Travelogue

A third eye for sensing danger has planted itself at the base of my skull. It sends out a dull throb when the possibility of bodily harm is perceived. It's set off by trucks that rumble in the periphery; revving engines, opaque tinted windows and careless drivers that don't make eye contact with pedestrians and cyclists as they move toward us; jagged fissures and gapes in the road; rigid, unforgiving pavement; noxious tar and diesel fuel disbursed by heavy machines carrying out this city's unending summer road-work project. Leaving the house sets my third eye on alert.

I wasn't always this tentative about the city outside my door. I have always been attuned to hazardous people around me—a sense of how to navigate the volatility of people. This base of the skull sensitivity however, is not that. This is a sensitivity to the possibility of a soft body meeting a hard bad thing.

My sensitivity to the soft and hard of my own body is so acute, that I've developed an aversion to many types of contact. When my knees press together I feel an unsettling awareness of my skin as an ineffectual threshold for the structures underneath. Postures and movements that require my spine and hip bones to be pushed against solid surfaces induce dread. If I lay down on the seam of my clothing or some folds of fabric I'm restless from their presence.

These sensations followed my recent diagnosis of illness and with it the realization of how very easy it is for the inside of my body to be accessed. To get a more detailed diagnosis for my leukaemia, bone marrow biopsies were needed. A surprisingly short and uncomplicated procedure, a distinct perceptible force at my hipbone tells me my marrow is being accessed. Just like that. 1, 2, 3. Easy to intrude upon. For the doctor, seemingly effortless. Following, I ride my bike home slowly, dreamlike, visualizing the inside of my body and all the hard things outside; thinking about the limits of the body's ability to resist, about the body as a physical barrier and where that boundary can't withstand. My days are like dreams.

This past year I visited locations that made me think frequently about things entering my body, but gaining access in more discreet ways. These things, though not invited, passed into me more organically. I even thought of these hitch-hikers and new inhabitants in my body as potentially fortifying and a kind of souvenir. Having the remarkable fortune of being selected to join a land-art field research trip, that consisted of camping in three desert locations, I was prepared for several weeks of living radically outside my comfort. My conscientiousness about bacteria, though not extreme, is not insignificant. I believe that proper hand washing is done with soap and water and I avoid putting my hands on shared public surfaces. I don't believe in anti-bacterial hand sanitizer because it is harmful to healthy bacteria and leaves a residue of sanitizing gel mixed with dirt, providing none of the tactile satisfaction of freshly washed skin.

Soap and water were sparse on this tour. In their place were hand sanitizer bottles grubby from handling. The water we had was for drinking, cooking and dish washing. Used sparingly, the shallow basins of water were recycled and reused to wash the dishes from one meal, and then the next. Instead of soaping and scrubbing the wares free of grease and food residue, drops of bleach were added to the wash water where the items were swished around. The food was not washed, the hands that prepared it were not washed. No parts of us were washed--not even after we shit in the woods. I bathed in the unfiltered water of streams and hot springs, and once snuck away to use a local's shower. I looked forward to the toilets and faucets in gas station bathrooms on the occasions that we were on the road.

I went willingly and knowingly into this challenge. The mechanism I used to get through it was the partial belief that the bacteria was possibly fortifying for my internal ecology though I worried that the hand sanitizer was eroding it.

We first visited the semiarid desert of Patagonia and then the Gila Wilderness, places where pale vegetation grows from parched earth and rocky ground. I ingested and breathed in the dust of these places, particles of the humbling elders that are the surrounding stones and mountains. In Patagonia the dust of ages makes dirt that is perfection for the agave plant to thrive. When the plant is ready to mother it sends a towering bloom stalk up--magic swaying in the landscape. Human habitats, resource extraction and borders drain magic away from this landscape. The fences between Mexico and the U.S.A. are one of the threats to animals native to the area, obstructing their movement across the land to mate and hunt.

A period of systemic killing of Jaguars began in 1915 to protect the interests of ranchers and homesteaders and came to a close when the last Jaguar that the U.S.A. was able to record for decades was killed in 1963. Recently a few of the large cats have been seen around Patagonia, making their way up from Mexico through one of the border fences' seven crucial wilderness crossings, bringing hope that the animal would once again flourish in the U.S.A.. The Jaguar is an umbrella species meaning that their level of livelihood indicates the landscape's ecological integrity. Despite it's status as a symbol of beauty, strength and ecology the animal is seen as indefensible competition to ranchers and the Department of Homeland Security. Against all manner of diversity, Trump's border wall would eliminate any of the current porousness and with it many hopes for health and success encasing the U.S.A. in a national state of biological, ecological and social quarantine.

In the Gila we were enveloped by geological time following dry riverbeds lined with stones while surrounded by rock faces streaked in the colours of sunset, that held crystals within them. Sitting in the pungent mineral water bath of the hot springs located in a canyon, I was afraid to look above me and afraid not to. I didn't see any predators, but wonder how many saw me? On my way back to camp I collected pockets full of crystalline fluorite and one day found a large animal's tooth that had laid there inert long enough to become a home for the moss that filled its' crevices. I thought about what affect it might have to shift my language around home and place in order to work against the entrenched meanings of ownership and belonging in relation to land. I considered change in the immediate calling it "the place we are camped" rather than "my campsite"; thinking about home and returning there to use "the home that I live in" instead of "my house" and releasing all places that I come into relation with from the language of ownership. I try not to forget to maintain regard for all the things that will continue to have a life after I'm gone from a place and all the things that could have a life there.

