

What Is Least Me Is Most Who I Am

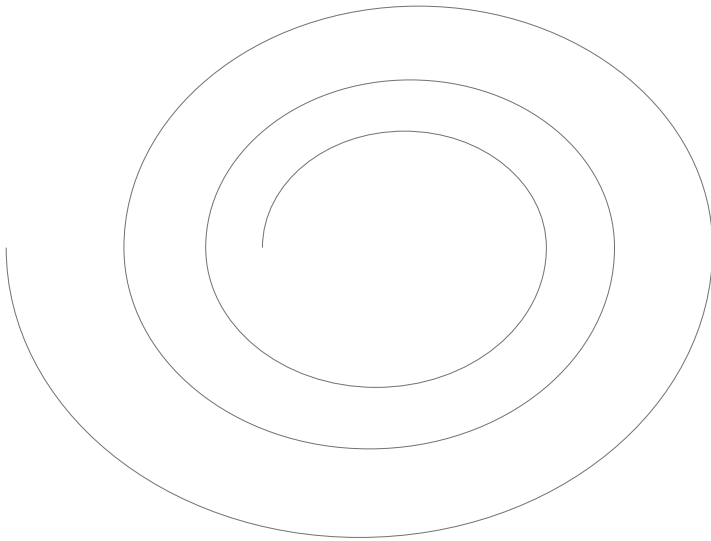


Peter Yovu

Front-cover image by Peter Yovu.

What Is Least Me Is Most Who I Am

P e t e r Y o v u



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*For my Mother and Father,
for Heather McHugh and Tom Lux,*

*and in memory of friends gone too soon—
so many sad Septembers.*

emptiness is home to all things but itself



The Artist

A short way up the dirt road, a dog
running with something bloody in its jaws
pauses, glances back as if I might
run after it to steal its prize.

Here, tracks in snow, probably
that dog's, and not far, the carcass.
A deer's. More tracks around it, different,
from deeper in the woods.

Not much left.

A few ribs ribboned with red meat,
sinews and tendons exposed, their blue-silver gleam.
And there, in pine-shadow a leg, definite,
emerging from last night's
inch of snow like the start of a watercolor sketch.

It's enough.
My eyes' teeth have it.
I'll take it home, take
a hard look at what's mine.

Observation Tower

In the dream you stand on
uneasy ground. There is no
railing or wall
between you and what is
a thousand feet below:
another thousand feet to fall.

What you stand on is a tongue thrust out.

You are the word on its tip
about to be uttered,
about to wake up.

End of Summer

The river was low.
Pools in dark hollows
of exposed granite bore a steady sun.

Sleeves rolled, for the electric
pleasure of touching the unseen,
I delved a pot-hole the river
over countless years had drilled into its bed,
and found one, deep down,

a time-tumbled stone,

and with fingertips
that had their own stream
of touch, and were cold,
my arm up to the elbow very cold,

I clutched it, and between thumb and fingers
tumbled it more, all its edges
long since subdued, before
lifting it out to hold in the hollow of my palm.

Water from the black well I took it from
steadied itself, reflected sky until
a slight breeze or vibrations
from the distant road
unsettled it and the sun
glinted fiery worms like nerve-lightnings flashing

in the socket where an eye
no longer was.

Next to Nothing

it weighs,
elfin skullcap, thimble for a fetal thumb,
ghostly dome that floated down
from an unseen minaret in the pine,

the least last skin applied
to a wasp's
nest.

I can't bring it close, breathing
will blow it off my hand.

There's a small hole
just where a nipple would be on a beginning
breast. Mouths,

dozens of wasp mouths made of intricate
alien parts, chewed—
I'll have to look up what they chewed—
and applied layer on layer of delicate
paste, accreting, hardening,
to make this.

Wasps, dead ones underfoot after an October frost,
unlike tightly curled leaves are juicily crisp
and make a sound that still keeps me
from wanting to deliberately
step on them.

