Ephemera

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Abstract
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Disciplines
Creative Writing

Comments
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It’s a strange feeling to go downstairs during an intense July storm just to unplug the computer and notice that the beige carpet in the northeast corner of the room has darkened to a wet triangle. Stranger still, to watch the stain spread to shades of taupe and dirty chocolate in the next few minutes, moving under the desk, toward the floor lamp and file cabinets.

I don’t begrudge water; it can go wherever it wants, but even at that moment, it struck me as wrong. Water should not be here, in the house, bypassing the maze of foundation walls and footings that architects designed centuries ago to keep the inside in and the outside out.

And even as I turned and closed the door behind me, I knew it was irrational to think that maybe I didn’t need to bother my fiancé with this information—that this lovely ten-year-old house with vaulted ceilings and wood floors that we’d poured all of our savings into had sprung a leak.

He was out in the flash flood street anyway trying to clear the woodchips from the storm drains. We’d watched them flow into the streets from our neighbors’ yards moments earlier. He was standing in thigh high water flailing away with a garden rake as puffs of lightning flashed and popped around him. Despite his efforts, the flood water had advanced halfway up the lawn.

When you buy property, you stake a claim to a small spot on earth. You trim, prune, and beautify. You fortify and defend. If the usual intruders try to enter—ants, mice, crickets, thieves—fixes can be found. But when 3.18 inches of rain falls in 23 minutes in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and you are (as we found out later from the Drain Commissioner) the lowest and last house to drain out of the watershed, plus your property has the poor taste to sit on a clay seam, well then you’re just screwed. Because once water has found its way into your house, it will always remember you. It will always find a way in.

The downstate part of Michigan is shaped like a human palm. Sometimes
if you ask Michiganders where they’re from, they’ll look around, as if searching for a map or a piece of paper, then they’ll just give up and raise their right hand as if swearing an oath and point to the spot on their palm where their town is located. Detroit, for instance, is in the eastern part of the state, close to the crook of the thumb. My fiancé’s house is in the heel of the palm, in Kalamazoo, in a direct line below the little finger.

The upper peninsula of Michigan also resembles a human palm, which people will sometimes demonstrate by hovering their other hand horizontally like a cumulus cloud over the vertical downstate palm. A few years ago, some guy made millions of dollars when he had the ingenious idea to make oven mitts with the upstate and downstate maps of Michigan printed on each hand. I’m not sure what became of him—the oven mitt millionaire—but I’ve wondered if he has since retired to gentler climes, as Robert James Waller did after he wrote *The Bridges of Madison County*, then quit his job as a college professor in Iowa and retired to a spacious ranch in Texas.

Now that I spend part of the year in Michigan in a house that takes in water, I’ve observed that the state is also a peninsula, surrounded on three sides by the Great Lakes, which is why Michigan is sometimes called The Fourth Coast.

If not for dependable Ohio and a few stubborn sand-dune miles of Indiana, Michigan would be an island, floating untethered like a lily pad in the filmy marsh upon which the state undoubtedly rests.

Lately I’ve been making the mistake of watching The History Channel, or, as I like to call it—Channel Countdown 2012. It was better when they stuck to real history like the hydrological marvels of Roman engineering, or even speculative history, like the search for Sasquatch across centuries and continents. But now The History Channel only seems intent on reporting the end of the world, based on the predictions of Nostradamus and the Mayan calendar.

It’s unsettling to watch some sober plate tectonic scientist from UC Berkeley speculate on how it might unfold, accompanied by animated graphics to simulate how the earth’s crust is like an orange peel, and how
it could someday, perhaps someday soon (and almost certainly has done so several times in the planet's history) just rotate and rearrange itself over the molten core of the earth, landing Florida in Antarctica, Moscow in Idaho, Beijing in the Arctic Circle.

My first impulse a few years ago when I heard the dire predictions for 2012, was to say, "My god, I have to finish my book projects!" Then it dawned on me, "Wait, if the world is going to end, it doesn't matter if I finish my books, because no one will be around to read them." So we may as well spend what short time we have hanging out with friends, cooking, making love, drinking wine, as the Epicureans advised us to do so many centuries ago.

I've decided if the end of the world comes, I'm going as fast as I can, not to my fiancé's house in the floating palm of Michigan where I spend my summers, or even to Iowa where I live and work during the school year. As solid seeming as it appears, Iowa sits atop a mid-continent rift buried deep in the bedrock, a billion-year-old tectonic scar that stretches from Lake Superior to Kansas.

