

Reflections on the Spirit of Place

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Image: *The Cosmic Door*
Photograph and Graphic Art
by Amanda Barton

The *Between Journal* has been designed
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T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

<i>Introduction</i>	6
Letter from the Editors	

Home

<i>Weaver of Wiles</i>	9
Caitlinn Curry	

<i>Heavy Hometown Air</i>	15
Jessica Hyatt	

Earth

<i>St. Thomas's Squares</i>	20
Akinke Lucas	

<i>The Lovely Maiden of the Fields</i>	24
Rodrigo Ruiz	

<i>The Do</i>	26
Romona Thomas	

<i>What Do We Do About the Rocks</i>	33
Dylan Young	

C O N T I N U E D

Water

<i>The Endless Sea</i>	42
Irv Hansen	
<i>Courtship with a Creek</i>	44
Signe Porteshawver	

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Traversing the betwixt and between of our shared realities, that of the “real” world and the world of academia, requires resolve and deserves respite. With the liminality of our times, we invite you to get lost in the spirit of place with the *Between Journal*’s 23rd issue.

Having worked in concert with the *Mythological Studies Journal* early on to develop themes that would serve our collective navigation of the pandemic and quarantine, we invited our authors to submit creative pieces around the concept of “genius loci,” or the spirit of place as it was known in antiquity.

More specifically, we offered Ken Wilber’s Four Quadrant model as a potential framework to explore this motif. The Four Quadrant model opens portals into the psyche of the authors’s relationship to “place,” and offers a means for one to imagine into the “I,” the “We,” the “Societal,” and the “Cultural” experiences of an environment, both literal and imaginal.

We are proud to present these thoughtful and meditative pieces to the student body and are most honored to have been given the gift of reading, editing, and designing this interactive edition of the *Between Journal*.

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HOME

WEAVER OF WILES

A STORY OF HELEN

BY CAITLINN CURRY

Aphrodite, weaver of wiles, queen of lust, maiden goddess who belongs to no one but herself: if you have ever held me in your grace before, I beg you, listen to my story now. Just this one time, sweet lady of the froth and the foam. Just in this single moment, precious Cyprian. For it is you that have led me here: to the greatest of tragedies which is my fullest of hopes. You have forcefully gifted me with the most valuable of treasures and yet branded me with the most incomprehensible of scars. It is with you, Aphrodite, goddess of passion, that my soul has found her truest companion and her greatest nemesis: it is because of you that I have met the world in all of her splendor, and yet it is because of you that I watched the walls of that glorious castle crumble through my fingers like dust. Hear me, Aphrodite, weaver of wiles, for I tell this story to you.

Even still, there is little certainty in me that this story is my own to tell, because there is little certainty in my mind that my body and my life and my narrative truly belong to me. All my life, I, Helen, have belonged to another: to the god, Zeus, to my father, Tyndareus, to my husband, Menelaus. To my lover, Paris. To one city,

Troy. To another, Sparta. No choice was given to me, I was not asked if I wanted to marry the man who had sent his handsome brother instead, I was not asked if I was ready to feel him inside me, I was not asked if I liked him at all, I was not asked if there was anything I desired, I was not asked if I wanted to be beautiful, I was not asked if I had wanted fame. Indeed, I had not been asked if I wanted to be born, and for the rest of my life, I was subjected to that which I had not consented. And hence, all my life, I resented all that to which I was given, because it represented all that had been taken from my soul.

My body.

My voice.

My power.

My freedom.

When Menelaus took me from my father's home, I was indifferent. I was neither excited to leave nor excited to stay: indeed, goddess of lust, I felt nothing. I felt neither dead nor alive, neither awake nor asleep. I was a ghost, a shadow, a muslin shade. I was an offering, a pact, a truce, an edict, an object, a pawn, a game piece being moved across the board by cold hands who saw me as nothing but a trade route. I knew I mattered for naught but the guiles of men and was valued for nothing but the pleasure my beauty brought them. I had known this all my life, been groomed like a show horse to be bred. I had decided to fight it, and when I did, I found that I had no sword: for swords, my darling queen, are not made to be held by maidens.

I did not hate Menelaus, but I likewise did not like him. I loved him in an odd kind of way: as time went on, I began to cherish our friendship, occasionally enjoy our conversations over dinner, and not necessarily dread the time we shared in our bed. He became a fixed person in my life, like an old, familiar painting on the wall that one does not have the heart to take down, a body I did not yearn to have in my sheets but whose warmth I was grateful for. He was aesthetically pleasing, and yet, my heart did not race when I saw his flesh. I would not forsake him, but he was not the crux on which my life hung. I was not happy, but I was not sad: I truly felt lifeless, a privilege that most women never have the opportunity to experience.

Where were you, you, Aphrodite, weaver of wiles, goddess who stirs the heart and the loins, and why were you distant? When life in Sparta was lonely and cold?

Your silence was deafening.

But, then again, so was my own.

He came on a diplomatic mission, or so they say. I cannot be certain, because they also said that he came because you--you, Aphrodite--told him to, and because he had a dream in which I reached out to him and drew him into my arms, to Sparta. Others say it was because I went to him in a dream, called to him, seduced him, and others say that my aching heart was reaching out for help, and it was his soul that heard me. Some say he came because he wanted to see if those rumors of my beauty were true, and others said it was to prove to his father that he had value, skill, that he was not merely a frivolous, flaccid body taking up space. Whatever the case may be: the truth was that one day he was not there and the next day he was, and my life could never return to the emptiness that was before his form filled the void.

He was tall, lean, muscular, broad-shouldered, and yet, there was something soft about him. Deep brown curls framed his face, and a thick, oiled beard clung to his jaw like a dark lover. There was something about his thin legs that pulled me to them, something about his proud chest that made my breath flutter, something about the sun catching on his smile encased by thin lips that muddled my vision. I was, for the first time, glad it was not my place to speak.

You ask why, goddess? It is simple.

What would I say?

When I next saw him, I grew nervous, though I had merely glimpsed his frame drifting through the halls of my husband's house. He was speaking softly with another man I did not recognize, and his low voice was melodic, his laugh hearty and round. Dark wisps of hair curled around his ears, and as he walked, he almost hunched, as if he was mildly uncomfortable with and deeply self-conscious of how much space his tall, lean body consumed. And yet, it almost seemed that he knew he was beautiful; almost like he knew his sweet eyes and tender

smirk would make any woman's mouth water. My heart leapt to my throat in a way that it had not done in all of my years.

Still watching him, I pushed myself into the crevice of the hall, pressing my body up against the stone as if trying to force myself back into my mother's womb. I yearned for that cave, the sweet grotto where the warmth and closeness of another's body was safe, and innocent; where my instincts beckoned me to only one thing--remaining cradled in contentment and the sweet, harmonious froth and foam of my mother's inner being.

Alas, I could not be unborn, I could not return to a past version of myself, a version of me untainted by the addictive highs of love and lust. Now that I had a taste, I would never be the same: like a wolf who had devoured blood for the first time, I was crazed, fixated on consuming more. Like a wolf, I watched him walk away. I was hungry, like a wolf. And, like the wolf, I lurked in the shadows, out of sight, out of mind. Alas, I was the lamb, the lamb who was being fattened to be sacrificial and to be slaughtered, so I hung in the shadows until my flesh, once more, became cool to the touch, and I returned to my loom in a flustered daze.

Secretly, silently, I squelched the flowering tension to howl.

I tell the truth when I say that I did not try to stop it. Indeed, I would tell lies if the story I told was one where I was faithful. But I tell you now, goddess, that I am proud of the choice I made: I am proud because I, dear goddess, weaver of wiles, I, Helen, picked up my shuttle and a strand of yarn and I made a *choice* to weave my own fate. Do you hear me, Goddess? *I made a choice*. I pulled the neckline of my tunic lower when I knew he was coming, I let my glances linger on his face, I let my eyes rake across the coals of his body, I let my mind explore aimlessly, imaginatively, over the labyrinth of his olive skin. I did not hide my wandering gaze, I stood close enough to him that he could not deny the swell of my breasts or the pregnant, saturated air ripe with possibility that clung between us.

Slowly, slowly, slowly.

With each moment, I became more powerful. With each gloriously crisp sunrise that crawled up the cusp of the earth and each sunset that slumped down behind her, I became bolder. I became stronger. I became fuller. I felt the frozen blood in my veins melt and begin to pulse once more. Time lifted her skirts, and exposed me to myself.

Paris.

His name was Paris.

Paris, Prince of Troy.

Even his name tasted sweeter than honey wine, even his name was so ripe it filled my mouth with more than I could swallow.

At first, it was nothing. A glance my way. The nervous bob of his throat. Even still, I fought to crush the guilt that rose within me: more than anything, I wanted to revel in the mystical wisp it was to desire and to, perhaps, be desired in return. And yet, this was Menelaus' house, and I was Menelaus' wife.

Or was I? Did he own me? Or did *I* own me? They say I was Menelaus' wife, and that is true. But what is also true is that I was my own, and I owned my desire.

Who said I could not be the wife of Menelaus' *and* Paris' lover? Was it you, weaver of wiles? Surely, it was not. For did you not taste the mouth of Ares in the bed you shared with Hephaestus? Did you not dance with the sultry winds of adventurous lust in the warmth of your own home?

Then, it was a crooked smile. A glance tossed over a shoulder as we passed one another. A look that was so swollen with longing it was unmistakable.

And then it was a flower. A brush of his hand against my own. A gentle, simple finger sweeping a curl from my eyes.

Everything within me roared.

The beast, the beast scratched at the walls of my ribs, her claws tearing at the walls of my stomach, her teeth tearing at the walls of my mind. She longed to be free, to devour me, to devour him.

And goddess, sweet Aphrodite, the crafter of legs that twine, it hurt. The pain was agonizing, crippling. There were two of me existing at once: the wife who belonged to Menelaus who was *there*, who felt *nothing*, and yet had naught a complaint, and the Helen who belonged to *no one* but *herself* and she raged to be free. And

both, both of these women were true, Aphrodite. Both were me. Both were whole. And I loved them both.

Alas, both led their own lives, completely void of the other. They stood on each of my shoulders, unmarried, unwhole. I was a chasm. The space between my selves was unreconcilable.

