

Reflections on In Situ Polyculture Residency **by Naomi Harrison-Clay**

Death

I am nervous to see him. I recall being a child, sick in my parents' bedroom. In the memory I spend many hours looking at the tapestry hanging on the wall. It is light brown with a rough texture, made of something thick with pulp. In black ink Andrew and Christine have painted a series of repetitive symbols whose meanings I do not understand. I pick out the ones that are the most perfect and think to myself, "Andrew painted those. Andrew is good." Kind, humble, something serene about him, something that puts my young mind at ease. Now he is sick and I postpone my arrival to his bedside. I take my time picking flowers. When I arrive with my bouquet, Lauren hugs me and says that he has passed five minutes ago. My father cries audibly into his hands, the second time I have ever seen my father cry. The first time was a year ago. He was describing to Tal and I about a video he had watched on youtube of a Leonard Cohen performance. He is telling us how beautiful the music is, and then suddenly he is overcome by emotion and he is crying into his hands. I submerge half of my body in the frigid waters of Maine and wonder what it is like for Andrew now that he has left his body. I wonder if he is afraid. I wonder if he has noticed that without a form, nothing can harm him.

Persephone

Persephone went to the underworld. In the underworld, Persephone lost everything.

"Why Am I Here?"

Days later I am nestled among the beauty of a new place. I recall speaking on the phone with Marisa earlier in the summer after several days of silence. Suddenly my composure cracks. I cry silently and muster up the bravery to ask her the question that is burning in my mind: "Why are we here?" She pauses for a moment. "Yes," she says. "Why are we here?" And then, with great and loving enthusiasm, she says, "We don't know."

Doing Nothing

It does not take long for me to notice that I have come here in order to produce nothing.
"When you can do nothing, what can you do?"

Tea House

On the second day, I begin dreaming of a tea house. The first instruction, above all else, is beauty. Each pillar is erected in prayer.

The Cows

On the second day, I walk 40 minutes up the big hill to sing to the cows. They watch me as intently as I watch them. Or, they lose interest and wander off to chew on grass.

Solomon's Seal

As I am making my way down the big hill, I wonder if there is any solomon's seal hanging out by the dry creek bed bordering the road. I look around for a while, and yes, there she is, hanging out by the dry creek bed bordering the road. She is called that because there are markings on her rhizomes that resemble the ancient seal of King Solomon. The seal was a gift from god and allowed him to have command over demons, protecting him from darkness and evil.

Taming The Body

Jesse calls to tell me that he pulled the strength card. The girl has her hand atop the lion. She has not tamed the wild, but she has found a way to suspend herself in time for long enough to be safe. Safe, originating from the Latin Salvus, originating from the Proto-Indo-European Sol, meaning "whole." She is made whole in her motionless dance with the beast. Here, we are surrounded by Solidago, bright yellow earth sun. I find myself with a desire to be of service to life by instilling discipline upon my body and mind. To rise with the sun, mama sol, to find solace in submission to her rhythms. Perhaps it was the girl who was tamed by the wild.

The Altar In The Woods

On the third day, I begin dreaming of an altar in the woods. "There, I will be able to do my work," I say to myself. "Or perhaps there I will be able to do nothing."
When you can do nothing, what can you do?

The Pigs

On the third day I am walking down the big hill and some pigs run up to the edge of their fence upon seeing me. I want to pet them but they want only to nibble on my hand. They are disappointed that I have not brought food. I am disappointed that they do not love the song that I am singing.

Shilajit

On the fourth day I learn about Shilajit. Shilajit is not a plant. It is a sticky black exudate found oozing out of rock layers in the highest altitudes of the Himalayas. It is formed by organic compounds and decomposing plants that have been compressed by layers of rock and transformed by heat and pressure over the course of many centuries. Shilajit means Conqueror of mountains, destroyer of weakness. The result is a substance that is highly medicinal.

The Toad

On the fifth day I am using a stick to sweep away dead leaves on the forest floor to clear a big space for my altar. I have lugged 17 heavy rocks up the hill to form a circle. As I am sweeping around one of the rocks, a brown and red toad the size of my palm emerges. I hold him in my hand. "Of course you are here," I say. Toads often appear. Jesse says, "There is what you know, and then there is what you think you know, and then there is what you don't know." I don't know what it is about toads. I began to notice them after allowing one to crawl into my ear and then into my brain. "There is no going back now," she said. I get excited about the presence of the toad and hold him in my hands for much longer than he probably would have liked me to. I look at and touch his whole body. I wonder if I am supposed to sacrifice the toad in order to gain the attention of the gods. After I release him, I say, "I'm sorry. I got caught up in my curiosity. I didn't mean any harm." I wonder if this was a test of my goodness and I failed, having made the toad uncomfortable. When I release him he hops a few feet away, but then he remains there for a long while watching me dance and sing. Now I remember, I am not supposed to fondle him or sacrifice him. I am just supposed to thank him.

Sacrifice

Ro tells me that the blood of horseshoe crabs is harvested and used to test the safety of vaccines.

I tell Ro, how interesting, that we have always felt the need to sacrifice life in order to create magic. I wonder if these alchemists called scientists know that there is already medicine hiding in the high rocks of the Himalayas, and you do not need to sacrifice anything in order to conjure it, you just need to find a way to get there. Sam tells me that Western medicine has roots in demonology. The logic is simple: In order to exorcise a demon from a body, you must learn its name. If you learn its name, you can obtain control over it; you can expel the foreign entity and return yourself to purity. All the better if you sacrifice a horseshoe crab while you're at it.

I think of all the losses that we face as a direct result of the things we have gained. In order to fly, we dirty the air. In order to heal, we kill. In order to be safe, we forget.

I think about Persephone, who had to lose everything in order to gain everything. And then I give thanks for all that we have lost and all that we have gained.

The Ticks

After spending a good while in prayer, I am feeling pretty secure about it all. I have thought to myself, I will prove worthy. I will be of good service. Try to test me. I will show you that I am faithful. The gods take me a little too seriously, or maybe they don't take me seriously enough.

Before I know it, I am crawling with more than a dozen ticks, ticks that are so small they are nearly imperceptible, tiny beings with great power over me. I suppose these ticks are little demons, or at least, the diseases they carry are little demons, whose name we shout, hoping this will make us good soldiers and we will be carried back home. I think about the girl with her hand on the lion, whose safety is in wholeness, oneness with the wild and unknowable beings. I contort and scour my body for tiny invaders. And I think of Andrew, who no longer has a body but who is still part of this world.