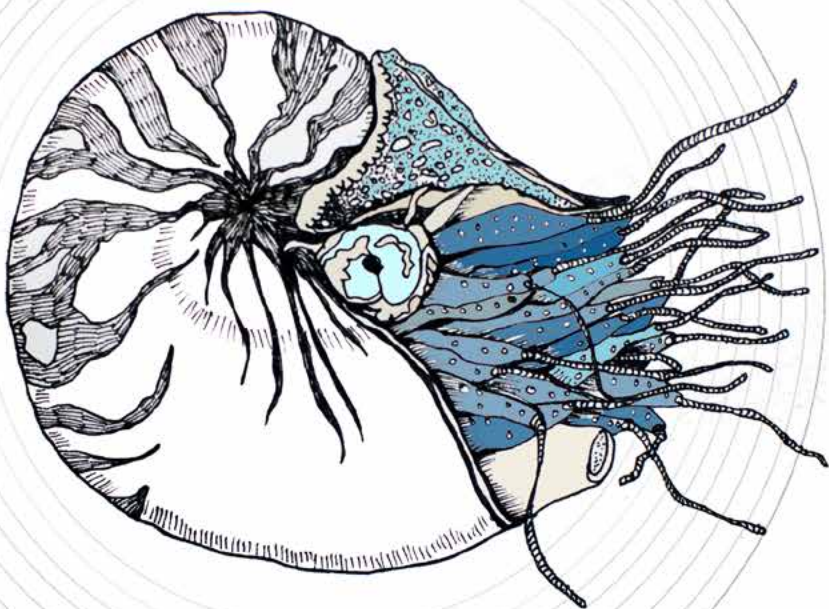


Openings: Into Our Vertical Cosmos

SASHA STEENSEN



OPENINGS:
INTO OUR VERTICAL COSMOS

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ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES



#40

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INTRODUCTION

There are secrets inside sleep. Each night we meet them, but at daybreak they revert to secrets once again. The insomniac knows she is missing something other than sleep, but she can't know what, exactly. I wrote this essay during a recent bout of insomnia that lasted a little over six months. I knew I couldn't write myself to sleep, but I also knew that I would not learn to sleep again without looking sleeplessness in the eye. Its eye is underground.

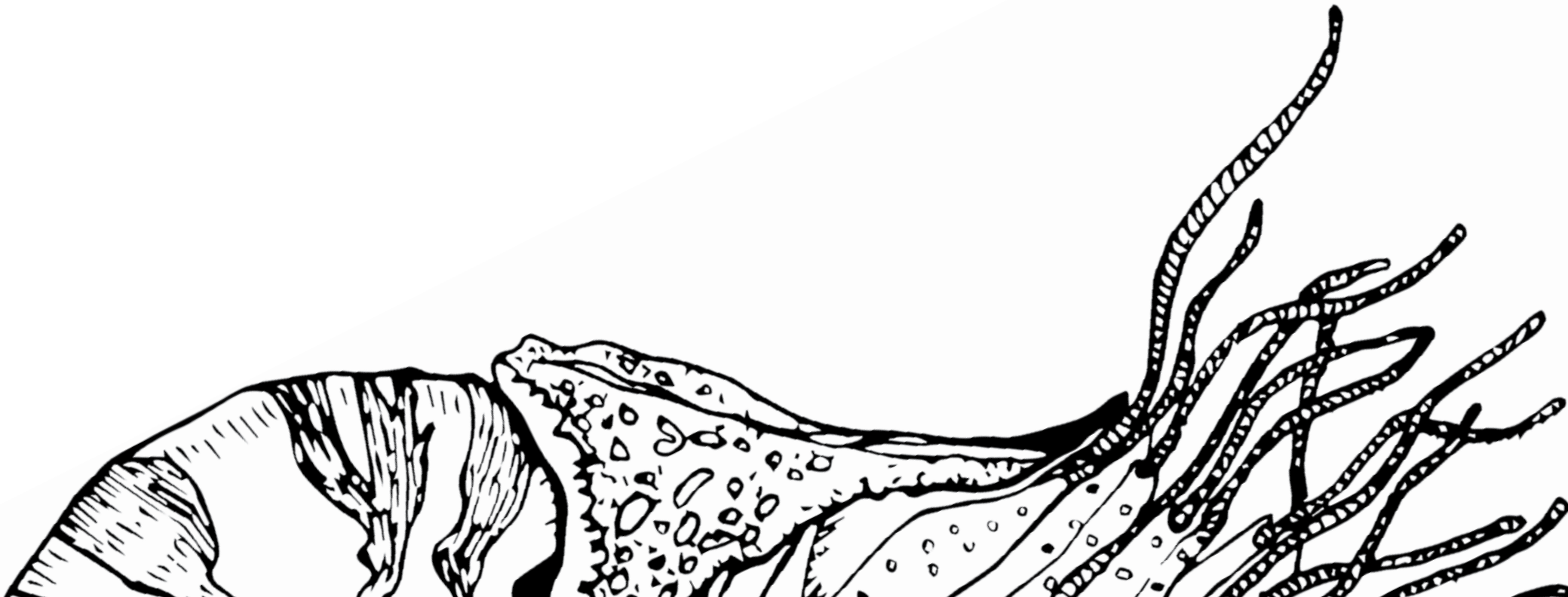
Tunnels have always fascinated me. I've sought them out. For some time while writing this essay I referred to it simply as "The Tunnel Essay." Tunnels open down, but they also open out. There are large expanses on either side of the tunnel's entrance and exit. So much awaits—the day, the night, the other side of life, the aboveground world, the word. I wanted to be enclosed by the ground that held me up, but I also found that every enclosure has an opening.

At the end of the essay, I ask "If writing is not the cure, then what is?" We tend to think of "cure" as a

synonym for remedy, something that puts an end to an ailment. But it comes from the Latin *cura*, which simply means care. The body cares for itself, repairs itself, during sleep. I had to learn to care for a body that failed to make space for its own repair. When I couldn't sleep, reading held a place open for me. I mostly lived there. During the day, I was less awake, and at night I was rapt in words, wrapped in a blanket of books. This essay is a record of that reading, of that care.

OPENINGS

INTO OUR
VERTICAL
COSMOS





*In a dark night,
With anxious love inflamed.
O, happy lot!
I went forth unseen,
My house being now at rest.*

—St. John of the Cross

I will wake the dawn.

—Psalm 108

1

ear-wise

I live in the open, the windy, sunny Colorado open, an open that is almost all sky but for the interruption of the foothills to the west. It is a landscape of divination. Just look out the window and you will know what's headed your way. Snow, rain, sunshine, wind, hail, fog and even wildfire—all blows off the foothills, and within 20 minutes, what was distant becomes present.

The foothills themselves are their own kind of open; climb them and you will feel gloriously and terrifyingly exposed. On many days, a furious wind blows off the hills, toward the open plains, taking with it garbage cans, trampolines, kiddie pools and the animals' lean-tos. Last spring, even our bolted-down wooden playset was uprooted and dropped on a nearby apple tree. I live in altitude too, not too much of it, but enough to make the light brighter and the shadows darker. Living here is not unlike coming up out of a tunnel, where the sun is so bright that you must look down, back into the tunnel, to adjust your eyes.

Recently, when I encountered a sudden personal openness (an openness in the form of time and silence) the actual openness of my landscape began to feel startlingly aggressive. I was on sabbatical, and I had quit sleeping. All of the sudden, I faced many silent, solitary hours each night. This contrasted starkly with the life I had been leading for so long, a life in which time was filled with talking: to my students, to my children, to my husband, to my colleagues, to the chickens I tend and the goats I keep. Some might have breathed a sigh of relief to have all that talking cease. But for me, the world seemed laid bare and unguarded. Gazing out over the acres between my house and the foothills, I noticed that what was once soothing in its openness had become unnerving.

I'm reluctant to call it agoraphobia. We make that word cover too much ground. "Agora" in Greek means marketplace, but agoraphobia just as often refers to someone afraid of being alone, in the wide-open, as it does to someone afraid of crowded, public places. And it wasn't simply the openness of the land itself that startled me; what terrified me most was my inability to be still in the face of this vastness. For several years, I had been too busy and there had been too much noise for me to notice how restless I truly was. Once I gave up sleep, what was hidden was all I could see.

In the face of this restlessness, I came to desire what the agoraphobic desires—retreat. The tunnel, a space made both of dirt and its absence, a space void of wind and light, began to feel almost like the opposite of my open life. I thought of tunnels I had

visited: mines in Nevada and Bolivia, the Hoover Dam tunnels, the Roman Catacombs, the Cu Chi tunnels the Viet Cong built right under the Americans' feet. I thought of the endless train, subway, bicycle and automobile tunnels I have travelled through, some going under water, others through the sides of mountains. I thought of wildlife tunnels built under interstates to protect endangered animals like the Florida panther, whose primary predator is the car. I thought of the tunnels I built as a child—snow tunnels and tunnels in the sandbox that I would immediately refill, certain I had made a portal for the devil. I thought of the fallopian tubes, the womb and the birth canal.