I became tired, weaver of wiles. Tired deep into my bones. This game of the feuding matriarch and patriarch was exhausting, and my body ached. My back screamed with pain, my legs groaned with each pathetic step taken. My eyes burned when open and scratched as if coated with sand when closed, and, O Goddess, I was tired. Tired of it all. Tired of the confusion. Tired of the split. Tired of the darkness.

“Helen.” His voice rumbled from behind me, and my skin pricked. I turned to see his eyes rasping over my skin like the rough cat of a tongue, affectionate, yearning, stripping away the filth which soft palms cannot scrape away. I lowered my head to him, but peered up at him through my long lashes. Was he mortal or god? Was he hero or villain? Was he right or wrong?

All of them, I knew in that moment as I watched the strong lines of his jaw flex and clench. Both. Neither.

He took a step towards me, and I did not move. His eyes bored into my own, not like swords, but rather like an all consuming, sanctifying fire that yearned to ingest me whole. I kept my eyes on his, a rainy gray that seemed almost to not exist. I watched as they wandered down to my mouth; I watched as he parted his lips slightly and swiped across them with his tongue, I watched as his neck flushed and his toes curled against the floor. Wordlessly, he held out his hand, and, without hesitation, I took it. And I turned, and I led him down the hall to the cave that was my chamber. And goddess, in that moment, I pretended that Menelaus’ wife did not exist, and, with a deep breath, I turned the key and I bolted the door.

Suddenly, I was lost in a hurricane; arms twisting around me like a grasping tornado, kisses showering me like rain, touches swirling around me as if I were being subsumed into the entrails of Charybdis. He was hungry, devastatingly so. He was dying, and I was salvation. He was a man, and I was divine. His strong, soft hands with their lean fingers tangled in my hair, pulling back my head. His towering form pressed me against the cool stone wall and frantically, trembling, tore at my clothing, desperate to enter into the snaking corridors of my secrets.

It was the first time in my life that I was worshipped, and I reveled in the glory. And when he, mere mortal, could bask in my unhindered presence no longer, we lay tangled in the sheets, smiling, his fingers tracing the length of my arm.

Before I could chain them, before I could bar them into the cell that resided within my chest, words began to pour out of my mouth. Carelessly, they dropped off my tongue, falling and crashing to the floor like ugly, unhammered lumps of steel raining from the sky. I was ashamed, for what were my words worth? As they spilled out, seeds wasted on barren ground, I begged the gods, wherever, whoever they might be, to help me grab them from the air and put them back in my mouth and swallow them back into the recesses of my lungs from whence they never should have left. How was it that I, someone who was lifeless and formidable as a cliff made of stone was unhinged in the presence of a man?

But his softness and wit, the way he listened: these were the things that melted the walls of my defenses, that draped over the soldiers surrounding my city and tucked them under the wings of sleep. He was no hero, no man of glory, no god who sought power and treasure and left bodies scattered on the ground like sand. He was mortal: and in his mortality, he was divine. He was so unlike any other man that I knew. In the candlelight, eyes I had thought were a colorless gray shone a murky blue. They were lighter than I expected, and turbulent as they held my own. And in that moment, I knew it was not the gods who would save me, and nor was it him: it was I, and I alone.

This, *this*, Aphrodite, is the key.

For in those moments, where his curiosity warmed my skin, where, for the first time I stepped from the realm of Hades to be born into the light: this was when I realized that I *wanted* something.

I wanted to be *free*.

And I would use what I had, and do whatever it took, to get there. For freedom, she was calling me, she was caressing me, she was stirring up my hair and my breast and my heart and my *soul* was *crying out* to be touched and loved and *seen* and *heard* by her and I had

To
Know.

I had to know how she tasted. I had to know what it felt like to breathe in her air, to feel her lips on my own, to toss my hair in her breeze.

I realized then that *nothing* mattered as much as where love was pulling me: that, for once, I wanted to *desire*, to be led by my *yearnings*, rather than caged by the desire that others had for me.

I tried to ignore the whisper of his mouth trailing down my neck. My skin prickled at his touch. When had anyone ever taken the time to make me *feel*? I pushed him away, but I could not resist his lips hot on my skin. I could not resist the freedom that would come from shattering the two woman I was, picking up the shards of them, and creating something that was both me and yet more.

I wanted him, but more than that, I wanted her.

And so did he.

Tell me, O Goddess, would not you have gone with him, too?

Perhaps not, for I was not worth all the blood that my husband shed to bring me back.

I heard it said that it was the plains of my body, the rolling hills of my hips for which their mouths water, that sent their guts churning and their blood pounding under their skin; that it was *my* face that launched a thousand ships and *my* wantonness that killed many thousands more. I have been followed, as Nyx is followed by her train of clattering stars, by people blaming me for the pungent folly of lost men, for the broken wiles of the power-hungry, for the yawn of angry gods that swallowed innocence and mortality with little consideration. I have heard that it was my lust for Paris, and Paris' lust for me that started a war. I have heard that it was *me*. Me, one woman, one *silent* woman, who started a ten-year war. And it was me that murdered them all.

It was all my fault, weaver of wiles.

I killed them.

Oh, Aphrodite. Aphrodite. Why have you forsaken me?

Perhaps you have not. For there is something deep within me that simply...

Knows.

Knows that the lust was not for me. No, the lust was for power. Glory. Blood. The kind that comes from the penetrative blow of death and not the open maw of life. They say I was the most beautiful, the most beautiful of all women. That there was and is nothing more beautiful than me.

Perhaps you would have still left with Paris, O Goddess, because perhaps you, like me, would know that it was not truly for me that Menelaus came. It is not truly *I* who was the most beautiful. I see this now.

Truly, truly I say to you, O Goddess, they think arrays of horsemen, lines of soldiers, or columns of ships are the most beautiful thing. It is not me. It is not her. It is not love. It is not lust after another human, another heart. It is not even you, sweet lover, sweet weaver of wiles. Those who feel the drums of war pounding in their throat are driven by the beauty of treasure, power, battle. They live not to see the painted lips of a woman left behind in prints on their skin, but the blood of men painting the ground and staining Gaia's cloak. It is this, the stealing of one's life, that excites them more so than the stealing of a kiss. It is this, the sucking of one's blood, that excites them, more so than the sucking of my mouth. It is holding death in their hands and fondling it that strokes their soul, that gives them pleasure. It is not holding my form with their eyes or my hips with their hands.

It is sleeping with war.

I would not be truthful if I did not admit the romance of war as true. How, in younger years when my dreams were small, the wanton appeal of Menelaus' skin lustrous with sweat, seeping out the scents of leather and metal, the flash of emotion that church'd wild in his usually enervated eyes. It stirred up something within me: something primal, something fierce, something shadowy.

But I would also not be truthful if I did not admit this, too. Those black ships, the ones that the Achaeans brought over the rolling back of Poseidon's deep to Troy, they have followed me all of my life. They have swept through my dreams long after they finished sweeping the surface of the waters between Troy and Sparta. Their mouths speak to me, their eyes follow me. The flies, the sleepless eyes. They watch me. They greet me like old friends in my waking, and in my sleeping, and in my living.

Tell me this, Goddess, was I wrong? Was I wrong in thinking that even an ounce of happiness belonged to me? Am I truly to blame for what happened on the sands of Troy, or do the stubborn voices of men shirk the responsibility to me rather than bear it on themselves? Tell me Goddess, tell me it is not the truth? That it is wrong to leave a husband? That it was wrong to seek escape? That it was wrong to, for once, follow the tails of my desire into the rosy fingerlings of the horizon? That I saw the magnificent womb of the world smoking as it opened to offer my escape, and I dove in?

Was it not possible, maiden Goddess, the one who belongs to no one but herself, for me to be set free? Perhaps, Aphrodite, you will understand when I say this: that my loves were all true. My love for Menelaus. My love for Paris. My love for myself. None was more true, more real, more important than another. But, alas, one was more necessary, and so that was the one I seized by the hand to use as I wrenched myself free from a mold that no longer fit me.

Tell me, O Goddess, sweetest of lovers, queen of all lusts, am I Helen of Sparta, or Helen of Troy? Is one true, and one false? Or am I both? Just as the woman I was and the woman I am as I journey through life, and all the women I was before and will be in due time, are still me? The harlot and the queen? The whore and the beauty? The lover and the one filled with hatred?

I am all of these things.

I am Helen.

And, O goddess, sweet lady of lust, precious weaver of wiles, just know that I see you. Just know that I hear you. Just know that I *know* you. And because of that, I tell myself this: just know, Helen, Helen of Troy, Helen of Sparta, Helen of Paris, Helen of Menelaus, Helen of Egypt, Helen the most beautiful, Helen whose face launched a thousand ships, it is not you I resent.

It is them.

HEAVY HOMETOWN AIR

BY JESSICA HYATT

The summer she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, everyone flocked to Charleston to see my Gran. I, too, made the pilgrimage home, through jetways and crowded airplanes to find my way back to the city where I was raised. I always call it “going home,” stepping through the arrivals gate to the city where I only appear now as a transient guest once or twice a year. It has been nineteen years and several cities since I resided there, yet I still stubbornly call it my home. My city of origin. My place of manufacture. Something about being there, in the same spaces I occupied as a child, pulls me into a kind of time travel. I think for a moment that I can slip on a smaller version of myself that I left behind like so many clothes in the drawers of my mother’s home. I shrink and become a child again, my tiny legs dangling off of the edge of the white wicker furniture.

When I stepped out of the airport, the air was dense and muggy, like walking into the mouth of a giant creature. I felt myself grow humid as well as I waited for my aunt to pull up to the Arrivals lane. The sweat of my body created its own environment, swampy like the Carolina air. It mingled with my grief, and I was sure I reeked. *God, I need a shower*, I thought. When Aunt Kathy pulled up, she hugged me anyway, and I felt my shirt stick to my back. We forced smiles as we loaded my bag into the trunk. On the drive, we asked one another about work, the kids, and how the weather had been lately. We didn’t talk about the cancer. It would be rude to mention the invisible third passenger in our car. We both knew about it, so what more was there to say? The small talk ran out quickly, and we spent the remainder of the car ride in quiet contemplation. I looked out at the trees. The way to Gran’s place was lined with massive live oaks with limbs that arched over the road forming a tunnel. Spanish moss hung densely on the boughs as though it was pulling the trees down into a stooped position. If the masses of moss and ferns were removed, would the oaks straighten their bowed backs and grow upright? As we moved closer to the house, the trees parted and gave way to a small residential area. Past two churches, a tidy graveyard, and a new shopping center, we arrived at her house.

