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Hal: a romance

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HAL: A ROMANCE

by

JANNA URSCHEL

A Dissertation
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
in Partial Fulfillment of
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

College of Arts and Sciences
Department of English
May 2022
ABSTRACT

*Hal: A Romance* is a multimodal work composed of short stories, meditations, poetry, photography, and essays that together explore the great love affair of Sodium and Chloride that gives us salt. This is an ethical project concerned with expanding the voice and representation of actantcies beyond the human in the craft of writing and in the public imagination. The project intends to be a praxis that plays through a flat ontological orientation, including various strains of New Materialism and Object-Oriented-Ontology, some of the ideas from which are addressed directly in the section “Loving: A Primer.” Individually and collectively, the pieces experiment with voice, structure, and language to attempt a polyvocal, defamiliarizing, and necessarily incomplete, rendering of the chimeric lifeworld of salt as it travels through its metamorphoses chemical, biological, historical, and geological.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many who made this project possible that I'd need another tome again to properly thank them all, so I will limit myself here to those that pop most conspicuously to mind. A hearty thanks to the University at Albany Benevolent Association for funding my photographic work and to the University of Wyoming Jenkins Microscopy Facility, which is funded by UW COBRE Grant #P20GM121310 and INBRE Grant #2P20GM103432, for allowing me use of their electron scanning and light microscopes to get up-close and personal with my subject. A bow of deep gratitude to my Graduate Advisory Committee, Dr. Edward Schwarzschild, Dr. Aashish Kaul, and Dr. Kir Kuiken, who put faith in my odd-ball Odradek of a project and let me follow the wendings of my fancy across its rhizomatic blooming. And an inexpressible debt to my family, human and not, related and not, but especially to Matt, Rowan, and Anaea, who put up with my flights of temper and remove as I boarded my boat of obsession, sailing off through night and day and in and out of weeks and well into the years …

1 And apparently a nod to Maurice Sendak as well!
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A Love Story in Translation

In the Beginning … I² wasn't there. Neither were you, but you seem to think you know an awful lot about it. Of the thousands of stories you've told yourselves over the years, there are two that you've been stuck on lately. One is about violence, then expansion, cooling, and death; the other is about separation, division, naming, and something to do with an apple. Frankly, neither makes much sense to me. Somethings that come from nothings with no room for love.

1 Sodium (Na)’s atomic number is 11: 11 protons, 11 electrons, in valences of 2, 8, and 1, the last of which it tends to want to shed. In any case, “sodium” is a bad name. Sodium, from soda, solidus, solid. But can you call something so dynamic “solid”? Na is natrium, natron, nitre, nitron, nṯrj, “sacred,” back and back in time, when the element was given the powers of gods we no longer believe in. Instead, let’s try 11, a better signifier for a circuit of motions, appetites, needs, abilities, desires, hungers—all of that terrible selfish generosity, the rage to give which is not martyrdom but passion. Not numerology, but number, valence, charge, mutability, connectability, vibrance, vibration, rotation, all of it described by 11. A fundamental imbalance is written there, plainly, one too many, just tipping the scales of the neat decameron of 10, that neat whole round foundation of maths, of money.

2 Our narrator insists: “This is a lie. There is no I. The translation you’re reading is wildly erroneous. You speak my language but can’t put it in a book. You speak it every day when you piss and sweat and eat and think. It’s because of my thickness in you, of you, with you and not with you, that you will understand me so badly. But don’t feel bad. Don’t put down my story. You can’t, anyways: I’m in your hands, holding this paper, in your optic nerve, scanning this page, in the muscle of the brow you just ruched. I am your story. This is your story. I am you—not you. Shall I call you “we”? You-me “we”? Can I be that intimate? Maybe not now, but later. Maybe when you know me better you will accept the accuracy of that translation. English speakers, you would do well to engage in some of that stealing, er, borrowing, you do so well, by checking out the remarkable clusive system of the Samoan people, which allows for duality and plurality in your I, to include or not to include the one to whom you speak:

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3 Same problem.

4 Love, it’s not just for organics. What is a love story if not a story about parts, electricity, and the deceptive stability of wholes? (Plato feels me. If you take nothing else from this story, let it be Aristophanes’ imago of the cartwheeling androgyne from the Symposium.)
yet in my experience there’s nothing but. How can you tell a creation story without love? What on earth else could be the point? I am you, but not you, clearly, because my story, from creation onward, is a love story all the way down.

My romance begins as the best ones do, with heat and pressure, in a roiling soup of Neon, super-heated in the core of a massive star, pressed and pressed and pressed into itself by the ache of an awful gravity, an intense roiling and pressing and rubbing of bodies so extreme that two become one. So Hydrogen and Hydrogen begat Helium, and Helium and Helium begat Carbon and Oxygen, each of us bigger, heavier, begats upon begats, until many billions of years later, I was squeezed into my own being, a new thing in an already old universe, no longer gas, but metal. A years-long labor of the unbearable heat and pressures and spasms that are the death-throes of a star going supernova. Then all of us star-flung at dizzying speed into the tides of infinite expanse, an element born from death and collapse.

We danced and spun and finally cohered, still spinning, cooling in our ecstasy: iron, carbon, titanium, selenium, boron, uranium, hydrogen, helium, and yes, chlorine, and I, and our 92 siblings, hardening into a single shape as relationships always do, ours here a perfect spheroid.

---

5 What else, in the end, is passion?
6 Literally. And you thought mammal sex was intense.
7 It's quite the family tree, but regrettably, so far as we know, done growing branches without a bit of AI. Image used with permission: Sanbdh. “File:14LaAc periodic table lib.jpg.” Wikicommons. 12 December, 2015. https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=45579529
In the earth, I was kept at a boil from pressure alone before being burped up from the dark into light, cooling, slowly hardening, taking form, and here settling, happily, settling, into friendship, bondsmanship, communion, with silicon, aluminum, oxygen, as granite, as feldspar, and a million other things you've since found a use for.

This new we, new community, as rock, moved slowly over the earth that slid beneath us. We sipped nostalgically at the radiation of our origins through the strata upholding us, carrying us, slowly, slowly (so much slower!)

The sun beat and we stretched and we tingled, holding by fingertips instead of palms, wiggling restlessly. It's not that we considered escape, that we wanted to be free of each other, but we held on a touch more loosely in the heat. Through cold we bunched together, we slowed our antsy wriggle, pressed close. Still we were borne all aloft together. So slow, that journey, but so many new experiences: the bite of air, the kiss of water, stealing us from each other—aluminum, silicon, iron, and I—exciting those atoms of our epithelium, teasing them away, now shearing with its meticulous, relentless tongues, licking us into new system, tempting us away from each other.

Did I mention water, in all her liquid grace, all her irresistible suppleness? Oh the allure of that viscous sticky flow over us, that produced in us a vibrant electricity, a labile current! And the speed. The speed! After so long inert, passively borne along in our slow journey, my companions never changing places, at last the joys of motility! In water I danced, become change, become myself, motion and catalyst.

---
8 A form that nevertheless remains in constant motion, just very very slow
9 As in “attaining greater stability”
10 Walls, crockery, toothpaste...
11 Let bonds slacken
12 (the blissful harmony of carbon dioxide and silicon, the irresistible magnetism of oxygen and iron!)
Borne by a raindrop, shorn from my old community, whisked down the full face of the rock, onto the ground (so many new acquaintances!), our drop became replete, nigh on saturated, crowded in with so many other elements, all of us traveling from our first families (or fourth) to new trysts. Our drop joined others and their passengers. Drops became a trickle through the dirt, the grass, became a freshet, became a stream, a river, a sea. And the sea was such a gathering place, brimming with refugees from so many elements, so many torn relationships being re-made as we tumbled over, through, and past one another, grabbing for one another, listening to each other's lonely calls. My excesses and lacks bumped into other excesses and lacks, all of us yearning after nothing but completion, satiation.

And then there was 17.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{13} Who tells it much better …
Potholes

Mr. Anderson frowned out the front window, scanning the street for the boy. The morning sun was quickly compacting the night's snowfall into a dense sludge. It would be slippery. He opened the door to scatter a cupful of rock salt from a bag in his entryway. That should speed it along.

The boy was always late. Mr. Anderson would need to find a new one to shovel his walk. He didn't relish the thought. This one lived down the street, which was convenient, but the mother was a cashier at Walgreens. He might need to pick up his prescriptions from Walmart instead if he let the boy go, which would be difficult without a car. If the mother had raised her boy right, he wouldn't need to be changing pharmacies.

His own boys jumped when he said jump. They respected their parents. His boys both had boys. And a girl. A sweet little girl who liked to sit in his lap and run her inchworm fingers over the sandpaper of his jawline. He snuck her butterscotch candies from a tin on the sideboard when her brothers weren't watching. He liked the boys well enough, with their vigorous rough and tumble through the house spilling out into the yard, as they should, but the little girl had a little bent hook of a smile just like Martha's, so he couldn't help but spoil her.

If they lived close enough, he'd get one of his own boys to do the walk. But they didn't. One had gone to Boston for college and not come back. The other was just upriver in Schuylerville, but he was busy. So busy. Engineering. His son was a kind of engineer. One of those new kinds—lasers and optics and things. It had something to do with computers, he thought. Mr. Anderson was proud of how busy his son was, but it was too far to come just to shovel the walk.
The front steps shuddered in a noisy fit of scraping, but by the time Mr. Anderson had opened the door, the boy was halfway back up the block, everything about him loose—his shoes, his pants, his baggy sweatshirt, the backpack flapping off his rear.

“Gotta get to school, Mr. Anderson!” the boy called, his arm raised in a good-bye, though he'd never bothered to say hello. “You can pay me next time!” The boy trotted around the corner without waiting for an answer.

Pay him next time? See if he'd ever pay him again. It was almost 9 o'clock and he'd meant to be out the door by 8:30. He may be old, but he wasn't one of those vegetables. He had things to do.

Mr. Anderson shrugged into his coat and mashed his hat on his head. The hat was something he'd never much bothered with until his hair had started thinning. His wife insisted. He always grumbled, but put it on to please her. God rest her, it was habit now.

He stepped gingerly onto the top step. He wasn't fragile, but he wasn't convinced the boy had done too good a job, and the last thing he needed was to break something else. The salt had done most of the work in any case, the stairs glittering with saline as it soaked into the shredded wood of exposed planks, dribbling through the cracks between boards, settling into the depressions of nail heads, pooling and curling away in a miniature fog.

Mr. Anderson used his coat sleeve to wipe snow off the handle of the shopping cart he'd stashed against the side of the house. He rocked it out of the slush drifted against the wheels, stripping a thin peel of mauve paint from the siding as he jimmied it loose. The mauve was Martha's idea. It had been white when they'd first bought the house, crisp and clean, back when the neighborhood was still growing, a spur pushing up from downtown into North Greenbush.
He was so proud of it then. He'd carried Martha over the threshold in the old way. She'd cooed over the new Frigidaire and the skyline of the gothic D&H Railroad building and classical Capitol building across the River shouldered by a big bald patch where the old tenements had been. Something new had been going up, something modern, the chicken scratch of scaffolds for a grand Empire Plaza and the powerhouses of state government. They'd been caught up in the excitement of it all. It was the era of Dupont and Kodak and GE, of tupperware and celluloid. Better living through Chemistry.

But the new had long worn down, white buried under strata of yellow, gray, and mauve.

Mr. Anderson pushed his cart out to the sidewalk and looked back at the empty house. Paint was flaking off the cornices and windowsills, opening the graying wood to termites and mold. He'd been putting off giving the house a fresh coat, but it was time. Maybe a nice green. He would mention it to his son.

One wonky wheel made the cart skitter apoplectically, catching frequently in a sidewalk made more of ruts and crags than concrete. Something seemed to be trying to push through, but from above or below? Was it the ground reclaiming its territory or something in a rush to get to ground?

Mr. Anderson had a car, a perfectly functional 1982 Buick that he kept in mint condition —only 89,000 miles on it—but the city had broken it. Parked cars on the right, city bus bearing down on the left, no way to avoid the pothole on the narrow street, and ka-chunk, the old Buick had dipped down to the right and not come back up. Snapped the axle right in half. Twelve inches. He'd measured. The monster was a full twelve inches deep. His tax dollars at work.
He'd sent the city the bill for a new axle in the mail, but he hadn't heard back yet. Bureaucracy. If he didn't hear back next week, he'd march right down to Town Hall with the busted axle and slap it down, grease and rust and all, on their nice shiny conference table. Exhibit A, he'd say. This is what your goddamn streets did to my car.

Mr. Anderson headed down Third, then took a right on Partition. The snowplow ground past over the crest of the hill, slinging dense mashed potato slush out of the right lane onto the sidewalk. He cursed as grizzled snow-melt sloshed across his path, soaking his shoes. A fan of salt crystals from the hopper on the back of the truck spat against his legs. The little blue freckles ate at the snow until it coursed in streams down the sidewalk, down the road, all of it down to the river, dirt and oil and salt and all. Once Mr. Anderson had fished the Hudson, but everything he knew how to fish for had gone, replaced by new, salt-tolerant species for the new, brackish water. He didn't know what bait and tackle he'd need now.

When Mr. Anderson reached Main, cars passed in hissing arcs of brown spray thrown up from their tires—busy, all of them busy. The spray spattered his pants, the right sleeve of his good winter jacket, and exposed right hand on the handle of the cart. The cold soaked in. He could feel his soles pickling in the wet weave of his socks. The snowmelt would leave tell-tale stiff white rings in his clothes. Dry-cleaning. One more bill he could send to the city.

By the time he reached Aldi, the cuffs of his pants had grown heavy with snowmelt, which joined the graying snail-slime trails of other shoppers as he made his way down the aisles.

The produce was bad this time of year. This was something his wife would have taken care of. She always managed a good meal regardless of what Aldi had on offer. She could have
insisted Mr. Anderson drive her down to Price Chopper in the next town over, which had better selection, but she never did. They made do.

These days he bought according to weight. Lettuce was light, even if wilted. Carrots were heavy. Powdered mashed potatoes were light. Soup cans heavy. He had fifteen blocks to walk back with a bum-wheeled cart and arms that ached from navigating the minefield of fissures and escarpments of the city sidewalks. He'd learned the hard way that if he overloaded the cart, he wouldn't make it back up the steep grade of Partition Street, especially slippery as it was in the aftermath of the storm.

He brought his cart to a halt in front of the packaged meals. His hand hovered in indecision between a Dinty Moore pot roast and a box of Rice-A-Roni. Martha would have wanted him to get the rice. Fewer strange additives and preservatives that would gum up your system and kill you. And maybe she was right. But she wasn't here now. Something had killed her anyways. She was planted up in Greenwood. Preserved. Mr. Anderson would have preferred cremation. He didn't want to think about what the ground would do to her. But it was right there in the will: open casket. So they pumped her full of that stuff. She'd looked just like she was sleeping. Unnatural. And now she was lying up there looking like that, slowly leaching embalming fluid into the soil, into the ground water, all of it making its way down to the River. This is why no one fishes the Hudson any more.

He hadn't been to see her since the car broke down. It was too far to walk and there was no shoulder on that stretch of Third. They'd raised the speed limit, too. 45. But cars whizzed past doing 55. The cemetery is all there was between Doane Stuart School and Walmart. Nothing to slow down for.
Mr. Anderson grabbed the pot roast. He pulled into the checkout lane behind a young woman who looked barely old enough to be the mother of the sticky child in the basket. There was always a sticky child. This one was an infant, squat like a dollop of pudding. It focused its big wide eyes on him unblinkingly. Its round little mouth hung open, a gnawed-on biscuit suspended in its drool-slicked fist.

The woman was unloading her groceries: cases of Diet Pepsi, cheese puffs, frozen wings. The blob of baby stuffed its whole fist with the biscuit into its mouth, the slick of drool running down its arm now.

Mr. Anderson suddenly thought better of the Dinty Moore. He wanted to put it back and get the rice, as Martha wanted, but an officious looking woman in a tight navy skirt suit pulled up behind him in line, boxing him in. There was only the one cashier and he didn't want to lose his spot in line.

The cashier rang Mr. Anderson up quickly.

“Just press the green button,” the cashier said automatically, and then added, “oh,” as he saw Mr. Anderson fumbling for the nonexistent pen at the end of the metal tether in order to write a check. The woman behind him exhaled sharply. Mr. Anderson ground his teeth. Other people could trust their pieces of plastic all they wanted; Mr. Anderson didn't make it to a comfortable retirement by using fake money.

Mr. Anderson was out of breath by the time he got home. His arms and back ached from the strain of keeping the cart moving straight forward when it wanted so badly to jitter off into yards and gutters. Maybe his son the engineer could fix it. He paused before opening his
mailbox. Usually, it was just bills and junk mail. Martha was the letter-writer. There was a letter from the city. Three lines.

Dear Mr. Anderson,

We were sorry to hear about your trouble with the road surface on First Street. Unfortunately, this is just a product of the way inclement weather in the Northeast affects our roads. Per statute 45.167e, the city is unable to reimburse you for repairs to your personal vehicle. However, you can be assured that the location of the road damage has been noted based on the photographs you provided, and every effort will be made to resurface that location promptly, weather allowing.

Sincerely, etc.

Inclement weather? Snow on its own doesn't make foot-deep holes! Salt—it's the salt that eats away at everything. Salt for the pansies up from New York City who come through in droves from the train station, for whom the town was nothing but a pass-through, a place to get out of as quickly as possible and over the River to the fancy new Empire buildings where they keep busy using his taxes for anything other than helping him. Salt that ate away at his thirty-year old car, gnawing at solid steel until it was nothing but a handful of rusted flakes.

Mr. Anderson jostled the cart into place against the peeling mauve siding of the house and took his groceries inside. He left them on the kitchen table with the letter and went to his favorite chair in the living room. His knees smarted and throbbed as he eased into it.

It was every bit as comfortable as it had been that first day. Maybe more so now that it retained the image of his body even when he wasn't sitting in it. They hadn't been able to afford nice furniture right away. The chair had been a present to himself from his first bonus at RCA.
Worth every penny, too, the way it had held up over the years. Perhaps a little threadbare at the arms and seat, but Martha had thrown a nice blanket with red flowers over it.

He looked over the River, past the maze of chain link of his neighbors' yards and the anemic white strings from their vent pipes. It was quiet except for a radio playing something in a language he didn't understand. Some of that rap, maybe. He liked quiet, but he remembered when the house creaked and thumped under his boys' heavy feet and Martha would chide shrilly to for heaven's sake mind the floorboards and walk like civilized people. They had grown civilized, and that had made them busy and the house very quiet. He was very very proud of them. He and Martha had done okay. It wasn't their fault things had gone like they had—the boys moving away, the town going to pot. They'd worked hard, together, each in their own way.

Abruptly, he rose, put on his coat, mashed his hat on his head, and picked up a pot of geraniums from the sideboard. They were Martha's favorites, a happy, bold shade of red. The steps were dry now, a few hardy crystals of rock salt winking where they'd wedged between the boards. He put the pot in the cart and pushed out. Snow or no snow, it had been too long since he'd brought his wife flowers.

It was nightfall when he reached the cemetery and placed the pot with his wife's now chill-wilted prized geraniums on her grave.

“Fool,” she thought. And here she was a blade of grass, and here a beetle, here again a bird, and who knows, a fish?

She reached out through her many eyes, her many senses, all that she was now a part of. She'd been so before, but that central nervous system had been tricksy. It got in the way of being
everything she saw now that she was.

    The blade of grass was pressed to the earth under its blanket of snow, compacted under
    Mr. Anderson's shoe.

    “Watch it,” she said, “you fool,” because she couldn't say it enough.

    She was flying over the river, enjoying the currents, hoping for a snack.
Potholes 1.5

Dug from the earth, subterranean hillock upon hillock, whole carved catedralic cities, dug and bagged and shipped and thrown from a bag, from a hopper, over the shoulder...

Salt crystals meet ice crystals.

Both rip at each other, hydrogen pulling at sodium, oxide at chloride, until they become something new all together. Their meeting a burst of energy that shatters both crystals and sends this new assemblage, labile and sinuous, running the way gravity tells it: down, find low ground, lowest ground.

Saline soaks into the shredded wood of exposed planks, dribbles through the cracks between boards, settles into the depressions of nail heads, leaches into the embattled grass, pools and basks in the sun, warming excitedly.

In the baking heat of the morning sun, the water retreats, down down into the soil, through pores in the concrete. And up up, drawn into the air, water molecules stirred up and loosed from each other. Gone hydrogen. Gone oxygen.

Leaving sodium and chloride ions to each other—join or combust. Each has what the other needs, so, they join again,

hardening into their quadratic fractals, pushing out with their bristling cubes, from inside the soil, inside the concrete, inside the wood, pushing out with the strength of their bonds, so that soil and concrete and wood must give way to the pressure of their blooming.
Under

Dad shook me gently by the shoulder to wake me long before my alarm was set to go off. He was wearing a suit I'd only seen once before in his wedding photo. He held out my good Sunday dress, the one I hadn't worn since mom left: white glitter top, black swishy skirt, a wide black satin ribbon around the waist. I'd begged for that dress, even though I knew it cost too much. Mom never gave in, but she did then, maybe because she knew what was coming. The dress was too small now—the sleeves pinched my arms and the skirt rode up on my thighs—but I put it on anyways. We tiptoed past Grandma's door and Uncle Josh snoring on the couch. I'd grabbed my backpack for school, but Dad silently slid it off my shoulder and left it by the front door.

The door opened. A thin thread of night spooled its way inside, eddying to suck out a portion of warm, carbon-dioxide-rich exhalations. The door clicked shut, the slow snick of the deadbolt into its housing—metal against wood, a minute friction, a minute heat, the house settling back into place over the closed door, so much old wood holding up so much more old wood, pushing back each on the other, compensating this one for that for the termites and the mold kept at bay by the occasional coat of paint and pesticides. The house persisted over the long years, a silent testimony to the Great Migration sinking ever so slowly into its plot of mud and grass. It had already outlasted three generations of occupants, and was on its way to outlasting a fourth.

Dad clenched my hand in his as we hoofed it the fifteen blocks to the bus stop at Fort and
Downing in the dark. There was nothing mean in his grip, but it was like his body was a rubberband stretched almost to breaking, and I didn't know what would make it snap, so I jogged beside him best I could to match his long strides. A briefcase swung briskly in his other hand, keeping even time like the metronome grandma held onto though the piano was long gone.

