

The kangling is a trumpet made from a thighbone. In this case, all that remained of a revered hermit, eaten by a tiger as he meditated outside his mountain cave.



### Extract from winter worm summer grass

Over the next few weeks, what I felt in the air that day became more real. I felt a virus, as eager to exert its influence on the world as the mushroom spores, pollens and myriad other life forms and intentions that share the air we breathe, the earth on which we walk.

The newcomer's influence was strong and it travelled fast. Unlike a pollen or a spore, it inspired more than a sneeze, more than itchy eyes and a runny nose. It turned its hosts into factories, reproducing itself, using them to distribute itself far and wide, without signalling even a hint of infection until too late. It quickly spread sickness and death around the world. It spread confusion and chaos around the world. It spread a search for healing and for community around the world.

Each day, when I went out on my bicycle rides through the city, I found a place - in the street, by the river, in a park, to stop and breathe more deeply, with more awareness. I could feel the air, warmed by the heat of the blood within my sinuses, travelling into my lungs, the exchange across the soft, moist, blood-rich boundary. Oxygen swapped for carbon dioxide, clarity for sleep, bright red blood for deep purple.

I widened my attention just a little and I could feel the golden dust, hidden within the air, ordinarily lost through a lack of interest, but with the right attention, seeping across the cribriform plate and gathering as light within the fluid behind my eyes.

Inside the sinuses, those caverns within my skull, I could feel the dust motes and pollens, parasites and viruses, bacteria and particulates attached to fine cilia, stuck to a layer of clear mucous that enveloped them, drowned them, dribbled them down my throat into the acid bath of my stomach, or coughed and spat out into the gutter. I could feel the dendritic cells, macrophages, and mucosal lymphocytes identifying, attacking and killing invaders powerful enough to outwit the cilia and the snot.

I could feel my immune system gathering information, preparing new strategies, as the stranger pressed and probed my defences.

I could feel danger. This newcomer was not polite, was not patient, was not looking to find balance. Nor agreement. Nor a willingness to share. It wanted to survive as much as I. Perhaps it had already learned from other viruses before it - isolation is its enemy, community its friend.

I felt my isolation and hungered for my friends.



When I left Amsterdam, I left behind a little circle of friends who brought me stories of the world beyond the Jordaan. Now I missed those stories and I missed those friends and I felt the need to reach out.

My family could no longer help me. They were living in another world, in sacred places hidden in mountains, dancing with finer energies that travelled through light and sound and feeling. I missed them so much. I wanted to be back in that world with them, away from the noise of the city, the noise of so much thinking. But I had chosen to stay here, each day more apart from them.

I decided to immerse myself more deeply in the noise of the city. I let my attention be drawn to screens in shops and bars, to the radio in passing cars, to people chatting on their phones, to headlines and newspapers everywhere. I tried to make some sense from all the scraps, but I felt I didn't know enough.

At home we had a computer, a laptop, usually tucked away in a drawer in the kitchen. It was only ever used for business, to send and receive emails, to do a little research, to send a photograph or two.

I wanted to use it more, to gather information, to understand what was going on in the world around me. I opened myself to the laptop, read the news in many languages, joined forums and groups, found friends and networks, immersed myself in conversations and discussions, watched movies and documentaries, followed exercise routines, subscribed to courses, to channels, to blogs and podcasts, to so many ideas and opinions, to so much information thrown in my face.

I forgot to dance the wind horse, forgot my family, forgot to sleep, watched other people cook instead of cooking. I heard the world was closed. It didn't matter, I'd forgotten the world outside. I felt my despair and I wanted to feel it more.

I switched off all the lights and went downstairs to the shop. It was Marianne's suggestion that I practice this skill, and I practiced it well. In the dark I could sense the location of every shelf and cabinet, the table and chairs, the counter and each object hanging from the ceiling and walls. Marianne told me. "Be prepared - not only for danger, but for a call from above. You don't want to miss either one."

I opened the drawer under the counter and bent down, my body astutely aware of the counter edge just in front and the wall behind. I took the kangling. It was the first time I touched it, and it seized me in an instant, dragged me deep into fear and pain. I was swallowed by the horror concentrated in that thighbone. I could see the mountain, the snow, the cave, the hermit freezing to death, the tiger starving to death.

This was not a good time to be a hungry tiger. This was not a good time to be a man alone. I heard a call from above. "Just let yourself go." I gave in to the fear, let the pain saturate every cell of my being.