Much of the day passed in a sort of haze. I was there to say my goodbyes and make some memories, but we already had so many. Memory is elusive though, especially in a childhood place. I could hardly recall any specific events rooted to a date or time, because so many of them were rituals going back to before I can recall, like the annual baking of Christmas cookies. Some were just vague impressions paired with yellowing scrapbook photos. I wondered if I truly remembered them myself or if my ideas were only a patchwork of old photographs and the stories adults had told me. Her house was steeped in layers of shifting memories: years of family dinners, and knitting together, and eating melting popsicles in her screened-in patio. These memories bounced around the space and filled the gaps in our conversations. The air of her home vibrated with living history and

the tension of unspoken words.

As I sat with her on the familiar floral couches, my dad and Aunt Kathy busied themselves with various house chores. My dad had been there for the past week, fixing every part of Gran's home. He had fixed the guest bathroom sink, oiled every creaking hinge in the house, and weeded her garden to perfection, and now he was putting up fresh shelving in the craft room. For her part, Kathy offered us food every hour on the hour, as she'd always had a habit of doing, but in caring for her sick mother there was a sense of urgency. She needed Gran to need something from her, even if it was just a plate of reheated macaroni. Now, though, after the chemo, her favorite foods just made Gran queasy, so all of the feeding impulses were funneled towards me. I could escape neither her maternal fussing nor the piles of leftovers and sugary treats. The day passed in that way: a fog of rich southern food, vague reminiscence, and the ever-present weight of Gran's illness which had descended upon the house.

"It's like being at my own wake," Gran told me, when there was a lull, "It's strange to have a warning. I get to see all the well-wishers coming through my house to say goodbye." She stared out the window into the verdant green Carolina summer, with a pensive expression I couldn't quite place. That moment carved itself into my memory, in deep harsh relief so that even the erosions of life could not take it from me.

I don't, however, remember what I said in reply. Probably something starkly unimpressive, something like, "Yah, I could see that being weird," before following her gaze out to the garden. The rest of the day's conversations have been lost, faded into the ambient buzz of home.

As the hour grew later, each family member found their way to bed one by one. The last to leave me was my dad, who drank bourbon with me until his body was ready to rest. My body, too, wanted sleep, but I could feel my mind refusing it. My brain was still tumbling through the conversations of the day and the memories of all my years with my family like so many colorful balls in a bingo cage. Perhaps once I called up the correct combination of these floating thoughts, I could get lucky and finally go to bed too.

"Gee fifty-three," my brain would call out.

"Bingo!" And I would fall into a dreamless sleep.

Once alone, I took the bourbon bottle to myself and sat on the screened-in porch feeling the Carolina night closing around me like a damp blanket, warm and heavy and claustrophobic. My hair clung to the side of my face due to the humidity and sweat. I did not turn on the patio light, which would have revealed wicker couches, floral throw pillows, and an impressive collection of hummingbird-themed knick knacks. I chose the blue-black silhouettes of night instead. I had spent my day immersed in the busy air-conditioned world of my

grandmother, and I was ready to be consumed by the simple humid darkness. The screen surrounding her porch was the only thing protecting me from actually being devoured by swarms of mosquitoes which, I knew from a full childhood of living here, were stirring en masse in the air outside. I took another pull of bourbon and grimaced as the burn of alcohol traced its way down my throat, leaving in its wake a sweet syrupy footprint.

This is it. This is home. The dark and pregnant night which screams at me from all sides. The sound of the frogs and crickets buzzing, filling my ears.

When she is gone, what will be home? Will I find home in the wicker patio furniture or the inescapable damp heat? Can I hear my home in the roar of the treefrogs? They say that “home is where the heart is,” but in my experience love alone cannot make a place home. There is some deeper sense of recognition, coming not from the heart but instead from the pit of the stomach. It is a primal draw, like the moon has on the tides, something carved into your being before and beyond memory. Your ancestral land, your family farm, or your grandmother’s house, they all have this gravity that pulls the water of your body, your bile, your blood. You don’t choose your home any more than a bird can choose the egg from which it hatches. You simply feel it. Perhaps when we lose our matriarch, it will all just dissolve away. Her house will be sold, and the family will have nowhere to congregate. Home will become a diffuse object, an abstraction. My home will melt like sugar in hot tea and disperse into the Carolina night never to be seen again.

I could feel myself, too, retreating into pieces. My edges were dissolving into the moist air around me. My dewy skin could no longer hold me in.

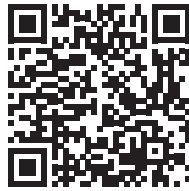
But I had stayed up too late, and I staggered inside to my place on the living room couch.

EARTH

ST. THOMAS'S SQUARES

BY AKINKE LUCAS

We invite you to scan the QR Code to listen to this piece.



Awareness is something that changes how you walk in life and how others perceive you to be. As a child who grew up in foster care, I struggled with the awareness of my gifts. I did not realize the power I held within my body that could help change lives. I have been writing since I was a wee tiny tot. Writing is a form of creating, and I am a creator! Creating is one of my gifts. Creating is given birth to what is already in you. Being aware of what is in me is essential.

Providing space for the internal me to flourish outside of me is a priority in my life. As a Coach, Artist, Writer, Spiritual Consultant, Drama therapist, and soon-to-be Psychologist. I create space for my clients to become aware of the greatness that is in them. I bring awareness to joy, laughter, and the potential for happiness. I am simultaneously being aware of the crucial reality. I give space for the greatness in them to flourish! This is who I am, and I hope you can see this through my work.

A sacred place for a foster child is hard to find.
Therefore, we create safe places in our fragmented minds.
Leaving doorway's open just in case you decide to step in
Given and sharing a trust hold that is buried within.

Thomas's builder once echoed his trains through the city in my mind.
no stops, no boarding, only waiting in line.
amongst billions of shadows quite like my own
no longer existing, always alone.
Memories of adult's shame, abandonment, not claimed,
Shadow children are the name of foster children's pains.

Faith hides us in St. Thomas's squares
Waiting to be rescued, waiting to be held.
As we wait, we build!
Squares that turn into doorways
Thresholds, then stairs.
Sacred places where safety hides
Sacred places disguised as bathrooms, closets places only we can fit,
Under beds in the dark where our shadows mix

Protection and freedom come through each wood plank-like air.
They stand on each side, Shango and There's
God and beast waiting to exhale.
Magic of love, lust, and fear.
Magic of survival, fight, and tears
Magic of shields and defense mechanisms.
But never a distinction of who is friend or foe.
I guess back to the shadows we go!

As time flows locks and keys
Labyrinth and riddles adjoin the path to the thresholds.
Yellow brick roads are paved with needles, bruises, and spoils.
No leftovers, no disciples, just pages from the Bible.
Litter the forest floor leaving nothing, but holes.
Decaying souls, soil that no one took the time to turn, to nurture, to love, to hold.

Eshu travels with the shadow children, always playing games.
Teaching them that a sacred place is no place for shadow pain.
For we create thresholds that go for miles.
Disguised in ancestral spirit, drunken off Generational milk and honey.
Swinging whips in the air, waving like we just don't care.
Forcing the shadow child back into hiding back beyond the squares.
Where spirit holds warm cups of tea and hot springs fed from Yemoja's breast
We build building blocks to symbolize a place of protection, a place of safety.
A reminder that foster children deserve a safe place to rest.

All thresholds are not squares, and all squares are not guarded.
Three meals and a cot is a prison where shadows children start to rot
So, look for runes, and sigils only you can see.
The mark of freedom.
A doorway to Be!
Blue Butterflies that morph into rainbows leading you to St. Thomas's squares
To a realm of possibilities, where yellow brick roads no longer exist.
Just Oshun and sunlight dancing in the mist.
Welcoming the shadow children from their journey
Drumming away layers of skin,
shedding like leaves revealing newness, oneness at the top of the tree.
For the spirit of a place exists not only in the threshold of the square.
But in the shadows underneath the stairs where the foster children play "love me if you dare"!

THE LOVELY MAIDEN OF THE FIELDS

BY RODRIGO RUIZ

Hailed as “an astonishing composing talent” (Apple Music), Rodrigo Ruiz regularly receives commissions from world-class musicians and ensembles that crave his “unabashedly tonal” (BBC Music Magazine) music. Behold the Stars, his debut, Dante-inspired album for Signum Classics—which features chamber music performed by Kerenza Peacock, Laura van der Heijden, and Huw Watkins—rose to #13 on the Billboard Classical charts.

As an avid reader of classics, he regularly engages with literary and mythological works, often finding novel ways to fuse music and myth. Rodrigo also writes about these subjects—music, literature and mythology—, a practice that led him to present “Immortal Mirrors: Homeric Gods as Psychological Personifications” at the Fates and Graces Mythologium in 2021.

Rodrigo is fluent in Spanish, English, Italian and French. In his spare time, he takes joy in the outdoors, reading, and cooking for family and friends.

I was perplexed, and—why not say it too?—
fair more than sad, though gladness touched my heart. A bitter-stained sweetness filled my days,
since love encompassed their togetherness.

Why had the maiden left the lad alone? The land was bountiful, the day a-glow, the season perfect for it all;
their looks, their hearts in tune with harmonising love.

Why were their eyes not filled with sad'ning tears the sunny morning when they took their leave? Wherefore the
young man, unperturbèd, stay,
as his heart's joy from him removed that day?

He should have gone a-chase! Why did you leave, O lovely maiden of the fields? And, where?

THE DOOR

BY ROMONA THOMAS

It was a hot summer night on the outskirts of Rachel, Nevada. My truck, a beat-up, pewter Chevy S-10 aptly named Old Gray Mare, my dog Jax, and I were rambling along the sticky, steamy, stinky asphalt. Jax, a four-year old, overweight mutt with the coloring of a beagle, and the long, short-legged body of a dachshund, and the determination and stubbornness of both was sticking his head out the window for the “fresh” air. At times he would howl like a baby coyote, then sneeze before whining and putting his head on the seat with his paws covering his nose, because of the stinky asphalt. Just as I was jamming to the song “Hotel California” the Old Gray Mare’s A/C died, which was why I was lamenting that on this dark, desert highway because we were using a good ole 2-80 air conditioner. You know, two windows down at 80 miles per hour so that the air could at least circulate through the truck like a huge convection oven. Lamenting too, that life’s adventures seemed over. Nothing out of the ordinary had happened in a long time. Radio blasting, dog baying and howling, and Old Gray Mare just chewing up the road while I sang off-key, loudly and with gusto, musing if I was already in Hell or close to it.

