

Poems from *The Apocrypha of William O'Shaunessy*

Peter Boyle¹

Book VII, XXVII

What offerings should we make to the plants that they might understand our intentions and feel less offended by our movement across the land? The people who live here believe that the plants do not accept them, that there is no way to bridge the hostility and incomprehension that have developed over so many millennia. According to the stories that have been handed down, the philosopher Leonidas was invited to visit that he might converse with the plants and establish some suitable rituals. He replied that he could be of little help since any valid ritual must grow out of the same soil as the plants and lie within the common ancestry of people and plants.

It is well known that all plants think with their roots, that they recognise each other more comfortably in the darkness of earth than the light of day. Rather than think with our heads or speak, should we not, then, train our feet to show due respect for the authority that lies within roots? If humans are most drawn to the beauty of flowers and leaves, would plants not respond most strongly to the moral eloquence of toes and ankles? Some have nominated clashing conceptions of time and identity as the chief explanation for the breakdown in the dialogue between plants and people. Perhaps the key difference is that, whereas people have long relied on the application of power to enforce their wishes, plants chose to become adepts in the arduous practices of an infinite diplomacy. Wind, rain, birds and insects, all know the delicate entreaties of plants: the incessant incantations of trees, the listless whispering of a tangled hedge in Spring. Often plants adopt the tactic of making it appear that they have no wishes at all.

When a person desires to travel they gather their baggage, they stand up and they go. When a plant decides it is time to move elsewhere, it must first negotiate transit rights, genealogies, protocols—an entire negotiation conducted underground. It must plan the sending out of emissaries to inquire of the land; it must consider the

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time of the year during which insects carry pollen and the likely success rate of seeds scattered among rocks. Some have asserted that with plants, as with people, there are those who wish to conquer the earth. The evidence is indecisive.

(Theophanes, *The Philosopher's Day-Book: Journeys along the East African and Arabian littoral*)

Book VII, XXI

How did those who wanted to collect doorways, do so across the vast stretch of ancient time? For only recently have image stealing devices arrived among us from the future, and for millennia to work pictures in clay, stone or papyrus was an expensive and rare luxury of the few, yet surely all people realise how important it is to hold clear in the memory the shape, curve, texture and number of all the doorways one has stepped through in one's life. Each doorway, each frame and passageway has waited so long for our arrival, our sliding through; each has its own blessing and name. Each one bids farewell to us, peeling away one more invisible false skin that had encased us for so long.

The Pahoi, who live west of the Sarmenians not far from the Carpathian Mountains, carve markings into their arms and cheeks that each doorway should be remembered. One places one's hand on a scar or one looks at a scar and immediately a particular doorway returns. The Treviani, on the other hand, tried collecting sticks that they might speak to them of doors and arches but the infidelity of the broken is notorious. The Ligurians are said to have developed a special language wide and solid enough to hold doorways and within this speech, it is said, those objects that are also moments of transition readily arrange themselves into easily memorised poems. During my visit to Liguria I made numerous enquiries about this language but none could recall hearing of it.

Strange indeed—all accept the necessity of an accurate account of the door and doors yet no proven method of retaining such knowledge seems to exist. Generally it is claimed that the good fortune of hunchbacks consists in the fact that, from birth, every door and arch they will step through has already been inscribed deeply into their spines. A blessing to others, it is a knowledge they have only one word for: pain.

(excerpt from Book XX of the *Uncut Herodotus*, the Etruscan Edition)

Book VI, XIX

Changing house

They need a small bus to carry the bones of all the fish
that have been eaten in this house.

When a house moves
it must bring all its detritus with it—
the ash of all the wood burnt in every fireplace,
the grease of the five thousand chickens
broiled in the memory of the dynasty.
Chains to hold the boat by the river must come
along with the light garland of leaves
that greeted a homecoming,
the marriage sheets, slippers woven
for the infant feet of the princess who now
wonders where her grandchildren have vanished.

In the slow train
of carts, covered wagons, winding files of bundles
strapped to the backs of mules and servants,
small objects must be placed.
So many presences must feel at home in this journey:
the boy who gathered the names of all the insects,
the father presiding from the wicker chair
floating still in his dream of ownership and giving,
an old lady wrapped in a whispering shawl of fire.

And there are doors that have fallen into long-collapsed rooms,
doors that must be found now, their frames restored
and brought back to form a passage for the sun.
For a house flows out into the trees that surround it
and the fragrance of pollens caught by a Spring day
becomes a part of the invisible cornerstone—
like the dust settled in the space between ill-fitting bricks,
like the open hands that found other hands
in the rooms that are now
all sunlight.