

Alberta #3

Today, I want to think through those who came before me and after me
—about family, heredity, and what I call
the open.

I also want to think about genetically passed down altered states and their relation to
Being.

To begin, I'm going to tell a story, or a series of stories, about some experiences with time I have had.

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November 2017: I am sitting beside a pool on a rooftop in Arizona. I'm looking at the scar that stretches from one side of my belly to the next as I write. I don't remember the day I got it, but I sense it. I sense it with a deep hunger, turning three, days before.
After the surgery, I am not allowed to eat for ten days as my large intestine grows back together. The nurses would give me popsicles only to have them pumped back out through a nose feeding tube that runs into my stomach: sensations in my nose,
at the back of my throat,
choking on tubes.

This scar makes me think of my mother. While it might be on my body, it's her scar too. The years we spent in
waiting rooms,
doctor's offices,
(pain on the bedroom floor)
and hospital rooms.

Time doesn't move in those rooms. You look out the window and people are going in and out of buildings, trying to be on time. In here there is no time. You have the beeping of the machines, but measures like day and night, breakfast and supper, 4 and 5 pm don't exist. Melancholy time exists as my mother is grieving her child, a child that is only a few feet away from her, but one whose potentiality, whose futures are depleted.

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Psychiatric hospital, Toronto.
May 2017: I meet Derek and I think he works at the hospital.
He is very pleasant, well-spoken, and approachable.
I feel like I know him, or have known him, like I'd know him if I remembered hard enough. His glasses look broken and his ability to hold eye contact was flickering. In this moment, I care deeply for him, like a brother. But there is a sense that maybe he is me.
It's something I don't understand yet.
I don't hesitate in becoming close with Derek.
We share a madness experience,

coarse and twisting, knotting, stringing along a stretching expanse.
It's not just the physical trace expressed in our genomes, suggesting some still present
common ancestor, but transitory:
we are all there, somewhere unconcealed, but not always accessible.

*

For me, illness is not a catastrophe, and it isn't simply about making-better or curing, but
it is instead a species-level meaning-making event. Illness is a very ancient space and we all
inhabit it. It's nested deep within each of us, deeper than the genetic strands stretching across a
geological timescale of billions of years; it is a space for communal immunitary kinship, where
our bodies heal the gnawing of

microscopic predators,
genetic expressions,
madness,
and time.

When I have my children, I become intensely aware—deeper than in an embodied way,
more like a geological awareness, long and vast and much closer to the ground than I ever
thought I could be—of all the illnesses that marked my life.

In the winter of 2016, I am standing in front of my great-grandparents' graves reading to
them about their daughter, in a land I haven't been to before, and a flash of lightning places me
both before and after, an intergenerational being, and I wonder

who am I from and who am I to?

I become present to my place in a vast line of parents who have all died, and to that,
somehow, I must learn how to die as a parent.

*



Paraskevia Church and graveyard, Smokey Lake, Alberta January 2016

“Don’t forget Paraskevia (Smokey Lake) where your ancestors are buried,” reads a note attached to a picture taken in the 1990s, in Smokey Lake, Alberta. The picture shows my father and my paternal grandparents, with their backs to the graves of my great-grandparents. I visited that site recently and the gravestone remains new—shiny black marble, etched with names and dates. The new stones were put in on the day of that photo, to replace the worn stone from their Ukrainian funeral, etched by wind and time. When I get this photograph, the note obscures all three figures, leaving only the surrounding space of the graveyard, a place at once familiar

(I had seen this image, or one like it, before)

and yet strange, made so by the effacement of paper and words: *this is where your ancestors are buried.*

*

Watching my daughter’s hair lighten to a fair blonde, considering her crisp blue eyes, and seeing the ultrasound photographs of her malformed kidney, I can’t help but remember something: a woman I have never met until finding her nested in my daughter, my maternal grandmother. I never had any pull to her until I watch her son die, Ellie become ill, and the near miscarriage of my second daughter.

(Did she ever miscarry?)

I want to understand her at one point, and then, at another point, I don’t want to understand her anymore. Instead, I am trying to understand myself, to make room in myself for my role as a father.

*

I first receive this photograph with the note on it, I don’t think much of it. My aunt has always been eccentric, sending me odd notes and pictures, so I just put it to the side. However, for years, including a move to a new house, I never remove it from my desk. It stays piled amongst the ever-changing table refuse, yet it’s always there.

In the winter of 2016, it brings me to my paternal great grandparents’ graves, accompanied by my father. On the first trip, we find our way to the “Necyk” farm, one that was sold over 70 years ago, and speak to the current farmer. Talking with him about the farm’s history, we can tell that the farmer cares deeply for this land.

He takes us on a drive through the fields.

