

Monocult

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*And there we were all in one place;
A generation lost in space*
—Don McLean, “American Pie”

Nebraska is a sea of land—flat and stretching in all directions like a Monsanto ocean. At dusk, hot orange radiates a full 180 degrees along the horizon. We are here to work, to raise this season’s crop of art, which will be fully organic, insufficiently subsidized, and only half-ripe when they cart it off to market.

I live with four artists—Raluca, Z, Lindsay, and Aimee—in a house that hardly even qualifies as a building. The living room is on the second floor, or the first depending on the part of the house you ask. There are leather recliners and floral couches salvaged from all over eastern Nebraska and an ancient heater. “Sassy Nebrassy, you’re one classy lassy,” someone has scribbled on the wall, “May I put my silo in your chassis?” A constant stream of moths floats between the single naked fluorescent light, and the great wilting marijuana plant hangs from the ceiling. (A hex on the fauna, says Z, but if you touch it after dark a veritable cloud of insects you didn’t see will abscond in a rustle of wings and leaves). We roll great dried leaves into amusingly weak spliffs and take big drags in the second floor studios. The freezer is full of Tupperware containers of eggshells and squashed grapes and wilted spinach. The sink has stopped working. At night I climb out one window or the other onto the still warm tin roof and try to feel things about the stars. The house is named Victoria and has a life of her own.

Vicky, having more holes than walls, makes you wonder about the difference between inside and outside. She is leaky and lovable, mother to generations of budding artists, a family of raccoons, a menagerie of birds and snakes and mice. She has a door on the second floor that opens into thin air. She has no foundation at all and can’t protect us from the incoming tornadoes, but she can protect us from ourselves. In a week, the dusty film on

your skin and the bug bites are comfortable staples. Their absence would feel disorienting, sanitized, inauthentic, like too-white teeth.

They call this a residency. We work for three hours a day keeping the farm in good shape—putting in shelves, unclogging drains, moving a barn ten feet to the right or a house five miles to the west. In return, we get free accommodations and studio space. I meet Ted, the guy in charge. He has a habit of quietly turning up behind you unexpectedly and then evaporating into thin air. He stands at six and a half feet and speaks softly and sparsely, as if compensating for his massive physical presence. It takes two days for me to notice he’s missing half a finger. “Don’t ask,” someone tells me. One of the other buildings on the farm was supposedly his childhood home, a leaky frontier house with something mysteriously called a “birthing room” where he may or may not have been born.

While we work, Ted mumbles instructions under his breath, ominous things like “use the table saw,” and, in one worrying case where I got a brown fluid all over my hands while rewiring a lamp: “that chemical causes nerve damage.” When I stab a rusty nail halfway through my thumb, he plants me in a very comfortable chair that looks like it was salvaged from a minivan and calmly pours out the rubbing alcohol. Ted is all quiet experience—standing in the shadows of the barn behind us, always carrying the right drill bits in his pockets and giving us the right tools before we know we need them. None of us has much experience with construction, but he forgives us when we screw up time and time again. He forgives us when we fall off roofs, get arrested stealing hemp plants from other farmers’ fields, when it takes all eight of us to carry a twelve-foot beam. “When I was thirteen,” he whispers to me, glowing, “I could carry two of these a mile by myself.”

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Last September a friend and I went on a day hike in the Blue Hills outside of Boston. We had no cars, so we took the subway and then the bus, which dropped us off a stop too late on the side of a highway. We began our hike trekking through parking lots and under overpasses, with monster hotels like trail-markers, trying to find the safest way to scale a clover junction. “No one has ever loved these spaces,” my friend said. She could very well have been right. For the roadtrippers and commuters driving through, it’s just another gas stop on the way to somewhere else. Employees at the hotels and restaurants probably see it as just another 9-5, a stop en route to the American dream where you can own a chain of these joints and never have to actually come to places like these.

This is why the farm was so special. The corn is a sea, and the farm is an island, an oasis of cathexis in a big world of nothing. These days you hurtle through the sky in a metal canister, disappearing from somewhere and plopping down somewhere else. You can drive, and the highway stretches for eleven hours, eight days, three months, but do you feel the distance from the raised interstate, the channel from A to B, lifted up and over everything in between?

