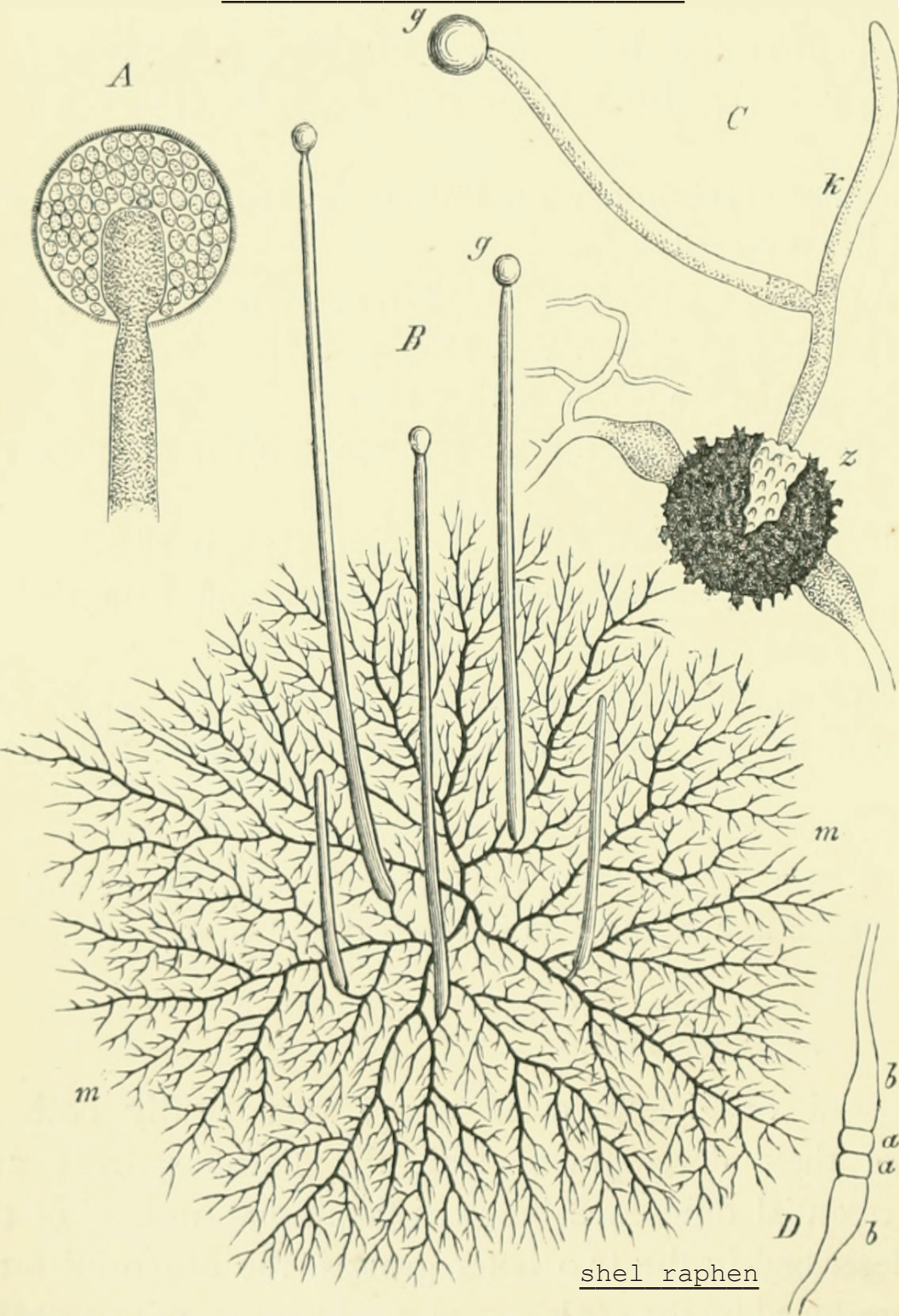


Jovian Flesh & Fauna



shel raphen

Abstract:

Second-generation adult cult survivors, or "2GAs," typically experience difficulty integrating with life in the outside world. Media portrayals of cults rarely reflect the lived experiences of survivors; and are often dehumanizing. A commonly cited point of difficulty is that the life, language, and worldview within the cult are completely alien to those who were not in the cult themselves. 2GAs sometimes describe a longing to return to the cult, simply because it is the only place with people who would understand their experiences.

