

Rising water / Palm to stone

poems and essays by C.S. Mills

for Violet, born as the water rose

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Invocation, Three visitings, and the three Palm to stone
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So much of earth history has been told in the thrall of the fantasy of the first beautiful words and weapons, of the first beautiful weapons as words and vice versa. Tool, weapon, word: that is the word made flesh in the image of the sky god; that is the Anthropos.

The slight curve of the shell that holds just a little water, just a few seeds to give away and to receive, suggests stories of becoming-with, of reciprocal induction, of companion species whose job in living and dying is not to end the storying, the worlding.

— Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*

A symbol does not disguise, it reveals in time.

— C.G. Jung, *Symbols and the Interpretation of Dreams*
(translated by R.F.C. Hull)

Rising water

Invocation

Rise cold water,
rise to the knees, to the hands, to the belly;
rise and envelop the body

What does the body feel? Cold.

beloved body, beloved cold

What does the body fear? Death.

beloved fear, beloved death

Are we ready? No, we are not ready.

no-ready

We are not ready but the water rises.

beloved teacher, beloved messenger, beloved symbiont

Answer with a shaky laugh as the initiatory water rises:

yes! we are not ready!

Whatever to come asks we not be ready

Across the threshold mind-body unfurl:

Not hand but sprouts around the stump,

not eye but lightless antichthon,

not tooth but arc of luminous spiral;

not flesh but deepest muck

Not breath but a knot in the air,
no life but amidst death,
not death but a body of cold water

Prepare the mineral bowl:
Cast the circle, flood the center,
follow circumference until
a subtle harmonic rises
oblique to the wind

Finally:
Loose the knot,
hold strands amid sprouts
dancing in the wind
— swim through

mother, is that you?
yes my child, it is me

Three visitings

One

At the height of the longest day, against silica sky over the island there comes a puzzling sign. It is a ring of vapor described by glinting cruciform craft whose white plumage hides beneath a thin osmium carapace. Ring morphs to isometric helix to icedust wingsweep — the craft likely a visiting from some peri-modern Atlantean people, a projection from that present-future-primeval unconscious beneath the azure swell.

Possibly to remind us:

That there rose a golden dome from the Aegean plane, rose atop ash-white stone walls dutifully limewashed blank, blank yet charged numinous by slanting shadow at noon. Recall that beneath the footings there was a crater lined meticulously with soft white stones. A nest beneath a temple, remember.

Two

The island is ringed at the shore by a low battlement of branches and boles woven by surf, which at pains we might dismantle and stack into a stout pyre, which when lit burns with disquieting rapidity and heat — the faintest spark encouraged by many hands shall become a great unholy cleansing conflagration that

even the revelers privately fear. What power is this among our hands?

Step away for a moment, out beyond the battlement, beyond the glow of the flames, into the moonless night where the amphibian chorus rises in veils of melodious precipitate, veils of auroral honey from amid the reeds. Where at the shore wave laps sand in perennial wingwash flutter — water stone together the infinitely self-transforming complexifier.

And out further beyond still, where waves wash over the low pebbled wedge of the point, stands figure; anthropic verticality unmistakable even at this distance — figure, clothed in the garb of hermit but face to wind like the fool, stands in impossible holographic verticality at irreconcilable distance. Mute hermit-priest a visiting from beyond yet, but not the last.

Three

At sunrise endless ponderous lavender glass to the horizon. From over open water, emerald ball of energy speeds along elastic catenary to a point before the heart, heart jumps at the surprise. A fierce weariness, finest feathers disheveled. *Joy* says the emerald bird *joy to you, we've won*. Tiny precious heart still in the breast, in two hands cupped.