Are you ever really anywhere? The states are full of neutral buffer-zones, airport terminals, strip malls, the kind of anonymous territory that could be Anywhere, USA: Huffington News, CVS, TGI Fridays, Au Bon Pain, Brookestone, Home Depot, JoAnn Fabrics, Walgreens, Subway, Kohl’s. You tell where you are from the local variations: Pittsburgh has the supermarket chain called Giant Eagle; I hear rumors of something called a “Higgly Piggly”; Nebraska has a fast-food chain called Runza that sells what are basically the mutant children of corn dogs and hamburgers. Middle America has a lot of sincere enthusiasm for the suffix “and more.” Waffles and more. Espresso and more. Corn and more. Life, and more.

* * *

Here in Nebraska, Monsanto is a local god. It brings the seeds that germinate and, year after year, turn magically into corn. It brings the chemicals that rescue that precious crop (and the American economy) from pests and demons. Monsanto is a god of science, of progress. Bigger, it says, and better: more ears to fill more mouths, better genes to fight better pests. Life scientists are engineering

soybeans that deliver omega-3s to fight heart disease, nutritionally enhanced broccoli, disease-resistant vegetables. The rhythm of life: sow, till, harvest; every four years pull out the nitrogen-sapping corn and plant soy to restore nutrients to the fields. The irrigators—raised, snake-like metal structures on motors and wheels—crawl through the fields of their own accord, forward and back. From our vantage point, the corn seems to grow itself.

Non-believers say the name like a curse. You hear those three syllables whispered in the car, speeding through the infinite grid of corn and soy. Their accusations: Monsanto “plays God,” meddling with things that oughtn’t to be meddled with. Monsanto Corporation has a long history as a civilizing force. The word culture itself comes directly from crop cultivation. A chronological survey of ominous-sounding products: Artificial sweeteners morph into PCBs which become plastics, Agent Orange, bovine growth hormone, LEDs, DDT, and most recently, the herbicide glyphosate and corresponding glyphosate resistant seeds. Their products work hand in hand to give life and take life away, two processes that in modern day agriculture are all but inseparable. I’m reminded of the plethora of mythologies where the god of fertility is also the god of death. Culture, specifically monoculture, will triumph over nature—but are they really that different?

The problem is that plants aren’t docile. We underestimate anything rooted to the spot. Plant genes, encased in spores and pollen and the like, are meant to move because plants can’t; plants can change rapidly, genes crossing from species to species and flowing wildly. Even monoculture crops don’t exist in a vacuum. Genes for pesticide resistance can flow into weeds, like viruses that develop resistance to antibiotics, breeding aliens from within. There are stories of invincible horsetail weeds eight feet high. Farmers react in the only way they know how—by spraying more, which only breeds bigger and badder monsters.

Monsanto isn’t omnipotent, but it is pretty damn powerful. Of the corn planted in the US, nearly three quarters is genetically modified and controlled by Monsanto. There’s corn for ethanol-based energy, corn for animal feed, corn for human feed. When you include calories from corn-fed meat products and corn syrup, it’s easy for a majority of your bodyweight to be composed of re-purposed corn. There’s a lot of money flowing around the industry: money to farmers, money to corporations like Monsanto to make crops cheaper

to keep people buying them, too-big-to-fail money flying this way and that, money for corn-based energy to ease our dependence on oil.

Here's how this looks if you're a farmer: organic agriculture is labor-intensive and expensive. The more you produce, the more you get subsidized, so you get paid more per pound for more pounds overall. So you go big or you go home: You pick crops that promise enormous yields, you band together, you grow big crops on big acres. You buy more seeds and plant more seeds and use more pesticides to prevent more crops from more pests. Farms merge into other farms, and the heart of the states becomes one great Monsanto ocean where you can't tell where one farm ends and another begins. The seeds themselves are copyrighted as intellectual property, and Monsanto is known to sue farmers who replant seeds from last year's crop to avoid purchasing new ones. Their license to use those seeds has expired, so to speak. Monsanto is working to bring "Terminator" seeds to the market—seeds which effectively self-destruct after a year, automatically enforcing the licensing. The big fear is that Terminator genes, in a plot twist eerily reminiscent of the film franchise, will flow into conventional and other crops, assassinating plants of all kinds and wreaking havoc on ecosystems. But hey, intellectual property is intellectual property.

