NET-BAGS and LOOKING GLASSES:

Writing in Sympoiesis

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Abstract

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"NET-BAGS and LOOKING GLASSES: Writing in Sympoiesis" explores the concept of storytelling as a ritual practice and the idea of sympoiesis as a framework for understanding cultural production. The essay reflects on my childhood experience of collecting and sewing bags, which served as containers for various treasures. Drawing inspiration from Ursula K. Le Guin's "carrier bag theory of fiction," I contemplate the power of storytelling to hold and connect different elements. As I grow older, I realize that the bags I create as a writer are not just physical but also metaphorical, containing worlds and relationships. The essay further delves into a pattern for worlding, discussing the interconnectedness of beings and the importance of recognizing our place within complex systems. It emphasizes the need for a new framework rooted in symbiogenesis, which acknowledges collaborative processes in cultural production. The essay concludes by presenting three knots of convergence as patterns for reading and understanding the world, ultimately calling for a shift towards sympoiesis as a way of looking at ourselves and our creations.

RITUALS IN THE BAG.

When I was nine, my grandmother gifted me a pink Brother sewing machine for Christmas. Using the leftover scraps of quilt fabric from her stash, I sewed bags upon bags upon bags. I didn't know any other patterns, and bags were simple: bags were square. Bags to tote my plastic-wrapped books to and from the library, bags in which to collect chalky stones from my grandmother's backyard-by-the-sea that when cracked open contained teeny fossils of kelp and clam shells, bags to shelter pinecones that I'd found rotted beneath culdesac trees, bags to hoard scrap fabric to make more bags, bags to store an excess of bags. And more often than not: all of these things, mingled together, pressed in-conversation, gathered in a master bag.

The things I collected were containers in and of themselves. The stones boasted the vines of the Cambrian Explosion and the cones sheltered the seeds of pitch pines that would only open when stroked with flames and the books–well, the books–the books contained the words, which were all ritual. Ursula K. Le Guin cued me into my ritual practice with her "carrier bag theory of fiction." This method of storytelling comes from the theory that women were the earliest creators of tools, utilizing bags to carry food before weaponry was even a glimmer in ancient man's eye. Le Guin connects these origins to the structure of fiction as a 'feminine' form wherein "the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words […] A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in particular, powerful relation to one another and to us."[1] Of course, this is not to say that 'collecting,' 'containing,' or even 'storying' are accomplishments unique to women (Le Guin herself resists such superficial binaries)–just that in the long gendered history of anthropology, the linear narrative of the masculine-coded hunter has long been prioritized over the nonlinear practice of the feminine-coded gatherer.

As I get older, it's sort of dreamy to flatter myself that what I do as a writer is a ritual practice, a knot in an ancient lineage. When I was a kid collecting rocks in my shoddily stitched bags, I couldn't yet describe *how* it felt to hold these remarkably old, chemically sophisticated shards of gneiss, quartz, and feldspar against each other, against my handiwork, against my skin. All I did was make the stitches, tie the knots at the ends of my

[1] Le Guin, Ursula K., and Donna Jeanne Haraway. *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. IGNOTA Books, 2019. p. 169.

thread. But the desire to put things in relation with other things, to provide a holding space where worlds could encounter other worlds, spectacularly and tenderly, outside of temporal confines, carried with me. And as I get older, I've found that the bags I create are not just sewn, not just material.

In any construction, I struggle to follow patterns. But bags are simple: bags are square. For your traditional tote you only need three scraps: the front, the back, and the handle. For me, storying comes in threes, but also in threes within threes. The number may seem arbitrary, but welcome to my bag. You're in it now. In here, you will jostle among the artifacts of not just my upbringing but of my readings, my misreadings, my research, my ignorance, my striving. What emerges–the writing, the art–is a product of a model system, making and sustaining relationships among its entangled contents.

Allow me to compile a simple pattern of the things that *I* must contain before I write.

