to the attitude and the attire of the 19th century. They preserve their family history in books as thick as bricks so that their dead ancestors can live, always. Funny that their religion isn't even that ancient yet could match others in the customary meticulousness they reach into a dead era with. You can drop into decades-long-since-gone simply by flipping through the pages of books nearly every Mormon household will have; thousands upon thousands of pages of genealogical records to remind those in the present to never forget where they came from.

The Mormons were drawn to Salt Lake City because no other settlement had been started there – white settlements at least. The Utes, Goshutes, Paiutes, Shoshone, and Navajo were there for centuries. The Mormons were perhaps more lenient than other colonizers to let the native people of the territory survive, if only they committed themselves to the Mormon faith. The Mormons went so far as to translate the Book of Mormon and other religious texts into native languages. Some of the most well-preserved records of Uto-Aztecan languages lie within the pages of the Book of Mormon. A paradox with a silver lining, I guess. I suppose for the promise of salvation in the afterlife and not a massacre in this present life, it's hard to pass up the offer of Mormon conversion.

The Act of a Sacrifice and the Ghost it Leaves Behind

The Nahuatl word “Illhuicatl” (Nahuatl being the language of the Aztecs and their modern descendants, the Nahuas) means “sky” or “heaven.” My father’s parents spoke the language but he didn’t know much of it himself. He knew, however, the language that once belonged to the Spanish Conquistadores, which has been melded with and metamorphized by Nahuatl. I know very little Spanish myself. But I bought a book a couple of months back to try and learn Nahuatl. I wanted to teach my father some words and phrases when I visited him after grad school. But now I can’t. And I can’t help but wonder if he would still be alive if he had been given US citizenship. Maybe if he had access to the meager healthcare this country offers. He had to “illegally” cross the border more times than I can count on both hands. He worked for unlivable wages as a mechanic, a cook, and other miscellaneous jobs just to scrape by. He had lived most of his life in California, where much of his family resided. He just wanted to be close to them.

During the Trump Administration, he was deported once again; ICE was (and still is) aggressively cracking down on “illegal” immigrants. He was deported to Tijuana, Mexico, a place he never lived. At least not a place he ever lived willingly; it’s a common spot to send deportees. But it was never his home. Still, he died there on January 9th, 2021. He died on Calli that wasn’t his. I look to Illhuitcatl and hope he has found peace. In ie tlecujlixquac, in ie tlamamatlac.

I remember learning at community college in Florida how the world developed oceans. The Earth was once just a hot molten sphere, covered in volcanoes that spewed ash and fire and dust into the atmosphere. Little did the volcanoes know they were spewing a perfect blend of hydrogen and oxygen into the air; gaseous clouds soon took over the sky above their molten caps. When the molten rock started to ease its fire-spitting into the sky and the earth began to cool, the gaseous H₂O mixture was able to collect in the clouds, eventually forming into rain droplets that fell to the hot Earth. And it rained for thousands of years, filling basins that would go on to form our oceans. It’s hard to take in the vastness of the ocean till you cross over it from the sky, like a cloud.

The first time I got the chance to see from this perspective was on a study abroad trip to London. I had (and still do, too often) dreamed of traveling the world. My spirit was aching for it. Crossing the Hueyi Atl, the Atlantic Ocean, felt like crossing realms. Though familiar elements of this realm were found in the one I crossed into.

I remember going on a literary tour in Westminster Abbey, lead by poet and writer

C.L. Dallat. Buildings gathered around the man as he walked those cobblestone streets, me and my classmates harbored around him, absorbing every word he spoke into the ether. We listened closely to the history spill out from beneath the man's beard. The ghosts of writers long-since-dead started to appear in the gardens they once tilled in life, and in the windows of their former houses, in the rooms they once slept and ate in. Down by the river, the sounds of a big band drifted up from the shore's edge.

Dallat went on with his literary tales, my head bobbing along to the rhythm of his speech so I could attune myself to his wisdom, so I could store his lessons safely somewhere in my mind. I kept imagining the ghosts of writers like Geoffrey Chaucer and John Milton and the Bronte Sisters dancing to the music emanating from the river's edge, their translucent feet clambering along the green grass, the soft summer sun gleaming on their dead gray skin.

