

A Letter to Hausdoerffer from the Confluence of a Very Old River, Ghosts, and a Few Brief Moments of Light

*Yes, all of this is sorrow. But leave
a little love burning always
like the small bulb in the room of a sleeping baby
that gives him a bit of security and quiet love
though he doesn't know what the light is
or where it comes from.*

-Yehuda Amichai

Dear John,

Yes, all of this is sorrow. I apologize in advance. I have been writing these letters for many years now, always on some topic that seems as foreign to me as breathing under water, resilience is no different, though I struggled in the pit of my soul to tell my brain – be positive damn it, before the entire world begins to think that you live in the saddest place in the universe – tell them how your people have survived for generations, their lives held together by an ancient dialect of Spanish, Nahual, English and even a small teaspoon of French here and there. Tell them how your abuelita would fry you an egg on winter mornings, how the puela would pop and sizzle while your young heart filled with how much you loved her. I want to tell you all of these things at great length, but, alas, I cannot.

Sometimes, in the pre-dawn we see the ghosts as they move up and down main street, malnourished doppelgangers intent on their morning bottle. There is no buoyancy in their stride, in their lives. Their failures and their pain were predicted before they were born. We can spot them, the oncoming brokenness of being that is my gente; we have become the weather men of damaged things, able to spot the low pressure fronts above the San Juans, the shifting jet stream of prosperity, the storm that is forming off the coast of some distant place over some ocean that most of these ghosts will never see. We name their thin and frail bodies

so that our children will know them, so that they may avoid the gravity that holds them in their orbit of failure. Look mijo, that one is a waste of God-given talent. That one is a bum. That one, mijo, he could shoot the basketball, but his name is acid now, drugs mijo, the acid fried his brain. And that one, the one on the corner his legs bowed like a harp placed in front of a mirror, that one was beaten with a bat. And that one, his father never loved him. And that one over there is just like his father. Yes mijo sometimes prison is hereditary. And that one, your classmate, try and be nice to him, his mother was driving home one night, the pass was so icy. I'm going to tell you something mijo, our secret, please do not tell your friends; they will just make fun of him. When he drinks, which is always, he takes his mother's high school ID out of his wallet and he stares at it. Be nice to that one mijo, I don't know why God has done that to him. And so we name and continue to name them, their stories are our warning, and here is a small truth that makes the subject of this letter nearly impossible; I have only named a few of them.

It's an easy enough assumption. The ghosts are so visible, there on the main drag. They have been there so long we cannot know if the gutted buildings they lean up against need their thin bodies to remain standing or if the reciprocal is true. People drive through and they make the easy assumption that everyone makes when looking at broken and abandoned things. This place is poor. The assumption itself is not incorrect, but I'm going to offer that the assumption is so rarely benign or born of winged things that might make a positive difference. Poverty has always been the excuse for exploitation, the knife sharpened against the benevolent idea that help is being offered.

At the south end of town there are black railcars owned by a multi-million dollar multi-national company that calls themselves Energy Solutions. The black gondolas wait on the tracks like tumors. They have been there over a year, patient as only nuclear gondolas can be, their hollowed bellies waiting for the cargo of nuclear waste from Los Alamos National Laboratories. To the north of the black gondolas the Rio San Antonio flows over an ancient skull of volcanic rock, and I imagine that the rock remembers its fiery birth, holds it, cool now, a heart of pain that keeps the river flowing. You see John, there are so many ghosts that we keep alive, all of them are passed down to us, hereditary markers where we store pain, loss, humility, humiliation as well as the small crumb of love we keep in our vast heart of longing. It's funny. No, it's sad. Our resilience is our pain. We too, like the bedrock of the river, were born in the shadow of an ancient volcano. Our land was stolen and then our water. Our language was next. A young boy, sincerely asks me what I think of the black rail cars. I tell him that I expected them all along. I mean this. Most everyone believes that they just arrived one day, and that is technically correct. They did appear without an announced warning, but we have all been instructed by our loss.

"Mijo, remember how they stole our water. It will become their habit."

So I tell the boy, they already took the land and water, now they are coming for our health. This is the story of conquest; every genocide has its rail cars.

As I began this letter I could not shake an image. It is still with me, and though I cannot find it on the internet I see it there in my brain, permanent as memory will allow. Primo Levi called her the Hiroshima Schoolgirl. She was one of the 150,000 vaporized, her shadow burned

permanently into a wall. I find images of other shadows, a man who was waiting for a bank to open, the shadow of leaves, the shadows of hand-rails, but I cannot find the girl's shadow.

Los Alamos calls it "legacy waste." This is their way of saying that the Uranium, PCB's and Radon are the byproduct of a heroic endeavor that ended the Second World War. They make it a point in the public meetings to tell us of its origins. You see the implication; it is our duty as patriots is to accept what the Department of Energy sends us because this waste, this legacy waste, saved American lives. I want to remind them that more Americans died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki than in the attacks of 9/11, but that would be a futile rebuttal to their jingoistic rhetoric. They don't care about Americans, past or present. Nuclear waste is money. Plutonium pits are money. Exploratory drilling is money. The entire war complex is money. Make no mistake, it is so difficult to be resilient when every force of nature seems intent on your destruction. Nuclear has become synonymous with three things, poverty, people of color, and greed.