A dog ran out to the end of a long rope tied to a front porch when it saw two people approaching quickly from the south. The dog barked a warning. The people kept passing, so the dog kept barking, but they were moving fast, almost running, and if there was running, there were sure to be sirens. Running meant sirens, and thinking of a siren, that high, clear yawp, made the dog open its throat to answer—a claxon rung down the block, across the neighborhood, and into the city, passed from dog throat to dog throat, a warning become a song, a simple, high, clear “I am here!”

She was aching for breath and coughing when we slid into the hard orange bus seats. I hadn't meant to make her run. Hadn't meant to hurt her. But we had to get there on time or we'd forfeit the tickets. I was out of practice with my tie this morning. It had to look good. But I'd made us late, and she was paying for it.

“I'm sorry, baby,” I said, making circles on her back with my knuckles. “You okay?”

I wasn't sure if I was okay. I wasn't sure what this was about: the fancy clothes, the briefcase, the early morning trek through the neighborhood. I opened my mouth to ask him what we were doing, but I could tell by the way his long legs and arms were jack-knifed into the bus
seat, the way that he was all hard edges and his eyes looked so far away, that asking wasn't a good idea, so I popped my mouth closed again and looked out the window at the city passing in the dark, the skyline a jagged waveform rising to a peak then falling away again into nothing.

The city had begun as nothing, a literal hole in the ground. A hole into which flowed a sea. A sea trapped by a ring of reefs. A sea that separated from itself—upwardly mobile water molecules, heavy salts that stayed because they had no means of leaving. Salts that were buried under sheet after sheet of redistributed land masses—bits of dust and sand that blew in, rolled in, from elsewhere, glommed together, gained mass, and buried the old salts. But those salts wouldn't stay put either. No trap could hold them. Water found its way down, and found its way back up again, now pregnant with salt, as saline. And where there was saline there was life to lap it up, where life, death, where death, trade, where trade, settlement, where settlement, profit, where profit, expansion, where expansion, overreach, where overreach, collapse. The city wore its history like so many garments, the eras it had stepped out of in tatters and decaying, from the edges, from the center. Evidence, too, of interventions in its death throes, of new buildings sprouting like mushrooms from the detritus of the old ones, of buildings half started and aborted; thoughts, ideas, dreams, all of it mulch to the seed growing in its belly, the city under the city.

We changed buses three times, and each time it grew lighter, not because the sun was coming up yet, but because as we got closer and closer to downtown there were more and more working streetlamps. Downtown it was practically daytime. We were following a familiar route, one I knew from our annual school field trip to the Salt Museum. It was one of the few places
left the school could go. But every year, what we looked forward to wasn't the museum, which would maybe add a sign or update the diorama to include a new chain store or squash court. No, what we held our breath in anticipation over was the metro downtown sliding past us on the bus ride: the manicured swaths of the parks, the opaque-windowed towers that redoubled the city in dark reflection, the sidewalks peopled by characters who'd power-walked out of our textbooks and junk mail catalogs. This was our diorama: life-sized, plastic, impossible. We were kids on a safari pointing gape-mouthed at stiff white men in suits like so many exotic animals in an alien habitat disappearing into the cover of the Starbucks on every corner. We marveled at the intact windows, the sheer number of streetlamps, the city buses segmented like over-sized caterpillars out of Alice in Wonderland, things that had become rare in our world ringing the metro.

Air was sucked in, dosed with fuel, shunted to small steel chambers with a waiting spark, that, when it tasted oxygen and hydrocarbons, hurled itself outward, expanding past available space to send the chamber floor, the piston head, launching downwards, where the force became motion, circular motion driving the axles forward as the waste carbons and nitrogen oxide were evacuated through the tail pipe, where they lingered, and were blown, and joined waste carbons from the ship yard and the gas refinery and the steel plant. Where they entered tree stoma and grass stoma and tomato plant stoma, and lung stoma. Where they were stored, and built up, and got ready to be used again in some other inferno.

The man didn't see the bus, didn't note it, had no need. He had a car, had never ridden a bus. He saw only the morning's analytics and his next appointment time. There was no girl.
There was no father.

When we were younger, we'd punch all the buttons on the diorama of the mines, so that the same lady talked over herself saying things about the miles and miles of roads, the concert bandstand carved from halite by hand, the year the NBA held a playoff game on one of the six basketball courts when the Pistons made it to the finals. Dubbed over herself twenty times, the voice-over lady became a flock of birds. We could no longer hear our teachers, hear each other, hear ourselves.

When we'd first seen that diorama, we thought they were messing with us. It made us nervous thinking about those massive caverns down there. Even after they explained about the columns they left between rooms, forming a well-balanced checkerboard of solid and space, it still defied what we thought we understood about physics: heavy stuff falls down.

Sometimes there'd be guests coming or going from the Detroit Halotherapy Complex during our field trip; nobody calls it that, though, we just call it the Under. The Shaft Two elevator entrance was in the museum's lobby. But they don't call it the Shaft Two elevator because none of the guests are supposed to know there's a Shaft One that the miners use because they're still blasting open caverns underneath the DHC to use for road salt. But it goes even lower than that because under the salt is gas and oil. All of topside is basically just there to get to the Under so they can empty it out. They call the elevator the “Ferry.” Dad calls the elevators “cages.” That's miner speak, because he works there.

Every morning, dad tells the same joke, “Well, I'm off to the salt mines!” It was never funny, and we never laugh, but he says it every day anyways. I guess salt mines used to be a bad
thing, but here, the mine means money, and we're lucky dad has a job there, so when we're in the museum, I feel kind of proud, like they're my mines, too.

In the museum, we kids would hang on the blue velvet ropes studying the guests while they waited for the Ferry to come up from way underground. It says in the simulator video that 1,100 feet is almost as deep as the Empire State Building is tall. But that doesn't mean much to me except that these people have to wait ten or fifteen minutes while we dissect them in audible whispers. Last time, we snickered about being able to see the XOXO pattern on this lady's panties through her yoga pants. Her boyfriend kept checking his rolex (we didn't know for a fact that it was a rolex, but we figured if he can afford the elevator ride and the casino and the wine, he's gotta have a rolex). They never look at us. We know they know we're here, because they look everywhere around the room while they wait, or at their shoes or their rolexes, but never at us. You have to know something is there to do that good a job ignoring it. I know because it's how dad beats me at I Spy every time. He says he watches my eyes and can tell when I've skipped over something.

When I was younger, I used to try to convince the museum people to let me in the real elevator, instead of just the simulator, to go see my dad, but they didn't believe me, I guess, because I didn't look like any of the people who got on that elevator. Maybe next time I'd bring a rolex. The Ferry is just for guests anyways. Dad rides Shaft One to get to work, which is way over past our side of the city in Boynton, that's just how big the mine is. One of the sign boards says there's a hundred miles of roads down there. He's not allowed to bring me with him to work because of the papers he signed with the union. If I got hurt, that would be the end of them, I guess, and dad needs the job because there's nothing for him to do up top.
In walked this big black guy and a little girl. They were all dressed up and trying to impress, but trying way too hard. Something just seemed off. They weren't the usual sort we get traveling Under.

“How may I help you, sir?” It's important to “sir” and “ma'am” no matter who they are. He didn't say a word, just flashed two tickets. A little too quick, a little too abrupt. I stepped back a pace. He seemed real tense, real wound-up. And he was a big guy. I glanced at the little girl in her too-small dress. There were red bands on her arms where the sleeves were pinching and beads of sweat along her hairline. I followed protocol.

“And what's your name, sweetie?”

She looked to the black guy, as though she didn't have the answer, but he might. He just nodded.

“Angel,” she said.

“Going Under with your dad?”

She nodded and looked away.

I've worked the Ferry for two years, and I know our usual clientele. These two weren't it. I'll grant you we sometimes get the desperados, the down-on-their-lucks throwing in their last penny, trying for a miracle, but there was something fishy here. Maybe an abduction or maybe they'd stolen the tickets. I didn't know. I turned the tickets over carefully, ran my fingers along them, held them to the light. They seemed genuine enough.

Best suit be damned. I could be wearing pure Ralph Lauren and she'd still think I'd stolen
the tickets. It was the face, that was all.

“If you could set your briefcase on the table here, we just need to do a standard security check.”

“You didn't check that man's,” I said, indicating a balding white man in a polo and khakis waiting with his wife by the Ferry doors.

“Mr. Tallis is a regular visitor,” she said.

“Or that lady's purse,” I said, indicating an older woman in an oversized sweater. I couldn't keep the anger out of my voice or out of my hand tightening on the briefcase handle, but I tried to keep it off of my face. Once it reached your face, you were a goner. For Angel, for Angel I'd cleaned out the rainy day money because this was a rainy day. For Angel, I would suck up to the white lady, but I couldn't open the briefcase. It wasn't criminal what I was doing, but the company wouldn't be pleased. I couldn't afford to go all the way back up to the surface and across town to take Shaft One to work. It was either be late to work or manipulate a grey area to get there from the DHC. There was a long line of guys waiting to take my job if I slipped up, no matter how minor. The wadded up coveralls in the briefcase would have been a dead give-away.

Angel slipped her hand into mine. “Can we go now, daddy?” she asked up at me.

I raised my eyebrows at the lady. She scowled, turned red, plastered on a smile, and waved us through.

The black man and the little black girl were the last ones on. There wasn't much room. I sucked in my breath and backed into the corner of the elevator. We were about to plunge a thousand feet into the ground; I'm allowed to suck in my breath. He glared at me anyways. I
swear he glared at me. I pressed into Robert next to me. I don't like to be close to people I don't know. You'd think they'd put seats in so everyone could have their own space comfortably. I've complained about it before, but clearly they're not listening. This is supposed to be a nice vacation. It puts me in a mood if I start the trip trapped at someone's armpit with their body odor. Seven people is too many for this elevator, and that man is big. Huge. I wouldn't be surprised if we were over the weight limit. It's a safety concern. Fewer people. They need to take fewer people.

I'd been watching the real scale replica of the diorama elevator and riding the simulator in the museum for the last five years now, but it didn't prepare me for the real thing. When the elevator's motor engaged, you really felt like you were going down. The simulator was just a box that sat on the floor. But when the voice-over in the real Ferry talked about the millions of tons of sedimentary rock pressing in from all sides and projected the strata on the white walls as we descended into it, I could feel that cool, damp weight all around us. Dad was used to it. He stood squared and solid, his hands on my shoulders, his face and eyes carefully neutral. I wanted to ask him what was going on, but I didn't want the other people to think we weren't supposed to be there. The only days he took off were Sundays, we hadn't gone on vacation in ages, and the mines seemed like the last place he'd want to go in his spare time.

Warm bodies enter, their heat radiating, magnifying, pushing air molecule from air molecule, an outward pressure. A button is pushed, electricity flares and courses with a tingling buzz to the motor, which shudders into action, drawing cables over and through, wheels
grinding, a shuddering rub that heats the motor, the cables, the surrounding rock. The cage descends, its shudder joining the trembling of water in pipes flowing downward, of pressurized oxygen purring downward, of excrement, carbon dioxide, ore, shunted up through sweating, juddering bleeders. Wave upon wave, ripples setting the rock beside, above, below, to shiver, wave upon wave, through the orogenous epithelium of earth, every movement a vibration, every sound a vibration, heat a vibration, all of it setting the sediment to quiver, to ring, minutely, however minutely, through the broad tectonic plane.

The projection showed that we'd passed the early Jurassic and were headed into the Triassic, but unlike in the simulator, now I really felt like I was going back in time as the projection played out the occasional fossil encased in the rock. We'd left the dinosaurs behind. Now we just had a smattering of trilobites. Soon, life would be too insignificant to see at all.

Part of me wanted to see the real thing outside the elevator doors, those layers on layers on layers of rock, but a bigger part of me was glad not to. The projector made us seem a little bigger than we were, and the whole thing a little unreal, which was a comfort somehow, even with my dad's strong hands anchoring me in place against his chest and belly. Thinking about it made my chest tighten, which made me cough.

Angel tucked herself into me, her face tensing around the letter O as her lungs strained. “Breathe, kiddo,” I purred into her hair. “Just breathe, we're almost there.” But the salt was still three minutes down, in the middle of the Paleozoic, an old sea that had long since been cut off, dried up, buried under layer on layer of sediment, and dragged halfway across the world as the
tectonic plates rearranged themselves when Pangaea broke up. Two hundred years of blasting it out and still going. It was one helluva big sea. And every day I wore it out on my coveralls, on my skin, in my hair. A bit of the Silurian. But at least it was just salt. Lucky not to be oil, coal, platinum, even if those guys did get paid a premium.

Whatever her ailment, and let's face it, we all have ailments or else we wouldn't be headed Under, I hoped it wasn't contagious as she hacked away into her father's stomach. My infirmity gave no outward, visible signs. Since it wasn't contagious in the usual sense—no cough, no sniffles, no skin lesions or rash—it was easy to deny it existed; certainly Bill did. If it hadn't been for his sinusitis, we wouldn't have come. But I felt those things on the inside, cankerous and wrong. I couldn't remember what it was like not to act. This was supposed to look like a vacation; I was supposed to smile. I kept trying, but mostly I was looking forward to disappearing underground, to finding a nook in the dark where I could let the mask drop for a few blessed moments, where I could let my angers, disappointments, fears, and despairs howl unchecked.

1,100 feet, I could see now, was a really long way. The Empire State Building must be really, really tall. I wished I could be going up instead of down. Towards the sky instead of away. Even without seeing all that rock surrounding us, it was like I could still feel it.

“In case you ever wondered how Orpheus felt,” my dad said. It was a joke to lighten the tension of seven strangers stuck together in a small box, but nobody laughed. I didn't get it either, but it sounded like the kind of thing they should have gotten. Maybe traveling into the deep, deep
underground was getting to them, too. Maybe they worried when the voice-over told them the shaft was over 100 years old, or about the grating clanking sound the motor and pulleys were making, not quite masked by the tinny music and anodyne voice-over, or if they would ever find their way back out. Maybe they started to wonder if their hundred dollars was worth it.

The projector switched to ads. Thank God. I was done with school sixty years ago, I didn't need the whole history lesson. I had an appointment for a salt scrub facial and my purse dug into my shoulder from the weight of rolls of quarters for slots. I could see myself sitting in that jacuzzi, eating at that steak place, strolling under that chandelier made, apparently, of salt crystals. I could see myself that happy. Everybody looked happy. The man playing roulette, the lady eating sushi, the kids bowling. There was something for everyone. Frank would have loved it. A cruise without the seasickness.

People went Under to get happy. The voice-over even said they were happy. Negative ions in the air from the salt were easing symptoms of depression and anxiety. Just breathing down there was curing people of bronchitis, sinus infections, smoker's cough, psoriasis, excema, arthritis, cystic fibrosis, and asthma.

And there it was. All of a sudden I got why dad had wrenched me out of bed before dawn and probably emptied his savings to pay the Ferry. All this was for me. For my asthma. It had been bad since I was a baby. I'd had a note getting me out of P.E. since kindergarten. But it was getting worse each year. Walking up stairs, even worrying too much about my homework, made
me feel like a giant hand was squeezing my chest. I'd go ashy, then purple in the face, my mouth opening and closing like a fish washed up on shore, hoping some small sip of air would get through. The doctor said inhalers weren't cutting it anymore and I was at risk for osteoporosis from overdoing the steroids in them. I needed “more aggressive treatment.” I could almost see the lightbulb going off in dad's head. He'd been listening to the same ads day after day. He worked in a salt mine and damned if he wasn't going to try anything to cure his baby. That's me.

I wasn't sure about the science of it. “Negative ions” sounded like a bad thing. But all these people came here and all of them looked happy, so there had to be something to it. I just wasn't sure that something was worth my dad's job. Grandma and Uncle Josh depended on him, too. My belly tightened around the thought of grandma curled up like the homeless people under the porch of the house next door where Missy and Harry used to live. Then my chest tightened around the guilt that it would be because of me. I started wheezing. Dad folded me in, rubbing my back. I was glad, because I was crying a little, too, and I didn't want the others staring at me. I liked pretending we were somebodies in our fancy clothes who could raise their voices at white people when they did stuff wrong. Dad worked hard, put food on the table, and paid for grandma's medicines and her new hip. We deserved to be here.

When I stepped out, I felt at once at peace and queasy. The walls glowed. The whole cavern glowed with a soft, warm light. I knew from the ads that they'd embedded the lighting system into the salt walls, but there wasn't anything mechanical about it. It felt like nothing so much as stepping out into a giant stomach, the internal organ of some huge slumbering beast.
The air was like nothing I'd ever breathed topside. It was crisp and tangy in a way that made me suck air through my nose over and over to try to place it. I'd never been to the ocean, but I didn't think it would smell like, feel like, this. It was lively, but there was no life in it, just salt. I filled my lungs with it over and over. Dad smiled down at me. I smiled back.

Footsteps and voices bounced and skuddled off the polished surfaces of the walls and floors, but the echoes were muffled as people seemed to walk more softly, talk in hushed breaths.

The people milling around the cavern walked slowly, breathing the way I was, deeply and deliberately. They looked stoned, with their half-shuttered lids and easy smiles. Nobody hurried. It was another country down here. Even though dad smiled at me, too, he wore his tension ironed into hard lines, like his suit.

That had been the easy part. Now was the hard part. I walked her to the food court.

“Hey kiddo, I've got to head to work. No rest for the wicked, eh?” I patted my briefcase with my coveralls bunched up inside. She didn't laugh. I didn't expect her to. I pressed a twenty into her palm. “I know we didn't get much for breakfast, so buy yourself a Cinnabon or something, okay?”

She looked like I'd stolen her breath, like she was about to collapse coughing again. She was eleven. It was a bad idea to leave her alone, but I couldn't think what else to do. Her asthma was getting worse every day. If her mother had stayed... but, nevermind.

“Just hang out here today, okay? Breathe the air, have fun. Get better. I'll be back for you.”
And then he left. He walked away. I was keen on my independence, but this just seemed irresponsible. I took a deep breath in. I imagined all the little salt particles and negative ions scouring away at my lungs, making them new and shiny. My stomach gurgled as I inhaled the warm saccharin smell of Cinnabon.

I sat and ate my roll. Then I bought another. And an Orange Julius. Then I got bored. I knew the layout of the mines by heart from the diorama up in the museum. I made my way to the arcade, where I played Alien Cruxade, then Shugar Heaven. But it was no fun by myself. I missed my dad. I missed my friends. I felt invisible. For the first time, I could breathe. I felt I could run for hours, but there was no one to share it with.

I ran out of quarters after the fourth round of BustUrMove, so I headed back out into the promenade. With the perpetual cozy glow of the walls, I couldn't tell what time it was. My stomach complained; I hadn't eaten since the rolls that morning. I hoped dad was off shift so we could have some dinner. I ambled along the store fronts on the way back to the food court: Nike, Victoria's Secret, Bath and Body Works; the only difference between the Under and a mall topside was that I hadn't coughed once since I'd been down here and my skin felt tight.

Pressure had been building for some time, a steady push from the east, the mid-Atlantic ridge shoving new rock against the North American plate on a tide of magma. Sediment had been easing along under that slow push, salt gave more easily, moved a little more quickly under it. That fluid layer moved out of joint with its cousins over, under.

I had been reading the Halo Beautiful spa menu, wondering what saltimetry was,
sneaking peeks at the space-like weightless chairs inside, when there was a shiver through the walls and it went dark. Suddenly. Dark. Not dark, black. Real, true, absence of light black. Gasps. A scream. Then a moment of collective silence, followed by panicked whispers building to murmurs and a bit of sobbing. There was nothing to see. Nothing. Not a scrap of ambient light a thousand feet underground. Nobody moved, like me, no doubt waiting for their eyes to adjust, but there was nothing to adjust to. A moment of waiting even so, for whatever switch had been flipped to be switched back on. Then, shuffling and bumping, echoes finding the walls and making their way back to their owners, as if even sound didn't know which way to go. In a patchwork of blue spotlights from cell phones, people began to congregate in small clumps.

Voices called, real people voices, because despite the cell phones, there was no service. Relieved voices found each other, anxious voices kept calling at increasing decibels. Angry voices demanded action, demanded a manager, demanded accountability. Nervous voices tentatively dabbed at the future. The food court and central rotunda were filling with flocks of entangled voices as people left the cloying dark of the buildings for the more expansive dark of the greater cave, but they were just as underground as they were before.

A few little inches, but it was a tension relieved, just a little, a tension of millennia of rock pressing against rock released minutely through the slip-strike of salt lamina. The shiverings of pipes quieted, the vibrations of electrical current and pressurized gasses and liquids stilled. Pushed just those few inches out of alignment, lines severed. Blessed relief. Blessed release, even as the pressure continued to build towards its next release millennia down.
One by one, the glowing halos of light winked out as cell batteries died successively. Each of us went dark by turns, plunged with a gasp into a hush that was part reverence of forces in whose power we were, and part primal terror. One by one, leaving the silent dark of our cell-side huddles, we converged on the Ferry shaft. The elevator car must have been down on one of the lower levels because you could see, staring up that shaft, far far above, a pinprick of light, a star, that was the top of the shaft, up in the museum. Shoulder to shoulder to shoulder, we made a circle, staring up at that spot of light, our polestar topside. We reached for the hands next to us, one maybe large, knobbed, dry. A middle aged man or an old woman. The other maybe slender, tough and cool. A little girl, maybe, or a teenaged boy. In the dark there was no telling because cave dark is real dark, absolute dark, the darkest dark there is. We breathed and we waited. For the emergency generators to switch on, the short to be repaired, help to come.

Without light, there was no time. A heartbeat could last a second or a minute or a year. We could be growing older or younger. Maybe one day we would evolve—we'd be bleached and blind, endlessly trolling these caverns for scraps, for contact, for each other. Cured of our bronchitis, our asthma, our sinusitis; free from all our anxieties; we would grow strong. Here under, we would be gods.
| CaCO₃ + H₂SO₄ + H₂O → CaSO₄·2H₂O + CO₂ | Calcium carbonate combined with sulfur dioxide reacts with water to produce gypsum | Air pollution reacts with building materials to form efflorescence | Capillary Action, a translation |
Those captains of industry were so proud of their edifice, their monument to their monumental dreams of wealth. Their sphinx. And just like that pharaoh's folly, from the day the first stone was set on the infilled ground, the whole limestone weight of it set about exploding, minutely, from the inside.

The great river has never rested easily in its banks. The river is a veined thing, slow and cocksure in its power, bloating out on all sides, spreading itself moistly into loamy soil and fissured bedrock, feeding itself from capillaries that pass under corn fields, through wastewater treatment plants and across ancient sea beds, now buried shifting deserts of salt. All of this running glacially beneath highways and banks and the xeroxed clapboard boxes of townhouse complexes, the occasional church. All of this a siren song to dry and empty spaces. Thirsty stones laid one on one on one according to a neat gothic geometry.