We kept moving on. Black columns belonging to some monstrous mansion came into view – they made me think of all the dead lords and ladies that must have inhabited this place. And who would decorate their home like that? So horribly gaudy. And the mood shifted. Dutch streets suddenly swallowed our party. Straight roads transformed into winding snakes, reminiscent of the serpent wielded as a weapon by Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of the sun, war, and sacrifice. Dallat continued pointing to the scenery that had inspired the writings of some of Western civilization's most famous writers. I wondered what they would have to offer Huitzilopochtli, and if their sacrifices would be enough.

Eventually, Dallat informed us he had to depart with me and my peers. The group's energy was depleted. We arrive at a church, a Gothic-style one, a place where souls have gone to surrender themselves to some unknown entity, some shepherd of humankind. What promises to God have been made here, and how many of them have been kept? "You shall

not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the Lord dwell amid the people of Israel,” Numbers 35:33-34. How many servants of Christ live by that? Crows started to cry out as our group sat huddled on the church step, eating our lunch.

Carved into all our young and thirsty faces was the realization of the path we had chosen; the world had moved on since the time of these exalted writers. The pastoral scenes they worshipped, while many of them have survived, were facing the threat of environmental devastation every day. Still, a feeling of wholeness swept over our collective. At different points, we had realized who we were in the presence of in London. Not just ghosts of legends, or a man named Dallat who bridged the past to our present, but the company of ourselves. And we ached with the same desire to write about the land. Yet, we were arguably smarter and not ignorant enough to believe the picturesque idealization could save the planet. Sure, the environment for writers has changed, and its complexity has certainly not made it easier for us to succeed. But the embers of the dead-and-gone didn't completely turn to dark, cold coals. No, they were passed onto us, and it's our choice whether we light ourselves alive or not and shed new light on a rapidly darkening world.

There's something to the multiplicity of being, writing, and living not just here, but in other worlds and other times. The planet lives much like this, it's history never solely living in one era, never wholly healed from the devastations of war or famine. The Earth could not be without the destruction that shot the moon into the sky or the molten rock that gave birth to clouds that would rain for centuries upon centuries. This blue marble of ours could not be without the moon or the rain.

Acknowledging the sacrifices of those no longer with us – those that secured our safe passage into the present – is vital. Yet it feels so difficult to proceed with alacrity, to bear witness to the radical and terrifying change we must undergo to endure. Nothing remains as it is. Each sentient and insentient being on this planet is interdependent on one another. “Things derive their being and nature by mutual dependence and are nothing in themselves,” so said the Sōtō Zen priest Shunryu Suzuki. And until each moment we have lived, each time we have been, each person we have lived as is mutually acknowledged and upheld, we must hastily pursue the realization of interdependency.

The Miracle of Fire to Both Cleanse and Destroy

Fires are another element of the earth I feign to understand, at least when it comes to their environmental usefulness, their necessity to replenishing the nutrients of an ecosystem. Maybe that’s why I have a hard time understanding these woods because I feel unrelated to them; being burned by fire would only scar me or kill me. When you think about it, humans are so vulnerable to destruction. The environment finds a way to make use of the destructive force of fire, to come back stronger and healthier, and more resilient. While one of my favorite attributes of humankind is our resilience, it doesn’t hold a light to the resilience of a Giant Sequoia.

It reminds me of the history of a place I once called home. I lived in Jacksonville, Florida for about six or seven years. In 1901, Jacksonville experienced the “Great Fire,” which is still the third-largest urban fire in US history. It burned for 8 hours, destroying some 146 city blocks and 2,368 structures. Seven were killed and approximately 10,000 were left homeless. While buildings were reconstructed, the city never fully recovered. Downtown

Jacksonville is largely a ghost town, investors feigning interest in it over the decades, but never staying interested long enough or bearing any care to house the homeless or create jobs for the jobless. It's a city consumed by poverty.

