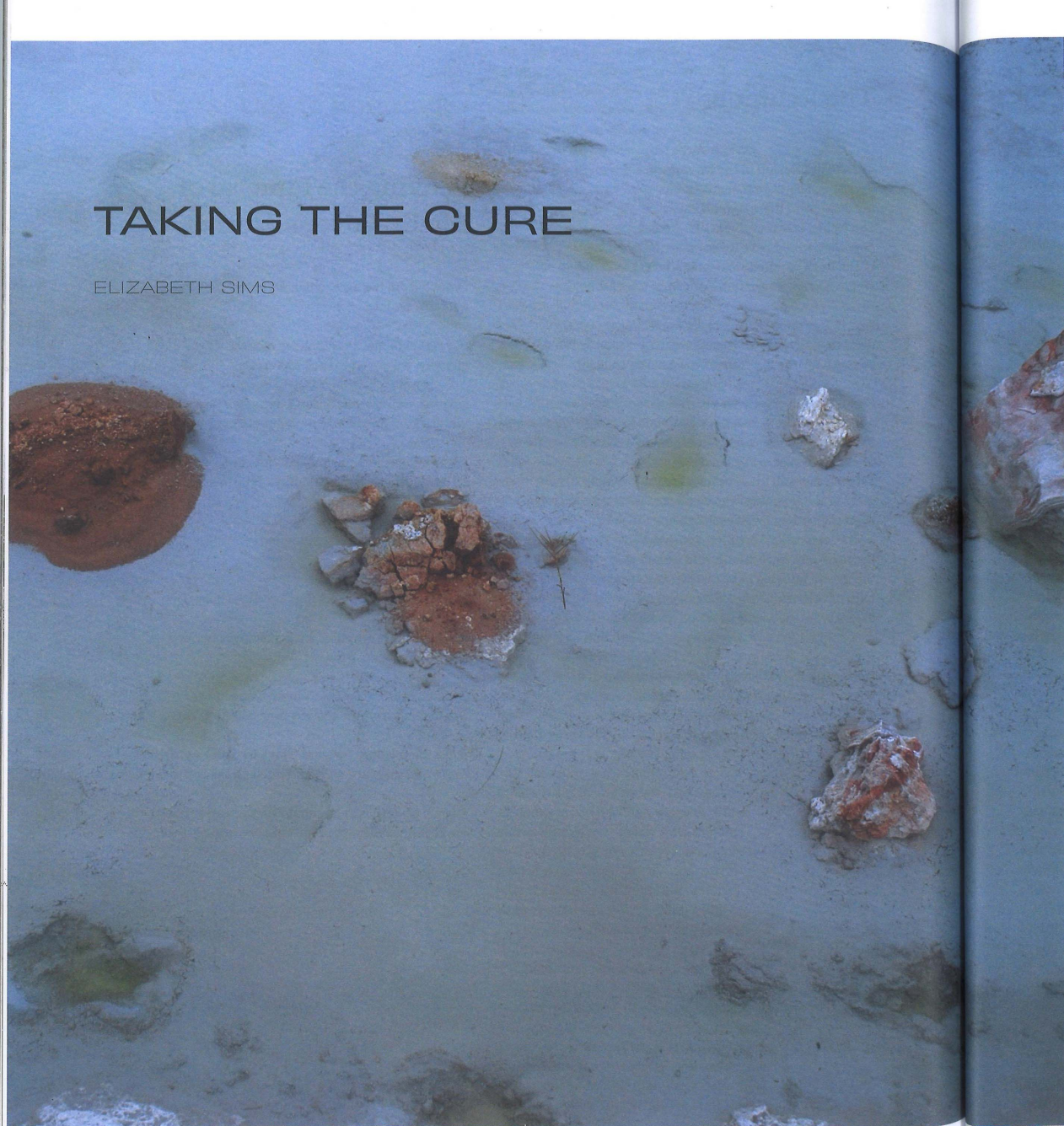


# TAKING THE CURE

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It's after midnight when I pull off the 395 Highway onto Benton Road, rattling over two miles of potholes and three cattle guards to park against a high bank of snow. I step out of my truck into a moonless February night in the Owens Valley, tonight just a featureless expanse lying between the steep slopes of the Sierra Nevada to the west and the White Mountains to the east. I look for a steam plume that should mark a rise of land about a mile off, but a low, frozen mist hangs in the road, concealing it. Two coyote packs miles apart from each other along the nearby foothills shoot a volley of broken cries and guttering howls overhead through the dark. Taking only a flashlight and a bottle of water, I walk out of the mist and into a landscape blanketed in starlight. My boots crunch through the snow, stepping in the hard-packed tracks of others toward the only destination around. After a frigid mile, pockets of thaw appear at my feet, revealing tepid water running below snow-flattened grasses. When I finally see it, the pool is just an absence in the field, a black hole wreathed in vapor. I come to its edge, take off my clothes, and climb down into it. Its heat rivers through me like a drug. My body comes to rest on velveteen slime. I lay there, chin-level with the muck, underground but nearly floating, suddenly looking down now, into a bottomless pool of phosphorescent sky.



I started going to hot springs as Occupy Oakland began to unravel. I found myself withdrawing from activism, making an almost involuntary retreat from years of organizing and volunteering for projects that had culminated (and maybe, a collective desperation suggested, dead-ended) in the Occupy Movement. I was exhausted from failing to balance full-time teaching, an art practice, and my work in several collectives and action committees. Like many, I was burnt-out—not just from the workload, but from factionalism and futility.

In the post-9/11 era that led up to Occupy, I had been drawn to the new political body taking shape. Catalyzed by surveillance and repression, and availed of new communications technologies, it took its form; viral, agile, elusive. Collectives organized in shifting, metamorphizing cells. Ideas emerged without authorship. One of its most conspicuous manifestations, the black bloc, was itself a kind of public invisibility. Masked participants swarmed to actions not as a contingent, but as contingency—a specter of masses of people leaving the ranks of the social apparatus to gather within a moment of refusal.