The thing that worries me the most about monoculture is how it edges out complexity on both ends. Advocates of Monsanto are fiercely defensive, perpetuating a rhetoric of better plants, stronger plants, feeding more people. None of the concerns have been adequately proven, they write. Don't bite the hand that feeds you. Critics talk about intense political pressure to suppress the science, of potential famine and farmers struggling under legal bondage to a corporation that charges more than they can afford for the only seeds they can grow. And everywhere is an either/or: You pick one creed or the other. Either the corporation is the benign bringer of a worldwide harvest, made possible by ingenious science, or a monstrous, hungry, and potent blight on the possibility of healthy and ethical agriculture.

I imagine the real Monsanto sits somewhere in between: a corporation trying to grow food for the whole world and grow itself in the process, blundering along like the rest of us, unable to fully account for all the effects—social, medical, ecological—of its innovations once they leave the lab, under economic pressure to not stare its dark

underbelly directly in the face, and convinced, perhaps rightly, that the nutrients it provides on an unprecedented scale to the people who urgently need them more than make up for any ethical quandaries. Nobody likes talking about controversy on an empty stomach.

We, the Art Farmers, are the anti-Monsanto. We are here to raise a crop of art which will grow so tall and fast it can skewer a cloud by July, while the corn is only waist-high. We are the alien weeds in the fields. We are monstrous stalks of horsetail, growing more and more resistant to monoculture every day. And we will flow into you, if you give us the chance.

There's this weird cliché that artists, by definition, are psychological crack-ups, masochists of the highest order. "*I'm just not talented enough,*" I whined at one point on the farm. All of my college friends were off making money and saving the world while I stared at my navel in the prairie. Writers my age suddenly had work in all kinds of major publications. I was feeling deeply unprepared for The Real World. "You picked this," Lindsay said. "Being an artist means constantly flipping between total egotism and absolute soul-crushing self doubt," she said. Of course, Western culture prefers to call this borderline disorder or bipolar disorder and make it go away. *Let's fix that chemical imbalance.*

The choice to make things often involves rejecting these narratives—the productivity Kool-Aid that keeps Monsanto plugging away—and diving headfirst into the crazy. One's prerogative as a creative is to dip across every line and then come back to the safe side, but I'm scared of one day not being able to get back across. I don't know which causes which—whether making art allows you to reject these narratives or rejecting the narratives leads you to make art, but the two almost always go hand in hand. Something about near-psychosis allows you to question the clichés and purported realities of societal life enough to give your work a strong jaw and sharp teeth. I like to think that the madness and discontent is not just destructive but productive, compelling you to produce out of emotional necessity, out of a need for the feelings and chaos and confusion to drip out of your head and into the world. Of course you run the risk of fetishizing a mental condition that makes you deeply unhappy. And of course, you run the risk of diving too deep.

On my first day of work, we drive Ted's pick-up to another anonymous Nebraska town, stopping

in front of a rundown old house. A man arrives in a silver van, gives Ted an enthusiastic hug, and unlocks the place. We carry all of the furniture—dressers, desks, a bike, an easel, sports equipment—out into the yard and then hoist it into the truck. The man hires a couple of us to help him clean out the place for a few hours. “Who said they needed a dresser?” Ted asks in the car.

Days are hot and dry and sticky with our sweat, or torrential. When it storms, you can see the twisters forming in the sky. The rain beats down on Victoria’s tin roof and, despite the leaks, the unfinished house somehow feels safe. By morning the farm is a great swamp and we hop across trails of pallets and hydroplane down the muddy roads.

The town is twenty minutes away by car: twelve silos, a post office, a water tower, a bank, and a bar called the Don’t Care Bar. Understaffed, they hire Lindsay, who has waited tables before and gets measly tips from the local wannabe biker gangs. We sit in the corner booth during her shifts and try to slip dollar bills into the back pockets of her jeans and get hit on by the locals.

“Whatever happened to old Ted? Is he still running that hippie cult?” a gruff man in overalls asks his friend.

“He’s gotta be seventy by now. I don’t think he’s got any kind of a plan for retirement, now that his wife is gone.”

“Wife? Another? Where does he find them?”