Instead, I'm running back to my home state of North Dakota, to the terra firma of my childhood, where I'm convinced nothing bad can happen. (Besides I've seen my brother's gun collection). Or I'm going to Greece, where people have already demonstrated they can hang onto the cliffs and hillsides like billy goats for millennia and survive.

The novel I'm writing about Greece is narrated from the perspective of an outsider. The idea first came to me in 1998 after I returned from my first trip to Athens and Corfu with my then-husband, who is Greek-American, and whose maternal and paternal grandparents immigrated to the United States in the 1940s from different parts of Greece.

Upon our return, after our rolls of film were developed, I was surprised to discover that I had taken very few pictures of people—not the dozens of his friendly relatives who had appeared at the hotel each day in exponentially multiplying numbers. I had not taken pictures of the beautiful tables of food they prepared for us, which we ate in their marble-floored dining rooms or in the seaside cafes around the islands that they took us to, where we talked and
laughed and drank wine as the sun dropped like an orange ball extinguishing itself into the Ionian.

Nor had I photographed the narrow cobbled streets we drove through to get to those cafes, or the little shops full of t-shirts and curios we walked past, or the white sandy beaches and misty harbors with sailboats, not even the Venetian forts overlooking the port or the tan hills in the distance.

Instead, I had shot roll after roll of olive trees, groves of them, up and down the terraced landscapes—each tree flashing green then silver in the wind, each one looking so unique and wizened, so human-looking, I suppose, that it must have felt when I came upon them, that I was seeing old friends who must be remembered with a photograph.

In Greece, people will sometimes say, “This olive tree was alive at the time of Christ,” or “This tree witnessed the fall of the Roman Empire,” but it’s still uncertain exactly how old olive trees can live to be. On the island of Crete, there’s evidence on the basis of tree ring analysis of a 2,000 year old olive tree with suspicion that it’s much older. Several olive trees in the Middle East and Mediterranean (around Greece and in Croatia, Italy, Palestine, and Israel) have been identified as 2,000 years or older. One tree in west Athens is referred to as “Plato’s olive tree,” because it’s believed to mark the last vestiges of a grove where Plato’s Academy stood 2,400 years ago. Olive trees were mentioned in Homer and by Pliny the Elder.

As an American, it’s hard for me to think in these long timescapes, but evidence of the ancient is everywhere present in modern-day Greece. Traveling around, it’s not unusual for someone to point to an opening in a rock face and say, “See, right there, that’s the cave where Zeus was reared,” or “That’s where Persephone was dragged down into Hades.”

Really, you want to say, God, I thought that was myth?

On my first trip to Greece, we were rushed around the island of Corfu by my husband’s relatives. Everyone needed to be satisfied that we had been shown the expected sites—the gaudy Achilleion Palace built by Emperor Franz Josef for his wife, and the spare sarcophagus of St. Spyridon in Corfu Town.
The haste with which we were dispatched, signaled to us that his relatives had done this a million times. They even knew the best places for us to pose—“Here, stand here”—they’d prop us in front of a rocky outcropping, a blooming trellis of bougainvillea, a marble statue. Click, click.

“Good.” They’d grab us by the shoulders. “Now, let’s go eat.”

Then they drove us to Palaiokastritsa, a headland on the western shore of the island of Corfu with a monastery and a cliff overlooking a bay that had the most aquamarine water I had ever seen, and as I was looking down upon the water in stunned silence, my husband’s cousin, Nick, pointed to a tiny island of rock just yards off the coast.

“Do you remember how the Phaeacians helped Odysseus return to Ithaca?” he asked.

I combed through my dim memories of The Odyssey, then ventured a guess. “They showered him with gifts, then sailed him home?”

“Yes,” he said. “Then Poseidon punished them by changing the ship and its sailors to stone.”

Oh sure, I nodded, as if I’d recalled these details all along.

“Well?” he said, and pointed a crooked finger expectantly at the tiny rock island. “That’s it—right there. That’s the stone boat.”

Wow, really, I thought that was myth?

In February of 1956, around the time I was conceived in a farmhouse on a hill in the high plains of North Dakota, the temperature in the Mediterranean fell to an unprecedented low of -7 degrees Celsius, causing a winter kill in olive groves around the region considered to be “the worst calamity since record-keeping began in 1739.” In his book, Olives, Mort Rosenblum reports that “the trunks of olive trees froze and exploded.” Ancient family groves were decimated. Millions of olive trees perished. Even though this catastrophe coincided with the event of my conception, I’m happy to report that I was not held responsible.

