

Are You Happy

They say you're only truly a Mainer if you have bones here. Despite being Brooklyn born, my father's bones are here. At the end of a long dirt road, in a small unnamed cemetery his tiny gravestone sits in the back, removed from the others, beneath the Birch tree and covered in leaves. He spent the last years of his life in Maine, living with AIDS. My mother came to Maine with her mother. Gramma left New York to flee her husband. She came to Maine and bought this land a few years before I was born.

"Fat and lusty", is how early colonizers described Maine's soil in an effort to articulate the region's economic potential. Maine was first home to the Penobscot Nation of the Wabanaki Confederacy. Apart from that, these twenty-one acres had not passed through many hands before Gramma's. None of the land on this old bog had.

Twenty-one acres of what from what we can tell was at one point an apple orchard. If I'm honest with myself, I feel a bit possessive of this land, which I cringe to admit. Or maybe it's just protective. I'm afraid that because of me it'll pass back into the cycle of violence that I want to rebirth from. Is that even possible? Could reincarnation be the key to freeing me from this place? How might I identify in the discarnate? Without a body, or a gender?

When I find an insect in my home, I try not to kill it. Instead, I take it outside, put it on the lawn, set it on a plant or window sill. Or, I just leave it. However, I understand that a gesture is not enough to recognize that all living things contribute to a biological balance. Because sometimes that balance tips in favor of my intolerance. Sometimes I choose to take my strength and size out on another life in the preservation of a perceived sense of safety Or for the protection of my property and my ability to expand. I exercise my dominance over the nuisance, which at that moment I have decided to regard the insect as.

A few weeks after I moved to New York, my grandmother passed away in her sleep, on her twenty-one acres in the small mobile home she had lived in for over thirty years. After she passed, her home sat empty. My mother and I were undecided in what to do with such a mound of occupiable potential but painful history that we were both too tired and afraid to touch. My grandmother had been an alcoholic, and with her death came both sorrow and relief. Her bones are now in upstate New York, where she was born.

With 2020 came a global pandemic forcing fight or flight; I came back to Maine and temporarily moved into Gramma's old mobile home. I would lay awake at night and as my eyes grew adjusted to the dark I would stare into the corner that her bed used to sit, beneath a portrait of Christ, covered in quilts and cats. The bed she died in. It was like she was still there. Sleeping. Praying. Smoking. Drinking a sherry. Watching me. Remembering me. I would lie in the dark sweating with ghosts and phantoms and of the Confederacy just outside my window, and images of my neighborhood in flames flashing on my phone in the dark beneath my blankets. I wondered what artifacts were buried beneath

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this home. Whose bones. Inside the house and underneath the bed - ghosts as equally sad and scared as I.

While the space offered a quiet retreat, it was unimaginably loud! The tiny paws of squirrels rearranging their loot above my head all afternoon. Thousands of small white husked seeds came pouring down from the ceiling of the screen house one hot day. A small mouse watched from the rafters. All that work gone, with winter just around the corner. Quite terrifying was the unannounced grinding of porcupine teeth that took to the side of the house, only when it rained. I was fascinated to learn that porcupines spend most of their lives in trees. I spent the rest of my summer looking up. Porcupine quills produce their own antibiotics so as to prevent infection, should they impale themselves when they fall from their treetops.

There was also a constant soft scratching within the walls near my bed. It never stopped. All day and all night. At night when everything else had settled in, it was all I could see in the dark.

It was a colony of Carpenter Ants. Sleepless laborers chewing their way through the innards of the cedar wood walls. I would place my ear against the wall and wonder "how many were in there?". I imagined crowded gallies lined with small black bodies and tiny feet. Walking on top of and into one another.

While ants each have their own role and tasks, they are not bound to this responsibility for life. It can change based on health, size, age. Through chemical interactions these roles shift in response to resources, and the needs of the colony. By cutting off supplies, raids, and chemical warfare, ants are ruthless in their colonial pursuits. A war currently wages between two invasive ant species in North Carolina. There are some species that raid the broods of others to raise their offspring as slaves. A mature Carpenter Ant colony can take up to six years to establish, and an Ant Queen can live up to fifteen years. The largest colony in the world consists of nests and dwarf nests spanning well over 3,000 miles and six continents. That's a lot of sisters. That's a lot of queens.

When one can hear ants within their own walls, it's a sign that damage is extensive. The day after I identified the source of the sound, an exterminator is assigned to rid the walls of the harmless but destructive housemates. It's estimated that Carpenter Ants cause 5 billion dollars worth of damage every year in the United States alone.

"If you see an ant, don't kill it." These are the instructions given by the exterminator.

"The ants will take the poisonous bait back to the colony and feed it to the Queen. If you see any ants in the next week, they may appear drunk, walking with no direction, and not like themselves. In this case, you can kill the ant. It has already ingested the poison."

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This feels violent. So much for a swift death. How many ants, spiders, wasps, and rodents had this man killed. What kind of Karma was this? I wonder if he will return as an ant.

Long after the ants are gone, I can't stop thinking about them. I don't feel good about how easy it was for the sound of them to fade away. I feel responsible, and guilty and wonder if I have a lesson to learn and if with this Karma, I too will reincarnate as an ant.

Every morning I wake up and from the bathroom window of the mobile home look out onto the land. The same bathroom that my grandmother in a drunken rage cornered me in when I was twelve years old. I slapped her across the face. When my mother came home my brother and I were hiding outside. Things changed after that between my Grandmother and me. Our relationship was never the same. Was she still here? Gardening just outside, laying in her bed? Passing a Rosary through her hands or drinking a Sherry while watching the news? Was she me? Was she the Ant Queen that I had killed? If she was then what did that make me?

The Igbo tribe of Nigeria has a proverb: "No one knows the womb that bears the chief." Their notion of reincarnation hinges on an innate desire to return to human form with the intention to continue pursuit of their prodigy, riches, education and social status. There is a sincere desire to return, and it is believed that this rebirth is in future generations of familial relations: cousins, children, neighbors, family friends and enemies. Reincarnates are recognized through physical and personality traits. It's even possible for a reincarnate to be split between two individuals: soul-splitting.

An angst around reincarnation began to creep into my dreams. In one dream, I'm in my Gramma's house. The house is filled with large deep black holes. I don't know where they lead. From my Grandmother's bedroom, an energy begins to exude from the room she died in. I turn and run towards the door in incredible fear from whatever that thing with me in the house is. When I finally get to the front door I turn around to find myself face to face with myself - but I'm not myself.

I'm a Black man wearing a red hoodie.

the bodies of bugs...insects

get crushed to bits by accident when they mistakenly cross our paths

we don't only crush them

we rip them to shreds

so there's nothing left

of them to give to their parents

how are they to grieve?

they won't

they can't

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we don't do this with people...humans
we preserve our deaths
in chemicals that we avoid touching when we're alive
and liquids that we would never consume if living
as if we're actually worth preserving

except for when they're black
then those bodies are just as good as dead
then those bodies are just as good as bugs

crushed to bits when they mistakenly cross our paths
not just crushed – but torn to shreds
so there's nothing left
of them to give to their parents
how are they to grieve?
they won't
they can't

Returning to live my life as an ant. If our lives are truly equal as I believe them to be, would a return to this planet as another being be so bad? I wouldn't question so much. Just a chemical instruction and I would know where I belong, and what I'm to do. Who am I to think that to return to this planet as an Other would be a life of lesser value than my own? I think about that for a long time. I think about the privilege I embody as a human. I am certain that I will return as an Ant Queen or a sterile female sister laborer. I wonder if I already have.