My wife and I have a friend named Marie Max. She is from Cameron, Arizona; she is Navajo, and she tells us how the elementary school has water fountains wrapped in cellophane, the water too dangerous to drink because the uranium the government mined has leached into the water supply. I think of Marie often. I'm not Navajo, but she says that I remind her of a Navajo; it is one of the finest compliments I have ever received. She gives me an eagle feather after I read poetry to her. She doesn't explain why; I gladly accept. I think of Marie for many reasons, often at restaurants. I remember how she refused the bread brought to our table by a waitress at Outback Steakhouse. She made the woman take it back and bring her a loaf that didn't have the knife sticking out of it. Her point was simple. Why would you stab your food? I

love to fish, it is my most basic form of peace. Current practice tells us that all anglers should release what they catch, return the fish to the river for sustainability and healthy rivers. I think of Marie Max every time I release a fish; I apologize to the animal for tormenting it solely for my pleasure. I don't know why I am telling you this. It must make sense, somewhere, somehow.

The gondolas wait for their cargo 250 feet from the river. The cargo arrives on flatbed trucks, the waste in soft-sided containers dubiously called "super sacks," glorified water resistant tarps. They are loaded onto the gondolas by crane, any accident or spill would, within minutes if not seconds, end up in the river, the town's water supply, the lifeblood of the acequias east of town, the water that blooms our fields, waters our animals and makes us whole.

Those ghosts, the ones I spoke of earlier. They have begun to write. They are finally asking to be heard. The town park is filled with their tags and graffiti. They announce their life in black paint. They claim this sad acre of park, where children rarely play, as their own. I believe in symbols, they have killed the park, the empty swings, the tagged slide. Their anger is palpable. Their abandonment has been complete for generations. So what is my point? Honestly, I'm not sure. I know this is all supposed to be connected. That is a writer's job, to connect what the heart knows to what the eyes see. These connections, these too are resilience, I suppose.

Energy Solutions and the railroad tell us the waste shipments will bring economic viability to Antonito. Their own documents tell us that 1-3 jobs will be created and that through the course of the "campaigns" 1-8 deaths can be expected as well. They want to ship the waste in perpetuity. That's a fancy word for forever, but we knew that before they opened their

mouths. They see our ghosts, our beaten park, the worn sidewalks of despair. They see how we take every failure, cut it open, weigh and measure the vital organs, always looking for the source, the failed motor that caused the living host to succumb to his aching life and thus conquer it by dying. They see these things and therefore view our poverty as weakness. They see our fallen things and imagine it must mean complacency and apathy. Put a different way, they believe we won't fight back.

Gerald Vizenor coined a term, Survivance. The root is simple, survive. It's almost an equation, survival + perseverance = living. Or survival + resistance, or sustenance, or defiance, or assistance, or appearance, or circumstance. Or perhaps on a lighter note, survival + dance or chance = a better life. Perhaps it is survival + resilience. I know the suffix does not quite fit, but I think the gesture is accurate, the intent is pure enough to make it true. I mentioned earlier that our resilience is our pain, but I have written myself out of that assumption, though I may come back to it once I leave your Headwaters and return to my own. Instead, I see now how our survival is our resilience. We will never bounce back to our original form as the definition of the word implies. Those days are gone, absent as a brief push of wind, here then gone. No, I suppose our survival and therefore our resilience will depend entirely on how long we wish to fight.

And what of those ghosts, those walking frailties of bone and poverty? I think of Marie Max, her refusal of the stabbed bread. I think of the town park overrun with graffiti and broken bottles. A question emerges, why? 225,000 people died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Their deaths were dropped on them with a parachute tethered to an atomic bomb. Their deaths were the result of genius minds working at evil intent. Antonito is in Colorado, but we are,

culturally, linguistically, religiously, spiritually and emotionally tied to the people and places of northern New Mexico. Those 225,000 lives disappeared in an instant of demon wind and heat, and I have heard how all the radiation entered into the sky, how the wind brought it across the Pacific. You see John, I don't want to be too melodramatic here, but I think you can see where I'm going with this. There must have been souls on that wind too, souls looking for the source of their destruction. I'm not entirely naïve. I don't buy into a whole lot of hocus pocus, but I don't believe that northern New Mexico and southern Colorado are some of the poorest places in the country simply because they are isolated. Can you imagine the weight of 225,000 deaths, how heavily that weighs on even the potential for resilience?

I realize that this letter is getting long. Perhaps you are tired. I will not be long in finishing. This is my first letter to you, however. I have written many to your predecessor and several to this somewhat anonymous group we call The Headwaters. But since this is my first letter to you I thought I should tell you that all is not death and poverty. I want you to know that I love my hometown. There are brief and brilliant moments of light, the sun through a kitchen window, neighbors that always wave as they pass, a herd of sheep as they emerge from the trees into a meadow, a river that forgets the sins we have committed against it, the memory of my abuelita frying me an egg on a winter morning, two kids just barely in love, holding hands as they walk down main street, a football team that takes the field one autumn and brings hope where none had previously resided. Yes, there are great storehouses of beauty, each made manifest by some small gesture or action. I want you to know that the gondolas have not moved in over a year. We are resilient enough to fight. We are in a great struggle of will and determination versus millions and millions of dollars, but we know, despite

our losses, despite our ghosts, that the river is our home, that the river makes our home possible, that the river in its many moods and flows is the truest metaphor, it teaches us how to be, and at its lowest, when she appears dry and weak, we know beneath the rock of volcanoes and distant pressures, that the river still flows, invisible, subterranean, toward a confluence of hope, a place where it emerges from the earth sweet and cold, perhaps flowing into a greater river which flows toward a greater river and so on, our own resiliency borne there upon the riffles and currents, our lives complete, our ghosts smiling up at the passing earth, as the river carries them

Much peace,

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