

## ON PROPERTY AND MONSTROSITY

*If you asked me what God I believed in in political philosophy, it would have to be the notion that there is no such thing as individual freedom, that human freedom is finally, always, a project of making a world with others.*

-Wendy Brown<sup>1</sup>

We bought an old garage surrounded by fruit trees—apple, pear, peach, plumb, apricot, and cherry—planted a decade ago by Dan, the previous owner, who, in addition to gardening, made soccer goals (“Goal Oriented” was the name of his business). Three years ago Dan’s wife died and after that, he let things go. Compass weed (an opiate) and thistle (good for tea) grew thigh high all around the trees. Volunteer elm sprung up to compete for light, water, and soil. Berry vines choked tree trunks, spiraling, twining and scratching our ankles with their thorns. All of this had to be cleared, once in the fall and then again when it all came back in the spring.

There was also a vegetable garden to re-create—beds to clear (again, the weeds)—raised beds to build, soil and compost to transport in our little Ford pick up with its broken doors, broken blinkers, broken window, and broken bed gate, so that we had to stand in the truck bed shoveling the soil and compost out, one heavy shovel-full at a time. There was planting to do—some things went in too early others maybe too late—an irrigation system had to be created and then, when the dog got to it, repaired. The strawberry patch weeded and then, when the birds ate the berries, netted. Rose vines, mostly dead wood, grew up and into and around the chain link that surrounded the garden, and for many days, weeks really, we cut away the dead wood and tied up

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<sup>1</sup> “Learning to Love Again,” 26

the vines to the fence again where, miraculously in June, they all bloomed—tight little red ones, outrageous orange, flimsy white, baby pink, sexy pink, and even creamy yellow. Finally, after all this, with everything coming up, we turned to the area outside the fence.

Two great big apple trees grew from what could have been the sidewalk, but that there was no walk, only weeds and the trees. Russian sage, mint, compass weed, various grasses and dandelion. The trees hadn't been pruned for so long they were almost unrecognizable as apples, so thick with shoots and so entangled with the mess that surrounded them. It was daunting to begin, but we did begin, spraying vinegar on the weeds first, so we could yank them more easily, then, armed with clippers, saws, shovels, but mostly, just our gloved hands, yanking and hacking away.

I say we, but at first it was just me. HR was planting wildflowers around the rose bushes. Jessica, with her 11<sup>th</sup> month baby on her back and her five-year-old by her feet was sawing the dead branches we hoped to turn to mulch. Sam was working the irrigation system. Petra was planting more spinach and carrots. I was sitting alone, cross legged in the shade of the tree, smelling mint and sage, pulling from the roots, then, when I got tired of sitting, standing to pull, then sitting again. There were so many weeds I didn't have to move much to get them, just shift a bit my angle and I'd meet a whole new crew.

But gradually I was moving in toward the trunk of the tree, into its dark cool center, which at first, I could not see. And then, there was an object. I startled. I was, of course, afraid, as if a suitcase out of place were a body out of place, and not just the sign of one. A suitcase—a pretty nice one, zipped up—a shoulder bag, also zipped, and a plastic bag holding a pair of sneakers. These items were neatly arranged, not tossed. They belonged to someone.

No body, though perhaps a body's markings, the weeds near the bags had been flattened. It seemed someone had been sleeping there in that quiet cave of leaves.

In May of 2012 Denver's city council approved an Urban Camping Ban, an ordinance sponsored by Councilman Albus Brooks. Other cities have them. In fact, 34% of American cities ban camping in public, 18% ban sleeping in public.<sup>2</sup> Making it illegal to sleep outdoors means, to state the obvious, that those who are un-housed have to sleep in a shelter (that there are not enough beds does not even need to be said), risk arrest (and the subsequent criminal record as well as fines), or find a place to hide. Other cities don't have such bans and instead designate areas for the homeless to sleep, providing services in these locations, but Denver has gone the other way.