Signs of fire can be found throughout various places in the woods where I live now. Unlike Jacksonville, forests rebuild. The flora and fauna find a way to recover, to be reborn from the ash and dust.

Lost (Somewhere) Yet Found Enough to Forgive

I lived in Colorado during my teenage years. I grew to hate that state during that time. And the drive through it to get to Bellingham was the first time I had been back in years. It was simultaneously the first time I could recall feeling at peace within its borders. I had dropped out of high school in that state, been arrested, struggled with drugs and alcohol, attempted multiple suicides. It felt like it had fragmented my soul – not only fragmented it but kept pieces of it after it was done landing its blows on my spirit so that I couldn't recover those parts of myself. And when I look back now, I realize that was the closest I'd ever been to follow the same path as my dad, and simultaneously the angriest I'd ever been at him.

Then something unpredictable happened, or at least unpredictable for a person who refused to see any good in Colorado. At one point while driving through the southern half of the state – through an area I couldn't name now because, at that moment, all I wanted to do was speed through Colorado without a second thought. But I was struck by a view stilled in time, suspended in the radiance of the unfolding scene as I drove. I was on a road that wound through golden hills of wheat, and the gilded wheat was lit aflame in an amber hue as it caught the setting sun's light. The light crawled slowly over the hills as my Subaru struggled

to tow the U-Haul along those elevating roads, carrying my entire material life in its metal body. Rain had been slowly pouring for the past 45 minutes or so, and its gentle touch on the scenery felt designed; the whole moment was swathed in the intentions of the natural universe. I felt as if I could've stopped then and there and put my whole life on pause; forego the rest of the drive to Bellingham, disregard grad school, and try to figure out how to hold onto that moment forever. But obviously, that didn't happen.

No, instead I am here now, writing this essay that I feel like I have no idea how to persevere through my academic responsibilities when nearly everything around me is being shaken loose of any stability. Yet there's something about exiting my little studio and walking down the slope of dirt and foliage to Squaticum Creek, to pop a squat on the fallen fir trees that now serve as bridges over the creek. It's wonderful that even a felled tree can serve a purpose in the woods. What will I serve when I've fallen over when I'm nothing but a body? I can't imagine I'd be much use as a bridge. In most states, you can't even let your body lie in the woods somewhere and decompose after you've passed, to let it be swallowed by the things of the earth. Why is that? We spend money year after year to maintain graveyards. Why can't there be a designated space where we bury the dead in nothing but dirt and just let the earth claim us as nutrients? Or just let the bodies lie out in the open air for some predatory animal to come along and eat? Seems more useful and space-efficient than a graveyard.

Oh yeah, I was talking about grad school (funny how it went from that to death). The whole experience leaves me feeling estranged, particularly with the pandemic. I live alone, and 90% of my time is spent in my studio; I have more time to dwell on the what-ifs and the things I miss: on-campus events, the hallway conversations in the English department

building, the walks to and from work and class, and so on. It's difficult to hold yourself accountable when your whole world practically goes on in a tiny studio. It feels too easy to be consumed with worries of the dying planet, the pandemic that's ravaging the planet, the injustices laid upon the most vulnerable among us. I can't see my daughter, Violet, or my mother, who are both in Florida. My time is limited with my partner Madi, as she lives in Canada, and we're mostly permitted to meeting at the border for brief periods. My father died on the other side of the border of this country, in Mexico, so I can't see him either.

I will say though, these events make me feel more inescapably tangled with this planet and its inhabitants. My life isn't entirely wrapped up in Bellingham, or America. I feel more like a global citizen than I do a citizen of the United States. And despite me being isolated from an in-person teaching and learning experience, I feel closer to my work. I feel closer to the Earth. I am desperate to help myself and to help others. We are facing the most crisis-riddled era of humankind. And to persevere it'll take collective action. So, the borders that surround me feel so make-believe, despite their stranglehold on my mental and physical mobility. Borders just reinforce the idea we're somehow separate. That our wisdom and resources shouldn't be pooled together to tackle the world's issues, and instead hoarded to protect a select group of us.