Several times, I elected to thrust my head out of the window with Jax, searching for that cool wind that the Eagles were singing about in their song. No luck. It was hotter than Satan’s armpit--and smellier too!. In fact, I swear the last sign I saw said, “Hell, 10 miles.” There was another name above it, but I wasn’t able to figure it out. I know it started with an “N.” Maybe it was Nowhere, or Nothing, or Nightmare, or Nemesis, or Nirvana, or maybe even Nekyia. Who knows? All I knew was it had to be something strange because Area 51 was fairly close. And strangeness means something out of the ordinary. So. . .

Rachel, Nevada, was the closest town to Area 51. It was home to the Little A’Le’Inn, little green men, and flying saucers. Pondering on those flying saucers, I glanced up in the sky. “My eyes are playing tricks on me, “ I thought because there WAS something up there headed down to earth. I peered through the windshield to obtain a better view. By durn, that strange object was hurtling, end over end, a loose, albeit much larger domino, and it was rotating too. Trying to wrap my head around both the hurtling and rotating, all I could think of was when you try to pat your head with one hand, and rub your belly with the other. It’s almost impossible. Yet this thing was able to do both. In utter amazement, I slammed the brakes on Old Gray Mare. She whinnied in protest. Jax’s pudgy body surged and bounced, turning a flip in the air, landing right side up on his blanket on the floorboard. His eyes wide with shock, he whined, the truck shimmied, the object in the sky continued to plunge toward us. What in the Twilight Zone of this world was that?

It was hovering close enough that I could just make out that it was a door. Hold on, a flipping door?! It was rotating like a UFO saucer, or more the more recent PC term, a UAP (Unexplained Aerial Phenomena), still flipping end over end. While my brain was puzzling over this almost inconceivable phenomenon of rotating and flipping simultaneously, it landed gently right in front of my truck, as if it had switched on the landing gear. How adorable and just my luck! Ya know, the person who invented the knock, knock joke should get a No-Bell prize!

Speaking of bells and doors, Jax and I were always scavenging for parts, this-and-that, or something else that somebody might want --- like railroad spikes, pine cones, old bottles, or found objects on the road like this door. Some might call me a hoarder, however I like to think that I’m hanging onto things until someone else needs them. Kind of like bringing home stray animals. Ya know, like foster care for misplaced or lost items before they find their future forever home.

Anyway, I threw the truck door open, clambering out with Jax on my heels. At first, I thought the door was glowing in the middle of the road. But as I got closer, the door was actually shimmering in an iridescent fashion that pulsated all the metallic colors imaginable in a harmonious fashion -- as if I was peering into the eyes of the Goddess Iris. This peculiar encounter reminded me of that old adage: “Our eyes are the windows to the soul.” Yet, this is a door...and a door that wants *me* to open it! Man, what a find! I could just picture Ms. Cassie, my friend and buyer of all things different and unusual, with her wide smile and open wallet. I can hear her now. “Oh, my God. I have to have it!” Yep. Better back up the truck and slide that strange bismuthian door into the truck before someone else shows up to claim it.

I got back in the truck. Jax had been whining this whole time, as if to say, “Mom, this is too wierd, I wanna go home.” I gave him a pat and told him it was going to be a great day; after all, we had the ultimate find. After Ms. Cassie purchased that unique door, we would celebrate with a ribeye steak. I backed up Old

Gray Mare as close as I could to that shimmering, iridescent door. Both Jax and I hopped out of the truck. We circled the door cautiously with my shoes and Jax's paws on the melted tarry asphalt sounding like cow's hooves squelching around in the mud.

Thanks to the blasted heat, that extraterrestrial door seemed to be melded into the asphalt with its hinges at the top or bottom of it, not like a normal door, more like a hatch. But then again, this wasn't a normal door. As my friend Amanda would always say: "Normal is a setting on a washing machine. So don't let the weird be washed out!" What weirdness could this door be? That door was made out of some kind of metal that I wasn't familiar with. Maybe bismuth, and copper or gold or maybe something otherworldly. After all, light spilled out from the door jamb like a glittering rainbow of luminescence. I tugged at what appeared to be a handle. It didn't budge. Just when I started to knock (while thinking about stupid knock, knock jokes), that polychromatic door slowly opened, like the hatch of one of those UFOs or UAPs that I jawed about earlier. I stepped quickly back; the dog whined with concern and scooted closer to me. I waited with bated breath until the door fully opened. *"What shall we see?" I asked Jax playfully.* "A portal to an unseen world? The jaws of a monstrous creature? The lips of a devilish angel? Who knows?" I thought with trepidation and awe.

What I did know, however, is that I wasn't too sure about encountering what might lie below that door, especially since my vision was obscured by that luminous numinous brilliance...at least I hoped it was sacred. Thanks to that luminosity, it was brighter than any day inside the cavernous doorway, even though the sky was exceptionally dark due to the New Moon. I inched closer towards that threshold full of golden, glistening, prismatic luminescence, hoping it wasn't hell with Lucifer, the Light-Bringer. However, Jax suddenly had no qualms whatsoever about the door's inner contents because he trotted assuredly down the stairs leading into that yawning mouth and barked at me in a confident tone: "Come on, what are you waiting for?" I really didn't want to go fetch Jax from those stairs. I'd had enough adventures in my life, like being the "Tie-Dye Bandit," owning a bookstore, working at a prison. Fables for another day. However, I couldn't just leave Jax. Ugh! I guess I had one last adventure left in me. I peered down the stairs. The light was so intense that I could not see past my hand. I hollered, "Jax, come here boy." As usual, the little goober just ignored me and yelped back one happy, excited bark.

I was thinking to myself that maybe, somehow, I was in the middle of Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit." or maybe totally down the proverbial rabbit hole. I knew I wasn't entering the lobby of Hotel California, but I still wasn't sure about being in heaven or hell. As I cautiously descended down the spiraling staircase, I caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror on the adjacent incandescently glittering wall. Gone were the old blue jeans, battered ball cap, tennis shoes, and tie-dye Grateful Dead t-shirt. Replacing this old hippie was a figure that could have come right out of the pages of Miss Fisher's murder mysteries. That curvaceous woman flouncing down the stairs in a 1920s flapper dress of teal and cyan with a little purple glitz among the sparkling peacock-inspired ensemble. With long teal gloves covering her hands and arms, gazing back at me from that mirror, was none other than yours truly. The person in the mirror had a bob and a hairpiece with a peacock feather. In utter shock at this exotic transformation, I halted so suddenly that I almost tripped and fell headlong down the elegant mahogany stairs with its ornate, Greek inspired balustrade topped with an equally classic mahogany rail. Without knowing quite what else to do, I sashayed down the steps, giggling as the beads swayed back and forth. A confused Jax, gingerly tiptoed up the stairs towards me. When he recognized me, he leapt into my arms, transforming into a manageable size that I tucked in the crook of my arm. Entranced with the graceful, scintillating movement of the beads, Jax stayed put.

At the bottom of the staircase, a handsome man in a tuxedo with a white ruffled silk shirt waited. As I drew closer, he said in the oiled, honeyed tones of a man that straddled the border between lawful and lawless activities. "Welcome to Hotel Nevada. All gaming is yours to enjoy." I glanced around. Sure enough there were baccarat tables, roulette wheels, poker tables, and the pungent clouds of smoke obscuring the losers and uplifting the winners. That cacophony of noise was a harmonious birdsong to my ears; a thornbird that sang so sweetly as it impaled itself upon the sword of addiction. It was more than tempting, but I replied in the soft-spoken, darling tones of a flapper, "Ahh, honey. I can't be here. I haven't gambled for almost ten years." Presto Change-O, my rejection suddenly prompted Mr. Slick to morph into the auctioneer barker that one would see at the county fair.

Suddenly warm buttery, heavenly popcorn, sweet caramelized sugar of cotton candy, and cinnamon fried dough aromas dislodged the cloying bouquet of cheap cologne, acrid smoke, and desperate sweat. Yet an unwelcome patina of the nauseating stench of barnyard animals shellacked my tongue and assaulted my nose. The flapper dress vanished, and in its place was a yellow checked dress like Fern in *Charlotte's Web* might wear to the county fair. This change in venue and a return to his original heft, prompted Jax to leap from my arms, run ahead, then scamper back to me, barking "come on slowpoke." Compared to the flapper dress, walking in this get-up was a piece of cake. I'll take a gingham dress over the weight of beads and sequins any day of the week, but there is nothing wrong with a little glamor every now-and-then. However, in all honesty, I'd rather be wearing my jeans. Keeping Sunday dresses and shoes clean while eating cotton candy, corn dogs with mustard, and cinnamon funnel cakes was nigh to impossible. Sitting like a lady with grace so my underwear doesn't show while riding the ponies or the midway rides took way too much effort to maintain. Not to mention the magpie, gossipy old biddies judging everyone. These were just part of that unwanted nightmare world. Throw in the muck and yuck of the animals, and no amount of fair games and midway rides could or would make it palatable..

Ahead of Jax and me was Mr. Barker, the auctioneer, who had replaced Mr. Slick. Surely, I didn't descend into no-man's land just to be tempted and to attend a county fair. I prayed fervently that I could leave this rural county fair of the 1950s. It was enjoyable as a children's story, but with both of my parents raised on farms, and forced to attend all of the county fair exhibits, I had no desire to attend another county fair in my life, EVER. At this moment in time, I wanted to explore exactly what was in this liminal space under the door. Not the dream or nightmare world, but the underworld. To escape from this 1950's *Charlotte's Web* county fair fiasco, I stood steadfastly in front of Mr. Barker, the auctioneer, while he was auctioning off a pig (hopefully not Wilbur because Charlotte supposedly saved his bacon by spinning words in her web) and attempted to get a word in edgewise. Finally, after an eternity just as soon as he said, "Sold!" I interrupted as loud and fast as I could. "This is a nightmare! Get me outta here!"

