

what is eternity?

by + and Adam Gottlieb

moving

my father told me that until your mother passes, you will never understand
i feel like that is important to this question
my mother, is like my life itself
sometimes, despite my best efforts, i still mutter at my lifeline, mother earth
take her for granted in this dream
tell her to do better
with mental chains around my neck
i think it's shame
life is either too short or too long for shame
for me not to meet my mother's eyes
as i would the daytime sky
i want her to see stars
i want to be inside her forevermore
i never want either of us to die
i want us to be so one with life
that when death begins us again
i am her womb as she is mine
eternity...

Still Moving

my mother is her mother's daughter
– poeta –

mira –
outside my window, the magnolia tree
in the front yard is in explosive bloom
with white petals – many already on the ground
(they last only a week of the year)

that tree has barely any right to be alive;
it's hollow all through the inside
& half completely dead --
leaning like it's being blown over...

...it is May
the month of my mother's birthday,
and her mother's death
one year ago, May 12.

(that summer, a red cardinal moved
into our yard, & mom
said she thought it was grandma,
who always loved to sing)

from my mother, i have learned
to notice beautiful things:
daffodils, a little girl in a dress,
sky through violet branches –

"there's so much beauty," she says.
"you can pass through life without seeing it --
the trick is to see it."

she learned this from her mother, a noticer too,
who in her dementia began noticing
the most random things:
a piece of granite, an unimpressive pebble, a stick
(she was more a child every day)

now i always make a point
to smell the magnolia
when i pass it, coming or going...

from my sister, who is a dancer,
i have learned that everything is moving
always, always moving...

so i pause to smell the white magnolia flowers --
to honor every blessed second of an impermanent
life -- the tree's or mine --

(still,
in poetry i find
worlds out of time
where chaos crystallizes
into fiction
& rhyme)

my mother is a magnolia tree
mi abuela, a cardinal

(the Universe is always moving...

i would like to live that way --
& be more like a child every day)

feedback loop

he said today is my birthday
he said buddy he said brother
and if i had believed him at the time i would have hugged him
had written a note to myself earlier today to follow my intuition swiftly
so when he asked me if i was ready to accept jesus into my life ask my lord and savior
the intuition that told me to stay awake
to ask him when he got saved
that told me to watch his eyes with my heart as his did mine
told me to not hug him
if i could, i would
but i didn't believe
i stood at my terminal,
thinking about writing this
thinking about the prayer circle
hand in hand with sobriety
thinking about the stories
of sudden flashes
my story
of a sudden flash
in the snow
on the bus
all white
no fear
everyone
everywhere
and god
inside me
god
with me
emanuel
my father and mother
saw it on rolling credits
and knew
you should see people's smile
when i say it
you should see people's smile
when i say it
i would smile back and say
"i know."
i know.
there is ringing
off the walls
and containers
through the space
of this place
of work

it's her laugh
sometimes a guttural
often a siren of joy
going up into the air
a work
of fire
i've wondered if it was fake
a void mannered to beg for attention
i could ask others
but what would they know
thanks to daymon
and the eyes behind his frame
i choose to believe
in jesus, yes
in god, yes
in magnolias, yes
in my father, yes
in the ying yang twins, yes
in a place
where people eat together
in warmth

La Casa de Gottlieb

my house had no religion, really,
but food & family —
call it Home, or Love.

warm loaves from the breadmaker,
chocolate chip pancakes on Sundays,
the rush of warmth entering the house
on a winter day in Chicago
to the smell of pasta on the stove —
that was church.

& the parties ending in salsa dancing,
& the pilgrimage to Grandma & Grandpa's house
in Michigan, where, upon arrival, we would run
from the car through the cold air that smelled of pine
past the magical light emanating from the windows,
to the door, which would open to reveal Grandma
in her nightgown. we would step inside & hug her —
her clothes always smelled of mothballs —

that was God.
the most comforting smell in the world.

(& Grandma's cream of wheat in the mornings,
& Grandpa playing piano, & singing, singing)...

& still, on Thanksgiving, the High Holiday,
the gate will swing a hundred times,
(shrill & blessed as Tibetan chimes)
& the relish tray will be piled with olives & pickles
(offerings to the ancestors),

& we will eat, & drink,
& talk, tell stories,
laugh, & laugh
& laugh, remember,
sing & dance & cry
& dance, & dance —

& dance, O Lord,
we'll Dance!

