On Scientists, Spirits and Spiders

AURORA OU

People always think I'm lying. Maybe it's the way I look upward and fidget when I talk, because I forget what I'm trying to say, or maybe it's my slow, uncertain speech. Nobody will deny that Einstein was a genius, but when I explain his ideas, when I tell them that time doesn't flow and explain how to travel into the future, they are not so sure anymore. I don't know if I can believe that, they say. But it isn't up to them; it's mathematically and experimentally proven. How can you accept the scientific method and then balk at the result? Maybe the kingdom of God is here, I tell fellow Christians. They frown with uncertainty. It's a nice thing to talk about at church and then forget for the rest of the week. It belongs in a corner of our minds, kept separate from the thoughts that regulate our day-to-day actions.

Is this what the inside of my mind looks like? Past sunny fields full of my fictional creations and real people I know, past my vivid dreams, I walk through a dark hallway into a corner of my mind that I have never explored. What will I find there? Perhaps a simple shelf with some boxes placed on it. One is for the theory of relativity, which I pull out for lecture on Mondays and Wednesdays; another is for Jesus, which I pull out on Sunday mornings. I wonder what they are doing locked away back here. Why do we claim to believe things, but keep them separate from our decisions and actions, so that one does not affect the other?

Maxine Hong Kingston's essay "No Name Woman" tells the story of a Chinese village in 1924, in which the villagers raid the household of a woman, the narrator's aunt, who is about to give birth—she had gotten pregnant while her husband was away overseas. The villagers do not, in fact, keep their beliefs separate from their actions; they have a need to make their superstitions into something real. They feel like they are being forced to act because the aunt's actions have threatened them as a whole. Kingston writes:

> In the village structure, spirits shimmered among the live creatures, balanced and held in equilibrium by time and land. But one human being flaring up into violence could open up a black hole, a maelstrom that pulled in the sky. The frightened villagers, who depended on one another to maintain the real, went to my aunt to show her a personal, physical representation of the break she made in the "roundness." (662)

The aunt's adultery is socially unacceptable in itself, but the villagers only attack her in defense of the "roundness"—their collective purity—because they believe she has compromised it. By breaking human law she has shamed them, but by breaking spiritual law, for which the entire village is accountable, she has endangered their souls. Her small, personal act was to them a dangerous spark that could potentially unbalance their delicate equilibrium, a thing as tiny as a black hole that could nonetheless destroy everything around it. It was to them a "flaring up into violence," even though the villagers themselves are the ones committing the actual violence. But by avenging the spiritual violence with physical violence, by meeting the spiritual threat with a physical solution, they restore their balance. Though they drive the aunt to commit suicide, their obligation to the spirits is fulfilled.

Like the villagers, we have a tendency to strive to bring the spiritual into our lives. The physical is what we can sense, but the spiritual gives it meaning; we need both in order to stay balanced. So how does this lead to us keeping the two separate? And how could restoring the villagers' balance require such horrible acts?

I step into the corner with my light, and what I find is not something so quaint as little boxes on a shelf. I thought that whatever I would find back here should be free to roam through the rest of my mind, but I was wrong. The face of the dead aunt, all wet hair and bloated skin, stares back at me, demanding an explanation.

In "The Dance of the Frogs" by Loren Eiseley, an older scientist, Albert Dreyer, encounters up close the very spirits he was studying from a distance, and in telling his story he makes the narrator, a younger scientist, experience the same thing. The Innu Nation website confirms that the Naskapi people of Labrador, Canada, who believe in the spirits the scientists are studying, do indeed perform a "shaking tent rite," in which the tent is the meeting place of the shaman, who represents the people, and Mishtapeu, the spirit who helps the shaman communicate with the other animal spirits. The narrator is content to know about and lecture on the rite, but when Dreyer asks the narra-

tor if the spirits dance, he "[grows] nettled" and says, "I am a scientist" (253). He only wants to be an outsider, looking in and observing other cultures, never participating, perhaps never fully understanding. When he is forced into his own "tent," the narrator no longer wants to face the game lord, part human, part animal. Perhaps the narrator is a coward. But perhaps he knows something that we do not. He does not underestimate what happens in the tent, where man meets spirit. For him it is such a huge undertaking that he does not even want to think about it. What is he afraid of?

Later in the essay, we see that his fears are embodied in the moment when Dreyer takes off his glove: "He paused and drank, and then . . . held up his black-gloved hand and deliberately pinched off the glove. . . . I turned my eyes away. One does not like a webbed batrachian hand on a human being" (258). The frog hand on Dreyer's otherwise human body is a jarring image that makes us feel all at once what it is like to bring two opposing, supposedly incompatible ideas together. It is the physical manifestation of Dreyer's indecision when he questions whether he should have jumped into the river with the frogs. Part of him wanted to, but part of him was held back by the human in him, so that only his hand was transformed. This moment is strangely uncomfortable, both for the narrator and for the reader. The narrator was dreading this moment, but he accepts the reality of it, only finding the combination unbearable to look at. The readers, however, are not even sure if they can accept that the transformation is real. The meeting of the physical and the spiritual that we were striving for has arrived, but it is unnerving. Why are we suddenly uncomfortable and unwilling to accept it?