The four-dollar gin and tonics become beers become a cider for the road, half off because it’s to go. We drive home with the radio on, the fields sparkling with dense hordes of fireflies. The roads are straight and fast. You can do ninety and not get pulled over unless you have plates from a blue state.

On my third day on the farm I stumble into the barn, which is actually four barns salvaged from all over the state and stitched together. In the midday heat the inside is pitch black, but I can feel its size even in the dark. I fumble for the light and poke myself on a nail – the walls are raw wood. When I find the switch, I see the heaps of stuff: paper, construction supplies, old wood. The ceiling is high and seems to go on forever. An infinite warehouse. Narrow walking trails edge through the chaos as if they were hiking paths. The quantity of miscellanea is so massive that it’s hard to pick up any one thing. A hacksaw balances on a canvas stretcher, leaning precariously against a doorframe. Piles of Folger’s jars from the past fifty years are filled with nails and drill bits. At one

point, the floor drops off, revealing a carpet of dirt about five feet down. (“We’re working on it,” says Ted.) Cans of congealed paint and rusted out bits of cars and unidentifiable fluff have grown together into uselessness. A brightly decorated bandsaw hangs out in the middle of the floor. An enormous Hy-Vee sign hangs from the ceiling, dusty neon watching over us all.

Things accumulate here, piling up in the barn until it becomes a cavern of things that once seemed useful but now just take up space. They’re like comfort objects, there in case you need them, though you couldn’t find them if you did and likely won’t remember they exist. “Let’s just say it,” Aimee says, “Ed is a hoarder.” The term, while accurate, feels derogatory, like we’ve relegated a man we all respect to a category of people including those whose dignities have been sold by their families to reality television. Or it feels pathologizing, as if we have accused him of having a personality disorder. All of my capitalist sensibilities are telling me this guy is a wacko and the whole farm a little shady. I put a lot of energy into suppressing that particular judgment.

It’s not all bad. Character accumulates here, too. It hangs in the air, in the murals and graffiti and the meadow where sculptures grow like trees. Thirty years of artists have loved this place. You show up, and you can feel it in the bones of the buildings—affection has soaked into the ground and found its way into the limey water and makes the mulberries so sweet and the grass so vigorous. It tells us to be reverent. It’s message is twofold: This is your place to love and do what you will with as many have before you, but you will leave, and your love will be piled onto the rest, your art will become another layer to be painted over.

The state of the barn feels more like a misguided attempt at practicality than a pathology. Everything in it is hypothetically useful, and, considering none of us can pay for board, if Ted needs any one of these things, having to buy it isn’t practical or ideal. In the work of feminist theorist Lauren Berlant, hoarding is explained as the inevitable response to the unstable nature of the consumer. Capitalism promises satisfaction through consumption, but that satisfaction is never lasting. Hanging onto objects, to the rest stops that are supposedly the vehicles of this satisfaction, feels like a way to make that happiness permanent. But to hoard comes at the price of isolation, of choosing possession over being in circulation. “In circulation,” writes Berlant, “one becomes happy in an

ordinary, often lovely, way, because the weight of being in the world is being distributed into space, time, noise, and other beings... In [the fantasy of hoarding] one is stuck with one's singular sovereignty in an inexhaustible nonrelationality."

I'm talking to a Finnish guy in a Lao hostel. It's the winter of 2013. He's wearing elephant-print pants with a hole in the crotch and enough bracelets to count as training weights. I am eighteen and have been miraculously liberated from my parents for long enough to backpack the Banana Pancake trail alone. I don't know much about backpacker culture, but I'm quickly assimilating. I've learned the routine: hi-where-are-you-from-where-are-you-going-next-oh-I've-been-there-there's-a-really-great-hostel-how-long-have-you-been-travelling. Normal lives are taboo: For the backpacker, home is the tangled network of hostels and single-serving friends that stretches across most of the world like a chart of a phone carrier's coverage or an airline's seasonal magazine route map.

"I want to see the *real* Laos, you know?" he says. I do know. What he means: he wants a nice old lady to invite him back to her house where she'll serve him authentic tea and introduce him to her shy and beautiful daughter and they'll all laugh and smile and come to love each other even though they can only communicate through body language. He wants to chop off a piece of something secret and take it home and show it off.

I doubt the impulse to see the marvels of the world with your own eyes has the same power in an age flooded with images: You've already "seen" the Taj Mahal; you've already "seen" the Eiffel Tower. They say seeing them in person is different somehow, but I'm not sold.

