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The Secret Language of the Desert: Poetry, Loss, and Awakening

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THE SECRET LANGUAGE OF THE DESERT:
POETRY, LOSS, AND AWAKENING

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing:
Poetry

by
Elisha Pratt Holt
June 2015

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ABSTRACT

The speaker of *The Desert Survival Guide* is seeking to reconcile his own disconnection, from the natural world, the cosmos, his family, and from his sense of his own humanity. The poems in *The Desert Survival Guide* are a healing ceremony, to come to a place of acceptance regarding the loss of my father. The semi-autobiographical speaker of these poems has lost the immediate physical presence of his father in his life but still retains a deep memory imprint of the father and an unresolved need to process the absence of the father. He is gradually establishing a new connection to the land on which his father lived out his life and was buried. Impressions of his father bloom out from the geologic features of the landscape, the natural flora and fauna, all a realm of immediate waking dream.

The speaker is something of an Orphean Shaman; he wanders the landscape howling his pain and loss, his love, his passions, as Orpheus did his songs. He seeks to pierce through the veil of death in order to reconcile the loss of his loved ones; he seeks to go beyond the human created world into the mystic experience of the desert through the power of utterance and by honoring virile animal familiars. He journey's to the beyond, for much the same purposes as the shaman, a purpose common to poets, mystics, and scientists, to see beyond immediate knowing. He follows the most primal of human directives, the need to understand and communicate the experiences of his life which have struck him with great intensity.

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:
THE SECRET LANGUAGE OF THE DESERT:
POETRY, LOSS, AND AWAKENING

There is no greater truth to me than paradox. At my father's funeral, in the earliest years of my adulthood, I overheard a woman I did not know comment to my older brother how strong my father must have been to live with muscular dystrophy. The truth of this paradoxical sentiment always stayed with me. The truth that my father, frail as he always was, represented a prodigious kind of strength, every day to push forth his life's will against a degenerating body, a force of death and decay that would inevitably win, and yet, he kept going, he got up every day and looked after himself, his home, and the family's farm, to the full extent of his abilities until he died. An educated man with a bachelor's degree who could only read very slowly and with frequent headaches because his eyesight was so poor, everything my father achieved took a force of nature. My father, both frail and strong, paradox, something that is, but can't be, a monsoon contained within an eggshell. My father taught me the truth.

Paradox, in simplified terms, is the crossing point of literal and figurative truth. My father's muscles were progressively degenerating from around the time he was playing little league. By the time I knew him he was literally, physically weak, in the realm of tangible senses, the trick world of cyborgs. But in reality, my father was capable of a kind of strength that many people die from lack of,

“inner strength,” figurative, intangible, beyond the immediate realm of perception. He possessed the will to dredge through the day to day mire, to struggle against personal suffering and economic necessity, to survive, to be a man on his farm with his son.

Andre Breton and the surrealists believed that the purpose of artistic work is to crush the barriers between the inner reality of the mind and external reality and to unify the realm of the physical world with the realm of the mind in order to create “superreality” and bring wholeness back to human experience:

Instead of accepting the idea of the necessary separation of man’s inner and external reality, desires and the world, or dreams and hard facts we consider the possibility of effecting a unity... “I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, into a kind of absolute reality, surreality” (Benedikt xi).

In the surrealist’s effort to create this unified reality of world and mind, the surrealist must locate the “point of mind” in which opposites become fused or cease to be opposites:

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, cease to be perceived as contradiction...one will never find any other motivating force in the activity of the Surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point (Breton 14).

The surrealist poem then, is the attempt to create a fixed point at which the real and imagined, all the contradictions and opposites of human existence on this planet, become one unified experience. The surrealists' ideal reality is a realm where paradox is not just accepted but craved after, a more fully rendered truth.