1

if i become a holy book
a calendar of lessons
something for you to believe in
while dying
after killing
will you take me with you across the world
will you open me in the morning
can you imagine how god waits?
i imagine leaves dancing suggestively in front of a smile
if it can be said
that eternity waits
or that a prophecy was ever not already true
i will wait for you
breath held,
eyes open,
smiling

“The Day That Was The Day Has Been Night”

“To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.”

- William Blake, “Auguries of Innocence”

"I am perpetually awaiting
a rebirth of wonder"

- Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "I Am Waiting"

"El día que fue el día, era noche."

- Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, "Communiqué from the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee, General Command of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation of Mexico, (EZLN)" December, 21, 2012.

Is a prophecy ever not already true?
Is waiting a passive act?
How do we know the sun will rise again?

Do we have free will,
or is everything (including this)
written in our stars, or DNA?

Why do we tell stories?
Why do we dream?

Why does history repeat?

Who is Subcomandante Marcos?
What is the meaning of the Mayan Calendar?

Why is the world so fucked?
How could God or karma allow these wars?
These genocides? This fascist state?
How is there so little of our precious planet left?
How did it come to this?

When will there be clean water? When free food?
When will the dignity of all matter to the few?

& what is my role? What is my purpose?
& how many lifetimes do I have to work for it?

...What is Eternity?

something simple, circular,

some thing

like a drop, or sea, of rain

it's raining as i write this
from my home in Chicago,
in August, outside my window,

(fierce lullaby...)

it is raining harder
on the morning of the 2012 winter solstice,
where i am in Chiapas
(in the mountains of the Mexican southeast),

where i walk silently, in the dark before the dawn,
with three good friends
through the rain (no umbrellas),
barefoot (pilgrims) over rocks,
& every cold, hard step is a prayer
for peace –

like this we walk
to the ancient temples
where (i swear) i feel the air

electrify with waking spirits

whispering among the pyramids,
(having slept for over 5,000 years
in preparation for this

exact moment

when the Earth aligns
with the center of the galaxy...)

& we are here –

for just a moment,
until we are found & escorted out
by a guard named Angel, with a large gun,
because, you see, the “park” hasn’t opened yet –
we snuck in without even realizing –

so we climb in the back
of the official pick-up truck with Angel.

the ride feels long, and somehow wrong,
these officers guarding temples
from pilgrims

(but when we arrive at the checkpoint,
a dozen more are there,
faces barely visible in the pre-dawn light,
and little by little they gather, more,
and march up the guards...

while we, our little company, walk against the flow,
having heard that the Mayan family we know
is holding ceremony
in the woods

outside a nearby tourist campsite...

no, not even they are allowed to be in their own temple
on this most sacred day)

&

at the same time

(though we don't know it yet)

30,000 people are marching in silence
through the streets of six nearby towns
(one of which is Palenque, where we are),
30,000 men, women & children
walk in silence, wearing black ski masks

(keep silence to make themselves heard,
cover their faces to make themselves seen),

indigenous people of México march, silently
(while the people of Chiapas cheer them on),

to demand the justice & peace that has
been denied them for 500 years...

(& this, I think, is a clue.
because it is as if the ancients knew

that we would be there, at the temples,
& the Zapatistas in the streets...)

The next day it is the cover of the paper:

“RESURGE EL EZLN”

& in that paper (now beside the altar near my bed)
there is a message from Subcomandante Marcos,
(a man in exile, thought by many to be dead)
which reads:

¿ESCUCHARON?

Es el sonido de su mundo derrumbándose.

Es el del nuestro resurgiendo.

El día que fue el día, era noche.

Y noche será el día que será el día.

¡DEMOCRACIA!

¡LIBERTAD!

¡JUSTICIA!

This message came from a man with no face,
but a mask, to mean, every face:

yours, mine, & the face of every human

who has ever struggled to be such
in every time & place...

*

And an astronomer said, "Master, what of Time?"

And he answered:

You would measure time the measureless and the
immeasurable.

You would adjust your conduct and even direct the
course of your spirit according to hours and seasons.