White Sands, the last place we are to camp, is the location of the first detonation of a nuclear weapon. Conducted by the U.S. Army at 5:29 am on July 16th 1945 the detonation was given the code name Trinity. Among the colossal preparations made for this project was the transport in of freshwater, seven hundred gallons at a time from forty miles away into this hot and dry desert. The production of the necessary fissle isotopes accounted for 80 percent of the project's budget. The Manhattan Project, a research and development project lead by the U.S.A. with support from the United Kingdom and Canada during World War II produced this and other subsequent nuclear weapons. It also resulted in the invention of the nuclear reactor, which has made the production of artificial radioisotopes used in the treatment of some cancers possible. There are various descriptions, from those who were involved in an official capacity, of the feelings that overcame them when witnessing the detonation, and of the quality of light that was emitted from the blast of thermal radiation. General Thomas Farrell, the deputy commander

of the Manhattan Project described the light cast on the landscape by the atomic bomb as “a clarity and beauty that cannot be described but must be seen to be imagined. It was that beauty the great poets dream about but describe most poorly and inadequately.” Trinitite, a glassy stone formed when the blast sucked up mineral matter, melted it and propelled it back onto the land, is literally hard evidence of the premiere nuclear detonation as well as a sought after souvenir, collectors item, jeweler’s muse and was used as propaganda against Japanese claims of suffering due to continuing effects of radioactivity after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—after-all wearing it as jewelry indicated that the atomic bomb created safe, wearable objects of adornment. White Sands Missile Range remains an active United States Army military testing area.

It is at White Sands National Monument, as the park adjacent to the missile range is called, that I ingest the most foreign particles. There are no bodies of water or piped in water in the gypsum dune fields. There, I don’t get to wet my skin to mimic the sensation of washing. One night there is a violent, unending wind storm. Sand permeates my tent. I’m swathed. It’s steeped into my hair, eyes and ears, taken in by my breath, it scratches my tongue and grinds between my teeth. I swallow it.

The sublimity of witnessing the unending dunes touch the sky makes the last, grittiest leg of the journey worth while. In day-time the vista is overtaken by two absolutes—gradations of white adjoin with lucid blue. As night approaches, the sky pageants through every colour in its’ most radiant form. Here, I experience depth while facing skyward into the near black of midnight-blue, just before being enveloped by the void of night showing me that I am miniscule. I try to capture the sky with my memory. I resign myself to sandy meals. I sleep on a bed of gypsum grains for just a few more nights. I go home changed biologically, I think. Unfamiliar dirt, minerals, dust and bacteria in my system. I believe in the benefits of cultivating a diverse ecology inside one’s own body.

I have had somewhat of a preoccupation with thinking about what populates my interior. Specifically boosting necessary and beneficial biological flora. I’ve encouraged its presence with fermented drinks and foods and eating unwashed produce from my vegetable patch. On this journey I’ve turned my reluctance to get dirty and ingest what I would normally, at home in the city, consider to be unclean into a potentially positive change on a molecular level. I am so fond of stones that I consider each dirt particle to be kin to the rocks and mountains that gave me immeasurable visual and tactile pleasure in the deserts. I want to befriend the beautiful stones and the homely ones too. Some I carry home in luggage laden with their heft.

A few months later I’m back in the South West of the U.S.A. at a residency themed “Equal Justice”. While there I’m one day hiking up a trail at Ghost Ranch, a place that Georgia O’Keefe spent summers and kept land in her possession. This place, like what I’ve seen of New Mexico so far, is vast and dry, surrounded by mountains. O’Keefe is quoted on Ghost Ranch’s website as saying “I find people difficult”. It’s quiet and dusty here. I can imagine that avoiding people would have been practically effortless before this became a destination. Even as a destination we barely encounter people or the sounds usually heard in populated places. Surveying the vastness you can understand how people are both inspired to protect it and motivated to extract from what seems like endless, eternal land. It’s very windy as we walk up the trail. In some parts the path is narrow and close to the unguarded edge. I’m terrified that I’ll sent over it. I strain to breathe and although I suspect it’s due to the altitude (around 7,020.7 ft), I feel weak and slightly embarrassed by my limits. I’m with Daphnie who is ahead on the path walking briskly and directly. My neck cranes to look in all directions and I stop to observe the surrounding boulders, stones, vegetation and twigs at my feet.

When we reach the summit of our hike we can't make it to the final trail marker, number 20. I head toward number 20, but the wind impels with such force that I drop to cling to the ground—fear prickles and pulsates throughout my body. Am I irrational to believe that each gust is a warning from nature's force that the wind will push me off the mountain without conscience?

On the way back down, less fearful, I observe the lichen on some gnarly rock. Does this organism give the stone life? Touching my face, eyes and hair I feel the sand and dirt that the wind has whipped into me. Once again I've ingested it. Ghost Ranch, New Mexico and my rock friends are too inside me.

The tissues that form our organs are made of molecules that are made up of atoms. Ninety-eight percent of our atoms are replaced each year. New atoms that we take into our bodies through breathing, ingestion and absorption are continuously incorporated. As our cells regenerate DNA each cell copies itself including any flaws. My leukaemia is a result of one marrow cell mutating and being copied over and over.

I've taken the drug therapy offered to me. A choice to keep this body and a choice to let it be strange with chemical responses.