This concept of truth as a multidimensional plane, a union of opposites, a merging point of different levels of reality, is the core concept of my creative manuscript, *The Desert Survival Guide*. I was raised in the unique landscape of the Palo Verde Valley, an ancient floodplain along the Colorado River that marks the border between the Mojave and Sonoran Deserts. I lived on this land for more than two decades. All of my early formative experiences, all of my memories have the mountains of that valley as a backdrop, the enclosing infinity of the desert in the distance. When I remember my father, I cannot help but envision him centered within that landscape, walking through the sweep of the alfalfa fields, flat until they rise into the white mesas, a roadrunner darting in the distance, the smell of creosote before the rain, these things have become part of his presence in my mind. In this sense, my father is the point at which my inner and external realities merge. My emotional landscape layers and intermixes with the physical landscape of my youth. For example, my poem "Sunset Atlas," continuing the narrative thread that my father died as a result of injuries from an accidental fall, breaks down my father's physical presence and dissolves it into the specific landscape of my youth. First, by asserting a concrete external

reality, the reality that my father's physical body was weakened by his condition and then broken in his fall:

The strength it takes
for a man to live
with muscular dystrophy
the truth it takes to tell you
that my father broke
into bits and became the sea

This initial passage ends by asserting a figurative, emotional truth as the conclusion, or, perhaps, the continuation of, the literal, physical truth of my father's death. The sea is a massive power, distant and forever unseen from the desert, and yet profoundly influential on the climate of the landscape, temperature and rainfall, as my father has become, in death, a powerful, forever distant and unseen influence in my life.

This is the point at which "Sunset Atlas" merges the emotional landscape that is the complex of memories and feelings surrounding my father, including his death, with the physical landscape of the desert, by overlaying his emotional-body-in-death onto the vast landscape of the desert:

the river and the silt that flows
joints and bones ligaments
of chord and the hill song
the land its rugged contours

sage brush the aerial roots of juniper

fruit of the palms

male flowers of the desert broom

night over the mesa

sun on the red buttes

There are natural ways to deal with the death of a father. The Kübler-Ross model, or the five stages of grief, outlines the emotional states a person goes through after the death of a loved one, and while it's possible that the order in which a person experiences prolonged states of denial, grief, bargaining, or anger can vary, ultimately one must arrive at acceptance in order to move past the emotional and psychological wound that has been inflicted.

The father poems in *The Desert Survival Guide* are a kind of healing ceremony, an effort to come to a place of acceptance regarding the loss of my father. The semi-autobiographical speaker of the poems has lost the immediate physical presence of his father in his life but still retains a deep memory imprint of the father and an unresolved need to process the absence of the father. He is gradually establishing a new father presence in his life, something spiritual, something like the distant and powerful sea: the desert. Not a mythic desert, but the actual land on which his father lived out his life and was buried. Impressions of his father bloom out from the geologic features of the landscape, the natural flora and fauna, all a realm of immediate waking dream. For example, in the poem "Each Moment Rising, Swells," the process of the dissolution of the

physical father continues, in this instance, the father is being reimagined into a series of symbols expressed in a litany:

our father the man
we knew our father
porcelain
doll branch of smoke
the burning bush
jackrabbit through a needles eye
evening light the burning bush
when he died deer
when he died
the mountains

The reality that my father's body was broken, which is more directly expressed in poems like "Sunset Atlas," is expressed in this poem in something closer to the condensed, highly symbolic language of dream that surrealists endeavor to achieve: "porcelain / doll," is something that can be easily broken beyond repair, like the body of a man suffering a lifelong condition such as muscular dystrophy. A "branch of smoke," is ethereal, tangibly present as a stick which is also the ghost of itself as it is consumed by fire, in the same way my father is both present with me and gone into the afterlife. The "burning bush" is a Biblical allusion to the Father, the utmost powerful and distant presence. Burning the excess weeds and dry brush from the irrigation ditches and the property line was also something I

often helped my father with on my grandfather's farm when I was a child. In this way, the father is being translated through the ceremony of language into a new form of presence in the speaker's life.

This is the process of acceptance coming to fruition for the speaker of the poems. The father's presence is something that can never be erased from the mind and spirit. Rather than accepting my father as a tragic figure who suffered greatly in life and whose death could have been avoided, I learn to let my father go in order for him to become a broader, and more deeply ingrained, benevolent father-presence. An example of this is in the poem "Mother," in which I assert the father-presence through the symbol of the burning bush:

Carry forth my child
in old age a path of pollen
burning bush will lead carry forth
my child
in the wake of jackrabbits
through the kingdom of poverty
into protectorate of puma and bees