Of time you would make a stream upon whose bank you
would sit and watch its flowing.

Yet the timeless in you is aware of life's timelessness,
And knows that yesterday is but today's memory and
tomorrow is today's dream.

And that that which sings and contemplates in you is still
dwelling within the bounds of that first moment which
scattered the stars into space.

*

now it is a different day,
& Manny has been waiting for this poem
for two months
& twenty-seven days...

patiently waiting,

like a seed, for rain,
or a frog, for flies,

like the 17-year cicadas in the ground,
or the Zapatistas in the jungle mountains,

like the sun, to rise...

*

now it is another day
& i am on a Metra train
on my way to teach a poetry workshop,
reading an essay by Subcomandante Marcos
called "A Storm and a Prophecy,"
written in 1992,
citing statistics from 1989
(the year I was born)
when (i have just learned)

Chiapas is the poorest state in México,
where, at the elementary school level,
72 out of 100 children don't finish the first grade,
& out of the 16,058 classrooms, only 96 are in indigenous zones,
where 1.5 million people have no medical services at their disposal,
where there are .2 clinics for every 1,000 inhabitants,
& other ridiculous statistics
like the fact that there are only .3 hospital beds for every 1,000 inhabitants,
yet 7 hotel rooms for every 1,000 tourists

(...i am one of those tourists, in one of those hotel rooms.)

the seats in the top deck of this Metra train face inward,
toward the opposite windows. rolling by my vision are...

suburbs:
strip malls, condos,
traffic jams on the highway (it is rush hour),
& endless cars in parking lots,

now, a pond,

now an auto body shop, a warehouse, a construction site,
endless broken cars in a junkyard for cars...

what did this land look like 500 years ago?
who were the people who lived and died here?

Many of their names I know as other things:

Chippewa – a park near my house
Menominee – a sports club in Old Town
Mohawk – a punk hairdo
Huron – a great lake
Illinois – the state I live in
Delaware, Missouri, Iowa, Miami, Peoria,
Dakota, Kansa, Omaha – states and cities near and far away
Where are you now?
Apache, Blackfeet, Cherokee, Cheyenne,
Fox, Hopi, Iroquois, Sauk, Shawnee, Lakota, Zuni...

Where are you, men and women who lived, worked, fought and died here?
Where are the boys and girls who played and cried and grew up on this land?
Who fished in these rivers and lakes? Who told stories of these skies?
Who sang in these canyons, said prayers in these prairies?
Who ate the fragrant onions for which my city is named?

How many of your bones weep beneath this world of cars

(where i rejoice for every bit of green)

*

i am in my yard writing this poem under a hot sun,
looking into the eyes of Subcomandante Marcos
staring at me from the cover of my book

i am in Palenque, Chiapas, México,
singing in the Temple of the Sun

i am being born at 3:11am in Chicago
at a Hospital named Columbus

i am in Puerto Rico, at Tia Teddy's house
watching geckos crawl across my front porch,
eating pan de agua, canepas,
acerola cherries from the tree just over there

i am sitting outside in the playground
with Puerto Rican middle-school students
in a poetry club in Holyoke, MA

i am riding my bike back home through hills in Northampton, MA

i am riding my bike back home in Chicago after an open mic
belly full of Ethiopian food

i am teaching a poetry workshop on "Imagining A Future Utopia"
i am teaching a poetry workshop on "Imagining A Future Utopia"

i am writing this poem
i am writing this poem again
i am riding my bike on Pratt Ave again
i am swimming in Lake Michigan again

i am at the Hare Krishna temple on Lunt Ave
(belly full of Indian food)
& here is a man telling me
that there are 30 billion bacteria in a single human colon.

 "Think," he says, "7 billion people on the Earth,
 30 billion bacteria in a human colon, all living entities."

i am swimming in a pond
two hours outside the city,
on my back,
looking up at stars...

*

Who among you does not feel that his power to love is
boundless?

 And yet who does not feel that very love, though
boundless, encompassed within the centre of his being, and
moving not from love thought to love thought, nor from love
deeds to other love deeds?

 And is not time even as love is, undivided and placeless?

But if in your thought you must measure time into
seasons, let each season encircle all the other seasons,
And let today embrace the past with remembrance and
the future with longing.

- Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet, "On Time"

*

i am a pen in Subcomandante Marcos' hand

i am a brick in the Berlin Wall

i am a star in the constellation Leo

i am a cocoon waiting to become a butterfly

i am Adam on my bicycle

i am a Lakota Warrior on horseback

i am an arrowhead sharpened by a Taino woman, meant for Columbus' throat,

i am a mouse in Walt Whitman's cellar

i am a guitar string plucked by Bob Marley

i am a piece of lint in Reverend King's shirt pocket

i am a cannabis leaf in a joint smoked by Jack Kerouac in Mexico

i am a Mayan boy chasing my brother through stone halls

i am a cobra in the jungles of Kerala

i am a frog in a pond two hours outside the city

i am a blue butterfly flying by Adam on his bicycle

i am a 7th grade girl in a poetry writing workshop

i am a carrot grown in a vacant lot in Detroit

i am a field growing over a parking lot in Ponce

i am a drop of clean water in a rainstorm over Chicago

i am a baby wearing a black ski mask

i am an eagle flying beside a condor

i am a kid in a poetry writing workshop

i am dreaming of Utopia

with all my mind and muscle

i am dreaming of Utopia

i am dreaming of Utopia

i am dreaming

if I told you
Eternity was a sky we could never fly towards
we are here once and only once
mush to dust
there is no supernatural
only pain and joy to calculate
hopefully
until it all went black
if I told you
death is eternity
and life is a dream
you can only fall (asleep) from
suddenly
and forever more
and you knew I was right
and you know that this is all there is
prayers are just trees falling in forests
from not being able to stand up on their own anymore
desperate for someone to hear
what would you do?

i would ask:

when my brain stops firing electricity,
and my heart stops pumping blood,

where will my dreams go?

and my love?

...will they seep into the soil, for worms to eat?

(because even that would be enough...)

*

it's funny...

your question is like the opposite of a question someone else asked me...

...last spring, a woman came into the school where I was working
to collect written pieces for an art project...

“How do you know that something lies beyond?”

was her prompt.

This is what I wrote:

nothing in Nature is wasted;
Everything is recycled, composted:
ants&crows&worms feed on bodies of dead
animals; fallentrees decay into soil,
becoming homes for moss&mushrooms;
horseshit fertilizes fields,
giving birth to newcrops. so, ultimately,
nothing dies – only changes;
lifeisdeathisfoodisbreathisconstant
impermanence—
reincarnation scientific fact...

as for Spirit,
what is it but
u n c o n d e n s e d
matter
?

(mutable, un-
bound, invisible
form, unperceivable
sound?

...vibrations, waves, are all that is;
what lies "beyond," in fact, is this:
eternal Tao, right
Now, heart-
breakingly
Here.)

*

Here is my brain
(i used it to write this poem)
Here is my heart,
(i used it, too)
Here are 30 minutes
i spent working on this response.
it's not Eternity.
but is it enough?

it's funny to not have enough time in a day
when days are imaginary
what else is imaginary?

the word time

words

i realized the other day that these fingers have been digging in this nose
since i was a toddler
it was comforting as all hell

my mom called me back while i was getting ready to deposit a check from work
after "(have a good day, ok?) you too!" and putting the phone back to my face
i asked her if it was weird to have seen me as a baby (our last conversation
was about me being a baby when my recently deceased great Aunt was not-yet
taken by Alzheimer's lost in time lost in a body where was her spirit even
where has it been waiting in a hot room in a trap)
and see me now as a man
she corrected me "young adult, but yes it is weird"
i agreed "young adult man"
she said "young adult man" again
us both still a little wary of the newness of me
her fumble of a child and teenager
now, presently, hopefully, eternally
outchea

time flies

thinking of eternities, and time
we tend to loop back
say something that triggers something else
and have to follow that rabbit hole
finding like things
to hold onto
philosophizing,
discovering in real time

in "real time"
i'm 24--

it's winter
(New Year's Eve)

but, feel Rhyme
find Nevermore--

Remember
(Eternity)

if i can write in Rising meter
--Dickinson-inspired--
maybe we, through Poetry
(that transcendental Liar),
can break the shackles of the Clock
& Rise in timeless Bliss--
above the Paradox of life,
& out of "That" and "This"--