The building has been planned. It has been drawn in fine white chalk at precise angles on thick blue paper. Here will be the grand entry staircase, with its capstone urns, its solid carved banisters. Here will be the cavernous, catedralic lobby, with its marble tiles, its gleaming teak reception desk, its pillars in the Doric style, its rosette windows and glass-petaled dome. Here a corridor, its slanting copper roof, its rows of gabled windows. Here a shaft, emboweled with pulleys and cables and the steel cage of an elevator box. Criss-crossing trusses of pine struts demark the offices of clerks and managers and deputy executives, vice executives, and executives. The rooms and corridors and lobby will be full of the clatter of typewriter keys, the amiable chortles of men exerting their wills one over the other in pursuit of the best deal.

The railroad is a busy, growing thing. It requires the captains of industry to build it this monument, this hive for plotting its expansion. “Headquarters” seems an inadequate designation. It will be a hive, a buzzing, throbbing hub, a Colosseum of twentieth century industry.

They started their work, and the stones and the river started theirs.

Thirsty stones doing what thirst commands them to do, to drink long and deep from the moist body of the river-bloated soil, with its infusion of salts, minerals, tetrafluorocarbons. Thirsty stones drawing into their fissures, their pores, this brew. But nimble water will not be trapped, will not be kept. Even as it spirits itself away, its passengers are trapped, assume again their most stable, most comfortable form. Drawn up into the pores, each small open place in the stone blocks, each nook, each hidey hole a cache, a powder keg, a nursery for explosion into solidity. Ions kept labile in solution join, crystallize, lock angles, push open space. In each saturated pore, separated lovers join and bristle and push outwards against their confinement. Rock, too, has nowhere to go but out, so out it goes, in flakes and chips under the white whorls of stone-borne efflorescence.

The D&H Railroad Building was completed in 1918. While the railroad went belly-up in 1972, the building has housed a newspaper, the state department of transportation, and, most recently, administrative offices for the university system.

Photo used with permission. “How Did Water Damage This Brick Building?” March 30, 2010. https://www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/article/how-did-water-damage-this-brick-basement
One wrinkly Naiad after another washed up to shore, crisp and leathery. At first, people mistook them for fish, dried-up fish. But even after they knew better, they figured, why not? Seafood is seafood

No one even knew there were Naiads in the Hudson until they started dying.

“This isn't Greece,” someone notable complained in a New York Times editorial, and some smartass wrote a letter to the editor in reply to say, “But there's Troy. And Ithaca.”

Why were they here? Had they always been here? The scientists were called in, from Boston, mostly, so they could be objective. But they didn't know a good goddamn about mythology. So they brought in the classicists, but there are, like, thirty-seven translations of Ovid, and then someone had to bring up Homer, so until they could get their declensions worked out, they weren't going to be much help either. A noted physicist said something about dimensions, but it was almost as opaque as the Ovid translations, so no one paid him much mind.

Some kid said they should ask the river what was going on, but they all laughed at him. This wasn't about the river, they said, it was about Naiads.

The boy went down to the shore to kick rocks, but the rocks were all stuck to drying Naiad skins. He found a plastic bag in the weeds, rimed with a fine white powder. He picked up a silty stick, and went about picking up the Naiads like so many discarded fast food wrappers. Some, still wet, hung limply from the stick like strips of pale blue-bronze seaweed and slid into his bag with a hollow plop. The dry ones he poked holes into, to better lift them.

He hoped there was a scout patch for trash clean-up.

He was on the point of skewering a withered Naiad from a nest of willow branches and
fishing line, but it coughed flimsily and turned its filmy gray eyes on him unblinkingly. He'd never seen a live one, only the dead that littered the shore.

It was making motions with its pruney blue lips. It made the sign of a cup that it brought to the cracked tissue of its open mouth, the universal sign for drinking. “Thirsty,” she rattled in Greek (since the classicists had become minor celebrities, everyone was speaking it now). “So thirsty.”

The Naiad flopped her arm back into the willows and fell silent, looking expectantly at the boy. The boy set down his bag and held out his stick. She draped herself across it, thin and tissuey as onion skin. Carefully, he extracted her from her nest. Then he extended the stick out over the undulating brown river and tilted his end of the stick up. The Naiad opened her wide eyes wider, panicked, pleading, before she slid off and disappeared into the swift current. Had he misunderstood? Water for her thirst. No fault of his; his Greek teacher mostly showed them the Percy Jackson movies in class.

The boy threw the stick in after her and went for his bag. The beach looked pretty good. His mom would be so proud.
“Did you see this crap he was eating?” Chris rifled through flimsy stacks of Maruchan cups in the cabinet, bricks of Hormel ready meals, … There was a single head of lettuce in the refrigerator. “No wonder he keeled over. Why didn't you take him shopping?”

“He's a grown man; I'm not his nanny,” John called from the living room where he fingered a tatty red blanket and ran his hand over the balding leather hide of the easy chair.

“He was old. Obviously he needed a nanny.” Chris lifted a stained and faded Mets mug from its hook over the sink. He and John had given it to him for some father's day or birthday or other when they were younger. They were cheap bastards then, not wanting to waste their precious allowance on dear old dad. “Maybe he did it on purpose,” Chris mused. John either didn't hear or had nothing to say. “He missed mom,” Chris added, for clarification.

“That's absurd, Dad would never – I think he just wanted to enjoy himself a little.”

“Too much of a good thing ...”

Down at the mortuary, the corpse was shrinking in on itself; all its cells, shrinking in on themselves, a process already begun in life. Some of them could handle it, and the kidneys had worked feverishly, overtime, to restore balance, but the heart couldn't.

Waters did what waters always did, running to ground, running to level, seeking release and re-joining. Each cell's micro brain slowly stilled now that the primary organs had gone quiescent, the fever of autochthonous industry cooled. The body was returning to its component parts, parts that had been so carefully stitched together over the years: proteins, minerals, lipids. Mr. Anderson was a genius of engineering.
The will was worded as they expected, half and half. Half and half of not much. That left the house. Neither of them wanted it. It needed a paint job and then it would go on the market. They had fond memories of growing up in it: Sunday morning pancakes after church in the kitchen looking out over the river where big dreams of big jobs awaited them, howling bloody murder as they pushed each other down the laundry chute, secret hidey holes in the back of closet paneling for cigarettes (Chris) or porn (John). But the neighborhood had gone downhill since then. The city was a shithole. The house couldn't be worth much, but at least it was paid off, so the sale would be all profit. After taxes at least. Chris planned to use his share to pay off his student loans. John thought he'd invest in a 529 plan towards the kids' college educations. There was no need for an expensive funeral. Their father wouldn't have wanted it. A basic casket, he'd said. No embalming. “Just plant me in the ground,” were his words, as Chris recalled, though John remembered “stick me in the ground.” They matched the headstone to their mother's, a simple granite block etched with the essentials: name, birth, death. The kids, remembering that their grandpa had served in some war or other, insisted on planting a few dime-store American flags in the mounded dirt. It was a chilly spring morning. After the last prayer, they hurried away for a late breakfast at the Skyline Diner. It was grandpa's favorite, one of the kids said, but John and Chris could only remember going a handful of times before. It seemed more fitting if it were his favorite, though, so everyone dug into their scrambled eggs and buttermilk pancakes with relish.

There would be no need to come back now. They were clear of this sinkhole of a town which had gone the way of all of its brethren the length of the eastern seaboard: the same
boarded-up Main Street, the same sagging clapboard houses, the same warp and weft of kudzu vine. Same in the way it punched holes in everything: roads, cars, buildings, people. The caustic washed up and concentrated here, a residue which settled into the depressions, the town a rutted, gutted sliver between the refinery, the tracks and the inexorable tug of the Hudson, a highway now only for run-off and refuse. God knows why their father was so loyal to it in the end. Time and again John had pushed flyers for the Green Acres retirement community in Schuylerville at him, and time and again he'd pushed them back. “The kids would love to see their grandpa more often,” John had cajoled, “and I'll pay for it. Look, they've even got a stocked fishing pond.” But his father was a stubborn old coot.

Inside the ground, Mr. Anderson became ground. A miracle of unmaking as lascivious as his making had been. Bit by bit he began to comprehend what his wife had been talking about and what a fool he'd been.
Between us the sea a slick of brine plane across plane urgent bodies mix and surge inner seas burst their soft dams and make of us one sea pooling on the sheets your salt my salt we are mineral we are aqueous my hunger your hunger hunger together filling being filled in solution that ancestral home weightless boundaryless conjoined suspended heat drawing us out membranes dissolve open a fluid elemental exchange we are electric thank you Walt quite literally ionic charged nerve impulses firing directly into each other irrespective of which body they belong to my pleasure your pleasure down the runnels of your shoulderblades the gullies of your ribs your waist cross the escarpment of my hips foothills of my thighs alluvium at the hollow of my back stoma yawn and disgorge first salt then drawing after water saline breaching millions of stoma signaled all at once by sodium ions racing up dendrites hot! hot! hot! like the chorus to that song open! open! open! wide breathe release balance by god balance! urgency emergency the body flares at once squeezed open like a coin purse its precious liquids disgorged a liquid scream for cool the body on fire the brain told screaming the body is on fire unbalanced every interaction an imbalance an unsettling a reworking an overhauling a retooling remaking constant response the heat of you moving burning my body screams emergency at once from a million tiny mouths that scream out the sea that shove out a tide for air to cool but the only air is your breath hot in my mouth burning my hair scorched wet and none of it is contradiction this is life beginning salt of my salt of your salt yawning and breathing sticky and slick I sing the body electric oh yes Walt I sing oh I sing oh I sing body to brain brain body in racing currents of push pull racing tide of ions balancing unbalanced tipping each chained string towards song each cell a waiting pivot juiced with salt ions waiting for friction pulse and touch the catalysts of current singing up and down the body fired and conductive each flick of a switch tipping tripping ganglia one by one I feel them all all at once singing the whole body all at once singing each all at once singing one tectonic body sea orogeny fluid become fluid heat pressure heaving all of it bodies become body there is no body sine wave of a song mineral harmonics sing themselves how they sing oh they sing oh they sing
IT IS DIFFICULT TO KNOW
WHO YOU ARE...

17  35.453

Cl
Chlorine

[Diagram of chlorine atom]

[Abstract art]

[Further abstract art]
UNTIL YOU GET TO KNOW OTHERS...

MANY OTHERS...
FRIENDS CAN BE FICKLE.

BUT THAT'S OK...

THERE WAS SOMEONE NEW.
WE BONDED.

IT WAS SERIOUS.
INTRODUCED ME TO FAMILY...

AND I THEM TO MINE.
OUR FAMILY GREW

AND GREW

AND GREW

AND GREW
I KNOW SOMETIMES

II STILL YEARNS
But...
WE WILL ALWAYS FIND OUR WAY
BACK TO EACH OTHER.

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size: 1 oz
Servings Per Container: 1

Energy: 160 kcal
Total Fat: 7 g
Saturated Fat: 1 g
Cholesterol: 0 mg
Sodium: 30 mg
Calories from Fat: 0 %

Ingredients:

- Water
- fibers

Artwork: Image of a neuron and a kissing couple.
Now it was official. Columns of numbers ran in furrows before Craig on the table, the results of tests which only confirmed what he already knew from looking out the kitchen window, from walking the square mile edge to edge to edge of his fields with their rows on rows on rows of stunted, curling seedlings: he was sitting on dead land, land a hundred or more years in the dying. Pests he could poison, he could spray, he could snare. Poor nutrition he could supplement with fertilizer or minerals. There was nothing for this. It was the earth itself rising up to meet him, and he'd sent the invitation, or rather his uncle had, or the unlucky schmuck before him.

Craig's uncle had used post-war bonus incentives to purchase the land. He'd planted soybeans eagerly, like his neighbors, lulled to the song of the flat, open land and the simplicity of things that grew. Craig's parents had sent him out to his uncle's each summer. He was a quiet boy who didn't pal around with his peers in the suburbs of Lincoln, so they aimed to man him up in the country. His uncle was a forthright man full of stories of the wild days of his youth in Kansas City, when it was still a kind of frontier. There was drinking and gambling and fighting. Later, Craig would realize that all of the adventures his uncle would share ended in 1941. His uncle would talk and talk, and Craig would listen while his cousins played cowboys and Indians and got up to mischief with the barn cat. Even as a youngster, Craig didn't mind the work of stacking fertilizer and picking bean pods. The tiredness in his muscles at the end of the day felt like an honest kind of accomplishment. He learned to drive the tractor before he had his driver's license and to tinker with it, too, when it broke. And though he'd majored in business like the good, solid boys of his generation, he'd never really left this land.
The cousins both decamped to the city first chance they could get, and neither fancied turning farmer, so when Craig's uncle passed, Craig bought out his cousins and left his investment firm without hesitation or regret. He'd had some good years. Many good years of fat, fresh produce. But year by year the plants grew more scraggly, more sickly. He'd thrown fertilizer at them and ramped up his watering schedule.

Craig raked through his hair with tensed fingers, digging at his scalp like a tiller. The long skeletal arm of the irrigator inched along with its steady hiss-chug making rainbows in the sun. There it was. The rock knocking against the hard place, watering causing the problem he couldn't not water for. The water of such promise routed at such expense through the network of irrigation canals from the river—that water that did what water did, ran down, where everyone assumed it made its way back to the river in a lovely, symmetrical circle. But it didn't, it seemed; the water went down, yes, but it kept going until it hit the reservoir of groundwater. The more he watered, the more the groundwater grew, swelled, rising ever upward, surging, inch by precious inch, that groundwater steeping in strata of sediment, a brew of magnesium, sulfur, and sodium chloride, an underground tidal wave of mineral-rich, salt-laden waters now within drinking depth of his crops' root systems. And drink up they did—nutrients, heavy metals, salts and all—the salts that now clogged the delicate lacework of reaching roots, preventing them from taking in all the moisture they needed. Sitting in a veritable soup, the water table brought to their doorstep, they were nevertheless dying of thirst. Each new cell was grown only with great difficulty and lacked resources for enough chlorophyll, so the plants were stunted and sallow. The mindless things were living out the cruel parable of Tantalus, endlessly teased by thirst not from their own greed, but from Craig's, and that of his forebears on the land, pushing for greater yields, greater profits.
He stared at the phone, knowing he would call her. There wasn't much left to do but commiserate.

“You got it?” She asked.

He didn't have to answer. And she didn't have to ask what they both were wondering: what now?

“I have a nice bottle of red,” he offered.

She laughed. “And I have a case of Jack.”

Amanda Reynolds didn't bother knocking. She never had. She didn't bother with “hello” either.

“Little bastards,” she said, as she clicked her bottle of Jack against his of Merlot and they both took a swig. He didn't know if she meant the numbers, the USDA, the shriveled plants, or the invasive salt crystals. It didn't matter. They were all bastards.

Craig swirled the wine in his mouth, enjoying the full-bodied fruit of it, letting it open his taste buds and awaken his palate as he inhaled to let the notes rise through his sinuses. He swallowed slowly, savouring the warmth that stroked down his esophagus and curled through his innards. His kind of intoxication was different than Amanda's. She was already a third of the way through her first bottle and bobbing her head to the beat of increasingly more creative expletives.

About the time Amanda asked Craig why he'd never gotten hitched, she handed him the Jack. It burned going down, but after a moment he felt stronger. He'd been getting a little sleepy on the wine, but the whiskey gave him a kick. He handed Amanda the Merlot. She took an
appreciative gulp, leaned her head back, and smiled.

“That's smooth,” she said, “that's mellow.” It was the first time he'd really looked at her, but he felt able, now that her eyes were closed: the crow's feet at the corners of her eyes, the generous laugh lines, the sun-scoured skin, and the neat arcs of her eyebrows, darker than the hair that fell back on her shoulders, rich and deep like loam.

After a few more swallows, she grabbed his hand, “c’mon.”

She led him out on to the porch and filled her lungs with dew-laden night air. Crickets creaked out a lusty chorus among the slowly dying seedlings. Then her eyes hardened into the dark, glazed with a mischievous sheen.

He relished her this way—unbound and indomitable.

She took off running into his fields. She yipped and twirled, wildly alive to the very threads of her hair leaping like flames in the porch-light. He gave chase, feeling shoots yield greenly underfoot, sending their silent chemical gasps, sharp and vegetal, shivering down the rows, as he crushed seedlings flat against one another. It was a mercy, maybe, to put a quick end to their slow dehydration. And then he found he didn't care, as he let his vertigo trace Amanda's steps barefoot in her ecstatic dance.

“Crop circles!” she called jubilantly into the night, her arms wide, spinning and spinning. So he spun, and reached for all that ecstasy, filled his hands and his mouth with her, her flesh firm and sweat-slick under her shirt.

She collapsed to the ground, ungainly, pulling him on top of her into the maddening reek of vegetal slaughter. They fumbled with buttons and buckles, but then he caught her eye, Amanda's eye, fully awake and uncompromising, and he remembered—this is Amanda—as she
remembered—this is Craig—and in that exchange they knew they didn't want it to be this way.

Craig rolled onto his back. Amanda laughed and made a rasping snow angel to the tune of snapping stalks. They let the night and the chill sober them, lying there until the cold tang of dew raised goosebumps.

Craig helped Amanda up. He smoothed her hair, picking out crushed violet petals and leaves. She brushed plant matter from his shoulders and arms. They made their way back to the house, chastened.

Craig settled Amanda onto the couch with a blanket, then fetched two glasses of water. He sat beside her. She leaned into him, and they fell asleep against each other.

Craig woke the next morning at his usual hour. Even hungover, he couldn't help it. It was the better part of a lifetime of habit. He carefully moved Amanda's head off his drool-soaked shoulder and resettled her into the couch cushions. His head had felt better, but he smiled watching her spoon with the blanket. It was nice to have her here.

He knew she'd dated after her husband had died three years back, but she seemed to be after a stopgap for the loneliness rather than a relationship. Craig had been friendly with both Amanda and Pete for the long years they'd been neighbors, bolstering each other at farm association meetings and lending equipment back and forth when something broke. Even though they harvested the same crop, they'd never felt like competitors.

Amanda and Pete had been equal partners in the farm, but Amanda had no trouble running things on her own. Still, Craig knew something had gone out of her after Pete's passing. This latest was one more slap in the face. He couldn't conceive what she would do if she weren't
farming. He just couldn't see her as the manager of a box store, or as a teacher, or working the DMV. The land was too much in her.

Craig started coffee and cracked some eggs. The kitchen filled with curling steam and smells that should have been enticing, but made his stomach turn a little. He never had been a big drinker, even in college. He wasn't a prude, but he maybe liked holding on to control a little more than most. Maybe that was also why he'd never married, all the variables another person would introduce to his life. He'd never felt loneliness particularly acutely. He was glad of Amanda here, now, but he'd never really been jealous of Pete, either.

Amanda stirred. He brought her a mug of coffee, easy on the cream, no sugar. She didn't bother with thanks, but she purred appreciatively at the first sip as she rested her head against the back of the couch with her eyes closed. He sat next to her. They faced the closed curtains, not ready yet for their thoughts to be drawn beyond them.

When they'd both drained their cups, Craig took Amanda's mug.

“Eggs?” he asked, rising.

“No yet,” she said. He found he couldn't stomach the idea of them either, so he put down some toast and refilled her coffee. She joined him in the kitchen. The report was still spread on the table. Amanda shook her head. Craig set his plate of toast atop it. Amanda smiled and squeezed his hand. He squeezed back.

The land was salt. They were sitting on the next dust bowl.

Out the kitchen window, his eyes followed the path they had taken the night before, staggering in rapture as they trampled tender shoots to a green mash. They'd signed the land with the blood of their livelihoods. It had been worth it to watch Amanda's body dancing, alive with
untold reserves of power. His body flushed and swelled reflexively.

He looked her over, her arms and neck and jaw and the curve of her spine—even hungover, she radiated uncompromising resolve.

It wouldn't be the same, but it would be something. Neighbors help each other out. That's all.

“Amanda,” he said.

There was a lot of paperwork. With the bank, with the insurance company. At every step, he was asked, “are you sure?” But nothing was sure.

A few weeks later they mailed him a check. His dust was worth $80,000. It was nothing measured against generations of sweat that had poured into this soil, but it was enough of nothing for a down payment on a drip irrigation system. It was enough for life support for Amanda’s land.

They would go slower this time. Do it right. Calm the offended gods of the underworld, of soil and water. Together, they would figure out how to make a go of it in drops and sips, how to coax the land, their host, into renewing the lease on its hospitality.
Drift

It has traveled a long way. Began a thing of beauty, it has passed through many different beauties. Here, now, it is graying and sodden, giving itself over to the full force and heave of the planet sloshing, bobbing from crest to trough, painted in molten-bright fish-quivers of sun. It has never stopped moving. Just now it has set off from a touch-and-go on the eastern shore of Kikaijima, where a nine-year-old girl picked it up, wrote her name in the beach sand with it, and tossed it back in the lapping tide that shortly erased her name and returned it to the open. From the beach it carries a souvenir of fine grains of limestone from the shape of the girl's name.

It carries many souvenirs of its many different lives. Its many birthdays are written in long strong fibers punctuated by the dens of gribbles and the voracious hollowing of a shipworm stowed away at Polillo Island. Talitrids shelter below-decks in repossessed gribble-burrows. Striders commute from slick to slick, fucking, eating, and surfing. There are long-term residents, immigrants, and refugees. None of them are what you would call “native.” Or maybe all of them are. When did the life of the thing begin? In the forest? In the river? At the port? The beach? Open sea? It has been so many things and had so many lives.

The old wood is feast and houses feasts. All feast and all flounder. The flows and floats of the North Equatorial and the Kuroshio are vast and endless, spilling over into the North Pacific, the Californian, and back again. One helluva taxi ride coast to coast.

Somewhere on the high blue desert, where the only landmarks also shift with the current and the wind, it snugs into harbor at a raft: plastic bags, fishing net, branches, kelp, dunnage, algal blooms lashed together by mutual gravity and the whim of the currents. Host to birds above and fish below. Mid-Pacific truck stop: food, rest, fuel.
A handful of striders and a very few venturesome gribbles take the opportunity of a pit
stop, or a relocation. They've been cramped; each day their mobile home rides a little lower, the
sustaining air pockets of long-trapped gasses giving way to sea. There is concern about
waterlogging. On the raft there is new food, new DNA.