Venus in Scorpio

At sunset,
Vesper settles
with charged mineral dust
into the ten petals
of the pentagram

After dark,
Antares keels along its low arc
through the zodiacal stream,
arc a segment of a great ellipse the
 mind follows to hubris;
but hubris admonished
by glistening jointed legs
breaching the horizon

Along the arc,
four hands clasped
and two bodies orbit one another;
they describe
two overlapping ellipses with
 lens held between

And around the pentagram,
the twins
Lucifer and Vesper
 never meet,
as if two faces of one body

One appears
to us as two,
two as one,
— and thus:

In dream,
heart occulted by chitinous plate,
starlit scorpion comes
fast clicking over rocks as
 we fumble backward away

And above,
through the thin smoke-opal shell
 of the sky,
— an apparition:

Lucifer in delicate crescent;
soft amniotic glow to the cusp an
 ashen light enveloping the sphere.
Twins together there
in the warm vessel

Five of cups

Form a brick from the bloodsoaked soil,
build a tower that memory cannot climb
in which to admire the sharpness of a spear;
four points to the wind

See rise from the water the Unholy Heavenly,
that generous killer of kings who patiently,
without passion or malice, will pull down tower
and wear brick to sand raked in the waves

Look, five vessels:

One for each known petal of the pentagram,
one for each ritual loop as she circles the tower;
three empty but two withheld

Evocation

Lift just one bone from the mineral body and
then some blood in a wooden vessel over the water

Lift vessel and carry bone so at the shore we might
see a god rise light in our image from the crucible

Lift light image! but god ever a tricky confluence
eddying dispassionately onward

Point quincunx

In storm
the impenetrable wholeness of
the point unfolds into four;
merciful, for the human mind has
no means by which to grasp wholeness

First earth, that
mineral body draped thin over scoured rock;
flesh and blood thinner yet but growing,
held to bone at the shore

Second air:
carry feather, carried by wing;
pull wave up to charging and
push blade to sand

Third fire, defeated by wave in storm;
bloodred remnant of the martian tower worn
to smooth phallus shrunken lost in the surf —
but fire survives yet when waves calm and
remnant dry under siege of sun

And fourth water,
that ineluctable current
carrying warmth and cold, vessel and stone —
water the agent, excavator, architect and executor,
who decides by evasion, decides by scorn,
whose laugh a dispassionate laugh as it rises
in proportion to the panic of our treading:

Water solves, waves give then take,
and in the rise and fall
memory is pumped
onto thirsty earth

In storm
the one unfolds to four, four folds to three,
and three is just two joined by rising water,
which again calms and the two settle into
one beneath the cold lens

Palm to stone

One: dolomite

In the year 1932, perhaps on a densely hot day in early August, as dust storms began to sweep the remnant prairies far to the southwest, as nearly a quarter of workers in United States territory were unemployed and the Nazi party became the largest in the Reichstag at Berlin across the North Atlantic, two government men parked their truck beside the state highway on the west side of this peninsula and looked up at the dune rising before them. Cicadas sang from the treeline as the men crossed an orchard on foot and passed through a gap in a wire fence. At the crest of the dune they saw the rolling expanse of sand and marram before them dropping away toward deep cerulean water to the horizon, and they set off that way, across the dunes and southwest up onto the great arched back of the moraine. How many trips it took them to carry the two twelve-foot lengths of iron pipe, concrete, mortar, water, three brass discs, hammers and sledges, drill and optical instruments those two miles up onto the moraine I don't know, but they did; the evidence remains today. They stopped upon reaching a high round dune covered in a luxuriant pelt of white cedar perched near the brink of the bluff over the lake, a dune that in the years ahead would succumb to the erosive compress of automobile tires abetted by the ceaseless wind, and eventually invert into the dish of sand whose rim is anchored today by dogwood roots. The cedar trunks bleached

bone-white are by turns buried and exhumed as the grains continue to tumble northeast.

Atop the dune the government men sank one of the lengths of pipe, anchored it in concrete and mounted a brass disc in the end. Some six hundred paces north-northeast they sank the other pipe into the till in the same fashion, capped again by a brass disc. To the west they found a dolomite boulder, a glacial erratic plucked perhaps from the



Niagara Escarpment and deposited here with the rest of the drift some ten thousand years prior, which, despite the weight of the midday sun bearing down on the three figures, felt cool to the touch. The men by some means bored a hole into the top of the stone, filled it with mortar and mounted the last disc with its arrow pointing toward the station at the crest of the dune. The men thus described a thin triangle atop the moraine tipped up to point at Antares as it would arc past after sunset.

