A Lexicon of Peace

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De longe a Ilha viram fresca e bela,
Que Vénus pelas ondas lha levava
(Bem como o vento leva branca vela)
Para onde a forte armada se enxergava…

From far off, the Island appeared fresh and beautiful,
Towards which Venus with the waves carried them,
(As well as the wind raising the white sail)
From whence the strong army was seen…

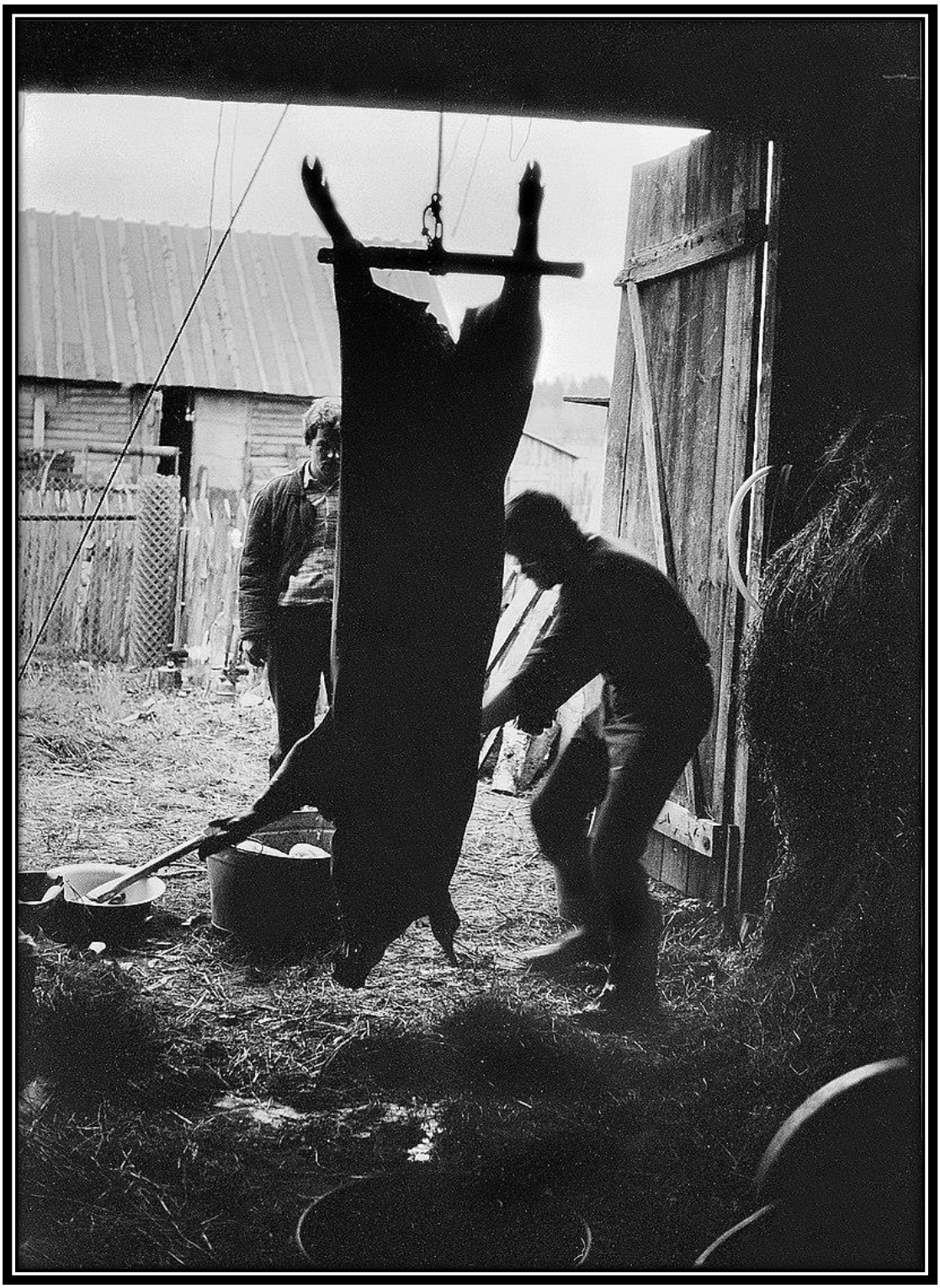
- Canto IX, *Os Lusíadas*, Luís de Camões

Grant us peace, Your most precious gift, O Eternal Source of peace…

- *Gates of Prayer*

What if God has the same affectionate disregard for us that we have for barnacles?