The speaker of the poem is addressing his mother, urging her past her earthly sufferings, urging his own child passed earthly sufferings and into health and well-being, by invoking the father-presence, in the symbol of the burning bush, who has blazed the path beyond suffering and can perhaps assist the living in their march toward old age and through the problems of the world. The speaker

uses his will, through the ceremony of language, to establish the guiding presence of a father in death which can serve the same role as that of the living father, who is a guiding presence in a child's life. The deep emotions the speaker feels for his family, the desire to connect his parents with his child and for them all to be well, is again interpenetrated and merged with the landscape. The pollen of the desert wildflowers represents life blossoming anew. The strong presence of the jackrabbits, puma, and bees all represent, to some degree, life, thriving, industrious and healthy. The "protectorate of puma and bees" is the desert itself, the land that provides and forever serves to teach us ways to survive.

The ability to transcend realms, inner and external reality, life and death, is a sacred theme in the world's body of literature. From ancient mythology we have Ishtar's descent into the underworld, Ovid's similar journey to the land of the dead to rescue Eurydice with the power of his songs. These storied beings of another nature had the power to pass beyond into the other realms and return. They represent the most profound of human realizations, one which lies at the foundation of both religion and science, that there are levels of reality beyond our immediate perception, whether microscopic, macrocosmic, or pan-dimensional. Death is an unavoidable reality for all living things. Death and the afterlife is a realm which human beings have for all of history desperately tried to penetrate and reconcile themselves with, perhaps since the first Neanderthals decorated the graves of their loved ones with flowers. Every human experiences the looming presence of death that is always near. Every living being must "pass

away,” the consciousness present within the body ceases to be, the body rapidly dissolves thereafter without embalming, mountain crumbling to sandstorm.

The concept of the mind pushing through the immediate into an understanding of the beyond is most clearly manifest in the spiritual beliefs of Paganism and Animism, and in the archetype of the Shaman, “specialists in the sacred,’ men able to ‘see’ the spirits, to go up into the sky and meet the gods, to descend to the underworld and fight the demons, sickness, and death” (Eliade 60). The speaker of *The Desert Survival Guide* is something of an Orphean Shaman; he wanders the landscape howling his pain and loss, his love, his passions, as Orpheus did his songs. He seeks to pierce through the veil of death in order to reconcile the loss of his loved ones; he seeks to go beyond the human created world into the mystic experience of the desert through the power of utterance and by honoring virile animal familiars. He mind-journey’s to the beyond, for much the same purposes as the shaman, a purpose common to poets, mystics, and scientists alike, “to see what is hidden and invisible to the rest and to bring back direct and reliable information from the supernatural worlds,” the worlds beyond immediate knowing (Eliade 60). He follows the most primal of human directives, the need to understand and communicate the experiences of his life which have struck him with great intensity.

For example, in the poem “Crossing the Dunes,” the speaker advises the reader through the context of the field guide or desert survival manual on how to react when confronted with an impassable expanse of sand dunes:

make yourself as small as possible

observe sand grain

tiny cratered satellites

reflecting sun glare each

in orbit around each

The speaker implores observation in the most scientific sense, to gather data on the subject, in this case sand dunes, which the speaker takes to a microscopic level of detail, the level of each individual sand grain. Observation is an organic survival tool, an evolutionary adaptation, a product of our biology, an essential aspect of our humanity. But there is also a shamanic quality to the speaker's observations, one of shifting perspective in which the consciousness of the speaker leaves the body and its ordinary, immediate sense experience in order to take on the perspective of sand grain. The microcosm of sand becomes his universe, the grains of sand seem large as moons, and the speaker can perceive the gravity that the smallest objects exert on each other as the sands of the dunes continually move in the wind like planets in the void. In this way, the speaker can begin to extend his observations of the phenomenal world into a greater understanding of life and the nature of the larger universe.

The speaker perceives, from the ever shifting movement of individual grains of sand within a dune, and the ever transforming patterns of the dunes as a whole, that everything in the universe is constantly changing. He can also see

the importance of transformation and motion in the universe in the behavior of desert animals:

star dunes into crescent dunes

dunes wind and dunes reverse

a universe composed of fluid

forms the lizard

sloughing off its shape

observe the passage of sandfish

The speaker recognizes the shared nature of dunes and living things through his observation of lizards, perhaps the Mojave fringe-toed lizard, shedding its skin and swimming through deep sands, the sands of dunes as they shift into a new shape. The core purpose of shifting perspective in a way similar to the shamanic trance is what the human can learn from the non-human in order to better survive in the world, physically, mentally, and spiritually. The mind journeys beyond in order to grasp the immediate present with greater depth and clarity.