Raven

For a long time I looked toward the snowy hills,
saw nothing, but could hear what sounded
like a death rattle changing pitch breath to breath,
muffled, as if coming from a closed room.

Then there it was,
a raven above the hilltop trees,
so close to them it could be
using them to scratch its sleek undercarriage,
to pleasure out the sounds it could make,
a slow grinding of rocks reduced
to pebbles, then to gravel somewhere back in its throat.

I watched: at times it seemed
no more than a black rag taken
up by the wind, buffeted and shaken.
At others like it was tumbling in and out
of a raven shaped hole in the sky.

I listened.

Until the raven veered once more out of sight,
too far to hear, but something remained,
a vivid absence filled my head,
broke free and rose up
to the snowy hills, moving up and down
the fringe of spruce, making its own sounds,
almost words, almost mine.

where leopards have gone shadows have spots



Night Shift

Eels swallow the hook. Line cut,
released back into the night sea,
they might swim down, sinuously continuing
among weeds on the bottom, and heal,
but more likely die. Mostly the fishermen
yanked the hooks and threw them
—junk fish—into a driftwood fire.
I couldn't watch. They writhed, must have.

One large man turned from shine to shadow.

From where I lay, lifted from sleep
by kitchen sounds and the front door clicking shut,

I followed my father down wet steps to the subway's
smoke and murk, to the screech of steel on steel,
to a gloom ghost-lit by the surf of sparks
the train scraped up, down
to where someone once fell under
repeating wheels. Followed my father

down, helplessly back
down to sleep.

Now You Are Gone All Over

I am taken in by the words I wrote for him a long time ago and forgot. I am taken down to a root cellar. Roots dangling like the leather grips in subway cars when I was a child. Roots dangling like dark lightnings in the earth. My father could reach them. I had to reach for him.

your hand withdrawn

I am taken down and become a mole with sensitive whiskers and dead eyes. And become a teen boy slumped, strung out as the train he's on slips into its tube. And become Hades casting a violet dream-light over his hoarded mineral wealth.

and mine in a dark pocket

And so I must climb out, must claw my way up the roots of my own words back to the world itself, back to street level, to people bustling, crowding onto the Staten Island Ferry. Back home to say good-bye once more ...

reaching for a nickel

As It Happened

What do you want?
somebody calls out from across
the street, above the sound
of traffic, unseen
in a crowd constantly moving,
constantly repeating.

And then once more, louder,
What do you WANT?
No reply. A corner crazy, I think, but
I want to call back, to yell:

I want to feel as if the whole universe
had no choice but to bring me here,
like it always wanted me and wants me still.

Give me a break, he thinks back.
All right, I want to stop looking for approval everywhere.
Good luck with that.

I try again.

I want you to come from wherever you are and talk to me,
I mean *talk* to me, I mean talk to *me*
and then I hear it, plain as day—

Ham, pumpernickel, lots of mayo,
just the way my father liked it.

Grace

After much cheerful banter the host
surprised me, asked me to say grace
I never had before so
I bowed my head
to think what it would be
but in that silence
a few seconds in I heard
as everyone did
my stomach's nearly endless
plaintive interrogatory

whine

no one laughed
they probably wanted to
but this was grace

I said please
forgive my stomach it
has a mind of its own
I said it speaks for itself

for a body
that has cravings
like yours, like everyone's
the world over

—I could sense approval—

it's
starving I said
it could
kill for something to eat.

Nairobi

On the city's edge I saw men,
their fingers eaten away,
whole hands eaten away,
feet worn down to blunt
flesh-stockinged stubs, crawling
on sidewalks, no, not crawling, I thought,

you need hands and feet for that,
paddling might be the word,
the lucky ones lying or squatting
on makeshift platforms with wheels attached
like turtles with no upper shells
swimming through waves
of a sandpaper sea. I thought:

there but for the grace of God go I,
but no, God's grace cannot be

selective I thought and who am I
to look down and feel grateful not to be
a man whose broken body may have brought him
into a wholeness I cannot know
and that was the thought I thought I would keep.

the more you love the sea the better you drown



Storm

Late in the day,
Heat climbs itself to where
clouds crawl, turn black,

merge and claim the sky. The sky
cracks, lets out a groan that crumbles
into smaller groans penetrating ground.