Imagine a matrix-esque simulation where you can go *anywhere in the world* and have a full sensory experience of that place. I'm talking goggles, electrical nodes, that scary Matrix tube of wires that plugs into the back of your skull, whatever you need to believe it. You can run a five-mile loop around the gardens of the Taj Mahal if you're so inclined, and even go inside. It's all HD. We've programmed in the smell of the ginkgo trees, the chipping in the marble beneath the nice Quranic script, the way the fog hangs in the morning and then evaporates with the rising of the sun. Hell, we've programmed in fifty years of accurate weather predictions, adjusting for climate change. Do

you still feel the need to go to Agra?

I don't just want to see it, you protest, I want to feel its presence, its aura, to stand in the same place as thousands of years of tourists who found it even more awesome than I will. On some level, I believe in this nugget of reality, of authenticity—a badge of real-ness that can't be imitated. But I can't decide whether this claim to "real-ness" has merit.

When travelling, we like to think of the developing world as encased in some sort of resin that keeps it in stasis. We romanticize this cultural subsistence agriculture as an alternative to our monoculture of productivity. We want to go to these places and be voyeurs, to watch them from the panopticon of our Western-ness and come back with stories and artifacts that will give us a leg-up in the perpetual struggle for social and cultural capital. And yet by observing these places we are changing them; the influx of enough backpackers makes the whole culture gravitate around a tourist economy. You can't have an *authentic* tea with that nice old lady, but you can share a beer with her son who has just moved to a town with more tourists than locals to open a tour bus business because it's the only real way to make a decent profit around here. We are mutating cultures, "contaminating" them through our wish to experience them before they are so contaminated they become absolutely nowhere.

The reality is that backpacking creates a culture that isn't tied to a specific location. It was born as a diaspora without a homeland, existing in the network of hostel common rooms and tourist bars where the customs are identical and the people are the same across continents. Through this culture of observation, you can go anywhere you want and never really feel out of place. This may not be a good thing.

I'm not sure why we still do it.

One role of mythology, writes Joseph Campbell, comparative mythologist extraordinaire, is to sanctify the land, to claim it. The term sacred, before it swelled to encompass its current meaning, is a derivation and amalgam of two Latin terms: *sacerdos*, meaning a priest or priestess who guards a temple or sacred space, and *sanctum*, the space itself. The sacred hung in the relationship between human and space, space embodying the spiritual energy of some deity, the person watching the space, act-

ing as spectator and container of that energy.

Plotinus describes the sacred space as designed to “capture” the deity, as if he or she is a flighty thing who may otherwise evaporate into the ether and never be seen again. The space needed to be an “appropriate receptacle.”

But if you catch her, will she stay? I imagine getting attached to a place somewhat literally: you wrap your thread around the person beside you, pulling it taut and making a double half hitch around your own waist and then you send it out again, to catch another and come back to you, as always. With each stitch your needle plunges through the air, the dirt, around a sapling, under a set of purple covers or through a crevice in the drywall, weaving the netting of your attachments into the fabric of the space. Soon you can’t walk anywhere without tripping over the threads.

These days the people are scattered. People I love are in San Francisco and London and Boston and Delhi and Greece, and my net of attachments spans the whole worldwide. The string knots around something here, something there, but largely places are forgotten entirely: To reach from here to India without getting stuck on the top of skyscrapers or tripping up airplanes, your strings have to be pretty high off the ground.

The word “temple” only dates back to ancient Rome, but its etymological roots had connotations of being literally “cut off” from the space around it, as if the ground was suddenly discontinuous. There had to be a line of sorts, a demarcation of where normal earth ended and the sacred began.

I spent countless hours this summer searching for the modern equivalents. They’re hard to find in a secularized world. I found them in galleries, white and stark like giant ice cubes, great museum complexes designed to eliminate all distractions from the pieces. The power of art, writes Marcuse, begins when “all links between the [art] object and the world of theoretical and practical reason are severed, or rather suspended”—cut off from hard-knocks materialistic, utilitarian reality like the temples of old. All that austerity makes galleries hard to love.