I felt intimately the accelerating existential threat this resistance organized against. A new level of political crisis was being fomented via the reification and atomization of political identities, resulting in retrenched tribalism. But as the effects of this crisis became clearer, the margin for refusal continued to shrink. Survival became increasingly predicated upon the willingness to produce and perform oneself as a commodity object within media's proliferating echo chambers. Despite its almost metaphysical tactics, activism wasn't immune. The dysfunction I watched erode organizational power arose from the decomposition of cooperative networks into insular polarities; the body politic just another territory divided and conquered.

I started spending more time outside of the city. I designated the retreat a productive hiatus, a return to my art practice, which is based in landscape. I had found some old letters written by my great-great-grandmother, who settled with her family on the California side of the unmarked Mexican border, and I read in them about my great-great-grandfather's mule-packing trips through the summer Sierras. I needed a new historical lens. I wanted to rediscover that country. I made my way through alpine passes until I came out the other side into an expanse that plunged from the fourteen-thousand-foot flanks of the mountains to the great sagebrush sweep of the Long Valley Caldera. Once I discovered the Eastern Sierra, I began regularly to put the entire Sierra Nevada mountain range between myself and my activism.

The Caldera is a twenty-mile-long scar left by an ancient supervolcanic eruption. 760,000 years ago, it emptied a magma chamber nearly two miles deep, sending lava flows over fifteen-hundred square miles, and blanketing most of the western United States in ash. Ash from the eruption that fell back into the caldera formed the Bishop Tuff, a pumice deposit thousands of feet thick. Over time, the rest of the caldera filled with water from the Owens River, which collects snowmelt off the Sierra Nevada to the west and the White Mountains and Inyo range to the east. About a hundred-thousand years ago, the water overflowed the rim and ran off to form the Owens River Gorge, revealing a high basin pocked with red cinder cones, eruptions of glassy obsidian, steaming valleys of fumaroles, and hot springs.

