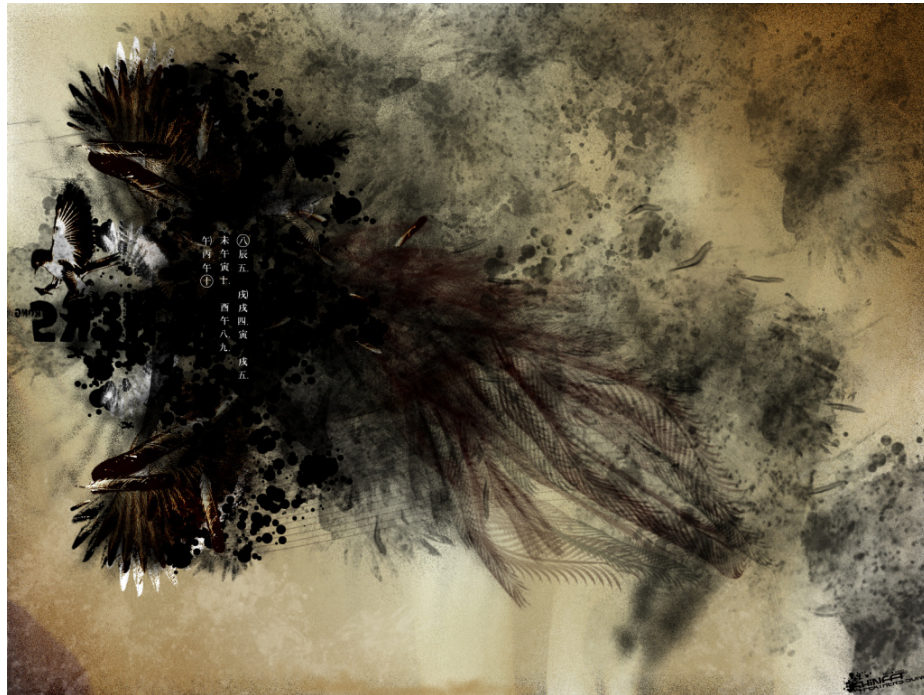


excerpt from Vestigial



by Aja Couchois Duncan

The book is the work of the book. It is the sun, which gives birth to the sea. It is the sea, which reveals the earth. It is the earth, which shapes man. Otherwise sun, sea, earth, and man would be focused light without object, water moving without coming or going, wealth of sand without presence, a waiting of flesh and spirit without touch, having nothing that corresponds to it, having neither doubles or opposites.

- Edmond Jabes, *The Book of Questions*

In their dream about god's dream, the woman and the man were inside a great shining egg, singing and dancing and kicking up a fuss because they were crazy to be born. In god's dream happiness was stronger than doubt and mystery. So dreaming god created them with a song.

"I break this egg and the woman is born and the man is born. And together they will live and die. But they will be born again. They will be born and die again and be born again. They will never stop being born, because death is a lie."

- Eduardo Galleano, *Genesis*

In this dream, only women were born. The men had to be made.

One: Earth

Accretion

It begins millions of years ago with algal mats and bryophytes.
Later, when the water recedes, the earth is stitched with
gymnosperms, angiosperms, grass fills the open expanse.

It begins the way all beginnings do. Everything is new,
unknown, cellular. The sun spills its full splendor across the
landscape.

It begins with her opening, almost imperceptibly, toward the
light.

It begins with an organism resembling the earth worm. The change is incremental but over time it grows legs, an abdomen, thorax, and head.

It begins with the cambrian explosion, the rapid appearance of animal phyla and the evolution of organisms.

It begins with sight, with the development of the compound eye, a patchwork of eyes or ommatidia, which in their multiplicity provide the ability to see in many direction. There are 25,000 ommatidia in the dragonfly, accommodating its swift flight.

Intersect. It begins with him, the presencing of, a multitude of parts.

Compound eyes can assimilate visual changes at a rapid rate, but such hurried processing has its drawbacks. The brain must interpret a composite of different, high resolution pictures. It must fuse a moving image. The dragonfly cannot differentiate between an enemy and a mate. It must fly very close to the winged other before it knows what happens next—tap, tap, tap—sex or death.

The visual field of humans, of predators, involve large areas of binocular vision. This improves depth perceptions, makes possible the chase.

It begins at night, in the dark interior. She can barely make out his face, but his scent is unmistakable. Pheromones. It begins with this, a lusting for.

Fluttering. Insects travel great distances to satisfy their ecological requirements.

He swims the atlantic, traverses the north american continent, then burrows in.