But maybe this is why these two places—North Dakota and Greece—are entwined inside me in ways I can’t yet explain. Maybe this is why, when I
was on the island of Lesvos during the winter of 2002 to research olive groves and work on my novel set in Greece, I spent each day feverishly writing—not about Greece, but about my home state of North Dakota. Even at the time, it made no sense to me, as I sat in my rented studio tucked into the steep hillside in Molyvos with views out the window near my writing desk overlooking the terra cotta roofs descending down the mountainside to a blue patch of the Aegean. Through the other window in the far distance was the feathered silhouette of Mount Lepetimnos, and all I could think and write about was the cold, flat austere beauty of North Dakota.

Traveling in Greece, I've been fascinated by the guidebook entries for each island, the running summary of the waves of oppressors who have vanquished the very ground upon which you are now standing. The tour guide will point to the evidence of the conquerors in the local architecture, the vestiges of city walls, the location of the moat, the style of construction of the stone streets, the fortifications on the hillside.

Each in their own time the Romans, Venetians, Ottoman, and in the last century the Turks, Germans, and Italians have taken their turns colonizing the place, but here's the thing that gives me hope: it's the Greeks, still there, still pointing to the architectural remnants, ruins, and battlements.

And it is olive trees that most remind me that things go on beyond the small measure of a human life—the vegetative equivalent of long geological time, the reason that some people visit gorges and canyons or mountain ranges, to feel inspired by the magnitude.

When you come into the presence of sacred places, N. Scott Momaday writes, “You touch the pulse of the living planet. You feel its breath upon you. You become one with a spirit that pervades geologic time, that indeed confounds time and space.” Momaday writes, “When I stand on the edge of Monument Valley and behold the great red and blue and purple monoliths floating away in the distance, I have the certain sense that I see beyond time. There the earth lies in eternity.”

So I spend summers now in a house in Michigan that has two sump
pumps—one on the southeast corner and one in the northwest corner. We call it The Boathouse. I don’t imagine we’ll ever be able to sell it. Sometimes we talk to our neighbors over the fence and declare in voices sounding like Ma and Pa Kettle, “Nosiree, Bob, we’re not leaving. We’ll defend this clay seam ’til we die.”

To fix the water problem, we had to hire a crew to come in and jackhammer out the interior perimeter of the basement foundation so that the crew could lay a drain tile system underneath the house and install the sumps. After the pipes were laid and fixed in place, they cemented the basement floor back over so that aside from a bit of discoloration in the concrete, you’d never notice. But it’s alarming to have crews in your basement for three days with jackhammers billowing great clouds of gypsum upstairs, then to watch them lug huge chunks of your foundation up the staircase and out to the dump truck.

And it’s disconcerting after the crew leaves for the day to go downstairs and catch a glimpse of the very earth that rests under your house. It’s something you think you should never see, maybe like seeing the mass of gray matter inside your skull while watching your own brain surgery on closed-circuit television.

So the drains are installed now under the foundation, capturing the water that seeps around the crease of the footings, and the pipes carry the water to the sumps, which spit it back out of the house in one efficient flush into the yard. We had backup batteries installed on the sump pumps as a fail-safe, so if the power goes out they will continue to function.

It only took us two years and about $20,000 to figure all this out. Still, when it rains we get twitchy. We stick close to home. We spend way too much time watching The Weather Channel.

For extra peace of mind, last year for Father’s Day, I bought my fiancé a gas generator large enough to power a small city. So if the power goes out (which it frequently does in Michigan) and the backup batteries fail, we can always fire up the generator which is louder than a chopped-out Harley. Tom rolls it out on the driveway and fires it up for a few minutes each month.
When he comes back inside, he says, “Our neighbors must hate us.”

I remember the day we stood in the aisle of Home Depot with all the other bearded and tattooed Michiganders who were shopping for generators that weekend. “We’re preparing for the end times,” we kept saying, as a joke. You could tell it didn’t seem funny to anyone else.

Olive groves are not planted by short-sighted people. Depending upon the species, olive trees take from seven to seventeen years to bear first fruit. Some olive trees bear fruit for hundreds of years. The investment is in a future one is not likely to live to enjoy.

The entire history of the development of Mediterranean cultures has been tied by ethno-botanists to the spread of the olive tree. In Prospero’s Cell: A Guide to the Landscape and Manners of the Island of Corfu, Lawrence Durrell notes that “the whole Mediterranean—the sculptures, the palms, the gold beads, the bearded heroes, the wine, the ideas, the ships, the moonlight, the winged gorgons, the bronze men, the philosophers—all of it seems to rise in the sour, pungent taste of these black olives between the teeth.” It is a “taste older than meat, older than wine,” Durrell writes, “a taste as old as cold water.”

