

Go gentle

*Such marvels, and how
to deliver them to you...*

(from 'Insect Exhibit', by Maya C. Popa)¹

When they appeared to us in our speed and steel, the flash of car wheels and sun-slick windows, they were quiet as summer's heat. Some sixty of them. Unstilled and expectant. Perhaps readying themselves for our eyes. The smell of them in the air. I'd like to say, a thick, musky odour. But there was no real scent except that which passes between memory and desire.

Only those who have been there have seen.

They were there before us, having stepped onto the grass, not with intent, not believing in anything except the promise of food, the fleeting aftertaste of what was to come. To them we appeared out of the light. In our flesh and stealth and motor fury. Our own metallic haste. If we were phantoms, coming and going, and heedless, we were also human and inalterable and large.

They were all animal. Their bodies—imagine— their bodies hot with fear or fright.
Their appetite like clouds of grass.

Only those who have been there have seen.

I was there after. Months after. Knowing the house but not the man. Having seen his upright piano. His guitar, his poetry books. His white claw-foot tub. The white window-frame by which the cottage was caught naked at strange hours of the day, whispering behind translucent curtains when the sun fanned the pear tree, teasing out buds of pain(ful)—of brilliant—white.

Every day it appears in more hallucinatory detail. The way the mind draws flesh from word, from the pauses between the unsaid, or the tear unshed—I see her drawing open the curtains, the white sheets gathered over his crumpled body. His face clammy. His hands? Still unseen. I hear the deer in the garden, in their almost inaudible silence. A close-up of their nostrils nudging

¹ *Granta*, 22nd May 2023, [Two Poems | Maya C. Popa | Granta](#).



the chicken wire, their breath on the quivering stalks. Then the flight by the back gate. The gentle passing between the garden and the yard.

If I could conjure the unseen—

The stained table-wood where his closest friends sat that last night before the parting. Tenderly, each ingredient held between the thumb and the furrowed palm, the flour curdling inside the fat, the Andouille drippings softening chicken and shrimp. The okra she had had shipped from a secret place. Yes, I've watched her cutting it in perfect cubes, slowly, assuredly. Her Creole Gumbo simmering in slow heat and his kitchen irrevocably transformed.

Of the connection between food and love-making, there's a literary euphoria. But what of last suppers? Of bread and wine split thirteen times. Of food to soothe the dying. Like Colm's Trinity of onion, celery and bell pepper. Like that other dying man I knew—whose name I dare not write—coming all the way home for the fast-food of his palate—peacakes and cheesecakes in their crusty layers of delight. Of Francois Mitterrand's last meal of songbirds in throated yellow: 'He shrouded his head with a white napkin to inhale the aroma of the birds and, as tradition dictated, to hide the act from the eyes of God.'²

The eye of God unseeing.

And so the elk appeared, timid and hesitant. They moved inwards towards the stain of wood where the redwoods strung out their flesh in strips of bark. There where the rivers hummed. Where the chords flung themselves across the light and the Pygmy Owl called from the Heart O' the Hills. There where I'd seen the lying giants from the storm. Their massive roots haloed upon the earth. And the Skunk Cabbages sprouting next to them, a yellow exuberance at home with the dead.

What holds us together is the thought of what has been. Perhaps, it isn't dying that terrifies, but forgetfulness. The moment unfixed in its passing.

² from *Apeirogon*, by Colum McCann (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).



On May 19th, 1900, a 19-year-old law student living in New York, ‘suddenly lost his memory and sense of personal identity and found himself wandering in the street of what he considered a strange city. He was so perplexed that he asked people [...] if they could tell him who he was and went to the libraries and hotels to search in the newspapers for stories of missing persons in order that he might get some clue to his identity. [A]fter spending five days in fruitless wanderings and inquiries he finally entered a police station [...] and requested that search might be made in record of missing persons.’³

‘Maybe life’s little more than our own blindness easing;
look, he said, *keep looking*.’⁴

February 12th, 1979—wind gusts in Port Angeles raved at 60 mph. Imagine the temperate rainforests of the Olympic Peninsula where ninety-two trees were wrenched from their roots, leaving a narrow swath extending a quarter mile. ‘Winds of the same storm sank the Hood Canal Bridge,’ says the sign. I can see them now—the giants—plummeting down, down. Not crashing with one clean thud, but wailing and groaning, screeching and snapping against each other. The wind in their mouths and their pain a hot bruise in the eye of god.