A PATTERN FOR WORLDING

I. Nothing makes itself.

The first law of worlding. In much the way that

> a mother does not undergo a perfect mitosis, plucking a baby girl from her neck like a skin tag, with her every disquieting, self-degrading thought transcribed in the child's head. there must be room for fat to grow, for the father's fears to cement like barnacles to the baby's back

or

> a coral system does not replicate as a reef without the intimacy of strangers, without dinoflagellate algae little-spooned against its polyps, photosynthesizing sweet nothings. it is either the holobiont or the limestone skeleton, alive and many or dead and one

or

> a writer does not translate a world, fully formed, into a human language. a writer is not *one* writer, but a collectively producing system, without self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries. evolutionary, unoriginal, translating a nonhuman language, formless, into a writer-shaped space, formful.

II. A model is worked, and it does work.

The second law of worlding. In other words,

> a girl-child can sit at the kids' Thanksgiving table and eat mashed potatoes with her cousins and ask the big people why it is that she has been segregated from the adult world, even as she is worked into a bruise by the fist-first, complex-enough, simple-enough adult world

or

> an African clawed frog can sympathize with the embryo shifting in the human woman's belly by expelling her own brood of skin-clear eggs into the water tank, even as it is the scientist who is injecting urine into this model organism's hindleg, monitoring her forced ovulation to see if her human counterpart is pregnant

or

> a writer can become-with, tangled-with and mired-in the holobiome of other artists' projects, other people's lives, other creatures' cellular integrity, asking how this or that graticule slide of the cosmos works, even as she is worked by the one animating project, unwritten. what she ends up creating will not be the same kind of thing as a metaphor or an analogy.

III. We are compost, not posthuman.

The third law of worlding. To the same degree:

> a girl when grown is not confined to a vanished past. she is a spine-scoliosed, pock-marked, crow-feeted, dimple-thighed alloy of her parents' and parents' parents' silences, their bursts-of-affirmations, their sweat and warmth and overcrowded mouths. she is the last paper layer in the shadow box of every ancestor's straining eye, peering up and out into the sun-god's face

or

> invertebrates when expired are not confined to a separate compost pile from humans. the octopus and grasshopper and snail are chthonic, demonstrative, writhing, permeating, in air, in sea, in humus, making and unmaking, being and becoming, tentacles and antenna and mucous fiercely knotted up with the femurs and skull caps of anthropos. equal, excellent rot

or

> a writer when writing is not confined to an anthropocentric narrative tradition. she is armed with fresh epochs of the thick present, her long-nets and carrier-bags bulging with the sympoietic work and play of the main characters of the underland, the overstory. she is staying with the trouble.

Perhaps I should clarify: patterns are not the same as how-tos. This is not a how-to on storying a world. Patterns are shapes. They are crepey cut-outs of paper that when held up to the window filter light. They glow. I need them not because I am chronological or methodical, but because I need a likeness I can trace.

Likenesses are important because I suffer from some degree of object impermanence and can forget too often, too quickly. Because when

> you are young and possessed by that biting tick to write enough worlds to populate every Earth analog in the eye of your telescope, you're bound to contract some variation of a god complex. god complexes for writers are like respiratory infections. caught by opening your mouth too wide, smelling and feeling too fiercely, blinking too seldomly. they sit, plaque-tight and phlegm-thick against the lining of your throat, your lungs, so that every time you breathe they ripple and multiply. they fever your thoughts and make you think that you are the originator of this one, great, good thing. that what you create is pure

or, not so alternatively,

> you are young and horrified by yourself. you write and you tell no one. you want to peel the words off the page like they are scabs, permitted to harden in the physical world for too long. you do not allow the story to heal. this is where the infection sets in. inferiority complexes fester all the same. they necrose, skin eating down to muscle down to bone, and you are convinced that you are the corruptor of this one, great, good thing that was never really a part of you. that what you create is already polluted.

These perspectives are not actually all that different from one another in the sense that they are equally self-contradicting. A writer can only develop a god complex and believe they are singular or contract an inferiority complex and believe they are nothing by becoming host to another organism. They are perspectivally compatible; they sit face-to-face, legs crossed over one another, breathing more and more self-replicating toxins into each other's open mouths. The only difference? One is

"from-above-looking-down," and the other is "from-below-looking-out." Unsustainable, though unsurprising. And totally incompatible with sympoiesis.

