

// IMAGINARY ATLAS //

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Dear Friend,

Found this today, tucked into the backflap of a vision quest journal from nine years ago:

Faith by Geslaw Milosz

The word faith means when someone sees
A dew drop or a floating leaf and knows
That they are, because they have to be
And even if you dreamed, or closed your eyes
And wished, the world would still be what it was,
And the leaf would still be carried down the river.
It means when someone's foot is hurt
By a sharp rock, he also knows that rocks
Are here so they can hurt our feet.
Look, see the long shadow cast by the tree,
And flowers and people throw shadows on the earth.
What has no shadow has no strength to live.

Mid-Continent

I was elated to write you when the day began.

It's late afternoon now and writing you is a total pain. Très bizarre! And clear the way a whole life maps onto a single day. Here in the late middle I am heavy: depressed into reflection, retelling old stories, ruminating on all that I *would* write, were writing the thing I had a mind to do.

The show goes on, whether we will it or no. Proceed sentence by sentence. Have you touched the void today? Or better, *how* have you touched the void today? It is with us always, tender companion, just off the left shoulder. Were there a curtain to peek behind, here's what you would see:

I am flying home to New York, a city that I barely resemble at all, though there is majesty there. I am somewhere over Nebraska after 40 days and 40 nights in Germany, Norway, Southern

Colorado, Southern Utah, and Northern New Mexico. They call New Mexico the Land of Enchantment but the entire Four Corners region is an epochal flirt, a muse of geological proportions; I have fallen in love again.

I've been reading *Anam Cara*, mystic-poet-philosopher John O'Donohue's first book of prose illustrating the confluence and interwovenness of the Human world, Nature, Divinity, and the Underworld in Celtic thought, "places" or "ideas" that the Western mind has been trained to see as distinct from, or in competition with, one another: Body vs. Soul, Human vs. Animal, Man vs. Nature, Me vs. Everything Not Me.

Bawdiness, animism, profound Love of Humanity and concern for our immortal souls break bread together in O'Donohue's missives and I'm reminded of the little leather daily devotional on my grandmother's bookshelf next to the Dictionary of Saints. How lovely 'twould be to hike up the slickrock to John's humble stone burrow every morning, to bend the fast of sleep with a friendly meal and laughter, butter and sourdough and poetry at table with my dear dead Irish friend and confessor.

I must admit to you my sternum's been aching for years. The notch just below my larynx, a trellised, icy burn wound radiating out my collarbones and down to my solar plexus. Sometimes it slams a hoof up into my throat, bores holes through my shoulder blades into my lungs from behind.

Between my head and my heart there used to hang a beautiful rope and plank bridge called Intuition and I burned it, slowly at first then all at once, the way one falls out of love, the way a marriage ends, they say.

Rural Bavaria

In a miniscule village called Hannasreid, I walk a fairy circle from the only restaurant (closed except Saturdays), under the stand of branchless Spruce trunks, down a pebble-hewn hill of dual rutted tractor tracks, over the only paved road that isn't the main road, past pungent creamy elderberry blossoms ("Don't cut these down," says Jakob, "They're protectors at the edges of things, like a fence around a home"), through knee-high grasses and knotweeds and heathers, gingerly across dry brown mud striped left and right with ants that bite, and finally through the intersection where I began, the one with the path that takes you to the haunted stone chapel built on top of a spring, wet and dank with half-candles and mosquitos the size of moths. I don't go down that path because I don't have shoes on and this, I've decided, is what makes my walk a fairy circle.

Mona and Jakob break it down very simply when I return, feet still sticky with spruce sap: first, we will smudge ourselves with sage; Mona will greet the four directions and the local angels (in German); we'll lie down on our backs; Jakob will drum for about fifteen minutes while Mona and I go on a journey.

"Imagine you're in a Sacred Place, a place in the world where you feel safe, or powerful," Jakob says. "Can you bring one to mind?"

I think of a forest meadow, some green clovered grove I've never been to, next to a stone spring pool that looks cold, clear and refreshing.

"Do you have a place?"

Before I can say yes, I'm in the desert, 400 feet up the sun-scoured cliffs of Cedar Mesa. I am shivering beneath a massive slab of calving sandstone. Two ravens helix up the canyon wall on rising vectors of warm wind. The white and yellow daisy mouths of a rose heath light up at me in greeting. I say hello.

"Yes."

"Great. From your sacred place you need to find your way to the Lower World to look for your spirit animal."

"Find my way?"

"Yeah it might be a hole in the ground, or a hatch, or a slide maybe."

"Okay."

"And then look around for your spirit animal. You could meet lots of animals, so if you're not sure just ask one if they're your spirit animal, they should tell you."

"Cool."

"Once you've found your animal, keep them close. They will protect you. Nothing can hurt you in the Lower World, but it's good to practice for when you travel to the Middle and Upper Worlds."

"Okay."

"When I start drumming faster, it's time to come back. Any questions?"

"Nope." I have lots of questions, *how* to "come back" for instance, but I don't want to be gauche. "Maybe afterward!"

I am trying to sound *game* but the only clear question in my mind is, *What if nothing happens?*

Also, *What if something does?*

Southern Utah

Three elk on the road, just as I turn the corner. A doe, a fawn, and a buck, towering still, looking at me, awaiting my arrival. "Holy shit," I bless. I stop the car. We breathe. They bound into the forest as one, invisible again.

It takes 6 hours to drive from Bryce Canyon to Cedar Mesa, mostly along Utah's highway 12. It is a remarkably scenic road: "Utah's Only All-American Road," a designation I can confirm from experiential data too riotous to scribe. Ye, the landscapes. I had the impulse to call my parents to insist that they drive this road before they get too old and die.