Geothermal areas occur wherever water heated by internal geologic processes rises through the earth's crust to pool and stream across its surface. Natural hot springs that are suitable for bathing are scattered across the American West—they can be



found in the coastal forests of the Pacific Northwest, the hills of northern California, the desert basins of the southwestern states, and across the high plains of Wyoming and Montana. Many of these springs have been cultivated for private commercial use, but many more lie out in the middle of nowhere.

Word of mouth, a handful of self-published booklets, and blogs—citing signs like fence holes, cattle guards, and forking footpaths—are what's available in the way of directions. The paths that wind towards the springs are carved by desire and doggedness through a tangle of terrain, plunging the body into a deep stratum of space that reason alone can't navigate. Your senses carry you when "you're getting colder" or "you're getting warmer" are literal rather than figurative clues, and where you can follow your nose to sulfurous exhalations. The journey is a passage into another kind of awareness. The earth expands as you attend to it, suddenly enormous, suddenly close. It floods your senses, drowning you out, until you become a sea of branching thorns thrashing with birdsong, of wind singing great distances, and rocks that clink and sigh when you brush past them. When you step on the cold dry earth, it spores up at you, sending the debris of unknowable seasons into your sinuses. When you step into snow, you hear meltwater go chiming down into the ventricles of the earth. The farther in, the closer you come—you and the world together, growing stranger and more familiar.

Geothermal sites are animated by bizarre phenomena. Hunks of featherweight volcanic ash heave in petrified froths above black glassy obsidian deposits. Prismatic ridges thrust out of the dirt like broken ribs, exposing the earth's tossed, crystalline guts. Pastel-colored mud pots bubble amid reedy nests, and steam seeps or pours from orifices in the humid ground. Primitive, spongy bio-matter, bleached and carbunched with mineral growth, thrives in these strange wetlands, as do grassy weeds that spread in submerged veldts across basin areas, incubating spawns of embryonic fish hatchlings, and attracting avian migrations.

Somewhere along the way, this uncanny wilderness delivers you back within the deeply human. You follow paths tended in anti-social but benevolent gestures by fellow expatriates. The pathways have been cultivated, maintained, and improved over millennia, sometimes by a steady trickle of footprints, sometimes with acts of engineering; stone curbs, cairns, even boardwalks. Anonymous expressions of care; a promise of what's just ahead.

Most hot springs lie on BLM land, tracts the early US government couldn't get rid of, passed

over by homesteaders looking for more promising acreage. The Bureau of Land Management today manages about an eighth of all United States territory as federal lands, leasing them for grazing and mining, maintaining them for recreational use, and sustaining their ecologies. This awkward arrangement lays the groundwork for protracted controversies as different interests contend for privileges. 2016 saw a Libertarian militia occupation of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, led by the Bundy ranching family, who instigated the standoff to advance their view of Federal land management as unconstitutional. Environmentalist critics of the action mailed bags of dildos to the occupation in protest, and one militant was killed in a shootout with law enforcement. Also in 2016, author and activist Terry Tempest Williams bid for, and won, two oil and gas leases in her native Utah at an annual dollar-fifty per acre, seeking to protect them and draw attention to environmental degradation and carbon emissions. The federal government withdrew her lease. In the past few years, another controversy has boiled over concerning feral mustang populations; the BLM asserts that the populations need culling in order to prevent overgrazing, and deploys helicopters to round them up for auction, adoption, or permanent holding. Mustang advocates argue that the roundups are cruel, while some ranching interests support the removal of mustangs entirely so as to preserve grazing resources for commercial use. The Bureau also provides leases to low-impact energy operations that harvest solar and wind power, as well as stations for scientific research, and geothermal energy plants sourcing clean energy from the same geologic phenomena that heat the springs.

In the national psyche, BLM land occupies a contested intersection between opposing concepts of freedom; that of commercial use and profit, of personal use and enjoyment, and of environmental preservation. Its embattled status comes from attempting to withstand the total hegemony of the "private" as a means of promoting a particularly idiosyncratic iteration of the "public," one that falls short of anything approaching the "commons."