I am striving for sympoiesis. I call it, "from-within-looking-among."

Let's phase-shift.

MODELS IN THE BAG.

"Sympoiesis" was originally coined by author and science and technology studies scholar Donna Haraway as an alternative to "autopoiesis," a term used across multiple fields to refer to a system capable of producing and maintaining itself by creating its own parts. In her book, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Haraway elaborates:

> Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means "making-with." Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. [...] That is the radical implication of sympoiesis. Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company. Sympoiesis enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it.[2]

In the context of Haraway's research, the term "sympoiesis" extends the idea of "autopoiesis" or self-making to include the various symbiotic, self-sufficient processes that contribute to the continuation, evolution, and sustenance of life. An entity that is sympoietic is a holobiont, which is, etymologically, an "entire being." It's important to note that "entire being" is not the same as an individual, but an entire *complex* of a being in space and time. You as a human being are a holobiont, host to a vast microbiota of bacteria on your skin and in your gut. Those hundreds of strains of bacteria are dead without you, and you are dead without them. This sympoiesis is contingent and dynamic, requiring specific sets of circumstances to come into being and to change over and over again, all of the time. You do not make yourself, and neither does anything else make itself– "being" is dependent on a web of relationships infinite yet locally fragile, occurring before a single cell has stitched you into yourself.

Semantics is important here because language creates the systems for which we ascribe meaning to our place in an Anthropocentric world. Scientific discoveries over the past century have given enough insight to understand that humans have a profound effect on ecology, but the mind frames that think in terms of units and competition are sorely limited when it comes to articulating symbiosis, collaborative entanglements, and microscopic worlding. There is a case, then, for a new framework rooted in the language of symbiogenesis,

[2]Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016. p. 58.

which relates to the cooperation between species in order to increase their survival. It's a powerful framework because it acknowledges symbiotic processes in the making of *anything*, from biological theory to political action to visual art to literature.

In other words: cultural productions are models, or places to work out possibilities and speculations, just as any other biological relationship.

You and I and everyone have been consuming such models for so long that it can be difficult to put a finger on the tangle in your neural history where you went from one-and-only to one-and-many.

> For me, I return to three possible knots in my life where I had to be worked by the model before I could, myself, put the model to work.

A PATTERN FOR READING

Model I: the part to do the thinking

(See first law of worlding: Nothing makes itself.)

It is 2006 and I am eight years old and my grandmother shares with me a clipping from her copy of *The Catholic Herald* after she sees me carrying around a paperback copy of Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass*. In it, the writer claims the book I have re-read twice already is "far more worthy of the bonfire than Harry [Potter]" because it has co-opted Catholic terminology and trifled with Judaeo-Christian theological concepts, all to effectively dismantle the building blocks for a future of evangelization in today's youth.[3]

If she had gotten to me before my first reading, there's a chance the fire and brimstone of that writer's assessment–that the *His Dark Materials* trilogy was "a kind of Luciferian enterprise"–might have stopped me in my tracks. But now, with my twice-re-read perspective, I find it all rather silly.

Because I am not thinking about a future of evangelization. I am thinking about a future where a religious and political body like Pullman's Magisterium seeks to control the freedom and independent-mindedness of children as they become young adults. I am thinking in horror about a version of this story where early on Lyra Belacqua is permanently wrenched apart from her Daemon, the physical embodiment of her human soul, stunting her physical, spiritual, and intellectual growth, and banishing all trace of wild, unabated, animistic joy from her life. I am thinking about the conversation Lyra has with Will in the third book, *The Amber Spyglass*, about the segregation the adult world has instilled between their bodies, spirits, and minds when contemplating visiting the world of the dead:

> "Could we really do that? Could we really go to the land of the dead? But–what part of us does that? Because daemons fade away when we die–I've seen them–and our bodies, well, they just stay in the grave and decay, don't they?"

[3] Caldecott, Leonie. "The Stuff of Nightmares." Catholic Herald, 1999.