It is natural for anyone trying to empathize with another to start from a reference point in their own life. But what happens when there is no reference point? When the daily life, emotions and ways of thinking seemingly do not resemble anything you know? Is it possible for those who were never in a cult to truly sympathize with cult survivors? Is it possible for cult survivors to heal without validation?

Jovian Flesh & Fauna is a collection of poems to inspire empathy with experiences completely alien to your own; and to reflect the frustration when attempts to communicate those experiences break down. I hope when reading these poems that you try to understand these feelings without relating them to your own experiences. This radical sympathy may or may not be possible, but perhaps it's worth it for us to try.

BEFORE

Genlisea

Wandering in the overgrowth
Seeking granola bars
and Gatorade
Fresh from the brush
Still in its peel
Aching for that soft
Crunch

I came across a Rite Aid™
Far off
Across an intersection

I had reached an island in the road
When the walk signal changed
Traffic trapping me

If I turned back
There was no end
to the rumbling and rushing
But towards the store
It was quieter

I jaywalked
and reached the Rite Aid™
a rare site in rural New England
The sign seemed
phosphorescent
The doors opened slowly

I bee-lined to the bars
and found them squishy
I noticed the clerk
looked like
a melted doll
Face askew

I tore the wrapper
and sticky pulp came out
The warm store
Felt moister
Felt flaccid

The clerk seemed to wobble
I decided I should leave
I approached the automatic door
Only to find it shut
I touched it
and felt warm
Fleshy
Fibers

The predatory plant
Genlisea Copia
has caught me

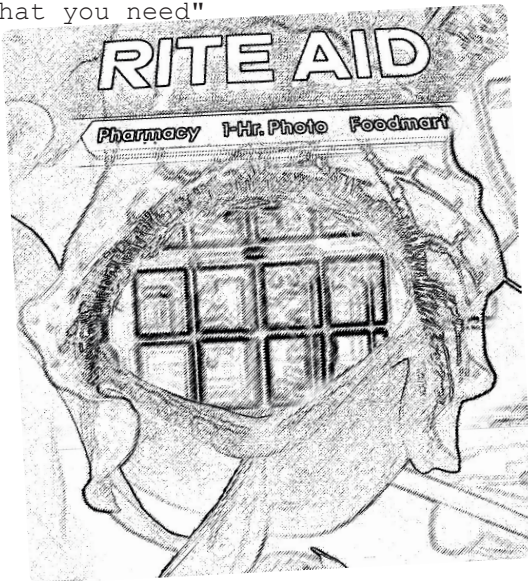
I don't struggle.
I watch as the aisles
become organs
or rather
are more obviously organs
and had always been

It prays on primates
How often must it feed
In this overgrowth

It makes me feel small
a part of something
at last, a purpose
I am wanted

I feel how satisfied it is
to finally feed
on flesh
and bones
My delicious marrow
dissolving into broth

In my last breath I whisper
"I understand
Take what you need"



Jovian Flesh & Fauna

Mycelia

Licking the sweet starch from the sole of your boot
You watch the new arrivals
Their metal box landing

Lucky little
Freshlings. Still tender
Their dark spots and rings
The Old Man says it's from sleep
The cold sleep of a long journey
From the burning earth

Lucky children from
Loving parents
sent far away

Branchbeetles watch
Perched in wavering white willows
Judgmental little things
Singing sad beetlebys

How will they integrate
into the mesh of
flossy white mycelia
Spinellus Mycorrhiza
its silky web linking us

Ah, there's one
The gentle tendrils
reach for him
affectionately latching
He's scared
He's not getting it
tearing hyphae from his skin
You feel their pain

There's always some like this
rejecting us
running off into the overgrowth
Many return
They get it
This is how it is now