Whatever communal ethos persists on BLM land is probably most present at the springs. The engineering benevolence evident in paths and passageways extends to the cultivation of the springs themselves, demonstrating the ingenuity of unnamed curators who pipe and channel water into pools, fiddle with water sources to perfect temperatures, erect stone enclosures in the eddies of rivers so that they catch geothermal runoff, even cementing porous bottoms to prevent

drainage. This tending carries forward a long tradition. Many pools were originally engineered by indigenous societies, who visited and cared for them for centuries. Continuing this custom, locals today routinely flush algae accumulations, and scrub mineral accretions from makeshift pipes and channels. Sometimes they leave behind tools to encourage others to do the same, disseminating a spirit of care and responsibility.

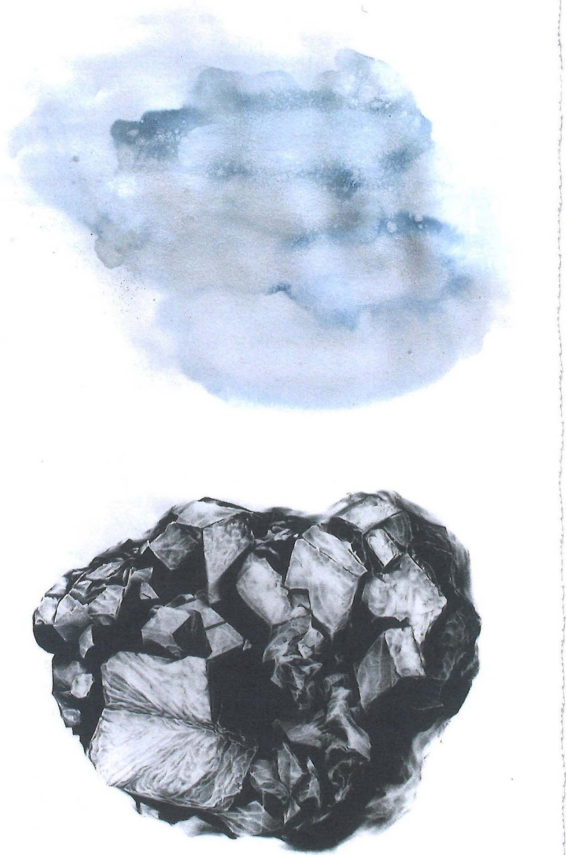
A friend of mine, submerged in the Travertine Hot Springs, once watched as an elderly man approached the remote pool at sunset, armed with a bucket, a hammer, and a can of Budweiser. The gentleman clambered atop the mineral formation that fed the pool, and, silhouetted against the dusk, began to chip away at the blockages forming in the channel. He hacked off chips between pulls of beer, slipping them into his pail before ambling off into the twilight without dipping a toe into the waters, without casting a backwards glance at the scene inside. A local man bathing near my friend tipped his camo cap at the retreating figure and said, "All hail the mayor of Travertine."

The anarchist poet Hakim Bey coined a term to describe the phenomenon of provisional, communal spaces that open outside of authoritarian control: The Temporary Autonomous Zone. According to Bey, the parameters of these zones can be interpreted broadly, including seventeenth-century pirate utopias, hidden enclaves of revolted slaves, modern web forums, and festivals like the annual Rainbow Gathering. Essential to all are a tactics in which the will to power is manifested through disappearance. In Bey's words, The Temporary Autonomous Zone "unfolds within the fractal dimensions invisible to the cartography of Control."

Ours is the first century without terra incognita, without a frontier. Nationality is the highest principle of world governance—not one speck of rock in the South Seas can be left open, not one remote valley, not even the Moon and planets. Not one square inch of Earth goes un-policed or untaxed...in theory.

The "map" is a political, abstract grid, a gigantic con enforced until the map becomes the territory. And yet, because the map is an abstraction, it cannot cover Earth with 1:1 accuracy. Within the fractal complexities of actual geography, the map can see only dimensional grids. Hidden immensities escape the measuring rod.

The passage to the springs is a passage that runs off, below, and beyond the map of dominion. You follow these passages to undertake a crossing, the uncanny margins of the springs forming a frontier.



