

Supplemental author notes for *I am the dead, who, you take care of me.*

The impulse for this book began with my rediscovery of the following poem by Walt Whitman.

SCENTED HERBAGE OF MY BREAST

From Walt Whitman's Calamus

SCENTED herbage of my breast,
Leaves from you I glean, I write, to be perused best afterwards,
Tomb-leaves, body-leaves growing up above me above death,
Perennial roots, tall leaves, O the winter shall not freeze you
delicate leaves,
Every year shall you bloom again, out from where you retired you
shall emerge again;
O I do not know whether many passing by will discover you or
inhale your faint odor, but I believe a few will;
O slender leaves! O blossoms of my blood! I permit you to tell
in your own way of the heart that is under you,
O I do not know what you mean there underneath yourselves, you
are not happiness,
You are often more bitter than I can bear, you burn and sting me,
Yet you are beautiful to me you faint tinged roots, you make me
think of death,
Death is beautiful from you, (what indeed is finally beautiful except
death and love?)
O I think it is not for life I am chanting here my chant of lovers,
I think it must be for death,
For how calm, how solemn it grows to ascend to the atmosphere
of lovers,
Death or life I am then indifferent, my soul declines to prefer,
(I am not sure but the high soul of lovers welcomes death most,)
Indeed O death, I think now these leaves mean precisely the same
as you mean,
Grow up taller sweet leaves that I may see! grow up out of my
breast!
Spring away from the conceal'd heart there!
Do not fold yourself so in your pink-tinged roots timid leaves!
Do not remain down there so ashamed, herbage of my breast!
Come I am determin'd to unbare this broad breast of mine, I
have long enough stifled and choked;
Emblematic and capricious blades I leave you, now you serve me
not,
I will say what I have to say by itself,
I will sound myself and comrades only, I will never again utter a
call only their call,

I will raise with it immortal reverberations through the States,
I will give an example to lovers to take permanent shape and
 will through the States,
Through me shall the words be said to make death exhilarating,
Give me your tone therefore O death, that I may accord with it,
Give me yourself, for I see that you belong to me now above all,
 and are folded inseparably together, you love and death are,
Nor will I allow you to balk me any more with what I was calling life,
For now it is convey'd to me that you are the purports essential,
That you hide in these shifting forms of life, for reasons, and that
 they are mainly for you,
That you beyond them come forth to remain, the real reality,
That behind the mask of materials you patiently wait, no matter
 how long,
That you will one day perhaps take control of all,
That you will perhaps dissipate this entire show of appearance,
That may-be you are what it is all for, but it does not last so very
 long,
But you will last very long.

It's a strange poem. I am fascinated and I am perturbed by it. I find it creepy—and creepily stirring—how Whitman uses Death to give permanence to the State, to *our* State, *these States*. But it's revealing too. Walt's onto something—something, in this case, about modern nation-states. Death *is* the permanence of the secular modern State. Death is where the nation goes to touch forever and enforce its aura of inevitability and endurance—and thus its aura of power: the aura of its sovereignty. It's why all those buildings in Washington look like mausoleums. I try to not go in them too much myself, those places where those in power move back and forth down hallways past the statues of other bodies who've occupied their offices. I've been pretty successful so far, though I should say I do live far away. My aversion became notable to me and developed new strength over the writing of these poems—particularly as I also found myself passing a great deal of time (as part of another project) among some peculiar and fanatical Americans whose lives had become cultishly given over to the pursuit of the necro-vibes of what I came to call for shorthand the “Sovereign American Thing.”* This aversion to *Necrostately* feeling and edifice was further reinforced by the necrotic rage of January 6, 2021—an event that typified (and perhaps apotheosized) the stream of larger scale Stateside political events that accompanied the writing of these poems from 2015 to 2022.**

But this book isn't only about this one kind of Death—*Stately Death*. It's full of dead and living people, poetry generally is. It convenes us through the gatherings of speech—we who are alive but will soon enough be dead, and we who are dead, but were so recently very much alive. Take *John Ashbery* for example. When I started these poems, he was alive. Now he's gone, but the poems in this book are still gratefully chanting, chattering, and singing away to his poems, just as

his poems still talk to us living folks—and not so terribly differently from how they did it when he was still around. This gives us a different flavor of *necrosociality*, perhaps closer to Mr. Ashbery’s than the kind we encountered with Walt’s *necrostate* above. A *necrosociality* in which poetry convenes us without any help from the sovereign, coercive, auratic powers of the State or its “imagined community.” ***

The rest of these notes concern the traces left by various persons, living and dead, whose words and life stories traversed me or these poems during their composition.