- Annie Dillard



Jaan Künnap, *Eesti: Seatapp Annas* (1983)

I.

A friend of mine once worked for a summer on a pig farm. My friend is tall and slight, too pale and a bit dreamy, better suited to gently playing guitar or writing poetry than scraping bacon. Nevertheless, out of a somewhat misplaced sense of no-longer-working-class guilt or simply because he needed the cash, he found himself working on the pig farm.

The work was brutal. Hard, repetitive, physical labor coupled with the visceral filth of pigs, dead or alive. He later wrote about it, "Peeling aside the cold-store's strip curtains, you smelled the off-white gore of opened pigs."[i] I am loathe to imagine the way this leaded mass of flesh must have hit the olfactory senses, coppery with blood and fear of death, rotten with already-decaying waste.

Perhaps this is an extreme example to begin with, for even the most basic tenets of gardening can be painful and violent. You pick beetles off your plants and crush them under your fingers, your knees and back ache as you plant leeks or dig potatoes, and blackberry brambles prick you mercilessly as you attempt to dislodge the berries from their bushes.

Only an ignorant could equate rural life with the notion of peace given its persistent and unrelenting bodily horror, and yet this is what our language constantly pushes us to do. In the midst of so much euphemism, I find myself yearning for a lexicon of peace that accommodates this insistent truth.

II.

Many of our words for peace in the English language come from Greek or Latin. The paradigms often employed for these terms typically center on a variety of repeated themes: rustic, mythical, isolated geographies. They describe something held and perceived at a distance. Frequently the imagery deployed is that of a lush oasis teeming with Nature, unblemished by human caprice and vulgarity. The notion of these terrains unspoiled by human nature leads us inexorably to the secondary theme of these terms: peace as a form of freedom from sin, a life absolved somehow of our basest instincts and desires. While these notions—as we shall soon see—necessarily come into conflict, nonetheless they play different notes of the same chord: peace is an isolated land, a myth, a mythical island. How easily frayed these concepts are by a consideration of the blood, guts, and gore—the viciousness of life isolated in nature, given over to cultivation and husbandry. How quickly a land such as this can turn from paradise to prison.

Take, for instance, the word *rustic* itself. From the Latin *rūstic*, it literally means "of the country." But from its earliest uses in English, it has connoted a peaceful life. The earliest citation of the word *rustic* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* comes from a Middle English translation of the *Opus agriculturae* or *De re rustica*, a 5th-century text by Palladius, writing about thyme ("rustyk swete"). A follow-up arrives in the late 16th century, with an author writing about Calvin's commentary on Genesis: "The whole life *rustike* is hurtless, simple, and most of all framed to the true order of Nature." Indeed. The word *pastoral* follows a similar trajectory. This term comes to us from Latin *pastōr*, meaning "to feed, give pasture to." While once it described simply shepherds tending to their flocks, by the late 18th century it, too, came to describe "the simplicity or natural charm associated with the country." A similar pattern is deployed with the term *bucolic*, from the Greek *boukólos*, "herdsman."