The work of the shaman maps out our reality. The shaman's visionary journeys to the realms beyond serve as a kind of mythic cartography, human conception of the gods, the larger forces that operate the universe, sickness, misfortune, natural disasters, the cycles of the sun, moon, and seasons, have always been derived from the accounts of those who have peered into the beyond. Our conception of what happens after we die is in large part based on

shamanic expression, as Mircea Eliade, the religious historian, wrote in his epilogue to *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*:

In all probability many features of 'funerary geography,' as well as some themes of the mythology of death, are the result of the ecstatic experiences of shamans. The lands that the shaman sees and the personages that he meets during his ecstatic journeys in the beyond are minutely described by the shaman himself, during or after his trance. The unknown and terrifying world of death assumes form, is organized in accordance with particular patterns; finally it displays a structure...little by little the world of the dead becomes knowable, and death itself is evaluated primarily as a rite of passage to a spiritual mode of being (Eliade 60).

What was the work of Dante if not the mapping of Christian 'funerary geography' and the themes of the mythology of death? Much of the mythology of hell comes from Dante's account of his own journey into, and return from, hell, a direct parallel with "the shaman's adventures in the other world, the ordeals that he undergoes in his ecstatic descents below and ascents to the sky" (Eliade 61).

The role the shaman serves in laying out the mythic framework for our reality is a universal need in human culture, one for which all human cultures will find their equivalent. The speaker of *The Desert Survival Guide* is a projected self, a poet-shaman in the Orphean tradition, he journeys into the desert, a land of death, he leaves his body, he assumes the aspect of animals, he journeys into the sky

among the planets and heavenly bodies and into the lowest sand pit of his own personal struggles with himself. He has visions, he chants and sings.

The Orphean poet seeks resolution to his troubles through altered states achieved through the ceremony of language and utterance much as the shaman does:

In preparing his trance, the shaman drums, summons his spirit helpers, speaks a 'secret language' or the 'animal language,' imitating the cries of beasts and especially the songs of birds. He ends by obtaining a 'second state' that provides the impetus for linguistic creation and the rhythms of lyric poetry" (Eliade 60).

Poets speak the animal language, the language of our most primal selves, the secret language of the individual's emotional experience in the world. What are elegies if not the summoning of the familiar spirits of those passed? What is human utterance if not birdsong? What are poems if not the cries of beasts?

The shaman's miracles serve "not only [to] confirm and reinforce the patterns of the traditional religion, they also stimulate and feed the imagination, demolish the barriers between dream and present reality, open windows upon worlds inhabited by the gods, the dead, and the spirits" (Eliade 60). The ascents, descents, and altered states of the shaman then, are very much related to the surrealists' ideal, multi-dimensional, super-reality.

The surrealist endeavor was to achieve a return to something primal and mythic that post-industrial life had atrophied in them, what the intense emotional

trauma of WWI broke open in them. What surrealists push toward with their super-reality is a return to a state of being that life in the industrial labyrinth of the human created world has caused modern man to be distracted from with its endless amusements, angsts, projects, assignments, and tasks. My goal as a poet is not to become a more specialized type of wage-earner but a more fully realized human animal, to live in a vast state of being.

The human animal knows a way of being present in the natural world, attuned to the rhythms of the seasons; the behavior of animals and plants, the smells on the air, barometric pressure. The human animal is permeated by the world. A vast state of being is to be comfortably grounded in the vivid and murk of the larger universe. Living in a vast state allows for casual but focused observation, genuine wonder at the magic of creation, and imaginative capacity that enables humans to grasp complex problems. To live in a vast state is to be a human being, possessed of an individual will, perpetually dissolving from the illusion of separateness. To live in a vast state is to be paradox, both man and animal, body and spirit, dreaming and awake, permeable to the environment and the cosmos, Vitruvian, axis mundi, common man and visionary. "The one who can be many places at once" (Herbert).