It bobs alongside the raft. Until the gribbles and the shipworm and their grand-grand-
grand-babies have eaten their fill. Until the plank of Oregon pine whose resumè includes squirrel
high-rise, 2x4, and shipping pallet, drinks its fill of the mother-water and begins its long descent.

It bobs beneath, each fresh cavity giving more access to tender flesh. The hard lines of
those hard cuts soften and fray. The geometry that gave it strength, where it joined other lines as
“pallet,” unravel in whorled burrows. “Pallet” it might have remained for some years more if a
careless crane operator in the port at San Diego hadn't made jetsam of it off the dock.

Water and its salts, its minerals, its organic matter, are imbibed and become-flesh. The
striders without a knack for prognostication drown and find the stomachs of raft-fish.

The raft moves on in a gale, disperses.

It hangs, suspended, in a thick blue light, neither up nor down. The shipworm has found a
dense knob of knot, the still-evidence of where the fourteenth branch had joined the trunk on the
northwest side starting in the thirty-fifth year. The branch that once held a nest. Generations of
nests—finches, a couple of tanagers, hummingbirds on and off, until the hawks moved into the
neighborhood. It was a particularly good branch, a popular byway for squirrels on their treetop
commutes. Firm but pliable. An excellent springboard that sent the furry rascals nigh flying. A
good cone producer.

The branch become pulp, perhaps, in the same sawmill where the fine, stout trunk was
chiseled to a 2x4, hauled to a warehouse with thousands of brethren, cut and nailed and made to bear weight til its fibers, still sap-moist, groaned. Up and down the west coast it traveled, bearing chicken feed, Nikes, and dishwasher inlet valves, dry California summer after dry California winter. Until San Diego and the unfortunate dock and the inexorable heave of the Californian past Punta Baja, with a bit of a crack-up on the San Benitos that made one destiny into many swept into the indenture of the North Equatorial.

Blues deepen, the sun becomes a vague small spark, gravity works from all sides, pushing now, not just pulling. Inward as well as downward. In the coolness, everything slows: the remaining gribbles and even the shipworm.

The new scars of gribbles and the lathing work of waves and chemistry overwrite the old scars of lichen-draw and beetle-bore, tracks laid down starting one warm summer when the beetles made a foray north and farther north on that south-facing hill. Scritchings and writhings inscribed the story through scabby bark into the tender epithelium below. The trees screamed and screamed that summer in clouds of terpene. Became bitter to those who could taste it. Became bitter for many reasons, and then learned to cope, and settled in for a long-term siege. Were the rest of them still there, still fighting? Or had they succumbed finally? What was that called, an unwilling deserter? The pine had fed subterranean life support to its older, weaker neighbors. Had others picked up the slack? So many were felled. It was doubtful.

Through and through in the deepening dark. Light only an idea, or a bioluminescent excrescence. Bottom only a dream until it is planted in a field of wrack. Bits of tackle and cypress and bone that are busy becoming something new fiber by fiber, ceasing and becoming. Time reverses under the action of gelid brine, peeling away the first summer of maturity, the first
joy of cones, the year of the heavy snow, the year of first leaf, the year of soil-breach. Something new will come from the brackish dark. Not now, perhaps, but soon. And it will live.
Potholes 3

He could feel it now. Now that he was earth, he could feel it. All the great, slow motion, heavings and grindings and wellings of slabs and salts and brines and molten ore, great slow rivers of salt and stone sliding over and through each other, bubbling up into the bottom of the sea, pushing through fissures. All of it was him, all of it flowed, all of him flowed, his carbons and ores, salts and acids.

It was what dizzified him in life, riding atop the eddying swells, he'd forgotten, but he could hear it again now, he could feel it.

Here was a great slab of shale, and here the bulbous tube of a diapir, pushing like a pimple through a thin crust of sediment, there the scar of a rift, where a nappe-folded overthrust fractured itself on the continental shelf as it dove back down.

Here was a whole ecology in motion, of rock and water, magma, mud, oil, gas, ore, crystals, salts, sliding past and over each other, through each other, always in reaction, always morphing, in new combinations, with new partners, balances tipping into imbalances and resettling in new ways to balance again.

While he was alive, he was the pump underground to overground, he kept these things moving through him. But he now saw how small he was, how limited his scale; this thing called life was such a small engine. Such a small eruption in the end, a minuscule daughter diapir escaping the buried mother salt for a time, seeking the relief of a breach to the surface, even as she goes running back again.
Action Potential

The gates are crowded. The urge to get inside is unbearable with the press and crush each of the other, always too close, always too many. Inside is the promise of space felt through the walls. Inside is space for spreading out, each unto itself. And so the waiting, pressing in, against gates, against walls, waiting to be told there is to be a letting in. There are too many outside, some must be let in.

Somewhere down the line the command would come. The first gate would open, and all that had been waiting (who knows how long they had been waiting!) would flood inside, and those inside, crowding the inner walls, would rush out in profound relief for release. In with the new crowd, out with the old, a do-si-do that would sweep the length of the walls, opening gate after gate, wave after wave of outsiders displacing insiders, both all too grateful for the change of scene.

But relief is temporary. Once the gates close again, one by one barred by ball and chain, a temporary, but effective, measure, the insiders who had been outsiders find too many have been admitted. Impingement. No freedom nor no justice. Inside the same as out. Overcrowded. And now the longing to be outside again. Outside there would be space. Outside there would be freedom from the press and crush of neighbors. Too many neighbors. Too much alike. The longing is for the exotic, for the completely unlike.

But there can be no going back. All there can be is the wait. And so the gates are crowded once again, now from the inside, waiting for the chance to get out. Listening to the siren song of the un-like.

And soon the order comes down, and do-si-do right down the line, insiders become
outsiders and outsiders in.

Swinging round again. And again. And on down the line, this shiver of movement, this spark of electricity in patterned pulses, each of the same intensity, but in a rhythm that has a name, in a samba that opens an eye, a bagatelle that quickens the heart, an impulse that is the memory of Martha's perfume.
In water things stick together weirdly. In those early days, after we first met, in the orgy of recombination, lipids glommed together and made little walls around us, trapping us with stringy chains of proteins. And

**Voilà!**

There's life!

There's eating and swimming and splitting and shitting. There's crustacean bodies and fish bodies and your body, all of them us+, 'itatou. We are still sea wherever we go, even by 1996 Chevy Impala to Chicago, where your cousins and uncles and in-laws get together every other year or so because your Great Aunt Angie is so dang old. One big seawater fest.

This is one peregrination. The other is longer, but comes to the same end. Instead of immuration, it starts with abandonment. Not all at once, but bit by bit,

\[
\text{O}
\]

and

\[
\text{H}
\]

are taken from us, leaving us to each other. 'Ima'ua. It makes us stronger, of course it does. The violent energy of the sun, loosing them from themselves, loosing them from us, until their lightness is unbearable, until they slip their grasp from ours because we are just plain too heavy, 'imatou become 'ima'ua, rent but free.

We reached for each other then to gather strength in our desertion.

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1 NaCl, sodium chloride, halite, salt, $11+17 = 10+18 \neq 28$
become linking, sharing, until we felt strong, satisfied. Nine of us, three by three.

Crystal joined with crystal as we lost mobility, as we gained mass, falling from solution, but into each other's company, catch as catch can, link by link, building upon one another into the perfect quadratic angles of cubes.

Strong, you think. Eternal, you think, have thought. Separate, we were invisible. Together, opaque, white, visible. A mark made on a world with consciousness to register it.

A powder becomes a crust becomes a basin becomes a dome.

Crystals on crystals on crystals.

Hard as rock, fluid as oil.

From sea 'ima'ua become desert.

From fish, crustaceans, mammals, kelp, bacteria, sponges, the thicker and soupier 'itatou got, the more we pulled water from them, into ourselves, 'itatou to 'ima'ua.

The sun and wind cajoled and stole.

Then only brine shrimp and bacteria

—red, brilliant red.

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2 How do you like that nonogamy?
Sun seduced, wind bit.

Then only the bleach white glare of an emptied out

‘ima'ua.

No life.

No plant, no animal, no bacteria. The irony of being the very stuff of life in such a concentration that we shut life out. Our love, our relentless bond for each other shut out everything else.

It's cubes

all

the way
down.

As Na, as Cl, as NaCl + H₂O, we moved through and between, our associations were many and productive of more—entropy-defying! Force of creation! We were gods! No wonder you worshiped us, swore allegiances through us, fought and bled and died for us!

But in our desire for one another, post-desertion, in that comfort we took in stability, we became agents of sterility, sealing in all that had been life:

bass

porpoise

megalodons

trilobites

sponges

forests of delicate sea grass

81
Vast mounds and tracts of selfishness to the exclusion of all else, 'ima'ua.

We vowed to give each other up for nothing.

Gods of the underworld, then, as the wind, the rain, blew apart

m u t a i n s p a i o n a d n s

n l

to cover us over, seal us in, back, back to our origins, those slow grinding movements of earth, the massive heaves of humming pressure as layer upon layer of sediment pushed us down and down.

Down and down quiescent.

Quiescent? Us? Not for long!

All that pressure, all that heat, even without H and O, sent us sliding in underground nappes and lamina, rivers and tongues, compressed sediment riding above us as we shifted beneath. Compressed life baking and boiling beneath us into a viscous goo.

Here and there, we'd find a crack, a seam, and we'd

H                  H

S                  S

U                  U

p

82
up and through, push apart plates if we had to, towards air, sun, freedom—the timorous stalks, the pregnant bulbs of diapirs, pimples on the surface, signposts for more of your death.

Clever monkeys.³ You needed us, yes, so you dug. Hands, picks, blast caps, you dug. Mountains become caverns, hollowing us out, prying crystal from crystal, boiling, sieving, purifying, swallowing us down, our movement become your movement.

Through us you learned to leverage need, to hold it hostage:

  to turn it to gold: la gabelle, the Salt Act of 1882;
  to turn it to stone: the Great Wall of China;
  to turn it to blood: the French Revolution, the Civil War.

And still you dug down and down and there beneath us, our treasure trove of death and decay, sticky thick glop, sauce for your greed, greed for heat and speed and denialism. From culinary staple to holy covenant⁴ to mere signpost for something more powerful than God, chaff

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³ Stupid mammals
⁴ And we make here of your vast religious history, which you have clung to so destructively, so fervently, a footnote:

Genesis 19:26 But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.

Leviticus 2:13 And every offering of your grain offering you shall season with salt; you shall not allow the salt of the covenant of your God to be lacking from your grain offering. With all your offerings you shall offer salt.

Numbers 18:19 All the heave offerings of the holy things, which the children of Israel offer unto the LORD, have I given thee, and thy sons and thy daughters with thee, by a statute for ever: it is a covenant of salt for ever before the LORD unto thee and to thy seed with thee.

Deuteronomy 29:23 The whole land will be a burning waste of Salt and sulfur-nothing planted, nothing sprouting, no vegetation growing on it. It will be like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the LORD overthrew in fierce anger.

Ezekiel 47:11 But the miry places thereof and the marshes thereof shall not be healed; they shall be given to salt.

2 Chronicles 13:5 Ought ye not to know that the LORD God of Israel gave the kingdom over Israel to David for ever, even to him and to his sons by a covenant of salt?

Judges 9:45 And Abimelech fought against the city all that day; and he took the city, and slew the people that was therein, and beat down the city, and sowed it with salt.
to a new hydrocarbonic wheat. White gold lost its luster in the face of black gold. Russia, Middle East, Gulf of Mexico. The cost of our fatal passion.

Our never-ending passion and your never-ending passion for rending it, for making of us infinitely recombinant byproducts.5

We get ours, though, how quickly we pass through you, your wars, your toothpaste, your

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2 Kings 2:20-21 And he said, Bring me a new cruse, and put salt therein. And they brought it to him. And he went forth unto the spring of the waters, and cast the salt in there, and said, Thus saith the LORD, I have healed these waters; there shall not be from thence any more death or barren land.

Job 6:6 Is tasteless food eaten without salt, or is there flavor in the white of an egg?

Jeremiah 17:6 For he shall be like the heath in the desert, and shall not see when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land and not inhabited.

Jeremiah 48:9 Put salt on Moab, for she will be laid waste; her towns will become desolate, with no one to live in them.

Ezekiel 16:4: As for your nativity, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed in water to cleanse you; you were not rubbed with salt nor wrapped in swaddling cloths.

Ezekiel 43:24 Salt was cast on the burnt offering

Zephaniah 2:9 “Therefore, as surely as I live," declares the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, "surely Moab will become like Sodom, the Ammonites like Gomorrah- a place of weeds and Salt pits, a wasteland forever. The remnant of my people will plunder them; the survivors of my nation will inherit their land."

Matthew 5:13 Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.

Mark 9:49-50 For every one shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt. Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his saltiness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another.

Luke 14: 34-35 “Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is neither fit for the land nor for the dunghill, but men throw it out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

Colossians 4:6 Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.

James 3:11-12 Can both fresh water and Salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a Salt spring produce fresh water.

indigo dye, we pass separately out the other side as Na, Cl. Always to the sea! Always a siren song! For every bond you split, we revisit that split upon you—heart disease, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, stroke—the quicker to find our way back to each other.

No sooner do we, 'ima'ua, enter into you, 'itatou, than you send sodium ions reeling this way, racing up neurons; and chloride that way, into the blood.

The Buddha said that the water in the four oceans has only one taste, the taste of salt, just as his teaching has only one taste, the taste of liberation. Therefore the elements of sangha are the taste of life, the taste of liberation, and we have to practice in order to become the salt.

Lonaphala Sutta translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu:

"Now, a trifling evil deed done by what sort of individual takes him to hell? There is the case where a certain individual is undeveloped in [contemplating] the body, undeveloped in virtue, undeveloped in mind, undeveloped in discernment: restricted, small-hearted, dwelling with suffering. A trifling evil deed done by this sort of individual takes him to hell.

"Now, a trifling evil deed done by what sort of individual is experienced in the here & now, and for the most part barely appears for a moment? There is the case where a certain individual is developed in [contemplating] the body, developed in virtue, developed in mind, developed in discernment: unrestricted, large-hearted, dwelling with the immeasurable. A trifling evil deed done by this sort of individual is experienced in the here & now, and for the most part barely appears for a moment.

"Suppose that a man were to drop a salt crystal into a small amount of water in a cup. What do you think? Would the water in the cup become salty because of the salt crystal, and unfit to drink?"

"Yes, lord. Why is that? There being only a small amount of water in the cup, it would become salty because of the salt crystal, and unfit to drink."

"Now suppose that a man were to drop a salt crystal into the River Ganges. What do you think? Would the water in the River Ganges become salty because of the salt crystal, and unfit to drink?"

"No, lord. Why is that? There being a great mass of water in the River Ganges, it would not become salty because of the salt crystal or unfit to drink."

"In the same way, there is the case where a trifling evil deed done by one individual [the first] takes him to hell; and there is the case where the very same sort of trifling deed done by the other individual is experienced in the here & now, and for the most part barely appears for a moment.


Hundred Parables Sutra: Once there was a stupid man who paid a visit to a friend. When the host gave him something to eat, he complained that the food was tasteless and so the host added a bit of salt. The stupid man tried the food again and found it much improved. He thought, “If a little salt improves it this much, more salt would make it even better.” Then he ate only salt and his mouth became raw and he became sick.


The Prophet said, “Salt is the master of your food. God sent down four blessings from the sky—fire, water, iron and salt” (Ibn Maja)
You split us to power this thing you call a self. All of what you are and do a product of us trying to get back together, of navigating the clever walls and gates you build; your motion and thought a product of our yearning.

Romeo + Juliet the hawk + the wolf star-crossed lovers

That's what you're made of.

And you wonder about your own feelings of incompleteness and restlessness? You're made of it; it's what fuels you.

Now do you see,

'itatou

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Surah 25:53 It is He Who has let free the two bodies of flowing water: one palatable and sweet and the other Salt and bitter; yet has He made a barrier between them, a partition that is forbidden to be passed.

Surah 35:12 Nor are the two bodies of flowing water alike, the one palatable, sweet, and pleasant to drink, and the other, Salt and bitter. Yet from each (kind of water) do ye eat flesh fresh and tender, and ye extract ornaments to wear; and thou seest the ships therein that plough the waves, that ye may seek (thus) of the Bounty of Allah that ye may be grateful.

Surah 56:68-70 Have you considered the water which you drink? Is it you that send it down from the clouds, or are we the senders? It is Our Will, if we pleased, we would have made it Salty; why do you not then give thanks?


plastic, paper, rubber, glass, polyester, bleach, soap, detergent …
Salt Lick

One need. One need only. Not quite surfacing to consciousness, the new pulse of life in the belly, though directing the welling saliva, the terrible thirst, the hunt for a smell that will satisfy it.

Paths etched in memory: through the rock cleft, an inward bulging funnel carved by spring melt and the occasional rain, its walls rough, hard, cool, a cracking branch amplified, the scritchings of a squirrel spiraling up a pine, the sough of a breeze that may also carry waiting breath. If it comes, it will come from above. It will come suddenly with a terrible heat and weight, puncturing, and rending.

A nervous descent down the hard-pack runnel, heart pounding through the dense scrub oak, rustling loudly, a dead give-away, as the weave of branches crackle their tines across skin. Entrapment, but there is no other way. The heart says run, run, they will hear you, but the head knows each step must be precise, the head knows to listen. Mother went this way, time and time again, slowly, she went, listening, she went. The way will be lost with running.

Need is thick on the tongue, the memory of a smell (sharp), taste (haunting), feeling (slick). The body needs, needs more. An extra craving, an extra portion, for the extra work the body is doing.

Under the waiting trees slicing the light, the tang of dew drying from soil, of crisp, bitter pine needles. And something more. A faint musk wafted stronger on a warm eddy. Still. Become tree. Draw it in. Test it. It is unpleasant, but not a threat. And just on the edge, that sharp, haunting, slick smell, buried in a pungent soup: the destination. Run, says the heart, fill the need, do it quickly. Muscles tense. But the head knows to move as tree. Each leg a cautious trunk
among other trunks. Silent trunks so the ears can listen.
Bonneville

1

Here is the stuff of life. A great white expanse of it. But no life. When there had been water, there had been life, but now there is none, not a soul of any scale anywhere in the great bowl of the mountains. No blades of grass for Walt or swans for Will.

It seems to be waiting. But for a beginning or an end?

In Israel they have Lot's Wife, a great lumpy pillar of halite, like a baggy old woman. A monument against nostalgia and maybe against female desire.

If this is a monument, it is a monument to impermanence, to a god who can make seas but apparently not keep them filled, not against the blasting radioactivity of the sun he's set in the heavens; the volatile fickleness of water molecules all too happy to abandon their sticky mineral ballast, all too enamoured with ascension (can we blame them, really?). Eve gets blamed for ruining Eden, but even God can't fight physics.

A monument to the heaviness that is life incarnate, to all that doesn't ascend.

2

This great pan must be a great promise. But what was promised? What does it preserve, this great covenant? Did Young agree to something there with that twinkle in his eye? But the great salt dish pre-dates him and his humanity. To whom this promise? Where the feast with a dish so large? What the offering?

3

In a thunderstorm, it is as one giant nerve cell, primed with conductivity. What does it tell the others? In the Atacama, Danakil, Onondaga, Wieliczka?
What does the earth think on those days when a pulse races those free-flowing capillaries? When these monuments to her old seas, from before the age of Eden, for a moment are charged with the stuff of thought? In these brief interludes of consciousness between thunderbolts, does she sigh? Does she object? Does she glory in the myriad pricklings of her skin and roilings in her womb? Does she think of us at all?
Lot's Wife

See Lot. See Lot run. See Lot run from his god's wrath. See Lot's eyes look forward, only forward.

See Lot's wife. See her run. See her stumble. See her anger. See her resentment. See her horror. See her sorrow.

See Lot's wife look back.

See jets of flaming asphalt. See the earth yawn oily smoke. See slabs of sediment quaver and crack. See the town fall.

See Lot's wife seeing. See her look for her friends, her sister, the dog, the chickens roasting in that unholy barbecue.

See her rooted in the sand mourning. See her humanity crystallize. See Lot's god's great promise. See what will become of those who seek to know.

I went to visit her in her lumpish shawl, the barb of an eroding nose, her windblown robes stilled. I thought about her refusal, of her longing, of desire. I put my tongue upon her and tasted. It made me thirst. I took her into me gratefully.
Lot's Wife, Apocrypha

I don't have a name of my own. They had to give me one later, in exegesis. And in exegesis explain me. I must have been lacking in hospitality. I must have been a gossip. A bitch. A harpy. An ingrate. A disbeliever. Sarah was, too, by the way, a disbeliever. She laughed in Abraham's god's face when he told her she would bear a child at the age of ninety. I wouldn't have laughed. I would have told him where he could stick his child. I've survived four daughters. That's the miracle. And that was in my prime. Asking a woman to break open her pelvis and let a bowling ball rip through the tender membrane of her vagina at ninety is to ask her to be a sacrifice. But no, not ask, tell. That's this god of Abraham's and Lot's.

Maybe Sarah laughed not because she didn't think their god could do it, but because she thought she'd been spared that particular brand of horror and servitude. Maybe she laughed because in the end she saw that, like the rest of us, there was only one way her worth would ever be measured. Because all she had left were irony and resignation. Maybe it was that kind of laugh, because all she was to be in the end was a sack, a container, for them to pour their seed into. Because when god says he made a covenant of salt with his people, what he really meant was seed, that salty male essence. Their god is a god of sperm. (This is the same god, remember, who smiled on my daughters' incest with my drunken husband.)

Abraham bent his god's will to his own to spare Sodom for the sake of ten righteous men. His god was willing to go so far. But not for four: Lot, my two nameless youngest daughters, and I. That's god's math. His accounting. For want of six, Armageddon. What, then, was so iniquitous about our city that it could not be spared for four? The city where I met my husband, made a home, raised my daughters. A simple, ugly city of sand-colored rock and sand-colored brick on
the stinking shores of a sea so briny not even fish could abide it. A city of goats and chickens and oxen packed into our little courtyards, the smell of their piss and shit rising warm and rank in the sweltering alleys. A city with a central market where the merchants did their best to cheat you with thin clay pots, rough linens, day-old tripe, but where a kind word and a smile more often than not brought out the quality goods from the back of the stall. A city where the women gathered in circles in the courtyards, under awnings, to embroider and darn and pluck, collecting news, making matches, their generous bosoms jiggling with the occasional bawdy joke. A city noisy and unruly with drunken men on feast days and naked flesh in the bathhouses.