She remains west, developing in situ, a process of adaptation and random selection. Like darwin's finches, her beak is shaped perfectly to harvest local seeds, her body just small enough to slip between the thorns of the acacia tree.

If she is the product of sympatric speciation, then he is allopatric, vicariant, genetically isolate.

The green hawk moth beats its wings, feeds on the nectar of flowers with the prick of its tongue. From a distance, she mistakes it for a hummingbird.

Convergent evolution explains many things. How different species can develop similar features. How their bodies can fit each other perfectly and yet they share neither chromosome nor tongue. How his scent is absorbed by her vomeronasal organ, signaling something to her hypothalamus that she cannot translate into words.

It begins with his hands, traveling from breasts to thighs, reading the exterior. It begins with her tongue circling his neck, tasting his heredity.

It begins with her arched back, her split abdomen, unleashing waves of pheromones.

He flies toward her cascading scent, tracking her location from miles away by the increasing number of molecules that coat the hair-like olfactory receptors on his antenna.

It begins with lust but mistakes itself for love.

She sleeps with his armpit in her mouth, licks the filamentous muskiness. When he leaves, she wraps her face in the cloth of his shirt, sucking his newly male scent like juice.

Their genetic lines are split by the western cordillera, an immense mountain range dividing the continent as if bone splitting the skin. On one side are rivers and valleys and on the other a vast open plain.

At its northern point, the cordillera is cold and dark. Between ice caps and glaciers, the earth hibernates. But even here the temperatures are rising. As the cordillera warms, it wakes and blossoms with an increasing number of fungi species.

The rise in temperature leads to an explosion of insects. Highly mobile, they mate quickly, accelerate their life cycle to match the warming planet.

As the earth warms, her mating cycle speeds up. She goes from proestrus to estrus in a single afternoon. He can sense her swelling labia, the oocyte moved along by cilia down her fallopian tube.

Lets make a baby, he says, laying her down on the linoleum floor. She opens her mouth, her legs, every orifice rising up to meet him. But he has no seminal vesicles, no prostate or vas deferens. When he comes, there is only the sound of it, an echo of gametes fusing.

Convergent evolution cannot explain the bio medical advancements, the rapid transmutation of human systems. It cannot explain what becomes of his secondary sex characteristics, the way a chemical compound enlarged his clitoris and produced a crop of pubescent hair.

Chromosomal pairs generally account for sexual morphology. But there are more options than there are types. It is hormones which determine if he sprouts and she sheds. But it is something else entirely that causes her to gather all the detritus and call it her own.

At its southern point, the cordillera is madre, a high plateau laced with river valleys. Each day they travel south from the volcanic peaks to the cordillera's sloping granite tail. Here, he says, take my hand. She reaches for it, holds it tightly for as long as she can.

Their journey is striated with extinctions. Most species die out within 10 million years of their first appearance. Hominids have traveled the earth for 6 millions years. With each step, the earth beneath them erodes.

Two: Air

Multicellular

Before everything came into being there was a great deal of waiting for. Waiting for the earth to form, waiting for life to appear.

She waits on her perch for him to find her. It takes millennia. When he arrives, he is coated in her musky scent, his body dusted with the damp molecules.

Listen, he says. In the silence she hears the universe.

Four billion years ago, in a galaxy that was not yet named, the earth was formed. Explosive and molten, the planet took another billion years to tilt and cool. Eventually it formed a solid crust, cupping water at its surface.

The first life was single cell and microscopic. When the cells recognized themselves in one another, they attached and in their connection created multicellular species. But such cellular coupling complicates reproduction. Multicellular life requires a germ cell, such as an egg or sperm, to combine its genetic material, to reproduce.

They are multicellular and yet they cannot procreate. But they are never without this hunger for. With silicone, hand and tongue, he makes complicated gestures toward coupling, toward recreating himself through her.

The first multicellular species were soft, lacking bone or shell. They moved together in small groups searching for food. Multicellularity enabled organism to exceed the size limits normally imposed by diffusion. Later it permitted increasing complexity through differentiation of numerous cellular lineages within an organism. Multicellularity made it possible to develop specialized cell types such as muscle and skin. It rendered the human form.

His adam's apple is thickening and the tips of his nasal bones are beginning to grow. She can no longer read the subtextual plot in the curves of his face. But when he moves, she rises up to meet him, finding something like love in the troposphere between the memory of his body and the person that he is becoming.

Billions of years passed before the first flowering plants appeared. They were late in the evolutionary story, opening skyward long after the first birds pressed their wings into the air.

Look, he says and she watches him unfurling.