One of the major problems the speaker of *The Desert Survival Guide* is facing is one of economic necessity, a reality of life made all the more pressing in his mind after having children, and he is struggling against the ways in which the modern, wage-earner, system of living in the world limits and disconnects him

from fundamental human needs. In the poem, "Desert Survival Guide: Employment," I seek to highlight two of those basic, often thwarted human needs. The first being the need to establish an authentic relationship with the land as a way to access one's true cosmic nature, the second being the related need for mythology, or those forms of art which speak to us in the language of mythology and dream, in order to access one's true cosmic nature. The opening of the poem speaks in the condensed symbolic language of dream and yet its metaphors are grounded in the immediate, accessible features of the landscape, the desert in which the modern man lives and works toward economic survival:

Ground squirrel under a
parachute made of
timecards
my rabbit starvation paycheck

The life of a ground squirrel, however admirable, is not a proper state of being for a human. It's claustrophobic and confining, our human experience is narrowed and our ability to see, nearsighted beyond the next shift, the next paycheck. Rabbit starvation is survival language. When a human in the wild eats but does not consume enough calories to fuel its body enough to continue living. The speaker is giving all his time-focus for a trickle of money which is never enough to truly thrive on.

The section that follows further highlights the human experience being confined to economic roles:

thresher mechanic working a call

center job thresher mechanic working a call

center // job

I made the personal choice to include a rural job role, “thresher mechanic,” essentially a tractor repair and maintenance man, and place him in a distinctly urban service economy role, working at a call center, in order to highlight a person ill fitted to the role available to him. His unique set of skills and abilities are meant for another tradecraft.

The poem then shifts to the complicated drought of mythology that is influencing the speaker’s life and highlights his arrested progress toward fully accessing his natural human connection to the larger cosmos:

Hermod ravening the loan statements

Rainbow Bridge

closed shoulder

rainbow bridge to the minifridge

sidereal

month under construction

Hermod is an obscure messenger god from Germanic mythology and the Rainbow Bridge is the magical passage between realms from the same pantheon of gods. Here, in the language of dreams, the speaker is both elevated to the level of mythology (in the sense that a degraded person often retains and projects an imagined hero vision of themselves) and he is also reduced by his

simultaneous economic role in the immediate “real” world of common sensory experience. Hermod was the messenger of the gods; the speaker’s reality is more that of a postman delivering bills, specifically loan statements, which have become a huge part of modern American life. Our loan statements are, in fact, messages from the powerful. This mundane role contrasts with Hermod’s epic quest to the underworld to plead for his brother’s life. The shaman aspects of the human are atrophied as he spends all his time doing mundane tasks. A human without access to his imagination, creativity, spirituality, a human that is not allowed to live out the natural rhythm of his body and mind and achieve his natural harmony with the world, to live according to his own pace, is living in a state of disconnection. The sidereal month is the cycle of the moon, specifically the time it takes for the moon to circle the earth. A sidereal month under construction is, like a rainbow bridge with a closed shoulder, a blocked connection between the human and the cosmic, causing him to become unhinged from the natural cosmic calendar and locked into an artificial calendar month.

The speaker of the poem, like Hermod, is highly concerned with family, being in a couple working to support young children:

two lovers standing
back to back in the mines
digging for checkstubs
to pay the debts disapproving

parents aging medical

how many hours of labor equals

medicine for a 9 year old's chest cold

The love of family is the prime motivating factor in the speaker's life. When he allows himself to be confined to an economic role, he does so because he is compelled to by the manic fight to get ahead that two lovers feel when they are living together, and working for a shared life, to ensure shared health and survival for the all the living generations of the family.