> "Then there must be a third part. A different part."
>
> "You know," she said, full of excitement, "I think that must be true! Because I can think about my body and I can think about my daemon–so there must be another part, to do the thinking!"[4]

There is the body and there is the soul (the daemon) and then there is something else. A thinking, ruminating, responsive part that is essential to the nature of human beings, and that has been, in the world of *His Dark Materials*, systematically stamped out by the Magisterium and devoured by Spectres. While Pullman draws on Christianity's requirement that its followers believe in a trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, literary scholar and critic Lisa Hopkins posits that Pullman is really "[telling] his readers that they are a trinity." And more than that, that "humans are internally complete; they have no need to look outside themselves for a deity."[5] It is not so much that Lyra or Will or anyone else is, as Haraway might say, "autopoietic" or self-making. Rather, they are holistic–the various systems that construct them should be viewed as a whole, not merely as a collection of parts. If one looks at a holobiome as a sort of self-deity, that does not mean that there is no interaction between the unit and the world outside of it. All it means is that the tools for self-confrontation and invention are innate and inseparable from the whole. The part "to do the thinking" interacts with its other components in the context of prevailing environmental conditions rather than the individual parts. In the context of the world of *His Dark Materials*, a corrupt, theocratic governing body has made it its goal to isolate these parts so as to maintain control in an increasingly anthropocentric society.

A human model is either the tripartite or the body severed from its memory, seeking shallowly outside of itself, alive and many or dead and one.

But all that really matters is that it is 2006 and I am eight years old and I am thinking, thinking, thinking.

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[4] Pullman, Philip. *The Amber Spyglass*. Scholastic/David Fickling Books, 2000. p. 166

[5] Hopkins, Lisa. "Dyads or Triads?: His Dark Materials and the Structure of the Human." *His Dark Materials Illuminated: Critical Essays on Philip Pullman's Trilogy*. Ed. Millicent Lenz with Carole Scott. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005. p. 55

Model II: the thing and its shadow

(See second law of worlding: A model is worked, and it does work.)

It is 2016 and I am eighteen years old and I am only just now beginning to notice a pattern in the kinds of books I like to read. They're all looking-glass worlds, uncanny inversions of my own. Up until now, as I'm entering my first literature course in college, this has mostly meant fantasy and science fiction novels. Not just the worlds of Philip Pullman, but of Ursula K. Le Guin, Cornelia Funke, Octavia Butler, Jules Verne, Ray Bradbury.

But I have just read Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* for the first time and am struggling to describe how this profoundly grounded piece of domestic fiction makes me feel just as curious and boundless and self-reflective as any of my looking-glass worlds. I'm thinking it has something to do with the capacity for language. Something about the relationship between craving and having in the coming-of-age of Ruthie, a young girl grappling with the facts of her mother's suicide in the watery town of Fingerbone. On a nighttime canoe trip with her transient aunt, Sylvie, Ruthie makes the following observation:

> To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow. For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweetly as when one longs to taste it, and when is the taste refracted into so many hues and savors of ripeness and earth, and when do our senses know any thing so utterly as when we lack it? And here again is a foreshadowing–the world will be made whole. For to wish for a hand on one's hair is all but to feel it. So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again.[6]

As "a thing and its shadow," craving and having stalk each other, because the very act of wanting her deceased mother conjures her likeness in Ruthie's mind, and the very process of having that memory produces longing for more of what the possessed recollection imitates. Through sensory association, Ruthie creates multiple representations of a woman whom she didn't know nearly well enough in life; she craves after a fragmented knowledge, a perished and ever-changing likeness, and an irretrievable reality. But in her very longing, Ruthie's memories have allowed her to hold onto her mother as an "extraordinary" creature. How her mother lives on in Ruthie's mind is not how she was in life. Ruthie has sacrificed the mundane details and pieced together the

[6] Robinson, Marilynne. *Housekeeping.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980. p. 152

comforting fragments of recollection to create a version of her mother that can exist eternally and tangibly to assuage her grieving mind, in the space between craving and truly having.