The kind of discomfort the narrator feels upon being thrown into a meeting of the physical and the spiritual is much like what we experience when we read "The Black Widow" by Gordon D. Grice, in which the venom of the black widow seems to have no reason for being as dangerous as it is. No matter how much we want to find the purpose for the widow being designed this way, we cannot. As Grice explains,

> We want the world to be an ordered room, but in a corner of that room there hangs an untidy web. . . . No idea of a benevolent God is comfortable in a world with the widow. She hangs in her web, that marvel of design, and defies teleology. (317)

Grice paints the widow as a defiant creature and a "marvel of design," a thing to be admired. Yet the contradiction present in her "untidy web" ruins our perfectly "ordered room." How can we reconcile the disorder and untidiness of the widow's venom if we see the widow as a marvel of design and not a

fluke? We are more likely to fail and go back to keeping the untidy web separate and far away from our order. We fail because our discomfort has grown from simply not knowing what to make of a story, to questioning our desire to believe that everything in nature has been designed with a specific purpose in mind. Our first impulse may be to do away with this discomfort. But should we?

Something tells me I should stop walking. I shine my light onto a huge spider web covering the entire corner. Such an ugly thing does not belong in my mind at all, but to get rid of it would be too dangerous, should there be a black widow living here. Seeing it is horrible, but deciding what to do about it is far more agonizing.

When the animal master visits Dreyer's own life, he is forced to decide whether to jump into the river with the frogs. When Dreyer takes the glove off of his hand, the narrator must question his previous statement about being a scientist, and the reader must decide whether to take the revelation literally. When we know about the venom of the black widow, we must reevaluate our belief that everything, including humans, exists for a reason. When belief is brought into the physical realm, hard decisions often come with it.

In the case of "No Name Woman," the villagers restore their equilibrium, but at the cost of that of the aunt. Not only has she been attacked by the villagers, but she gives birth to a baby in the same night. She cannot simply ignore what has happened and continue to live the life she had before. As Margery Wolf explains in "Women and Suicide in China," in Chinese society, a suicide implicates those who were responsible, but it would also be committed in the hope of revenge, by the spirit of the person coming back to haunt those responsible: "To the young woman . . . who sees as the source of her misery oppression by familiar people whose authority over her is their only mark of superiority, revenge must be a strong motive for suicide" (Wolf 114). The aunt's physical act of drowning herself in the well, perhaps inspired by her desire to haunt those who had rejected her, turns back into a spiritual act of revenge, something she must do to regain her own balance.

But was she right to take the baby? Kingston accounts for this choice by acknowledging that "A child with no descent line would not soften her life but only trail after her, ghostlike, begging her to give it purpose" (Kingston 663). The baby is the place where the violations of the human law and the spiritual law have been brought together. The aunt, who has taken on all of the discomfort the villagers should feel, would be inconsistent not to take the baby.

Since she kills it, the fatal discomfort goes back to the villagers instead of passing onto the baby.

No matter how much is at stake, be it a few moments or an entire life, we are unwilling to make the discomfort last. We must perpetually shift it away from ourselves, like a cruel game of hot potato. It does not matter whether the results of that are horrible or not, as long as we do not have to face them. Like the villagers, we ask for this meeting of the physical and the spiritual, but as we find in "The Dance of the Frogs" and "The Black Widow," it turns out to be much more than we were prepared to accept. Better to shove the responsibility over to others like the villagers and the aunt, engaged in an eternal dance where each must keep their own balance. Better to cry for help at the last moment like Dreyer at the river, to turn away from the ugly hand like the narrator, than to face it and do what it demands of us—to make a decision, to take an action. Unless we are willing to live in constant discomfort instead of avoidance, we would do better to keep our beliefs in little boxes.

I step into the dark corner and find . . . nothing. I fear the worst: that whatever was here before has already been let loose into the rest of my mind. Einstein's ideas may force me to live with the knowledge that reality is counterintuitive and hard to believe, and that I am insignificant and, just like the widow, random. If I live in the kingdom of God, I may be held accountable for my actions. But I refuse to undo it, secretly hopeful for the havoc it may wreak.

WORKS CITED

Eiseley, Loren. "The Dance of the Frogs." *Encounters: Essays for Exploration and Inquiry.* Ed. Pat C. Hoy II and Robert DiYanni. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000. 252-60.

Grice, Gordon D. "The Black Widow." *Encounters: Essays for Exploration and Inquiry.* Ed. Pat C. Hoy II and Robert DiYanni. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000. 313-17.

"Information About Innu History and Culture." *Innu Nation.* 25 Oct. 2006 <http://www.innu.ca/culture.html>.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. "No Name Woman." *Encounters: Essays for Exploration and Inquiry.* Ed. Pat C. Hoy II and Robert DiYanni. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000. 656-64.

Wolf, Margery. "Women and Suicide in China." *Women in Chinese Society.* Ed. Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1975. 111-42.