

PICA CEREMONY (for feeding hungry ghosts)

A stranger is poor, voracious, and turbulent

He comes from nowhere in particular

...

His method of knowing something

Is to eat it.

-Anne Carson

Dharani for Satisfying Geophagy (homage to)

Three types of strangers haunt the city of Arepo.

The unwelcome.

The abandoned.

The dispossessed.

The pigs, the *yokai*, and the fleers.

Including Ozzi, including me. Including the other fleers who left the filth of the camps and chose this: a quiet death in a quiet room. The world has posted and reposted fleer photos on their lambent scrolls and turned from us. So much was preventable that was not prevented but instead, perversely, wrought.

So we haunt the empty village. The unwanted, the abandoned, the dispossessed. Radioactive isotopes dance into our bloodstreams and irradiate our inner seas. Here I roam with other fleers and their given-up children who are less vital than the *yokai*, while the native population buzzes busily in its towns and cities, safe inland where the wind doesn't carry.

Here is the deep quiet of a place where no human wishes to be.

The death that comes to us here will also be quiet.

Our gums bleed. Our bones thin.

If I let death steal slowly over me, and Ozzi, too, at least I will see the maple leaves redden. The cypresses wave green.

The people of this island also fear the sea. They, like us, have known incineration, clouds of poison, children flash-fired where they stand. Their hair, like ours, is black. Like ours, like charcoal. Their eyes are dark. Like ours. Like liquid soot. They are like us. We are tired and our eyes are full of rubble and our lungs are scuttled boats and the water is our grief.

“They need people to dispatch and burn the wild pigs,” around the camps it was said.

“Their own citizens won’t do it. The place is poisoned. Perhaps they truly need us.”

To be necessary buys a sort of belonging. Shall we belong to this island? Shall we be of use?

In photographs of Arepo, the danger is invisible. It will kill us slowly.

It hasn’t affected the pigs.

This is the life our hosts have offered us as we are dying:

Birds in flight.

The air pushing the pines.

The small grunts of coveys of pigs.

This quiet is as near as we will ever come to peace.

In Afghanistan wild leopards thrive among the minefields.

We tell ourselves, “In Russia, where this has also happened, that land is a wildlife refuge.”

“The pigs survive there,” we say.

“Humans are said to resemble pigs, and perhaps we won’t die.”

Hope can raise a home upon the slenderest beams of belief.

Dharani Summoning the Three types of soil with Precious Names (gassho)

Here is what I brought with me to Arepo:

Ozzi, silent, untenanted. A child of straw, of sticks. Spirit-fled.

A silver knife.

I used it to scratch earth from the wall when I was pregnant with Ozzi.

Two neat sets of screw-top cylinders, stacked into tiny pillars.

The first pillar seals up the four scents of my home. A pinch of cedar, bitter pods of aloe, fine yellow granules of frankincense--a teaspoon's worth; and lavender clinging to pebbles of salt.

The second pillar, phial by phial: three types of clay: finespun dust like cinnamon, clots of brick-red terracotta, black crumbs of common. My particular, our particular earth.

I scraped, sealed up, concealed. A carrying fragrance. A pinch of dirt.

They said bringing our children to a place that holds still would bring them back.

We have a place for you, the pamphlets said.

During the day I shake the cylinders over Ozzi. The rattles soothe him, but fail to stir him awake.

Our hosts, ghostly in their hazmat suits, bring us tablets of charcoal they tell us to ingest, to guard against the radiation, tablets we brew into tea, and the taste of charcoal is like the soot that fell on our tongues in flakes from burning buildings, when everything was one fire.

They give us other drugs that are supposed to slow the poison. Behind the plastic pane of their face shields their eyes are guarded. Their hands are gentle. Sometimes they dip their heads at us; you can see them reminding themselves to bow.

A stranger is poor, voracious and turbulent. His method of knowing something is to eat...

On good days I scavenge through the gardens and hunt up bitter melon to mash. The melon is for me. Ozzi won't eat. He is beginning, I think, to glow.

Dharani for Severed Roots

The pamphlets warned us of the pigs. (They didn't mention the ghosts. Perhaps they didn't know.) The pamphlets tell us to shoot the pigs, but we're distracted by the yokai. Abandoned goods grown restless.

In the empty school the knapsacks wriggle on their hooks like fidgety children. The pinball machines complain, spitting their ever seeking silver ball that pings and rebounds and pings, so brutally, so sadly. The rake shivers, tines chattering on the gravel. There is a jizo statue that turns in circles, eyelids serene but its body so agitated it vibrates, rotates, topples and rights itself. It hops in place.

There's an umbrella we're all afraid of.