The building was for Counterpath, the non-profit community art and performance space we run in which we'd recently hosted "Neighborhood History Day, "A Blind Date with Democracy," "The Open Opening" (to which anyone could bring art to display, art of any kind), a feminism and philosophy conference dance party, the launch for 11-year-old Patrick's online journal of jokes, magic spells, acrostics and palindromes, and many other such events for poets, performers, activists and artists. The garden was for anyone who wanted to work in it and eat from it. A portion of all food grown would be donated to soup kitchens in the area. The idea for the apples was that once we'd cleared the area around the trees we'd prune the trees back to health. I didn't know if it would work, but I hoped that then the trees would produce fruit in abundance again. And maybe the kids who lived on the block, Cornelius, Coredelia, Cortelle, and their cousin Asian, or just anyone walking by, could eat that fruit next September and October, and I could make applesauce and pies.

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<sup>2</sup> Robinson and Sickels, *No Right to Rest*, 20  
<https://denverhomelessoutloud.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/no-right-2-rest.pdf>

But when I saw the bags I didn't know whether what I was currently doing made any sense.

Gently, I pushed the bags further in—and what, exactly, did this accomplish?

Was there some lesson waiting to be learned from the suitcase under the tree, for example, or from the other thing on my mind—that I was clearing these weeds and making this garden in the immediate wake of a massacre—49 people who went only to dance and to be with one another, mostly young, gay, trans, Latinx, all already by this country at this time punished for nothing but being? I was clearing these weeds and making this garden while every seventeen minutes somewhere in the country another person was shot. Though humble, and maybe stupidly so, I hoped that the clearing was a peaceful act, an act *for* peace, and not just a private one, one that would extend, more than many things I did, beyond me.

It seemed, even, there could be a parable, or more modestly a metaphor, in such clearing. And then, there was, but it wasn't the metaphor I had imagined.

Days later the bags were still there, untouched, and still I did not remove them, even as I removed sage, brome, shepherd's purse, mint and cut the dead branches from the tree, cautiously, slowly now, with less certainty, less pride, trying not to cut any healthy branches, any with apples, failing in this regard.

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I once had a friend named Itty Neuhaus, an artist who specialized in placing objects where they should not be. Her breakthrough work, "Padded Landing," suspended an entire car frame in a net from the underside of a bridge in Manhattan, traffic flowing overtop. This unlikely act, placing the car under instead of on the bridge, set her career in a particular direction. When I met her she was soaking the oddly named "husbands"—those pillows with the little arms that people

used to lean on in bed. Itty placed three husbands in a kind of circle, like a witches' coven, and then, methodically, got them wet – sprinklers set up in the gallery to rain.

Itty was interested in the body, too, particularly the female body, because of how it swells and shrinks, in puberty, in pregnancy, but also just in the less predictable ways of weight gain or loss. The swollen soaked pillow, the suspended car, the distended body, and bread dough—one of her central materials in those years—all of these things in their ungainliness, their monstrosity, their escape, you could say, from form into new form, or formlessness, were her muse. Mostly, she was interested in instability or dissonance, how a house made of bread dough would rise, then rot, how a pillow soaked would expand and then collapse, and how placing an object where it did not belong made the space itself unstable, even untenable, no longer itself. All this came to mind as I considered the suitcase under the tree, unwilling to move it or look inside.

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“The body presents the paradox of contained and container at once. Thus our attention is continually focused upon the boundaries or limits of the body,” writes Susan Stewart in her essay “The Imaginary Body” (104). And then later, “We want to know what is the body and what is not” (105).

But what if the body was never this thing—never a form that could be provoked or perverted into a monstrosity—entered and expanded, soaked or cut, and thereby un-made or made other? What if the form of the body or the form of the city is already not and will never be what we thought it was, what we are told it should be, a clarity, a perfection, a completion? What if there really is no shape of a tree to prune for, no garden to re-invent, and therefore no weed or brush to clear, no health or wholeness to return to.