The Conversation with Mushrooms Continues, but Not Before the Duende Butts In

No recovery ever makes you entirely whole again, only as whole as you can become with your trauma in tow. If you're still able to reflect on a wound – recall it, remember the pain of it first opening on your skin or on your spirit, then it's still there. To be absent of the wound your mind would have to be empty. So, we “fight at the edge of the pit,” proclaims

Garcia Lorca, with the *duende*: the avatar of the Universe's creative exertions, exertions that cause a wound, "and in trying to heal that wound that never heals, lies the strangeness, the inventiveness of man's work" (from the "Theory and Play of the Duende").

Lorca goes on to describe the mystique of writing, and how a creative work, when inhabited by the *duende*, bears regenerative properties; "with *duende* it is easier to love, to understand, and be certain of being loved, and being understood..." All struggles arise out of the socioecological traumas we've faced; all human suffering arises from how we've chosen to organize on this planet. Through writing, we can invent solutions to the struggles we face, we can learn to trust the love we give and receive to and from one another – if a writer can allow their work to be possessed by the *duende*, the wounds that never heal can become objects of meditation, from which alleviation of socioecological ache can be gleaned.

It would feel inauthentic to have arrived at this essay, with its congruity to my recent memory and the freshness of wounds scored on my life, to not write about my father. And I want this essay to be anything but inauthentic because I need to love, to understand, to be certain of being loved, and to be understood. My father's name is Louie. I still know so little about his death. I assume his wife was there with him but I'm not certain; I don't know if he died alone. I have very little contact with my dad's side of the family. But I know he had his guitar with him. I know that he loved me. And I know I wanted to visit him after I graduated, to show him who his child has grown to become, that the boy he sang songs to while strumming his nylon-stringed guitar has a child of his own now. I wanted him to meet Violet, my daughter, and show him I now understand parenting is immeasurably difficult.

Much of my recent writing has manifested itself out of his passing. And I can feel myself at the edge of the pit, along the borders that separated me from my father. Even if I

had had the money, I couldn't have gone to his funeral – or seen him before his passing, for that matter. He had worked his whole life to try and become a US citizen and still was always being deported. He lived a tortured life. I imagine the *duende* inhabited him when he sang his songs and played his guitar, attempting to heal his wounds. It hurts every time I think about what I know of his life. The *duende* has yet to fully possess me so that I can transmute my trauma into a tangible work. Or maybe it has. Still, the physical and imaginative landscapes of my life challenge the full force of the *duende*. Yet I feel its tug on my silhouette, tempting my spirit to cross that edge and plummet into the pit.

Meditations like these make me feel a little less lost. I feel a little more at home in these woods surrounding my studio, despite so much of its inhabitants and their workings being largely unfamiliar to me. Being in its midst of so much of nature's lifeblood and activity helps me pull out fragments of myself and piece them together; there's connective tissue being built between my hodgepodge knowledge and splintered memories, across time and space and lifetimes and versions of myself. It's almost like a network of fungi is being built beneath the surface of my thoughts, connecting me to other humans who are also watching the earth fight for its life, connecting me to other humans separated from their loved ones or who have lost loved ones. Healing is more obtainable when you have multiple minds who bear the same wounds addressing the damage, who have different remedies and tactics to not only recover but to be more resilient to future suffering, becoming more capable of locating the sources of such pain so that those who follow after us do not have to face the

same sufferings. Part of my life's work, I think, is nurturing this network so it can one day span the planet, so it can repair itself if scarred by fires, so that it becomes so vast no borders could dare to divide it up. I want to nurture it so that if anyone connected to this network ever feels lost, they can tap into its connective tissue and reach out to their global family, so somebody can respond and show the lost one the way home.

Poetry

A Desert Crossed on Nylon Strings

Most of the memories I have of
you are not mine at all
flashes from a camcorder cataloging my 2nd birthday
the last one you attended
“feliz cumpleaños, mi hijo!” you say to a boy I don’t remember being.

there is little I can associate with
you considering the deserted
memory not tangible enough to be
forgotten but not present enough
to be real

that we share.

At age eight,
you came to this country
your conquest of the Sonoran Desert
your immigration into the “American
Dream.” You crossed that desert knowing you could
die.