If I could conjure the unseen—

Which room was it in? Surely, not this one where I lie sleeping, but the room where the wind chafes the bark of an invisible fir. To hear but not to see. This is how the dead survive. And so the moose came out of the dark and for that moment, the travellers were transformed. The bus driver watched the size of her as if she were a god. Not beautiful. In fact, almost ugly—perhaps, a wing-clipped messenger—⁵

We did not rush past, or brake, or reverse. We were watchful and expectant, holding them right there between the eye of doubt and the escape into the forested green. Wapiti. All presence and small motion. Their white behinds, fleeting signs of some passing. Only now do I know. Each

³ Henry Rollin, ‘Loss of memory and Sense of Personal Identity’, *The British Journal of Psychiatry* (2001-2005, Vol 178 (5), p. 480.

⁴ from ‘All That Is Made’, by Maya C. Popa, in *Granta*, 22nd May 2023, [Two Poems | Maya C. Popa | Granta](#).

⁵ ‘homely as a house’, from ‘The Moose’, by Elizabeth Bishop.



clip half-seen and smudged against the iris of sight. I didn't notice then what I see now. No stags around them. Not a single antler. All ears and mild foreheads. A herd of female elk!⁶

'The emotion we call awe—our capacity for deep pleasure in facing the incredible and trying to take it all in—may reflect a basic need to understand the world in which we live,' says Paul Piff, an associate professor of psychological science at the University of California. Michelle Shiota, professor of social psychology at Arizona State University, calls it 'a little earthquake in the mind', allowing the brain 'to reassess its assumption and pay more attention to what is actually in front of it', like dialing back the mind's predictive coding.⁷

All this seeing can make you blind.

The deadwood is at your feet, baring its bone to the sky—and the elk move away into the V of themselves, carving inwards, like a boat leaving its wake in a lake glassier than it had been. What do trees know of dying? Or the elk in their sudden light? Forty-five years from the day of the storm and these trunks are nursing new green. 'Come then, little earthquake—⁸ What you've seen, can never be unseen.

The lake is coldest at its centre where the heart of it wants to bleed. There, you can die, the nitrogen fixing you forever into one last frozen breath. A year ago, the lake swallowed a man. His soon-to-be-wife swam back to the shore. 'Imagine the scene,' says the sign post. Meaning: travel far between memory and desire. Imagine 'an immense tongue of ice clogging the valley' and jamming up the cliff-flanks. Yes, 'higher than the peaks.' A receding glacier leaving steep rock walls and a crescent lake.

Because when the other humans emerged from their vehicles. When they came across what they hadn't meant to see, but had been offered to them. When they emerged from themselves to see what we really had stopped for. They pointed and chattered and spoke in shrill voices. First, the red pick-up reversing and the man emerging, slamming the door shut. Then, the second car, and the third. Their consonants catching on leaf and snap. Their blindness searing the sky.

⁶ I am opening the car door and stepping out, lifting my iPad for a picture—

⁷ from 'Awe: The "little earthquake" that could free your mind', by David Robson, BBC, 6 January 2022.

⁸ Ibid.

Only those who can see, have seen.

One day, Mount Storm King became angry. The Klallam and Quileute people were fighting each other. He sent fire-rain and thunder-belts, but still, they did not see. He carried the moon on his shoulders and they did not see. He bled the moon into the lake and they mistook it for their enemies' blood. Desperate, Mount Storm King hurled half of his crest down into the valley. The huge rock dammed the stream, splitting Lake Crescent from itself. And so the people lay buried in an avalanche of their own making.

She tells and retells the story, to find an answer—⁹ And then she twists the tale. Makes it her own. But a story is never whole. The author not dead already, but always, always—dying. And so she rushes towards the parking lot and waits for the leaping salmon with the living dart for an eye and the dead moon in its mouth.