In her seminal essay analyzing the particular cruxes of patriarchy and white supremacy in America, “Mama’s baby Papa’s maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers considers the difference between body and flesh. “But I would make a distinction in this case between ‘body’ and ‘flesh’ and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions,” she begins, and then, goes on to note William Goodell’s 1853 study of the American Slave Code in which he details the precise acts of terror that will turn body to flesh:

The smack of the whip is all day long in the ears of those who are on the plantation, or in the vicinity; and it is used with such dexterity and severity as not only to lacerate the skin, but to tear out small portions of the flesh at almost every stake. (Spillers 207)

We are reminded, then, that the fantasy of a whole and un-ruptured *social body* is a fantasy that rests, in the history of our country, against the forced flesh of the slave, just as the fantasy of the well-functioning affluent city, the dream city we are trying to make, is built on a foundation of criminality, on land that was only ever stolen.<sup>3</sup>

To discover the suitcase under the tree, to read the massacre’s list of names, to remember that it is precisely when the border between inner and outer is broken that the body becomes flesh is to know once more that the collective that is our dream-nation is *already* broken, already torn by its own brutality, both historic and present. To clear land Tim and I have purchased is, in some sense, in the context of our city, to add to such brutality, even as growing food for the families of

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<sup>3</sup> Who is the “we” that must be reminded? Anne-Lise Francois speaks of the “open secret” as that readily available information that only those with power can choose not to see. Spiller’s “reminder” of the material history of flesh-making will only be a reminder to those of us who can, for reasons of wealth or whiteness or both, afford to “forget”.

our friends and neighbors, for the students, or for others who we do not know is some attempt to heal what we, even before such purchases were made, have already done or already are.<sup>4</sup>

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My copy of William Carlos Williams' great book *Paterson* shows the signs of my needs. The pages are marked, post-its adorn it, dog-eared corners rip at their seams, fallen out pages have been stuck back in upside down or in the wrong place. I have written so much in its margins that it's almost a kind of journal.

What might be in that book that answers such needs, or, at least, describes them? The book, already a monstrosity, becomes more so each year that I pull it apart to "teach it," to learn it, again. A book like that, read so many times, starts to draw apart from its author. It's not that it becomes mine, but that it becomes an appendage of myself, a growth of me from outside of me. *Paterson* opens on monsters, a giant (the character "Paterson" himself) lying along the falls. And beyond him, "oozy fields / abandoned to grey beds of dead grass, / black sumac, withered weed-stalks, / mud and thickets cluttered with dead leaves – " (7): a place a lot like the place I'm in, crammed with growth not wanted, or not called for, uncalled for excess that threatens to burst the word "field" or the word "garden" and destroy it.

A few pages later, we find "a monster in human form,"

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<sup>4</sup> My own great-grandfather, Omer Madison Kem, was a homesteader, moving from Indiana, where he was a destitute farmer, to the "free land" in Nebraska, free for whites because taken from the devastated Otoe Indians. This "free" land he also failed to farm. Instead he turned to the far-left anti-capitalist political party, Populism, running for and winning a seat in the House of Representatives, which he held from 1891-97. The success of his political career allowed him to purchase land near Montrose, Colorado, the former home of the Ute Indians. On this land he, like his great-granddaughter, attempted to raise apples.

he is twenty-seven years of age, his face from the upper part of his forehead to the end of his chin, measures *twenty-seven inches*, and around the upper part of his head is twenty-one inches: his eyes and nose are remarkably large and prominent, chin long and pointed. His features are coarse, irregular and disgusting, his voice rough and sonorous. His body is twenty-seven inches in length, his limbs are small and much deformed, and he has use of one hand only.... (10)

This composite man who lies in a cradle but cracks jokes with clerics, presents a problem of truth. Though this description is lifted directly from Neil Baldwin and Henry Howe's *Historical Collections of the State of New Jersey (1844)*, the coincidence of the number 27 makes of the man's monstrosity a myth and a metaphor. And indeed Williams provides us with what could be called his "tenor" in the very next prose paragraph, which details the town of Paterson's population just seventy years after Alexander Hamilton saw fit to fund its development into America's first planned industrial city:

There were in 1870, native born 20,711, which would of course include children of foreign parents; foreign 12,868 of whom 237 were French, 1,429 German, 3,343 English – (Mr. Lambert who later built the Castle among them), 5,124 Irish, 879 Scotch, 1,360 Hollanders and 170 Swiss. (10).