The Outside World

The child looks astray
Aside from the center
Aside from nature
Sitting in rows
And there is a wrist
Twisting and tightly
A factory and a conveyor belt
Stamps and expirations
The children sit as they are moved along
Branded by irons one by one

As the dark smog fills the room
The adult withholds her words
She leaves marks, red and red
Lasting deeply
This is the problem with the Public
This is how it is out there

Someday the world outside will be like us
Happy and free

Jovian Internal Schooling Protocol
A curriculum for pediatric advancement

Leave child in warm location to rise until doubled
Do NOT touch it!
Let child wander and
see what happens to children

until child learns
the importance
of herd

Brushed Yellow Fur

Brushed yellow fur
Its probiscus dangles
A long tongue
The Slint seems to slither
Its five legs
Its eyes glint
Its three pre-hensile fingers
Gently stroking your hair
As you rapidly decide
Never to speak of this
As its tongue
Runs
Up
Your
Neck

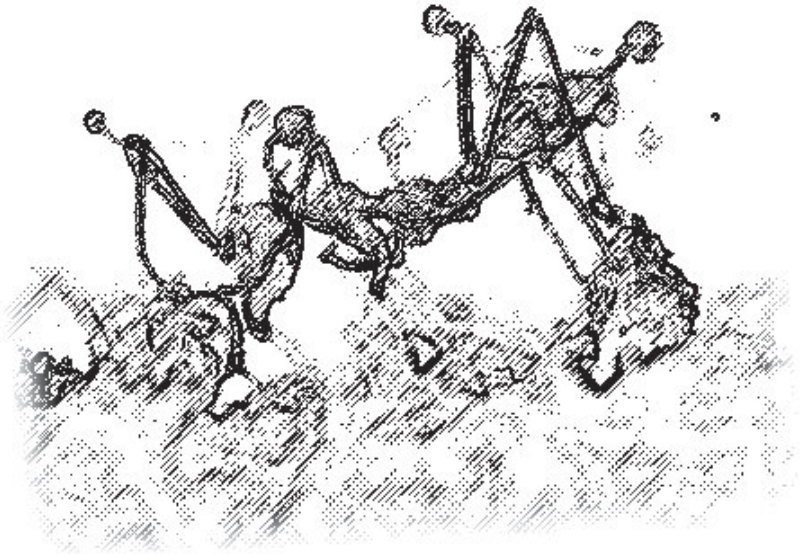
Shivers
Running
Up
You are not food
It seems
Not its type
and it leaves
leaving its options open

Our Philosophy

We are a pariah
Earth is on fire and they fear us
We are on a thin thin line

It is the responsibility of every child in the
colony
to preserve the continued existence of the colony
and keep our philosophy in everything they do.
In every way we are.

The outsiders are broken
You must be disciplined
Pity and fear them
They could destroy us
But we will save them



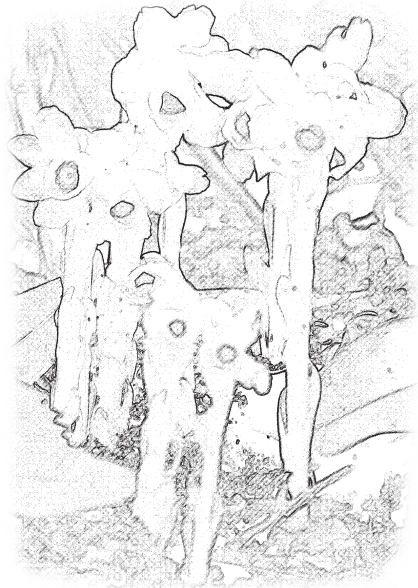
Ghost Stories

Sometimes
by flashlight
'neath copper tents
and starry skies
the children tell stories

Infinite halls behind forbidden doors
Spirits that turn you
Hidden rooms
Disappearing people
the smell of rotting flesh

You've been telling lies
It scares the younglings
A teen told you and you told them

The teens move on
They move on and they don't come back
We do not need ghosts



Justice is Forgiveness

You shouldn't have done that
You knew it was wrong and you did it anyway
Did you think you wouldn't get caught?
You know that's not how this works
We all know what you did
It doesn't matter what you say