Angiosperms are flower and seed producing. Once members of the gymnosperm class, those naked seeds, they appeared suddenly, luring mammals with their lustily garbed fruits. With more than wind and rain at their disposal, angiosperms replicated quickly, replacing gymnosperms as the dominant trees around 100 million years ago.

She witnesses his physiological changes, the sexual dimorphism and flowering parts. But the hormones are changing more than his sex. Virilizing and anabolic, testosterone enlarges his organs and forces his heart to pump harder. It causes his mind to uncoil like a snake, striking the closest object in sight.

As he expands, she contracts. Each day, she is increasingly pocked and barren, like a pomegranate flayed and stripped of every seed.

Darwin found such things a problem. The difficult to explain, to describe. Suddenly flowers appeared in the fossil record. It's an abominable mystery, Darwin said. Only later would it be possible to trace the evolution of the angiosperm from gymnosperms to seed ferns, the extinct link, and narrate the passage from frond to flower.

Puberty comes late for him; he is already middle age. There is no adolescent body for him to grow into. And yet the hormones behave as if he was fourteen. They excite his libido, kindle his brain.

He is changing so quickly she does not recognize him from one day to the next. One morning he leaves and when he returns he is compact muscles and denser bones. Who are you? she asks. It is me, he says. But his voice is deeper and his chest is thatched with fur.

Ecological changes in the phonology and distribution of flora and fauna is not new. But everything has speeded up. What once took thousands of years can transpire within a few of the earth's orbits around the sun.

She is disoriented by the changes, by what phenomenologically she must unexperience in order for him to be other than. Some days, the language of it escapes her and she finds herself flying too close to the window, blindly smashing her wings against the glass.

Birds are the only members of the clade, originating with the earliest dinosaurs, to have survived the cretaceous-paleogene extinction event.

Listen, he says, and she rests her head on his newly male chest. Listen, he says, the story goes like this.

Sixty-six million years ago, an asteroid fell to the earth. The resulting impact was so great that debris filled the sky and blocked the sun. A lingering winter ensued. Three quarters of all plant and animal species died. The birds flew where they could. Those who found sunlight survived.

Many birds still migrate annually, traveling south from their breeding grounds to their winter home. They fly together using cues from the sun and stars, from the earth's magnetic field, from the beating of their four chambered hearts.

Migration carries high costs in terms of predation and mortality. The birds are hunted, dismembered by power lines, prone to parasites and pathogens at overcrowded resting spots.

Migration causes other complications as well. It changes his sex. It alters her story.

By winter they are housed in the same aviary. Each day sunrise lights the hillside but they are fenced in from all sides. They use their beaks and claws to pick at each other. Soon their flesh is bloodied and their feathers spread like dust around their anisodactyl feet.

Molting. Whatever comes she says and means it. She is good at meaning things. Such arrogant gestures to lash together words and make a voyage of them. To travel the cordillera in the most precarious of bodies. To miscalculate the distance. To tear the map in two.

If only the body could be read as geology, as time and accretion. But it is but a temporary architecture. At night, despite the battles, she draws her hands along the angles and planes of his freshly hewn masculinity, running her fingers down his southern tip.

Ooohps. That is how it starts, a little mistake. Not paying attention. Or rather too much attention to the wrong thing. The way his body feels. The way hers feels beneath it. Lust is wanting the body to open in some way that it cannot. Splitting her heart open like a rib. His rib. The one she takes from him.

He is busy sewing things on. Adding parts to the ones too small for her to cherish. But there is no one to suture her heart, stitch the mess of it back together.

More than half of all species are insects. Humans are merely a fraction of. He is a small part of her story and yet he has swallowed almost all of her words.

In a land that is not this land, in a time that is not this time, there is a stand of trees in which there lives a bird or rather two birds but they are fighting and the intensity with which they battle each other makes it appear as if they are one.

In a land that is not this land, in a story that is not this story, there is a stand of trees in which lives two birds. The birds fall in love but the feeling is so strange, so unnerving, that they lose their ability to fly. They wait there in the tree for the feeling to pass, for their capacity for flight to return. When it doesn't they began to worry, and, in their anxiety, peck at each other. Just to clean each others feathers, or so they say, but the truth is that it is easier to peck than wait, or worse to say goodbye to the thing for which their bodies have evolved, the hollow bones, the open space between them, amidst the crisscrossing trusses, to make them light, to keep them aloft, their entire skeletal system fused into a single ossification. Surely it is not love but flight for which they were intended. If it had been love, they would have had been given lips and fleshy palms with which to caress each other. They ponder this in the time between the sun rising and setting. So much time waiting on a branch for flight to return, for love, or the passing of it, to be enough.