William Holman Hunt, *The Hireling Shepherd* (1851)

Perhaps the term par excellence of this notion can be found in *Arcadia*, a demi-mythical place in Greece "taken as the ideal region of rural contentment," a notion that comes to us from Virgil. I am far from the first person to note the distance between these ideals of rural life and the much grittier truth of such an existence. Garry Wills, in an article entitled "The Real Arcadia" in *The American Scholar*, noted "…Arcadia does not accommodate. It challenges … And the breathtaking grandeur of the country cannot distract one from its disheartening poverty."[ii]

While we are in Greece, and speaking of poets, let us also note the term *idyll*. *Idyll* comes from the diminutive form of the Greek *eídos*, meaning "picture." As a poetic form, an idyll is a lyric poem, one often dealing with a sentimental, pastoral, bucolic image. By the 19th century, however, and in part thanks to Ralph Waldo Emerson (who else?), we had replaced the description of the thing with the thing itself; an idyll is now simply something related to or evocative of a peaceful, pastoral scene.[iii]

The Greek poet Theocritus is credited with inventing the poetic idyll. Whether or not he did, he is taken as exemplary of the genre, so before moving on, we should see what he has to say:

> Lark and goldfinch sang and the turtle moaned, and about the spring the bees hummed and hovered to and fro. All nature smelt of the opulent summer-time, smelt of the season of fruit. Pears lay at our feet, apples on either side, rolling abundantly, and the young branches lay splayed upon the ground because of the weight of their damsons.[iv]

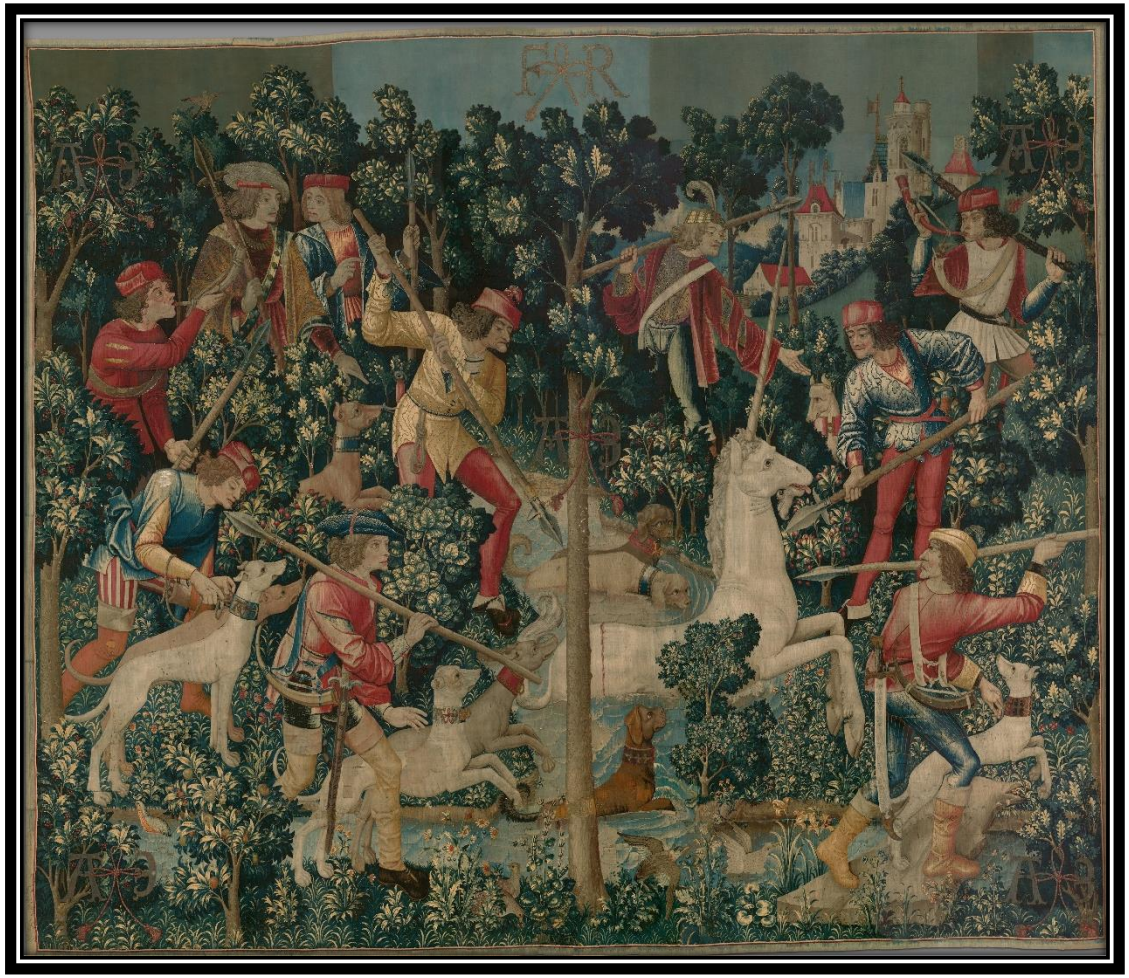
It is quite a pretty picture Theocritus has painted for us here. And yet, I cannot help but feel there is danger lurking in the orchard amidst so much faux-natural scenery. But before we get to the frisson of violence, we can appreciate the detail with which Theocritus (did his friends call him Theo? I wonder) has etched his scene. All of the senses are evoked—our ears drawn to the sound of desirous creatures, our nose to the smell of ripening, our eyes to the colorful fruit splayed around us—everything gasping for sex. Is this hothouse of paradise truly a peaceful scene? Certainly, we are meant to believe so. Yet, despite all of the buzzing of the bees, it feels a sterile sort of reproduction, one doomed to go around in circles endlessly, never-changing.