That such rapid and diverse growth is seen by Williams as a kind of perversity is underscored by the third prose passage in the group. Here he borrows a news item from 1817 that describes the catching of an enormous 126-pound sturgeon under the heading "The Monster Taken."

But what is Williams' attitude toward these "monsters"? How are we to understand his feelings about his rapidly grown mash-up of a city (and book)? Such instability is, we learn, his source, his



muse. The monstrous, the obscene—of poverty, but not only poverty, also grieving, age, sexuality, even childhood—provides him with the “things” or “facts” he needs to write from.

A delirium of solutions, forthwith, forces  
 him into back streets, to begin again:  
 up hollow stairs among acrid smells  
 to obscene rendezvous. And there he finds  
 a festering sweetness of red lollipops-  
 and yelping dog:  
 Come YEAH, Chichi! Or a great belly  
 that no longer laughs but mourns  
 with its expressionless black navel love's  
 deceit...

They are the divisions and imbalances  
 of his whole concept, made weak by pity,  
 flouting desire, they are – No ideas but  
 in the facts... (27)

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A man cares for a younger man in the café where I write. The man being cared for doesn't speak, rocks back and forth, makes unexpected and loud noises, stands suddenly and bursts for the door. In another age he might have been considered dangerous, me might have been kept away, he might not have been cared for at all. Today, the man caring for him catches his elbow, gently restraining. The younger man, groaning, pushes the other's hand off, so that the caring man takes

his waist instead. Again pushed off. Standing in the way of the door, he speaks urgently but quietly: "I'm down with going wherever you want to go, but you just have to tell me, you can't just jump up!" After a longer struggle involving various attempts to bolt, the first man coaxes the other back to the couch where they settle, finally, into reading. The agitated man is lying down now, his head resting in the lap of his caretaker. The reading man's hand lies on the other's forehead exactly as if checking for a fever. He reads out loud, pausing to drink from his water bottle (using only his reading hand, not moving the other from the forehead), until finally the man who does not speak is asleep. The first man continues to read, but now silently, with the younger man's head in his lap.

A week later Counterpath sets up our performance booth at City Park Jazz, the free summer concerts we've been invited to collaborate with. Each week we publish a chapbook and invite a different artist or group to create a performance or installation in the booth. This time two dancers, Lauren Beale and Brooke McNamara, dressed in golden bathing suits perform; the booth's been set up to look like a fifties living room. Meanwhile, Hazel Miller sings on stage and I wander down through the picnicking people so that I can also dance with the collective of kids, couples, and folks on their own, barefoot or in cocktail dresses, in their flamboyant freestyle or dance-class swing. There I see the young man from the café, dancing with a woman who appears to be his mother. She moves her body in a kind of semi-circle of protection. Dancing with him, but also, around him, so that, I guess, he can't easily bolt. But he doesn't seem to want to, they are having so much fun. Her necklace of beads swings free of her chest; his curls bob. Their private agreement extends into the crowd; everyone gives them a little extra room, as if dancing were a brief and contingent healing, a utopic rub, a slipping stroke, and care itself only and ever a momentary and minor gesture.

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Williams' interest in dissonant, out-of-place, or monstrous events and entities runs throughout the five books of *Paterson*. One could say it is the work's central theme. A lake bed writhing with eels (34), a man's body caught between logs, and dangling above the Falls (35), a dead horse in the sewer (37), the "deformed and mutilated verses" of the Greek poet Hipponax (40), the monstrous acts of the natural world—fires, floods and earthquakes—and of the human—murders and rapes.