And I thought of tunnels I have never seen. I thought of the miles of tunnels under Berlin: World War II bunkers, pneumatic dispatch systems, Cold War air-raid shelters, escape routes under the Berlin Wall, American spy tunnels and Nazi transport systems. I thought of metaphoric "tunnels," which are called such because of their quality of secrecy (The Underground Railroad) or mystery (the wormhole). I thought of tunnel vision. I thought of the Beijing tunnels, recently in the news, where over one million residents live in converted air-raid shelters. I thought of living tunnels—the tree-lined tunnels of Ukraine and the Wisteria tunnels of Japan. I thought of the dozens of Palestinian tunnels in the process of being dismantled by Israel and rebuilt by Hamas. And, I thought of death tunnels, the entrance of which is an end and the exit a beginning. I longed to (re)visit each of these tunnels.

In *The Wind in the Willows*, Badger speaks beautifully of the tunnel as refuge. Shaken by a recent flood that claimed his friend Rat's house, Badger sings the praises of the underground life:

There's no security, or peace and tranquility, except underground. And then, if your ideas get larger and you want to expand—why, a dig and a scrape, and there you are! If you feel your house is a bit too big, you stop up a hole or two, and there you are again! No builders, no tradesmen, no remarks passed on you by fellows looking over your wall, and, above all, no *weather*.

While Badger is relieved not to be at the mercy of an unexpected and sudden meteorological shift, the underground world offers other safeguards as well. Ideas find the space they need, and the thinker can consider them in peace. Underground, the nosey fellow cannot see.

But we are not badgers, and digging is laborious, dangerous work. Nonetheless, every civilization burrows at some point or another: to find water, to survive disaster, to grow and preserve food, to acquire minerals and metals, to bypass obstacles aboveground, to discover remnants of our collective and personal pasts, to dispose of our dead, to expedite travel, to protect ourselves from one another as well as to launch unexpected attacks on our enemies. We dig for our own personal reasons, but the civilizations most prone to burrowing are those that are either desperate for liberation or hungry for (more) power. In either case, death is

often the price we pay for underground exploration. Resistance fighters *and* those whose occupation they are resisting lose their lives, though the former's death toll tends to be much higher than the occupier's. When powerful civilizations dig in search of resources, travel routes, or even during war, it is the poor who die. Just think of mining.

The tunnel is usually purposeful and multidirectional, and when we are in one, we find our aboveground orientation does not serve us. The body knows the difference, and if we go too deep, we bend over in agony. This is why Brooklyn Bridge workers who suffered from decompression sickness started referring to the disease as "the bends." Some historians suggest that they were evoking "The Grecian Bend," a dance move, popular at the time, in which women stooped. The dancer supposedly resembled a female Grecian statue, modestly bending forward to hide her nudity.

Aboveground, our orientation tends to be from our eyes outward. We scan the horizon right in front of us, forgetting all the while about the teeming mass under our feet or the expanse of sky above. We look up occasionally, perhaps to check the weather or admire the clouds or the stars, and we look down when we've dropped something or when we are walking on uncertain ground. The foothills and distant snow-capped mountains behind my house may make their vertical claim, but on most days, the wind's horizontal insistence is louder.

Underground, we struggle to adjust: our pupils dilate and we begin to see with our ears. Our

2

going to hell

oldest recorded myth of the underworld tells us of the Sumerian goddess Inanna, who adorned herself with beautiful clothing and ornaments and “opened her ear to the Great Below.” Inanna opens the tunnel that is her ear and hears her way into the underworld even before its tunnel opens to her. Why would Inanna, the queen of Heaven and Earth, want to visit the place of no return? When she is asked this question at the gates of the underworld, she answers “Because...of my sister, Ereshkigal.” The underworld is the domain of Inanna’s jealous sister. Ereshkigal is everything Inanna is not—infertile, sexually insatiable, naked, husbandless, lonely and full of wrath. She is Inanna’s neglected other.

Almost five thousand years before Freud, Inanna knows that she herself contains an underworld in which she might meet her other self, but by the time she passes through the underworld’s seven gates, she’s stripped of all her clothing and all her power. She crouches naked before her naked sister, and sees herself fully for the first time. The only possible outcomes of these visits to the underworld are death and wisdom. Inanna receives both. Before her servant comes to fetch her, before she offers a suitable replacement for herself (which turns out to be her own husband), Inanna becomes a corpse and she is hung on a hook. The wisdom, it turns out, is in the hearing. The Sumerian word for ear is the same as the word for wisdom. From the Great Above, the goddess opened her wisdom to the Great Below.

There are no shortages of underworld myths, some undoubtedly more familiar than others. There are abductions and rapes (Pluto abducts Persephone). There are successful rescues (Dionysus rescues his mother; Aphrodite retrieves Adonis; Heracles rescues Theseus after Theseus’s botched plan to abduct the already abducted Persephone). And there are botched rescues (after Orpheus looks back, Eurydice must remain in Hades; the Norse god Baldr isn’t released because the entire world won’t weep for him.) There is retribution (Guanyin is sent to the underworld after taking on her executioner’s karmic guilt; prideful Satan is sent to hell as a result of his disobedience). There are quests for power (the Chochenyo anthropomorphic figure, Kaknu, defeats the underground Stone God). And there are quests for beauty (Venus sends Psyche to the underworld with a box in which she is supposed to collect a bit of Proserpina’s beauty). There are underworld gatekeepers (Neti, Aker), and underworld guides (Charon, Hermes, Aken, Mutt, Xolotl, Virgil) and too many underworld gods and goddesses to name (the Chinese have close to one hundred).

And, of course, there are quests for wisdom (besides Inanna, we have Aeneas, who learns of the future of Rome from his dead father, and Odysseus, whose underworld visit with Tiresias offers reassurance of his eventual homecoming). In fact, nearly all these myths open an ear to wisdom. Almost every underworld god, goddess, guide and traveler has some wisdom to depart or some to receive. Often this wisdom is transformative. Psychoanalysis merely extends this ancient notion of depth as revelatory. As Freud writes in his 1933 "Revision of the Theory of Dreams":

with the theory of dreams, analysis passed from being a psychotherapeutic method to being a psychology of the depths of human nature. Ever since then the theory of dreams has remained the most characteristic and most peculiar feature of the young science, something which has no parallel in the rest of scientific knowledge, a newfound land, which has been reclaimed from the regions of Folklore and Mysticism.

This newfound land is the land underneath and within. It is, for Freud, the unconscious. Inanna went inward by way of her ear-tunnel, but Freud goes by way of the dream. If Inanna finds her sister and death, and manages to escape them, Freud finds sleep and dreams, and carries them back into the living, waking world.

All dreams, Freud tells us, are wish-fulfillments. The insomniac agrees. In fact, I've never understood the French expression *la petite mort*. Orgasm isn't the little death—sleep is. In the underworld, Hypnos, the

god of sleep, lives next to his brother, Thanatos, the god of death. Even those who sleep well know that death and sleep are bedfellows. "Each night, when I go to sleep, I die," writes Mahatma Gandhi, "And the next morning, when I wake up, I am reborn."

When sleep is scarce, whether out of necessity or as a result of insomnia, we begin to see death's proximity to sleep more clearly. Having children radically altered my experience of a day. Like a horizontal sundial, time began to spread (often too thinly) over the surface of the plains. With the first light, the family was awake, and as the light retreated, so did we. To echo Woody Allen, sleep for the new parent is bad and the portions too small, but I should not have been complaining. When insomnia set in a few years later, my waking day often spanned 20 hours. But back then, sleep, however truncated, was the good death, a respite from the seemingly endless tasks of mothering. During these early years of parenting, my dreams, often interrupted by a baby's cry or a small hand shaking me awake, were sweeter than they had ever been before.

There were moments, after insomnia set in, when actual death appealed to me simply because of its proximity to sleep. And just as, in the underworld, siblings are often the other side of self (Thanatos and Hypnos, Inanna and Ereshkigal) the underworld is itself the other side of this waking, living world. The Egyptians believed we walk upside-down in the underworld, as if our living, conscious feet were attached to another pair, with just a sliver of earth between.

And, indeed, very little separates us from the underworld. The earth is covered by a crust that comprises only one percent of its volume. From time to time, volcanoes and earthquakes remind us just how thin and porous this surface is. It is not unlike our skin—often the first place to register internal imbalance, whether it be physical or emotional. The skin reddens, wrinkles, erupts in pimples and rashes. Like the body, the spirit too knows the proximity of above and below. Royal tombs and sacred burial grounds can be found on every continent. India lays claim to over 1,500 rock temples, many of which are relatively shallow, requiring the visitor to take only a few dozen steps in order to meet the temple's deity. What lies below is close, and its time is not that divergent from our own.

The underworld, then, is more than an eschatological realm. Its influence is not relegated to the depths; we bring what we learn back to the surface of the earth. Even if Zeus (god of the sky) and Poseidon (god of the sea) chose better lots than their brother, Hades's very name is associated with knowledge and beauty. Socrates tells Hermogenes, "It's much more likely, then, Hermogenes, that Hades derives his name not from what cannot be seen (aeides), but from the fact that he knows (eidenai) everything fine and beautiful." The underworld is the place of dark beauty under our very feet.