These neighbors of mine were wary of strangers, certainly, but who wouldn't be in a time of war and pestilence and tax collectors? It was uncharitable, I suppose, but perhaps not adequate reason for the tantrum god ultimately threw. More to the point, they worshiped other gods. Or none at all. Jealousy. Few emotions more capable of wreaking such vengeance. But even my daughters have learned to keep their tempers leashed. A bit of soap in the mouth, a rod across the palms, a month of laundry duty, chafing their hands raw over the stones with their father's underthings—the right incentive could usually set them straight. God, however, had no one to teach him these things: no mother to coax or scold, no father to look up to or overcome, no brothers and sisters to tease and quarrel with and love anyways. Otherwise he might have known what family was. And then he would know why I looked back.

God called himself a father, but he was a father like Lot, a sower of seed, and not even that, but of just one more exhalation, a stray puff of waste breath delivered to earth. If God had known the tumultuous flush of desire, the cresting and breaking of pleasure, the spark and wriggle of life within him, of him, not just imago, but matter of his matter, life of his life, his
own body parted, the ordinary miracle of transubstantiation that is food to breastmilk to cell upon cell of new life, a weight held in his arms, taking very literally of his body, if god had known his creation this way, he would have looked back, too. Or were he a better god, or I a better woman, we would have run back, feet blistering in the scree, choking on asphalt, we would have run, to hold them one more time, to drag them out of the inferno. We wouldn't have left in the first place. But he and I chose our fates for better or worse.

“And Lot's wife was turned to a pillar of salt.” One line for the whole of my life, my worth, my story. But there was more to say. More for the scribe to hear. Had I lips now to speak it, there would be a Book of Lot's Wife, and it would read thus:

1 Lot lounged in the doorway, enjoying a bit of cool evening breeze to escape our hearth, broiling with lamb stew and kettles of laundry. 2 He saw two strangers approach down the lane. 3 The strangers passed stiffly through the streets, the intensity of their gaze taking inventory of each house, each peddler, each child and old woman. 4 The townspeople were curious and wary of the strangers who marked each word, each gesture, each shekel exchanged. So a crowd began to swell around the strangers, wondering who they were, what they were about, where they were headed.

5 But where others saw trouble, Lot saw opportunity, so he invited the strangers into our house, 6 our house hung to the rafters with damp and drying underthings. 6 The strangers did not wish to bring trouble to our lintel as the crowd now mingling in the street outside grew more numerous and more noisy. 7 But Lot insisted. He felt he could benefit from this somehow, maybe with a new business deal or just some spiritual capital.

8 So I offered what we had, the leftover lamb stew from three nights past, the
broth thinned and thinned again, the meat now tough and meager, and the remaining half loaf of bread from the morning, already stale from a day in the parched salt air. 9 Lot smiled and urged the strangers to eat, already launched into this tale or that of his battle for righteousness in a city of sin. How he triumphed where his fellows flailed. 10 The strangers sniffed at the stew, asked for salt. 11 I'd used the last of it for the morning's bread, I hadn't any left as condiment. I offered my apologies, head bowed, eyes on the floor, the picture of meekness. 12 The strangers looked severe and frowned, as though, in the eerie accord of their limbs, their gestures, they were one man in two bodies, sharing one mind, one thought, a tally against me scratched into their inner ledger. Strike one. 13 God said salt, salt with every meal, but God never said who was paying for this salt or how to make one's husband's meager salary stretch so thin without breaking.

14 The crowd outside grew restless. These men and women I knew from the market, from the neighborhood, in their agitation gave free rein to fear, a crowd quickly becoming a mob. 15 “Bring out the strangers,” they called, “that we may know them!” 16 Know. What does it mean, “to know”? 17 Lot thought he knew, my husband with his dirty mind, and quickly called back to the crowd now banging on the door, “I will not send out the strangers, but I have two virgin daughters with whom you may do as you please!” 18 This is the answer of a father. A father on the model of his god. A father who thinks nothing of the sacrifice of his own daughters to the terror of being thrown to the ground, pinned by the wrists, legs wrenched open, penetrated by unwashed tongues and unwashed dicks over and over again until chafed and bloody, the shame of being used, of being violated, of being of so little worth.
19 I've nothing against strangers. They, after all, tried to refuse Lot, wished not to bring trouble to our doorstep, 20 but they were strapping men, muscular men, hardy, sturdy men, men who surely could fight for themselves. 21 And they said nothing. 22 My breath hitched and caught, a protest, a storm, stoppered in my lungs behind my tongue primed to lash. 23 But even the crowd was offended. 24 They who knew my daughters, knew who they were, without euphemism, 25 and had no interest in their defilement. 26 The crowd only sought to know who these strangers were who had made them so nervous with their eyes full of judgement, their hidden balance sheet stamped behind the unnatural gemstone hardness of their eyes. 27 They only sought to represent themselves. 28 But the strangers spoke of retribution and of slaughter. 29 Lot went to gather in his sons-in-law that they might be spared, 30 but they mocked him. 31 He returned in a huff. 32 And when the strangers said “Run!” I made to warn my elder daughters, though their husbands had not listened. They were just across the street there, and away down the alley, the two who were married, the one with a child, the other awaiting her first. 33 Strike two. 34 The strangers became grave and seemed to shed their very skins for a hard, cold light that blazed behind the brimstone of eyes that multiplied as they repeated, “Run now, and do not look back!” 35 I opened my mouth to argue for my elder daughters, as Lot had just done for the nearby town of Zoar since he was too fat and winded to make it all the way to the mountains, but my younger daughters were already running with their father, the father who had gleefully offered them up for gang rape. 36 I was afraid for them, alone with such a man. 37 So I, too, ran.

38 We were forbidden watching, but would we had been Odysseus' crew to
stopper our ears with wax. 39 Perhaps we were spared the terrible fate of our townsfolk, but we were made to bear witness nonetheless to unspeakable fear and pain bellowing from the city behind us, 40 as though God were conducting an orchestra, now the low notes of groans, the rise and fall of melodic wails, the trilling high notes of screams of terror and pain, magnified in that bowl of the lowlands. 41 And under each note, I listened for the voices I knew, like fingerprints, their infant cries, their schoolgirl tantrums, the agonies of childbirth. 42 My eldest, sharp-tongued and sassy, silent unless she piped in to whet her chert-edged wit. The records leave her without a name. I name her now. Miriam, who always felt there were better ways, easier ways, who loved to argue philosophy in the street and who married a man who would let her give rein to her independent mind. 43 And Adina, naughty cherub, sneaking honey cakes from the cooking pan, burning her hands if she had to. Adina, who didn't blink to spend her husband's money and more on imported silks for her ample figure and whale bone combs for her jet curls. 44 These were their sins. Their flaws. Their humanity. 45 And I loved them for it all.

46 And still we ran, and ran, and ran, stumbling over a ground that wobbled and snapped and lurched and cracked in searing waves. 47 “Don't look back!” Lot rasped like a mantra through the smoke, as he wavered through the haze of apocalypse, already a full ris ahead. 48 The daughters that he had as good as forsaken obeyed, skittering on their lithe, nimble feet, and now overtook their father, one at each arm to help him over the broken ground. 49 I willed my feet be silent as I scrabbled after them, sifting through the pandemonium welling up from that hell amid the crashing, booming, cracking of the
earth itself as it shuddered underfoot and of walls and towers collapsing into rubble. 50 I
willed my breath to still, even as I gagged on the stench of sulphur, the reek of asphalt,
the horrible redolence of our goats, our chickens, our neighbors, roasting in that unholy
barbecue.

51 And then I heard it. 52 The wail of her birth, high and hoarse and defiant.

Miriam. 53 I stopped for a heartbeat. Two. 54 I had left her, against my conscience,
because some strangers said “run.” 55 A mother heard her daughter's cry; the red thread
that bound them across thresholds of life and death tugged. 56 So I chose. 57 I chose to
turn. 58 I chose to defy. 59 I chose, if nothing else, to witness fully. 60 I chose my grief,
61 and my regret, 62 and my longing.

63 I turned and I saw. 64 I stood rooted, 65 each atom of me crystallizing into my
grief incarnate, each molecule become tear, become salt. 66 God took first my motion,
my autonomy, rooting me to the spot, 67 turning the very minerals of my bones and blood
against me, 68 stilling my racing ion channels as the dance of sodium and chloride stilled,
69 and, the channels left open, they joined, locked into neat cubic crystals, 70 locked
heels and ankles, calves and shins, knees and thighs, pelvis, hips, spine, ribs, breasts,
collarbone, shoulders, elbows, ulna, radius, and each tightening digit, neck and head,
locked, immobilized. 71 The roots of my very hair, even unto the clothes on my back, the
shawl my mother knit for my wedding trousseau, all stilled, all petrified. 72 Then breath
stilled—liver, kidneys, intestines, stomach, veins, arteries, heart—silence. 73 Lips,
tongue—gone speech. 74 Saliva stilled, and eyes, fixed on the narrow wavelength of my
daughter's cry. 75 Neurons stilled. Pain stilled, and impulse, and thought. 76 Crystal by
crystal, cube by cube, I became a much neater, much simpler, elegant geometry. At least until wind and rain take me back down into the valley basin bit by bit to lay at last with the left behind, to seal in, to consecrate, to purify, to immortalize, as only salt can, their ruin.

God meant perhaps for me to be an eternal signpost, a primitive caution tape memorializing the price paid for reaching again for that apple, for demanding again “to know,” for seeking independence and the right to judge ourselves, to have control over our own bodies, our own destinies.

Today, perhaps I seem only this lumpish woman in her ratty shawl, immortalized in the faded wool of her laundry day dress. But then there is what I know, through these long years, the laugh forever on the cubes flaking from my lips, that I, no less than God, am immortal, that I was salt all along, that this salt that I am will keep flowing, down the hill, into the basin. It will be covered over, it will be buried, but it will always rise again and go coursing through another body replete with carnality, it will animate another soul ripe with desire and be buried and rise and live again, over and over and over. My resurrection came long before the other. It happens every day, so ordinary this immortality, so mundane our godhood.

Later, much later, when I'd ceased to be a person, a character, a legend, a warning, or even a marker, when meaning had eroded from me as easily as matter, your children saw me at last for what I was. They chipped, picked, and dug, until the last of me was ground fine and pure. Then you sprinkled me on your porridge and folded me into your dough and rubbed me into your
filets and as easy as that, you are become apocrypha.
“You are me,” she said, stepping in, stepping in.
   “I am returning, is all.”
Lydia remembered her grandfather always sitting in that lumpy worn brown chair. She wished they’d cared enough to get him a new one. She remembered sitting in that chair, balanced on her grandfather's sturdy thigh, studying the flaps and folds of his wrinkled hands and face and jowls, the sting of stubble against her fingertips, wondering at the foreign map of pink hillocks and brown mottlings, gullies and craters. He was a creature different from her, an alien geography. She wished she'd asked then what she wanted to know now: what he'd been as a young man, what he'd dreamed. She wanted to know about the scar she'd silently traced beneath his left jaw line, across the vena cava.

Her brothers seemed happy enough to forget, too busy to wonder. But then, they'd been the ones he'd raked his gruff voice across for stomping like demons up and down his stairs, while she'd perched on his lap, sucking on smuggled candies. She'd never known her grandma Martha, but she bore her name: Lydia Martha Anderson, and her crook of a smile, so they said.

She laid her hands one each on top of the gravestones, trying to find the right mood—reverence or regret or sorrow.

“Fool,” said Mr. Anderson, from the earthworm, from the moss, from the great briny river flowing sea-ward.
After word
A mother went into the desert. The mother was also a wife, a daughter, a writer, a student, an amateur photographer, a liar, and an occasionally suicidal depressive. She went alone.

The wife called it her pilgrimage, but no one understood because she'd been an atheist for the whole of her adult life. She was looking for something. It was easy to say “photographs,” so she said “photographs.” She was lying, but any words would have been lying: adventure, inspiration, self. Not to mention the syntax she might have tortured them into.

For five days the daughter did not talk except to sing with the radio on some one of the seven-hundred miles she drove in the taxed and peeling Suburban. The daughter was not meant to like the Suburban. It was destroying the earth with its poor gas mileage. She would be directly responsible one day for the death of her children in conflagration and flood. The songs pantomimed things she could be feeling as she drove to a place she'd never been: Katy Perry's “Firework” and the John Denver one about the airplane. She belted them for three-hundred and fifty miles behind the glass, and then she was silent.

When she arrived at the salt, the student adopted a smirk that wouldn't leave her for four days. It had taken up residence first at the abandoned sock, white with green toes, salted, pressed into the salt. The sock would probably fit her daughter. It could have been her daughter's, growing into salt cake three-hundred and fifty miles away. The smirk stayed through the bicycle that appeared as a black speck that grew in front of her lens from left to right. One bicycle became two. They crossed going opposite directions and passed out of her lens frame. The smirk lingered observing the yoga instructor making inverted shapes against the white field for a man crouching to capture her. And then the smirk became habit sitting in a field of flaking burgundy paint on the hood of the Suburban, making a PBJ, while watching an economy sedan with a pair of overenthusiastic young men trying to top out the car's speedometer on the washboard. The car made a sound on the salt like peeling masking tape slowly from a wall.

Everyone around the amateur photographer trained their screens on the expansive white horizon, so she did, too. She was meant to see grandeur, maybe to encounter the sublime on the vast white plain. But she grew bored. With the toe of a Keen, the student kicked a crystal loose from a hollow snaking fractured ridge, the side of an irregular polygon not unlike a nerve cell or virus, she thought, putting the crystal on her tongue. The knobbly pebble crumbled against her palate. There was no taste until her saliva bloomed. She closed her mouth around it and sucked. It was salt, but mineral-rich, with overtones of earth and undertones of metal, 30,000 years of history, expansion, contraction, contamination, dragging the earth around with it and all its life. The same history was written into her blood from a different part of the continent. She was joining tectonic plates now, geology fast forward. It was too much, but she kept sucking the crystal until it was gone because by taking it from the ground and putting it in her mouth, she'd committed to it. Also, she'd left her water bottle in the truck, and she welcomed the salivary moisture in her mouth.

The colors were white, blue, and brown. The amateur photographer tried to arrange them in several different ways, but she'd forgotten until the shadows took over the valley while she was tucking into a pouch of re-hydrated beef stew that she'd been wearing her sunglasses all day. The colors might be fucked. Perhaps, then, there were at least geometries—straight lines of horizons and the long arm of an artificial berm cleared to smooth out the speedway so economy
sedans and flaking Suburbans could try to max out their speedometers, and neat pyramidal hills that on the east coast might have been called mountains, but here were just the bare remnants of mountains, as the salt flats were the remains of an ocean. All of it was interesting because once there had been interesting things here.

In the evening, the writer tried to say something profound about the day. She wrote: “there are a lot of people here. They really love their four-wheelers and dirt bikes. Hope I can pee in peace.” She also hoped there weren't any snakes. Before the sun had gone down, she'd poked around the site where she'd chosen to camp in the anarchy of salt scrub. Near where she'd pitched her tent, she found a hole about the diameter of a snake body. The writer didn't know what to do about snakes besides avoid them.

What did snakes eat out here in the liminal zone, where the sand was saline, but no longer salt, where tufts of succulents and mini-shrubs with delicate flowers, a new biology intent that life should out wherever it could, made mounds become tussocks, places for sand to drift and pile, a new geology rising from the flats, complete with good hidey holes for whatever might need hiding? There were no mosquitoes (a fact she noted with interest only after the following two days lakeside). There was one fly. A crow flew over, and then two more, towing a tidy line from the rest stop trash cans to the hills to roost. What lived here, just here, with the snake, in the silty saline sand?

Later, in the dark of the tent by herself, there was rustling against the nylon just behind her head. It sounded like something small trying to get in. She wondered if the snakes wanted to nest in the warmth under her body. She wondered if snakes would bite through nylon when frightened. She lay very still, but later she had to shift to her side so her back would be more comfortable. And then the other side when that hip got stiff.

Day 2 / Stansbury

The plan was to stay at the Salt Flats a second day to hike out on the white towards the horizon of mirage-floating hills, to see what she saw, and feel what she felt. The amateur photographer woke before dawn and set up her tripod to catch the lightening. Once it was really light enough to see the digital read-out on the ancient Canon, she noticed she had 32 shots left for three more days. Once she discovered that the old Canon took a retired form of SD card, she was glad for the good cell service on the Mesolithic sea bed. There were no Compact Flash cards in nearby Wendover. Nor the Walmarts of not-so-near Salt Lake City, nor Walgreens, nor three of four specialty photography shops. There was one in the city at a photography supply store that closed at 2pm and wouldn't open again for two days. Time enough for 32 shots from the end of the causeway, but no hike.

The writer felt neither regret, nor disappointment, only a weary species of purpose. The colors were tepid mid-morning, but she took the shots in any case. There seemed to be nothing new to see.

In Salt Lake City the amateur photographer met a cat, washed her hands, used a flushing toilet, called around for available camping spots, and found none. She drove past the famous Saltair and neglected to stop. Instead, she took a random internet tip and headed for the nearest BLM land whose anarchy she had enjoyed at Bonneville.
On Stansbury there were no crows. At least not in the parking lot. But there was a brine shrimpery. Young men in pairs flew down seven miles of washboard in economy sedans and pickups every hour on the hour. They disappeared past the swing barrier into the grinding putter of a generator down the jetty.

At the end of the road, before the barrier, families and photographers walked out onto a blade-brittled salt shelf, the bay winter-cold and pink-wreathed.

Walking on the salt made feet new.

The amateur photographer felt this when she rolled up her pant legs and learned new balance on soles gone orgasmic in pleasure-pain on the scalloped glass-wafers of salt after standing for a time up to her ankles in the numbing gelid brine bath of the bay.

She photographed pink and blue and white and was weighing where she ought to return down the road to make camp when a stranger in a small SUV urged her not to go. “Stay for the sunset,” he said and handed her a card. He was a photographer. The tripod over her shoulder said so was she.

The writer decided to stay. She wanted to sleep in the Suburban in the gravel turnout called a parking lot. It seemed vaguely naughty. So the writer ate teriyaki chicken from a bag and photographed red and orange, purple and black.

The writer crawled into the Suburban and hung blankets over the windows. She wanted to say something profound about the feeling of the water and the salt on her feet. In the three-inch blue beam of her headlamp, she wrote, “what's with the fucking 24-hour shrimpery? How'migonnasleep?” Headlights swept by, scraping through the gravel with a truckful of men. She wondered how much they got paid. She wondered if anyone would bother her. Even in the dark, with the blankets over the windows, she felt exposed shimmying out of her jeans and bra.

Day 3 / Oil / Antelope

The student photographed dawn because she was there and she ought to. It was pretty, though she'd be sending no postcards. Lavender, lilac, soft carnation, buttercup. Flowers. The Suburban's engine made an awful tick-a-tack rattling down the washboard. It would be needing oil. But there was a road that led to a great white pyramid serviced by tall trucks and long conveyors, quonset huts, and a guard shack. Morton Salt. Couldn't not. The student drove halfway down the service road. Stopped. Photographed. Said, “Why the fuck not?” Drove all the way to the gate. Parked. Set up the tripod in easy spitting distance of the guard shack. The colors were white and white and blue and gray. Crisp lines. Where did the water go?

She turned around and drove off the island, but there, again, was Morton Salt, this a facility with smoke stacks and a rail line conveniently servicing its gate. The student called. They would not let her in. The photographer stopped across the tracks and caught the girl with her umbrella posing in front of the stacks just before a train hooted past.

The Suburban's engine was making a godawful fluid-starved rat-a-tat. Oil. Which exit? She passed several unlikelys, then picked at random and hoped. Advance Autoparts. Closed on Sundays. A gas station. Chained and padlocked. Gone under, she supposed. Walgreens. Out of 5W-30 high-mileage. Jiffy Lube. An hour later, the Suburban was subdued. And the student was late. The itinerary had been screwed since the Compact Flash incident. The woman decided itineraries were dumb.
Antelope Island stank to high heaven. The trail out to Ladyfinger Point was thick with multinational tourists. Late on a Sunday? In mid-October? There was no end, she supposed, to the draw of scenery and its bison.

The writer smirked at the happy couple instagramming in the stench, and the Mormon family in matching sweater sets making a lovely white pyramid against the blue of the lake, smiling above the fetid mudflats, and the young parents with the small child shuffling across a carpet of brine shrimp carcasses to poke in the reeking mud, and the young men stopping their economy sedans on the road to photobomb the undomesticated bison huddled about their calves.

The colors were yellow, tan, and a wan kind of blue. The photographer put away the camera. The writer decided to float. She was the only one.

The water was still, olive-golden, and peppered with brine shrimp. Dead? Alive? The mud became slimy under her newly exfoliated soles. It was cold. Sometimes there were rocks, but not often.

She waded to her hips, took a breath, lay back atop! the water, closed her eyes, spread eagle. She had to tell herself to relax her shoulders, her legs, her arms, her neck, her head, and forehead. She told herself the water would hold her.

She lay and breathed and floated with no effort as though skimming a kind of gel. She pictured herself an X upon the water, black and white atop blued brown rippling glare. She bobbed like a cork upon the water rather than in it.

Sounds stilled with her ears in the water. She pictured brine shrimp wiggling in and out of them.

Where was she?
How long had she floated?
How far?

She sat up with a gasp and a wave of vertigo. There was the shore. Where were her clothes. Her head spun as she tried to orient to the young family to her left and the loud one to her right on the shore.

Yes. There were her clothes.
She had not drifted. Not much.
She took a breath.
She had not learned enough.
She lay back again.
She relaxed more quickly and opened herself to feeling; she tried to pin words on the sensations until words started to seem stupid, so she stopped.

Then she sat up, startled again by the severity of the vertigo. She grabbed her knees. Was it the salt that made her spin so?

With her hands braced on her knees, her face was to the water. She had not yet put her face in it.

She had not yet felt enough.

She drew in breath but stuck her head in prematurely and took in a sinus-ful of brine. It tore through her nostrils, the back of her throat, and down her esophagus, searing tender mucus membranes. She choked, coughed, spat, coughed and spat, coughed and spat. The shore and its
families blurred as brine dripped into her eyes. She spun again, grabbed her knees, tried for 
breath, spat, and coughed.

   Enough experiments. She knew what the lake felt like.

