

BODIES, of the HOLOCENE



christopher cokinós

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For Kathe
beginner's mind, beginner's skin

because I prayed
this word:
I want
—Sappho

They were mere grains of pollen in a great sea.
—Brian Aldiss

. . . an ephemerid . . .
—Robinson Jeffers

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body ('bäd-ē) *n.*, *pl.* **bodies** [ME. *bodi*, *bodig* < OE. *bodig*, trunk, chest, orig. sense “cask,” akin to MLowG *boddlīke*, tub for brewing, OHG. *bootah*; prob. < It. *bottega*, shop < L. *apotheca*, storehouse, esp. storeroom for wine: see APOTHECARY] **1.** the whole physical structure and substance of a man, animal, or plant **2.** *a)* the trunk or torso of a man or animal *b)* the part of the garment that covers the trunk **3.** a dead person; corpse **4.** the flesh or material substance, as opposed to the spirit **5.** [Colloq.] a human being; person **6.** a group of people or things regarded or functioning as a unit [*a body* of soldiers, an advisory *body*] **7.** the majority of a number of people or things **8.** the main or central part of anything; specif., *a)* the parts of an automobile, truck, etc. that holds the load or passengers; part of a vehicle that is not a chassis *b)* the hull of a ship *c)* the fuselage of an aircraft *d)* the main part of a piece of writing as distinguished from headings and introductory or supplementary matter *e)* the sound box of a stringed instrument **9.** anything having real or material substance or form; any physical or perceptible object. **10.** any of the natural objects seen in the visible heavens [*the sun, moon, planets, stars, etc. are heavenly bodies*] **11.** a separate portion or mass of matter [*a body* of land or water] **12.** substance, density, or consistency, as of a liquid, fabric, etc. **13.** richness of tone or flavor **14.** *Law* a person or something legally regarded as a person **15.** the shank of a type –*vt.* **bodyed**, **bodying** **1.** to give a body or substance to; make substantial **2.** to make part of; embody –**body forth** **1.** to give shape or form to **2.** symbolize or represent –**keep body and soul together** to stay alive

com-ma ('käm-ə) *n.* [L. < Gr. *komma*, clause in a sentence, that which is cut off < *koptien*, to cut off < IE. base *(s)kep-, to cut, split, whence CAPON, SHAFT] **1.** a mark of punctuation (,) used to indicate a slight separation of sentence elements, as in setting off nonrestrictive or parenthetical elements, quotations, items in a series, etc. **2.** a slight pause

of (uv, äv; *unstressed əv or sometimes before consonants, ə*) **prep.**
 [ME. < OE., unstressed var. of *af, æf, away(from)*; akin to G. *ab* < IE. base **apo-*, from, away from, whence L. *ab* (cf. *ab-*), Gr. *apo-*]
1. from; specif., *a*) derived or coming from [men of Ohio] *b*) as relates to [how wise of her] *c*) resulting from; caused by; through [to die of fever] *d*) at a distance from; apart from [east of the city] *e*) proceeding as a product from; by [the poems of Poe] *f*) deprived, relieved, or separated from [cured of cancer, robbed of his money] *g*) from the whole, or total number, constituting [part of the time, one of her hats] *h*) made from; using (a specified substance) as the material [a sheet of paper, made of tin] **2.** belonging to [pages of a book, the square root of a number] **3.** *a*) having, possessing [a man of property] *b*) containing [a bag of nuts] **4.** *a*) that is; having the designation; specified as [the State of Utah, a height of six feet] **5.** as a kind of [a prince of a fellow] **6.** with (something specified) as object, goal, etc. [a reader of books] **7.** having as a distinguishing quality or attribute; characterized by [a man of honor, a year of plenty] **8.** with reference to; concerning; about [think well of me] **9.** set aside for; dedicated to [a day of rest] **10.** *a*) during [of late years] *b*) on (a specified time) [he came of a Friday] **11.** before: used in telling time [ten of nine] **12.** [archaic] by [rejected of men]

the (*thə; before vowels thi, thē*) **adj., definite article** [ME., indeclinable article < OE *se* (nom. masc. article) with *th-* < other case & gender forms (*thone, thæs, thære, thæm, thy*): for base see THAT; the meaning is controlled by the basic notion “a previously recognized, noticed, or encountered” in distinction to *a, an*] **I.** used to refer to a particular person, thing, group, period of time . . .