In short, the underworld belongs to us and not just to mythology or psychology. And yet, just as some Christian theology encourages followers to look ahead and beyond, to focus not on the things of this world, but on some distant rewards in heaven, so

too do we continue to see the underworld as there and not here. But didn't Jesus say "the kingdom of heaven is within you"? Perhaps heaven's sibling—hell—slumbers next to her. Perhaps the underworld is not off-limits, even for the most holy among us. "For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly," Matthew tells us, "so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." The heart is never distant from the body it enlivens.

I am not unaware of the problems with this move downward, with this reaffirmation of an inside/outside binary. It has long entrapped so many of our disciplines—not only mythology and psychology, but also archeology, engineering, geology, history, philosophy and even linguistics. Each of these disciplines tells us that knowledge is waiting to be unearthed. Even if Plato's cave was once considered a space of deception, we forged ahead and tunneled through, assuming we'd find some wisdom on the other side of the cave wall. This was no less true during the Enlightenment than it was in classical antiquity. "The truth of nature," writes Frances Bacon, "lies hid in certain deep mines and caves." Plato's cave quickly transformed itself from a place of illusion to the starting point from which we begin our excavation process.

If the ancient Greeks, via Plato and his cave, first introduced us to the idea that appearances might misrepresent or obscure reality, they were, according to Nietzsche, also just as interested in the surface and its possibilities. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche alludes to the aftermath of one of our most famous

underworld stories, Persephone's abduction by Hades. Demeter, mourning the abduction of her daughter, is inconsolable—that is, until the witch Baubo elicits a laugh by exposing herself. Nietzsche praises this moment as a moment of pure surface, pure appearance, and he contrasts it with the desire to uncover truth, to know everything:

Today we consider it a matter of decency not to wish to see everything naked, to be present everywhere, to understand and "know" everything...One should have more respect for the *bashfulness* with which nature has hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties. Perhaps truth is a woman who has grounds for not showing her grounds. Perhaps her name is—to speak Greek—*Baubo*?... Oh those Greeks! They knew how to *live*: what is needed for that is to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin; to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, tones, words—in the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial—*out of profundity*! And is this not precisely what we are coming back to, we daredevils of the spirit who have climbed the highest and most dangerous peak of current thought and looked around from up there, looked *down* from up there?

But doesn't Baubo seem an odd example? After all, what makes Demeter chuckle is precisely the exposure of something that would have otherwise been hidden. And according to Clement of Alexandria's *Exhortation of the Greeks*, it wasn't

just Baubo's genitalia that were exposed. Quoting a lost Orphic text, Clement tells us that she "showed a sight of shame; child Iacchus was there, and laughing, plunged his hand below her breast." Seeing this sight of shame is powerful enough to make a grieving mother temporarily set aside her grief.

At any rate, Nietzsche calls out, as only Nietzsche can do, but it takes some time for us to hear him. Modernists, too preoccupied with their depth inquiries (psychoanalysis, Marxism, even semiotics) were deaf to his calls, but finally, postmodernists answer. "Yes," they say, "this *is* precisely what we are coming back to!"

According to Fredric Jameson, toward the end of the twentieth century, we began relinquishing our depth models in favor of superficiality. In works like Munch's *The Scream*, "emotion," writes Jameson, is "projected out and externalized, as gesture or cry, as desperate communication and the outward dramatization of inward feeling." This paradigm falls away in postmodern culture because there is no inside, no depth that needs plumed, no cathartic gesture, and most importantly, no affect indicative of an inward emotion. The swirling depth below Munch's figure is flattened. We now need neither my tunnel nor Munch's bridge.

At this late date, the word "postmodernism" itself is almost enough to put me to sleep. Simulacrum, ahistoricity, intertextuality, opaque language have all served me, but so have the depth models we carried forward from antiquity. Even if I now had two holes to tunnel through (our ancient inside-

outside hole and our shallow postmodern hole), I was drawn, first and foremost, to that ancient hole. I knew its limitations well. Like Jacob and the angel, I had wrestled with them all night long.

The limitations that bother me most are the secular implications of our vertical cosmos. Heaven above, hell below, earth smack-dab in the middle—this has been at the center of our impetus to see the aboveground world as a temporary abode. When we see heaven as elsewhere, we tend to abuse the earth and its inhabitants. A far-away heaven is inoperative and it can either disempower us, or embolden us to commit the most unforgiveable injustices, or both. I've worried for quite some time about this distant heaven. I've long desired, as I am sure we all have, for heaven to open onto us, gently laying a shroud of peace and abundance atop this crowded earth.

I've worried, too, about what a distant underworld might mean. What if the underworld is, in fact, only dark because we are so dark about it? Its association with death (the very telos of all being) suggests that the underworld's power infuses this very moment with meaning. "All psychic events have a Hades aspect," writes James Hillman, "when we search for the most revelatory meaning in an experience, we get it most starkly by letting it go to Hades." Thus, when I couldn't sleep, I went to hell instead.

3

from birth forward

In 1818, the ex-Army officer and American businessman John Cleves Symmes distributed a handbill to philosophers, politicians and colleges; he pledged to explore the "hollow and habitable" earth. The earth's center, Symmes was certain, was essentially a tunnel with an opening at each pole. While Symmes devoted his life to acquiring funds to prove his theory, he died before the 1836 expedition got underway. There is a passage at the end of *Walden* in which Thoreau questions the expedition:

What was the meaning of that South-Sea Exploring Expedition, with all its parade and expense, but an indirect recognition of the fact that there are continents and seas in the moral world to which every man is an isthmus or an inlet, yet unexplored by him, but that it is easier to sail many thousand miles through cold and storm and cannibals, in a government ship, with five hundred men and boys to assist one, than it is to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific of one's being alone... It is not worth the

while to go round the world and count the cats in Zanzibar. Yet do this even till you can do better, and you may perhaps find some 'Symmes' Hole' by which to get inside at last.

It is as if Thoreau's entire experiment comes to this call for verticality and "home-cosmology." But notice that, for Thoreau, while we may overvalue horizontal travel, these expeditions may evidence an underworld that has yet to be explored. Perhaps, in our circumnavigations, we might stumble upon the underworld.

There is a Symmes Hole, says Thoreau, but it doesn't lead from one pole to the next, it leads to a geography all our own, and while some of us need a boat to get there, others might simply need sympathy. Too many of us "love the soil which makes [our] graves, but have no sympathy with the spirit which may still animate [our] clay." For Thoreau, this spirit is our own neglected self, but the clay may point to something more primordial, something that contains life but precedes consciousness.

Many scientists who study abiogenesis have noted that clay, because of its capacity to store as well as transfer energy, may have provided the ideal environment for the emergence of our most primitive life forms. In origin stories from the Sumerians, the Greeks, the Chinese, the Egyptians and the Inca, we are told that the first humans were formed from clay. While the Bible prefers dust, the Quran provides a portrayal of the origins of life in which we move almost immediately from clay to semen:

Certainly We created man from an extract of clay.

Then We made him a drop of fluid in a secure abode.

Then We created the drop of fluid as a clinging mass. Then We created the clinging mass as a fleshy tissue. Then We created the fleshy tissue as bones. Then We clothed the bones with flesh. Then We produced him as another creature. So blessed is Allah, the best of creators!

It turns out that if we are willing to speed past the more than three billion years between the earliest unicellular microorganisms and the first homo sapiens, the Quran's account is, at least in part, and perhaps in full, stunningly accurate. Clay hydrogels may very well have been "super sponges" soaking up huge quantities of seawater, trapping chemicals that, over time, interacted and formed complex biochemicals.

Even if this clay theory turns out to be just another hypothesis in the long list of abiogenesis theories, we know that sperm does find the egg; the fertilized egg does cling to the side of the uterus; the fetus does begin to develop bones and flesh. In short, we know that life requires merging, and in the human this merging of sperm and egg happens by way of a journey, outward and inward and outward again. The baby travels the same tunnel as the sperm did some 40 weeks earlier, but in reverse.

Maybe we are tunnel-bound even before our first breath. Sperm and eggs emerge from their own

tunnels; they meet in a tunnel; the zygote travels down a tunnel; the tunnel-like umbilical cord sustains the forming life; the emerging baby makes its way into the world via a tunnel. If the tunnel, by definition, has at least two openings, are the urethra, the fallopian tube, the umbilical cord, and the birth canal tunnels? Yes, because the body, with its orifices aplenty, is itself a tunnel.

The smaller tunnels that propel and sustain us from conception on are a fundamental structure that we return to throughout our lives. Some have even suggested that this is the meaning of the tunnel so often traveled in near-death experiences. Death, some have argued, is a return to the forgotten memories of our life prior to birth, or death is itself a second birth, not terribly dissimilar from our first insofar as we cannot expect to know what lies at the other side of the tunnel.