Art Farm is the alternative, I guess. It is a space made sacred by being cut off from circulation, like a hole punched out of Monsanto land, an incubator for a culture entirely separate from the surrounding sea of corn like a hostel in a Lao village. The farm has its own mythology, rich with the legends of heroes, demons (i.e. the possibly rabid raccoon we live with), and personal familiars. Ted

tells the story of an artist from a couple years back who sliced his thigh open while clearing part of the prairie grass with a machete. He insisted on sewing himself up on the porch of the farmhouse with embroidery thread and a bottle of whiskey. And then there’s the resident who, en route to the farm, got slammed with a traffic violation so extensive that he had to complete extensive hours of community service before he could leave the state. Every year, somebody gets arrested.

We make our contribution. On my first day of work we plant trees. The holes are already in the earth, which is brittle from the direct prairie sunlight. It will become softer now in their shade. I keep each sapling straight as Z sprinkles dirt around its little roots. I hold it delicately between my index finger and my thumb and she pours in water and packs the mud down with bare palms. The ground around the tree gets denser and denser but I can’t imagine the baby cedar will manage to stay rooted through the June tornadoes. The prairie plains don’t get along with trees so well. The sun makes our hair hot to the touch and dirt cakes around our ankles. Decades will have to pass before incoming artists will have shade. I will be at least forty by then. The tree doesn’t care; he won’t hurry for me.

“I feel like we’ve given birth to a child,” says Z, dusting off her hands.

“It needs a name,” Raluca says. We look at it.

That night it storms. The wind slams shutters and Ted ushers us onto the prairie to watch the cyclones form in the sky. Hot and cool air, fluttering this way and that.

In the morning the tree, hardly a twig, is still there. Larger ones, planted by residents decades back, have lost limbs. We call him Saint Cyclone, because he made it. He had worked his first miracle. We sanctified him as the permeating spirit of the place, dumping him onto the heaping pile of Farm lore.

I think in order to make riveting work these days, you have to worship your own gods. Campbell applied his theories of ancient shamanistic mythologies to explain the role of the 20th century artist. “The shaman is the person, male or female, who in his late childhood or early youth has an overwhelming psychological experience that turns him totally inward,” he tells Bill Moyers on PBS. “It’s a kind of schizophrenic crack-up. The whole unconscious opens up, and the shaman falls into it. This shaman experience has been described many, many times.” Spiritual authority, the power

to interpret, fell on the shoulders of a single initiate, who drew wisdom and magic from personal familiars that spoke to him and him alone.

When ancient societies made the shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture, cultures rejected the old shamanistic way of life. This made sense with the hunter lifestyle, which prized and depended upon individual prowess, but in a planting society success was dependent on external factors, like rain, but also on the hard work of every member of the group, with no place for virtuosos. Myths had to have the ability to bind families and villages together in a cohesive unit for shared survival. Spiritual life fell to the people, who shared a pantheon of communal gods, often masked and distant, never appearing to the individual. Planting is about the link between life and death, the way the seed falls to the ground and grows the food that keeps the people alive and then dies, leaving seeds which will grow again. Campbell retells a planting-culture myth that encapsulates this shift, in which the individualistic shamans, in their arrogance, piss off the sun and the moon, which desert mankind, leaving the world dark and barren:

The shamans say, oh, they can get the sun back, and they swallow trees and bring the trees out through their bellies, and they bury themselves in the ground with only their eyes sticking out... But the tricks don't work. The sun doesn't come back. Then the priests say, well now, let the people try... [The people] stand in a circle, and they dance and they dance, and it is the dance of the people that brings forth the hill that grows then into a mountain and becomes the elevated center of the world.

The dance of the people brings back the sun. The shamans are "lined up, fitted into uniform, [and] given a place in the liturgical structure of a larger whole." Once assimilated into the rules of a society that has no room for magic, the shamans are faced with a choice: liturgy or interiority.

At seventy-two Noah Purifoy left for the California wasteland to build his world. In 1989 the desert was still arid and empty, teeming with potential for solipsism. Joshua Tree would have been a blank spot on AT&T's coverage map, a gap in the spreading virus of constant connectivity that

nobody bothered to fill or think much about. It was a mythical barren wild where art couldn't be contained in white cubes and preserved for posterity.