With this question stalking me, I move now in the gallery to the next little image, this one done not in oil paints but in gossamer thread. Here, in a tapestry crafted by Luís Vaz de Camões in the 16th-century epic poem *The Lusiads*, we see the early modern Argonauts, the Portuguese in Greek revivalist garb, arriving at the so-called Island of Love. They are brought there by a favorable wind sent by the goddess Venus, who apparently was so fond of the soldiers, she felt they deserved a bit of a treat. Camões describes the island in vivid terms, here translated by William Julius Mickle:

> In cultur'd garden, free, uncultur'd flows,
> The flavour sweeter, and the hue more fair,
> Than e'er was foster'd by the hand of care.
> The cherry here in shining crimson glows;
> And, stain'd with lover's blood in pendant rows,
> The bending boughs the mulberries o'erload.[v]

One cannot help but notice how Camões has mimicked Theocritus's fruit. Although, after a moment, I notice that the mulberries are actually lifted from Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe, a story of two ill-fated lovers. According to that tale, mulberries get their red-black hue from the blood of Pyramus, which splashes on them when Pyramus stabs himself to death, thinking Thisbe has died.[vi] Evoking those colors here does add an air of menace to the tableau, but no matter, we read on.

The Portuguese soldiers run up on the beach, eager to take in this idyllic scene. Spying the nymphs "naked as Venus stood in Ida's bower," one of the "brave" men waxes rapturous: "To us, behold, all Paradise reveal'd!" Naturally enough, the men chase the nymphs down in the woods for some "wanton" frolicking. Though this is described as a hunt, Camões assures us, "fleet though they fled, the mild reverted eye and dimpling smile their seeming fear deny." Don't worry, the nymphs really wanted it.



The Unicorn Crosses a Stream (from the Unicorn Tapestries), France and the Netherlands, c. 1500

As I stand taking in this chaotic hunting party in the woods, I feel troubled. Is this truly idyllic? It feels like there is a compression of time and space here. Somehow, despite the energy of the hunters sprinting through the forest, I feel trapped on this island where time stands still. Perhaps it is all the vegetation filling up the rest of the field of view. It is stifling. Just when I am beginning to despair there is no way out of

this static little picture, I recall the gentle way Elizabeth Bishop simply lifts up the edge of the tapestry and turns it over, revealing the messy guts of the strings, in her poem "Brazil, January 1, 1502". She moves in to captures her own image, imagined as a film reel perhaps, of the Portuguese explorers arriving on the shores of Brazil:

> Directly after Mass, humming perhaps
> *L'Homme armé* or some such tune,
> they ripped away into the hanging fabric,
> each out to catch an Indian for himself—
> those maddening little women who kept calling,
> calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)
> and retreating, always retreating behind it.