Sit before us
Plead your guilt

The harm you could have caused
We
Are on a thin
Thin
Line

Everyone you know
Knows what you did
Nobody approves
You are a shame on this community

So plead your guilt

Two toe nails and
one from a thumb
Rip them off quick

Then
cleansed by rain
breathe in spores
we forget

The Old Man

In his bunker
All steel and shade
The colony ship
Wires and tubes
Spinnelus strands denser than anywhere

The old man founded this colony
He used to be friendly
When you were younger
You saw him outside
He has throat cancer now,
You see,
He's on life support,
You see,
He speaks to you
You are connected to him
Through the mycelia

So long ago, did his mouth move with his words
So long ago, he was inspired

You enter his chamber
You look at him
Shriveled and covered
The wires and tubes
White and fuzzy
His skin
White and fuzzy

You have, questions
You don't need the answers
You could just go home
Forget about this
Why don't you?

You ask if earth is really on fire
Of course it is.
You ask if the creatures were always here
Does it matter?
You ask if he believes in what he tells you.

No need for all the questions, child.
No need to start shouting
You are lucky and pure,
Remember?
You have lived here your whole life
Happy and free
Why are you getting upset?

Here, an answer:
Jupiter was dead
And you terraformed it.
The flora and fauna grew here
Like the colony
Grew big on the thick Jovian gas

Do you feel better now?

The old man is so still
So restful
Why disturb him?

Was this what he envisioned?

This is what evolved.

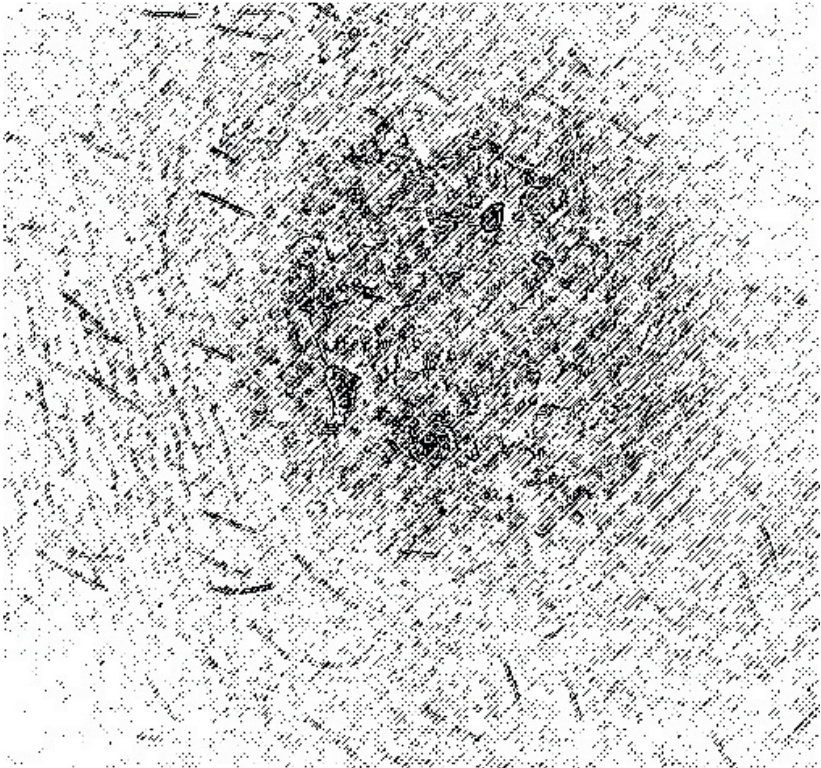
You think he's molding
That this is mold
You look at your arms
The fuzzy white patches
Are you molding?
Is that what you think?
We are symbiotic
Remember?
You ask why he is the only adult
You ask why the children never grow
What happens to them

Why are you tearing the hyphae from your skin?
Why are you hurting us?
Why are you cutting us out?
What do you intend to do?
Where will you go?
Come back
Stop it
Why are you crying
We care about you so much
Please don't leave
We are so hungry