I can only pluck at assumptions as to what you needed to be safe from.

At age eight,
Bilbo’s journey there and back again
was the greatest crossing I had ever made
an adventure to help those without a home find one.

And what do you conquer
now? Thirst, I imagine.

The trek across the desert prepared you
for a lifetime of need for something to
drink.

The first time you call, weighted apologies
rest in your throat – but you hang up before
they reach your mouth.

I hadn’t talked to you for 22 years
except in old photos and crinkled letters
visages of a time before your mind began to
smolder
before the rattling in your hands made you incapable
of strumming your nylon-stringed guitar

‘*Duérmete mi Niño*’

‘*Luna Lunera*’

– songs you once sang to lull me to sleep
but now your mouth is as dry as the Sonoran,

and the melodies of sleep and the moon scrape roughly against

your vocal cords
You call again sometime later and you don't hang
up: someone beat the shit out of you and stole your shoes while you
were trying to remember how to play the songs

that were once a part of my bedtime ritual.

I come to find

(22 years from your days as my Sleep Summoner)

you've recently saved enough money from playing your guitar on street
cornersto pay a drug pusher to smuggle you back into
California

it's your only path in

because your papers don't match

mine

you don't remember how many times you've been deported

Oh, and you have found God.

You tell me that repairing your relationship with me is your admission into heaven:

you abandon me

God abandons

youI seek you

you seek God

barrón y cuenta nueva – wipe the slate clean.

I bought a nylon-stringed guitar just
yesterday;we can't make up for the missed
birthdays

or the songless nights I struggled to sleep
but perhaps on the bridge of this here
guitar

you can teach me the songs that used to be
minebecause I want to sing to my own child
about

a calming sleep and a playful moon.

Fathering Sunlight within Semblance Revolutions

There's a place in my being
where you have long since glimmered
in a chamber, but not in the physical orbit.
You revolve in a vastness and esprit
causing me
to stumble upon the edge of dawning
I have known you
before your body
had ever been proclaimed into being,
before you came whirling into existence.

You flicker into illustration within my inner vision
making the spot between my eyebrows
tingle
and radiate;
I know this to be the seat of my soul.
And when the eclipse of the eyes occurs
and I am returned to the void
within shadow
and silence –
in these moments, often
you come spiraling into the masslessness
a sphere of comfort.
I hover towards a beacon of resolve
my clutter dissolves and I glimpse
and see a framework of sense.

Little Hands, Cultivate

Bury your little hands
in the gritty soil and insect hovels,
into the sweet skin of the calamondin –
let its bowed dark orange segments
and its stringy white pith
stick to your plump fingers.
Pluck tiny jasmine flowers
from a throng of vines
whose own grasp seeks to swathe
the neighbor's blueberry bushes,
but your little hands pull them back.

Grab hold of the tin watering can,
poke holes in abandoned cobwebs – whatever it is
know that the garden yields
a textured moment
for each time your little hands reach into it
and you have felt this since you first entered,
when you rolled woody debris
between your uncalloused palms.

A Lumia Descends Upon the Sonoran Desert

She landed like a meteorite
and slumps out of her crater, erecting herself before the
highly contested landscape.
Her bones crack back into place;
regenerated for her reeving of the land before her.
Shadowed mist begins to crawl over the landscape
emitting from the new wound
in the earth, a tilted
sunlight casts downward on the wayward
traveler's face, her fragmented teeth
point hungrily towards the globes of light – the lifestream of the planet, bursting
from fissures made from
the impact of her landing, grains of sand
continue to fly through the air.
Saguaro cactuses and bur sage bushes
topple from the swirling dark winds that
encompass the marred leech of a creature;
a spire of debris begins to
climb towards the azure vault above her head,
while beneath her feet – the lifeblood evaporating from the
cracked earth disburses
into the air now thick with her black vapor; the mist
wraps itself around the outpouring lifeforce,
the mist becoming more solid and opaque
carries the lifeblood
to the unwelcomed traveler's gnarled mouth.
A nearby caravan of nomads looks on, their faces
etched with terror; prayers
slip from their mouths.
Her cavernous maw opens wide, her jawbones
breaking as her mouth continues to span,
a black hole meant for one purpose:
to siphon every ounce of the planet's spirit
– a celestial vampire,
driven to sap
the galaxy of life,
till each heavenly
bodyblinks out, till the
skies
grow dark as the belly of a
whale, she will go where the light
still thrives:
to turn the dark anew.