The pigs like to sleep in the sundial shadow the disabled reactor casts across the town. The pigs are not afraid of us. They trot with arrogant hooves resounding off the bitumen, tails lifted, snouts down. Occasionally a wild boar and a *yokai* will collide and neither knows quite what to do. The *yokai* follow the pigs, pleading silently.

I saw a pig chasing a bicycle the other day. The bicycle, of course, had no rider. The pig ran, and the bicycle rolled, and it wove in circles around the pig, and the pig charged, but it was all in play.

At night, I put my nose to the second phial, the bitter pods. I could eat one and depart this earth. This earth that is not mine. But Ozzi might wake up.

The hogs are radioactive and a few sprout tumors that hang from their haunches but the tumors wax and wane. I've seen pigs scratching them off against the sides of buildings, leaving fleshy smears, and they trot off bleeding. But the pigs don't die. I follow them into the forest to figure out what they are eating. Bitter melons. Shitake. And the bicycles have joined them.

Ozzi has no ghost, he is an unhaunted object.

They scamper up to Ozzi, these yokai, they circle him, asking of him, summoning him, but like me they have no luck. He is some still center that they want.

The pigs simply ignore him.

Dharani for Opening Throats

I cradle my empty son, I dress him. Into his unresisting mouth I spoon gruel I
cook down from rice left for us at the town's border.

Ozzi won't swallow anymore. His beautiful dark eyes are filmed with something
glassy, unshed rage, undropped tears. He voids himself into my lap.

Soon that will cease, too.

Giving up syndrome, they call it.

Dharani for Dredging Clay from the Riverbed By the Gates of Hell

There are three types of stillness in children.

Sleep.

Death.

Giving up.

In sleep they are the first sweet sip after your glass is replenished.

In death they are drinking salt water to slake thirst.

When they have emptied themselves of their will to live you wind the windless the well
echoes the bucket rises cracked and bone-dry.

Another charcoal tablet, another sip of soot.

Ozzi won't wake up.

They swore he would wake again if I brought him here. Here where life holds
still, where he could grow solid.

Of course this earth is poisoned and what is solid will disintegrate under its work,
but slowly, slowly they said. Slowly enough that I would have time with my son, time
with the sea air and the empty houses and the spaciousness that was the town and the
forest and the sea.

They renamed the town Arepo, to make us feel at home.

***Dharani for Quieting Hankering
by contemplating the Word "Ash-Tongue"
on a Sphere of Blackened Water***

Every morning we sweep the houses for haunted objects and we net them up in fishing catch and tie them to Ozzi's wheelbarrow. Sometimes they are so restless they rise and pull him through the town. The pigs squall at our parade and break for the trees.

We bring our haul of ghosts past the hulking reactor, past the elementary school so haunted by its rain of rubber erasers and dancing colored pens that it rattles like a box of ball bearings, and we hurry past it. Those ghosts need the hands of children to put them to rest and there are so few now. Given-up. None of ours move.

We tamp the ghosts in barrels meant to contain nuclear waste. There is some worry that the ghosts will contaminate the barrels, bring them to life as well. But we don't know what else to do.

The ensouled objects mob us.

They want us to make use of them so they can grow quiet with purpose.

There were so few of us and so many of them and they are immune to the radioactive wind. They will outlast us, and they are beginning to know it, and it frightens them.

We are all frightened, except for the pigs. Except for our vacated children, whose fear has sent them where we would follow if we could.

Ozzi lies curled snailfootwise in the wheelbarrow. This wheelbarrow used to be a ghost. I tamed it. These abandoned objects want so badly to be useful. I whistled for it, and it jounced over the road balanced on its single fat wheel, top-heavy, canted at a

dangerous angle, the rust streaks along the frame smiling, the handles gray wood worn smooth and perked like eager antennae as it came trundling up. I lifted Ozzi to place him in it. The wheelbarrow understood. It dropped its back feet with a clang. It waited.

I was sipping charcoal tea. I set a grain of clay on my tongue, the black clay. I swished. I spat it into the wheelbarrow. A shining black drop.

It was the first yokai that yielded to me. When I restored it to use, its soul departed.

Dharani for Summoning Magpies

Ozzi lies in the wheelbarrow curled snailfooted on top of a yellow Pikachu sleeping bag, Pikachu the radioactive mouse. My son grows thinner every day. Yet without his spirit he is dead weight.

I sing to him as I wheel him around the town. A yokai follows me, a single-armed rose-silk kimono who wants her stolen sleeve. She is blown about by the sea wind, she ripples above the waves. The sun shines through her, and the waves glow pink as sunset. By the light of this kimono that I examine my vials of clay. The light curls around them like a tongue. The one-armed kimono strokes the sleeve I stole from it, the sleeve scarfing my hair. Restore me, it says without speaking. I swat it away.