The tunnel, then, bookends our lives, but it also defines so many of our experiences as living bodies. Our bodies draw materials into themselves (food, air, liquid, sound waves, light and odors), but they also busy themselves with the fluids they create and dispel (sweat, mucus, shit, piss, vomit, tears, earwax, amniotic fluid, breastmilk, bile, pus, blood, menses, semen and "female ejaculation"). Unlike semen, the fluid expressed by some women during orgasm lacks the dignity of its own name. We can refer to it only by referring to the action that (sometimes) produces it and the sex of the body from which it emerges. Even if, by now, most societies have conceded that woman do actually experience sexual pleasure, it is as if we are not yet ready to substantiate it with

a name. This fluid has been banned from even the most risqué of publications—pornographic videos. In 2002, The British Board of Film Classification ordered the filmmakers of *British Cum Queens* to cut more than six minutes of footage depicting female ejaculation. Meanwhile, semen is shot from every direction in most porn movies. Give us scripted moaning, but do not give us tangible evidence of female pleasure. If the female body is a tunnel, its leakings must be policed.

The Greeks were the first to call the female body "a leaky vessel," and the early Moderns concurred. The female body leaks menses and breastmilk and urine. If there is no toilet to be had, women have to squat and try not to piss on their feet, while men, on the other hand, neatly direct their penises at the nearest tree. Since having babies, I often pee when I sneeze. But the real problem is menses. Menses, Julia Kristeva tells us, is a kind of pollution, on par with excrement. Blood is meant to stay in the body, and each month the boundary between my body and the world's is breached. Interestingly, even though the female barely leaks (and rarely ejaculates) during intercourse, she's still much leakier than her male partner. "Sexually," says Anne Carson, "the female is a pore...the pores must be kept closed. The unbounded must be bounded. The purity of all that lies within depends on it. A house or society that does not take adequate measures to contain the leakage of its women is sailing the sea of life in a Melian boat, as the ancients might say."

Though it has an opening, the phallus is not a pore. It neatly propels its fluid into the world. Usually, nothing

enters this opening. In Freudian sexual symbolism, of course, the penis is a vehicle (often a train) entering the vaginal tunnel. The rocking sensation of a train ride is so evocative of sexual pleasure that "all boys, at least at one time in their lives, want to become conductors." But if the little death (and this time I mean orgasm, not sleep) is a passenger on the train, so is the big death. As repression sets in, Freud argues, pleasure is exchanged for fear, and "these same persons...react to the rocking and rolling with nausea...or show a tendency to attacks of anxiety during a journey."

Freud experienced this anxiety himself. He was afraid of train wrecks, but his most enduring fear, it seemed, was missing his train. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he writes at some length about the meaning of the dream in which the dreamer misses his train, and he concludes, "'To depart' is one of the most frequent and one of the most readily established of the death-symbols. The dream therefore says consolingly: 'Reassure yourself, you are not going to die (to depart).'" Orgasm and death may be transformational, but no one wants to arrive on the platform just moments after the train pulls away.

Freud's adopted "eldest son...his successor and crown prince," Carl Jung, experienced his most profound vision while traveling through a train tunnel between Zurich and Schaffhausen. Apparently tunnels can stun anyone, as is evidenced by "Babies in Tunnels," a two-and-a-half minute video compilation produced by the makers of the '90s TV show *America's Funniest Home Videos*. The

second the videotaped babies enter the tunnels, their demeanor changes. Crying babies stop crying; smiling babies stop smiling; and all babies quit blinking. The babies are all too young to speak, but whatever it is the entranced babies see, they cannot take their eyes off it. Jung, on the other hand, offers a detailed description of his vision, which lasted an hour or more. He saw all of the countries of Europe, save Switzerland, sink into a blood red sea. Three months later, while going through the same tunnel, the vision returned.

There is no hint of Freudian sexual symbolism in Jung's vision, unless we read the blood as hymenal rupture, or perhaps even the male fear of menses. But Jung would object to such a reading. A month before Jung's vision, his and Freud's relationship had soured, in part because Jung had becoming increasingly wary of Freud's insistence that most dream-symbols are evidence of repressed sexual desire. There is no doubt that Freud's tendency to see sex everywhere can be exhausting. But there is also good reason for it. So many of our most basic interactions and experiences, particularly those with a creative aspect, are made up of stages not that dissimilar from those we associate with sex: foreplay, intercourse, climax, rest. We start by playing with ideas or materials, and before we know it we are fully entwined in them, even, at times, indistinguishable from them. If we are lucky, something emerges, and like the song Wallace Stevens plays on his blue guitar, it is beyond us, yet ourselves. There is always rest, or at the very least, an opportunity to see one's own *rest-less-ness*, and while this is sometimes

frightening, it is crucial. The mind must lay fallow every now and then.

I don't mean to suggest that the motion of these creative activities is so neatly linear, or horizontal, for that matter. Yes, the train stays on its tracks, but watching it, we see that before it halts, it weaves; it encounters barriers; it slows to a crawl:

I like to see it lap the Miles—
And lick the Valleys up—
And stop to feed itself at Tanks—
And then—prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains—
And supercilious peer
In Shanties—by the sides of Roads—
And then a Quarry pare

To fit it's sides
And crawl between
Complaining all the while
In horrid—hooting stanza—
Then chase itself down Hill—

And neigh like Boanerges—
Then—prompter than a Star
Stop—docile and omnipotent
At it's own stable door—

In this famous riddle-poem, where the unnamed "it" exceeds its referents, Emily Dickinson compares the train to a horse, its body full of need and desire. It faces obstacles—it cannot easily fit its "sides" (or "Ribs," one of Dickinson's potential variants) through

the quarry, but eventually the train is rewarded with beauty and release. I bet you think I am going to say this poem is about sex, but I say: first and foremost, it is about writing, making. The quarry-tunnel the train must travel is not a vagina, necessarily, but the seemingly impenetrable word that the poem eventually bores through.

Admittedly, this reading is all the more apparent if we acknowledge one other important variant: I like to hear it lap the Miles. The poem's climax is auditory—it isn't the pleasant sight of the train, but its "horrid...hooting stanza" that propels us toward knowledge. As if the train/horse simply needed a little extra force, that additional line in stanza four pushes "it" forward. In ecstasy, the train/horse is outside itself, and thus, it sings, and in its singing it gains understanding, omnipotence even. This poem is about what we find on the other side of our own stable door. And the poem is about trains and the industrial age. And sex. The poem is also about sex.

Perhaps, too, the poem is concerned with the tunnel that waits on the other side of our lives. Again and again, Dickinson reminds us that whatever else it is we might be doing, we are, like the train, on a journey that will stop "prompter than a star." The near-death experience has almost universally been described as a journey whose end point is the brightest of lights. Raymond Moody, the scientist who wrote the first sustained study of near-death experiences, *Life after Life*, identified seven common elements of the NDE, one of which is "the sensation of being pulled very rapidly through a dark space of some kind" toward a radiant white light. This

space has been described variously as “a cave, a well, a trough, an enclosure, a tunnel, a funnel, a vacuum, a void, a sewer, a valley, and a cylinder.” While darkness, movement and light appear to be cross-cultural features of the near-death experience, the tunnel is much more common in Western near-death accounts than it is in non-Western accounts. Why do Westerners who die but live to tell about it overwhelmingly report tunnel travel?

This tradition, it seems, stretches back to our oldest afterlife stories. At the conclusion of *The Republic*, Plato relays the story of Er, a soldier who dies in battle but is later revived on his funeral pyre. The architecture of the afterlife, according to Er, is defined by two tunnels—one in the sky and one in the earth, each of which has its own entrance and its own exit. The moral souls entering the sky come out on the other side full of tranquility, whereas immoral souls exit the earth tunnel full of despair. The Talmudic tradition, too, offers an example of afterlife tunnel travel. In the Messianic period, Jews who have died in diaspora will travel, via underground passageways, to Israel.

But beyond these formative texts, near-death tunnel narratives may have modern underpinnings as well. Allan Kellehear, author of *A Social History of Dying*, argues that the tunnel experience so often reported by Westerners is reinforced by modernity’s fascination with the tunnel as a symbol of progress. He writes, “from a child’s kaleidoscope to the adult’s experiences of gazing through telescopes, microscopes and binoculars, Western people have grown accustomed to seeing strange new

worlds through the dimness of tunnels.” As the Enlightenment taught us, mastery entails seeing and examining, and, eventually, arriving. In the Western imagination, the tunnel as passageway, as magnifier, as tool that overcomes barriers, might be second only to the skyscraper in its ability to represent, architecturally, what we Americans hold so dear: industrialization, dominance, knowledge and power.

When it comes to death, then, could the tunnel simply be a reflection of our ceaseless drive to master? By virtue of arriving at the tunnel’s end, we come to conquer what we most fear. Nearly all the individuals who report this tunnel-experience relay an overwhelming sense of peace followed by a complete absence of the fear of death. In the tunnel, death loses its sting.

Thanks to the International Association of Near Death Studies, an organization that brings together researchers, health-care professionals, educators and “experiencers” (the organization’s term for those who have undergone a near-death experience), the near-death experience, in all of its variety and mystery, feels a little less distant. Their website includes over 400 experienter narratives, some written, some videotaped, but I kept coming back to Bill Vandebush’s narrative, videotaped in 2002 at the organization’s annual conference. I watched it again and again, despite the fact that there is nothing particularly extraordinary about the sequence of events he narrates. In fact, it was, in Vandebush’s own words, “quite typical of most experiences.”