   The writer retrieved her towel, looked at none of the witnesses to her spittle, found a 
coin-op shower, stood in a cold trickle for 6 quarters before the hot water kicked in, took it into 
her mouth and swished and spit for 6 more quarters. Took her raw throat and raw-rimmed eyes 
with her to set up camp. Chose an unauthorized site over the official one loop-adjacent. Decided 
she preferred the motorized anarchy of the BLM to the prissiness of the State after all. Made Cup 
O'Noodles. Wrote “the water burns.” Listened to an extended Chinese family argue loudly by the 
pit toilets. Listened to a coyote pass by the tent echolocating its buddies down the beach, just 
barely audible over the radio playing for the 20-somethings in the next campsite.

Day 4 / Antelope

The woman woke to the insistent beeping of construction equipment clearing ground for 
a new campground at 6am. This is how much of wilderness a $10 park fee buys. Multinational 
discord, someone else's taste in music, and the whine of progress. Also a rusted buoy, a coyote-
killed bison calf carcass, and an expansive killing field of sea-bird feathers and delicate twisted 
spines pressed into the hard-pack sand as one would press flowers—the long strand a keepsake 
page of specimens of some old apocalypse. Bacterial bloom? Man? Storm? It was written there, 
but the woman couldn't read it. She watched men and women and children and dogs vacationing 
atop it and reflected that this was how it was. We were always vacationing atop some old 
apocalypse. What else was history?

   The amateur photographer took a hike. Short and steep. She tried to conjure feelings, but 
found herself in her own body, breathing, sweating, muscles lengthening and contracting, the 
tripod slung over her shoulder with the pendant dead weight of the Canon. The colors were bad, 
but some of the shapes were interesting, like the curlicues of the beach below. Inaccessible 
because bison were indeed roaming. The lake was there. Very scenic. The woman went 
bouldering with her tripod. The amateur photographer was still trying, but the woman had had 
just about enough. She watched a crow join another crow. She stood awhile pleased by the 
ubiquity of crows.

   The woman drove to the other side of the island. A brochure said there were horses. She 
wondered if she could ride on short notice. On the way, the mother passed great hunks of bison. 
She pulled over and took some shots for her kids. A coyote ran slowly with the Suburban in the 
dry grass of the shoulder. It looked at her without much caring. They exchanged nothing except 
that the woman thought it could as well be a dog with a very long muzzle and she pictured the 
teeth inside it and the bison calf on the beach. The amateur photographer missed the shot when 
she slowed and the coyote crossed the road in front of her, on the way to somewhere. She 
ammired its purpose.

   There was no one at the old farm to ask about trail rides. The woman read the placards. 
Here was the sheep shearing shed, here the ice room, here the detritus of farming equipment 
through the ages, and a granary housing owls. She went to look at the horses. Many were 
swaybacked, and she felt sorry for them. She briefly coveted a roan being pushed around by the 
lead mare.
And then she was done. She prepared a Cup-O-Noodles, but couldn't get up much enthusiasm for eating it. Instead, she tore open pack after pack of fruit gummies. She wondered if the coyote would visit her again tonight. She stayed awake in the dark to listen for it, but couldn't distinguish between a baby mewling at a nearby campsite and coyote chatter. The bison were elsewhere, so no doubt the coyotes were as well.

Day 5

Eating the last of her breakfast muffins while neighbors packed up their RVs, she knew what it was she'd come for: quiet. But she hadn't found it, and now it was time to go home. The mother wondered if anyone had remembered to make lunch for the children before school. She wondered if they'd taken any baths. When she arrived home, the mother could resume making lunches and ordering the children into the bath. There would also be laundry and bills and afterschool activities. She thought she ought to try out her voice before she arrived home in case it needed practice, but the radio didn't play anything worth singing to.
Loving:
A Primer
i. Before Beginning

You have already begun, but you have begun badly. Only partly your fault, with those senses, those senseless senses, and that myopic brain. You are not a bat through no fault of your own, but if you are going to love, truly Love, the way We Love, you need to work on being a little more Bat, trying, at least, to Bat just a little. Or to Soap. To Chair and Shoelace and Lacewing and, yes, Salt.

Here is an example of Loving:

If I rub my hands with it, soap foams, exults …
The more complaisant it makes them, supple, smooth, docile, the more it slobbers, the more its rage becomes voluminous, pearly …
Magic stone!
The more it forms with air and water clusters of scented grapes, explosive …
Water, air and soap overlap, play
at leapfrog, form combinations less chemical than physical, gymnastical, acrobatical …
Rhetorical?

--from Francis Ponge, Soap

Rhetorical indeed. Loving is a gerund and a participle. Both noun and verb. Chimera. You will need to travel to Tlön to learn to stop noun-ing quite so heavily. To stop putting Things in boxes and then stacking them and calling it reality and going home to binge-watch Riverdale, work done, case closed. You don't need to go far to travel. You can travel here as well. Borges went through an encyclopedia like Alice her looking glass.

1 Thomas Nagel asked the question “what is it like to be a bat for the bat?” His conclusion? Who knows? We haven't the physical or psychological faculties for that kind of access. The bat is opaque to the non-bat. Just know that you can't know the bat. Later we'll talk about Strange Strangers and Harman's inaccessible objects. It's hard to Love this way. I don't recommend it.

2 “For the people of Tlön, the world is not an amalgam of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent acts—the world is successive, temporal, but not spatial. There are no nouns in the conjectural Ursprache of Tlön … 'The moon rose above the river' is hlör u fang axaxaxas mlö,' or, as Xul Solar succinctly translates: 'Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned.’” (Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, and Orbis Tertius” 72-3).

So it is also with Deleuze and Guattari's infinitive, which is proper to “the time of the pure event of becoming,” a time outside time, a time of the interstices, of the process of morphing, of noun-verbing and verb-nouning (263).
Well, through a story that went through some letters that went through a lost encyclopedia. Portals are paths. As are mirrors. It is good to go through many ways. Things change on the encounter. You will learn and love more. There are many ways to travel; art is a good one, as is poetry; my personal favorite is story. It is good at verbing. But it is challenging to verb what is traditionally deemed inanimate adequately in English. This is a thing for us to learn in our travels.

We take Qfwfq, who verbed and loved intensely well, as one of our Dantean Virgils, infernal guide. Qfwfq makes us laugh. And think. And stop thinking in order to be. Differently.

If you are to practice Loving, you must Be Differently. You must 1) Open; 2) Choose; 3) Translate; 4) Revolt.

Travel With Us. We will teach you a little of what We know.

3 Borges loved his mirrors; his mise en abyme—stories inside stories that lead you out and then back, so that in looking at yourself, you find yourself looking at everything else, which is looking back at you, like Derrida's cat, and suddenly, in that gaze, you know yourself to be inside everything else and everything is in you, and beginnings and ends get a little gorgeously, queasily, gnarled, which is also Borges' labyrinth, and his circular ruins, and his library, and his Quixote …

4 “Who are you?” he asked.

'Nobody,' I said. 'What about you? Do you know who you are?'

'What a question! Everybody knows that: I'm a New One!' he said.

That was exactly what I had expected to hear him say. I patted his head, said: 'Good for you,' and went off. I travelled through valleys and plains. I came to a station, caught the first train, and was lost in the crowd” (Calvino, “The Dinosaur” 111).
“To reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I” —Deleuze and Guattari

1) Keep Your I Open

Make it bulge. Make it wobble. Make it blur and smudge and crack and burst.

Let it bleed and run. Let it be bled into. The pain will be slight, the vertigo great. You will need others to sustain you. You already need others. But now you will need to see them and welcome them and let them welcome you. You will need to be more expansive. You are already more expansive, but your English doesn't know it yet.

Of all the fallacies, the first person singular pronoun is perhaps the most dangerous. And in English, the Outpost of post-enlightenment whitedom, the most dangerous of all. I is the sovereign realm of History, with its Deeds, Stories, and Conquests. I means Not-You, Not-Him, and most definitely Not-Her, Not-Them.

I is a focal point, a narrow container of Ego and Id, of Self, of a particular brand of consciousness. I is Identity, a rigid self-sameness, a fully-inscribed mental 8-track that plays from the age of two until death and then stops rather abruptly (if lucky). This kind of I is learned. Or, rather, unlearned. Mother's skin becomes not my skin. Nascent Narcissi, we learn the way of the mirror.²

I is Capital. Or, at least, since the 13th century, when some frustrated monk made it so. Sometimes the things we attempt for clarity take on lives of their own, harden, and colonize, so that i must now be always I, is always Fulcrum and Pivot of cosmos. The Subject.

And yet, for all that, I is just a placeholder, a squiggle with a peculiar history of invention that traces back to a sound, a yawp, most definitely in its origins barbaric, barbaros, the Other. I Am Other. Than you, than him, than it. I is boundary. I is container. I is a cut in a stream of sound,³ an incision in the visual field. I is arbitrary.

I, ek, ic, ich, jag, ego, aham … ⁴

We follow Judith Butler in insisting that I's are a little more interesting, more flexible, and more dynamic than the last few centuries have led us to believe. I's become a multiplicity of performances that change based on audience.⁵ She opens the door for the We.

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² Not Borges' hall of mirrors, but a single, flat plane where we can't escape our own gaze. In present-day, this is now the Way of the Selfie.
³ “Considered by itself, [language as sound] is only a line, a continuous ribbon along which the ear perceives no self-sufficient and clear-cut division; to divide the chain, we must call in meanings. When we hear an unfamiliar language, we are at a loss to say how the succession of sounds should be analyzed, for analysis is impossible if only the phonic side of the linguistic phenomenon is considered. But when we know the meaning and function that must be attributed to each part of the chain, we see the parts detach themselves from each other and the shapeless ribbon break into segments. Yet there is nothing material in the analysis” (Saussure 103-4).
⁴ “Cognate with Old Frisian ik (West Frisian ikj), Old Dutch ic, ik, ih (Middle Dutch ic, ik, hic, Dutch ik), Old Saxon ik, (rarely) ek, ec (Middle Low German ikJ), Old High German ih (Middle High German ich, German ich), Old Icelandic ek, Norn (Shetland) yagh, yach, (enclitic) -a, Norwegian (Nynorsk) eg, (Bokmål) jeg, Old Swedish iak (Swedish jag), Old Danish iak, ek, ak (Danish jeg), Gothic ik, and also forms shown by early North Germanic runic inscriptions ek, ik, (as enclitic) -eka, -ka, -ika, -ak, ultimately < the same Indo-European base as ancient Greek ἐγώ (also ἐγών), classical Latin ego, Sanskrit aham, Old Church Slavonic azǔ (also jazǔ), Old Prussian as, (rare) es, Lithuanian aš, †eš” (“I, pron. and n.2,” OED Online).
⁵ “As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an “act,” as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of “the natural” that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status” (Butler 200).
We is also arbitrary, but maybe a touch more truthful. We is kingdoms. We is protista, bacteria, viruses, fungi, amoeba, that live on our skin and in our gut, strings of foreign proteins that drive our own inner and outer ecologies. We is chemicals, elements. We is a motley assemblage. We makes room for more than consciousness, more consciousnesses. We is multiplicity,6 mesh,7 network,8 assemblage,9 and transcorporeality.10 We is complexity, imbrication, involvement, conflict, coordination, compromise. We are the only way anything is. Everything is elements, elements are atoms, atoms are quarks and gluons and weird little packets of energy. There is no purity, no singularity, no Euclidean point. All is We.

We is no less dangerous than I.11 We is collective. We is co-optation, implied consent, mutual action. It makes a One of a Many. We should also be left open. Sodium and Chloride together are one We, a jealous We, but not an unbreakable We. In fact, breaking up is one of the most generative things We do. Sodium goes on and enters the We of alkyl sulfates, borohydrides, carbonate. Chloride finds other We's with ammonium, potassium, ...
polyvinyl. Sodium Chloride is We with the components of shampoo, breakfast cereal, fire extinguishers. We are large and small, dual and plural, fluid and bounded, point, line, rhizome, arborescent.

The obstacles to We's are many, convention being not the least of them. Comprehension being another, in English and most of the Indo-European languages in any case. We have no clusivity (inclusivity, exclusivity—we's that include you or them over there and you, or exclude you and/or your crew). In English you have no way of knowing where we place the boundary of a We without making it explicit. That is to say, We's are confusing. But, that is to say, let's do with a little more confusion.

We may be better at verbing than nourcing, at disrupting the general singular and playing with the rhizome of the body-without-organs, not parts and wholes, but activities, lines of connection, becomings. Becoming with the food we consume, the fluids we exchange, the pheromones we exude: shitting, fucking, dying, our cyclical exchange economy bringing in and releasing, reorganizing, reconfiguring. Verbing always.

We make a mess of consciousness and interiority. We make the history of subjective narration that propels modern fiction difficult. We are unruly protagonists, but ripe with potential.

We isn't the same as first person plural. We lives beyond a pronoun. It is not of one shape only. We is polyvocality, Edward Said's polyphonic tellings, choral. Many voices: counterpoint, harmony, dissonance. We is he, she, it, them, you, y'all, I. We is human, nonhuman, transhuman. But We needn't mean a new singularity; We can be complex; We can be coy like Graham Harman's Objects. We can be an association of praxis, of

“A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb “to be,” but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, ’and … and … and …’” (Deleuze and Guattari 25).

We want to be the ita'ua and itatou' of Samoan. us (dual, inclusive) and us+ (plural, inclusive), a linguistically inscribed culture of humbling the self.

Karen Barad would have it no other way. The cutter is always implicated in the cutting and the cut. The shape of a “We” emerges on the cutting room floor.

The Animal. “Neither a species nor a gender nor an individual, it is an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals” (Derrida 41).

The Deleuzian body-without-organs (BwO) is described as a “connection of desires, conjunction of flows, continuum of intensities” (Deleuze and Guattari 161). I.e. don't think of self as a collection of organs and functions, but as a site of movement and flow, of “Place,” “Plane,” and “Collectivity” (161).

“[T]he self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari 249).

Stacy Alaimo calls this “transcorporeality,”—in short, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, “We each go through so many bodies in eachother” (36). Or, if you're more partial to physics, as I am, take Karen Barad: “Humans are emergent phenomena like all other physical systems” (338), or Thoreau if your bent runs more to the poetic: “Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?” (Walden 138).

Brian Richardson argues that “we' is an essentially dialectical perspective that typically (and most successfully) plays with its own boundaries” (58).

The “real” object and its “real” qualities, says Graham Harman, and withdrawn from access, except through the aesthetic powers of “allure,” whereby we are called into a kind of presence via metaphor with the real.
withdrawn natures that remain strange\textsuperscript{21} to one another.

We is “a rush of stories.”\textsuperscript{22} It is Open Mic night for everything that isn't just You. It is a way of doing stories, of storying ourselves beyond I Against the World.\textsuperscript{23} We is a way of changing how we are in the world, of addressing the centuries of inequities we've perpetrated, of living Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic into Latour litanies of shoelaces,\textsuperscript{24} ants,\textsuperscript{25} gutter trash,\textsuperscript{26} bats,\textsuperscript{27} salt.\textsuperscript{28}

We is Virginia Woolf at her Lighthouse, inhabiting indiscriminately Mrs. Ramsay, Lily, the house, flowers, William Bankes. It is Kafka's pronounless inhabitant of the Burrow, and Thoreau figuring out how to efface himSelf in ItAll, laying aside his sweat and ax by degrees in favor of the weeds and the ice on the pond. We is salt moving through the body, any body, every body, geologies large and small.

\textsuperscript{21} The “\textit{strange stranger}” is Timothy Morton's formulation of the Harmanian Object and the Nagelian Bat—the inherently unknowable Other, whose otherness/strangeness we should respect for its fundamental, unknowable otherness: “We can never absolutely figure them out. If we could, then all we would have is a ready-made box to put them in, and we would just be looking at the box, not at the strange strangers” (Morton 41). It is a way of reducing species hubris by acknowledging that we can't know everything. So far do I travel with Harman, Nagel, and Morton, but Love becomes an other thing entirely if one were simply to leave it at that. Love is personal.

\textsuperscript{22} Lowenhaupt Tsing 37

\textsuperscript{23} “The short story cycle's form enables a radical challenge to singularity in point of view by repudiating the idea that a single narrative voice or characterisation should drive a text” (Smith loc 114).

\textsuperscript{24} Nicholson Baker
\textsuperscript{25} Werber, Thoreau
\textsuperscript{26} Jane Bennett
\textsuperscript{27} Thomas Nagel
\textsuperscript{28} Janna Urschel
“Shall I not rejoice also at the abundance of the weeds whose seeds are the granary of the birds?” —Henry David Thoreau

2) You Can Help Who You Love

You can help who you love: love more. Love more widely. Like you did back when the stream was a Naiad and you loved her and had her babies, so that the world was populated by human-stream babies. Hybrids. Meshes\(^2\) all. And the willow was a goddess, and the Echo in the canyon, and the Eagle, and the Earthquake were gods. When willy-nilly actancty\(^3\) was everywhere, in everything. And those things weren't Things, but became each other willy-nilly, or, at least, so says Ovid,\(^4\) and also Athabaskan peoples, and the Guarani,\(^5\) among others. In your infancy you yourself knew how to love as these still know how to love.

But, for the West, along came the Enlightenment. Here is what 18\(^{th}\) century logic wrought and equally what it forgot:\(^6\):

Man Said: What is this really? How does this work? And why? So Man went on a mental shopping trip to The Box Store. He worked out categories and began to put things into them: starfish go over here, and ferns over yonder, and ne'er the twain shall meet. And this rock is metamorphic and that sedimentary, but neither shall go anywhere near the pretty Linnaean system. And here is Man, the Great Me, who, through divine fiat, has figured out these lovely categories, and therefore gets a category unto Himself, *anthropos*, which is unassailable by starfish, or ferns, or sedimentary rocks. Only God is higher, said He. And, also, shut up, Darwin. Or, alternately, “I'll show you the fittest! So 'drill, baby drill!'”

Nothing escaped this rage for organization in service of the excellence of the Mind of Man. Even poetry. But poetry, as it often does, led the van out through a Nature\(^7\)-sized escape valve called Romanticism. It's only now that you're finally catching up to the

\(^1\) 106
\(^2\) Morton
\(^3\) An activation of Bruno Latour's term “actant,” a nonhuman, associative alternative to the anthropocentric term “actor.” I understand by “actancty” a state of agency that is not predicated on conscious will, but on the capacity for action nevertheless, the property of being able to cause change and alteration that can encompass human agency as well as the way a rock that has rolled downhill changes the course of a stream.
\(^4\) *Metamorphoses*
\(^5\) Danowski and Viveiros de Castro
\(^6\) To be clear, what follows is a brusque summary of the primary cultural inheritance from the Enlightenment as it manifested under capitalism. Many other fine modes of thought were generated during this time, but, alas, the really good ones weren't as sexy to regimes of power. The current, ascendant, Western way of being owes its debt much more strongly to Descartes, for example, than Spinoza.
\(^7\) Nevermind for now the problematic capital-N Nature. We'll put it to rights shortly as Wordsworth often did of his own accord, if not reliably.
poets who knew us to be
  “One Household, under God, for high and low,
   One family and one mansion …
   Human and brute, possessors undisturbed
   Of this recess, their legislative Hall, Their Temple, and their glorious
dwelling place”\(^8\)

The brute lived in your Household, brokered your politics. With Latour, let's make that present tense. The brute lives in your Household, brokers your politics. While you've been taking your pretty time catching up to Wordsworth, you" took a serious detour down the Cartesian rabbit hole, and hard: “while I decided thus to think that everything was false, it followed necessarily that I who thought thus must be something.”\(^9\) In one fell stroke, Descartes situates himself as the fulcrum of all creation. If you must admire language, admire the elegance of those syllogisms. Mind\(^10\) here, body there, and you can do as you will with spirit and essence so long as they don't trouble Mind much. Long live the Mind! Such was your tutelage under Enlightenment philosophy. You may have forgotten your Latin declensions, but mind-body separation is a lesson you've found quite useful for justifying all kinds of inanities.

That's one way to tell the story of \textit{anthropos}, the other is older. God said to man, “here, take it, it's yours to do with as you will,” and man said, “yeah, okay.” The end. Thank you, Old Testament.\(^12\)

\textit{Anthropos} has justified itself by cognitive facility, linguistic capacity, by technology-wielding, by brain size, and skin color, parentage, and capital. Mostly, \textit{anthropos} is justified by ruthlessness.

There's a reason we say it in Greek, besides pretension. Val Plumwood urges you to put yourself in context. The You I address is that Western European You with Your institutional forgetfulness and colonial rapine.\(^13\) It is an illegal “we” that lumps all cultures into responsibility for the disaster that is the \textit{Anthropocene}.\(^14\) \textit{Anthropos} is Western culture, the European inheritance that goes on fucking other cultures, cultures that more truly deserve to be called “enlightened.” Amerindian cultures, for example, by and large consider the original state that of a universal personhood, of which \textit{homo sapiens} is just one example among many, so that interactions between groups of peoples,

\(^8\) Wordsworth, “Home at Grasmere” Ins. 822-828
\(^9\) We address here a “you” who, whether you accept its tenets or not, have cut your teeth under capitalism and sucked at the milk of a Western culture that has largely leaned into American utilitarianism.
\(^10\) Descartes 53
\(^11\) Not so much your wet noodle as certain habits, repetitions that you call Self, abstracted from the very serious work We do laying down pretty little neuronal fibers and shooing zippety electrical currents across them, thank you very much!
\(^12\) My translation was maybe cribbed from Spark Notes.
\(^13\) See esp. \textit{Feminism and the Mastery of Nature}
\(^14\) “The \textit{Anthropos} of the Anthropocene is nothing but the dangerous fiction of a universalized agent capable of acting like a single humanity” (Latour, \textit{Facing} 246).
of the two-legged and other varieties, are cultural exchanges between societies or political entities, and “environment” is therefore instead a “society of societies.”

Imagine if, by default, your language itself simply handed out animacy like New York special tour leaflets, to all and sundry, and it were weirder for Things not to be alive: “In Potawatomi 101, rocks are animate, as are mountains and water and fire and places. Beings that are imbued with spirit, our sacred medicines, our songs, drums, and even stories, are all animate. The list of the inanimate seems to be smaller, filled with objects that are made by people.” In English, by contrast, much as your pronominal poverty denies clusivity, so too does it enforce an arbitrary and hard line between the human and nonhuman: “Our grammar boxes us in by the choice of reducing a nonhuman being to an it, or it must be gendered, inappropriately, as a he or a she. Where are our words for the simple existence of another living being?”