In the origin story of the city of Athens, a competition is held between Athena and Poseidon for the right as protector of the city. Each god offered a gift—Poseidon struck his trident on the ground and created a spring; Athena threw a spear from which an olive tree grew. The tree won the favor of the king, and so, fortunately, the city is called Athens and not Poseidonia.

The fruits of the olive tree can be tied to every human need, from physical to spiritual—as an oil for heating and cooking as well as to light votive-offering lamps; as an emollient for the skin. It took humans a relatively long time to figure out how to use olives as a food supply, but the discovery was significant. Scholars theorize that Alexander the Great was able to march and conquer lands at such great distances in part because the curing of olives provided his armies with a portable food supply.

At one time, Greek infants were given an olive branch at birth; athletes were awarded olive branches and an amphora of olive oil for success in
competition. Olives and olive trees are mentioned over thirty times in the Bible—most notably in Genesis 8:11, in the story of the Great Flood: “When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth.” In this story, as in most stories about olives and olive trees, the leaf serves as irrefutable proof of hospitable climate, the possibilities for habitation.

“Wittgenstein says that when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it,” Elaine Scarry observes in On Beauty and Being Just. In this way, beauty “brings copies of itself into being.” The impulse to reproduce beauty is likely tied to biological imperative—“beauty prompts a copy of itself”—but it extends, Scarry argues, to all forms of beauty: flora, fauna, landscape.

In the case of Greece, which tempts writers and artists with its beauty, it also eludes them, because Greece cannot be reduced to broad strokes—a glass of ouzo on a white terrace, some Rembetiko music, and the tinkle of a goat’s bell in the distance. The closer you look, the more its complexities mushroom. The artist is doomed to fail, which is why we have enough paintings of sunlit beaches and sailboats on the Aegean and enough books about flings with dark-haired men and the-summer-of-my-Greek-Taverna to last an eternity, or at least until 2012.

As an artist who wishes to write a narrative about this place I have come to love, I fear this guarantee of failure, even before I’ve begun. The main character in my novel is a stranger and not expected to be conversant in the language, religion, botany, myths, geology, geography, history and politics of the place; yet, I must know them. And there’s another problem—cultural theft. Greece is a place from which much has been stolen.

I have stood in the new Acropolis Museum in Athens under the temporary frieze created by architect, Bernard Tschumi, that highlights the travesty of the missing Elgin Marbles—more than half of the Parthenon frieze, the metopes and pediments that Lord Elgin claimed as an archeological treasure for the British Museum two centuries ago when he served as British
ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, and which the Greeks have requested and demanded countless times to be returned to Athens.

The Acropolis Museum display, described in a New York Times article by Michael Kimmelman as a “$200 million, 226,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art rebuttal to Britain’s argument” wraps around the top floor of the museum in a room otherwise filled with light. In the Acropolis Museum display, one can circle the frieze and see the original fragments—the ones Lord Elgin chose for whatever reason to leave behind. These weathered fragments of the original marble are installed in the permanent frieze to duplicate the way it would have looked when mounted on the Parthenon. In the empty spaces where the stolen sections belong, the museum has installed rough and chalky white plaster replicas of the originals from the British Museum that painfully demonstrate their absence and their rightful place.

If you are a person of conscience, to circle that room for any amount of time, to mingle with Greeks as they circle and look up at where the marble ends and the plaster begins, is to feel the weight of the hand of power on you, to feel the audacity of theft that imperialism allows and perpetuates. It causes one to want to incite violence. It also causes a confusion to rise up in me—helplessness, then guilt and anger, then complicity. I begin to worry in new ways about my small project, which lays its own unrightful claim to the riches of Greece. I study and worry, study and worry. Will I ever develop enough fluency in the place to earn a right to finish my novel set in Greece?