Gray sharp blades of rain rip trees.
Sky-flash. Streams flash
down mountains into

black water hauling blacker water up.
Stones like fisted wombs
stir in the river's mud. It goes

on, not long, long enough. Stops.
Time is stunned.
A jaguar yawns.

The sky turns a blue ear over,
and thick leaves bob as unfinished rain
climbs gravity's ladder leaf by leaf

down, rippling in pools
dusk-struck, silver.
An oropendola calls.

Pelicans, Flamingos on Lake Nakuru, Kenya

Relentless heat.

With unchanged expression,
feet forward, white pelicans skid
and crumple the belly-cooling sky
reflected on water, settle and smooth
their angles in.

Following the code long ago
pinned to a map printed behind charblack eyes,
they form a ragged crescent on the lake.

The sky's blank glare hangs over like an unstruck bell,
shining cold off the tiled skin of fish they plunge in unison
to trap and scoop as on

the surrounding shore flamingos like unfueled fire mill,
hissing as they stride and dip their heads to drown the sun.

Ghazal

I heard the word esophagus before I knew I had one,
held a toad in my palm before I knew toads sleep
all winter under a pond. A rooster's feathers are a cool

metallic burn. Creeping is speed to the sloth.
All things take whatever time it takes, my minute
to get the steak just right is yours to tie your daughter's shoes.

The trombonist shares his bed with a cellist he met a month
ago.

He's very good at lying about the size of fish he has caught.
No matter, she thinks. There are minnows and muskellunge

in the same water. A Brazilian rain tree shrugs and hornbills fly
out.

Nature is kind, it lets hornbills believe it's a choice *they* make.
Would you compare a duck full of buckshot to a watermelon?

We're in this together, seems to be the point.
Still, its good to get inoculated. Nature is also kind to viruses.

This Animal

Walking downstairs to breakfast,
halfway down I remembered a dream, if it *was* a dream,
of a fathomless darkness out of which emerged
a stag, his great muscular weight
distributed down through delicate legs to the four split hooves
hard as obsidian, as if forged in volcanic fire,
starlight streaking his antlers as he turned his head
and shivered with the cold coming down.

In the dream, if that's what it was, I both watched and was
this animal.

Farther down the stairs I thought:
a stag does not know it is a stag, not in the same way
I know, or think, I am a man,
but standing in the everything and onliness of its being,
aligned to starglances and the breathing that accompanies them,
knows what cold is, and darkness penetrated by stars.

Walking down to breakfast it seemed that
only from death that does not know itself as death,
something emerges,

something I cannot call
me.

last words are first words somewhere else



Regression

Words sing me, hold me, crumble
to ur-sounds, sputter,
dissolve. I slip under
the word-bog,

mud-dark and dankly rooted.
Larval lip-bubbles
break through the earthflesh
I am rolled into, am

inseparable from.
A cochlear ocean
hums, brings
waves of whitewarmth

to swim into and drown.

What Language Was There

What language was there
before Mary Breare,
called mother, called mine,

what ocean before
waves rolled over
nameable whale

or radiolarian?
What sound was there
before words ever

scrolled the vortex of ear,
what seaselves filled
shells

before language before
the day the now there would be
no more

Mary my mother now never
but once always
here.

It's too soon

for the grub to grow sky-
blue elytra and fly
from the earth;

for a child's clarinet
to sing out its glad
goose-squawk mis-steps

on a creaky stoop;
over March fields too soon
for clouds to uncloset

their brooms of rain
or any dawn to bring
what any light will bring.

When I Gave Up Writing

A skin of words all over me
I stepped into a pond, kept going
deeper until I was under and could
feel them peeling off
like starlings lifting from a leafless tree.