("The day is made of many days"
Neruda writes in "Time"
--indeed, it seems i know what he means--
in heart, if not in mind)

i see the clock--
12:21
& then 12:22--
on my computer screen
as i
compose this verse
for you--

& soon enough,
12:23
arrives to take it's place,
and by the time i write that line,
12:24 replaces it!

i take a break to pee and think,
& 5 whole minutes fly--
and during those 5 minutes,
i must wonder -- where was i?

in Mexico--
in Outer Space--
Chicago,
in my room--
at Native Foods
with you, my friend,
discussing money's Doom--

& how, we say, a Brand New Day
is waiting to come in--
(i hear it Knocking softly Now
upon the hearts of men--)
& that to hope is no small thing
--& no mere dreamer's Dream--
but rather, just to thankfully
acknowledge Time's great Scheme--

for what are we but chemicals
& atoms, after all?
set into motion by a Bang
--so infinitely small--

& yet, our small parts equally
complete this greatest Story--
& through our lives, though short, we strive--
revealing it's true Glory--

the Poet, & the Coffee-Man,
the Mother nursing Child--
through them all the Universe
is working, is compiled--
day by day, and year by year,
minute by small minute--
century by century,
of every small Thing in it

--the snow on the magnolia tree
is beautiful and still--
the world is cold,
the Tree is old,
outside my windowsill—

Tomorrow starts a whole New Year
--quite arbitrarily--

& yet, it seems significant--
Revolutionary, even.

the story continues from infinite angles

“The Story Continues from Infinite Angles”

Right.
For instance,
I'm in my room again,
writing this poem,

but at the same time i am looking into your eyes
& we are talking about revolution

-- how to save the world --
over burgers

& at the same time i am on a train
& at the same time i am on another train
& you are on another train, writing,

& our friends are busy
going to school,
working at restaurants,
recording rap songs,
waiting on El platforms

in the dead of this Chicago winter.

there are times
where i do things others consider crazy
and I don't care
today I had a moment where I was like "am I going crazy"
and was running up and down my mind
turning over the situations of this love affair
the ways of her and her love and fears
and me and my love and fears
and I'm questioning who I am
or maybe what is "wrong" with me
and when I die
do I have no further questions
to honor
no more pickles
predicaments
irony
do spirits blush from irony
or is everything a flat plain
of "of course"

Of course
the day I happen to pick back up this poem,
after months of nothing,
is the day after my birthday.

25.
Twenty-five years old.

A quarter of a century.

(Whoa.)

The day before, I went to a protest
organized by We Charge Genocide.
We stood and chanted outside a police station
where the officer who killed Roshad McIntosh
has still not been named.

And I realize this is a fight that's been going on
for over four hundred years.

What changes can I hope to see in my lifetime?

It's not that I am cynical – far from it –
afterwards, I went to a hip hop show at MultiKulti,
and when the emcee said "Freedom in our lifetimes,"
I cheered with all my chest,
because I believed it.

I guess what I'm trying to say
Is that I too cherish the tension
of being alive,
of living in time,
of believing, but not yet seeing,
despite the pain and agony of waiting...

When I die,
I don't know what will happen.

Maybe we're all Bodhisattvas.

Maybe we must all
keep coming back
until every last
one of us
is free.

How This Book Came To Be

On April 27, 2013, we led a poetry-writing workshop on food & health at a UIC Health Forum (using the music video “Food Fight” by Dead Prez and the poem “Prayer to the Corn God” by Susie Swanton). It wasn’t the most organized affair - technical problems and such - but we had a meaningful time with our students nonetheless.

Afterward, we wandered to a nearby Thai restaurant for lunch. As usual we laughed and had a magical time. The food was yummy. We decided to take our friendship to the next level -- by writing a book together. However, we needed a prompt or question to center our writing around. We turned to a man who was sitting at the next table and asked if he had any big questions on his mind. He replied, “I think about a lot of questions, like what is eternity?”

And that was how the project started.

We wrote the poems in this book as a conversation over a 2-year period, and released the first version of it online on May 10, 2015 (Mother’s Day).

Thank you for reading.

-- Adam Gottlieb & emanuel vinson (+)