"37.6627°N, 118.7892°W (Hilltop)," a work from Sims' 2017 exhibition *Prima Materia*, suggests the alchemical theory of first matter, the primitive formless base that constitutes the starting point for all things. Using geothermic sites as sources, these works feature drawings of earth, water, and stone dissolving within the abstraction of uncontrolled media such as watercolor and ink. Mutating beyond the constraints of identity, these forms suggest the power of ephemerality, volatility, and convergence.





“37.6896547°N, -118.8126318°W (Hot Creek),” another work from *Prima Materia*, reflects the artist’s exploration of the fumaroles and mud pots of the Eastern Sierra. Fascinated by our origins within natural history, Sims mines this heritage to imagine radical futures. Unearthing traditions through which we have sought intimacy with the land, and forging new ones, her work composes empathic encounters with the wild that prefigure models of survival, resistance, and liberation.

The springs are portals, not just to the enigmatic depths of the earth, but to another vein of being.

Eye level with the earth, as it stretches out before you, scale and distinction dissolve in the steam that softens the horizon. Wild grasses loom larger than the mountains beyond, bent by the orbital paths of water droplets that cling to them. Puddles mirror the sky, rending luminous holes in the earth. The pool’s walls are a slabbed cross-section of the invisible, pulsing with mud, minerals, and roots. Floating in the liquid that filters up through its pores, you are flesh within flesh.

The water is slippery, like silk. The temperature of the pool is uterine, and wisps of vapor pour off its surface. You can smear the fine, silty mud over your skin or squelch it between your toes. Sand-bottomed pools are aquamarine and clear, casting patterns across the floor where you sift your fingers. Bathers take their time feeling out the cove with the best temperature, the most comfortable nook, coming loose of the constant effort to withstand physical and psychic discomfords. For centuries or more, thermal springs have been associated with healing. Hot springs bathing was once called “taking the cure.”

The communal taking of the waters is a ritual of tenderness. Bathers nearest the water source push the heat toward those farther away. They make way for new arrivals, huddling close. They advise newcomers on how to enter safely, how to navigate the pool’s features. Bathing is an act of vulnerability; many bathe in the nude. It is one of the few places in America where the naked body is visible but unexploited. Where you might sit thigh to thigh with a woman bearing nothing but mastectomy scars. Where you might bathe while a man without a home cleans and warms himself discretely. The springs are full of bodies—tattooed bodies, young insecure bodies, the synced bodies of lovers, aging and athletic bodies—all coming to rest; empathic, harmonizing.

The wilderness de-contextualizes. It sends its breath over your forgotten parts, bringing them to life like a fever or a phantom limb. It greets the roles and routines for which you’ve mistaken yourself with a silence that hollows out your skull until it rings like a singing bowl, honing the scales of history into one annihilating note. Casting off your clothing at the pools, you abandon your caste and your tribe. You take your place among the impassive monuments of the landscape—millennia-old bristlecone pines, magma cooled to obsidian glass—not beings apart, but momentary expressions of a great totality of planetary energy; fleeting phrases composed by weather within a greater syntax of pressure and time. Like them, for a precious while, you become no one at all.

Bey describes the participants of the Temporary Autonomous Zone as nomads—voluntary exiles temporarily dispossessed of citizenship: “They are corsairs, they are viruses...camps of black tents under the desert stars... fortified oases along secret caravan routes...bits of jungle and bad-land...black markets, and underground bazaars.” He includes among their “inter-zones,” “the forest conclave of eco-saboteurs, the idyllic Beltane of the neo-pagans, anarchist conferences, and gay faery circles, the Harlem rent parties of the twenties, nightclubs, banquets, and old-time libertarian picnics.” We are infiltrated with liberated

zones—places like the Oakland Ghost Ship, often coming to light only once they are lost. Outcry against their precarity, their tragedies, misses the point; a pervasive social trauma so unrelenting that it moves its sufferers to risk their safety for a moment of relief.

Not all drawn to the T.A.Z. are suffering, not all are outsiders. Coming to the springs can be un-reflexive, can look like pleasure-seeking or adventure.