Ho-lo-cene (-sēn) **adj.** [HOLO- + -CENE] designating or of the Recent Epoch of geological time

i. shapes that bring me here

| a lie is a truth giving in

Driving to Jazz in the Rain

Fugitive assertion, I drive through it slowly, like a dream of gutted clocks beneath a moon some clouds surround, occlude, until there's a zero, there's a ring, an open milky note that's visible then gone. The radio's evening jazz from fifty miles east is slow too, a blur that accretes like understanding or water nosing into pail and crevice.

Silence between songs. Then "I'll Remember April" so suddenly the streets I drive in a town I hate are chemise-slick and lined with lamplight diamonds, such clichés to savor, and the wipers' click in time, out, are, briefly, good beats in the smeared gleam of midnight glass.

Puddles and lights in puddles the rain dimples or lets alone, a breezy sheen by tires and yellow curbs, countless grace notes tapped on a few empty cars, and my engine idles in the quiet, noisy way engines do while I wait for the light to change.

These are songs I mostly don't know or care for, wanting instead songs with voices, stories, reprise, so when static finally rakes my skin, having gone farther still, I just click it off and let the window down. Here is clearing weather and wet pasture and a gravel road I could turn on, the last stop in this county, a place to go I'll take years to get to.

In couples' yards night thickens in the dripping lilacs and can't be helped.

Water lays it all down and mats the fur of skulking vermin.

O moon, o little myth, you burn time above roofs I could be under. You light the night's last reproach: If forbearance is another word for love, then desire is the truth, fragrant and tiring, the miles on and on with lies.

If Attention Is a Form of Prayer

as Simone Weil said, then it must be that hawks and owls are the most religious among us.

Once, I stood by a roadside ditch while a wingspan away, a harrier hovered right beside me, below me, held above the brackish weeds by instinct's physics. She eyed me with crooked head and moved as slow, it seemed, as rhizomes, a membrane of dusk on black eyes.

Across the salt flats, where plovers nest, at the edge of cottonwoods, three falcons and two harriers perched on the ground like gods carved from basalt.

Quick, the curve and glide of the short-eared owl in that distance was the only motion, that and wind,

wings

tilted upward, like a harrier's—

The owl vanished into grasses having seen hunger is worship when filled, seeing is life, and having no need that needs the sacred. So much comes close if you make of staying still a temple, where silence is the liturgy, silence or birdcall, and feathers almost graze the lift of eyes.

Probability Clouds

I. *Pre-dawn, The Augusts of Several Years*

Again, the earth's against my back.

Everywhere up there, stars plot points on some infinite graph.

The Perseids fall. Coyotes call and answer in countries of breathing or ceasing, this still and cool air in which to know alone this sudden silence, and, brilliant as bird eyes, these meteors, the vanishings—

II. *Tentative,*

there, I steadied against the woman I loved then and would leave. We stood in wind that tickled our shins with sand the San Juans spewed once, pumice, ash, black bands of magnetite that smudge cursive dunes mounded before the Crestone Range, peaks as stern as equations unwinding in the physicist's dream just before waking of some decisive, connecting theory, unspeakable, and any eyes opening are lost and briefly home, a summer morning's tree-green light fluttering through glass, through curtains that only barely scrim, that, at night, in our years of moments, were never a screen for ourselves as one, in profile.

III. *Star Dune*

On the Great Sand Dunes, our boots cast consequence, so many brief cascades. We were hiking up the star dune, a radiance of ridges merging, wind-bladed, another knowledge than the one we'd passed through, straight roads and center-pivot farms.

Suddenly I thought of Fermi—in khaki trousers, a white shirt—in a different desert, taking bets. Would the sky light like

fuel in a driveway pan?

*And Krishna opened his mouth
for the dirt he'd eaten
had become all creation.*

They waited. They hid their eyes with dark goggles.

The lighting effects beggared description.