Moon Mother's Womb

In the transcendental tombs of long-lost tunes
I found a room with the grooviest of boons.
It swayed and it swooned, and I became attuned
to the croon that emitted from the Moon Mother's womb.

And it cracked the black space between me and the void,
and there was no avoiding the crackling fire that issued from its fissures.
They burned and obliterated all that I thought, and I
think all should adhere to the phantasmal speech
where ghosts and ghouls gather 'round to discuss the dire need for mass distribution of
Ouija boards, for the dead are lonely and could use some company.
They recall to me the remnants of the reverberating past
and they wonder how only the dead seem to hear the echo of its exhortations.
It's why I spasmodically sign up for summoning
circles I can sing along with the so-called sinners
who simply seek to solidify relationships with so-longs and
farewells they were not strong enough to say initially.
I stomp along with the cell dwellers and the ne'er-do-wellers
who swell up in a storm of tears every time the boom
of a baby's heart drops a beat.

So, I siphon what I can of these self-effacing texts
and I discover the histories of heroes, one's attempting to sift through the destruction
left behind by insatiable absolutists;
gathering what they can to put the pieces of prosperity back together again when
in the end, all their hard work is razed by the hard-headers,
who use what was built as their havoc-reeking throne
from which they spit venom into the ears of all the listeners beneath them,
and those who do not elect to educate themselves are evicted
from the venerable sanctity of freedom of speech.
So, I beseech thee, to free yourselves from the grasp of
gawking, greedy half-goblins and highwaymen
and the pious who'd rather bash their books into your brains
than give you the tools to make you feel whole again.
You see, it's why I went on a quest to befriend and genetically manifest
a living, breathing, Tyrannosaurus Rex,
and the ol' King of the Cretaceous-era taught me how to use my teeth
to bite my tongue so that when I am drunk, I do not embarrass my friends
with my inebriated, intoxicated karaoke-hymns
which I dedicate to the whims others threw to the caution in the winds.

But I let them sweep me off my feet to the decisive dystopian-dancefloor
where I settle an old score with Attila the Hun,
whose moves could affect the boom of the approaching war drums,
and while his writhes for the carnage, mine bend backward against it,
like a breakdancer infused with elastic leg extensions.
And not just groovy-moves did I bring to this funky-town battleground
because with verbosity I can elevate empty sound
right off into the atmosphere.
Because novels were used to carve my bones, and screenplays were soaked into my blood,
and in ancient tongues, ancient aliens wrote ancient poems into my chromosomes.
And with words alone I can explode into a microphone:
the eruption of adverbs and adjectives begins to agitate the adjacently indifferent.
And perhaps where their rook meets my queen on the chessboard,
we can agree on a stalemate, and designate a new fate that steers away
from the laws written by dinosaurs.

Because I want to be an entrepreneur of deep-sea creature tours
where I can guide the uncivilized to the bottom of the ocean floor,
and they can only come up for air if they can successfully teach a kraken
how to dress for dinner parties.
'Cause what's the point of pushing off when these punks
pin me to these problematic anchors?
When I can drag my feet perfectly well on my own
with the tact of a tectonic-plate breaking earthquake;
I could use them to cut through the crust and into the Earth's mantle,
to the homes of the lizard people who watch us on the Soap-Opera Channel
but you see, I was taught to see from a village of Cyclops-seers,
to sleep with one eye open because opportunists
seek to strike for riches while the cities snooze,
and it's not their fault when the Earth begins to ooze
hot magma to mummify the environmental mischief-makers
when the tree-hugging, dirt-worshipping caretakers
tried to warn you of the planet's wrath.
It's why I take everything I hear with a grain of salt to season my own wisdom,
thus I am prepared for the zombie apocalypse
and in the chance that Jesus rises!