During the Vietnam War, Vandebush was a 19-year-old squad leader who was called to help downed American helicopter pilots. Though his squad was being attacked by a North Vietnamese army force, Vandebush's injuries came from American friendly fire. With shrapnel in his side, and a severe head injury that claimed his right eye, Vandebush resolved to die. Instead of calling out for help, he removed his pack and calmly attempted to make "himself comfortable." He moved toward what he refers to as "a typical dark corridor." "Everyone," he goes on to joke, "who has had a near death experience knows what this dark corridor is all about," at which point the crowd chuckles knowingly. Despite his wounds, once Vandebush entered the tunnel, he was whole and calm. Arriving suddenly at a bright, white light, he "felt a tremendous amount of peace, tremendous amount of knowing, of knowledge. It was like the answers to the universe were there. It wasn't academic stuff like $E=mc^2$ or the square root of 347, nothing like that, it was like, who I am and why I am here and why we all exist—those kinds of answers, that kind of knowledge." Ultimately, Vandebush was sent back, and as he approached the battlefield, he first heard (again—the ear!) the bombs and guns, and then he found his body, ravaged but awaiting his return.

Much of what Vandebush reports is reiterated in the other accounts I watched and read, the majority of which were narrated by American experiencers. The more I thought about his account, however, the more I began to see it as a metaphor for the persistence of cultural cohesion, even in the midst of incredible cultural collision. Dying on a Vietnamese

rice paddy, Vandebush experiences a quintessential Western near-death experience. Of course, how could it be any different? After all, he was given the symbols of his passage by the representations he found in American culture. As if to fully embody the power of these cultural proclivities, just last year Vandebush acquired a prosthetic eye with a Seattle Seahawks logo where the pupil would otherwise be. Vandebush makes visible the persistence of our culture's narratives even in the face of death. He lost his eye to see the other side of life, and replaced it with an emblem of his devotion to place and tribe.

If the tunnel turns out to be a fundamental symbol during my own death, it will be because I have traveled this tunnel before, hundreds of times. One of my favorite books as a child, *Alice in Wonderland*, manages to exploit the tunnel for all of its symbolic and transformative richness. Just as this underground space seems itself to be in flux ("The rabbit-hole went straight on like a tunnel for some way, and then dipped suddenly, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down a very deep well"), its power of representation is just as slippery.

As too many theorists of juvenile literature have pointed out, the tunnel in *Alice in Wonderland* manages to evoke death, birth, sex, drug use, dreams and, not least of all, the shift toward independence which characterizes later adolescence. In other words, Lewis Carroll situates the tunnel at the heart of all of our major life events, conscious and subconscious. From childhood on, both popular

and high culture have reinforced my fundamental relationship to the tunnel through films (Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*), TV shows (*Battlestar Galactica*), visual art (Cy Twombly's haunting white tunnels), scientific theories (quantum tunneling), songs (Bruce Springsteen's "Tunnel of Love"), poems (Hart Crane's "The Tunnel") and now the countless near-death-experience narratives I have read or viewed.

I keep trying to imagine a North Vietnamese soldier dying at the same moment, perhaps on the very same rice paddy, as Vandembush. I do not have access to any Vietnamese near-death narratives, but in accounts offered by Buddhists from other countries, the tunnel is almost entirely absent. Buddhist experiencers tend to report meeting the underworld god, Yama, or one of his guides, known as Yamatoots. Yama was the first mortal to die, leaving his twin sister, Yami, ravaged by grief. Before his death, there was only daylight. The gods created night so that Yami might understand that, despite her loss, time continued to move forward. As she slept, grief receded. As with the twins Thanatos and Hypnos, sleep and death are again entwined. Yami stands on the banks of the Yamuna river, the main tributary for the sacred Ganges, while her brother, adorned with a necklace of human heads, extends his blue arm, leading the dead through the purgatorial underworld.

Scholars of the near-death experience, most of them Americans, find it curious that these non-Western accounts contain no mention, either in the transport to the underworld or in the underworld itself, of tunnels or corridors. Whatever the reason, the

tunnel, so prevalent in the Westerner's near-death narrative, is almost entirely absent in non-Western accounts. I can do nothing to reconcile this but turn to the imagination. When I think of Vandembush dying, I see his body lying on dry, brown ground, his pack off to the side. I have seen the lushness of the Vietnamese rice paddy, but in my imaginings, it just doesn't seem to hold his body.

Psychologists have a theory ("the rice theory") to explain why some Asian cultures appear to be more "cooperative" than many Western cultures. Our ancestors, they say, "planted some of these cultural differences hundreds of years ago when they chose what grains to sow." Wheat can be cultivated by a single family, but not rice. It takes an entire community. As intriguing as it may be, this theory falls flat for me. Just as I can't make sense of another culture's death symbolism, maybe I am just unable to see how the wheat field necessarily produced individualism or the rice paddy, cooperation. Still, Ho Chi Minh certainly saw the value of the community rice paddy. Immediately after declaring independence from France, he collectivized the paddies.

4 *the black echo*

I am aware of only three Vietnamese tunnels, though I am certain there are many more. The first is mythical—a tunnel that housed a giant fish called Ngu Tinh, who was intent on splitting Van Lang, or ancient Vietnam, in two. In the 28th century B.C., King Lac Long Quan ruled Van Lang. The area suffered from disunity, and the king resolved to travel from North to South in hopes of unifying his kingdom. In the Southern waters, he met Ngu Tinh, the fish who had plagued humans for centuries by eating anyone who dared travel past. Ngu Tinh lived in a tunnel running from the bottom of the ocean to the top of a mountain chain that separated the North from the South. King Lac Long slayed the fish, emptying out the tunnel and ushering in the security that would eventually lead to the tentative unification of the two regions.

This myth not only reflects what must have been an ancient hard-fought battle for unification, but it predicts a fundamental truth of the Vietnamese experience—unification requires the defeat of outside invaders. For thousands of years, the Vietnamese have had to resist these invaders: the

Khmers, the Mongols, the Chams, the French, the Japanese and, of course, the Americans. Each invasion reveals the age-old rupture between North and South, the tunnel first occupied by Ngu Tinh. Not unlike our mineshafts, the tunnel, in Vietnamese history, is strewn with bodies. So perhaps it isn't a symbol of progress, per se, but, in the country's most recent upheaval (the American War), the Vietnamese went underground in order to survive and resist.

After heavy American bombing, residents of the "demilitarized" Vinh Moc region built over a mile of tunnels that included kitchens and bedrooms and health-care facilities. The tunnels housed 60 families, and during the six years the tunnels were occupied, not a single resident died of war-related injuries. In fact, the one direct hit that did impact the tunnels created a hole residents would later use as a ventilation shaft.

Perhaps even more impressive are the Cu Chi tunnels, a series of tunnels that, though begun during French occupation, were expanded and finished during the American war. Though Cu Chi refers to the region outside of Saigon, where the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong regularly planned and staged crucial attacks, like the Tet Offensive, the tunnel complex stretched as far as the Cambodian border, covering over 150 miles. Both regular army units and volunteers patrolled the tunnels. The latter were mostly peasants, men and women, who tended their gardens during the day and fought from the tunnels at night. The tunnels were incredibly narrow and plagued with booby

traps, some constructed from bamboo spikes, others triggering grenades or releasing scorpions or poisonous snakes. Entrances, exits, ventilation and exhaust holes were all ingenuously concealed, and the tunnels contained everything the soldiers needed to survive: kitchens, hospitals, bomb shelters and sleeping quarters. There were even large chambers used as theatres, music halls and a print shop with a full-size printing press and 37 trays of type.

Several months into my sleepless year, I flew to Vietnam, boarded a boat and traveled up the Saigon River to the Cu Chi Tunnels, now a tourist attraction. As an American climbing down into these tunnels, the thought occurred to me, *Here is a place where our strong arms couldn't reach*. I have visited other countries where American presence meant the most stifling oppression, but here in these tunnels, I faced a monument to our own defeat, and instead of feeling vulnerable, I felt safe, finally. The irony, of course, is that I felt safe because my own country appeared weak, and so the safety I felt wasn't for me personally, but for humanity.

However brief and however costly, America's defeat and its consequences cannot be underestimated. Despite our stockpile of weapons and despite the strength of our tanks and helicopters and airplanes, America met its match not only *on*, but *in* this ground. Finally, Americans were too big to fit their bodies through these holes, or too uninformed to avoid the booby traps they faced at every turn, or too focused on air strikes and chemical weapons to succeed at tunnel warfare. Of course, attempts

were made. German Shepherds were trained to sniff out the Viet Cong, but enemy soldiers began washing with American soap, rendering the dogs useless. American troops tried flooding the tunnels, but despite the hassle of water-logged food rations and sleeping quarters, the Viet Cong were not deterred. "Tunnel rats," U.S. soldiers who were shorter and slighter than the typical American, were sent underground, and while there were some successes, some enemy deaths, ultimately Charlie and his terrain remained elusive.