The women, in Bishop's telling, distinctly do not want to be caught. They are "retreating, always retreating behind" the tapestry, deeper into the mess of fabric trees. The sound of birdcalls evokes the nightingale, that ancient symbol of raped women; in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Philomena is raped by her brother-in-law and, after killing his son in revenge, is transformed into a nightingale. Poets ever after have pasted the nightingale's song in to remind us of the consequences of such a tragic, violent digression, though whether it is a warning against rape or filicide can remain a bit murky. Ironically, or perhaps there is some poetic justice in this, the female nightingale in real life does not actually sing.

I am grateful for Bishop's intervention here. She has extracted me from the static, cyclical time of the ancient Greeks and Romans, where one is admonished to find peace in the relentless repetitions of agrarian life and in hothouse gardens teeming with too much sex and vegetation. These geographies were liable to drive me mad; I could not breathe in them. Their violence is relentless and mundane, either written out entirely or else carefully concealed under a mass of a "that's just the way things are"-ness. Instead, she points me in a different direction entirely. My eyes are drawn to the Christians in her poem who, "directly after Mass," have "ripped away into the hanging fabric." In other words, we have been pushed out of the garden and thrust into History, that relentless teleology, where we are now to try and find our peace in absolution.

III.

Commenting on Lotze's *Mikrokosmos*, Walter Benjamin noted:

> … there vibrates in the idea of happiness (that is what that noteworthy circumstance teaches us) the idea of salvation. This happiness is founded on the very despair and desolation which were ours. Our life, it can be said, is a muscle strong enough to contract the whole of historical time. Or, to put it differently, the genuine conception of historical time rests entirely upon the image of redemption.[vii]

These images of redemption are drawn in terms from Latin that signify peace while also raising the specter of the inverse: I am thinking here of terms like absolution, propitiation, accord, equanimity. These are concepts dragged, bumped and skidding, along the long road of History, while dead gods hover over them anxiously. (After all, only they can truly grant forgiveness in the end.)

Consider *armistice*, from the Latin for "stopping of arms." An ending of hostilities. But then, of course, in the very near rearview of an armistice, there was armed conflict; we are simply in the eye of the storm. Yes, the eye, because if we look ahead there is more fighting on the horizon. The *OED* is quite clear that *armistice* meant "a short truce." We are now far from our idylls; we are now stuck in the midst of two warring factions who seek cosmic balance.

The emphasis on balance between two conflicting sides comes into focus with *accord*, a term so closely associated with the formal end of wars, the management of differences. From the Latin meaning roughly "to the heart," it originally meant to bring people into harmony with one another. A settling of scores. A full rebalancing of the scales. Misdeeds wiped clean. A forgiveness—an expiation of sin, even.

Actually, yes, take another look at *expiation*, a word that pulls together so neatly what Benjamin's commentary was pointing to: from the Latin for "to make satisfaction" or "to do atonement." Through asking forgiveness from G-d, the word thunders, you will create satisfaction. Balance will be restored to the universe. We will march back and forth along this path in a constant cycling tide of transgression and forgiveness, and in moments of propitiation, inclined towards our source of appeasement, we will find happiness.

This is a strange sort of happiness—if we can even truly call it that. I am unsettled by this aggressive form of peace, one predicated on balances barely held, surrounded by peril. It is a peace conceptualized around the idea of having to make routine sacrifices to an angry G-d to restore the balance in the world, to cleanse myself and others of sin, to make things whole again. The calculated violence of this practice as it was in ancient times prefigures the intensity and expectations we find in these concepts now.