Significantly, one of Williams' later objects of fascination is the irradiated and pregnant body of Marie Curie, her "fetid womb"—a metaphor for the world itself—which occupies the better part of the second section of Book IV, dated 1951. But to say "metaphor" is too simple here. In the fourth book of *Paterson* "constellation" is probably the better term, as womb/world/bomb/atom/and book link together, versions of one another or parts of a whole. One could say that in this section, Williams' interest in monstrosity becomes monstrous in itself, as physics and chemistry in their most heinous application become symbolic of human and creative transformation. Or, as Williams put it, rather horrifically in 1948, "one great thing about 'the bomb' is the awakened sense it gives us that catastrophic....alterations are also possible in the human *mind*, in art, in the arts . . . We are too cowed by our fears to realize it fully. But it is *possible*. That is what we mean. This isn't optimism, it is chemistry: Or better, physics" ("The Poem as a Field of Action" no pag.). As Marianne Borruch acerbically noted in 1985, "It's hard to think straight—that is kindly—about such remarks" ("Williams and the Bomb" 38). And yet, with Borruch and others, we recognize that Williams was not blithe in his engagement with science, whether medical or atomic. The engagement was deep and the connections he tried to draw between twentieth-century eruptions in science and those he instigated in poetry were in no way trivial. Further, his relationship to the bomb as "image" shifts significantly over the years. In *Paterson* we find an early, hesitant, and in many ways uninformed application. But for this reason in particular, I turn to it, trying to find there an indication of what a poetics of dissonance, of

fission, of monstrosity might deliver. Perhaps even more to discover “How the twentieth-century mind becomes alert to its own recklessness” (Borruch 41) in order to become more alert to my own.

The section opens on a rare scene of paternal attention. Williams remembers taking his teenaged son to a lecture on atomic fission. And yet, this scene begins quickly to break apart into a confused or “fetid” swarm of references—parenthood, poetry, Curie and the 1943 film *Madame Curie*, Billy Sunday’s evangelism, and finally a letter from Williams’ other (true?) son, Allen Ginsberg. At one point a “poem” emerges, recognizable as such by way of indentation and the use of Williams’ “triadic-line”:

A dissonance  
 in the valence of Uranium  
 led to the discovery

Dissonance  
 (if you are interested)  
 leads to discovery

—to dissect away  
 the block and leave  
 a separate metal:

hydrogen  
 the flame, helium the  
 pregnant ash (175)

This description of the transmutation of the unstable element uranium was written, of course, in the wake of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. And yet, the “dissonance” of uranium is evoked here, as throughout, more for its potential to bring forth the new—for the “pregnancy” of its ash—than for the cataclysmic damage that its “little boy” had, only a few years prior, wreaked upon an entire nation.

Images of perverse or violent (re)production occur over this handful of pages with an alarming range. Here is just a partial list: a nurse with abdominal “disturbances”; Curie’s own laboring mind, her “ponderous belly, full / of thought”; the city itself “that complex atom / always breaking down”; the sun parting the “labia” of the “shabby” clouds (echoing the rapes of previous pages); and finally, the developing debt required to fund the Cold War, which Williams equates with Uranium, presumably for how debt is both generative and destructive. None of this resolves. To resolve would be, in fact, to belie the aesthetics of fissure, which only wants to mushroom outward and upward in never-ending expansion, just as the “spreading” “splendor” of America’s cities grow and grow, fueled by the “radiant gist” that is national or personal debt (176-185). Which is to say, in this section of *Paterson* we are given to understand the core of violence that both sustains and damns the fecundity we enjoy.

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Property values in Denver have been rising this decade at faster rates than in any other non-coastal city in the country, marginally outpaced only by Seattle, Portland and San Francisco. Currently, the average home price in Denver is \$500,000, with one-bedroom apartments within a ten-mile radius of the city averaging \$1,600 a month in rent. Meanwhile, a full-time minimum-

wage worker earns just \$1,300 a month.<sup>5</sup> On Colfax Avenue, one block north of the garden, runs a 10 mile stretch of one and two-story motels: Sand and Sage, Airway Motel, The Branding Iron, The Driftwood. These motels with their evocative names are the topic of much conversation at neighborhood meetings. On the one hand, prostitution and drug-related activities, on the same hand, homeless families.<sup>6</sup> There are currently 23,300 documented homeless students in the Denver Public Schools, a number that has tripled during the same decade Denver has “enjoyed” its real-estate boom.

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Here’s to the baby,

may it thrive!

Here’s to the labia

that rive

to give it place

in a stubborn world.

