

WATER~STONE REVIEW



Water~Stone, known in alchemy as the Philosopher's Stone, was composed of the four elements of earth, fire, air, and water. The stone was supposed by alchemists to possess the property of changing base metals into gold, the most perfect of all metals. It was thought to combine within itself matter and spirit, or body and soul: a union of opposites in perfect harmony. *Water~Stone* connotes the dynamic, transformative power of literature, as well as the search for beauty and perfection at work in the hearts of aspiring writers. The logo type for *Water~Stone* is based on a hybrid of two ancient alchemic symbols: one for the amalgam of all elements, and the second for the element of water as a pure and dynamic force. The amalgam is a reference to the multigenre, interdisciplinary nature of the graduate writing program at Hamline University.

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Mood Rooms

MARY CAPPELLO

An Essay Excerpted from Life Breaks In: A Mood Almanack

I ndoors or outdoors, we are always *enclosed*: this is what is meant by mood. If moods are inaugural and primal, then we might grant them the condition of a crib or a cradle, devices that keep us from straying or sway us in place. Told to sit still, we set out into the territory of daydreams; rocked to a still point of sleeping, we wander among bedrocks—building for, and from, our brain space, the dimensionless rooms we call moods.

I could say that mood is like ether—an invisible gas that makes you laugh or lays you low—but that's only because, when prompted to think of moods as rooms or vice versa, the first thing that comes to mind is an operating room with myself as patient. I peer through a portal but without the faculty of sight at four masked and hatted figures, sure, short-sleeved, and bibbed, who stand at a vanishing point that is actually the near end of my six-foot-long bed. Their main detail is this: they all have their arms folded when, really, they are meant to get down to work. The team of them, green and glowing, seem bored but not impatient, detached but not indifferent, and this combination sets the tone: they are waiting for me with all the time in the world even though the drug they've administered is so quick-acting as to put me out in a blink. They are waiting for

me in some other world that I need to arrive at but cannot be present to.

Certain rooms from our childhoods are telltale with mood; in my case, not the ever-suggestive basement, but our row home's inner front door. Not a room then, but a go-between. Just the face of the door, snow-colored and closed against snow, open to sun showers, pollen, and thunder. Sometimes I stand before the outer screen, arms folded, musing: the door as egress to unintentionally reflective moods, an occasion to study a bee or cicada stuck to the mesh. The space between the doors, a repository for a newspaper rolled like a blanket inside of which lay the Sunday comics in full color against black and white, makes me think that seemingly nondescript door could set or alter the tone of whatever was going on behind it. Otherwise, the idea of mood rooms takes me to closets—small enough to hold one person lost inside wool coats in a game of hide-and-seek, or a larger, free-standing one made of cedar that contained my mother's voluminous wedding dress and my father's diminutive collection of bright-colored polyester ties.

Childhood's most comforting rooms are an autumn-tinged, fold-out paper village that my mother displayed at Thanksgiving, and a genre of "pop-up books" whose paper pull-tabs, levers and springs, sliding windows, and accordion doors perpetually surprised me even when I knew what they revealed. Outdoors, on a trip to Philadelphia's Art Museum, I salute the Brothers Peale as they coyly climb their *trompe l'oeil* staircase, entryway to a room I cannot see; indoors, I enter books as if they are rooms: I pull on strings and watch books' rooms unfold in three dimensions.

Such dreamy interiorities are only ante-chambers to a vast and variegated architecture of mood rooms that have shaped me, I am sure, and they make me think I'm misconcocting mood as a place we go for refuge. I'm remembering now the perpetual mood of my father—the poor guy was always in a "lousy" mood, which isn't to say he appeared as though lice were sucking the life out of him. He didn't seem depleted or depressed; he just always seemed to be in a mood that could only be described as "filthy rotten." At the dinner table, he's gruff; in his garage workspace, he's sullen; in the bathroom, he's pained; in the living room, he's tortured; before the wheel of the car, he's anxious. Only inside the menacingly sudsy clutch of a car wash does his perpetually disgruntled mood state lift, and it's a curious privilege to be asked along for the ride. I always agree to join him in this trapped, mechanical venture. We don't talk but sit silently and stare straight ahead as though anticipating the novelty of a drive-in movie

but without the snacks. The car may jerk and rumble on its tracks, but my father appears relieved, as though the Jack and the Beanstalk-sized sponges were giving *him* a deep cleaning and not just the wheeled chamber that is the car. The car wash's pulsions and hissing hydraulics were evidently soothing, while the long strips of rubber that lapped the car could be reminiscent of the beaded curtains that served as vented doorways in that country my father's family never spoke of, even though they smelled of its partly bitter, always pungent, braised escarole, fennel, and capers: the island of Sicily.