Jack Wilson is the name the nineteenth century Northern Paiute shaman Wovoka went by in his English-speaking life as a ranch hand and professional rainmaker in northwestern Nevada. Wovoka/Wilson is best known as the prophet of the Native messianic religious movement whom many call the “Ghost Dance,” though that name tends—to my mind—to flatter Euro-American melancholy about Native folks, while further serving the centuries long project of Native erasure on this continent. The actual dance was a feat of social creativity and lively spiritual resilience—a feat of *survivance* as Anishinaabe scholar, novelist, and poet Gerald Vizenor has put it. Wovoka’s rites arose at a time when Northern Paiute people seem to have needed new forms of social gathering that included the dead, everyone having lost so many and so much. The dance and the modes of assembly it allowed seem to have been a creative new way to bring the dead as trance-images into the bodies of the living. Russell Thornton’s scholarly work on the demography of the spread of the Ghost Dance from Nevada across much of North America further informs this perspective.

John Samuelson was a Swedish miner who lived for a time in the 1920s in the Mojave Desert, quite near to where I have made my home. He chiseled some curious proto-environmentalist, anti-Christian, and populist political epigrams into the flat tombstone like surfaces of a mound of boulders near his cabin. English was a second language to him, and his spelling wasn’t great—but that didn’t stop him. He crossed out his errors, chiseled in the inserted corrections, and just kept carving away, all of which adds to the eccentric charm of his monument—and its paradoxical feel of spontaneous or fleeting permanence. From on top of the mound of huge rocks, you can see pretty far up that valley to the east and west; it’s full of the outstretched arms of a host of Joshua Trees. There’s also the willow and acacia thicket of the big wash that winds through the floor of that landscape. Above you are the rockpile mountain assemblages of the desert, studded with cacti and scrub. Sometimes it’s very windy, sometimes shockingly silent. It’s a nice place, with a strong geological-time vibe of a sort common to the Mojave. Samuelson himself seems to have been fairly psychotic, with a set of very elaborate persistent delusions, though he seems also to have been mostly amiable enough—when not too terribly drunk. He actually didn’t last long out here in the desert, though not out of lack of affection for the locale. He was displaced from his mining claim due to not having US citizenship and headed afterwards toward the coast where he ended up doing time in a mental ward after shooting two men dead in a drunken bar fight. He didn’t last long in the mental ward either; he escaped fairly quickly and fled to the logging camps of the Pacific Northwest. All that’s known of him after that seems to come from the letters he wrote from the logging camps back to his one fellow miner friend in the Mojave, expressing his longing to return to the desert. But he never did. He died up there in the rain. The relationship of Samuelson’s life story to the poem in this book that bears his name is oblique or just plain obscure to me, but I started writing it at his monument, and when

occasionally I hike out to Samuelson's Rocks (as the place is now called), I read the poem aloud. I've found the poem seems to belong to that place.

Jean de Brébeuf, whose mistranslation of "guardian angel" gives this book its title, was a 17th century French Jesuit missionary. He is perhaps best known, outside of the Church, for his detailed description of the Wendat (Huron) collective funerary festival known as *Yandatsa* ("The Kettle"). Brébeuf was an honored guest at a 1636 iteration of the rite, which he called, in his Catholic idiom, *The Feast of the Dead*.

Brébeuf and The Feast of the Dead. The ritual, as described by Brébeuf, began when living Wendat removed the corpses of their dead of recent years from their individual resting places, mourned them anew, cleaned their bones of decayed flesh, and wrapped them in beaver robe bundles. The dead were then taken back to their family lineage longhouses and honored in their home villages with a week of feasting and games and collective gift giving, including the giving of gifts from the dead to the living. These elaborate festivities were only a first step. Next villagers departed on a long slow procession to other nearby villages. On the way they carried their dead on their backs, calling out all the while with what Brébeuf described as the haunting cry of the souls. Their destination was an agreed upon location where they met with other Wendat also carrying their dead. At the site a great pit was dug, which was then lined with beaver furs. Once the pit was prepared more festivities began. One more time the remains of the beloved departed were unwrapped, mourned and adored. Brébeuf reports personally watching one Wendat woman combing the hair of her dead father and adorning her dead children with wampum and glass beads. There was now more feasting and speech making, games and gift giving. On the final day at dawn, all the bones were poured out at once—cacophonously—from their fur robe bundles which had been suspended from a scaffolding perched over the great collective pit. In Wendat religious thought human persons had two souls. Following the completion of the *Yandatsa*, the souls not associated with the physical remains of the deceased were said to now depart for the village of the dead.

Brébeuf and the Wendat. Brébeuf himself was and remains a difficult figure, beloved and despised. He was a curious and perceptive ethnographer and adapted remarkably easily to Wendat ways, taking on a kind of shaman/healer role in the cultural, and spiritual life of Wendake. At the same time, he was also relentless in his proselytizing, devoted ultimately to transforming traditional Wendat spiritual life, something many Wendat understood from early on would be disastrous for their people. Additionally, in early stages of the Jesuit mission to Wendake, Brébeuf and his fellow priests put a great emphasis on baptizing those near death, in order to ensure a greater number of souls for what they often referred to in their writing as their "glorious harvest." In those first years among the Wendat the Jesuits also avoided baptizing the healthy, since healthy converts had a strong tendency to later renounce the faith. The dead, on the other hand, could not apostatize. This practice combined with a mind-boggling number of deaths from European epidemic disease convinced many Wendat that the bearded foreigners they called "the Black Robes" had come from France expressly to make everyone die. It is this side of Brébeuf's reputation that eventually earned him the martyr's death he craved on the pages of his private journals. ****