My father tells us that his grandmother had a miscarriage in these fields. In that moment, I experience

nine months later,

a bleed,

the near miscarriage of Mary

loss,

A hundred years before

my great-grandma, terror in those fields,

grief. Grieving a child, never met.

I didn’t understand that yet.

My father asks if there is still a pile of rocks in the center of the farm. The farmer takes us there. My father explains that the farm assigned to my great-grandfather when he brought his family from Ukraine was a field full of rocks—glacial rocks collected then dropped across a geological epoch. It would take him years to clear the field, each year slowly revealing more land to farm—generational time. Seeing that sculpture of rocks struck me. I feel my great-

grandfather's labour, frustrations, and time. I can see how my grandfather never went into farming and became a school teacher.

Later, my father and I visit his mother's parents' graves.

There is an area off from the gravesite, deep within trees, for unnamed, unbaptized babies and people that committed suicide. The graves are so worn you couldn't read any of the names, and no one had replaced them, unlike my great-grandparents' graves. I wonder if they were my relatives.

(With this disorder the statistical odds of me committing suicide are incredibly high.)

I walk up to the top of a small hill and, on that crisp winter day, I can see for miles. I see the rail line that my ancestors would have come on from Ukraine.

I see a great many things that aren't yet visible.

*

In September of 2016, I begin to think about my unknown grandmother, who I assume is still alive. My maternal grandfather has been dead for years now and I still haven't cried for him.

I wonder what my grandmother would think of his death. She knows about it because she is close to one of my cousins who would have told her. I wonder what their love looked like, before they did all those tough things to each other.

I think more of Spedden, Alberta, the city I started writing about years ago. I promise myself that I need to go there for the film and for myself to see this land, and slowly I start to see the relationship between this place and the woman I will never meet. I won't.

I write about both of them, the place and the woman.

I write about the deep sadness I feel trying to hold all these things in my life together, and I could see how she was not able to.

I think of my bipolar diagnosis years ago.

(Would she have had the same diagnosis?)

People say that when they see Elliot, they see my mother.

Last weekend, at my brother's wedding, my cousin, the one that is in contact with my grandmother, says my mother looks identical to her mother. There is a photograph of my seven-month-old mother sitting in a bath in the kitchen sink smiling. Her mother left a few months before.

How did my grandfather take care of those four children alone? His family lived in Saskatoon.

Who would have helped him? I have no idea where his parents are buried.

I imagine myself alone with my children. Mary is now the age of my mother in that photograph.

Would she smile at me without her mother?

(Would I still be here?)

This last month, Candace and I take Elliot off her daily antibiotics, meant to prevent infections from overtaking her kidneys.

You had kidney problems.

My own mother had kidney problems.

So did two of my cousins on my mother's side.

What else of you, grandma, is nested in my daughters?

*

In the summer of 2017, I'm in rural Pennsylvania writing about a different you, thinking about you, being with you: Derek.

Are you doing well?

Are you still out there?

I'm talking to a five-year-old child named Holden as he swims in the outdoor pool where I have my feet cooling. He wants to know what I am writing.

I said

I am trying to remember something.

He asked

when did it happen?

I said

a few months ago.

He asked

don't you just remember?

I said I am trying to.

*

June 2017: I go manic three weeks after I leave you, Derek. It's the worst episode of my life.

I think of you often during that month. I wonder what my recovery would have looked like if we could have been together.

It was so lonely.

Remember when we went to the music room on that last day?

I record your hands as you improvise on the piano. Your voice is captivating.

That day you are returning down, slowing, and coming to realize all the things you have been through.

It looks painful,

you are losing control,

but it is part of your journey.

It isn't until I myself break that I am able to start putting all these experiences back together.

*

I think of you, my daughters. How many things I want to share with you, and how I won't be what I am now but will be an old man when that day comes.

I'm sitting on a small sofa bed in Greenwich Village,

New York City,

August 11, 2017,

11:46 pm,

33 years old,

watching a documentary about Bob Dylan with my dad.

This is the first time we shared this experience together: sharing Dylan.

He is 66.

*

June 18, 2017: I don't have any distinct memories from the previous two days. I know I took my pills, read a lot, and painted.

Today, I wake up and go downstairs.

Mary is crying, and I can tell that Candace is exhausted from being up with the girls multiple times last night.

I mutter with hate to her
why did we have kids?

Candace shuts down and starts to cry.

Then, Elliot asks me for one of those small boxes of cereal that you can pour milk into and eat directly from.

I try to open it with my fingers,
then a knife,
but I can't open it because I'm crying too hard.

Candace rushes me up to the bedroom. I keep crying.

Elliot

three-year-old Ellie, child
comes in and asks me what is wrong.

Candace says I hurt my leg but that I will be okay.

Elliot places a stuffy in my hand and Candace leaves me to cry.
slipping time, Candace comes back in:

We talk about many things, things that I don't want to remember saying.
Things no one should ever say.