The triangle of course did not point that way for long, even if it does persist in some inscrutable form to this day. The station in the till was quickly buried beneath sand

stabilized by marram and juniper roots, as was the station atop the dune, which vanished almost immediately under the migrating body and eluded a surveyor who returned to search for it in 1951. By the time of a third government visit forty-eight years after its emplacement, the station had disappeared entirely, the dune having since begun its inversion into dish following some forty-four summers of motorized tourism. Perhaps the iron-concrete-brass conglomerate, left behind by the migrating sand, slid slowly down the face of the bluff to the beach so that the triangle skewed to point toward the limestone deep beneath the lake. Or maybe it persists in place after all, a vertical composite figure with its rough naked mass of concrete suspended above the hollow dune, brass disc at the focus of the parabolic dish.

The dolomite boulder, by all accounts, has maintained the position it held the day the government men appropriated a part of it as plinth. But the brink of the bluff advances



continuously, having reduced forty paces to six in the intervening years, and before long the stone will tip and slide down the face to the shore where it will settle, hiding the brass disc for a time beneath its crystalline body lapped by waves, and the triangle will have skewed to point onward.

Two: slag

At the beginning of May 1958, a few weeks after Sputnik 2, carrying the body of a stray dog from Moscow burned upon reentry into this planet's atmosphere over the Amazon and a twenty-four story depiction of a single iron crystal was unveiled to the delight of gathering crowds on the Plateau du Heysel in Brussels an ocean away, a small group of local historians and their patrons gathered here on the shore of this peninsula, near the outlet of a river, around a ten ton boulder of slag. The boulder, dense and cool in the spring sun, bore on its face a newly mounted bronze plaque. A few words may have been said, hands laid on the rough surface, and the monument was thus dedicated to the memory of a preceding but related people at the edge of the historians' narrow period of interest.

Eighteen years earlier, just across the river to the south, the bones of two adult humans had been exhumed from a high conical hill back from the shore of the lake by a local resident, perhaps a builder hired to work on the cottage atop the hill. Upon later examination by anthropologists, the bones were determined to date from between 500 and 2,500 years prior. That conical hill, called Round Top since the time vacationers from some way south purchased the land on which it sits in 1900, was thought to be an earthworks built by a long-departed people who participated in the so-called and dimly apprehended Hopewell Interaction

Sphere. Excavation of the hill continues today, but not of an inquisitive sort, as soil is moved to make way for driveways and foundations just back from the rising water. The hill



may well suffer the same erosive fate as the forested dune perched at the brink of the high bluff eighteen miles to the southwest, whose form the hill recalls, and today is remembered only by the bleached softwood timbers littering its hollow belly. What further remains will be exhumed then?

Eighty-six years before the skeletons were found, before vacationers had begun visiting the land around the river's mouth, a newly-arrived settler from Quebec set to work with the help of six others damming the flow of the river to provide power for a sawmill. In so doing, the man, who is honored as the founder of the village that today is flooded with vacationers from the southern reaches of the basin, destroyed the natural fish ladder that the Odawa and Ojibwe people who had lived there for generations, who live there today, relied on for food. The following spring, huge numbers of recently-introduced European carp crowded the mouth of the river trying to get to the small lakes upstream to spawn. Settlers pulled them from the river with

pitchforks, and, seemingly unconscious of the message they bore, renamed the river after the fish. A new, larger dam built a decade later would raise the waters upstream twelve feet and flood three small lakes into one, now suitable for timber rafting. Those rising waters would bear the ten ton boulder of slag, or at least its component parts, to where it rests today.

