Metagestures

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“Where did I come from?” Anouk asked her mother.

This was hardly the first time that the young girl—following her mother about the house like a mischievous shadow, cast shorter than its source by a mid-day sun—had asked this question. And her mother, being the kind of person who believes in initiating the young into the true mysteries of life at an early age, repeated the same answer she had given the time before, and the time before that.

“Your father put his seed in me,” she said matter-of-factly, scanning the bookshelf for a cover that only she would recognize.

Anouk smiled the same smile she smiled the time before, and the time before that. Indeed, she liked hearing this, because of the image it gave her. She pictured her father placing a seed, the size of a peanut, rather seriously and ceremoniously, under her mother’s tongue. In Anouk’s mind’s eye, her father would then gently close her mother’s mouth, like a purse, before giving her a soft kiss on the forehead for good measure, to symbolically complete the transaction. Anouk then imagined her mother cooking, driving, walking along the beach—even sleeping—all the while with this seed under her tongue; a tiny kernel preventing maternal speech for a whole month, by which time
the little object was finally swallowed, now softened enough to blossom. Anouk pictured a tiny shoot then starting to push its way out of her mother’s belly button, like the tentative uncoiling of a fern, quickly growing, day-by-day, into a little bonsai tree, eight inches high: a development obliging her mother to lie down for the last few months, and watch the tree grow nearly to the ceiling. Among the leaves fluttering in the air-conditioned breeze, Anouk would picture a fuzzy coconut, in which she — Anouk — was lying encurled. And no matter how many times her mother tried to detail the true biological processes involved, Anouk could not help but stray back to the vision of the peanut and the fern and the bonsai tree and the coconut.

Indeed, this stubbornly persistent image of her own genesis informed Anouk’s entire cosmological outlook; especially regarding the other beings that crossed her path, whether they be sentient or not. Even before she began her formal schooling, Anouk had a profound hunch that every worldly thing existed by virtue of the gesture of planting. And by logical extension, she could create more of such things by finding the right seed. Thus, in order to procure the family cat a new playmate, she planted some of her own grey fuzzy socks in the garden, and diligently watered them with a red plastic watering can. When a stray cat appeared on their porch a month later, frazzled and hungry, Anouk smiled to herself, confident that this wary apparition was on account of her own green-thumb.

After that successful experiment, the garden soon looked as if it had been overtaken by an army of moles, as the formerly green grass gave way to clumps of dirt, under which were buried an entire cabinet’s worth of curiosities. Having quizzed her parents, uncles and aunts, and two different babysitters about the secret lore of planting, she began to get a sense of the essentials of the ecological alchemy which brings things into being. From what the grown-ups told her, she gleaned that cereals, vegetables, fruits, and nuts were the most common things to be planted. Apparently there was a special breed of person dedicated to this task, called a farmer: a vocation which she instinctively had enormous sympathy for; although she was unclear as
to why they would narrow their crops to *these* specific items, when there were so many other options to cultivate.

And so she sowed.

Having picked up bits and pieces—scrap[s] of knowledge swept off the kitchen table-top like crumbs—Anouk discovered that one could also plant bulbs. And so a new mound of dirt appeared in the garden, underneath which lay a 60-watt lightbulb, from which she hoped would sprout a lamp-post; or even an entire powerplant, if left to grow at its own pace for long enough. Under another pile of dirt lay interned a humble sparkplug, from which she hoped to soon harvest a Honda Accord. (Or perhaps a Harley Davidson, depending on this metallic seed’s provenance.) After being told of subterranean tubers, Anouk stole a toy trumpet and several kazoos from her kindergarten shelves, and buried them with some mulch, in the hope of harvesting an entire crop of brass instruments, glowing golden in the dawn like corn; an occasional F sharp or B flat scaring the bees, when the wind gusted in a certain direction.

Anouk planted a dozen eggs in a row, hoping to sprout some long-legged birds—regal stalks of storks—waving lazily in the breeze. And one evening, to the utter dismay of her baby-sitter, she buried an entire jar’s worth of fire-flies, muttering something or other about “lightning seeds.”