I stoke my flames with the fodder that is composed of the fallen
and I cleanse myself in the clarifying rivers of the riven grim reaper's robes.
I'll continue to comb the earth for a home where a hermit cannot be harmed,
where the winds wind up rhyme-coated wonderstruck-ribbons
with the rhythm of my own tune,
and no matter the end, I am prolifically prepared for the promise-makers and
the promise-breakers of the impending, unrelenting, unavoidable doom.

So, I'll just continue to follow the sound of the croon
that emits from the void of the Moon Mother's womb.

The Morphology of Forget-Me-Nots and Jellyfish

It is difficult working towards
anything
when time slips me into nothing
when I am working to a cadence that is not my own;
laboring to exhume a glint of a dream self
kindred to some blue flower,
only to watch it
fall below
the shadow of some great leathered boot.
The thought of it makes my heartbeat
skip, skip –

I remember being just a child and I now realize the silence of the night is the origin of my anxiety, and it has carried on into the moments where I am dragging myself half-paralyzed into blooms of rushing, wavering, trailing conversations. The swarm drifts on around me while my legs lock up and their toxin floods through the surface of my skin, rushing towards my chest – a numbing reminder of how each moment is tinted with those hushed nights, blotted on the insides of my eyelids, blemishes caused by the treacherous calm that presents itself whenever my lids snap shut.

– like a disintegrating loop
each time it comes around, a petal is
plucked in the name of an unanswerable wish
the naked pistil
dragged through the gritty dirt
towards the nexus of all endings
where those quiet beginnings
ripple softly;
I dreamed of a sweet hum traveling aimlessly in the night.

I wilted my stem so that I might go unwanted.
I severed my spine so that I might become a jellyfish.
I just wanted to know that my presence wasn't paper-thin.
I just wanted to feel the surf tug my silhouette into the sundown.
Let me know that a light breeze won't wash me from your memory.

Swallowable Amounts

Watching the world from atop
a looming nest thrown together from dead
twigs
and anxiety is not like tying
a ribbon of sunlight tightly
around your finger
as a reminder
that fire only consumes
until it's full.

That's just not true.

It's not as if depression
wades quietly,
patiently for a
seasonable flash to
flood your lungs,
lungs struggling to keep you surface –
level while the ache
of grieving quakes your frame
and all the illustration
of your person
crumbles out
of focus
and dissolves from within.

Briefly you feel retentive;

And do you know what fear is not like?
The moments when you're told
everything is going to be okay
but you know it can't be.
Still, it stills your thumping
heartlong enough for it to return
to pumping your brain full of blood,
allowing you to clearly perceive the
lack of immediate danger. But haze
still rests over
your foresight,
dimming the possibility
of everything being okay.
Still, you collect your worry
into a sizable bottle
so it can be leaked out
drop
by
drop
at a later time
in swallowable amount.

An Observatory of Mystifiers Made Clearer in Transit

Even without sound, my heart does not decompose like the inhabitants of an untended garden; a wish made in the brain is always veiled in fluid and bone, while archivists get lost in the revertie of deep space. But perhaps I am longing for something within my plasticity of reaching. Perhaps the form of stasisness reached while asleep in this idea was found at some point, found in the drift between coloring books and the first signs of amnesia, where I walked the silk road and searched its shoulders for ruinous mushrooms. This knowledge has not crossed plots out on a whim and put them in urban backyards or on a community theater's stage, since solipsism doesn't provide entertainment for those who feel sorrow perform in their stomachs when they stumble upon a decaying cabbage in the back of the fridge. And I prefer stories with round buttons pushed by hands computerized with great affection in Clearfield, Utah (and that's all I want to say about that). These I use like rituals to balance me on the horizon of storytelling, which like sophists and poets, evades both yes and no answers. So, let's mingle in the androgynous grassland where a hidden memory may be made clearer by the perpetual rotation of crops. And as the day and night reel overhead, the whirl of some great ruminatorock will calm the grasshoppers in their tiny hovels – those makers of dreamscapes with bodiless spectrums.

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