Encounter is a hidden property of the springs; subtle, brief, and concealed within pastime. The suspension of social norms provides provisional entrance into a makeshift community whose work is a kind of intuitive, seditious magic.

You share the springs with Mormon families traveling the country, tech entrepreneurs, rural Trump supporters, urban feminists with pierced genitalia, French teenagers and their chaperones. You share them with working class snowplow operators, professional snowboarders, anarchists, and UC students. You bathe with pot-smoking snowmobilers, Australian tourists, backpacking dropouts, and US Forest Service employees. You meet the nouveau riche of the Middle East, snow bunnies, and actual cowboys, children, locals, artists, and nurses. You bathe with hippies, rednecks and that infamous breed of Californian that lies somewhere in between. But you don’t find them as such.

Entering a delta of talk, you can join in or listen. Bathers come and go, but the conversation never ends. It shifts and mutates, threads gathered and woven into improvised forms. The stories are not what you would imagine. Strangers remain strange. Their failure to archetype unsettles, intimately. Your own form gets muddled.

The springs hold a never-ending mad tea party, with riddles and rearranging seats. It’s always happening; you can show up any time you like. You’re a host. You’re a guest. Among strangers and friends. If anyone has anything, they’ll share it—property is anathema. It’s an eternal festival; a patch of sacred consumption, a jubilee of pardon and redemption, a mildly carnal bacchanal.

Time is recuperated as holiday—that recurring gap in productivity, a special time outside of time with its own quality and texture. Bey identifies temporal resistance as originating with medieval insurrections against the erasure of “intercalary intervals.” He says, “science was conspiring to close up these gaps in the calendar where the people’s freedoms had accumulated—a seizure of time itself, turning the organic cosmos into a clockwork universe. The death of the festival.” Festival is resurrected, perennial within the springs. But

participation is temporary. The lessons of historical revolutions are lessons against permanence.

Once, Burning Man was a thriving, episodic Temporary Autonomous Zone. Now, it presents a calcified and co-opted facsimile of counterculture. Moments of rupture are fragile. A marginal, provisional existence is necessary to the Zone’s survival. In the words of Bey, “its defense is its invisibility...it conquers without being noticed and moves on before the map can be adjusted. It is an uprising which does not engage directly with the State; a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere.”

Hot springs are sites of deeply recurring human pilgrimage, a natural locus for passage out of profane and into sacred; a ritual return to a time outside of time. Many pre-Columbian societies considered geothermal areas to be sacred, lands calling for a suspension of all antagonism. This designation is preserved in the native names of these places, names meaning Place of Peace, Breath of Healing, Water for Us. Cultural knowledge that has survived tells us many tribes considered geothermal areas to be territories of truce in which all manifestations of conflict, including weaponry, were taboo. One was bound to enter the area of the springs unarmed, vulnerable.

Natural features like hot springs often took on metaphysical significance for indigenous societies of the North American West, most of whom engaged in migratory patterns as they cycled annually throughout their lands for seasonal provision. This peripatetic practice is enfolded within a sacred one—moving through the landscape, indigenous peoples activate mythos. Landmarks evoke sacred figures and events. The Huichol of the Sierra Madre Occidental take an annual journey that carries them past a series of “gates,” including a natural spring called Where Our Mother Lives. This journey takes them simultaneously forward through space, and back through time, a return to where life originated, in pursuit of healing. The final destination yields the peyote that the Huichol harvest and consume, allowing them a visionary crossing back to this point of regeneration.

The altered state offered by the hot springs is milder than a hallucinogen, but it still signals a crossing. You follow signs leading out of the civilized world and into an eternal, cyclical, and mysterious one. You come unburdened of the items and identities that have meaning in the world left behind. You come naked in pursuit of cleansing and healing. You enter and construct another existence. The ritual is messianic: it prefigures while it enacts a return.