When I was pregnant, I ate dirt. Scooped it from the wall twice a day. They said it would knot in my guts. They said it was an illness. But I ate it twice a day.

When you are pregnant you become the earth and inside you the child's a clod of finespun blood, so insubstantial, it must take root, and for rootedness, you send it earth. Red clay.

Here is your home, you say, taste it, and when you come you will recognize your place. There is a home awaits. Come out. It is safe.

The earth encourages the child to emerge. To set foot, one day, upon the greater earth. First home: my body, last home, the earth.

And in between, women eat dirt. How does it taste?

Like dirt.

God made men from clay.

Turned stones to bread.

In the fairytale, the first trail dropped to lead the children home was made of stones.

The second trail was bread. The stones held. The bread was taken up by birds and the home road vanished into a thousand crops which took flight. Birds despise the earth. If you want to find your way home, rely on stones. Eat a pinch of dirt. Then home will be inside you as well as underfoot.

Come out, I tell my son. Dirt lapses from his lips.

Come home. It is safe.

Above my head the branches of the plum trees are spectral with blooms, and the house sparrows that survived the fallout twitter in the branches. They have white feathers now where no white feathers were, sprouting from their shoulders. I shake my canister of earth at them, but its small rattle cannot deter. They remain.

Dharani of the Flavor of The Very Cup of Trembling (Liquid Soot)

Today I shot a sow between the eyes. She was camped in the sunken tub in the bathhouse, nursing her last piglet. I didn't shoot the piglet. It continued to nurse for a long time.

I tried to nurse Ozzi. I rubbed lavender salt around my nipples, mixed with a paste of terracotta slip. My breasts could always soothe him.

Long ago, Ozzi was a good nurser. As a baby, Ozzi sucked as smoothly as a wave.

There are many kinds of waves.

Before it was named Arepo this town caught a terrible wave. Their reactor melted down. A US Navy cruiser strode to meet the disaster and the Americans didn't know that plumes of radioactive smoke had risen silver and thus it snowed in summer, miraculous and passing strange. But Americans, like dogs and children, treat snow (and disaster) as a holiday and when flakes fell silver on the decks they swept them barehanded and bare headed. Poisoned they swept the decks and threw snowballs, laughing, with what innocence and what cheer.

There are many kinds of waves. We who fled were a wave. We who fled were a flood. Bomb-struck land parts like water, like a woman's flesh when violence or sorrow is driven into it. It parts like water and like water it can swallow you.

Clay wetted with water looks like blood.

When our land was parted we took to the water, but water can be dense as clay if you hit it from a height, which some of us did. When the ships foundered and the lifeboats filled, those remaining on deck leapt.

We waded ashore with the dead a wave pushing us onward and those on foot a wave and we came and lapped at the ankles of a strange and hostile country. We were seeking a place to grow solid again. Before our children dissolved, evaporated. Oh make them solid, we begged.

I scraped the caked-up soil from the dead sow's hooves and saved it.

I don't know why.

Dharani for Radiant Pigs with Lily Hooves, for Miscreant Bicycles

Today we captured some bicycles. They're fast, they speed by with seaweed tangled in their fenders, slapping the spokes, oleaginous green, smelling of birth and brine. But when we place our hands on the pommels, on the handlebars, they subside. Willing steeds.

Now we chase the pigs. We shoot them from our bicycles. The wild pigs are a wave, their bodies solid and firm when they run. We couldn't chase them at first, but now we have bicycles. The pigs are solid and firm. They are terribly alive, but we kill them. Those of us who can keep astride, we kill them. My aim is improved. The pigs squeal like gulls on the waves. Their blood is a torrent. Our guns are not ghosts, and leave none.

Perhaps we can remember or invent what it is to thrive.

Even as we are dying. Even as we die.

"Try to be grateful," we tell ourselves.

We tell ourselves to imagine radiation as magic. It has the allure of venomous and poisonous things. The gleam, the luminescence. Imagine it imparts power. Spiderman, Godzilla, Akira. We tell ourselves that Arepo is a peaceable kingdom and we're all dying anyway. We weave a fantasy of the non-metaphorical transmutation of poisons; of human transcendence.

Some of us insist that the birds spouting epaulettes of white feathers aren't appalling but wonderful and that the half-life in the water and in our bodies shunted from death to death will finally reach a level of radiant homeostasis.

The pigs, grown wise, elude our guns.

Someday they will bury us, or eat our corpses.

Being eaten is a burial.

The pigs will persist.