Fuzzy Patches

Everything goes gaussian
You're not sure how you found a ship
The earth was not on fire
You're not sure how you found a job
How you made friends
How you came to speak poorly of us

You stopped calling us the soft patches
The fuzzy patches
You started calling us mold
How offensive
Good riddance



Settler's Rash

Under the skin
We are here
And will always be

Settler's Rash:
Tinea Vitis
Is a doubt that hangs

Someone talks of chemistry and ferns and number two
pencils and we itch.
Of AstroTurf and brass instruments and basic
geometry and we itch.
Of birds without teeth and carapace
And you are scratching

Here, the beetles are so small
Here, the earth is larger than Jupiter
Everything on earth is smaller than you and you feel
so very small
And you itch

Nobody on TV ever gets eaten.
Nobody on TV has fuzzy white patches
It inflames us
It reddens us

Perhaps you are not so special
Your life was like any other
And you simply forgot all of it

Everything on television is real
Things that everyone can relate to

How do you begin to describe it?
You choke up a thesaurus from your throat
And nobody hears you
You blow spores and they arrive as pollen.
You touch doors before you enter them
You begin to blow pollen instead
You let the pollen come into you
And your nose is dripping
And you are covered in hives
As enzymes in your body try desperately
To convert it into
Something digestible

Sometimes you scratch until you bleed
Blue succor and sticky tacky slime
You touch your ears and gaze at the mirror
You practice laughing
And saying things like
"My high school"
"My parents"
"My hometown"
And wonder if these are the real words
And wonder if it's possible to connect without
consuming
To be heard without giving the fuzzy white patches

There is something called a fungicide
A cream
You apply it twice daily
You apply it on your ears
And your legs
Your forearms
And all of your crevices
It smells of soup and Sleen breath

But it only works on earth creatures
And we are not earth creatures
You
And us

Symbiotic, remember?
A shame, that you are so
Very alone
You can never stroke the silky mycelia
You can never listen to the branchbeetles singing
soft beetlebuys
Instead there is only itching
Scratching
And a rash

AFTER

A Venture

We are going to do a breathing exercise

Take deep breaths quickly

In out in out in out

Pause and do this for a minute

Have you done it?

You are stepping outside for the first time

You are eating lunch

You are putting french fries on your pizza

You are learning

new faux pas

you describe your life and are looked upon
and you are seen

Long and grey

spindles twisting into points

seeing eyes and twinkling mouths

pale red eyes

Pause

Breathe deeply and quickly

Resume

You are invited to a ball.

The ball is full of vines

nails running along

This is the night we lick nails and hammers

Drink the nectar that drips from gutters

You sit on the floor

in the corner

Authoring scrolls on every difference

They chug their nectar with fists closed around the
handle

you put both hands flat around the cup
your nectar has grape jelly in it
theirs has hibiscus brandy
hibiscus is tart
hibiscus has a long stem reaching out and out
enticing pollen
out and wrapping wrapping
you'd never heard rapping before?
it's new
wrapping yourself in thin green coats
until you are a pile of laundry
and someone has stolen your detergent

Breathe quickly, quicker, please
It is a part of the exercise

Just go home.
You are not ready for this.
You are a child
Nobody gets it right their first time
Go watch Daniel Films and calm down
You have no fucking clue what a Daniel Film is and
it isn't helping
Get straight on the train to South Station
The train feels the same between stops
Get on the train from South Station
Go home
Smell the burning rubber
Breathe it in
slowly

Gelatin

There is a wall of gelatin wiggling
it glistens, semi-opaque, and through it
the outsiders. they move and wobble.
it's lime, the gelatin that is. it tastes like lime.
I know they are like me but they all look green
They speak green too