The boulder, which is large and dark with a rusty shade and bears a bronze plaque, has eroded considerably since its dedication some sixty years ago. Large crystals of vesicular slag are wedged off by frost to expose chatoyant fibers of charcoal embedded beneath, and thus the plaque and its rough mass of mortar now stand a few fingers proud of the surrounding stone. The boulder is the product of a long-since demolished blast furnace that stood nearby for the final decades of the nineteenth century, a furnace fired by charcoal made upstream in conical kilns from the old growth maple-beech forests that once surrounded the flooded lakes, and whose air-blast was powered by the impounded waters of the river. The boulder was of course not the only product of the furnace — and indeed appears itself to be a failed product on account of its richness in metal and uncombusted charcoal — but a byproduct. The smelting people who built and operated the furnace were after crude iron, shipped by schooner to the southern reaches of the basin and sold. Slag, like the boulder, was a waste product formed in the reaction between hematite ore from the Marquette iron range and osseous limestone, which was floated in from cleared farmland surrounding the lake

upstream and used as flux in the furnace. The molten slag was dumped into pits, and when those were full, onto the beach. And thus the boulder, in its persistence, concretizes the collective psychic and physical energy expended to dam the river, expended by the river itself in pressing against the dam, and indeed by each of us through the generations as we actively maintain the ongoing impoundment of the waters. The waters, which in resplendent compensatory mode will only continue to rise in proportion to the energy expended to repress them.

Six or so quiet years passed between the last firing of the furnace and the first arrival of vacationers to the mouth of the river. Although the owners had long since skipped town, the furnace still stood when this new resorting people began to visit, and so it cannot be denied that they had some contact with the preceding and related smelting people, but the furnace would be quickly disassembled and



the bricks carted off for new construction. Memory, dulled by the amnesic of vacation, soon faded. Cottages were built, like the one at the summit of Round Top, and filled with

contemporary Anishinaabe handcrafts, shipped-in furniture and nautical antiques. The chimneys were built from salvaged furnace brick, the fireplaces stoked with maple and beech, and the resorting people came and went with high summer. By that time the great heaps of slag dumped onto the beach by the preceding smelting people had been dispersed by waves, and smooth fragments began to wash up with the pebbles. These fragments, which wash up still although in fewer numbers, range in hue from viridian and turquoise to Egyptian blue, to amethyst, to Swedish red, some milky with lime, others clear as quartz. Today, more than anything, they recall fragments of trinitite.

As far as can be told, those early resorting people didn't pay much heed to the smelting heritage beneath their feet, enthralled as they were by their caricature of Anishinaabe peoples and the preceding archaic ones, both of whose craft objects and artifacts they collected with such thirst — a thirst that seems to have arisen in compensation for the stunted mythos of the vacationers, who seemed to vacillate in their view of the land between reverie and horror, but who nonetheless felt compelled to return summer after summer. Still, enthralled as they may have been, they continued the work of displacement and erasure of Anishinaabe peoples that their recent lumbering and smelting ancestors had begun. The thirst remained unconscious and so would remain unquenched, indeed remains unquenched today, even by the ever-replenished waters held above the dam.

But as time passed, and the smooth fragments continued to wash up with the pebbles, the slag began to replace

Indigenous objects as the operative artifacts among the resorting people there at the mouth of the river. Instead of holding in misapprehension the stolen artifacts of others, they began to collect the artifacts left by their own recent but dimly remembered ancestors. Slag, then, became a substitute for bones in the ground, and thus advanced the work of erasure in a profound way. If slag could replace actual bone, the history of that land at the mouth of the river would be scrubbed of its participation in genocide — and critical history, such as it is, would need only deal narrowly with the trouble of the *behavior* of settlers and vacationers, not their *presence*. Slag as artifact is safe.

So safe, in fact, that the resorting people began to shape the slag into jewelry and amulets with which to adorn their bodies. This jewelry is ubiquitous today among the resorting people in the regions surrounding the mouth of the river, and is celebrated as a quirky but proudly amnesiac Anthropocene fashion. And thus slag has been turned to gemstone, not by diligent alchemical transformation, but by plain forgetting. Perhaps in a thousand years, when the waters have risen yet higher to submerge the dam and bear the boulder of slag out into the lake, bones will be exhumed from the glacial drift by some future people, and with the bones they will find funerary objects carved from strange blue stone.