Brébeuf's death and the end of Wendake. Brébeuf's death came alongside the death of the Wendat Confederacy. As the Jesuit mission grew more successful, and the numbers of living, healthy converts grew, Wendat elders had warned the Jesuit missionaries that their practice of forbidding Christian Wendat from participation in traditional religious rites would tear their non-coercive, consensus-based polity asunder and bring certain disaster. The disaster came for Wendake and Brébeuf at the same time, when the latest in a wave of catastrophic assaults from the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) confederacy smashed the society and turned what survivors remained into desperate refugees. Among the societies of the Eastern Woodlands, it was common to adopt members of other groups—including those captured in war. This is why when Brébeuf was captured by the Haudenosaunee he fell directly into the hands of some anti-French formerly Wendat warriors who had become members of the society of their ancestral enemies. These men despised the old black-robed sorcerer and they promptly executed him, pouring boiling water over his head while repeating the same baptismal phrases with which the priest and his friends had ushered so many of their neighbors and relations off to French heaven. Brébeuf's skull can still be visited today, very near the site of the Feast of the Dead he described, at the church of the Martyr's Shrine in Midland, Ontario. Fragments of the priest's bones are used in Catholic healing rites at the shrine—just as he used bodily relics of Jesuit order founder Ignatius of Loyola in his healing rites as a missionary in Wendake.

Repatriation of the Wendat dead. The remains of the Wendat re-buried together in 1636's Yandatsa have undergone a dramatic history of their own. After the shattering of Wendake and the dispersal of the Wendat across the American continent, the site of the burial remained undisturbed until it was unearthed by 20th century archaeologists. These researchers verified the precision of Brébeuf's description of the rite, and in the process, without alerting Wendat descendants, carted off all the human remains for further forensic study. In the 1970s a descendant from the Wendat community in Quebec learned all this to his horror; thus began the long process by which the various groups of the Wendat/Wyandotte diaspora overcame their own conflicts to win repatriation of their ancestors' remains. Finally, in 1999, 363 years after the original mass burial, their efforts paid off. Using Brébeuf's text as a guide, Wendat descendants of groups from Michigan, Kansas, Oklahoma and Quebec, now reconciled in the presence of the bones of their ancestors, re-dug the old collective grave, lined it again with furs, and ceremonially reburied all of the bones, alongside the same ritual offerings of kettles and other implements they had originally been interred with on that day in May of 1636.*****

More resources on Brébeuf and the Feast of the Dead. In addition to Brébeuf's own words in Volume 10 of the Jesuit Relations readers can learn more about the Wendat and Jesuit story in other years of the Jesuit Relations authored by Brébeuf and his fellow priests. Further perspective on the Jesuit and Wendat story as it pertains to the Feast of the Dead can be found in the books of historians Bruce Trigger, Erik Seeman, and Georges Sioui whose work provided some of the background information above. I also recommend the John L. Steckley translation of *Religione*, the remarkable Wendat language primer on Catholicism prepared by Jesuits to train missionaries to the Wendat's conquerors, the Haudenosaunee, who spoke related Iroquoian languages. In Steckley's translation we can see how accommodating Jesuits had grown to a syncretic vision of Catholicism, an accommodation which they effectively hid in this instance from the eyes of church authorities who had no way of reading the Wendat text they had made.

The existence of such a text was made possible by the alphabetization of that language accomplished by the work of Brébeuf and other Jesuits—and by the assistance of Wendat Christians, whose participation had to have been essential. In a few passages in my *Calamus* sequence readers will find borrowed and altered language from this strange and stunning text.

*As a phrase, the “Sovereign American Thing” partakes of the style of anthropologist Michael Taussig’s ragged masterwork *The Magic of the State*. Taussig is one of many folks this book likely couldn’t have been written without.

**These events included, among so many examples, the 2020 campaign of Donald Trump, which was kicked off, you may recall, with a 4th of July speech at Mt. Rushmore, in which our then Troll-in-Chief announced that if reelected, he would not only defend all those American Monuments protestors for Black Life had been tearing down, but he would also build a new great garden of stone, a massive park full of more and more and more statues of the proud American dead.

***Walt Whitman does this sometimes too, of course, when he’s not rhapsodizing the States.

**** In one epidemic alone the Wendat are estimated to have lost more than 50% of their population.

***** The central conflict between Wendat descendant groups had been a battle between the Kansas-based Wyandot Nation and the Oklahoma Wyandotte Nation over a Kansas Wyandot cemetery on valuable real estate in downtown Kansas City. The Oklahoma Wyandotte had sought to sell, and then later to develop a casino on this burial ground. The return of the bones of the dead of the 1636 Yandatsa effectively brought this extensive and painful conflict to an end, with representatives of both groups apologizing and forgiving each other for past actions and words in a ceremony that preceded the reburial. An account of the reburial can be found on the website of the Kansas Wyandot Nation at Wyandot.org in the history section.

Anthony McCann. Joshua Tree. 2023.