Of course, when nothing actually grew, Anouk was forced to play host to disappointment, and was then obliged to face the limits of her childish assumptions. She was forced to see herself, moreover, as the product of gestation, rather than plantation. Even so, whenever she happened to notice a dog burying a bone, she half-expected an elaborate skeleton to start sprouting from the soil, ready for display at the Natural History Museum.

Over time, Anouk learned to accept that the gesture of planting was just one among many explanations for how the bewildering variety of forms on this earth came to be. Beyond reproduction she learned about replication, construction, fabrication, engineering, and many other modes of manufacture. She learned about the traditional distinction between *nomos* and *phasis*, culture and nature, the organic and the artificial. And
yet, Anouk was never completely comfortable with such distinctions; feeling deep in her marrow that all these varied ways of ushering new things into the world could be folded back into the humble, miraculous compression of the seed. The vase of a Venetian glassblower existed by virtue of the lungs, certainly. But there was at least a mental seed in the artisan’s mind, inspiring him to ever more exquisite exhalations.

At university, Anouk experimented with hydroponics, until her little rented studio was filled to the brim with bright green vegetation. Leaves tickled her nose when she slept, and thick rubbery stems curled around her like amorous fingers. After taking art classes alongside earth sciences, she bought a vintage camera, experimented with various exposures, and then buried the negatives in terracotta pots outside her window. These she watered out of habit, half-expecting a miraculous form of photosynthesis to occur—a bouquet of captured images to sprout and develop under the sun’s rays, breathing themselves into quivering, verdant, oxygenated life.

Unsurprisingly, Anouk selected for herself a vocation with an intimate connection to the soil: viniculture. She invested in a modest plot of land in Languedoc, along with the strong and simple man who sold it to her. She then spent several months sampling different kinds of grapes growing in the region, and especially chewing on their bitter seeds, confident that this would give her a truer sense of each one’s essence and potential than any given single vintage which relied on its juices. In the end, she settled on some rare old vines from several valleys to the West. The gesture of planting in Spring gave way to the gesture of harvesting in Summer which in turn faded into the gesture of clearing in Autumn. The scent of the dried vines burning at dusk gave Anouk a numinous feeling; a mood suspended like the mellow smoke of this pagan incense.

After a sudden illness, Anouk’s father passed away, and she suspended work to attend the funeral, and help her mother move in to the three-room “chateaux,” perched above the vineyard. As others wept at the sight of the coffin descending into the ground, Anouk had watched dry-eyed, but heart-bursting,
for she understood that her beloved papa was preparing himself to be reborn as a tree. A tree which sighs and hums and whispers, protecting passing creatures from the rain.

Unable to sleep, and in honor of his metamorphic journey, Anouk crept by candlelight to the cellar, where the liquefied fruit of her labor snored silently in rows. Four score and eight bottles — one, by sheer chance, for each year her father had lived as a person on this earth. Walking slowly around the cellar, cool and damp, as if Time Itself had condensed there, banishing the fetid centuries separating the various vintners who had toiled in this place, Anouk caressed the bottles gently; watching over them like a sentimental nurse in a hospital ward. For this is how she saw her cellar at night; the plum-colored bottles lying in rows like wounded soldiers, freshly returned from the front, bursting with sacrificial blood. Anouk, like all of her compatriots, knew that the soil was nourished by the brave, foolish, terrified bodies of her ancestors. She knew that to drink wine is to drink the blood of the namelessly crucified, and somehow redeem them. Wine is, after all, a totem drink in her country; a form of deep bodily remembering, and unconscious resurrection.

To plant and cultivate wine is, therefore, the ultimate act of optimism, infused with a resigned nihilism specific to her race. “We shall live to drink another day,” this act says. “Though we will be drinking the mineralized bones of our own bloodless futures.”

The taste of wine is the intoxicating taste of death, delayed one more day, at least.

And the tang of terroir is a pleasure fermented in a now-muffled terror, soaked deep into the soil.

Such were the dark, yet strangely fortifying, thoughts of Anouk, as she communed amidst her bottles, before creeping back upstairs and into the house, to curl up next to her wheezing mother.

“Maman,” she whispered, without waking the old woman. “Where did I come from?”

And tucking a lock of grey hair behind her mother’s ear, she answered her own question with a ventriloquial whisper.

“Your father put his seed in me.”