In a mere instant, Jax and I were seated on the cool, cavern floor, staring wondrously at the opalescent stalactites and stalagmites. Wow, this rainbow-colored mineral in the stalactites and stalagmites was bismuth. Usually, bismuth is found with copper or gold, never by itself, and certainly not as stalactites and stalagmites as it is too brittle. Yet here it is. After that doorway, nothing can surprise me. Struggling from that seated position on the cavern floor, Jax and I managed to gain our feet. Once again, I was clothed in my old jeans, ball cap, tennis shoes, and tie-dye Grateful Dead t-shirt. Now we could explore. With my right hand and arm I reached down to pat Jax's head with an assuring touch. Instead of petting soft, supple dog fur, I was petting the coarse, wiry fur of a coyote, one of my allies. Before I could comprehend that change, I heard a hissing sound at my left side, close to my feet. A snake, my dream companion and ally, slithered next to me. For lack of more intriguing names, they are known as Snake and Coyote. Well, I suppose there was still some magical mystery in this underworld cavern because when I asked Snake and Coyote if they would guide me to wherever I was supposed to be headed, they warmly exclaimed, "Yes!"

We meandered through the cavern, marveling at the nooks and crannies and admiring the bacon strip-like mineral deposit curving, geometrically crinkling on the ceiling of the cave. I could almost hear the sizzling and taste that bacon. (It was easier to shake off Mr. Slick and the casino than Wilbur becoming bacon. Eating pets was never kosher in my book).

The vivid warmth of the colors and the perpetual coolness of the underground cavern contrasted sharply with the oppressive heat of black asphalt at the surface. A phosphorescent, multi-colored glow illuminated the cave and its contents. All I could hear was the steady drip, drip, drip of the mineralized water, the pat-pat of Coyote's feet, the sibilant hiss of Snake, the clomp-clomp of my sneakers and the ominous thud-thud of my heart attempting to leap out of my chest. Oh, and lest I forget, the receding echoes of all of them. The echoes along with the whistling of the wind winding its way into the cavern composed a musical harmony, culminating in a symphony of sound. Adding the luminescence of the cavern, it transformed into an orchestra of scintillating flashes attuned to a musical composition similar to Michael Burritt's "Scirocco" played on the marimba, a percussion instrument similar to a xylophone but larger.

Yet not everything dwelled in harmony. My tongue felt cottony, coated with a veneer of minerals from

the cave's symphony of sound and light. The still, oppressive air that lingered in the nooks, niches, and crannies where the wind didn't reach, assailed my nostrils with its pregnant lifelessness.

Down, down into the depths we hiked, the air cooler and more moist with each step and breath. Suddenly, I heard drumming and chanting. The reverberations of the drums and chants created a cacophony, a thunderous amalgamation of layers of drums and chants overlapping one another ending in utter dissonance. Intuitively, Snake and Coyote halted. Following their lead, I stopped too. Confused by the barrage of sound, and unsure of which direction to navigate, I peered into the surrounding stygian darkness with only the faint glow of prismatic phosphorescence illuminating an arm's length of the cavern at a time.. My eyes began scanning from right to left for another light source, not only to follow as I would the North Star in the world above ground, but as a welcoming beacon, a sign of the human inhabitants that were drumming and chanting. Sure enough, ahead on the right a tiny pocket of light flickered and glowed.

The three of us quickened our gait in order to reach that beacon of light, that haven of warmth. Arriving at the lightning flashes of a campfire set in a niche in the cavern just large enough for a few people and animals to gather around it, I screeched to a halt. Sitting around that lambent firelight, chanting and drumming were two people that I never expected to meet in this crazy adventure, Don Juan Matus, the Yaqui shaman/sorcerer, his apprentice, Carlos Castaneda, and Castaneda's animal companion, Chicano Coyote. This is where my two guides, Snake and Coyote, had led me. With flickering flames, crackling wood and flying sparke, the three of us sat down. The six of us formed a rough circle around the fire. -Don Juan, Carlos Castaneda and his ally, Chicano Coyote on one side of the fire, Snake, Coyote and me on the other side. What a thrill!

Now I had the opportunity to talk with Castaneda and ask him if his books were authentic stories from his research and field notes, or were they works of fiction. I have always felt that Castaneda was misunderstood and not truly recognized for his accomplishments. His first book, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, had been accepted as field research in anthropology back in 1969. This field research had included Don Juan teaching him how to journey as a shaman under the influence of sacred hallucinogenic plant medicine in order to "see" in a different way. His second and third books were also testaments to the experiential knowledge gained from his apprenticeship with Don Juan. With his third book, *A Journey to Ixtlan*, he received a doctorate in anthropology. However, in 1976, Richard DeMille debunked his work, giving seemingly irrefutable evidence that the experiences with Don Juan were not authentic, but fictional. UCLA stripped him of the doctorate. For me, the most intriguing element of this situation was that Castaneda published a total of twelve books, without ever once acknowledging or denying the authenticity of his first three books. Now here he was right in front of me, and so was Don Juan. Possible evidence of authenticity? Regardless of the truthfulness of Castaneda's writings, I could ask Don Juan about becoming a man of knowledge, a true warrior. Here, in this immense cavern, an unseen opportunity had arisen--a conversation with both of these learned men.

"Carlos," I asked tentatively, "are your books chronicles of real-life experiences or fiction? You never said one way or another."

"Ahhh, you are one who must know the nature of the truths that we gather and speak," he replied with an impish grin.

"Well, yes, the validity of the experience lies within the reality," I stammered, suddenly unsure of myself.

"Whether it happened in dreamtime or in real time, does not affect the value of the knowledge gained. It is the same when you tend your dreams. You see through the images to the message that Psyche has for you. How do you know that the insights you have from your dreams are not gifts from the gods? Is that wisdom less because it came from inside of you?" Carlos reflected.

"Noooo. . . but. . ." I sputtered, needing to really contemplate this revelation.

Snake hissed her understanding and curled around my arm, while Coyote lay quietly in my lap, allowing me to stroke him as I pondered Castaneda's words. Chicano Coyote would remark "¡Que bueno!" as awareness and comprehension moved across my face.

"Come, let us share a pipe and talk some more," Don Juan interjected. "I see that you have more questions."

Don Juan produced a small bag from the leather pouch around his waist. He measured out a handful

of tobacco mixed with devil's weed, also known as jimson weed or datura and stuffed the mixture into a pipe. Within this otherworldly realm, he offered the pipe to me.

"Devil's weed will help us to see the answers to your questions more clearly. I have mixed it with tobacco so that we may travel to the world of sorcerers and shamans without the worry of death."

I took the proffered pipe. Inside the bowl, I could distinguish the brown shreds of tobacco and the dried leaves of the devil's weed. I took a draw off of the pipe and passed it to Castaneda. The bitterness took my breath away. I remember thinking how appropriate it was to be smoking devil's weed around a campfire in this enormous cavern. As we passed the pipe from one person to another, I knew I had to ask Don Juan about his teachings regarding a man of knowledge and his four enemies before I succumbed to the wiles of the devil's weed.

"Don Juan, you talk about a man of knowledge and conquering his enemies. Tell me more, please."

"To be a true warrior, a man of knowledge must make allies of the natural enemies of knowledge: fear, clarity, power, and old age. Romona, your name already belies your true nature. Romona has many meanings. Among them are a warrior woman, a wise protectress, protecting hands, or counselor. To live up to your name, you must learn the way of the warrior."

Enthralled, I hung onto every word. "And the way of the warrior?"

"What do you do when faced with fear?"

"I react with fight, flight, or freeze."

"Then fear rules you? Yes?"

"I suppose so."

"You tend your dreams, no? You talk with those intimidating figures until you understand their nature. You do not let your fear rule you. You must meet fear head on. Then you create an alliance with it. You take your enemy and keep them close as an ally, for now you know their strengths, weaknesses, needs, desires, and secrets. That is how you conquer fear. Know it intimately, so you can know yourself better. Keep it close, but not in control. When fear is an ally, you have achieved clarity."

"What is clarity?" I asked as the flames of the fire engulfed us with their fiery embrace.

"When you have clarity, the true nature of everything is revealed. You see with other eyes the purpose of all things, all people. You see clearly your purpose. You can enter any situation and know what to do. But clarity is also an enemy. The sword of clarity must be tempered with reason, and a healthy dose of doubt," Don Juan instructed.

"Why reason and doubt?" I asked searching for the clarity within his response.

"Without reason and doubt, one becomes a . . . how do you say it in your world? . . . a zealot. One whose clarity is damaged from not seeing beyond the absolute truth of their own vision. Thus they are imprisoned within their own mind, and cannot open themselves to other truths. They have lost clarity. But for the person that tempers clarity with reason and doubt, they obtain power. The power of fearlessness and clarity inherent in a warrior."

"Didn't you say that power was also an enemy?"

"Yes. People with power neglect to use it wisely. They forget to trust their gut and their heart. They give power free rein. Then it reigns over them. Power becomes a never ending head trip, where power tricks the person into powerlessness by consuming its host. To have power as an ally, not an enemy, one must feel the power with their intuition and their soul. They must seek clarity in how their use of power will affect others. Your enemy can become your ally. You already know this. You must reach deep inside and become the warrior you were destined to be. For there is more than one way to become a warrior. Seek that knowledge through dreams. Listen carefully to the figures within the dream, seeing them with different eyes. The wisdom you pursue will come. Do not try to force it, for it knows when you are truly ready to see."

"Okay. . . patience has never been easy for me, but I can wait. What about old age? You said that it was the final enemy and cannot be conquered." I beseech him.

"Yes, we all must face death. A person of knowledge, a warrior, faces death without fear. They know that death is just a bridge to another state of being, where we become an ancestor for those that come after us. A place where our wisdom meets the knowledge of those that came before us and transcends time and space with

love and light to form that which is called by many names. A numinous, omniscient presence that lives within us and apart from us. Old age and death are not the end, but another beginning. For when one door closes, another one opens.”

“You said it is an enemy to a person of knowledge, a true warrior. How do I live up to my name if I cannot conquer old age and death?” I ask with genuine frustration.

“One does not conquer death, they welcome it. But death for many is a slow and lingering process. Again, one’s enemy must become an ally. A warrior takes the day in stride, working with time, not against it. Learn to listen to this world’s vessel. Rest when needed. A warrior does not fight the inevitable, they work with it. Accept that this earthly container will die, yet your actions will be your legacy.”