To calm myself, I return to the subject of olive trees: If you grew up on an island in Greece, let’s say Lesvos, in a house that bordered an olive grove. Let’s not say it’s an ancient grove. Let’s say it’s four hundred years old, conservatively. And if you had picked olives each year and your parents had picked olives from that same grove, and had cooked with the oil, and their parents had picked from the grove and made oil and used the oil for cooking and for lamps and as an emollient, and if you assumed or knew for certain that their parents and their parents and their parents, going back those four hundred years, conservatively, had done the same—then how would that shape the way you felt about the house and the grove, about the village down the side of the hill, and about the people you met on that path each day?
And let's just say there arose some dispute over the ownership of that olive
grove, because a place that has spawned so many generations will naturally
have to cast off members to preserve equilibrium, to send them to the city or
to other countries. And so let's say one of those disgruntled cast-off family
members decides to circle back home and take a torch to the grove of olive
trees, so that the land can be cleared and be made available for lucrative sale
to Germans or Dutch retirees or for development as a resort for tourists.

If this were to happen in a wheat field or corn field even on a Midwestern
Century Farm in the United States, the offense would be serious, but it might
be recoverable. But if it happens to a four hundred year old olive grove, what
is the equivalent seriousness of the crime committed against the land and the
family? I don't know these answers, but they are questions that writing the
novel is making me ask.

Geologists tell us that the two primary shapers of landscape are wind and
water. I was shaped by a flat, land-locked place. Windy and recently glaciated,
it was devoid of water. Sometimes I think that the flood water in the floating
palm of Michigan was trying to school me, to teach me something about
itself when it came in the basement.

And if I'd only paid attention, rather than worrying so much about the
carpet and the collection of junk in cardboard boxes that I was too lazy and
noncommittal to throw away, I may have learned enough to write about
it, would have finished the novel already, and the water would have gone
elsewhere—into the street, into the storm drains, into another neighbor's
basement, into the river beds, on its way to Lake Michigan.

And now it's 2012 already, and I can just imagine that big blue water bag
of the lake bulging and breaking, ready to submerge the state of Michigan
once and for all. Or I can imagine the big seamy gorge of the Mississippi
River, the way it could split the continent down the center if the earth's crust
decided to shrug us off a bit, and it gets me wondering what the true purpose
of all this scholarly activity is. These books we compose, and the thousands of
hours we invest in the writing and reading of them. What is their value when
compared to the true currency of another day on earth, another twenty-four
hours to be healthy and alive. To breathe, to sing, to eat, kiss, make love.

These utterances, this breath that flows through the vessels of our bodies shaped into words and songs, into chants and prayers, curses and gossip that we convert to scribblings, to something we imagine might stay put—what does it all amount to? And who will ever care to remember it, ever remember to read it?

A horse can live to be forty; a camel, fifty. A queen bee might get five good years, while a worker bee is lucky to have one. The Amazon parrot can make it to one hundred years, and the Galapagos land tortoise can live 190 plus, under optimal conditions. An elephant has about forty years; an American alligator, fifty-six.

And Athena’s tree from mythic time, the one that grew out of the spear she threw to defeat Poseidon and earn the honor of namesake of Athens. It was reputed to have lived for thousands of years by the temple of Pandrosus near the Parthenon. During the Persian Wars, after Xerxes defeated Athens in 480 BC and ordered the city to be razed, all that remained of Athena's tree was a blackened stump. Yet Herodotus claims that soon after, a green shoot sprang from the dead stump out of which grew an olive tree that survived to the second century AD—demonstrating the promise of generation and regeneration even after great catastrophe.

What do humans get? One irreplaceable unit of time, averaged out between genders in the US, likely to last about 77.9 years. We are fragile creatures, short in our time on earth, especially when matched against the fierce power of the cosmologies, the long temporal landscapes, and the rougher geologies of the planet.

This ephemeral life. Just when it starts to get really interesting, that’s when it becomes clear that someday, perhaps someday soon, we will have to close our eyes and look no more upon it—this awful beauty of the world.
The poems enact a sense of restlessness, of high-speed chases, traversing both physical and psychological landscapes, and taking the reader into a world where “Hope Street” can exist alongside prisons, cellars, and empty windows. People and their environments impose themselves on each other and the poems never allow for easy conclusions as to which force is more destructive. Judson’s muscular language pays attention to the minutiae we take for granted, from upturned buckets and dabs of jelly, to “an older man pumping gas into a tiny blue car.” While commanding its own careful rhythms, the poems invite readers to forget simplistic distinctions between prose and verse, opting instead for a form that is malleable, seemingly chaotic and improvisatory yet methodical and deliberate. Here, the world is often rendered as an uneasy place where an inmate’s ingenuity reveals the lack of humanity afforded to him, where cattle die of blood lost to mosquitoes, and where “all of us without sin” are reminded that “we are all being driven into time.”

Note: Don Judson’s poems will appear in landscape format to preserve their formatting.