Wandering around the grounds above the tunnels, I spot bomb craters the size of swimming pools, and I imagine the rumblings that both tunnel rats and the Viet Cong must have heard again and again. In the tunnels, which are now lit with electric lights, I shut my eyes. I imagine the walls contracting, shrinking back to their original size, before they were expanded to accommodate Western tourists. Still, I cannot get any closer to what the tunnel rats called "the black echo." What did it feel like to crawl into these tunnels, where the ear hears what the eye cannot see? What is the echo that appears not as sound but as the absence of light? And what is the darkness that must be heard instead of seen?

Before tourists descend into the tunnels, they watch a black-and-white film showing peasants happily harvesting fruit and rubber. While the footage was shot before the ravaging of the region, the narrator tells us of the "merciless American bombs" that will render the land unusable. "Like a crazy bunch of devils, they fired into everything—property, people, even statues of Buddha." The film shows us what

we can no longer see (a thriving, fertile country), until, abruptly, the footage moves underground, where soldiers and peasants dig holes with picks and mattocks.

The film's narrator, disembodied, stands in for the rupture that cannot be pictured. Perhaps the black echo is a bit like this—in utter darkness, the body, one's own and one's enemy's, sounds its presence even as it remains invisible. Tom Mangold and John Penycate describe this corporeal transformation: "the tunnel rat's best piece of equipment was a body tuned to near perfection...his fingertips and ears became to him what a walking stick is to a blind man." Just as Inanna went to the underworld by ear, so did the soldier fighting tunnel warfare. "We became so tuned up," said tunnel rat Arnold Gutierrez, "that when the other person would flick an eyelid up or down, you really knew he was there."

Whatever else the black echo might have meant to the soldiers whose ears rung with it, it could just as easily refer to the sound of the earth making her wounds known. Whereas bombs shook the ground and landmines detonated above the tunnels, the silent destruction of chemical defoliants echoes even now. Crop yields in Cu Chi are among the lowest in Vietnam, and the water is still contaminated. Gone are the robust, tall, fruit-bearing trees that covered the region before the war, and while saplings have been planted, they are nothing more than skinny trees struggling to produce leaves. Here I can see the blackness echo, even if it has been somewhat muffled by time, but I still can't hear it. It is just not mine to hear.

Instead what I hear is the echo of a dozen AK-47s. Situated in a clearing above the tunnel complex, there is a shooting range where tourists can pay up to \$1.50 a round (the price of a bowl of pho) to shoot weapons used by both sides. The Soviet AK-47 is by far the most popular choice. Western tourists prefer the gun that won the war, the gun that hails from the other side of the world. For a split second, I wonder, *Do Americans choose this gun as opposed to our M-16 simply so that they can hold their own defeat in their hands?* More likely, they choose it simply because it is "everyone's favorite gun." During the Vietnam War, if an American soldier was lucky enough to capture an AK-47 from his enemy, he would quickly stow away his M-16. The gun has received endorsements from Osama Bin Laden, Chechen rebels, Mexican drug traffickers, Irish Republican Army members, Somali Pirates, Ice Cube, 50 Cent, Clint Eastwood and Samuel Jackson, who, in Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*, proclaims the gun's preeminence: "AK-47. The very best there is. When you absolutely, positively got to kill every motherfucker in the room, accept no substitutes." Reportedly, it is not all that accurate, so perhaps its popularity has to do with its ruggedness, or maybe it is because, as a Soviet weapon, it has always seemed "off-limits."

But I do not want to celebrate the AK-47 simply because it is not an American weapon, any more than I want to celebrate the war simply because we lost. If the tunnels serve as a monument to our defeat, the monuments to our "success" are all the clearer. Take the body count. For every three North Vietnamese and Viet Cong killed, allied troops would

lose just one soldier. And while American officials continually pointed to this ratio as evidence that we'd eventually win the war, years earlier, during the conflict with the French, Ho Chi Minh had famously said, "You can kill ten of our men for every one we kill of yours. But even at those odds, you will lose and we will win."

Even now, aboveground, a visitor can still see these successes, out in the open, at every turn. Spend just a short time in Vietnam, and you will see countless adults and children with Agent Orange-related birth defects. Sit in a cafe and chat with a middle-aged man who wants to practice his English, and you will discover that he lost his father to the war when he was nine. Visit the War Remnants Museum in Saigon, and you will see Howitzers and Hueys and Patton tanks strewn about the lawn. You will see countless horrifying images, including the famous "napalm girl" photo, depicting badly burned, naked, nine-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc. You will see jars of preserved fetuses miscarried and deformed by chemical warfare.

And you will see the sewer pipe where three children hid before former senator Bob Kerrey and his Navy Seal unit killed two of them, one by disembowelment. Even before Kerrey confessed to knowingly killing civilians (for years he claimed he believed he was shooting at Viet Cong) he did not hide his deep regret: "It's far more than guilt. It's shame. You can never, never get away from it. It darkens your day. I thought dying for your country was the worst thing that could happen to you, and I don't think it is. I think killing for your country can be

a lot worse." Kerrey, who kept an easel in his Capitol Hill office, painted watercolors and wrote poetry. Atop one painting, in black marker, he copied the following lines from an Emily Dickinson poem: "Remorse is memory awake, / Her companies astir,— / A presence of departed acts / At window and at door. [...] / Remorse is cureless,—the disease / Not even God can heal / For 'tis his institution / —The complement of Hell."

If the tunnels, a hell themselves for all who fought or hid within them, relieved a personal pain I've felt for some time, a pain inspired by my nation's endless list of oppressive acts, the War Remnants Museum inspired a deep sense of shame not unlike Kerrey's. Just as the black echo wasn't mine to hear, the crime wasn't mine to commit, but I still felt remorse at my association with it, and even more so at my response to it. I wept my way through the entire museum, but the display that made me feel the deepest remorse (a collection of medals donated by Sergeant William Brown) was one in which remorse itself was the subject. Neatly pinned to black velvet and encased in a glass frame, Brown displayed his eight medals, including a Purple Heart. At the top of the display, he had placed a gold plaque that reads: "To the People of a United Vietnam. I was wrong. I am sorry." However short the gesture falls, it is a gesture of deep remorse in more ways than one. While remorse is what has led Brown to offer this display, the display itself is a re-infliction, a re-presentation, of the very remorse Brown likely seeks to relieve. As if to enact the word's etymology ("remorse" is born out of the Latin "remordere," to bite again), Brown bites himself where he has

already been bitten before. Remorse is a self-inflicted wound that bites harder, not softer, as time passes.

Because of the lighting or the nature of the glass, or both, I could not see the display without seeing my reflection at the same time. Of course, while the reflective quality of this display is likely accidental, the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C. was specifically designed to provide a reflection of the viewer as she reads the names of dead soldiers she may or may not have known. The design came from 21-year-old Chinese-American architecture student, Maya Lin, who was attacked not only on the basis of the memorial's highly unconventional design, but also on the basis of her race and gender. The memorial, unlike others on the National Mall, is black rather than white, and it is sunken into the ground rather than piercing the sky.

Tom Carhart, a Vietnam vet and a Pentagon civil lawyer, argued that the monument's black walls were "the universal color of sorrow and dishonor," and that Lin had "hidden [the monument] in a hole, as if in shame." The memorial, Carhart insisted, is nothing more than "a black gash of shame and sorrow hacked into the national visage that is the Mall." If the hole is a place of shame, Carhart would rather stay aboveground, admitting no remorse or regret about his own part in the war. But notice, too, that the National Mall has a face, a visage, and the monument, as a gash on the Mall's face, is capable of reflecting our own wounded faces back to us. When I visited the memorial as a child, I did not yet understand this wound, but when I looked at

Brown's medals, I felt deep remorse, not only as an American who benefits from my country's power and wealth, but also as someone whose life has been largely untouched by the war. If remorse is to bite twice, the second bite came when I acknowledged that my distant interest in this war and this region was prompted by complete and utter selfishness. In my imagination, the Vietnam War had figured not so much as the site of so many American and Vietnamese deaths, but as the possible site of my own non-birth.

Had my father enlisted, had he not received the college exemption, had my brother not been born, I would not be here. Before the draft lottery, my father received a student deferment, but by December of 1969, one year before he was set to graduate from college, the draft lottery was instituted. My father's birthday, May 30th, was the 103rd date-stamped capsule to be drawn, on national television, from a large urn. Having used his one-year college deferment, my father would have had to report for duty in April 1970, when numbers 91-120 were called. That is, had he not, just one week prior, on March 24, 1970, become a first-time father. He was eligible for another deferment, but just barely. On April 23rd, 1970, President Nixon issued Executive Order 11527, which terminated the Class III-A paternity deferment for new fathers.

My brother was a surprise, and while my mother's father was none too happy to find out his eldest daughter, pregnant out of wedlock, had eloped, my father's mother couldn't have been more relieved that her only son had escaped the war, again.

I suppose if my brother had not been born, or if the paternity deferment had been abolished just a month earlier, my father might have fought and survived the war. My mother might have married him later, when he returned. I might have been born on April 1st, 1974. And I'd likely still feel remorse. Interest is selfish. Had my father fought in the war, the glass might have reflected back to me my own fascination with a war that miraculously didn't claim me before I was born.