We sat in contemplative silence for what seemed an eternity, yet time was suspended. The colors of the cavern seemed more luminous but bled into one another in a surreal Daliesque manner. Throughout this timeless encounter, our animal companions rested quietly alongside us, absorbing every detail of Don Juan’s and Castaneda’s teachings. At some point, my coyote companion morphed back into Jax, yet Snake still wrapped around my arm, reiterated the lessons in long sibilant hisses injecting my bones with the powerful medicine of my visitors, an antidote to the shallowness of the world out there. Time and space ceased to exist. All that mattered was the here and now, the lessons of life, the reality of this moment, and a deep sense of love and peace that transcended each instant.

Not long after smoking the devil’s weed, the shimmering neon undertones of the cavern bathed me with intense waves of scintillating luminosity while generating the calming sounds of crystal singing bowls. The ribbons of luminescence blended with words that formed speech bubbles, the shape of one word melting into the texture, hue, font and letters of the next. The fire spoke in odd rhyming couplets. The wind whispered, thundered, whirled and fell silent. The colors faded, the light dimmed to normal, words were no longer animated in speech bubbles. However, the prismatic glow illuminated the trio of Don Juan, Castaneda, and the Chicano Coyote. As the brightness faded, so did they. Before the last glimmer winked out, I heard Don Juan say, “Remember, your allies are there to help you to see with different eyes. Use those eyes to honor your name.” With the lingering effects of the jimson weed, Snake and Jax led me through the cavern awash with the eerie luminescence of lingering otherworldliness of the departed trio. At the steps of our portal to the Nekyia, the underworld, Snake uttered one last sibilance, unwound herself from my arm, and slithered into the stygian darkness of the cavern. Jax bounded excitedly up the stairs waiting impatiently for me. I climbed the now stone stairs, turned and gazed wonderingly into the cavernous jaws of darkness below, stepped over the threshold into the world of the living. With her bed facing the door, Old Gray Mare rattled her bones expectantly. Once inside her cab, Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of sleep intervened and I slept.

Waking up, I gazed with sleep-filled eyes at the landscape. Dawn’s fingers trailed rivers of morning light through the dark moonless sky. Jax and I were in the pickup, backed up to a door on the still steaming asphalt. It was an ordinary door, no shimmering, no glowing, no glitz, no glitter, just a door on the road in the middle of nowhere, close to Area 51, near Rachel, Nevada. With that last thought in mind, I started up Old Gray and headed home with the Eagle’s “Hotel California” once again seeping into the cracks of coherent thought. Well, the last thing I remember is seeing that trio fade away and Don Juan’s parting words. I didn’t even run to the doorway. As “Hotel California” fades and segues to Bob Dylan’s “To Ramona,” I reflect on the adventure. Like Bob Dylan states, “Everything passes, everything changes.” Recalling the enterprise of that underworld journey through the Nekyia, with Snake hissing the remnants of conversation, I began to see, not with my eyes, but with clarity and power, and most importantly with my heart and soul. Everything does pass, everything does change. And maybe just maybe, my journey and my animal companions will lead me to become a person of knowledge, a warrior of wisdom, a counselor with the written word. Perchance, my hands will lend truth to “the pen is mightier than the sword.” Perhaps not forever, but for a passing moment in time. That would be enough.

WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT
ROCKS?

BY DYLAN YOUNG

Stones are smelly after summer rain. *Petrichor*, as it is called, despite the fact that I could not begin to pronounce the word should I try. And I have: on long walks up an arroyo mumbling to myself, in drunken conversations with a new friend who is comfortable enough with me trying out new words on her, even to *virgae* that distantly announce the rain by which that stony smell of *petrichor* seems to perfume. It takes scent to pick up what eyes leave alone; rocky aromas bring about feelings of life restored to an otherwise empty hard place. My home, a *casita*, is such a place submerged in stone—some shrapnel of neighboring cacti, too—but most of my surroundings, sandy as they are, are unnoticeable. Here, sky reigns supreme. Sky is what captured Georgia O’Keeffe’s upward gazing eye and it is what attracts tourists every year to a balloon festival that bloats the sunsets with what look like nylon spirits tied to baskets. Although known as the land of enchantment, spirit is not in the ground here in New Mexico; not this ground, not anymore. Only the mundane matter of beige and light red rocks sprinkle neighborhood driveways and make up the walls in which we residents live. These rocks are a material that reminds us that there are indeed cosmic ornaments, like plants, and surely they as rocks are not included in this beatific category as such.

In concrete reality as much as in idea, rocks and stones proliferate beyond conception. They exist everywhere, slowly. Stones are alchemical for the philosopher and clocks for the geologist. For the stonemason, the world is a solid place because the sensation of stone on hand sells reality as something materially responsive and therefore available for intimacy and trust. For myself, however, the opposite holds true. The existence of rock, mineral, and stone around me suggests something unstable about the world within which I find myself thrown. There exists a vague sense of disconnection. For how can there be a material that seems to be doing something so significant as existing *as* the make up of the world by sheer fact of its assemblage in consciousness, let alone *its* presence of consciousness, but does not seem to be animate in any conventional sense? And how does this material quite literally form the basis of reality from which I stand in opposition *contra naturum*; as the literal ontological ground that uplifts the notion of the “I” held in contradistinction from everything else that does not seem to exist as my personhood? In less accusatory terms, how can I by and large ignore that which offers my corporeal body support without ever abandoning me for the entirety of my life? And what is not so unique in my routinely lived experience of ignoring rocks that make it shared behavior amongst generally everyone I encounter, at least in contemporary western societies? Such a dissociation deeply suggests a problem of monolithic proportions for the human psyche inasmuch the environment that ensconces us humans. All these questions follow the presupposition that actions should necessarily be taken about the subject matter at hand (or rather, below feet). Rocks and stones and minerals warrant action that is perhaps less immediately for them, to

them, with or against them, but rather, an action of which their *concern* takes priority over whatever intentions I may hold. To imagine for what reasons rocks should receive concern is to perhaps give them just that, which simultaneously addresses why rocks should assume neglect by my modern eye. And it is at this plot (plot as is in narrative or as in place in the ground? in an otherwise as-of-yet unnamed inquiry that I would like to begin to dig out of such concern.

Ideas that Matter

“Mere perception—perception without imagination—is the sword thrust between spirit and matter. It was the increasing predominance of that kind of perception [...] that enabled the philosopher Descartes to formulate his partition of all being into the two mutually exclusive categories of extended substance and thing substances—which is another way of saying: between matter and spirit. But mere perception is not what normally occurs when we look at, or listen to, a fellow human being.” (Barfield 170)

To look at rocks and see something equitable to substantive nothingness presumes something about the quality of my attention and the value it stores in the worlding of the objects such attention affords. It is a style of attention that has already made a sacrifice, a distinction, prior to my particular consciousness judging the character of the rock that seems to exist outside. The rock made dead on arrival, inanimate a priori, allows my personhood to ostensibly move through the world with expediency. And if dead material is all there is “out there”—ambiguous abstract “stuff, bonded chemicals, ultra-slow electrons—then to qualify it as anything other than material for my disregard implies irrationalism. Consequently, the notion of animation or enlivenment inherent to the rock would seem as antiquated in truth as the rock itself. As such, my way of regarding rocks as unworthy of their own so-called thingness, their own value as a subjects in themselves, suggests the individual human consciousness that my selfhood is situated by no longer knows how to properly perceive objects such that they seem to speak. Something unbeknownst of me is no longer bewitched by the wink of the rock face; something of me can no longer see its smile. Having believed myself to have implicitly denied rocks of their animation, of their own subjectivity, I can go about my day regarding the world as mostly dead and consequently am I absolved from responsibility of needing to do anything out of concern for things that just don’t matter enough.

Yet it does not take many trips down lonesome arroyos to understand that something of the ground is animating and animated. Regard for sensate experiences becomes inescapable in such moments, given that I move

slowly enough to feel the speed at which the terrain and its seemingly dead objects hustle. As my attention gets provoked by the beauty of the scene, so is my regard for rocks around me. And such a performance of attention, it should seem, is a ritualistic enactment as the notions of *concern*, *regard*, and of *about* are chief expressions for the topic of ritual. Ritual is said to be “performance of the ideal, in full relationship with the messiness of life” (Stephenson 26) inasmuch as it is “a way of thinking and a way of knowing” (3). It is also “a way of regarding things. Ritual is both action and idea [...]” (7). And yet, in speaking about ritual the place of language from which ritual itself speaks must be taken into account. In the wide swath of scholarship since the 19th century that profess a special relationship to ontological structures that are said to comprise ritual, henceforth referred to generally as ritual studies, rituals are not understood by those who participate in ritual as anything other than a performance that is necessary for the expression of an implicit ideal (Stephenson 26). And little challenge exists for me to put this idea to the test: if I go to a religious ceremony, say Catholic mass, I generally do not understand the drinking of wine as a way by which I know Christ (although wine drinking in other circumstances may lead me to think otherwise), and should I prepare coffee after waking so as to get into what I ambiguously call a *groove*, am I not enacting a ritual that I cognitively know little about even and especially as it is performed? In this way,, ritual is an outsider term for the performed ethics of something or someone that plays to the tune of a differing scale and rhythm than one’s own. It is, in short, an embodied idea, lived in the world as a process of worlding, of letting subjects speak their own voice.

Ritual as such is an idea, or *eidos*, and not what produces ideas, as Emile Durkheim posits (Stephenson 41). For Plato, *eidos* is something akin to the primeval notion of James Hillman’s archetypal image, that is, not the content of what is seen but rather the way in which a subject lends itself to consciousness (Revisioning 142). An idea is therefore a way of seeing and regarding. When ideas move with self-regard, they become responsive ways of thinking and knowing. To have an idea, or to ideate, then points to something important about rocks that is less descriptive of their character than it is about the performed ethics of ideas that disregard them. And to engage in ideation is itself ritualistic, although somewhat neurotic. Inasmuch as ritual is a concept born from a style of ideation associated with modern Western peoples does it, too, perform that which ritual studies attribute to ritual itself, which is to say, that its performance is a way of knowing and thinking. Approaching rocks *vis-à-vis* ritual therein implies that I am engaged a priori in ritual *about* ritual through the process of ideation. Herein is the status of object-disregarding consciousness seemingly situated. And it is this sedimentary layer of consciousness that would seem necessary to better understand if I am to respond to my central concern of doing something about rocks.