This is a miniature cosmos. In the wet of Fingerbone I can observe how the revolving parts of competing and cooperating units create and sustain and break down crucial relationships and interconnections. This is a looking-glass world for my grief, for my sisterhoods, for my transience. Donna Haraway uses Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as an analogy to suggest that the models we choose to reproduce and reuse have a profound effect on how we think: "A model is like a miniature cosmos, in which a biologically curious Alice in Wonderland can have tea with the Red Queen and ask how this world works, even as she is worked by the complex-enough, simple-enough world."[7]

In *Housekeeping*, Ruthie's memory is the model. As her external life with Sylvie becomes more unreliable and chaotic, her internal self, in a bid for comfort, settles for accepting and even embracing the untruths implicit in collected memory. Even though memories are irretrievable in reality, they possess a certain degree of agency in their desire to salvage themselves in Ruthie's mind. The "incipient transfiguration," as Ruthie later calls it, hints at the developing nature of memory.

It is 2016 and I am eighteen years old and I am writing a literary analysis paper about memory, and though I only get a B, the model is already working. In everything, I see a thing and its shadow.

[7] Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016. p. 63.

Model III: the animal aspect

(See third law of worlding: We are compost, not posthuman.)

It is 2021 and I am twenty-three years old and I am reading like a writer about critters. In my nearly two decades of being a reader, I have never sought out to read 'like a writer.' Certainly, writing professors have given me this instruction multiple times over. But I didn't think writing essays for literature classes counted as in those cases I was given little option other than to consider writerly choices. A voracious reader I was; an active reader I was not. Whatever that distinction might mean. But I am in this MFA program now, and I feel a mounting pressure to develop a *voice*, a *thing*, a literary *lineage*. So I am reading and reading and reading and feeling like I have no place on these shelves until finally, I get to *Invisible Beasts: Tales of the Animals That Go Unseen Among Us* by Sharona Muir, and something clicks.

This is not a book, but a bestiary. Not a novel, but a net. An amateur naturalist, Sophie, has the ability to see invisible creatures, and writes in her field guide with tenderness and scientific precision about the beauty and complexity of small and large unseen living things. There are Common Invisible Beasts, Imperiled and Extinct Invisible Beasts, Rare Invisible Beasts, and more. There is the Couch Conch, which appears in bedrooms after nights of passion. "It's wonderful that mollusks, who don't care about us, can show us what our bodies express," writes Sophie. "But mollusks are full of lessons."[8] There is the cloudlike Oormz, which blankets Sophie to dispel melancholies and restores memories like "a bandage between your animal past, sadly forgotten, and your present."[9] There is Sophie's biologist sister, Evie, whose scientific insight grounds the mythical fieldnotes and provides real-world perspective on the mass extinction of species. There is Sophie's passion, pain, anticipation at losing these creatures, and her realization: "*Human beings are the most invisible beasts, because we do not see ourselves as beasts*. If we did, we would think and act differently. Instead of believing ourselves to be above animals, or separate from them, we would understand how every aspect of our lives—spiritual,

[8] Muir, Sharona. *Invisible Beasts: Tales of the Animals That Go Unseen Among Us*. Bellevue Literary Press, 2014. p. 23
[9] Muir, Sharona. *Invisible Beasts*. p. 171

psychological, social, political—is, also, an aspect of our being animals."[10] We need to see the beasts that we don't see—ourselves and others.

This is consilience, what Muir is writing. This is what was meant by biologist E.O. Wilson when he wrote about the literal 'jumping together' of knowledge by the linking of facts and fact-based theory across art, science, and the humanities to create a common groundwork of explanation, to build toward a more harmonious culture.[11] This is the animal aspect. This is what I implicitly strive to do, as a writer: write to see the beasts that I can not see.

What Muir does, what I wish I could do, is turn the lens onto the human aspect. The cephalopods and flatworms and crustaceans under Sophie's magnifying glass are not alien or entirely extinct; they make up the same "compost pile" that humans will inevitably join in detritus. The "chthonic ones" that Donna Haraway claims are inextricably involved in human life and death are the ancient and ever-persisting rank of earthbound creatures—the ahistorical, the tentacular, the nonvertebrate, the true terrans:

> Critters are at stake in each other in every mixing and turning of the terran compost pile. We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities. Philosophically and materially, I am a compostist, not a posthumanist. Beings—human and not—become with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in earthly worlding and unworlding. All of us must become more ontologically inventive and sensible within the bumptious holobiome that earth turns out to be, whether called Gaia or a Thousand Other Names.[12]

Thus, a humbling connection is drawn: we are not "posthuman;" rather, to be human is to be of the earth. Writing in the terms of posthumanity ignores "multispecies stories" that put us at stake with each other. I cannot afford to write off the other "biotic and abiotic powers" of the earth as passive, as distinct from myself. I must tell stories and pursue modes of communication that encapsulate this era of multispecies worlding and participate in sympoiesis—a collective creation, a "becoming-with."