I've been thinking of my parents a lot lately. I always tell people they were babies ("Children raising children," smiling, shaking my head) and deserve the grace generally reserved for the innocent. Only recently--after T's father died suddenly, she told me all about sensing his sudden spiritual freedom, realizing that he had been trapped in the same systems that she fought with every ounce of her strength to escape--only very recently have I come to see that my own father was parented by his father in a way that he struggled mightily to improve upon. And he succeeded, by a wide margin. Same goes for my mother. With eyes only for their errors, I've spent years plotting out the flaws and weaknesses I'd correct for once I had my own children.

Therefore, by the transitive property: If I have children, they are probably going to see most of my efforts as shortcomings too, areas to correct for, at best. At worst, a Hamlet situation. Perhaps they'll excuse my struggles with grace, *He was but a child himself*, they'll say to their friends. *He was himself haunted*, smiling, shaking their heads.

Northern New Mexico

When Zoe loses her shit, B stays cool. This is a meltdown. Crying, wailing, intermittent shrieking, 45 minutes of it. There are goldfish crackers all over the picnic table, a water bottle is launched ballistically across the campsite. She commands B to retrieve it, and collapses into wet wet despair when he refuses.

For days, I have been waiting for the bomb to drop. Zoe is three and Dia, B's other daughter, is nine, but neither of them have managed to get this guy to crack yet. Every time Zoe becomes obstinate or Dia gets sassy, I lock my shoulders and brace my guts against the inevitable blowback from a father who's *had it up to here!* But it never comes. Nothing they're doing is working. And it's not like B is white knuckling his way through this camping trip, just trying to get to the end of the godforsaken week so we can drive mercifully home. He loves it out here. He's chillin'. Just bobbing along like a rubber duck in the white water rapids of the Rio Conejos. He speaks calmly, communicates gently, reiterates the tasks to be done, the marshmallows at stake. And when they react *insanely*, he just... stays the same... "Okay little Rabbit, these are your choices..."

I know he's not *always* this patient, he's admitted as much -- "Raising a three year old is my spiritual practice, so if I get through a day without yelling, that's a Good Day" -- but by that

measure, every day I've spent with them has been a Good Day. He's in no rush, doesn't need to change their feelings or overpower their emotions with his own, he's just staying... clear? I don't know how to describe it. Perceiving their needs. Logicking through the maelstrom. And loving them. And, I really believe, in moments, he's loving *this* too, the insanity of communicating with his children through these wild emotional upheavals. I witness this throughout the week, day after day, and eventually my nervous system starts to relax. I soften. I experience less and less fear and anxiety and fixation on the emotional states of the people around me. *Ooooooooooooooh*, I realize, *This is what it's like to have an adult in the room.*

Southern Utah

The aforementioned Sacred Place is right beneath a giant hulk of rock at the edge of Muley Point, where two cliff walls meet and jut out toward the San Juan River running through its own deepcut canyon 2,000 feet below. It took me almost two days to find this spot, nine years ago:

I am looking for some kind of SIGN FROM GOD about the best spot along this mesa's edge to fast-for-four-days-alone-in-the-wilderness-and-cry-for-a-vision-for-my-people and the gods are givin' me nothing. I mean, there *was* that arrow-shaped coloration in the rock pointing off the edge of a cliff. *An arrow is definitely a sign*, I chastise myself, *you gonna ask for a sign and then ignore it when it comes? Again??*

I have this suspicion that Nature is going to murder me (truly), this week. To teach me a lesson. The last time I went on a vision quest, 13 months prior, in the Rio Grande gorge, I got a sign--

"I want to be a writer!" says the boy by the river on the rock in the rain.

"Okay," says the thunder, "Begin it."

--but I didn't begin it. I didn't become a writer. I barely wrote at all for an entire year, and the price of betraying such unqualified permission is that you don't ever get to ask anything of the gods EVER again, and--AND!--if you somehow pony up the brass to ask for something else, you will pay with your life. I really believe this. I am literally convinced I will die on this cliffside if I ask sincerely for a vision for my life.

T tells me the other day that since she met me 7 years ago, I've become significantly gentler with myself. After writing that last paragraph I see what she means. I was once the child of a Punisher God who grants wishes and prayers but only to those who are truly deserving, those with the intestinal fortitude to ACT, without question or pause, upon the Instructions Transmitted To The Heart. NOW OR NEVER.

Whose child I am now remains to be seen.

Rural Bavaria, Hog Springs UT, Moki Dugway

A giant raven hands you a perfectly black egg, solid as stone, and you swallow it whole.

A lizard cuts open your sternum and eats a watermelon seed stuck in your throat, regurgitates it in an underground orchard. It immediately blossoms into a Night Tree.

You are buried up to your neck in a cave and your legs become roots that birth an infant version of yourself. This is yours now. You hold him so close to your chest he's half inside you.

Dreams are flat in the telling because Life is already a dream. The visions that visit in sleep (and waking) are little legends, map keys in the corner, decoders and signifiers offering clues about where to look, how to proceed. The map itself is a metaphor for something else.

Tucked into the backflap of my journal from the Cedar Mesa Vision Quest, there is this a 50-year-old quote by Carlos Castaneda on the other side of a 9-year-old piece of college-ruled paper:

“Any path is only a path, and there is no affront, to oneself or to others, in dropping it if that is what your heart tells you... look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself, and yourself alone, one question... does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't it is of no use.”

How have you touched the void today? We are rebuilding the plank and rope bridge of intuition. The materials are all around us. This is not a metaphor. The materials are all around us.

Yours,

Zachary

Here are links to past issues and as always, happy to hear your thoughts and reflections.

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