The speaker is facing the common problem of the modern American, the sense of confinement and disconnection that repetitive labor tasks, living according to an employer's prescribed schedule, moving repetitively along the same routes of travel, and according to a prescribed role, causes us to experience:

autumn of the palo verde smoke

break in the parking lot

a parcel of this

lush Sonora

my allotment of breathable air

10 spare minutes for me to inhabit my life

As a way to self-medicate his illness, his repeated and profound disconnection, he turns to substances: "the methods I employ / to keep myself mellow." Perhaps because the sense of euphoria from getting intoxicated reduces his stress level,

or perhaps because the flirtation with oblivion that substance abuse gives him provides something of the sense of awe and surrender one feels when having a profound spiritual experience: “the post workday mudslide / my search for the Absolut.” Absolut is the name of a vodka. The concept of Absolute reality has long been a religious and philosophical quest throughout human history. The search for the absolute is, in the simplest terms, the quest for God, the desire to adjust one’s perceptive abilities to encompass a greater depth and range of the true, complete reality of the universe. For the speaker, this, most powerful of human drives is constantly thwarted, his connection with the larger cosmos disrupted, and his attention corralled and diverted to the everyday tasks of a patterned, rigidly structured, mechanistic lifestyle, one that lacks the effortless, natural flow of the rainbow and the magic of mythology. The constant pinprick of economic need increasingly makes the dream language a foreign dialect, spoken as a child, but mostly forgotten now.

What the speaker of *The Desert Survival Guide* is seeking to reconcile is his own disconnection, from the natural world, the cosmos, his family, and from his sense of his own humanity. He is a person who is disaffected by the unfairness of sacrificing his time and labor for too little return, the lack of opportunity that exists in lower socio-economic classes, the prevalence for substance abuse, exploitation, and violence among the poor. He has felt the pain of the loss of a father and he is in turmoil over the prospect of bringing a child into a post-industrial labyrinth he is profoundly dissatisfied with. He journeys into

the deep desert to face the raw world with nothing but his own human faculties, the capacities of his physical body and mind. He strives to regain a more natural unpressured way of being in the world, a vast state, something similar, perhaps, to Gary Snyder's "mythological present."

to live in the "mythological present" in close relation to nature and in basic but disciplined body/mind states suggests a wider-ranging imagination and a closer subjective knowledge of one's own physical properties than is usually available to men living (as they themselves describe it) impotently and inadequately in 'history'—their mind content programmed, and their caressing of nature complicated by the extensions and abstractions which elaborate tools are...unused capacities go sour (Snyder 434).

To live in a predominantly domesticated way is to navigate a maze of barriers between human animal and the natural world. The endless anticipation of bills, the requirement of credit and debt in order to participate in the world, the ease and constant sales craft of consumerism, the reliance on increasingly complex technologies, knowledge derived primarily from internet databases, a sense of time based on the calendar week and the timecard. These human created devices conspire to stand between human and world.

When Gary Snyder talks about "primitive" culture what he is seeking after is a more authentic way for human beings to live in the world:

Having fewer tools, no concern with history, a living oral tradition rather than an accumulated library, no overriding social goals, and considerable freedom of sexual and inner life, such people live vastly in the present. Their daily reality is a fabric of friends and family, the field of feeling and energy that one's own body is, the earth they stand on and the wind that wraps around it; and various areas of consciousness (Snyder 434).

A more authentic human life would be one with minimal human distraction, minimal labyrinths of social pressures, economic directives, carrot/stick motivations, and overly analytic micro-managing religious paradigms. Authentic would be a life less fueled by desire for what glitters, an aspect of humanity which is teased out and frustrated from the time we are toddlers watching toy commercials in between cartoons, toy commercials that knowingly are made to exploit child psychology in order to make kids want to buy objects as a prime directive, an essential human value. In order for this being to be fully human, his place in life needs to be less pressured, un-narrowed.

The narrowing effect that the speaker is experiencing is the effect of an imbalance between the two fundamental compulsions of organized humanity, the need for order and the need for chaos. He is battling between the conditioned mind that has been programmed with the behaviors of assigned roles that he must perform within the system of organized humanity, and the living mind which is constantly evolving into new places, breaking down old structures of thought

and building up new ways of remaining in balance with the organic, ever changing world. In his essay, "Paideuma," Leo Frobenius, an ethnologist and archeologist, described two very distinct ways that the human mind approaches the world:

In the mechanistic view the world consists of a system of facts which can be analyzed into cause and effect, elements and combinations, and from which it is possible to deduce relationships of universal validity. It is a type of biological or psychological approach based on albumen tests, laws of association, motives and impulses, ganglion cells and nerve tissues, all duly classified and reduced to dry formulae (Frobenius 37).

The mechanistic view is analytic; it breaks things down into their constituent elements and strives to classify them into rigid, separate categories. It creates degrees of relatedness and unrelation.