It is 2021 and I am twenty-three years old and I am writing, writing, writing.

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[10] Muir, Sharona. *Invisible Beasts: Tales of the Animals That Go Unseen Among Us*. Bellevue Literary Press, 2014. p. 13.
[11] Wilson, E.O. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. Vintage Books, Random House, New York, 1998.
[12] Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016. p. 98.

KNOTS IN THE BAG.

Literary relationships are dependent on these knots on top of knots, infinite yet locally fragile, entangling one another before a single cell of story can stitch. I am thinking, I am remembering, I am writing. And if not all of these things at once, within-and-among each other, I am perspectivally challenged, I am lost without the pattern.

In different ways, at different points, Pullman, Robinson, Muir et al. have provided space for me to work out possibilities and speculations, to hone the perspective of light coming through my looking-glass world. Sometimes, I angle that beam of sun so that it sizzles the sister anthills of inferiority- and god-complex. Sometimes, it is enough to make the perspectival shift "from-above-looking-down" and "from-below-looking-out" to the sympoietic, all-fulfilling "from-within-looking-among."

And while perspective is locally fragile, it is first and foremost topological.

Similar to how the topology of environmentalism situates humans apart and above the environment, i.e. as operating in a global rather than a spherical lifeworld, the topology that a writer stretches, twists, and crumples to their word situates them to their looking-glass. In his essay, "Globes and Spheres: The Topology of Environmentalism," anthropologist Tim Ingold argues that "we do not belong to the world, neither partaking of its essence nor resonating to its cycles and rhythms. Rather, since our very humanity is seen to consist, in essence, in the transcendence of physical nature, it is the world that belongs to us."[13] Both ecocentric and anthropocentric conceptions of nature imagine humans on the outside-looking-in, an approach he flashily coins as "anthropocircumferentialism." In this pattern of worlding, the West situates itself externally to nature, viewing ourselves as aliens looking down on a globe that we can both observe and act upon. Instead, he suggests, we should turn to perspectives of dwelling-in that entrench humans in the natural world.

Language has this power to position humanity at the core of nature rather than at its edges.

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[13] Ingold, Tim. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill.* Routledege, 2011. p. 214

It is, perhaps, as Haraway says: "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories."[14] In this context, she is speaking of overhauling language as the primary thing that can guide us out of the current ecological disaster (which is only extended by the posthuman language of the ecomodernists that casts a 'veil' over the displaced environmental costs of climate change, further mystifying accountability for locally-felt consequences and anesthetizing meaningful political action on a global scale). But narrative itself exists in the synapses between the "knots," the "descriptions," the "ties." Fiction cannot do the job of translating "other worlds" unless it confronts relations with other relations, creating sympoiesis.

How we talk about ourselves and tell stories about our shared human history matters. The language of the Anthropocene assumes posthumanity and autopoiesis; it attempts to reflect the future onto the present as if human relations exist within a closed system, divorced from other landscapes, other lifeforms. Fiction can do the opposite: reflect the present reality onto an imagined future or past, thereby positioning the reader "from-within-looking-among" and presenting humans as subject to their surroundings. When you are reading sympoietically, you are seeing the story not just for what it contains but for the stitches between the scraps.