The book of Leviticus details everything one needs to know about burnt offerings, every gory step in the ritual, followed by a trial demonstration by Moses and Aaron. The text gets quite specific:

> [Moses] led forward the bull of sin offering … and it was slaughtered. Moses took the blood and with his finger put some on each of the horns of the altar, cleansing the altar; then he poured out the blood at the base of the altar. Thus he consecrated it in order to make expiation upon it.[viii]

After the bull, two rams are slaughtered, their blood splashed up on the sides and pooled along the base of the altar. Their entrails and dung are burned. It is against this morbid backdrop painted luridly with the fluids of creatures whose lives were given over to restore balance and earn redemption that we learn the story of two of Aaron's sons. First, Moses marks them with the blood of the second sacrificed ram. This marking takes on an eerie significance the following day:

> Now Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord alien fire which He had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord … And Aaron was silent.[ix]

Nadan and Abihu go up in flames in front of a bloody altar in seconds. Mingled with the smell of burned organ meats and animal shit is the smell of scorched hair and human flesh. At the moment when the Israelites are becoming liberated from their sins, they are reminded of the violence of not choosing the path laid out before them. The pain and terror of the moment is drawn into focus by Aaron's silence as his sons burn alive before him.

Pedro Orrente, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* [El sacrificio de Isaac] (c. 1616)

It is a vicious, shocking, and cruel moment. In this tale, G-d does not raise his hand at the last moment to forestall the monstrous sacrifice, as in the story of Abraham and Isaac. No, the sons carrying fire are introduced and then immolated in a narrative flash; they are *consumed*. It is a display of literal shock-and-awe, meant to cause fear, trembling, and a submission to G-d's will. Indeed, there is even an element of Prometheus's folly to this story; rather than waiting for G-d's own light, the sons bring their own "alien fire," a mistake for which they are mortally punished as a warning to others. Read one way, not even their own father mourns their deaths (although I don't know how you can read Aaron's silence as indicative of anything other than of a father's grief).

In all, it is a peculiar sort of peace depicted in these images of redemption. There is a choice, certainly, but only along a fixed set of points. For instance, we can choose two directions: one way points towards progress and salvation; the other toward regression and condemnation. Whole moments, those bubbles of space we call "happiness", are those when balance has been struck between parties and tension is momentarily resolved, the litany of sins wiped clean. These moments of armistice are sweet, delicious, reminiscent even of our previous, pastoral peace.

Inevitably, though, we slip, we fall, we transgress, and we find ourselves once again before the sacrificial altar, rummaging around in our pockets for a lighter.

IV.

The image of all of these burnt, gutted creatures brings me back to my mate on the pig farm. Perhaps I was wrong to suggest earlier that there wasn't a sort of peace to be found in his work. Like Aaron's sons, he spilt not only animal blood but his own, which evokes its own sort of perverted blessing:

> The day I slit my knuckle on a metal cage
> the yardman, Michał, bound my palm with tape,
> said *kurwa* under every second breath.[x]

It's a grim sort of peace to be found there: the peace of being physically worn out, of carefully skinning and gutting a creature, a grotesque, relentless peace, the uneasy kind of peace you slip into when constantly surrounded by death. Even your aching muscles are a terse reminder of the numbered days.

This brings us to a source of the imagery for peace that is easy enough to dance around or overlook in the florescent spectacle of budding fruit trees and so much bloodletting—death. *Resquiscat in pace*, a peaceful death, "that good night", all phrases that take up the act and its aftermath and bind it up into a temporally, if not emotionally, satisfying bow. As we have already seen, after all, peace does not prefigure happiness.

What if, though, we were able to conceive of another notion of death, one that allowed for possibility? What kind of peace would that prefigure? What if death was not a break, but a wild continuity? I am suggesting a peace born out of an entirely different ecology than the ones we have seen so far; not an idealized garden but rather a concept of the world that fully takes on its instability, its lacunae, its recklessness.

Consider this: what characterizes a distinct organism from another is a fuzzy boundary at best. As Timothy Morton notes, "… there is no rigid, narrow boundary between life and non-life."[xi] Take as an example: we are a human, but we are also the host to the bacteria in our gut and the microscopic parasites feasting on our hair, skin, and sweat, and, when we are no longer animated, the carbon in our bone dissolves or is eaten, our water seeps into the earth. Decentered and deconstructed, our bodies become porous and distemporal. There is something prickly and generative in the peace to be found in this idea of death—our bodies as a site of fecund, reckless growth.