Three: granite

Just back from a county road at the base of this peninsula, visible between red pines from the gravel shoulder, sits a massive granite boulder resting in the thin soil and glacial outwash beneath. The erratic is like so many others amid the drift here, but distinguished beyond comparison by its sheer size. The end facing the road shows a conspicuously canted space left empty by a slab split away some years ago. The boulder's surface is marked by five hollows, shallow bowls lined with quartz and biotite crystals, bowls which after a rain each holds a little water. These bowls are vessels, rumored to have been used by Anishinaabe people and early European settlers as mortars for grinding corn.



Whether this is true or just another scrap of projected settler fantasy, or perhaps both at once, the settlers did note the bowls, their evocative shapes, and that their situation atop this enormous stone was in some dimly apprehended way significant.

And after the turn of the last century, this apprehension

of significance, like similar suspicions of the conical hill to the northeast or the forested dune to the west, quickly verged among the settlers into a possessive fixation. The conical hill was titled and named and a cottage built on its crest, the ancient bones resting beneath dug up and sent away; the forested dune was summited one after another by automobiles laden with tourists, chassis and tires modified to better dominate it, until the wind took hold of the newly exposed sand and inverted the dune into a shallow dish littered with bleached trunks. Such a possessive fixation, always and necessarily unconscious, diminishes its object. It is a sublimation of something deeper and at base authentic, but repressed: a hunger for belonging to the land that in its dark groping throttles the first significant object it finds. And so the fate of the granite erratic, marked too as it was by significance, was inescapable. In eerily direct fashion, at the height of summer 1934, the settlers chose to split the stone in two and carry half away to be displayed as a monument nearby — as a dissociated symbolic portion removed by force from the whole. How they undertook this work I can only guess, as I haven't yet found a detailed account of it, but a possible *chaîne opératoire*, an operational sequence, is not hard to imagine. Perhaps the stone already showed a fissure on its surface, extending from the top face down at an inverted angle to where the body rested in the soil, and with thin iron wedges the settlers widened the fissure into a raw, mineral void which sucked in Earth's atmosphere for the first time in the stone's long life. Then perhaps they undermined the slab, which was in fact not nearly half of

the whole, but massive nonetheless, and on wooden rollers guided symbolically by a hand on the cool surface they winched it from the soil onto a stout trailer and drove it a mile downhill to a park on the shore of a deep spring-fed lake where they slid it from the trailer and stood it upright, rotated a half-turn from how the glacier placed it some ten thousand years earlier, its back to the remaining portion. And then, just like they did the dolomite erratic on the moraine two years prior and soon would the boulder of slag near the mouth of the river, the settlers drilled into the stone and mounted a bronze plaque on its face. The plaque,



situated where until recently the fine salt-and-pepper crystals lived in absolute darkness for a span incomprehensible to the human mind, commemorates a few recent European arrivals to the peninsula who had since died.

To the west, across the spring-fed lake divided by a causeway and separated for now from the surrounding inland sea by a low mile-wide strip of young land, rises the moraine,

atop which is perched the inverted dune. Some ways north of the dune, amid marram and knapweed and blowing sand, rests another granite erratic, smaller than the one the settlers divided, but likewise split in two. The halves are separated by a wedge-shaped space half filled with windblown sand and sheltering a small, tenacious sand cherry. On my



last visit, I sat on a nearby tussock and wondered at the igneous symbol delivered here by ice. What could have split this stone? Water could have, certainly, freezing and thawing to force the halves apart like a mercilessly ratcheting jack, perhaps helped by the probing hydraulics of a plant's roots. Or maybe fire split the stone, heating the surrounding sand as flames charged fast and hot through the grasses. Whatever split it, the stone stands in sure but puzzling relation to the larger one across the lake. The two stones, the four halves, form a kind of frame for a message that might emerge from the center of the deep, round lake. Perhaps the rising water itself, in compensatory fashion, bears this message.