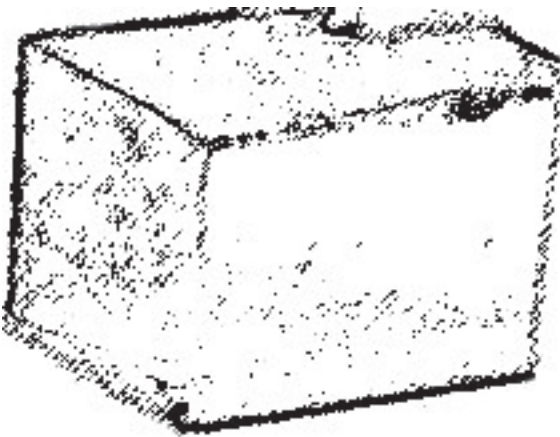
gelatin is made
of ground up bones
the hooves of horses
or agar agar
this wall is made
of calloused skin
swollen veins
and carpet colors

I plunge my arm into the wall
I reach in, deeply
warm and deep and further
my shoulder and thigh
I hold my breath and push

until I am on the outside
and I am on the outside
I am outside

and the people outside are not green
they are many more colors than on the inside
but they are not green
and the people outside do not speak green
they don't speak any of the colors from inside
but they do not speak green
I'm learning to hear their different colors

but I look back
to see the wall
opaque and pale
if I speak, the inside hears green
I am lime now. I am outside
I press my hand against the wall
I didn't stop being pale
and opaque
but the wall is firm
how hated I am by everyone I knew
how they must look at me when I look back
I am an outsider now
among the outsiders
who will always be outsiders to me
how I long for the past
knowing I left for a reason
as much as I cannot return
I should not



Bitte

I want you to feel the fear
See the clockwork in orbit
Its mechanations a mystery

The shame
The dead flies spilling out your mouth

The embarrassment
The unknowns
just for you

See the tallness
Make your neck a crane and fail to see the top
Always taller than you think it could be
Always different when you think you get it
What, this? Tall? This is nothing
There is much taller out here

It's so very tall out here

Feel the bigness
Always zooming out
The unfamiliar plains
Stretching out
Stretching and stretching

You see a bush
with triangular berries
You are supposed to eat them
Nobody tells you if it's safe

Beetles

Remember when you used to like the Beatles
Because that was the music you knew and that's what
was around and it felt familiar

And now you hate the Beatles because everyone knew
the words to the songs back then including you
sometimes and it felt familiar

It feels like a moral issue really it feels like you
should hate the Beatles because out here everyone
you know hates the Beatles

The Beatles get all this praise and attention when
they're essentially a boy band and yet all these
other bands get less praise and you think it might
be racist

But you wonder if compliance is all you know now and
if you only liked the Beatles because everyone did
and you only hate the Beatles because that's what
people say out here they say they hate the Beatles
and they bond together and you want to bond together
so that means you hate the Beatles

You don't secretly hate them. You hate the Beatles
and you know it to be genuinely true. Nothing
changed about what their music sounds like to you.
You just hate it now.

If you went home to everyone else you would like the
Beatles and that would be true too.

Yeah, you remember that...

Your words

Conveying feelings you've never felt
Empathy without reference point
i'm losing track of this book
it won't end and i can't get it to work
Why don't you understand me?
Here is a take-home test on my trauma

F

F

F

I've never had a take-home test
I don't know what this feels like
Do you get it?
Take it again

No

No

Zero

Zero

Do you understand this language
Are these your words

sometimes i fear i really am smarter and better and
wiser and more enlightened than everyone else
that the lashes set me straight
that i have been ruined now
that everything good about me is because of that
place and everything bad is my fault
if it's true that i'm smart
what else were they right about

(they never called me smart
they called me smarter than you)
(i'm disgusted by these thoughts every day)

i'm afraid to reconnect with the only people who
would know my words
they don't see mycelia or spleens
pitcher plants and pit rash
they see through a film on their eyes
a nictitating membrane
all cherry trees and four-square courts
not how the cherry tree weeps
not the rot in the porch

i'm afraid i'm the only one struggling
and they're all doing good
only happy memories
i'm making it up
i'm ruining it for everyone
i'll get it shut down
i'm afraid that i'm a monster now and it's my fault