The critics call this his Environment. The capital-E denotes that the term encompasses all of the sprawling little-e "environments" included within. Each environment is wonky assemblage, so-called junk dada composed of desert trash. If Purifoy's work is any reflection of local demographics at the time, your average resident was a toilet married to a bowling ball. Driving your truck fifty miles from civilization to dump is almost universally cheaper than paying for waste disposal. A friend of a friend of a friend once found a mountain of ties twenty feet tall out there. Under mass-consumerism, everything is buried alive. The afterlife, for all manner of unwanted miscellany, is located in the extreme conditions of Joshua Tree.

Purifoy's isolation sustained him through the turn of the century until his death in 2004. He died surrounded by the artifacts of his internal landscape, made material through his hard physical labor. In the years since the extreme climate has gnawed away at the structural integrity of the environments: pieces which once supported human weight have grown too dangerous; dust, wind, and heat have worn away details. He wanted it this way. His artistic remains are, like him, becoming the desert.

I had a friend who told me not to be a writer unless putting words to the page felt like shitting. Don't follow it, he said with a little too much gravitas, unless it has to come out, one way or the other. As Purifoy aged, his work ethic became frenetic, colored with the increasing urgency of the ultimate deadline. Nine years before he died, he shared lunch with an interviewer in his mobile home. "It's been said that if you don't accept death as an equal part of existence you're in for trouble somewhere down the line," he said. "I'd never given much thought to any of this because I thought I'd live forever, but I've come to realize that's not the case. That may have something to do with why I push myself so hard now to finally get the work out that's always been in me." His hardy body: a little metabolite, a machine for the translating the blueprint of his mental space into the physical sphere, pulling image and idea out of his head and into the physical world to save it from the decay of his flesh.

Isn't this what we're all doing when we create? We slide our hands, wrists, and forearms down our

throats and back up through our nasal cavities to cup the base of our brains, unraveling the tangle of electric pink matter. We pull it out, in one long strand, through our mouths and proffer it. *Look at this*, we say. Somewhere in that string of you is a whole solar system. I think of the way scholars refer to Kafka's "universe," as if each work of fiction was a different episode forming a singular plotline, the genealogy of another reality discrete from our own, as if writing was a wormhole, sharing the particular timbre and hue of the artist's interiority with the rest of us. I imagine Noah Purifoy's ghost wandering the environments by night, haunting the labyrinths built to contain it.

For the contemporary artist-shaman, the price of the magic of creation is pretty steep. Insanity, Foucault explains, is a societally constructed malady. We made up the line between sane and insane. Reality within civilization isn't necessarily some hard and fast objective truth about the world, but simply the code of conduct and set of beliefs to which we all subscribe. A loss of connection to reality isn't a loss of connection to the world, but to other humans. It's a loss of the common language of culture that binds us all together—the rules of your world are not the rules of everyone else's anymore. The ultimate goal of art, I suppose, is to chart the unfamiliar territory beyond the scope of that language, to translate the untranslatable into something that can be digested and shared. I'm not sure if this is possible. When I think about Noah Purifoy I think about someone who sacrificed community and the possibility of happiness among other people for work that deeply fulfilled him. Maybe he gets all that missed connection posthumously, when disciples trek out to Joshua

Tree for communion with his work. Me, I'd like to feel that before I die.

Art Farm is a cult: it's isolated, it's insular and out of circulation, but it's a living culture like anything else. We just operate in a different kind of currency. We don't talk in pounds and pesticides and profits, but in citronella candles and brushstrokes and hickeys. It's not stabilized against the dollar, and its so-called value fluctuates wildly.

Another of my favorite myths that Joseph Campbell tells to Bill Moyers on that PBS program is the story of the young boy who has a vision in which he realizes "the central mountain is everywhere." Campbell explains:

The center [of the world], Bill, is right where you're sitting. And the other one is right where I'm sitting... What you have here is what might be translated into raw individualism, you see, if you didn't realize that the center was also right there facing you in the other person. You are the central mountain, and the central mountain is everywhere.

The middle of the world is at the heart of a Nebraska barn piled with thirty years of accumulated debris. The middle of the world is in every ear of glyphosate-proof corn that has ever graced the Earth, in every Monsanto executive, in the amputated tip of Ted's missing finger. It is here, with you, as you read this, and it is here with me as I write this however many weeks prior. It's not going anywhere.