

PLANTING SEEDS AND POLYSTYRENE BEADS

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There has to be someone who found it. They could have been walking in the light of a half moon, waves creeping with the rhythm of breathing. It would have felt a little like tiny stones in the sand, but with the smoothness that marked the hand of man.

Or it could have been sunset. Walking in the fleet heat of a scarlet evening, moving to the high chirp of a forest kingfisher, they would be little pearls in the sands. And you would have known that the Magnetic Island was polluted with beads. Little balls of polystyrene half buried in its pale sands, swallowed in the earth's shifting, carried like blood clots into the soil to rest beside the roots. They are land mines for *natator depressus*, the Flatback Sea Turtle which nests ashore Maggy Island and only lives around the seas of Queensland. They are a poison for plants and any hapless creature poised to swallow them. I had known about the beads from a small article titled: "Magnetic Island beaches once again polluted with thousands of bean bag beads." It was barely three paragraphs long, the fact of the act and the slow work of the island natives and residents to clean it up. It was buried in half a dozen articles of more pressing concern: How the ocean burns with a fever heat that sweeps through the churning deep, bleaching vermiform polypi, turning a living mosaic into dead, bone pale strata. Or how great barges sulk across the sea like worm-ridden boars, trailing plastics behind it that wash days later upon the beaches of The Island. But no matter how many things I read, I couldn't rid myself of the thought of those beads. Something about them troubled me beyond the obvious implications. It lay on my mind like so many stones, lingering long after my work had finished. The beads came from the torn open carcass of bean bag chairs set on the beaches.

Enough time passes that I begin to wonder why. Why this affront to nature would so distinguish itself when it's so paltry next to things like oil spills and invasive species. Why the thought of it burned in me. It was only when I saw someone toss trash into a lake near my home, an act of desecration so intimate that it awoke in me a realization that it was because it was PERSONAL. Instead of the mindless industrial machines churning out pollution, it was a small group of people who had done it. People who came to the island to enjoy themselves and leave, to take what they could and leave behind what they would. It was borne from the carelessness of transient consumption, it was fixed by the work and dedication of the people

who actually lived where the travelers had desecrated. They lived in places untouched by their own carelessness, places where they needed to live with what they did. All environmental degradation, all pollution, were the same as the beads. Same in a sense of procession, a sense of axiomatic assumption. It is a place all human cruelty comes from, which is a place of true Severance.

Note the word, Severance. Not separation. Separation is an odd and necessary sleight of hand, a small distinction in the shape of things. Most would not claim, necessarily, that they ARE their hand. There is a powerful inclination to perceive the hand as part of oneself, but not exclusive. Studies show people mourn the loss of their limb like they do a brother, or a mother, but no man ever truly considers their personhood deprived by the loss of an appendage. Between the two, Hand and Person, there is a healthy respect in the separation of Being as it relates to identity and the flesh that lets us walk among the weeds. That, however, is far different from a feeling of Severance, a lingering doubt that the hand to your left is even yours in the first place. It is critical we never, ever lose sight of our connection to our own body. Dysmorphia of the body is evidence enough of this, the things we do to ourselves when we don't connect to our flesh is unspeakable. It allows for a level of distortion that shouldn't be, the severing of the clever knitwork of the soul. The most banal, basic, well tended evolutionary desire to eat can be overridden. We can safely, albeit tearfully, ignore the little voice that has been with us since our lungs touched air: "Pull your hand back, this lighter is hot!"

This example uses flesh, but it is not limited to it. Its foundation is kinship and connection, contextualized in the case of OTHER bodies as "empathy." To realize a person's struggles are not so different as your own, to make a mirror of another and see your own humanity stare back at you. It is profound that our connections require expanding our self-bound borders, that living in the skin of another through books increases empathy, that words like "We" can see the One in Many, that we are capable at all of understanding that our well beings are all tied up in resisting the urge to kill each other.

Yet, we all know that this is not how we live. It is a bone deep feeling, though difficult to articulate. We live in a society of disconnection and discontent, we live every day more fragmented than the last. Alienated from our economy, from our neighbors, from ourselves, a profound dysmorphia of the spirit occurs. Corporations become people, bodies that are not bodies in possession of central desires which relate not to human well-being, but a mathematical calculation that extends like a long shadow across time, that demands

accumulation as ends in themselves, like a stomach which forgot its central goal is to provide nutrients. Separated from nature, nature becomes an object, and in our spiritual dysmorphia can be destroyed without cause for concern. Even the eco-poets and painters can lose sight of the truth about our relationship with nature, advocating for a return to it without ever realizing the silliness of the statement. Without realizing that trying to uncouple us from nature is to uncouple voice from air, to believe so foolishly that interdependence can be reversed to independence. That the presence of a relationship implies independent being.

But it does not. We are a required dichotomy, distinguishment necessary for there to be anything at all. As dark and light exist only in contrast, we exist to Nature as wholly separate and yet completely of it. We see what happens when people think otherwise. It becomes a place where men dine on food picked by their fellows, drink wine grown in human gardens, sit in chairs made and lacquered from across the earth and SNEER at the idea of community, who speak of self-reliance with words built with a million million minds. Who participate gleefully in the debasement of their spoken inheritance. But then, what remains is the question: “How do you clean up one million beads?”

Do you take your knees to the sand, picking with sore, cold fingers, each and every one?

One million little acts of duty against one negligence, one million acts of stewardship against one abandonment, one hour of compassion, set against one explosion of cruelty?

Yes. Yes, we must. It is hard, hard work to maintain ourselves. But to end our separation, both on the front of the economy and our conceptual separation from Nature is the only path to a future worth living. It is changing our stories to recognize that stewardship of earth begins and ends as self care, to expand our personal identities beyond white picket fences and to the lands we are connected to, to end all economic estrangement and exploitation, and to evolve our language, because when uncoupled from the land the pillars of our language and memory, once stone, are borne away by time and worn to sand. And like sand, drift in any aimless wind. But we have said this all before.

The poet repeats himself, but only if that which his eyes see is unchanged. You whisper into the rushing air as you fall that there is a bottom, and it is as it is no matter how close to it you come. Hoping someone with strong arms will catch you, carry you away. Praying to something unseen for strength in the face of desolation. A power in you lighter than air. As the

Magnetic Island faces its battle against ecological catastrophe, it will take a concentrated effort on all fronts to care for it. To reestablish our connections to it, not as merely a spot to park a beanbag but as a breathing community of life. Like all self-care, it takes one thing.

Work.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-04/magnetic-island-beaches-polluted-with-bean-bag-beads/12847666>