It's undeniable that the mechanistic impulse, and the desire to create structure out of the raw mass of the world, has served humanity over the course of human history. Division of labor directed towards an overriding social goal, building a monument, winning a basketball championship, or curing a disease, has allowed the whole to benefit from the labors and sacrifices of individuals. Analysis has given us specialists which focus on individual aspects of being human. For example, the field of medical doctors breaks down into geneticists, heart specialists, foot bone specialists, and so on. The advances made in an

individual specialization, among foot bone specialists for example, contributes in depth knowledge to the problem of how to medically treat the entire human body in order to improve duration and quality of life. In this way analysis and the mechanistic view serves and maintains order, safeguards and enables humanity. The speaker of *The Desert Survival Guide* himself is analyzing the desert in a mechanistic sense, observing the sand grains, the lizard, the cactus and their properties as the individual constituent elements of the desert, in order to understand the desert as a whole. But when analysis becomes obsessive to the point that we can no longer see the entirety, we lose the natural, holistic sensibilities which allow us to feel secure in our place in the world.

The [mechanistic] seeks to establish laws as a means of understanding the processes and phenomena of the external world and of human consciousness. The strength of this method lies in its power to elicit such laws; its weakness is that it cannot avoid setting up an unnatural opposition between the norm and the abnormal, the regular and the irregular, the rule and the exception. Whatever diverges from the law is treated as second-class reality, so that the observer loses his power of comprehensive and impartial judgment (Frobenius 36).

The mechanistic view is what allows a society to organize its citizens into distinctive groups with separate rights and responsibilities based on race, gender, sexual preference, or prevailing condition of poverty. It is what classifies

dream as a separate state from waking reality, a separate reality that is less real than our mundane everyday concerns, our role as wage laborers carrying rocks to the monument. In the mechanistic world, our primary value is determined according to our perceived service to the maintenance of the current structure of our social group.

The speaker of *The Desert Survival Guide* resists the overbalance of the mechanistic in his life by fleeing society and going into the desert like a stranded hiker or a mystic visionary. His experiences in the desert are an impulse toward a holistic, multilayered, intuitive view of the world:

The intuitive approach, on the other hand...is content to perceive the main phenomena and assign to them, as sympathetically as possible, a place in the general structure. In this way the intuitive observer can, with full understanding, enter into all the vicissitudes of reality...The intuitive observer...seeks to enter with his whole being into the lawless profusion of spiritual activity... He surrenders to the inner logic of growth, evolution and maturity...Instead of petrified laws and formulae, he discovers symbolic events and types of living, breathing reality (Frobenius 36).

This unfolding of living, breathing reality is what the speaker of *The Desert Survival Guide* is recognizing in his visionary experiences in the desert. He discovers that all the different levels of reality, memory and dream, the trees and animals, the movements in the heavens above, the passage of time, death and

blossoming life, all comprise an interconnected fabric, the totality of existence, as far as it extends into the cosmos:

A comet held in the mouth
of a gopher snake
meteor shower weathers
to antlers of bighorn sheep
skull of ram a cosmic
axis where blood and starlight seep
from the same marrow.

In this passage, from the poem "Birth of Man," the speaker restores connections that were broken in him. His hallucinatory visions restore to him the spirit-knowledge that life on Earth is permeated by the cosmos, is affected by, and a result of, cosmic events such as the movements of meteors and the lifecycles of stars. All things share a common cosmic origin, including man, "blood and starlight seep / from the same marrow."

The authentic way of being human that Gary Snyder prescribes, the same which the speaker is wildly questing after, is one in which life is more directly in contact with world, the labyrinthine walls knocked down, and the vast inner universe of the individual permeates, and is permeated by, the vast universe of creation. The emotional landscape of the human being grafts to the physical landscape of the natural world. The wind and climes become markers of human emotion. The lizards, rattlesnakes, and birds: teachers, friendly companions on

the path. Just as “a hand pushing a button... will never learn what a hand can do,” a man living separate from the world will never develop a healthy relationship with it (Snyder 434). He will have no sense of impact, consequence, or health if he is limited to the dark narrow cage of his mundane existence.