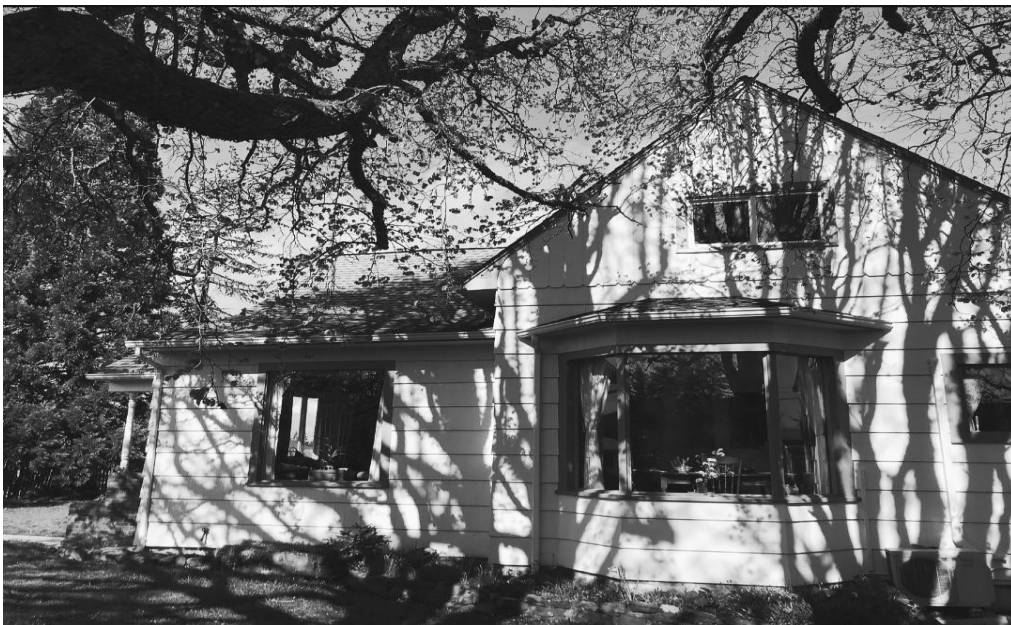
⁹ adapted from H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, Book 6, 4, (New York: New Directions, 1974).

And still the elk did not move. Still, they watched and waited as if the world were an acorn and they were ready for it to split. Then another car went past, and another, and the screeching was too strident. The men emerged in their loudness and cheer. Their skin was human and unused to the wild. The Indian reserve was there for their making. They saw but could not hear. Their lust for a snapshot, abrupt and incircumspect.

The seven ridges of the mountain sing a dirge unto the water. ‘Is this the mirror by which he dies—?’

Ferns lay fingers on hemlocks so ancient they know the strain of each twisted sun. I think of the elk, their heads turned, their ears pricked, the fast star of an eye that is trained to flee. Perhaps, I’m only here to write the dead. ‘No ritual will save / our souls,’ says Catullus, in memory of his brother.¹⁰ But in Anne Carson’s translation of the same poem, the line draws a blank and the ‘last gift’ is ‘mute ash’.¹¹ From afar, I see remnants of a glacial tear. The rip of ice bluing against the sky.

What we see is half-imagined, half-absence.



¹⁰ from 101, *The Poems of Gaius Valerius Catullus: Some English Versions*, translated by Roz Kaveney, (Bristol: Sad Press, 2018).

¹¹ from *Nox*, (New York: New Directions, 2010).

I cast my gaze on the elk. I could only sing the elk.

The woods were on fire

and the elk answered.

The house was his gift. That day, crossing over to the other side of Lake Crescent to walk over Devil's Punchbowl Bridge for the last time, he already knew what would happen. Less fearful now. More awed. Everything was as it should have been. And time too—faithless lover—having escaped him before—was now bending to his will. At sunbreak, the drag of breath, the slow lunacy of a hum.

I spotted the bridge on the way to Cape Flattery, minute against the blue mountains where Colm walked.¹² Perhaps, I'll spend a life-time calling back the dead. Or the low-tide will make everything visible—starfish and sea anemones waiting for the blessing of salt water in their little tide-pools of patience and want. There where sea-stacks guard the forest and the grey carcasses of huge trees deck the sand. Somewhere, between memory and desire,

the elk entered and would not leave—

¹² With deep gratitude for the residency at Gentle House, made possible by Jeffrey Levine and Kirsten Miles of Tupelo Press.



And then, he caught himself looking—