When you are writing sympoietically, you are seeing the world not just for what it is but for the pattern pieces. Writing sympoietically can be approached with the same credo that Ursula K. Le Guin held in her speculative writing: that fiction presents the future as a metaphor, reveals the nonhuman as an historical agent, and imagines technology as a tool of self-confrontation. As previously described, Le Guin utilizes her "carrier bag theory of fiction." The making-with and becoming-with of fiction allows me to fill those in-between spaces and load up my "carrier bag." I view the contents of these "carrier bags" as consisting of "a web of connections infinite but locally fragile." This web includes and classifies what would be seen only as natural resources as "fellow beings—kinfolk."[15] And, ultimately, the thematic content of my stories both informs and

[14] Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016. p. 12.
[15] Le Guin, Ursula K., and Donna Jeanne Haraway. *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. IGNOTA Books, 2019. pp. 15-16.

is shaped by my approach to writing: storying that prioritizes dethroning humanity from the insular and centermost seat of history. Not books, but bestiaries. Not novels, but nets.

Donna Haraway advocates for more stories that act as "capacious bags for collecting, carrying, and telling the stuff of living."[16] She directly references Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* and Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Sower* as models of such bags. And certainly with my examples of Pullman and Robinson and Muir, a state of sympoiesis is reached in the synapses between textures of life, emic imagery, physical details, depictions of nature, and imaginings of living and dying. The "becoming-with" that is so crucial for developing new modes of thinking about concepts such as human nature and memory and extinction ripens when relations between the abiotic and the biotic are held against each other, as if in a "carrier bag."

> The perspective is coming from inside the bag.

[16] Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016. p. 43.

I return to the simple pattern of the things that *I* must contain, before I write. But I suffer from object impermanence and forget too often, too quickly. And that's okay; every now and then, it's necessary to forget. Because when

> you are researching, you might as well be underwater. the marianas of wikipedia, where the tempting blue of reference links sucks you in, fingers-first with the sources. you are not swimming in a vacuum but a trench, and here the floating exigencies matter, environs and materialities and histories and epistemologies and affects. and everything is equal, and everything is logging your lungs, and everything is dark and wet on the page. your gills closed up millions of years ago with the tiktaalik and this shit is drowning you.

or, not so alternatively,

> you are researching and you are drying up. these straws of credibility, of motivation, to institutions and infrastructures, from text to test, suck the moisture out of your story. you rewrite the same lines until they are scratchy on the tongue. everything is reinforced. no gaps, no inlets, no rockpools where strangeness can grow, neither mesoglea nor cerata nor papulae. instead, what you write is gasping. your lips peel; the page curls.

It may matter what knots knot knots, what contexts go into writing, what research informs worlds, but sympoiesis is not a tangle. It is a net. Avoiding overwhelmed or clinical prose requires dismantling the scaffolding. Poking a finger through the snarls and forgetting some of the knowledge. Otherwise, how can a story with a human pulse leak through? As I mentioned earlier, patterns are not the same as how-tos. Patterns are shapes. Patterns glow.

"Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged," Virginia Woolf says. "Life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end." The writer's task is not to drown in the details of materiality, but "to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed

spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible."[17]

I am striving for a net, for a carrier bag, for a semi-transparent envelope, for a pattern that light filters through.

Let's forget everything else.

[17] Woolf, Virginia. "Modern Fiction". *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Twentieth Century and Beyond.* Ed. Joseph Black. 2006. p. 227.

A PATTERN FOR FORGETTING

I. Nothing makes itself: there is the body and there is the soul and then there is something else. those strangers, their ruminating sweetness, take their place in your lungs until you are breathing every syllable, every lyric, every shadow and spore and particle of dust.

II. A model is worked, and it does work: in everything, you see a thing and its shadow. a host and its symbiont. a memory and its transfiguration. you are the biome, but you are also dwelling-in the biome, subject to its language, its lore, its encroaching algae and lakewater.

III. We are compost, not posthuman: to grasp your nature, you need to see the beasts that others don't see. to become ontologically inventive with yourself. chthonic, not epochal. first detritus, then dethroned. you are the invisible beast, de-camouflaging, bark shedding to reveal prismatic scales. a mirror.

It's simple. Everything is reflecting. Trace what bounces off you. Write the lines of bending light.

MORE NET-BAGS and LOOKING GLASSES

The following are works by novelists and essayists that were not directly referenced here, but that nonetheless have filled up my carrier bags and provided reflections, iterations, and inversions that have become patently and indivisibly knotted-up in my own writing and thinking.

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