The Problem

The problem is that
Looking back on it
The yellow orchid
was actually pink
And there was a deer there
Which you forgot
Which meant there couldn't have been
wings on a coastal cliff face
staring out to the other side
of the far out cape and distant tip

Because deer don't roam on beaches
So it must have been in the woods
Which means it happened two years later

So actually the time with the sock
Over the bird's beak in the car
Must have happened before
Which means the sock on the bird
Had nothing to do
With the orchid on the beach

So how can you justify what you did
To your wrists and your hands
To your friends and family
Uprooting every orchid
Severing every beak

The truth is

The truth is I didn't even get the worst of it
I wasn't liked but I wasn't expelled
I was never sleenfood
I was the cleric of Justice

I hurt people there

In someone's traumatic memory of being nine years
old and screamed at for not punishing their friend

I was the one screaming

I told people to distance themselves from outsiders
To fight with their families
I shit-talked outsiders, called them pathetic drones

I was the most zealous of us all
I carried the lawbook wherever I went
I'm not proud of who I was
what I did is a greasy residue I can't wash off
but I try to be compassionate to that person

A product of the colony

I write these poems,
make myself out to be the victim

I was a perpetrator more than a victim.

And even I am struggling so
I guess that tells you something

Our Words

I thought
If I could only grasp the right words
If I could grab you
My nails digging into you
Forcing you
Giving you the holes to receive my story

I thought if I couldn't learn to say it in your
words then the solution was to say it in nobody's
words

But you always see yourself in the mirror even if
it's not a mirror it's a window and this is my face
and her face and his face why won't you look at us
what is this glass made of anyway why are we the
butt of jokes in comedies starring Jake Gyllenhaal
like this doesn't actually happen to people.

(I learned out here that if you reference
celebrities you know nothing about it makes you more
humanlike to earthlings)

I thought if I could say it in your words
If I forced you and pushed you
and twisted your neck through your spine
Planted fungi in your ears
That I would feel fulfilled

What I needed was to say it in my words
Homewords
No translation no tricks of the mind
To say it in how I remembered it
Without needing to explain anything

Without needing to relate it to those who would
never find it relatable

I needed one of Us to hear me. It couldn't be the
green people the earthlings the everyone I've known
since

It needed to be the old people the jovians the
everyone I'd ever known

It wasn't you who I wanted to understand me

This project in alien empathy fell apart
when I was contacted by a homeworlder
"We're starting another colony
Tell me what went wrong last time"

If that alone
If that alone was all I heard
Already I'd be satisfied

So I wrote the mycelia and I didn't say mycelia
I wrote the trees the toes the rash and rot

But I didn't call them that

and I gave it and they said

"I never want any of this to ever happen to my
kids.

I am so sorry that this happened to you and your
friends and your everyone you ever knew.

I am going to make sure this never happens again."

What else could I possibly want
Not even in my fantasies had something that
satisfying ever happened

It wasn't that I needed to be understood
I needed to be believed

XLVII



W.H. Fish, Bot. et. 333.

M. & N. Hasbani, imp.

Morus alba, Linn.

I think it's time I moved on
From inside and outside
We are of this earth, too

Cover image from page 171 of "Comparative morphology and biology of the fungi, mycetoza and bacteria" (1887) \ Genlisea illustration is composed of photos by California Carnivores and Paul Sancya \ Mycelia illustration modified from a photo by Laurel Fan \ Our Philosophy illustration modified from a photo by Vipin Baliga \ Ghost Stories illustration modified from a photo by coniferconifer on flickr \ Fuzzy Patches illustration modified from wikipedia commons \ Gelatin illustration modified from a photo by star5112 on flickr \ Back cover illustration is modified from a photo from NASA

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To my fellow lifers:

I'm sorry. I understand how much it hurts to think critically about it after spending our whole lives defending it. Something can have good parts while also having bad parts. You know people who were hurt. This poetry collection isn't about making accusations. It's about exploring emotions and experiences. If you want my proper critique, reach out in private. Most of all remember that a cultic group is not universally abusive to each and every member, rather, that the systems inside function to make members accept or ignore the abuse enacted on the members who are abused.