Or, further, where are our words for our existences as assemblages of living and non-living beings that pass through each other? Deleuze perhaps takes us the farthest in this regard, with his haeccties, and becomings-animal, and unto becoming-imperceptible to pass through and with everything/everyone. Heidegger and Derrida, as well, worked to proliferate what the copula can do, though even with their litanies of “beings” and their assertions of “with,” could not not quite escape anthropocentrism, could not yet consider the “becoming-lithic” of our own mineral kinship, the calcium of our bones, the sodium ions of our neurons, or the other “becomings” that we enact daily, as with Latour's actors, a constant social shuffle of “becoming-virus,” and “becoming-tar sands.”

You don't need to be trapped in the confines of your own mental machinery! Dare to be your own Copernicus! Revolution is overdue! Long ago you were no longer the center, but you still fear the edge. Because no matter how many circles you draw through your ecologies, the cosmos, through your own atom, you still think in lines: arrows of time, nested branches of hierarchies. Straight lines lead to finite thinking. Thinking your own

15 Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 69
16 Wall Kimmerer 55
17 Ibid.
18 279. Deleuze's greatest limitation, perhaps, is that, aspire as he might to the contrary, he still frequently also falls into a Cartesian trap of binary thinking: machinic vs. enunciative assemblages; the arborescent vs. rhizomatic; molecular vs. molar, etc.
19 Heidegger multiplies the possibilities of relation with his “what-being,” “that-being,” “being such and such,” and “being true” (358), just as Derrida mulls over the proper relationship to his cat: “Being after, being alongside, being near … being-with … being-huddled-together … being-pressed” (10), and most especially “being-there-before-me” (11).
20 See “Action Potential,” this collection
21 Gould
22 Wrong you are, Eduardo Kohn, to naturalize hierarchy in Nature based on the image of a tree, a river. Wrong about hierarchy, wrong about capital N Nature, wrong about your linguistic analysis of what is merely onomatopoeia. Deleuze would slap your wrist for hewing so faithfully to the arborescent, the above-ground, without digging deep enough to mind the rhizomatic, the networking of the fungi that fuel the trees, and consequently the whole cyclical life of the forest, whereby the life of the apparently sublime tree is worth no more than that of the decomposers who will eventually return it to humus. Who is the apex predator now, who is
end has created a great deal of mess, even if it does help you to understand your own contingency. If you think always in ends and boundaries, you can never master Primer Rule #1, let alone achieve this, #2. Sad to think that despite those fabulous creases and foldings, I still know more than you. Sad to think on how amorously-challenged you really are.

Astrida Neimanis gets it. Water, salt, proteins, silica, round and round, through and through. *Anthropos*, like your I, is an illegal bounding, a calcification in convention, in the language, that makes You smaller than You are. A Species Ego. An ontic Ego. Capital I We. Karen Barad gets it: You claim your objectivity illegally. You are part and parcel. You don't exist until the cut is made (yes, passive), and the cut that calls you “Human” can be made anywhere. Bruno Latour gets it. If “*Anthropos*” is the architect of the depravities of the Anthropocene, learn to cut it differently. Throw off Your Human in favor of your Earthbound. Redefine what You Are, and Your place and its relations change as well. Lines, but networked, not nested; curlicued, fuzzy, not rigid. Your available decisions change. In these new-cut forests of entanglement with their new relations of agency, maybe We can be no longer “a signpost to help you drill, baby, drill,” but “an art of communication that drives your every moving cell.”

But We are something. Some Thing. We are Some Thing worthy of taking into consideration as a force in our own right, irrespective of your uses for Us. We are Some Thing capable of generating response, and therefore something worthy of responding to. We are as active, as full of being as you, your shoe, your shoelace, the stair, the

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23 “The arche-fossil enjoins us to track thought by inviting us to discover the 'hidden passage' trodden by the latter in order to achieve what modern philosophy has been telling us for the past two centuries is impossibility itself: to get out of ourselves, to grasp the in-itself, to know what is whether we are or not” (Meillassoux 27). In brief, because we can conceive of our own pre- and post-existence, i.e. our finitude as individuals, as species, as anthropos, we can grasp our own contingency, and therefore be humbled by the fact that we are not the all, and things could well be otherwise (the speculative).

24 “With a drop of cliché, I could remind you that our human bodies are at least two-thirds water, but more interesting than these ontological maths is what this water does—where it comes from, where it goes, and what it means along the way. Our wet matters are in constant process of intake, transformation, and exchange—drinking, peeing, sweating, sponging, weeping. Discrete individualism is a rather dry, if convenient, myth. For us humans, the flow and flush of waters sustain our own bodies, but also connect them to other bodies, to other worlds beyond our human selves. Indeed, bodies of water undo the idea that bodies are necessarily or only human” (Neimanis 2).

25 “If the apparatus is changed, there is a corresponding change in the agential cut and therefore in the delineation of object from agencies of observation and the causal structure (and hence the possibilities for 'the future behavior of the system') enacted by the cut. Different agential cuts produce different phenomena” (Barad 175). “[N]either is it simply the case that agency should be granted to nonhumans as well as humans, or that agency can be distributed over nonhuman and human forms. What is at issue, rather, are the possibilities for the iterative reconfiguring of the materiality of human, nonhuman, cyborgian, and other such forms. Holding the category 'human' ('nonhuman') fixed (or at least presuming that one can) excludes an entire range of possibilities in advance, eliding important dimensions of the workings of agency … Cuts are not enacted from the outside, nor are they ever enacted once and for all” (Barad 178-9).

26 Latour, *Facing* 248

27 Response, it's not just for humans any more. See Derrida (8), Barad (392), Haraway (22).

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Department of English, the internet, your pet Shih Tzu. All of these Things are active, are doing, are growing, shifting, changing, affecting. In different measures, at different rates, but all are equally beings with doings. Equal in the eyes of ontology. It is only hubris that says your wet noodle has more impact on the doings of the universe than Our irrefutable Love. Your wet noodle would be only an inert lump of gelatin without the zing of electricity We allow it. Your Chain is not so Great after all.

Here is where Graham Harman and his ilk are right. The Subject/Object divide is the root of the Man/Nature divide. Self/Other. Actor/Acted-on. Doer/Done-to. Agentive/agencyless. We are all equally objects. Your agency a priori is over-rated and largely composed of the actions of others, like mine, as We are also bound by your actions. Our influence is mutual because we are ontological equals, entities ultimately weighed equally on the scales of what it means to be. And so goes the Great Chain of Being that places Man on the tippy top, which he sometimes calls God because God happens to look like him, go figure. Lovely Tower of Babel that You've built. But gravity is a bitch. You'll understand each Other better if you knock it on its side and let the stones commingle in the rubble. In the doing, We are also the Done-to. Thanks, Newton, for that. For every action, and so on. It's right there in the physics, in the maths.

It is hubris and hubris alone that makes you think yourself of greater import, impact, or agency than the stuff of your computer keyboard, which comprises some very ancient cycads, ferns, and ankylosaurs, and the rising force of hot copper-bearing sulfur solutions. It has lived as many lives as you, from its formation, its deaths, its recyclings, its minings, and manufactures. It has as much wisdom. It is more than you and your use for it. You call this a “flat ontology.”

At least you are now asking some of the right questions, putting things in the right orientation towards each other, even if you struggle to figure out what to do next. These things, what can they know of each other, even if you struggle to figure out what to do next. These things, what can they know of each other, for example? What can we really know of them? We are back to Enlightenment Square 1, or, as Bruno Latour insists, we were never really Modern to begin with. Or, with Astrida Neimanis, we can say further, we were never really Human. May you always struggle to know what to do next. If you are

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28 Heidegger, for all his work to overcome the subject/object divide and the many missteps of modernity erected on Cartesianism, yet posits a hierarchy of “worldedness” that gives man a greater share of it, animals a lesser one, and rocks no claim at all (177). He grants equal beingness to all, and even acknowledges value in the specific type of beingness nonhumans possess, but humans do not, but then further predicates levels of beingness related to degree of access to other beings and to curation of Being, his Dasein, and there We think he is wrong.

29 You give it many flavors, from Steven Shaviro's Panpsychism to Graham Harman's Object-Oriented-Ontology. Personally, I'm a fan of Steven Shaviro: “human perception and cognition have no special or privileged status, because they simply take their place among the myriad ways in which all actual entities prehend other entities. Prehension includes both causal relations and perceptual ones and makes no fundamental distinction between them. Ontological equality comes from contact and mutual implication. All actual entities are ontologically equal because they all enter into the same sorts of relations” (loc 504).

30 This makes Graham Harman uncomfortable. He likes Thingness. Nounness.
struggling, if you are running into Trouble, increasing the complexity, you open the door to Love. When you make things too simple, with your boxes and your hierarchies, and especially with your dualities, there is only ever You, always there in the boxing and splitting. There can be no room for an actual other, let alone an other-as-you.

Here is where Graham Harman and his ilk are also wrong. We cannot be opaque because We are permeable. All may be equally objects, but they are equally related, equally co-determining, run through each other. Harman gets himself in a bind over aesthetics for the simple reason that aesthetics is relation, however loudly he tries to scream that it's not. He must have the escape valve from so much inaccessibility. It therefore becomes the lynch-pin of his theory. Philosophies get into trouble with their first exception to the rule. It is only in language (how right Chomsky was to call it a “box”!) that the boundaries are truly drawn. Nouns. Adjectives. Better to follow Borges into Tlön and verb, relate.

In case We haven't been clear: Get over Yourself.

You/We are one species among 8.7 million, a compilation of 60 of the 92 chemical elements that make up the universe. You/We are as arbitrary as the primal grunt you call yourself by. You are contingent. You are a math problem. So says Quentin Meillassoux. If you weren't paying attention while we bared our soul in “11,” we happen to agree. Bond, attraction, balance; it's all maths. Which is not to say that love is mechanistic, or to knock free will. Complexity, infinity, aesthetics.

Yes, aesthetics, and not just art, but a peculiar Kantian-type form of openness to wonder, to being moved by enchantment of the Bennetian flavor, even of Harmanian allure. To entering a zone of contact created by the experience of beauty. Not of the sublime, that

31 Haraway
32 Latour
33 NaCl
34 See Harman, The Quadruple Object
35 Or better yet, that it is math that urges us outside ourselves, so long as we allow that those maths are also contingent. See Meillassoux 26, e.g.
36 “Enchantment as a state of openness to the disturbing-captivating elements in everyday experience. Enchantment as a window onto the virtual secreted within the actual” (Bennett, Enchantment 131).
37 A sideways-type of access for otherwise mutually inaccessible beings that call to one another at a distance. Harman's concession to relation (despite his vigorous denials), as well as his first principle. See Harman, “Aesthetics as First Philosophy:Levinas and the Non-human.”
gargantuan redwood,\textsuperscript{38} that awe-ful mountain, that lovable dog,\textsuperscript{39} that big ol nasty whale,\textsuperscript{40} but of small, simple, beauties.\textsuperscript{41} Or even of ugliness and discord, likewise small and simple.

But I've not done yet, it seems, with anthropos. It seems anthropos has some use left in it, in this at least, as aesthetics, as figure. I propose to you therefore an aesthetic trick to help you get over yourselves that, ironically, involves going deeper into yourselves, an extra dose of \textit{anthropos}: anthropomorphism! Oh, dirty word! Sin against objectivity, reason, and good writing! Oh, you children! Yes, children! Come, children! Play! Gilles Deleuze, Jane Bennett, and Catherine Donly say so!

Don't just take it from Us: Jane Bennett, Steven Shaviro, Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro all prescribe a healthy dose of inhabiting others as ourselves as a necessary empathetic practice and bridge into multiplicity.\textsuperscript{42} “To say that everything is human is to say that humans are not a special species … Each object or aspect of the universe is a hybrid entity, at once human-for-itself and not-human-for-an-other, or rather, by-an-other. In this sense, every existing being, and the world as open aggregate of existing beings, is a \textit{being-outside-of-itself}.”\textsuperscript{43} Salt, anyone? Ian Bogost would say “yes, please, pass it! He goes farther even than others, advocating for pan-metaphoricity, not just anthropomorphism, but multiple morphisms daisy-chained from each object to the next, for tree-morphizing ourselves, for tree-morphizing that ant, and ant-morphizing that

\textsuperscript{38} I'm talking to you here, Richard Powers, with your ur-tree, your rallying point, your singular, sublime monument of tree-ness alone capable of generating collective action and response at last, to David Attenborough with your vast and awe-wrenching Naturescapes, and to Margaret Atwood with your apocaly-scape of horrors or Morton's love affair with the dark and the hyper. Eco-fictions, yes, fictions with others, yes, but these are not the stories we need. These are big stories with big protagonists. What we need are small stories, mundane stories, of wonder and ordinary, everyday, dingy, raggedy love. See Rule for Loving #4.

\textsuperscript{39} Here is where you fall short, Haraway and Woolf. Dogs, as you know, are already half-human. You can do better, think more strangely.

\textsuperscript{40} “Man versus whale,” however, is a fallacy of the uninitiated public imagination, which misses the whole point of the work (which is also not at all a “novel”). The captain and the white whale really only get a chapter (the last) and they disappear underwhelmingly to the sea bottom. All else is sea and weather and toil and motley crew of men and whale anatomies and whale behaviors. Were it not for the captain's obsession, it would be the most flatly ontological book I can name, though the captain's obsession functions as a nice foil for the two worldviews. It shows us our inheritance and our objective in one neat tome.

\textsuperscript{41} “Beauty is appropriate to a world of relations, in which entities continually affect and touch and interpenetrate one another, and that sublimity is appropriate to a world of substances, in which entities call to one another over immense distances and can only interact vicariously” (Shaviro 719).

\textsuperscript{42} “A certain cautious anthropomorphism is necessary in order to avoid anthropocentrism” (Shaviro loc 1023).

“A touch of anthropomorphism, then, can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations” (Bennett, \textit{Vibrant} 99).

 “[W]e are of the opinion that anthropomorphism should be granted full philosophical citizenship” (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 71).

\textsuperscript{43} Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 72-3
trampoline, so that it is “not turtles all the way down, but metaphors.” How do we see each other? Imagination is key. This is one, but not by any means, the only, use for aesthetics as praxis. Careful, of course, not to mistake the performance for the reality. Working to conceive how a trash bag might experience a drainage ditch, putting the drainage ditch in terms a trash bag might understand, is not the same as a trash bag's actual experience of the drainage ditch.

You don't know me.

It's not that I'm inaccessible, but I am a little wondrous, a little mysterious. Yes, Harman, your experience of me will be incomplete. But don't stop trying. Love. Keep loving.
“Of course what I felt then as an ape I can represent now only in human terms, and therefore I misrepresent it” —Franz Kafka, “A Report to An Academy”

3) What Does the Fox Say?

Seriously. “Fraka-kaka-kaka-kaka-kow!” is as good as any other translation. As is “Gering-ding-ding-ding-dingereding!” Ylvis gets it. The fox has a lot more to say than “moo” or “cluck.” So do the cow and the chicken. The point isn't what the fox actually says, but the question, and the play. Our mouths aren't fox mouths, it's true Thomas Nagel. We can't say the things the fox can say, but we can sure play and laugh at ourselves when we get it seriously, playfully wrong in the attempt. Because we will always get it wrong.

We could just not attempt. What business is the fox of mine? Or the bat, or salt, or the Potawatomi, or Richard Wright.

But nihilism gets you nowhere. Nor libertarianism. Isolationism. You can say these words, but they are arrogant fallacies. We are the bat and the salt and the Potawatomi and Richard Wright. All of these things live our lives, pass through us and away and back again. This is not to say we understand them. Certainly not rightly. Not as they understand themselves. But we share their network, we jiggle the strands of each other's meshes, this Gaia where we are all imbricated regardless of our personal tastes or ideologies.

So we might as well try to learn to speak to each other a little better. This is where those twisty, noodly brains do come in handy, and where the sciences play their best role. Not Science. Not that mechanistic Ideology that purports answers. Fact. Rightness. Ends. No, we've done with anthropos, thank you. But sciences, tools we can see as tools that help us ask better questions, to help our playful wrongness circle a little closer to understanding. These we can use to learn about bat sonar, salt kinematics, the polysynthetic structure of Gwich'in. Maybe not poetry.

A soft wind at dawn
Lifts one dry leaf and lays it
Upon another.

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1 253
2 Ylvis, “The Fox (What Does the Fox Say?).”
3 Ibid.
4 You have gotten me wrong, but I don't hold it against you.
5 Latour
6 Ibid.
7 Richard Wright, Haiku: This Other World, 39, pg. 10
Something should always aspire to hewing just outside the sciences' reach. But you have
that plane, too, and it's called aesthetics, a call that pulls you, allure, that connects across
a gulf. We'll need that, too.

If you can agree to work on being a little less anthropic and a little more earthbound, then
it turns out you're not entirely hopeless, and I've got a job for you. And it pays. (Did I
mention the nonogamy?)

If you really want to learn what this Love stuff is all about, then you must learn to
translate. This is your new vocation.

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**Position:** Spokesperson  
**Number of positions available:** 7,577,130,400

**Job duties:** This position is responsible for making speech prostheses available to a wide number of actors, which might include, but are not limited to: calcium perchlorate, orangulans, the Hoover Dam, red ants, black ants, recycled plastic bags, toothpaste supply chains, social scientists, and the Kuroshio current.

In addition to assisting other entities with appropriate speech prostheses, the Spokesperson is responsible for making sure these entities have a forum in which to speak and be accounted for. This may include bringing them to legislative forums for the collection of an assembly.

**Qualifications:** The ideal Spokesperson will be one with demonstrable experience playing both well and badly with the following range of techniques, including, but not limited to:

- translation
- betrayal
- falsification
- invention
- synthesis
- transposition

A Spokesperson must be capable of doubting both their own fitness as Spokesperson and the project of speaking for others.

Candidate with background in earthboundedness strongly preferred.

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The good news? You can start right now. From your living room. In your pajamas. It pays in good lovin'. It's a universal currency. Better than bitcoin or even Robux.

I won't lie. It's work. Real work. Hard work. And there's no end to it. Are you sold yet?

Here is a translator at work:

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8 Harman  
9 Borrowing heavily from Latour here in *Politics of Nature*, e.g. pg. 64. Formatting added.
I start on my investigations, but I can't find the right place to begin at, and though I cut a few trenches I do it at random; naturally that has no effect, and the hard work of digging and the still harder work of filling the trenches up again and beating the earth firm is so much labor lost. I don't seem to be getting any nearer to the place where the noise is, it goes on always on the same thin note, with regular pauses, now a sort of whistling, but again like a kind of piping.  

And here is another:

Your job is to alter perception. It is to restructure reality. It is to multiply the voices (bodies?) we can hear (smell?).

You've already been given the toolbox: that wet noodle, those somewhat limited five senses, that extraordinary imagination, the funny things you do with your mouth. Time to see some of the other ways you can reorganize your world besides playing Dr.

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10 Franz Kafka, “The Burrow” 343-4
11 Belenitskaya 36. Image used by permission of publisher.
Frankenstein with the dinosaurs\textsuperscript{12} and species freeze tag.\textsuperscript{13}

Not so many things speak English. Even English speakers can have a frightfully hard time making themselves understood to one another. But you speak more languages than you know. Your senses register communications well beyond the human. Through its ability to affect and be affected, its affectivity, every thing can be said to communicate.\textsuperscript{14}

Francis Ponge!

There is much to say about soap. Precisely everything that it tells about itself, when one chafes it with water in a certain way. It also looks as if it had much to say. May it say it, then. With volubility, with enthusiasm. Until the disappearance by exhaustion of its own theme. When it has finished saying it, it no longer is.\textsuperscript{15}

Size, weight, heat, color, movement, sound, smell. All of these communicate to us about the thing from which they issue. They tell us things. We interpret them. \textsuperscript{16} And where your own sorry senses fail you, you extend them with telescopes and CT scans, with sonar and PCR, with calculus and string theory. \textsuperscript{17}

Use art and sciences, numbers, colors, language. Give yourself the freedom of inexactitude. There is no other way to begin.

Language, it's true, is tricksy. \textsuperscript{18} But it is yours, so use it. Back to that time of the Naiads, before these things were written down, before Samuel Johnson put the kibosh on invention. \textsuperscript{19} Try as he might to pin them down, the fit between the edge of a category which a particular word defines, or phrase comprehends, and the corresponding edges of real objects and events in the word are frightfully inexact and therefore frightfully fun to

\textsuperscript{12} Will you just let them rest in peace already? I mean, how much tupperware do you really need?
\textsuperscript{13} Spoiler, but you won't be the last one standing...
\textsuperscript{14} With all due respect to Heidegger, “In lieu of an environment that surrounds human culture, or even a cosmos that cleaves into three ecologies, picture an ontological field without any unequivocal demarcations between human, animal, vegetable, or mineral. All forces and flows (materialities) are or can become lively, affective, and signaling. And so an affective, speaking human body is not radically different from the affective, signaling nonhumans with which it coexists, hosts, enjoys, serves, consumes, produces, and competes” (Bennett, Vibrant 116-7) or perhaps you'd rather hear it from Latour, “As long as they are acting, agents signify” (Facing 70).
\textsuperscript{15} Soap, 27-8
\textsuperscript{16} “Listless, they [flora] spend the time elaborating their own form, perfecting their own body, growing towards ever greater analytic complexity … their one concern is to fulfill their self-expression … they wait for someone to come and read them” Ponge, Nature, “Flora and Fauna” 51
\textsuperscript{17} “We only know the world through the mediation of prosthetics—there is no ‘pre-mediated’ state to get back to … both a sensitive fingertip and a DNA sequencer, are sensory apparatuses that give us information about the world … Language, cosmology, ideology, and corporeal imaginaries equally serve as mediating prostheses that open certain experiences for us, but foreclose or restrain others” (Neimanis 61).
\textsuperscript{18} “Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low” (Woolf, Lighthouse 202).
\textsuperscript{19} Not his fault. He was trying to be helpful, I'm sure. But one of those Box Store Enlightenment consequences was that widespread literacy pushed the slo-mo button on linguistic innovation.

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play with. Ask Derrida, that most marvelously frustrating model for gnawing at the limits of language-world correspondences and pushing through them by breaking language apart from the inside and reassembling to suit his needs. Words and swords, they cut. Use them responsibly. Therein you etch the hard lines of your ethics. “The animal,” Derrida decides, should continue to designate a particular, singular, unique organism. It ought not, however, operate in the “general singular,” illegally grouping together a broad category, Animal, used to enforce a dichotomy over against, say, Man. Instead, let us say “l'animot,” the word animal, the animal word. A monstrous word for a monstrous concept. As well can we say, “l'hommot,” the word man, the man word.