Blowout grass and scurf-peas trembled by the wide, dry wash below. In their season the prairie sunflowers glow upwards. Whatever fades persists, this bonedust, flower, eyeball, peptide.

IV. *Fractal*

Driving west into late-day cloudburst while, sweeping east, the wind fired sunlit raindrops arcing headlong toward perception, each silvered bead distinct against the dark-light clouded, columned sky, millions bright as molten rock or Trinitite or universes birthing, fired from nothing and forever isolate, the random radiant faced head-on.

Even now, years gone, I still believe I almost heard breath blow through a fist, the spray of pigment on a flickering wall, the distant cave where red-flanked bison bloomed, before the cavern emptied for some coming death, before the prey: Particles in binding force found within a swarm.

V. *Depositions*

Right living is as slow as glaciers melting into rivers, rivers silting down, rivers drying till quickwinds skim sudden rivulets of river sand across the skin of anything alive, us, say, or animals the day hides.

Sometimes the blue sky will light all the skin that lives beneath it. Sometimes skin imagines how to do this. I could not

Speak then, ever, without some wounding misdirection mistaken doubly for artful care.

Atop the dunes, pointing, you said, *Look*, and we did, as though vista were a talisman against all that can come to break or fail, but I can't say now what we looked at, and all the photos are boxed or gone.

I would like to say that we are made of clouds, as in Schrödinger's model of the atom, where probability clouds overlap, like then into now and now into next, where thickest, where most veiled, most obscure, the electron can be defined—I think of the way averted vision welcomes distant light, a galaxy, stronger in the eye by looking away—so what accumulates, finally, what is received in periphery, becomes the shape it is, the form it cannot help but be.

The Earth Here Brims with Watchful Breathing

Sky as gray as autumn leadplant, the grizzled silver flank of the badger half-glimpsed near bur oak, chinkapin, wavy branch-clicks that realize wind, sliding through purple tufts of bluestem and tawny rushes down the slope, down to brittle leaf-brown creek bed: long minutes after the moment's seconds, looking for track, scat, and burrow in the slope that's covered with layers of leaves or in the fallen limestone barn the years have made their own. A meandering human search like creek water that trickles in another season, a little. Give up looking though the eyes remember. The beautiful remembered, hidden, was there and moving. The badger hunkers back to the dark that's deep and close, the dark we walk on while lukelight loses this aged sky to nightfall. Again, I believe an aspect of the world shows how it is best always to disappear, as instinct's prospect needs, to vanish and so to believe that I am home.

Mute

The house was lit and the world was darker. The watcher became the screen, and summer night was, in measures, the conscious effluence of the screen. The house was quiet and the world was not. The broadcast words were spoken as if there were sound (and the watcher leaned into his chair, which squeaked as he leaned). He needed most to be negation to whom the screen is true, to whom the summer night is the absence of consequence. The house was quiet because commercials were on. The quiet? Mostly reflex, part of days' ends, work clothes strewn, dinner's delivery soon. And the world was cars, passing. The calm in which meaning might itself come clear lived in the end of blue light from glass, fractured by the start of a show. Summer's coming squall line leaned toward traffic and cicadas and lawns to read the phrases of roofs held open by broken spines.

About the Author

Christopher Cokinos is the author of two books of nonfiction, *Hope Is the Thing with Feathers: A Personal Chronicle of Vanished Birds* (Tarcher/Putnam, 2000) and *The Fallen Sky: An Intimate History of Shooting Stars* (Tarcher/Penguin, 2009). His poetry chapbook, *Held as Earth*, was published by Finishing Line Press. His work has appeared in such venues as *Poetry*, *The American Scholar*, *Science*, *The Iowa Review*, and *Orion*. He contributes to the *Los Angeles Times* and *High Country News*. The winner of the Glasgow Prize, the Sigurd Olson Nature Writing Award, the Fine Line Prize for Lyric Prose, and a Whiting, Cokinos founded and edited *Isotope: A Journal of Literary Nature and Science Writing*. He lives in Tucson, where he teaches in the MFA program at the University of Arizona and is affiliated faculty with the Institute of the Environment. He has lived in eastern Kansas and northern Utah.