When the settlers chose to split the larger granite erratic, which they themselves had celebrated as a symbol of Indigenous inhabitation, they also widened a fissure in their own collective memory, enforcing a total dissociation from the ongoing displacement and erasure of Anishinaabe peoples, from genocide. What resulted, and we see it today writ large in public and private words and actions among settlers, is a kind of neurosis. It is a forgetting, enforced by the marshaling of enormous amounts of psychic and physical energy, seen surfacing most frequently, and obviously, in the commonplace: in orchards doused in biocide, in old fields yearning toward forest but shorn monthly for show like the head of a prisoner, in blue eyes squinting at passing cars from beneath a silver crew cut, in the maintenance of the dam at the mouth of the river. The thing about neurosis, the damming of the waters of memory, is that the waters simply rise until they breach the dam. The messages borne by the waters offer us settlers an opportunity to reunite the dissociated half with the rest, to remember. But it must be said that whether by diligent transformation or fatal collapse — that is to say with or without our remembering — the fissure will close. And as for the stone, despite being undeniably diminished by the split, the remaining enormous portion persists, and each time it rains the vessels on its surface fill until the memorious waters overflow their mineral bowls and stream down the split face. Vessel is as scornful to human force as rising water.

A few weeks before the equinox in the autumn of 2020, as wildfires of an intensity unknown to the memory of

settlers on this continent charged through forests along the west coast, at the end of a warm day of steady wind from the southwest, a calm came over the peninsula. The dome of the sky, although clear of clouds, bore a thin layer of smoke within its silica shell through which, at evening, the sun cut a clean tritium disc. The smoke, cooled by its passage across the continent, was charged again to glowing on the horizon by the sun. And beneath this portentous afterimage, up on the moraine amid the perched dunes, sat the split granite erratic held within a cone of windblown sand. The day's wind had moved a few more grains from between the two halves and the mineral void narrowed by an imperceptible amount.



Dilation

Raise them from the still surface,
these hands from the cold lens —
two hands cupped holding
just a little water

Come here repent
for the loosing of breath's knot
— spear released into still air —
for admiring that arc
from these hands

But here:
heat to water, cold to blood;
a helical pattern in the scattering swirl.
Just a little heat to give away,
endless cold to receive

And yes cold is given too,
neither breath nor spearthrust
now, but surrender

Raise these hands to the mouth:
the spring gives some
and withholds some

Acknowledgments

These poems and essays were written over the course of spring, summer and autumn 2020, beginning with *Invocation* at the end of May, just as the shape of plaguetime had begun to settle in the imagination, and demonstrations for racial justice were gathering force around the country. I felt an unmistakable sense of reckoning just over the horizon then, a coming initiation even — and now, fast approaching the winter solstice, that sense has neither passed nor retreated, but is right here. I hope that these writings, in their modest way, might further invite a reckoning, or as we conceive of it in the last essay, a *remembering*. It is for that reason I also hope you will read the poems aloud, alone, as spells.

I wrote these pieces in and about the present, ancestral and future home of Anishinaabe peoples, my home too, which for some hundred and seventy years has been held stolen under colonial occupation by settlers much like me. I recognize and thank the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians for allowing me to be here on this peninsula. It is time we settlers end the occupation, long since time. This acknowledgment is not the work itself, but a commitment to the work.

The photographs on pages 20, 22, 27 and 29 were generously provided by the Leelanau Historical Society Museum on the banks of a certain river in Leland, Michigan. The

archivists there also assisted in my research for *Two: slag* and *Three: granite*. Thank you. The photograph on page 16 comes from an uncredited postcard in my collection produced sometime in the 1920s. All other photographs were taken by me. The painting on page 34, *Circe Invidiosa*, is by John William Waterhouse, 1892, and lives at the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide. May the commons only grow.