My father and I are encased in metal and glass that rattle beneath the long tongues' gentle slapping, while in Sicily those always colorful, permeable sheaths that front Sicilian doorways let in air but keep out heat, let in light but keep out weather, let in voices but keep out winds and dust, ask to be parted, and hang like hair, dance on the belly of a threshold on a street where nothing happens for days. On one end of the island, near to where my father's family were from, in Palermo, some of the most unusual subterranean crypts in the world: the Capuchin Catacombs (*Catacombe dei Cappuccini*); on the opposite end of the island, an "ear" born of the landscape's myth-infused rock formations and large enough to walk around inside, listening to one's voice come back to one: the "Ear of Dionysius" (*L'orecchio di Dionisio*).

If you wait to be in the right mood to visit the catacombs, you will never go—as chambers of death, they hardly invite an outing, family or otherwise—but on one of several visits to Sicily, I finally felt able to brave the descent and investigate their corridors. The surprise was that the experience was neither Gothically freakish nor ghoulish and terrifying: the corpses, standing, sitting, or lying down, mummified and dressed in the finery or uniforms suited to eras ranging from the seventeenth through the early twentieth century—there were 8,000 bodies in all—were profoundly humanizing. The place was shot through with a leveling irony: even though the dead were cannily arranged in groups befitting their rank and station—all the teachers in one room, all the lawyers in another, etc.—death here was the only rank and file to be obeyed. If one expected gruesome spectacle, the most spectacular scene to be found was a corroding button or the rotting tassels of an eighteenth-century epaulette: we all decay, as do the threads that hold our clothes together if given enough time.

I had expected to be frightened in the catacombs. I had expected wanting to flee. Only fictions about death are frightening, presuming as they do that death and horror go hand in hand. Here, death was blithely a face-to-face affair, and

the atmosphere of the catacombs a surprisingly warm and homey one. I hadn't expected to be instructed in the catacombs, but I was left with an image that I never forgot—not one that clung to decaying flesh, but that had everything to do with architecture. To each person, one of a few guiding placards explained, a *niche* might be constructed suited to his or her shape and size. During one period of fastidious religiosity, in the name of humiliating penitence, living residents of the city would occasionally visit in order to inhabit their *niches* prematurely. A bit worse than being sent to the proverbial doghouse, the act of standing for a while in your niche was meant to remind you that you art dust and unto dust you shalt return.

The catacombs give the colloquialism “to find one’s niche” an entirely new meaning, as if to suggest that the way we fit into the world and thus feel suited to it, defined, and purposeful, is synonymous with the measure of our days, our coffins.

In an interview that French philosopher Gilles Deleuze agreed only to be broadcast posthumously, he summarizes his proposition that there is no territory without a vector of leaving the territory; that there is no leaving the territory, no de-territorialization, without a vector of re-territorialization elsewhere. He shares his fascination for animals, like ticks, whose territory is extraordinarily limited. But then he quips: “Every animal has a world. It’s curious because many people do not have a world.” In a final, arresting example, he recalls watching a stray cat he’d agreed to take into his house when his child asked for it. The cat had become ill, and as it neared death, it sought out a corner in which to die. There is a territory even for death, in other words, and the animal puts itself into a territory in order, we might say, safely, peacefully, definitively, markedly, properly, to die.

Is it possible for an animal to have a sense of propriety? Is it likely for a person to maintain a sense of the animal?

Our world is parsed by territories, psychic and bodily, political and aesthetic, imaginary and real, circumscribed and vast. Moods are niches that I want to imagine as separable from the containers that take us to our deaths. I want to believe that some niches exist for us to die in, others to live in, and that those (invisible containers) we choose to live in are our moods.

On one end of the ancestral island of Sicily, subterranean niches; on the other end, an open-air, larger-than-life, smoothly cavernous ear. Both were starting points and end points in a familial mythology, and both were laced for

me with fear. It's only now that I realize their impression as perfect orienting points in my thinking about mood, for I know that what compels me to follow mood and to attend to it, thoughtfully, lovingly, has been some conviction about the power of enclosures, familiar and otherworldly, just as I've always understood mood to be intimately yoked to listening, to the heard world, sound atmospheres, acoustic pleasures or dins, and in particular, to the voices that carry us.