The distemporality, or perhaps more properly speaking, the mixed temporality of this state of being is important. In our idylls, captured in our paradise, time was fixed and unmoving, allowing for only the most repetitive of movements. Once bound to propitiation, we were free to move along a track forwards in time towards forgiveness, or backwards towards sin. But, I suggest, there is a third peace found in a third time, one we do not yet have a vocabulary for, one left out of our language: the peace of a finite, brutal, confused, and tangled time. In this time, there are beginning and endings looping in and out of one another, threads bubbling up messily, horrifically, spinning off into unknowns or running around in circles for hundreds of years. It is infuriating. It is delightful.

If there is possibly a place to start crafting this lexicon of a new peace, a vital peace, as it were, I would start with *fecund*. From the Latin *fēcundus*, meaning fruitful, *fecund* has long been applied to the heedless, wild proliferation of grotesque multitudes. Fecund organisms feed on the undergrowth, the rotten, the discarded and changeable: earthworms, parasites, fungi. Recall Palladius? He used the term to describe growing mold.[xii] It's there to capture the too-muchness of life, the kind of life that heaves and throbs with defiant slime and excess. In her essay "Fecundity," author Annie Dillard writes:

> I don't know what it is about fecundity that so appalls. I suppose it is the teeming evidence that birth and growth, which we value, are ubiquitous and blind, that life itself is so astonishingly cheap, that nature is as careless as it is bountiful, and that with extravagance goes a crushing waste that will one day include our own cheap lives, Henle's loops and all. Every glistening egg is a momento mori.[xiii]

What kind of peace is a *fecundity*? One where the organism is tied into a bounty, where its wholeness is fragile but its constituent parts are durable and reconfigurable, where there is novelty that springs out of relentless imperfect repetition. It is not that I do not seek the isolated garden or do not desire absolution, but rather that I wish my peace to be characterized by finitude and its generative pressures.

Elin Lennox, *Lubricant* [detail], 2009

V.

Around the age of 10, I went on a hike with a group of other kids in Estes Park in the Colorado Rockies. As we marched along, someone overturned a rotten log and out came a swarm of wasps, angry that their home had been disturbed. In my memory, the wasps are comically large and yellow as they swarm over me. I rushed into the nearby creek, urged on by the staff. The water was freezing cold, and it took the wind out of me immediately as I hit it. "Dunk your head! Dunk your head!" someone screamed hoarsely over the chaos of splashing, panicked hikers and the running creek.

I took a deep breath and plunged under the surface.

As the stings on my limbs raged and swelled, carbon dioxide built up in my lungs, and the cold held me fast, I was entirely at peace.

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[i] From the unpublished poem by William Thompson, "I bowed under the shoulder," 2018.
[ii] Garry Wills, "The Real Arcadia," *The American Scholar*, vol. 67, no. 3, summer 1998, p. 25.
[iii] "idyll," *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, 2009.
[iv] Theocritus, trans. Anna Rist, "Idyll VII: The Harvest Home," University of North Carolina Press, 1978, 135.
[v] Luís de Camões, trans. William Julius Mickle, *The Lusiad*, 1774 (?), Canto IX, lines 273-278.
[vi] "As he lay stretched out on the earth, his blood leapt up in a long jet, just as a spurt from a waterpipe, bursting because of its faulty leadwork, gushes out through a tiny crack to create a hissing fountain of water and cuts the air with its impact. Splashed by blood, the fruit on the mulberry tree was dyed to a red-black colour; the roots were likewise sodden below and tinged the hanging berries above with a purplish hue." Ovid, trans. David Raeburn, *Metamorphoses*, Penguin, 2004, Canto IV, lines 121-126.
[vii] Walter Benjamin, trans. Howard Eiland, *The Arcades Project*, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 479.
[viii] Leviticus 8:14-15.
[ix] Leviticus 10:1-3.
[x] "I bowed under the shoulder," Thompson.
[xi] Thomas Morton, "Queer Ecology," *PMLA*, vol. 125, no. 2, 2010, p. 276.
[xii] "fecund," *Oxford English Dictionary*.
[xiii] Annie Dillard, "Fecundity," *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 1974.