The hermit held out a hand, withdrew his attachment to it, allowing the bitter cold to close the capillaries as the tiger feasted on his flesh, crunching through gristle and bone. The sated tiger wrapped herself around the hermit and slept, the heat from her body keeping the hermit from freezing to death as he journeyed deeper into himself.

The hermit guided the tiger in her feasting. There were still a few weeks to go before the thaw, before life returned to the surface. The tiger had to learn how to pace herself, how not to gorge, to trust the guidance of the one she ate, and to keep him warm at night while he continued his inner work.

Limb by limb the hermit discarded his body, withdrew the sense it was his, gave his meat to the tiger, travelled deeper into his core, into his spine, into the fluid within the membrane, into his being within the fluid.

That fluid, at first troubled and turbulent, now settled, its rhythm slowed down. Now like a long quiet river, rising from his heart to his head.

He floated on the river, on a raft made of reeds, into a fluid filled cistern, within the warm embrace of his brain.

He travelled to his heart, now beating erratically, struggling to make sense of the loss of his limbs, the change in pressure, discontinuities and dead ends.

He found the north star in the sky - the still point around which all the constellations turn. He let it touch the sinoatrial node in his heart, calm its agitation, restore its stillness. From its stillness, his heart found a new beat.

Now I could feel the marks in the bone where the tiger gnawed away the flesh. The bone had been cut with a saw, its interior cleaned with a red hot rod, a mouthpiece of silver attached at the end nearest the hip, the bone polished and waxed where it flared at the knee.

Usually, a tiger would eat the guts first, enjoying the concentrated nourishment of the liver and stomach, kidneys and spleen, chitterlings and tripes, fresh arterial blood vibrant with the last breath.

It would spit aside the gall bladder, that sac of bitterness and bile, enough to ruin any meal, enough to ruin an entire life.

The tiger waited, for a sign from the hermit, that the moment had come, that he'd gathered everything worth saving and was ready to let go of the rest. The vultures circled overhead. They knew there was more than enough to go round.

The tiger sank her teeth deep into the hermit's emaciated belly, ripping through the aorta in one go, almost drowning as the hermit bled out, his heart pumping to the last, until there was nothing left to pump and the muscles flapped like wet rags in the wind. The tiger lapped her fill. She guarded the corpse for three days and on the third day crunched through the skull and let the hermit fly free.

By the time the tiger and the vultures had finished their feast the land had thawed and, beneath the earth, a fungus cracked through the head of its caterpillar host.

winter worm summer grass



I brought the kangling to my lips and blew. Its sound was haunting and beautiful, a feeble wailing, a call to hungry ghosts and demons. There was no shortage of both in this part of town. Soon there was little room in the shop to move, little room to breathe.

They pressed against me, pinned me to the floor, sat on my face, sealed my nose and lips with their cold fatty flesh, leaving just enough room for me to barely inhale, each breath tainted with the reek of shit and rotting meat.

They taunted me with my history: a mother unable to love, breasts dry and sour, bottle fed by strangers, left alone to cry, body aching from so much reaching out and no reward. All the faces passing by, pinched and judging.

"She's a changeling this one."

"No wonder her mother couldn't love her."

"Don't get too close, she'll give you that look."

The hungry ghosts and demons beat me with my memories until all that was left was despair and I couldn't find the smallest thought with which to counter it, couldn't find the smallest impulse with which to seek a jewel.

I gave myself entirely, relaxed into that dark and dreadful place, willing to be completely overcome, to drown myself in the pointlessness of life. I signalled my surrender with a sigh, felt the hungry ghosts and demons tearing at me like vultures, stripping away the flesh and all its history, disincarnating me until all that remained was flayed bone.

Then there was peace. The hungry ghosts fled with their cravings unsated. The demons fled with their anger intact. Their stink remained.

One fine, bright beam of light pierced the darkness - a tiny hole in a shutter and, from the place where it touched the wall, I looked at my skeletal self, laid out as a cross, legs apart, arms out to the side.

My bones were not brown and dry like the kangling, but glossy and pink and vibrant, their marrow core seething with potential, creating liquid life afresh. The extraordinary blood machine in which I took shelter became whole again, memories of the muscles wiped clean, memories of how to survive, how to fight, how to flourish, built anew from a deep knowledge held within the plasma.

I felt a shift, from the personal to the communal. My suffering was swept away, my vision widened to see life as it was. Despair, just another quality flowing through a universe of all possibilities. Not intended to be taken personally.