5

the poem below

There are so many poems that have gone to hell that listing them would require an essay in itself. The underworld poem has an ancient name—Katabasis, from the Greek *κατα-βαίνω*, meaning “to go down.” Herodotus, Isocrates and Strabo all use the word to signal a descent into the underworld, but it has figurative uses as well. The Stoic philosopher Chrysippus employed the term to refer to the descent of an idea into the mind. Some dictionary entries mention poetic and rhetorical uses, but examples are not offered. At best, we are told it is a “gradual descending of emphasis on a theme within a sentence or paragraph.” In these cases, the word's opposite is evoked. Anabasis, an ascension, can refer to a text's progression toward meaning or emphasis. Does the katabatic text, then, move away from meaning and insistence? Does it achieve significance by escaping it?

Perhaps the katabatic text is not unlike Jesus's harrowing of hell—full of contradiction. Here's what Paul says, parenthetically, about Jesus's katabasis: “But what does ‘He ascended’ mean except that He descended into the lower parts of the earth? The

one who descended is also the One who ascended far above the heavens, that He might fill all things." During the period between crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus's followers lived in uncertainty, but only so that Jesus might be nowhere and everywhere at once.

In the Liddell-Scott-Jones Lexicon of Classical Greek, *katabasis* couples itself with the Greek word "ergon" to refer, cryptically, to "a hanging work." Is this a work that hangs in the balance, a work that is neither aboveground nor belowground, a work that is forever suspended? Of course, like *katabasis* itself, which is both the activity of going underground and the poem that is produced as a result of this activity, a hanging work might be the work we, as readers of the *katabatic* text, are called to do. A text that critiques itself by moving away from the deepest desire of most texts—to mean—is a text that asks the reader to suspend (dis)belief.

Michael Thurston argues that "modern poets have used the *katabasis* to frame moments of cultural critique...deploying the narrative to dramatize problems in contemporary society." Of course this is nothing new—nearly all the ancient underworld myths criticize some element of the culture of which they themselves are the product. And any society in need of a poem meant to "Justify the ways of God to men" must be, in the eyes of the blind poet, rife for critique. What is it that the poet sees in this great darkness, and what is it that he critiques?

Like me staring at the soldier's display, Paul Blackburn sees his own face. "We enter the tunnel. // The dirty window gives me back my face," he

writes in "Brooklyn Narcissus." The poem seems an echo of so many other tunnel poems, but especially Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" and Hart Crane's "The Tunnel." The tunnel, in each of these poems, offers a face. In Blackburn's poem, it is his own, being reclaimed, but in Pound's and Crane's, it is the other's face, surprising, stunning and full of sound:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

And so
of cities you bespeak
subways, rivered under streets
and rivers.... In the car
the overtone of motion
underground, the monotone
of motion is the sound
of other faces, also underground—

These faces are veiled by reflections, apparitions, sounds. The tunnel's dark keeps the face at a distance. Or rather, the dark reminds us that the face (our own and everyone else's) is always at a distance, even in the light of day. If our own face can only be seen reflected back to us in reverse, the other's face keeps itself at bay, always presenting its radical autonomy. But even if the face calls us into a relation, as Levinas says, the face also refuses to be contained. Like the tunnel rat, "so tuned up," who learned to hear what he couldn't see, the poet turns his ear to the other and hears the face he longs to see more clearly.

The poet's love of language is indistinguishable from her love of the human face because, as Levinas tells us, "the face, preeminently expression, formulates the first word: the signifier arising at the thrust of his sign, as eyes that look at you." Celine thinks along these same lines: "in the Scriptures it says, 'In the beginning was the word.' No! In the beginning was emotion." If emotion precedes the word, expression appears first on the surface of the face. But the face quickly betrays its openings. When the mouth-tunnel utters its first word, the face simultaneously lifts and weaves the veil between you and me.

This is why the poet has always been drawn underground. Eros leads her in through the mouth, toward the origin of words. Anne Carson says that there is a strong relationship between language and love because breath moves "words from speaker to listener as [it] moves eros from lover to beloved." Emotion, expression and breath all come before utterance. Air goes in and comes out, transforming itself into the word, but the underworld's relationship with language, especially speech, remains troubled. As if speech comes from above, the tower from which distraught Psyche is about to leap suddenly breaks into speech. And what does it say? It tells her she will survive her journey underground if, among other things, she holds her tongue. And even if she had disobeyed this order (she gets herself into trouble not by speaking, but by peeking at beauty), how could she have hoped to speak clearly with Charon's quarters stowed under her tongue?

For Dostoevsky's underground man, speech is the problem with the aboveground world: "I am

convinced that we underground men must be kept well reined in. A man like me may be capable of sitting in his hole for forty years without a word, but once he comes outside and breaks out into speech, he'll talk and talk and talk." Dostoevsky's underground man is either plagued by neurosis or a spokesperson for individualism, or both. The novel reads like a speech meant to turn around Dante's signpost on the gates of Hades. Hope, the underground man seems to suggest, is found underground, because it presents an alternative to the stifling rationality of the aboveground world. The hallmark of this brightly lit rationality is the right amount of controlled speech. When speech flows out of control as if pouring forth from some underground abyss, it is associated with madness.

Any poet who makes an underworld journey carries with her the force and traditions of her poetic predecessors, and it is a lot of weight to carry. But women poets carry not just this tradition, but also the stigma of the garrulous, high-pitched voice. In classical antiquity, women's voices were always-already excessive and shrill. Even if the male poet's katabatic critique is questionable, as in the anti-Semitic rants against usury which plague *The Cantos*, the sound of Pound's voice itself isn't always-already troublesome. "In general," writes Carson, "the women of classical literature are a species given to disorderly and uncontrolled outflow of sound—to shrieking, wailing, sobbing, shrill lament, loud laughter, screams of pain or pleasure and eruptions of raw emotion in general. As Euripides put it, 'For it is woman's inborn pleasure always to have her current emotion coming up out of her mouth and

out through her tongue.” Even if emotion plants the seed of speech, emotion itself should not be seen.

In the opening pages of Alice Notley’s *The Descent of Alette*, our heroine describes an underworld of subway trains, where emotion is the very air she breathes:

“To ride a “mechanical”
“contrivance” “in the darkness” “To be steeped in” “the
authority”

“of” “another’s mind” “the tyrant’s mind” “Life of bits &
pieces”

....

“There is
substance” “of darkness” “And emotion” “strong
emotion” “The air”
“is all emotion”

To write an underworld poem that critiques the patriarchy is to ride a train of authority that has never belonged to you. The emotional air might be dusty but it still speaks. Where the eyes, emblems of rationality, are not functioning, the ears and the voice move in. Indeed, this (non)sight is the seat of the mother’s power. When Alette delivers the mother’s head, the mother is hesitant to put it back on her neck:

“I’m afraid,’ ‘she said,’ ‘to take my head back’
“Why?’ I asked’

“I’m afraid,’ ‘I’ll lose my power’ ‘to speak from’
‘deep inside of me’

‘Lose my power’ ‘to make visions...’

A vision is not an image; it is not something the reader is *made* to see (or smell, or hear, or taste, or feel, for that matter). “An apparition” is one of its definitions, and that has always been the word that most throws me in Pound’s poem. Does he, or does he not, see “these” faces, and what are we meant to see? There can be no “direct treatment of the thing” when the thing isn’t a thing at all, but *The Descent of Alette* is not meant to be direct, because “directness” is the hallmark of the tyrant’s speech.

Katabasis, I forgot to mention, can also refer to a military retreat (and anabasis, to an advance). When Alette finally tells the tyrant her name, she immediately adds, “‘my brother’ ‘died in battle,’” and sinking to the ground, she re-members him—the shape of his head, his profile. Alette’s brother died in the tyrant’s war, which he describes as a “‘necessity’” and “‘a proximity to life & death—’ ‘that captures / many men’s’ ‘imagination.’” Alette’s grief and the tyrant’s rationality meet. But war is often the result not of necessity, but of men’s fancy. This war-mongering imagination is a trap that can only be escaped via a counter speech, one that does not privilege rationality. It is Alette’s speech that eventually releases humanity, and we are told in the Author’s Note that the persistent quotation marks “remind the reader that each phrase is a thing

said by a voice: this is not a thought, or a record of a thought-process, this is a story, told." This speaking stands in contrast to the well-crafted speech. *The Descent of Alette* is a hanging work in which each phrase is held in suspension by the act, and the symbol, of speaking.

Blackburn, Pound, Crane and Notley all chose the subway as their underworld guide, but why? The subway is the tyrant's domain—an emblem of capitalism and industrialization, and the product of dangerous, wage-labor work. But as Cu Chi taught us, what is underground is often unseen by the enemy. This hidden quality cannot help but be appealing to the artist. Graffiti thrives underground because the artist needs the dark to finish his painting. But what does it mean that poetry is the one art form whose presence on the subway has been sanctioned by the authorities? For 20-some years, the Poetry Society of America and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority have teamed up to run Poetry in Motion, a program that has placed poems in subways in over 20 cities. The poems, so says the MTA, offer travelers "a moment of timelessness in the busy day." The poem on the subway car is offered up as a retreat in and of itself.