Black pollen between me and the sun.

Naked, released, I crawled out and went to a cliff.
Swallows swooped and darted,
scripting the abyss.

a sheet drawn up
words that someone
else will get to speak

As I write

these lines I watch my shadow writing its own.
As I speak, I hear my words break into words I cannot hear.
As I walk, I feel the roots of my tracks drawn down to dark water.

And I go on writing and speaking and walking
because my death says it cannot live without me.

another death
another ocean
to crawl out of

After Lorca

I don't want to stay curled up in the lap of grief,
I want to get far away from the bull's-eye in the mirror.
I want the stride of that child who drifts into dawn
like an unanchored boat.

When the sun has the sheen of an apricot,
I want to get far away from the dog in the centrifuge.
Tell me again how the cortex wraps the thinking tree,
but leave out how the barren shore goes on begging for waves.
I'd rather not hear about grease cringing on a garage floor
nor about how death distributes his snakeskin shoes to the poor.

I want curving hallways and to keep a golden mandolin under my
bed.

I want to be the continuing shine of the turning wheel,
and to know there are elephants chanting
in the caves filled with their ancestors' bones.

When I'm dead warm the earth you throw on me with your hands.
If the soul, as I claim, is an ocean of anti-bodies,
festoon my grave with nautilus shells. I will not be able,
so scratch it for me, the itch that will remain.

sea breeze the barnacle at the back of my eye opens



The Artist

A small boy I could dream
into the simple watercolor sketch
of a jackrabbit
in a one dollar pocket field guide
to the mammals of North America,
big enough to contain
all of North America
and its one jackrabbit.

It had veins in its ears that glowed like lamps
casting light I could see blue mountains by.

Someone made them that way.

A desert wind swirled through my chest.

Song

Wind is sighing in the weeds.

Rocks are snug
in the river's soft pockets.
The moon in your cupped hands reflected
reflects upon your face.

Beyond the willows there are pines.
Beyond the pines the path you and I
will take to a store of many fabrics,
to seeds in pictured envelopes.

A deer has come a little way
or maybe far to stand a while before
we realize he is not there

was never there but is

but is desire.

Ghazal

The grackle tilts his head and catches some sun on his throat.
He likes the feel of wet grass stroking his belly
and to carry its scent up into the pines.

“Pygmy slow lorises are the only known poisonous primate.”
The brain cells responsible for thinking the word “elbow”
are in frequent communication with those that think “oboe”.

There is ample room above the human eyebrows for lifting them.
There is a lit match always hovering over the word “gasoline.”
The bronze-green necks of grackles hypnotize the crickets they eat.

Shadows have bellies that crawl about in the caves of the moon.
Remember when crawl felt like flying?
You could feel the sky inside you.

by translucent waves
I am rocked
open to inhabitation

I was born

without words and with blurry eyes,
but now I see

a tree looks bigger at night than it does during the day.
Once I could say that, I always knew.

Falling asleep is when words go off on their own.

Desire: a tree tall enough to penetrate cloud,
leaves wet with unfallen rain.

Dawn: words shower down.
Among them those I will say sometime

and those someone else will say
when I do.

The Poet

You say *trees*, you say *dusk*,
believing there is
something you can track, follow
into what is

no longer belief
but life—

then, as if eyes others than yours could see,
you pause,

look up just as a fox

loping across the field
to where the forest is
already night

pauses,

turns,
looks back at you,

and *you*

are gone

Sometimes

Sometimes you see yourself
as a stranger might see you
from far off. The Milky Way
fades and at dawn you walk
on sand slowly, peer down

at the lacework of foam
the sea leaves at your feet,
a script both alien and known.
You reach into your pocket
half believing light

has filled it,
find there a kind of warm
emptiness and when one wave
surges, turn to watch your tracks
dissolve. Something like a thought says