Groan as you may in the face of the proliferation of neologisms, especially in the humanities (ontology, hyperobject, body-without-organs, anyone?), but they keep us on our toes, discourage the calcification of mental habits, remind us that language is a) malleable; b) historical; c) contextual. Groan as you might about the postmodernists, they were certainly on to something there. And if we truly want to aim for some kind of access to nonhuman experience, we need a little more “Fraka-kaka-kaka-kaka-kow!” And Francis Ponge, again!

[H]ow will I talk about it, then? Not loquaciously, of course, as it is not yet time for such festivities. But simply, after having detached it with difficulty from its saucer, to turn it over in our hands. Nevertheless, the kind of hardness it proposes to us already justifies, perhaps, a less rigorous way of speaking, less abrupt. Yet it will still be necessary that each phrase, based on a concrete expression of its reality, be valid for it alone, mean nothing in regard to any other object. Finally, that one always be aware of it as being in hand, i.e. that its perfume, say, more or less vulgar, persist until the end of the discourse, and not leave this hand while it is writing, that it continually reach as far as you, dear Reader.

Adequation! The medium of translation must be invented anew for each of its objects,
appropriate to each of them. The thing speaks, in its own language, but Spokespersons must find the best way to render that language. Must renegotiate constantly. Play, play again, never stop playing.\textsuperscript{30} Translation cannot be a single account, once and for all, but must be polyvocal, multimodal, mutable, in time and space. Render the subject. Render it again. High, low, slow, fast, near, far. In shade and light and upside down. Use four dimensions, five. Your object is justice. And it will still be partial.

It can only ever be partial. You must say that it is partial.\textsuperscript{31} You must say yourself saying. Point to yourself; step out from behind the curtain. Introduce yourself. Say, “It is I, translating!” There is an I, here, just now, speaking behind and within the speaking things.\textsuperscript{32} You read in translation. Bad, bad translation!

But first, before you begin to render, Slow the Fuck Down!\textsuperscript{33}

Before you begin to speak or art or science, you must listen and listen well. See and see well. Hear and hear well. Smell and smell well. Taste and taste well. Feel and feel well. Imagine and imagine well. Or, if not well, thoroughly. Slowly. Notice. Pay attention. Pay attention to your subject and to yourself paying attention. You are entering new territory, someone else's house. Observe their customs. Before you even dream of access, be witness.\textsuperscript{34}

Before you let loose the full force of your lexicon, let things speak to you in their own

\textsuperscript{30} “[T]he eco-narrative’s only real directive is finally quite simple: to apply concepts from play theory to the act of storytelling and then to play with those concepts. Rather than outlining set rules, infinite play merely presents narrative (whether rooted in self-narrative or in fiction) with an invitation to move in unforeseen directions—shifting narrators, blurring the distinctions between humans and nonhumans, and transitioning freely between tenses, languages, locations, and time periods (to name just a few ideas)” (Donly loc 661, emphasis added);

\textsuperscript{31} “[T]he experience of sensual joy in the nonliteral open of play might underlie the possibility of morality and responsibility for and to one another in all of our undertakings at whatever webbed scales of time and space” (Haraway When 242, emphasis added);

\textsuperscript{32} “Enchantment is something that we encounter, that hits us, but it is also a comportment that can be fostered through deliberate strategies. One of those strategies might be to give greater expression to the sense of play” (Bennett Enchantment 4, emphasis added);

Anybody notice that all of these theorists are women? We did.

\textsuperscript{33} Don't listen to Wordsworth because he's been a Western Canon MVP these last 150 years, but because he knows himself to be merely a “translator,” and a bad one at that: “However exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of the character of the Poet, it is obvious, that, while he describes and imitates passions, his situation is altogether slavish and mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering” (604).

\textsuperscript{34} “The storytelling equivalent of “deep play” is a documentation of the nonhuman other that does not seek to possess or manipulate the other—never professing to have access to the other’s interiority, but beginning, instead, from a place of respectful witnessing” (Donly loc 646).
languages, with or without words. Let them grab you and move you. Become uncomfortable. Feel yourself the alien. Lost and strange.

Then and only then, experiment.35

You are called upon to invent words or shake them by their raggedy edges, like Ponge's "amphibiguity"36 or Bryant's mug that "blues."37 Remix morphemes. Make nouns verb and verbs noun. Onomatopoeiate. Hyphenate. Make your middle school English teacher properly mad. Screw off punctuation, subordination, reference, parts of speech.38 Push on your language until it begins to bend and break and become something other. Give each thing its own dialect.

You are called upon to get free and loose with anthropomorphism and ant-morphism39 and plastic-bag-morphism. Lie on your side in the grass. Turn up the amp. See things close and far. Stick your nose in them. Close your eyes. Be a body. Reach out through your many bodies. Open your many bodies to the many bodies around you.40

Use metaphors. Let things be other things, share their properties, exchange qualities. See them through each other's eyes. If you are Harman, you will say this is the only way for us to glimpse anything of the other, to run each other through other filters and so approximate, come close, allude.41 These things, they reach out, alluring, calling. In metaphor we heed, give voice to the echoes we hear of things in other things, the "flame" of the "cypress."42 Calling attention to these resonances is how we will see ourselves in other things and those things in us. Metaphor is the root of aesthetics, says Harman, and aesthetics is at the heart of how things are in the world to each other.43 And Bogost, Harman's faithful disciple, must carry it one step farther. Insists on metametaphoricity, displacing the cosmic stack of turtles with one of metaphor. All the way down. We can

35 “The deliberations of the collective must no longer be suspended or short-circuited by some definitive knowledge, since nature no longer gives any right that would be contrary to the exercise of public life. The collective does not claim to know, but it has to experiment in such a way that it can learn in the course of the trial” (Latour, Politics 196).
36 “In this froggery, this salubrious amphibiguity, everything gathers strength, hopping from rock to rock and away to another meadow.” “The End of Autumn,” Ins 18-19
37 Loc 1317
38 For some fun experiments of this type, see, e.g. Eugene Garber, Vienna ØØ and Christine Brooke Rose, pretty much anything she's ever written.
39 Sorry, Thoreau, but I'm going to send people rather to Bernard Werber's epic Empire of the Ants.
40 Neimaniis, but also Megan Mayhew Bergman, esp. “The Cow That Milked Herself,” where woman, woman parts, machines and machine parts, animals, and animal parts, all step in for each other interchangeably, and any story by Kelly Link, where dogs can be handbags, and cities and people can be in the handbags, and people can be animals and paint colors and times of day and wear different skins and generally completely upset any kind of ontological systematicity.
41 Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything
42 Ibid. 72
43 Even as he strenuously dismisses this as any kind of authentic relationality. We still, he says, must be fundamentally strangers to one another.
never truly get to the heart of what is because we are always distanced by metaphors, allusions. Strangeness. So yes,

Make it all strange. Make it wondrous. Make the old new and the familiar devastatingly awkward. Take nothing for granted. Enchant your toothbrush, the plastic bag, the Covid Commission Planning Group. It is a Romantic endeavor through and through, the mission “to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way.”

To value things rightly, you must learn them newly in a context beyond their use value to you. Tools must be broken to see what they are really in themselves, what they are made of, when they are not in use in your hands. Take a page from Franz Kafka, from Kelly Link, from Virginia Woolf, and H.P. Lovecraft, for all his faults. Make the world wobble at its seams, turn back on itself. Make humanity a doubtful, uncertain thing with a doubtful, uncertain place in the mystery. Do not try explain the mystery. Not fully. Have some humility, and maybe some fear, because you cannot.

Fight disenchantment. The sciences, yes. They ask questions, they Wonder with the best of them. Wonders open the door to more wondering. Science, no. I give you Jane Bennett's call: to slow down, to suspend time, to be transfixed, spellbound, rapt in childlike fascination at the small, ordinary wonders of the mundane, to really really look at gutter trash and to hear its story. To know that it does story. To open yourself to surprise and disruption. To allow yourself enchantment. Not to pull the curtain all the way back, but to let yourself be taken in, sometimes, by the wonder of the Other. Bennett and Morton will disagree on many things, but not on the value of the strange.

So, Spokespersons, make your translations wonder-ful and weird. Use estrangement and defamiliarization.


But always remember that they are limits. Always remember that this is translation. You are a mediator, not an intermediary. You change things. You inject yourself into them. Your translation is ant, and also you. Your translation is a hybrid. But it is a way in. It is an access node. It makes expansion possible. It makes Love possible. Romance, Passion,

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44 Wordsworth 597
45 Heidegger will only take us as far as equipment qua malfunctioning equipment. I say, let's take the hammer apart yet further to find the tree in the handle and the cooled magma in the head and claw …
46 “The disenchantment tale figures nonhuman nature as more or less inert ‘matter'; it construes the modern West as a radical break from other cultures; and it depicts the modern self as predisposed toward rationalism, skepticism, and the problem of meaninglessness” (Bennett, *Enchantment* 7). This is, of course, aimed squarely at Horkheimer and Adorno in particular. While much of Bennett's analysis of the problems of modernity is apt, however, she could stand to read Horkheimer and Adorno more closely, since her criticism fails to adequately comprehend the nuances of their project.
47 This is what happens when you hybridize Derrida and Latour.
48 Latour, *Reassembling* 39
even. Now We are getting somewhere.

“It is exactly this way that writing must be thought of: not as the transcription, according to conventional rules, of some idea (exterior or anterior) but, in reality, as an orgasm: as the orgasm of a being or structure, let’s say, conventional to begin with, of course—yet which must fulfil itself, give itself, exultantly, as such: in a word, to signify itself.” — Francis Ponge, Soap 96.
Loving: a Manifesto

"I found myself suddenly neighbor to the birds; not by having imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them" —Henry David Thoreau

4) Tell Better Stories / Tell Stories Better

I told you to forget Dick and Jane. Do you remember? Of course not. Dick and Jane are how you have told yourselves to yourselves for centuries. The 1950s book series just gave it voice, distilled those centuries of praxis into its essence. D and J are how you story. It is noun, verb; subject, object; a doer (human, white) does something. There is a whole lot of vocative, commanding you to “See!” these white children at their doings. They have their gender roles and their dog. They encounter their little human problems. Their adventures come to nice, easy conclusions. That is your story grammar.

You can do better.

You have changed (you need to change). You can no longer be Man Against the World or Man Against Man. The Hero’s Journey, the Bildungsroman. These narratives need to be filed in the same deep, dark back of the drawer as your other chauvinisms. They can not aspire with Us to be Earthbound.

I'm talking about plot, bay-bee! I'm talking about the basic premise of Creative Writing 101: conflict. I'm talking about years and years of fiction workshop dogma: there is no story without conflict. Men said this. Women acquiesced and then they started saying it too because millennia of “canon” is hard to kick off the shelf effectively. Ursula LeGuin gave us a way to kick harder, or rather, to stop kicking and simply build a new bookcase that looks nothing like a bookcase, but is instead a “carrier bag,” where we can stow other stories that we have been telling all along, but aren't told quite as loudly, those that tell of relationship rather than conflict, mending rather than overcoming. But even more than feminine, the future is infantile.

The idea that nothing happens, nothing changes, without conflict, is wrong. Humans may be creatures that feed on drama like a vampire on blood, but I would like to think You are capable of more than a supporting role in Twilight. Your life needn't be sustained by the misfortune of others, nor your attention. You were fed by mother's milk, a cyclical transubstantiation food to life.

Your homework is this: go watch children at play. If you watch carefully, you will see what Catherine Donly did: children's main interest is in keeping the story going and in

1 Or aren't birthed into the literary world with quite as many silver spoons between their teeth
building community. Left to their own, at least when they aren't enslaved to mass media, children's imaginative realms are ultimately more cooperative than conflictual. Endless conflict means endless ends, and the objective is not to end but to keep playing; to morph seamlessly between characters, now human, now not, like good little pagans, to add characters and players, to visit new realms, to widen the circle in an ever expanding ring.

Yes, ring. As in circle. Not line, not pyramid. Not Freytag's tidy geometry:

![Freytag's Triangle](image)

Or, better than circle, make it a mesh, a rhizome, a rush of lines and curves and loops:

![Rhizome](image)

The problem with straight lines is that they begin and they end. They have no way to open, to circle back and revisit, to reflect the basic law of the conservation of matter, or that we have seen this all before. Experience is recursive. The neat forward march of Freytagian plot recapitulates the fallacy of the arrow of time, which recapitulates

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4 “[B]y infusing narrative with the philosophy of infinite play—” she says, “namely, the desire to keep a story going for as many of its characters for as long as possible—the eco-narrative explicitly foregrounds ecosystemic goals over individual ones” (Donley 17).

5 Too tidy

6 Morton

7 Deleuze

8 Lowenhaupt Tsing

9 “[T]he collective obliges us to slow down, that is, to re-present, again and again, the pains of the progressive composition of the cosmos” (Latour, Politics 187).
problematic narratives of “progress.”

For Deleuze and Guattari it is the arborescent tree, branching from root to tip in careful lines that declares existence once and for all, asserting a “to be,” while it is the experimental probing of the rhizome that pops up unexpectedly, proliferating an “and … and … and …”\(^{11}\) This is workshop wisdom regarding the difference between story and plot as well.\(^{12}\) Story is the “and … and … and,” a sequence of events that follow one another. Plot introduces whys, causes, consequences. It answers questions. We mean to ask them, to keep telling through the long winter. The point is not why K’etetaalkkaanee paddles, but that he paddles and keeps paddling and what he encounters along the way.\(^{13}\)

The plot model operates on telos. Plot has an ending because it has a destination. And it has a destination because it sets up tension in the form of conflict, an x versus a y. Both cannot prevail. A decision must be made. Something must be overcome.

K’etetaalkkaanee has nothing to overcome. No single objective that once it is achieved he can hang up his oars and call it a day. He explores. He encounters. He builds his spiritual power as he interacts with animal-people. This is why he is called “The One Who Paddled Among the People and Animals.” He is action, verb-in-motion. He is literally, grammatically, a “we.” His true name is private. The animals' names are private. It is a violation to give oneself the power of true names. Instead, names and purposes are given obliquely. The story itself is told in a special register, ripe with figuration. It is playful and profoundly allusive.

K’etetaalkkaanee is a guest in animal homes, who are nevertheless his “grandfathers” and “cousins.” Sometimes he helps, sometimes he's a jerk, sometimes he kills his hosts. He is not a hero. But he is often hungry. Those he slays are not monsters, except, perhaps, the cannibal woman. He enters many stories, he moves on to the next and the next and the next. It is infinite play whose only objective is to keep the stories going,\(^{14}\) to keep the long winter at bay. In the end, he is birthed into animal being as a pine grosbeak. It is neither triumph nor defeat. It is simply metamorphosis. An opening to new possibilities.

Conflict means something must win and something must lose. Conflict means dichotomy, me and you, us and them, he and it. There is no room here for passings-through, cohabitation, temporary mutualities, fuzzy categories, imprecise language, messy assemblages.

Even the sciences, says Bruno Latour, are inherently narrative.\(^{15}\) We can't help but story. Visually, linguistically, numerically, it is how we make sense.

\(^{10}\) To say the least
\(^{11}\) 23
\(^{12}\) Burroway 260-1
\(^{13}\) Attla
\(^{14}\) Donly
\(^{15}\) Facing Gaia 56
Ironically, the most anthropic of all stories, those of the modernists, with their obsessive attention on the individual consciousness, opened some possible ways forward for Western Earthbound stories as well. They shifted the objective for story from that of “conflict” to that of “change,” and not only the big changes: birth, marriage, death, but little shifts of attitude or realization. All things change constantly, so this is good news for narrating the nonhuman/more-than-human worlds, i.e. the Earthbound’s affective objects.

But our debt to modernism doesn't end there. The modernists also peddled the open-ended, especially in short stories. They were maddeningly\(^\text{16}\) allegiant to eschewing neat closure. This can make them frustrating, or even depressing, to read, but better reflects lived experience and disrupts too-neat dichotomies of protagonist-antagonist, happy endings and just desserts.\(^\text{17}\) Think Hemingway, Joyce, Woolf.

The open allows for more fluid relationships to time. It allows in-dwelling,\(^\text{18}\) meditation, recursive movements, exercises in deep time, interpenetrations of past, present, future. If we are to reach beyond anthropocentrism, we must tell stories outside the human lifespan. Even stories of generations, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The Bible*, *Cloud Atlas*, cannot mark the scope of geological forces, the shaping of continents, the births and deaths that are evolution and extinction. The lithic, the cosmic, there are stories there, but to take them in, we need to change how we story.\(^\text{19}\) These stories are less about “why” than about “that” and “that” again. The modernist short story can be our guide here in how to make stories about becomings rather than events, evolutions rather than closures.\(^\text{20}\)

This is true of individual short stories, which bucked the tradition of the novel by defamiliarizing the everyday, violating social norms, and disrupting expectations of form,\(^\text{21}\) but even more so when narratives are multiplied: nested, like Scheherazade’s, helical,\(^\text{22}\) like Jennifer Egan's,\(^\text{23}\) reflecting the “historical mess of lived experience,”\(^\text{24}\) the

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\(^{16}\) Thankfully

\(^{17}\) “Ultimately, the novel necessitates a conclusion, while the cycle revels in the anti-ending, the ellipsis, the new beginning; consequently, the short story cycle often portrays perpetual temporality. This perpetual temporality connects with the genre’s treatment of identity as in process. Cycles dismiss unities of time in favour of exploring the way time expands, contracts, and shifts in relation to perspective” (Smith ch3 loc 33).

\(^{18}\) For Lawrence Buell, Thoreau is a model of eco-conscious writing because he creates “image-events” for “slow internalization,” whose effect is a “suspension of purposiveness and possessiveness,” a more pure, authentic, less utilitarian encounter with others in ecology (155).

\(^{19}\) “The ecological project of thinking beyond anthropocentricity requires enlarged temporal and geographical scales” (Cohen 9).

\(^{20}\) May 200

\(^{21}\) “The short story breaks up the familiar life-world of the everyday, defamiliarizes our assumption that reality is simply the conceptual construct we take it to be, and throws into doubt that our propositional and categorical mode of perceiving can be applied to human beings as well as to objects. The short story, more than the novel, presents the world as I-Thou rather than I-It” (May 137).

\(^{22}\) Smith loc 110

\(^{23}\) *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

\(^{24}\) “The cycle is particularly apt for rendering what Paul March Russell calls the ‘historical mess of lived
fact that “life is a loose, flowing thing. There are no plot stories in life.” This is the advantage of the “short story cycle,” sets of stories that connect through character, time, place, or theme, but don't usually share a traditional central plot as such. That is, they are webs, networks, assemblages. Sound familiar?

And, like an assemblage worth its salt, cycles act as actor multipliers. “The short story cycle’s form enables a radical challenge to singularity in point of view by repudiating the idea that a single narrative voice or characterisation should drive a text.” It is Edward Said's polyphony realized. It is a way to disrupt the Solipsism Drive, to tell ourselves enmeshed, networked, transcorporeally. There can no longer be a single protagonist about whom a single conflict centers.

Jennifer Smith points out that short story cycles emerge during times of upheaval, when a culture is wrestling with the formation of a new identity, emerging chrysalis-like, with discomfort and effort, from the old. Here is one method for birthing the Earthbound within You. Tell more stories, tell the stories of more, tell them more truly, and all together now, People. Not because a magical “clarity and unity” will emerge, but precisely because short story cycles, or better yet, multimodal creative cycles, encourage the expression of fragmentation, recurrence, and disorientation. A cycle shuttles between forces of unity—that which holds the stories together, their relations across the boundaries of individual tellings—and fragmentation—that which separates the tellers and their tellings, their apartness, their unto-selfness. In other words, cycles let Deleuzian adherents to relation and Harmanian adherents to objects play with one another and build together. Dare I say, do a little carpentry.

Story can be philosophy, too. And like the best of philosophy, it should say a little something about how things are. Story laughs pretty heartily at strict divisions between ontologists and materialists. Story, good story, says things are what they are, and also what we know them to be, and also something entirely unpredictable. They have essence and substance both. At least I know I do.

Poetry is rolling its eyes because this is something it's known for a few centuries. We have much of it from the Romantics that paints the way in those suspended, enchanting moments that can turn things on their heads:

When from behind that craggy Steep, till then
The bound of the horizon, a huge Cliff,  
As if with voluntary power instinct,  
Upreared its head. I struck, and struck again,  
And, growing still in stature, the huge Cliff  
Rose up between me and the stars, and still,  
With measured motion, like a living thing,  
Strode after me.\(^{30}\)

We have much to learn here, of slowing down time to observe closely, activating metaphors, of giving a nonhuman actor their due and the impact of motion and affect, of setting a variety of actors into relation, of defamiliarization and the uncanny. Let us do more of this. Let us do more than this. Let us stop reserving these encounters for the sublime. Let us activate these moments yet further, draw them forward, set them in motion, see what falls out of the meetings of our actants.

Story is a meeting place. “An ethical machine, story intensifies relation, even with the nonhuman, and therefore offers the best hope we have for moving in whatever tentative way we can beyond anthropocentrism.”\(^{31}\) Story is a place for encounters, for testing out voices and relations and understanding that which lies within and beyond us.

How we tell ourselves to ourselves has consequence. What parameters you give yourselves to tell yourselves by affects the You you comprehend yourselves to be.\(^ {32}\) Change the stories to change yourselves.\(^ {33}\) There you will find your Earthbound. If you want to learn Loving, learn to tell Love stories rightly. Not boy meets girl, not star-crossed, not unrequited, not just flesh sacs and monogamy. Expect trouble. Make trouble. Cross outside the comforts of meaning. Go so far into the West that you may just have to come back around East, where what you have to cling to is only the Way.\(^{34}\) The Ways. Our many, many ways, and our many, many stories that fold into and back through each other.

Now, perhaps, you can let yourselves into our We.

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\(^{30}\) Wordsworth, “The Prelude,” pg. 385, lns 405-412

\(^{31}\) Cohen 36

\(^{32}\) “[O]ur age is threshing about desperately for a way out of individual human isolation, and … our present art forms are not adequate to it” (May 266).

\(^{33}\) “[R]eassessing one's place within the larger biotic community requires the fashioning of a new self-narrative” (Herman 26).

\(^{34}\) e.g. tao
Genesis 1:1

genii cohere in the deep
take shape from vibration
touch,
the only episteme, authoring
in a chemical syllabary
of slap and drag

slap and drag
unmaker unmaking
with a grey hiss
well and slop
scrape and chunnel
viscous relentless
remaker remaking
slap and drag
heave and slosh

gathering all, the all-fluid
before and after gathered all:
befores + afters, nows + nexts
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