I don't know how long I stay there. I hear Candace call my mom, herself crying, and ask for help. Soon, I hear them come in the front door. Candace comes up and asks me if I want to kill myself, and I say

I can't be left alone.

I fall asleep for many hours.

I awake with Candace by me. She asks if I am okay. I feel drained yet somehow better.

I tell her I hate myself for what I said.

It is Father's Day and I can't remember the faces of my children.
My parents are watching them downstairs as Candace and I are on the bed upstairs.
I can't see anything anymore. All clarity is gone, and I am without affect.

I don't remember the rest of the day, but I know I take my pills that night.

*

Sometime in the dream, my dad drives me to the university to see my friend, Dan Harvey. I lay out several papers I want to write with him.

Cancer madness Anthropocene
pain pain pain

He listens.

I know I'm not making complete sense, but he listens anyway.

As we sit outside a hard rain hits and we rush inside.

We talk, but I am looking out the window.

Did it always rain this hard?

I become intensely aware of my body being pulled

down
and
down
onto our planet.
I feel the rotation of the earth, the momentum around the sun,
the weight of Jupiter, then
around the center of the galaxy,
and of the pull of everything towards everything
within the supercluster of galaxies we are within.

I feel the abyss
A million lifetimes
colder than cold. (I gaze in)
Dan and I still talk.
I realize there is no place to escape, that I am stuck in this husk of flesh
on a rocketing planet,
in an indifferent universe.

Why am I not getting the ecstatic revelations, the communions with God that Derek got?
Why is mine so meaningless and devoid of hope?
(I don't understand yet)

I find my dad sleeping in the car in a parking lot. We come home, and I continue to paint.

*

I finally eat.
My mind is too fast, and I think I'm going to throw up.
I am dizzy, not the kind that would make you fall but the kind that unbalances your soul.
I tell Candace about this, and she sends me to the pharmacy to fill my anti-psychotic
medication. She suspects I am in a manic episode and I will have to slow myself down with
drugs.

In the pharmacy, there are aisles and aisles of
ordered and repeated objects
of care: deodorant toothpaste tampons
As I walk through the aisles and aisles
my visual experience falls out of sync

with the standard seamlessness of my visual field,
and time itself, becomes a falsity,
a grand illusion.

reality—

Walking down that aisle time becomes a
flat disc,
where everything that was or would be rotates for infinity, and I would be in that aisle
forever
(I have dreamt of this aisle, had dreamt, dream of this aisle.)

Driving home the sky opens,
and the crisp blue prairie sky takes on a new vibrancy,
and just then every generation of my ancestors sees it too,
and I, an intergenerational being
—make kinship with everyone before,
and with all my children's children's children.
We all share this sky.

*

I take my medications and sleep that night.
I wake up and can't focus my eyes.
I go downstairs and my family,
my children,
are not mine anymore, not my own.

I think back to Sunday, to wondering how many pills I'd have to take to die.
That's when Candace calls my parents for help.
They come, and I feel ashamed.
My dad goes into the garage to look at my paintings. He turns to me and cries and holds me.

It is me crying holding an adult Elliot.

I see a thousand of my ancestors crying,
but then I realize the physicality of my father's body.

He's getting old.

His control over the world, over his children, over himself, is waning.

I feel so sad that he sees me this way.

Then I fall into the VISION

Elliot

worlds one,

knotting

strung

common ancestor

O, ellie.

growing closer

weaving

cosmic expanse

God I love you.

and I am so scared that I will have to hold you like my father is holding me now.

I tell him I will

get better.

I finish the large painting.

I see Derek.

I see his broken glasses, how similar he and I look,

I feel the wear on his notebook and see his gentleness, his intellect.

He is 12 years older than me and has been hospitalized six times before.

I thought my life would be different, but a month after meeting him I'm here, now, in this room, with these pills, drinking them down, thinking about how to get it done.

How to kill myself.



Mania. (2017) 3.5 x 7 foot Oil on Canvas.

*

I think of my ancestors, stretching back into the Holocene and before.
 What did their love look like?

Did they have children with my diseases?
 Did they grieve them?

What was it like for them to hold their children, their child?

I think forward to my children, and their children, and their children's children.
 I feel the world in pain,
 a geological pain.

I feel eco-sickness as I breathe in the smoke from the forest fires in the north
 west
 east
 south.

I feel eco-anxieties as a rain hits, one that hits particularly hard,
 that pours over my gutters
 and breaks my ancient elm tree.

What will their world be like?
 How could I have brought them into this?

I feel intense guilt.
 In 2046 Elliot will be my age now. Mary 2049.
 They will have first-hand experience of a natural disaster,
the loss of everything in everything everywhere.

What impact will that have on their psyche?
 Will these eco-traumas begin an epigenetic cascade into a bipolar episode?
 Will I hold Ellie, Mary like my father holds me?