Ernst Cassirer, in discussing the Polynesian principle of mana, or spiritual life-force, in his seminal book *Language and Myth*, lends a lens through which rocks can be experienced through ideation as something other than inanimate:

“It is not a matter of “what,” but of “how”; not the object of attention, but the sort of attention directed to it. Mana and its several equivalents do not denote a single, definite predicate; but in all of them we find peculiar and consistent form of predication. This predication may indeed be designated as the primeval mythic-religious predication, since it expresses the spiritual “crisis” whereby the holy is divided from the profane, and set apart from the sphere of the ordinary, in a religious sense indifferent, reality.” (66)

Cassirer demonstrates that the object-disregarding status of consciousness that I wear as my own personhood is in fact a spiritual crisis. Matter and spirit are separated in this way of perception, and ennui elongates itself in my heart when I move through the terrain beneath and around me. I am “heartsick because I am *thing-sick*” (Thought 74). Although the logical solution to this crisis may be to rejoin both spirit and matter, I am led to think this task is easier said than done. James Hillman would agree when says the route is not made through a back-to-the-land attitude, nor is done by going “primitive”, animistic, or by yearning for the far eastern philosophies (Revisioning 12). No, the poison in need of a cure exists entirely in the status of object-disregarding consciousness as the psychological condition in which I find myself thrown has everything it needs, always already given, if only I am sensitive to listen. This is not to suggest there is not immense value in any other ways of being but rather to imply that it is “ugly to go over to another order” (*Thought 50*) by ignoring that which gives oneself in exchange for the fantasy of another person’s, culture’s, or thing’s way of existing. Ironically, to go another order seems to express a dissociation comparable to what is required by not paying attention to rocks. Perhaps, as intimated by the aforementioned Barfield quotation, the solution resides in the middle ground between spirit and matter, the place of *in medias res*, the idea of soul and imagination.

Matter that Ideates

The matters of soul and imagination, two terms relatively synonymous in archetypal psychology, make it a goal to deliteralize the material-ness centralized in *mater*, earth, rock as styles of consciousness. Stones and

rocks not only display a soulfulness, personifying an attitude that is experienced and done so by the rock's own volition, but they too are psychological, and necessarily, metaphorical. Of the rock are descriptions, not substances. Solid ontology continuously swept aside by the broom of epistemology *via negativa*, always curious to hear what more is the phenomenon at hand (or below feet) saying about itself. This adjectival consciousness, which knows things by the gleam of their genius, their presented character, and aesthetic display, is known to Hillman as the poetic basis of mind. Perhaps my style of consciousness is stony, that it experiences itself as stoned, anesthetized, beside itself in isolation. It would follow that the conjoining of matter and spirit through the imaginational lens of the soul would mean to keep the two perceptions of spirit and matter, sacredness and profanity, held in distinction so as to notice more attentively the particulars of each.

Noticing is a tough activity though when the world almost demands inattention. The sensate and affective burden the attention necessary to breathe in the depths of aesthetic and sensory wonderment by means of microplastics, COVID-19, car exhaust, noise pollution, light pollution, incessant advertisements. It would seem that to move more deeply into ideation about ideation by ritual-ing about ritual *via* noticing rocks would mandate that the process of ritual slow down (Somé 17). Slowness is also another characteristic of rocks; their dialogue with one another makes glacial pace seem as fast as broadband internet. In becoming stone slow within myself may I begin to notice the stone's subject-ness without staying preoccupied or imprisoned by subjectivism. Hillman states:

"First, an aesthetic response to particulars would radically slow us down. To notice each event would limit our appetite for events, and this very slowing down of consumption would affect inflation, hyper growth, the manic defenses and expansionism of the civilization. Perhaps events speed up in proportion to their not being appreciated; perhaps events grow to cataclysmic size and proportion to their not being noticed." (*Thought* 75).

An aesthetic response to matter allows the matter to ideate for itself. For once in a long while, rocks may now be witnessed as doing something about rocks by simply lending themselves to and as imagination. The doing about something inanimate is to first ideate about the inanimate images performed through ritual ideation. And an appreciation for aesthetic experience, which is performed imaginatively with a poetic basis of mind, or what Hillman refers to as *notitia* and *aisthesis*, respectively opens the "capacity to form true notions of things from attentive noticing" (75) by breathing in the heart of the world through the thought of the heart (70). The soul aspect of aesthetic experience may be the missing third ingredient for reconciling spirit and matter as such.

Postludes and Perfumes

Rains return to Santa Fe as reminders of the slow attention required for *notitia* despite the rapid pace at which these rain clouds shadow the soil. My ears and eyes transfixed on what looks like bird chatter outside, I am already believing myself to be immersed in the depths of the events around me. And yet, I forget to breathe in. Even to explore my thoughts in anticipation of the coming petrichor, the smell whose pungent aesthetic flavor runs off with my imagination, I realize how challenging it is to earnestly pay heed to the rocks and dust around me. Instead of writing descriptions of rocks that poetically reveal the pursuit of my ideas, I seem to dissociate away into my thoughts, returning only at the ends of moments when the urge to go inside is too palpable to ignore.

Scientists suggest that we live today in a so-called anthropocene, or the period of time in which rocks that have been permanently demarcated by way of human action (Ellis 10). Although it may be true that the world is always ending, mythologically speaking, the gravity of consequences from my persistent un-noticing of the world feels monolithic to hold. And yet, even so, I take the smell of summer rains on rock as an offering to notice yet again, to appreciate the depths of the quarries I dig, and to perhaps bring back something sacred from the seemingly profane by way of a soulful imagination.

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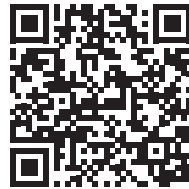
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WATER

THE ENDLESS SEA

BY IRV HANSEN

We invite you to scan the QR Code to listen to the piece's musical accompaniment.



The endless sea ... the endless tide
The endless dream ... the endless rise:

Out of the waves, for just one moment
A torn embrace, then you remember:
The endless sea ... the endless tide
The endless dream ... the endless rise:

As you believe
The image crying;
A boundless scene
To the horizon.

The wave is raised
By winds of nature
The spiral trace and still
Marina's face:
The endless sea ... the endless tide
...the endless dream.
Oh, come on, the endless ride:
The endless sea ... oh, come on ...the endless tide
... the endless dream, oh come on
...the endless rise

COURTSHIP WITH A CREEK:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL LOVE STORY
BY SIGNE PORTESHAWVER

It was love at first sight really. There was certainly nothing special about the apartment. The carpet was so dirty that you didn't know what color it used to be and the building had none of the good character and strong bones of the Victorian we were being forced to vacate. Yet all that faded away as I was drawn to the wall of windows, which could not stop the oaks from tangling me in their hair. "Look at that!" I exclaimed, by which I meant, "We will move here." Those oaks are always calling out to me, not just grabbing my attention, but asking for my presence beneath them, calling forth my own sway, longing to hear the wind through me. To resist their outstretched arms at the edge of a lively, wet, mysterious, cacophonous, flowering dance floor in order to write this is nearly unbearable. I must say, I would much rather tango with that many-flavored lover to the sweet beat of Robin's song, Jay squawks, squirrel kacks, rippling ravine, highway hum and the twittering buzz of hummingbirds.

How do you go about coming to know and dance with a place in its unique genius and beauty? The spirit of a place cannot be counted. It is not discovered by classifying its species or sampling its soil. Yet, it is something we can feel. It is an irreducible expression that swallows us or entices us or scares us. That welcomes us or pushes us away. It is this concern that has fueled the field of phenomenology – that so much of what governs our direct sense of the world, how it feels to be somewhere, is totally overlooked and impenetrable by the natural sciences, which after all are called hard for a reason (Abram 32). Phenomenology's pioneer Edmund Husserl saw that science was displacing us from our experiences, from the phenomenal world in which we are warmed by the sun, intoxicated by jasmine blossoms, comforted by a friend (34). Direct unmediated participation in the world is the ground of meaning in our lives, the mode of experience through which we can sense, participate in and be nourished by the unfolding spirit of a place.

Westerners have been so indoctrinated into the scientific worldview that we have come to believe atoms are more real than the cool breeze licking my skin as I write (34). What is real has become that which we cannot directly touch taste see smell or feel. To encounter the spirit of a place requires that I trust my direct perceptions again, which implicate my entire body. To do so I must let go of what I've been told about the world through the deadening lens of science and experience it as if it is alive. Awakening to our senses -- the delight of rose stamens bright-tipped with pollen, the song of wings beating against sky, the waves crashing their white hands on the shore -- is a portal. Our senses experience the world in its throbbing aliveness, which invites the dance of our suddenly more deeply enlivened selves. It is our senses which tie us to the living planet around us. We can reclaim an essential facet of our being, our sensing bodies, from the abstract disembodied world that dominates the modern experience by turning toward the realness of our sensuous exchanges with wild others. Falling in

love with a place is the natural result of this turning.

For me, the place is at the corner of Richmond and Randwick boulevards just a few blocks north of downtown Oakland, California amidst an abundant and unusual wild creek ecosystem. A city park. The place that holds my body through all its complex ponderings. The place in the end, in which I truly exist. I have been emplaced here in this life-world by the animacy that grows out of a phenomenological way of relating. This place is not the backdrop, but the very ground of my existence. Hand in hand with the beings here, our spirits blossom.

Looking across the creek to my apartment: that window you can barely make out in the blue-ish building straight ahead.



Sensing a World of Subjects

Taking up the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, David Abram shows that our ability to experience the world, with its thick black wings and rustling leaves, is only possible because we are entirely in it with our sensing bodies (68). To be able to sense others, we must ourselves be sensible by them, who take note of our

participation and respond to us. This realization opens up a vastly different way of experiencing the world than does the scientific paradigm, because objects do not sense, only subjects do. Going beyond the obvious sense of this when we encounter other humans and animals, who smell us, stare at us, or run from us, Abram claims the entire world is this way, its rivers and tables and stones, which perceive us in the way that particular subject senses (67). The table receives the oils from my wrists as I rest them here to type, subtly settling in response to the regular weight of my clicking, which I in turn respond to, creating worn edges and calluses both. Suddenly the entire landscape is alive with animate conversants, shapeshifters in arms with us. We are therefore not acting on the world, as if its beings are objects of our manipulation, but acting in a reciprocal dance with the pulsing aliveness and agencies of other subjects.