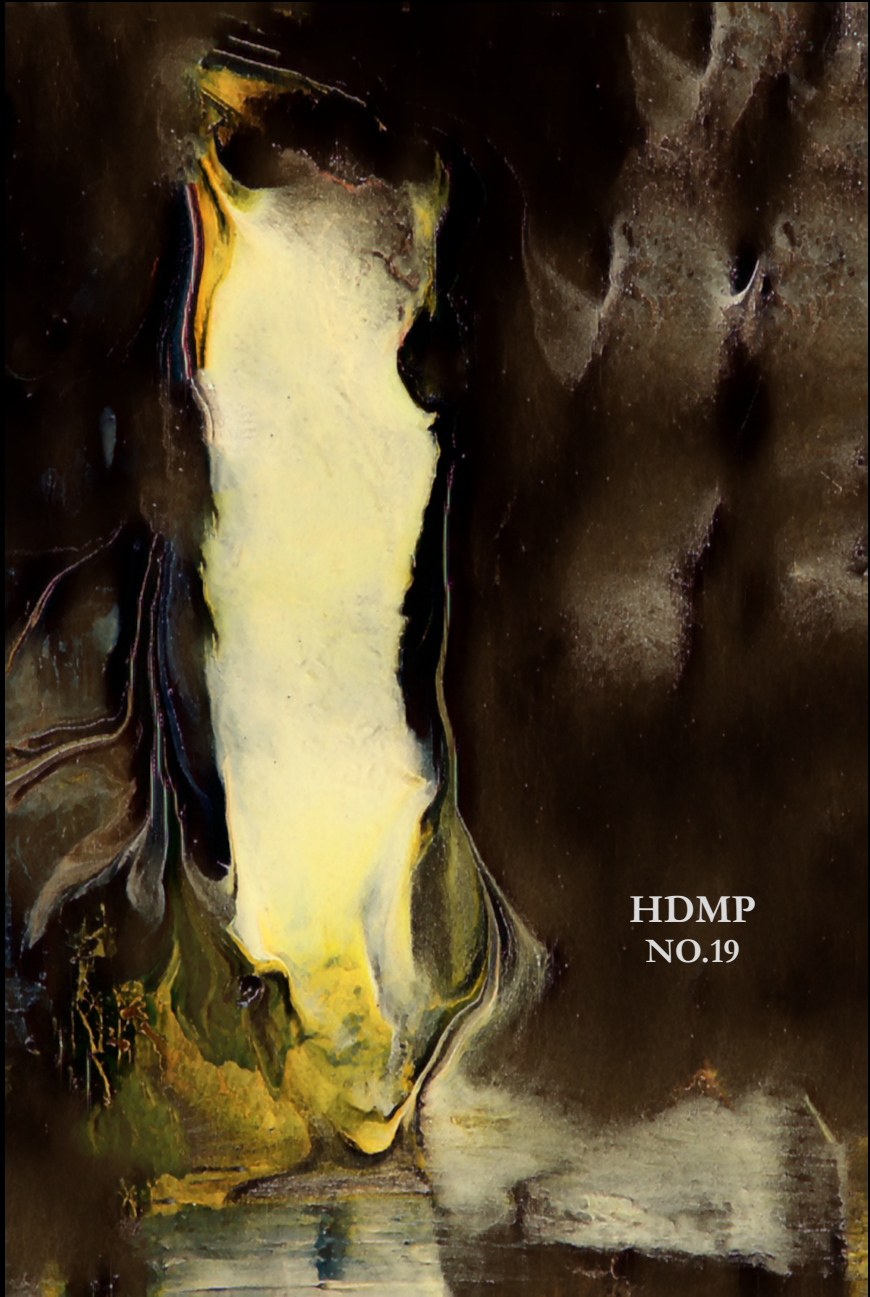
this is who you are
as you lift a hand to say
“good morning” to no one you know
walking toward you,
who nods, and walks on.



“Now You Are Gone All Over” appeared in *Frogpond* 48.1.

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