Through the desert and the ceremony of language, the speaker of these poems wills himself beyond the chirps and challenges of a mad pack that have pushed him into a hot contest over scant resources and lost the harmony of a guiding song. In his wanderings as the desert Orpheus he gains the songs of the animals set to the music of the planets humming along the rim of their orbits in the cosmos, and that is what gives the human his sense of place in the entirety of reality and allows him to be healed.

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APPENDIX A
THE DESERT SURVIVAL GUIDE

Sunset Atlas

The strength it takes
for a man to live
with muscular dystrophy
the truth it takes to tell you
that my father broke
into bits and became the sea
the river and the silt that flows
joints and bones ligaments
of chord and the hill song
the land its rugged contours
sage brush the aerial roots of juniper
fruit of the palms
male flowers of the desert broom
night over the mesa
sun on the red buttes
the land and its contours of chord
and the hill song his ever widening sphere
my father I am your son

Each Moment Rising, Swells

When he died
an eagle broke
from the cage of the chest of a melting
wax man
roadrunner mothered a clutch of king snakes
chuckwalla arose from coals
the grasshoppers convected into a storm

my father cresting the hills on a tractor
blue jeans in the wet alfalfa
when he died
the mountains swelled and crumbled under
the weight of clouds
deer drank from a night spring
beside my ghost

my father breaking
the pair of glasses
he is most remembered for
so that at his funeral we were made
to pretend
that this was the face of

our father the man
we knew our father
porcelain
doll branch of smoke
the burning bush
jackrabbit through a needles eye
evening light the burning bush

when he died deer
when he died
the mountains

Mother

Carry forth my child
in old age a path of pollen
burning bush will lead carry forth
my child
in the wake of jackrabbits
through the kingdom of poverty
into protectorate of puma and bees
will lift your toils bees will lift your
toils the roadrunner bows
before the dawn runs
her talons through sand
carry forth into the shining
land my daughter and leave the rent
mountains where they lay

Desert Survival Guide: Crossing the Dunes

Don't look beyond

make yourself as small as possible
observe sand grain
tiny cratered satellites
reflecting sun glare each
in orbit around each

star dunes into crescent dunes
dunes wind and dunes reverse

a universe composed of fluid
forms the lizard
 sloughing off its shape

observe the passage of sandfish

you will divine no water in this place
you will die and become larval
ant lion lay cupped in the dunes slipface
here among the slithering
ghosts of mountains

observe the sidewinders track
dissolving on the crest

Desert Survival Guide: Employment

Ground squirrel under a
parachute made of
timecards
my rabbit starvation paycheck

thresher mechanic working a call
center job thresher mechanic working a call
center // job
Hermod ravaging the loan statements
Rainbow Bridge
closed shoulder

rainbow bridge to the minifridge
sidereal
month under construction

two lovers standing
back to back in the mines

digging for checkstubs
to pay the debts disapproving
parents aging medical

how many hours of labor equals
medicine for a 9 year old's chest cold
how many equals my medicine
my daily offering of incense
how many hours left
before I get
to see
my princess

autumn of the palo verde smoke
break in the
parking lot
a parcel of this
lush Sonora
my allotment of
breathable air
10 spare minutes
for me to inhabit my life
my slow

death from petty vice the methods
I employ
to keep myself mellow
each day the same
tomorrow

home is a scorpion
mouthing
a cockroach
on the sidewalk a complex
interplay
between minimum wage and the Lotto

a ceramic cactus shot glass a Tombstone
pizza 24 hour drive thru liquor

hand me down television sets
torn chair we've rolled in from the dumpster
the post workday mudslide
my search for the Absolut

Birth of Man

A comet held in the mouth
of a gopher snake
meteor shower weathers
to antlers of bighorn sheep
skull of ram a cosmic
axis where blood and starlight seep
from the same marrow.

From dew, the electricity
held in each tuft and blade
of the hard mountain grasses,
alkaline, oxygen bubbles along the peaks,
moon refracting in the back hollows of the eye,

aggregate a precise step among crags.

Windblown rocks intaglio the mud flats
in death valley a drop of rain
pressed tight against a cricket
in the belly of a lizard
pollen mingling with clay:

a common man

laboring a stick pile a trailer
beneath the panorama of mountains
and the Milky Way.

The earth folds itself into an edge
obsidian
plainest of stones.