The pieces chosen by Poetry in Motion are meant to be comforting. If they aren't completely comforting, they are edited accordingly. Take Sylvia Plath's poem "I Am Vertical." We are given only the first stanza, in which she praises the beauty and longevity of upright trees and flowers, while simultaneously declaring her desire to trade her own verticality for

horizontalty. The omitted second stanza explains this desire:

Sometimes I think that when I am sleeping
I must most perfectly resemble them—
Thoughts gone dim.
It is more natural to me, lying down.
Then the sky and I are in open conversation,
And I shall be useful when I lie down finally:
Then the trees may touch me for once, and
the flowers have time for me.

It is as if the tree and the flower can have this conversation with the sky, despite their verticality. This is not so for the speaker. Only by laying her body down on the ground, whether in death or in sleep, may the weary speaker find meaning. This second stanza of the poem points to a kind of timelessness, but not the kind the MTA hopes to evoke for its passengers on their way to work.

The poet's relationship to the underground is so ancient and dark that even the bright lights of the subway car will not illumine it. The katabatic impulse is full of contradiction and rebellion, like the subway itself. The subway may be a product of a system that excludes so many, but it has often served as a shelter for those who bear the greatest brunt of this exclusion. Nowhere is this dual role more evident than in Marc Singer's film *Dark Days*, which documents the lives of a group of homeless people living in makeshift dwellings in the Freedom Tunnel section of the New York City subway system.

The circumstances that led these individuals to the tunnels (drug abuse, poverty, imprisonment, sexual abuse, childhood neglect, racism, unemployment) are indeed dark, but the exposure to the hostilities of the aboveground world transform the tunnel into a place of refuge.

“Somewhere down the line,” one resident notes, “I said, ‘It can’t be as bad as it is up top.’ Because out in the street, you have kids fucking with you. You had police fucking with you. I mean, anybody could walk by you while you sleeping and bust you on the head. At least down in the tunnels you don’t gotta worry about that, cause ain’t nobody in their right mind gonna come down there.” This reality has been played out in many modern cities—the homeless have lived underground in London, Las Vegas, Bucharest, Portland, Beijing and Kansas City.

Marc Singer, who had no experience as a filmmaker, decided to shoot the documentary after befriending several of the tunnel-dwellers. Once he began the film, Singer himself became homeless in part because he needed money to buy film and supplies. He sold everything he owned and moved underground. The film crew was made up of Singer’s subjects, and they themselves created dollies and controlled the film’s lighting. *Dark Days* was shot in black and white because a filmmaker friend of Singer’s told him it was easier than shooting in color. The few times the camera goes aboveground, the intense light hurts the viewer’s eyes. All the people shot aboveground are filmed from a distance. For the most part, the aboveground conversations

consist of authorities making their case to a silent and invisible cameraman, presumably Singer—an Amtrak authority offers a litany of reasons why residents must be removed, and a worker from the Coalition for the Homeless describes his negotiations with Amtrak, which eventually lead to securing apartments for displaced residents.

In contrast, belowground we see faces close-up; we hear personal, heart-wrenching stories; we sit inside the residents’ dwellings, many of which are quite homey, and we watch the tunnel-dwellers cook, sleep, eat, take drugs, tend their pets and watch TV. Belowground there is domesticity: there is intimacy, and there is safety. One resident even suggests that, in the tunnels, he doesn’t think of himself as homeless. At the end of Singer’s film, when armed Amtrak Police give residents 30 days to leave the tunnel, one resident compares the displacement to an assault on the family: “We are over here, down here, you know, by ourselves, my friend, like family alright? Now you gonna break up the whole family, alright.... It’s not fair to us.... This has been our home for over three years, for me. Imagine all these people that have been down here for 20 years.”

Somewhere down the line, aboveground residents began referring to the tunnel-dwellers as “mole people.” For obvious reasons, this term is derogatory. But it makes me think not of an actual mole, but a fictional mole, in particular Mole from *The Wind in the Willows*. Badger, you might remember, believes that “there’s no security, or peace and tranquility, except underground,” and mostly, he wants to avoid nosey “fellows looking over [his] wall.” For Mole,

this is not so. As happy as he is living underground, when spring arrives, “penetrating even his dark and lowly little house, with its spirit of divine discontent and longing,” Mole excitedly tunnels upwards. Throughout *Dark Days*, this same spirit haunts the residents—they long to be aboveground, but not without a proper home. The mole people who were given apartments have them because they were willing to be exposed. They turn their faces not to the light of day, like Mole, but to Singer, his camera, and the artificial lighting they themselves helped to create. The underground dweller is already vulnerable, but in the film, this vulnerability becomes visible even as it stays hidden under the busy streets of New York City.

6

Oh, morning

Living without sleep is nothing like living without a home, but like the tunnel-dwellers, when I was in the throes of exhaustion and anxiety, the tunnel emerged as a place of retreat. I wanted to write myself into solitariness, darkness, enclosure. In short, I wanted to be where I might fall sleep. And I also wanted what the agoraphobic most desires—retreat. If I had begun this essay in sisterhood with the agoraphobic, I eventually began to feel the deep-down closing in on me. Somehow, I managed to feel both claustrophobic *and* exposed at once. I could not write myself out of that hole. The flashing cursor became an entrance and an exit, obscured by every word I typed.

For some time as I wrote this essay, I wondered if the problem I was facing was the result of the transparency of language, of the word reflecting itself back as materiality, therefore obscuring the meaning it exists to evoke. But if this neat little equation (word above, meaning hiding below) is all there is to language, why do we keep talking? It isn't simply because we believe meaning might

someday, after all these centuries, be released from the depths and join its attendant word on the surface of the earth. It is because words aren't completely successful at hiding what they know. They are too close to emotion.

Kristeva says that Celine ("in the beginning was emotion") presents us with a "loving auscultation... imagined essentially as probing a hidden inside... where the unnamable truth of emotion lies." But I don't think the unnamable truth of emotion lies only in the hidden inside. What about the body? What about the face, which, again as Levinas says, "opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation"? The face first articulates emotion as affect, and then it opens its mouth. If we reconfigure the inside-/outside-language equation with this in mind, we find that, even if the word obscures what lies below, it also carries within it the emotion that precipitated its creation. But the face is also an in-betweenness that nearly renders our inside-/outside-binary useless. If we open our ears, we hear this contradiction in every word we speak.

It is, for Celine, an attention to sound that offers us a way out. Sound is tied to reason when it acquires its meaning, but before this, it is all emotion. But does that mean that where the word emerges, emotion must fall away? Celine, riding his "emotional subway," hopes to "*resensitize language*, to have it *throb* more than *reason*—SUCH WAS MY AIM." For Celine, only style can achieve this, because style attempts to register the hollowing out that happens when emotion meets sound. Emotion stands before

the word with an open mouth. The word hollows itself out in order to echo the emotion at its heart.

This is why the writer can write herself into a hole, but she cannot write herself out. Virginia Woolf tried. She spoke affectionately of her "tunneling process," by which she dug "beautiful caves behind her characters." But she soon found that even though these tunnels were "meant to connect and each come to daylight," they led only to more depth. I have read *The Waves* at least a dozen times and, thankfully, I have never found my way out of that book.

I had wanted to escape daylight—to find a darkness in which I could rest my eyes. If writing is not the cure, then what is? I took herbal sleep remedies, benzodiazepines, hypnotics and SSRIs; I gave up alcohol, coffee, sugar, gluten, naps, TV, Facebook and, worst of all, reading in bed; I got a therapist; I meditated; I saw an acupuncturist; I went to bed earlier; I went to bed later; I was hypnotized; I visualized myself in all sorts of beautiful places; I exercised; I practiced yoga; I learned breathing techniques; I participated in a sleep study; and I pleaded with God to put me to sleep. But the cures, I learned from the pulmonologist who finally helped me, were the very things I had come to despise: daylight, silence and wide-open expanses of time. I was to stay up until the middle of the night, with the house alight, and I was to be outside at 6 a.m. to expose my eyes to the sunrise. I was to sleep only four hours a night until, so tired and desirous of my bed, I would experience it anew, without the strife.

It is unlikely that I will ever be “a good sleeper,” but I no longer pass an entire night without sleep. The spring when my sleeplessness finally began to recede, one of the goats I tend birthed a kid. Once we started weaning the baby, I milked the mother each morning at dawn. Over time, daylight began to represent more than the restless hours I had just spent in bed. Goats have a horizontal pupil with which they can see 320 degrees, and in their eyes the human recognizes the possibilities inherent in a wide-open world. The kid’s bleats as it calls for his mother, the goat’s belly rumblings in my ear, the sound of the milk hitting the metal bucket—these are the first sounds of a day I now enter gladly. “There lives the dearest freshness deep down things” writes Gerard Manley Hopkins, “And though the last lights of the black West went / Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward springs.” No longer terrifying, morning is now an opening through which the dearest deep down things come out to greet me. *Oh, morning*, I sing in gratitude, and with my ear open wide, I hear the dawn sing my song back to me.

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