When we are in the ground, or in their stomachs, but at home somewhere, think of the pigs trotting over our bones on silvered hooves. Think of them shitting light.

Dharani for the Lids of the Eyes at Closing time

Today I made a mistake.

I burnt a curl of cedar.

I dropped a single aloes pod from my store onto the charcoal burner and let it
explode in the flames.

I doused the fire with a cup of soot, but it was too late.

I am tired of waiting.

Dharani for Blessing Brick of Clay with the Unimpeded Radiance of Hunger

Yesterday I buried the silver knife in front of the bathhouse, and today the knife dug itself free and now it dances on its point in front of me. It hops after me tap tap tap blunting itself on the sandy paths, idiotically.

I refuse to touch it.

More yokai have come.

They want something new.

(Blood from a trench?)

The kimono's kindred waft distraught, lashing me with obis when my attention wanders, and the one-armed wraith coils around Ozzi and I fear he will suffocate.

I have thought of suffocating him myself. Perhaps if he dies he will come back to me, hidden in one of these haunted objects. A bicycle. A rubber ball. Though no one else's child has come back.

We mothers watched their spirits fill them day by day, our newborn infants. Rising to meet our gazes, like young porpoises. They grew sweeter, clearer, coming into being. Their bodies organized themselves. They learned to roll over, crowing. They learned to sit up, to crawl. They learned to walk to speak to joke to draw; to love us not simply with the bodily love that doesn't distinguish itself from its mother, but with their souls.

Now, at sunset, we lay our emptied-out children side by side on the beach, lift our heads together and scream.

Esoteric Dharani for Brick and Cup and Knife (9 prostrations)

Something is going to change, I can feel it. Today the air over the sea is very clear and it is impossible to believe we are being poisoned, although I broke my wrist today lifting Ozzi I think for the last time.

The air is blue today but the ocean is wrinkled and sulky. The kimono drifts beside me wherever I go. I've lost another tooth. It fell out this morning, and the little silver knife flicked it down the road. Remember how the boys played football on the long red road back home?

When Ozzi gave up I thought I could bring him back to his body, since I brought it into being; tended it through the teething and the tantrums; the defiance, the way he wouldn't stop pulling at his little penis until he stretched his foreskin into a fleshy string I was sure would tear before it was time to circumcise him. His body came from mine. We shared clay. Remember when our bodies were our children's earth?

If I could take Ozzi back inside myself I would.

The yokai have come to wake my vials of dirt.

Beside me the kimono bellies out. She is tented over Ozzi and from those folds inside her I hear a pulse like our babies' heartbeats. How we laughed at them amplified, strong as surf back when the sonogram showed our sons trapped in the coal mines of our bodies.

I hear that heartbeat, Ozzi's heartbeat within the folds of the kimono. It wraps around my gone-away boy and he curls within her, head down in that same tuck he took inside of me and maybe if I shrug into the ghost's rosy sleeve I will carry him again and bring him forth and he will learn to sit up and roll over and crawl and walk and speak anew.

And so I do.

The yokai settles over me, over Ozzi. We are cold and silky with purpose.

I loose the lids on all my jars of clay. I mingle each measure with the poisoned soil chipped from the dead sow's hooves with a silver knife. I wet it down with seawater, with soot. I knead and pound. I fashion it into a blood-red brick. Moist and dense as any flesh.

I invite the silver knife; it leaps and sinks itself to the hilt. In the clay. In the dense red brick.

The yokai, collectively, sigh. I feel their restlessness, their hunger, because it is mine. It has always been mine.

The tea bubbles on the burner.

I stir into it: flakes of radioactive soot; the charcoal wards; the pods, the grains, the shavings, the tinted salt. Here is a ceremony. Here is a feast.

I will take the brick into my hands. It is our home, I show them, our battered world, bereaved, abuzz, and raw.

I will cradle it, turn it over in my hands, I will display its contours. I will hold it to my ear. I will broadcast to the assembly its laughter and its singing, its jubilations and its pain.

I will cup it in my hands and then at last I will wrap it in tenderness, and when it is wrapped completely I will offer it to you.

Here is the world. A blood-red brick, cracked and rich, pierced by a silver knife. Here is grief: soot in a sieve, strained into a cup. Here is the world, shining and quiet, poisoned and haunted. Here are the corpses of boars we slaughtered, and we women tend them, as women have always tended corpses. We supervise their burning. They send up greasy smoke. Here is the water, luminous with disaster. Here are the yokai, with their yearning.

Here is the world; we could not redeem it.

A boat is landing on the beach. A woman steps onto the shingle, clasping her bundle close. For her, too, I will slice off a morsel of this earth. I will serve her this bitter black tea.