The world is full of subjects who not only reach toward us with their scents and textures and movements but who we reach toward with our sounds and flavors and displays (67). Just as we respond to the jasmine bush by nose-diving into its ecstatic aroma, the plant takes in our scent and responds to us with subtle shifts of stomata opening or closing and giving up pollen to our cheeks. So rather than a subjective world in here that meets an objective world out there, our subjective world meets an intersubjective world, a playground of interacting subjects like us, even if with rougher skin and rooted feet (38).

Abram's phenomenology invites us to act in the world as if it were true that others – bay tree and chickadee and millipede – notice and call out to us and dance with us. On one level, most would not have to pretend at all, at least with the beings more like ourselves. We know the squirrel that stares down at us and flips their tail has noticed us, and the ear-full of Cedar Waxwings that take off in a masquerading flurry upon our approach. The deeper invitation is to consider that our presence is not only noted, but matters, that our participation has a world-making, a spirit-making impact. As poet William Stafford declared, “How you stand here is important. How you listen for the next things to happen. How you breath” (Stafford 72). Our participation, and its response, is the flesh of the spirit of a place.

This practice of “as if”, behaving *as if* the world is in a listening co-creative dance with me, opened a powerful dimension of connection, meaning, aliveness, and Eros that shaped the land around me, confirming without a doubt that the world is indeed alive and responsive, and not only listening, but wanting to hear. I feel a mutual hunger with this place in the same way a bee hungers for nectar and pollen while flowers hunger for the perfect intimacy of their pollinator. A world is created in that precious moment of oneness, a fruit. It is through such sensuous courtship between subjects that the spirit of a place sets seed. The spirit of a place is what arises between us. It is only if we can step into this practice of “as if”, a method in phenomenology known as bracket-

ing, that we can engage in the world outside of the scientific paradigm we have become accustomed to calling reality. Phenomenology asks us to bracket (suspend our beliefs about) what we think we know of the world, so that we gain understanding instead through our direct embodied and sensuous experience.

Awe-vocado Courtship

One side effect of this way of being in the world, as if it is animate and interested in us, is irrepressible awe and wonder of the absolutely ordinary, which we can encounter as if for the first time. At the southeast corner of the park, where the creek runs under the street before popping out again to cross the front yards of some very lucky people, there is an old leggy tree, which I suspected to be an avocado. It is one of the beings I find myself in regular communion with, if only through gazing up at and being swayed by its branches when I pass. One day my gaze was seized by a singular green-black fruit, hanging like a lone grape way up high and emanating with a modest miraculousness. “Wow!” I proclaimed loudly, astounded. A neighbor out gardening came close, hoping to spot what he imagined was a rare and beautiful bird. No – just the exquisite fruit of this old tree.

I kept an eye on that avocado, and its dark green eye peered down at me. One day it wasn’t hanging there in the tree anymore. I looked all around its roots to no avail. It seemed our relationship had dropped. That is until we passed the tree the morning of my birthday. I invited a few close friends to the creek to celebrate my life, which had become entwined with this place. Our first adventure was a storied tour so I could introduce some of my dearest companions and what had unfolded between us. The magic of a place is in what happens there. While the avocado tree wasn’t a stop on the tour, the group was a bit spread out by the time we walked by, so I slowed and spoke about the tree to enable the stragglers to catch up. My husband was gazing down as he walked and when I mentioned the missing fruit, he was astounded to find that he was looking right at it. “You mean this avocado?” he exclaimed, holding it above his head like the trophy it was.

The avocado became our talisman for the rest of the day. I held it, and it fit so perfectly, in the palm of my hand as I spoke of/for/as this place. After the tour, we each wandered alone as if the creek park were my body, as if the beings here were somehow expressive of my own being. Then we shared a council using the avocado as our talking piece. To close the celebration, I gathered bits of the flowers, bark and leaves of the beings my friends had met and created a mandala, an offering of impermanent impractical beauty, with the green black gem at the center.



Sharing Flesh with this Place

The invitation to explore the creek as if it were a facet of myself was inspired by Merleau-Ponty's notion of Flesh (Abram 66-69), and by my own embodied experience of inseparability from the world. The deeper our intimacy with place, the more we begin to feel ourselves as we are: utterly in it and not on the outside looking in. We begin to feel ourselves as different facets of the world experiencing itself, like my skin and the inside of my mouth are different ways of experiencing my body. I am a sensing organ that feels our larger body (this place, Earth) in a particular way, while the sensing organ of avocado tree feels our larger body differently. Through our dance, we access the matrix that makes us both.

As I deepened in connection with this place, I began to notice that when others offered it care I received that care directly. I have never met the person who ensures the oak reaching over the park has a working swing. It inevitably breaks – the old chair they've repurposed begins to split, the knotted rope pulls through a hole meant to resist it. Without fail, this person or team replaces it – now a fresh thick piece of pine bolted to chains. I've never met them, but I am loved by them.



I was loved by the tenderness of a COVID graduation ceremony that unfolded on the grass beyond the swing. The soccer coaches went around to all of their seniors' homes and called them out to be celebrated, often enough on just a bit of sidewalk. But here, in this open yet protected place nestled among homes and bursting in bird song, the meaning and significance of the occasion blossomed, bringing tears to the young man's eyes. Perhaps it was my felt identification with this place and its possibility and tenderness and care that the group opened naturally to me, although I was a stranger sitting in my camping chair reading. I joined the circle, put down my book. As last words were shared, the group body turned toward me and called on me to speak as if I had been invited. What an honor!

I am loved by the children who splash in the creek and delight in skipping through the ivy. I am loved by the couple with their huge lens who come to take pictures of the Cooper's hawk that hangs in these branches. I am loved by the neighbors who plant native shrubs along the banks. I am loved by the elders as they explode in smelly creamy flowers. I am loved by the mallards who return each spring to mate. All of us together create the exuberant and caring spirit of this place and it blossoms uniquely in each one.

Reciprocity & Belonging

Alongside and feeding this love, I feel a profound sense of belonging to this place because it receives me, thanks me, beckons me, trusts me. So estranged from Earth and our role here in these times, such feelings are ecstatic – profound homecomings and precious reminders of my unshakeable attachment to Gaia, my largest body. The first spring I lived here I was down by the water when a hummingbird buzzed by and settled on her nest. I poured over its abundant and wee beauty, and visited it daily, singing emergent love songs and speaking poems of wonder as the tiny birds sprouted feathers, pushing open the flexible nest as they grew, opened their obsidian eyes, and fledged.



Ever since, it is as if the hummers want me to find them and visit them and sing to them and by what seemed like magical chance I spotted several more nests. Really, it is not chance, but a courtship dance between my loving attention and expressions and the curiosity and openness of Hummingbird, a mutual allurements. One day the

entire bird population collaborated to bring me to a nest, the first I'd encountered holding two raisin-sized cream eggs, which momma shifted with her needled feet to cook on all sides. Coincidence is without possibility. This place, these birds, saw me. They have been seeing me, smelling me, drinking my ritual blood. They invite me, are courting me, deeper and deeper into their magnificence and into a co-creative dance that choreographs the spirit of this place.

What will I do with this trust? With this love? With this "carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land" (Abram 69)? It is certainly how Abram (69) suspects - that I would never violate this place even if escaping the gaze of humans. Intimacy with other-than-humans begets an ethic of reverence and commitment to preservation. But that is smaller than what is called forth in me. I am called to beauty. Hummingbirds must eat every 15 minutes and yet they spend energy decorating their nests with wild plum petals and lichens in blue and char- treuse. That is what I am called to do. To make impractical, impermanent, and excessive beauty. I am called to profoundly intimate acts of love that feed the spirit of the place, that invite this place deeper into me and me deeper into this place. After some lucky crow or jay nabbed those eggs, I returned to the nest to decorate it with flowers only hummingbirds can enter – bright orange birds of paradise, tubular fuchsia goose berries.

Love Letter to a California Buckeye

When the world becomes a subject, a lover, it is no longer appropriate to only speak about them. One must speak to them, knowing they are listening, drinking up our poetry, becoming aroused by our movements, flattered by our gifts. This form of communication is commonplace in oral and Indigenous cultures but must be reclaimed by modern humans (Abram 70). Speaking so as to tenderly brush the face of a lover. This feeds the animacy of the world and the participatory power of the senses.

One early spring day as I stood before you, noticing your pregnancy just showing, a neighbor asked me, "Is it dead?" There is something stark about you when you have no leaves. And when they brown and crumple in summer – you have a sickly look about you I have to say. Yet spring comes, and your bones erupt in a thousand tender hands and you become the most luscious being here. I feel my blood surging to my skin, sprouting hair. All the bound up places in me part their tight bud fists and unfurl. In the morning you shine a soft blue, lat-5

er bright lime green. Your next surge of beauty is already forming, rising from the valleys of your wrists. Small hard seeds at the heart of each breast.

Each day you subtly soften and fill until you are all flower, pale pink bosom tumbling out of your ribbed green shirt. To miss even a moment of this unfolding is a tragedy, but you see to it that I won't, pulling me out to your side with your reaching, fattening fingers. I wish only to keep time by you.



Today I kissed your scaly bark, let my body form around the gentle curve of your trunk, the tips of your tender leaves caressing my cheek. I am sorry that I do not often touch you. Your feet are usually crowded by cars and if not, it is an exposed place to be intimate. But today I could not resist you. And you received my loving gestures generously, opened yourself to me. After all this time enamored with your front side I was finally invited behind. As if after months of passionate kissing, which was perfectly satisfying, you gently guided my hand in-between your legs.

I did encounter a yoni, the womb full of bean pods from your neighbor acacia, and a puddle of blood. I anoint myself. And let wild sounds pour forth to resonate in that round chamber, and into the rings of your life. Sounds of praise and gratitude, sounds of grief. Expressions of the closeness between us. Your lips beckon mine. Just as in me, layers of your flesh are dissolving and spilling over the edge. I wonder if this is how you'll go. But no, "It isn't dead".

The World is Waiting for You

The spirit of this place would feel different to you, as different beings would fix your gaze and tickle your ears, which would illicit unique responses. And you have your own way of flirting. I believe something remarkable would happen if you too listened, and spoke as if you were being listened to. You might find yourself in a co-creative dance that widens your flesh, reclaims your embodied sensuousness, and nourishes the place that grounds it all.

Works Cited

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