And here’s to the peak

from which the seed was hurled! (192)

This brief and aggressive celebration of sexual reproduction from Book IV is nestled between two tributes, the first to the Passaic river: “My serpent, great river! genius of the fields,” and the second, an almost verbatim steal from an early twentieth-century text titled *A Little Story of Old*

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<sup>5</sup> Statistics from Kautzer, *The Struggle For Space*:

<https://denverhomelessoutloud.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/biennialdholbooklet.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> They are also the topic of the excellent short documentary film, “Colfax Motels,” by Corky Scholl: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqBaMuBdoKU>

*Paterson as Told by an Old Man*, which describes the town of Paterson as it might have looked circa 1700. The striking aspects of these otherwise pastoral idylls are the vicious histories they almost casually allude to. For the tribute to the river opens with a reported conversation with a “Jap”: “Yellow, for genius, the Jap said. Yellow / is your color” (192). We are reminded, if elusively and with unclear intentions, of the period’s anti-Japanese sentiment. We are reminded too of the true horrors of the bomb that in previous pages has only been discussed in scientific or metaphoric terms. This is, in fact, Williams’ only mention or allusion to Japan, and though it is unclear what work he thought it was doing, the moment presents an undeniable and bitter cry. The passages taken from “A little Story” nostalgically mention “branching trees and ample gardens,” but also make reference to “The wigwam and the tomahawk, the Totowa tribe” as well as to the “colored slaves” of eighteenth century Paterson (193-4). Again, intentionality is vague, but effect is clear. There is no growth, no Paterson at all (as there is no Denver), without the stolen lands and stolen bodies beneath, behind, and within its history.

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What am I to do, then, with this book and its strained and “vulgar” attempts to bring together, between its pages, the brutally murdered, the beaten, the silenced, the disregarded, the forgotten and violent histories of a town all while it attempts to make of such monstrosities an adequate and productive metaphor for writing?

*Paterson* dwells in monstrosity in order to find in difference a source of energy, even health. But, despite how Uranium’s “dissonance” seems so conveniently to fall within the range of dissonances Williams celebrates, the bomb can never *be* an image, can never really *be* a metaphor. And

perhaps no act of violence, no matter how local, how precise, how unintentional, can be harnessed for its metaphoric uses without doing further damage to the flesh that suffers.

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We bought the building with the savings Tim had put away in case his business (academic book production) fell into hard times and with money from my parents who had just sold the building that had housed my father's business for over thirty years. That is, we bought the building with family wealth and job security, as it's only my tenured job that allowed Tim to take that risk. The diseased tree hiding the baggage that I will not open, that belongs to someone who does not return for it, grows along the border between public and private land, though in fact, the property, being owned not by us but by the non-profit that is Counterpath, hovers between these two poles.<sup>7</sup> The tree's seeming illness, its monstrosity, how it is barely recognizable as a tree, is, it now seems, a kind of health for how it has sheltered someone's survival. And yet even this health hides a greater illness, for it's a city's lack of structural care that makes such fragile temporary shelter a solution.

In my effort to heal the tree, cutting layers of blight away branch by branch, I perform a service and a disservice. In pruning it I find myself unwittingly enacting the very "pruning" that my city has chosen as law. "To be situated in a position of greater social power produces the social privilege of not seeing how the interests and concerns associated with one's... social location have deeply informed the physical and social world to the disadvantage of those occupying different

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<sup>7</sup> Because the property belongs to Counterpath, we as individuals can never profit from its sale. Any profit would have to fold back into the organization. This legal detail does not, however, make any difference at all to the person who had been sleeping under the tree.



social locations,” I read<sup>8</sup>, and do not know what to do. It had seemed that if I could heal the tree, then I could heal something else as well. It had seemed that the apple tree in its eternal metaphors might, once producing fruit, represent the hope for a healed body, a healed city, a healed country. And in that dream, children emerge from the houses—my children, the children of my students and friends, the children from across the street and those in the motels on Colfax—they all come to eat. But the tree was never really a metaphor, or its metaphor was, by me, misread. Porous, soaked, rotting, blighted, sending out shoots, trying to live, the knowledge it offered was not waiting to be uncovered like some pure and virginal body, but was there all along within its depths, in its imperfections, in its flesh.

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<sup>8</sup> Chad Kautzer, “Homelessness and the Politics of Dys-appearance in American Cities” (no pag.)