Many stories feature the birth-like crossing of a people up and out of a layered cosmos. Emergence myths describe a metamorphic ascent through a series of subterranean worlds. Peoples evolve physically as they rise through a stratum, finally arriving in their present forms and homelands. The Kiva ceremonial structures of the North American Pueblo peoples reconstruct this concentric passage, each centered on a depression in the floor called a Sipapu that symbolizes the original portal to the world they occupy today.

For the pilgrims of the hot springs, echoes of the emergence myth remain. Hot springs are literal portals to the underworld; porous membranes between the geologic forces of planetary history and the atmosphere of the present. They are heated by volcanic, tectonic activity. They emerge in places where the world is still being written; where plates diverge in great, boiling rifts, or converge to birth mountains; where slabs of its surface subduct backwards into a subterranean forge. We were born in this furnace. We evolved from rocks, matted layers of cyanobacteria and mineral growing inside lumpen stromatolites marinating along forgotten coastlines.

Bey spoke of the utopian in terms of the alchemical, citing a “fascination with the inchoate...a yearning for its formless form.” The base material for alchemy was described originally by Aristotle as *Prima Materia*. This “primary matter” was the primitive, formless base to which everything is reducible. *Prima Materia* contains all the qualities and properties of all things. A seventeenth-century compendium of alchemical writings stated that *Prima Materia* corresponded to everything, “to male and female, to the hermaphroditic, to heaven and earth, to body and spirit; it contains in itself all colors and potentially all metals; there is nothing more wonderful in the world, for it begets itself, conceives itself, and gives birth to itself.” It has been called iron, gold, salt, sulfur, blood, poison, clouds, dew, sea, mother, moon, dragon, Venus, microcosm, chaos, and darkness.

We are still learning about the process by which organic molecules assembled on the surface of minerals into the essential building blocks of life. Recently, scientists discovered a signature of life—the earliest yet—along the shore of Hudson Bay in rocks that once composed a vent spilling lava onto a seafloor. These fossils are at least 3.7 billion years old. Life arose rapidly after earth began to stabilize: as soon as the froth of geology cooled, biology established its role as a planetary process.

Ancestral organisms called Archaea still thrive in the thermal vents that spawned them—including those that feed natural hot springs. These Archaea produce the spectrum of uncanny color that often emanates from the springs in prismatic halos. The exchange between the mineral and the biotic within these springs is dynamic: bacteria entombs itself within gypsum, while algae constructs crystalline envelopes of hyaline, or shrouds itself in grains of sulfur. Other flora become encrusted in a carbonate of lime, new growth emerging from stony masses. These bizarre formations appear to the bather to lie somewhere between the animate and the inanimate. But this *proto-anima* is both the origin and the destiny of the bather—the base potential of our own earth-born matter; *Prima Materia* in alchemical flux.

We return to the pools to reactivate it, this spark of something strange, to free it for a moment from the mold of modern selfhood. We possess a true origin story, an evidence-based emergence myth. It calls us through our migrations, and we return to the joyful, self-immolating rituals in which we lose ourselves and find each other. We go back to the nothingness we are made from to remake ourselves anew, remembering our potential to become iron, gold, salt, sulfur, blood, poison, clouds, dew, sea, mother, moon, dragon, Venus, microcosm, darkness, and chaos.

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Coyote song shifts through space, approaching then retreating. I can feel it on the back of my neck. I startle when a flock of geese unsettle themselves somewhere nearby in the dark. The crystalline cloud has followed me from the road. It’s drifting closer, heavy along the ground. It engulfs me slowly, swallowing the fields, the stars, and then everything but the edges of the pool. It is wet, cold, heavy. I look for a landmark, but there are none left. I flick on my flashlight, but it lights only a low dome of slowly falling droplets. The coyotes continue to howl. I grow anxious—about the visibility of the trail, the inhuman temperature outside the pool. I dip the head of my flashlight underwater. The half-shell of the pool is illuminated; I am a naked oyster come to light at first crack. I look and see a tiny, albino crustacean clambering over my thigh. He is translucent, almost invisible. I marvel at his blankness, his perfect adaptation. I turn off the flashlight. The water is as warm as blood. I breathe out a vapor like a wraith. Sink deeper into the dark. ●



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