My father's father, the first-generation Sicilian immigrant, on his deathbed reported a dream that he was taking a bus to Syracuse. Since there were no family members living in upstate New York—the original members having all settled in South Philadelphia—my grandfather's children were hard pressed to understand what the dream could mean. An old-timer, upon being presented with the riddle, explained that my grandfather's parting dream didn't have the country in which he'd spent the past sixty years in mind. It was evident that he was journeying to the other Syracuse, to Siracusa, Sicily, the western port dotted with amphitheaters where the plays of Aeschylus were, in ancient days, performed, the city with the monumental cavern shaped like an ear.

On my own first trip to Sicily in the aftermath of my grandfather's death, I made a conscious decision not to go to Syracuse. If Siracusa was the corner in which my grandfather chose to die, it wasn't a place I should immediately visit, if at all; when I was ready to discover it—which I did on my fourth visit to Sicily over the course of eight years—I might need to treat it less as a trip and more as a pilgrimage. It happened to be the year of a cancer diagnosis, but my partner, Jean, and I had planned the trip to the western part of the island before this news. I didn't know if I'd be well enough to go, but I was, and like a lot of people, with or without ritual motives in mind, when we found ourselves standing inside the echoic ear, we didn't know what to say, what sounds to produce to feel its full effect. Do you bellow out "hello!" into the void, or, amidst its cool, damp trickling, emit an "ohm"? Do you feel more oxygenated or less inside its pressing heights? Do you fall back on the idea of all sound as recordable, never as ephemeral, by blurting mechanically, "Testing 1, 2, 3"? Do you choose to scream or sigh, whisper or sing; do you form words or only make sounds to feel the way they ricochet off your body, creating their own language somewhere between the ramparts of heaven and the parched Sicilian earth? Our choices must depend on our mood: Jean, as I recall, sang a verse her deceased mother would sing to her, then said it had nothing to do with her mother, only

that she liked the song's harmonies. As the words echoed back, she created an earthenware round: "White coral bells / upon a slender stalk / Lilies of the valley deck my garden walk / Oh, don't you wish / that you might hear them ring? / That will happen only when the fairies sing."

Do we only say we're in a mood when the mood that is our normal temperature shifts? What makes our "sad," "bad," "good," or "strange" moods worth remarking, and what name could we give to the state we are in the rest of the time if not our "mood"?

If we are never without mood, what leads us to identify some places as mood spaces and others as scarcely productive of mood at all? In a biopic about Mozart, the narrator explains how, on a trip to London in which the great composer's father took ill, Mozart, who was only seven, "occupied himself" by writing his first symphony. Our moods are our ways of occupying ourselves; they are our literal occupations (see niches again). When Mozart occupies himself by writing a symphony, he fashions for himself a place in which to reside; he creates a room within a room, a container within a container, a language for a mood. If moods are rooms, feelings are the objects in those rooms; art, their re-arrangement.

If you could name only five types of rooms as constitutive of the mood repertoire that creates you as a feeling subject in the world, what would they be? I would have to name fountains and birdbaths, especially in gardens in working-class neighborhoods, even if they aren't exactly "rooms"; kitchens, in movies and in real life; 1960s television, the TV itself a room (or box), most especially, Dick Van Dyke's living room; meeting rooms and cubicles; Catholic confessionals; library rooms—especially listening to vinyl in an undergraduate library, reading books as a form of listening, reading as a steam bath or sauna of the mind, leaving a library in an altered state and nearly getting hit by a car; classrooms as rooms a group of people make; and most especially, vestibules—the room that is in the wing, the antecedent to public ritual, visibility, and booming oratory or group-think: the furtive, hidden room of fore-scents and touches of cool water. The town I grew up in—Darby, Pennsylvania—itself a vestibule to the city I could not see but only hear to the tune of my imagining in the distance.

That's apparently more than five, perhaps a baker's dozen, but who's counting? Mood rooms are many, multiple, and multifarious. Only when we're depressed do all the rooms compress to one—see the sort of sentence that recurs in the short notes I receive from my brother: "The problem is I am somewhat

depressed and find it hard to escape from my microcosm.”

Some mood rooms recede, while others compete for full occupancy. Some are vast as grass; others as small as a corner, and as isolate. Still, they share this trait in common: all of them are equivalent to how your people held you. Whether you feel trapped in rooms or able in them, whether memory opens its doors or keeps them closed shut has something to do with that, too. There's that man, my father, not exactly happy, but at least calm inside the car wash's lash and lapping. I'm in the passenger seat, but it's as if we're both driving, and I feel a different sense of him for a spell, being carried along.



I refer to the DVD set *Gilles Deleuze: From A to Z*, with Claire Parnet, directed by Pierre-André Boutang and translated by Charles J. Stivale, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012.

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