Letter to Joan Didion from a peripheral character

By Josh Berson

All at sea

July 2023

Bogong, Republic of Kulin (Victoria)
December 2046

Dear Joan,

Was it you who put me on to Yoshida Kenkō? *Essays in Idleness*—I picture an old man sitting at his writing desk in the hottest part of the summer, dragonflies buzzing at his ear, looking up when the rain comes. It falls in sheets, out of nowhere, you've been waiting all day, please God, let it rain, the sky dark with the promise of it from the moment it's light, and then it comes, 3 p.m. on the dot, and in the space of ten minutes the temperature drops five degrees and you can breathe again.

It could not have been you who put me on to *Essays in Idleness*, but somehow it had to be you. Idleness, quiet days—you must have been writing 'Quiet Days in Malibu' around the time we started corresponding. I say around the time we started corresponding, as if it were a decision we took jointly, but really the decision was yours. You wrote me. You reached out, though it'd be another twenty years at least before "reached out" entered the lexicon. I was in Mexico City and you were no longer in Malibu, nor on Oahu, and you had got a little obsessed—was that your word or mine?—with my mother's story, Inez Christian Victor's story, and you wanted my perspective on the events of March and April 1975.

Or that's one version.

Lots of rain in our story. There was rain in Hong Kong.

'The day Jack Lovett flew down to Saigon the rain began in Hong Kong. The rain muddied the streets, stiffened the one pair of shoes Inez had with her, broke the blossoms from the bauhinia tree on the balcony of the apartment in which Jack Lovett had told her to wait and obscured the view of the Happy Valley track from the bedroom window.'

And there was rain in Kuala Lumpur the week you flew down to see my mother, the week my mother told you Jack Lovett had been dead four months.

'There had been during the course of her account a sudden hard fall of rain, temporarily walling the porch with glassy sheets of water, and now after the rain termites swarmed around the light and dropped in our teacups, but Inez made no more note of the termites than she had of the rain or for that matter of the teapot.'

There was rain on Oahu too, not the monsoon glassy sheets of Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur but the year-round island mists my mother spent her life missing, rain that does not so much fall as bead up on your neck. '"Get her in out of the goddamn rain," Jack Lovett said to no one in particular'—or that's how you had it, Jack Lovett watching from the operations room at the Honolulu airport the morning my mother returned to Hawaii to bury her sister and have her father certified incompetent to stand trial. It occurs to me now that you made that up—how would you know what was said in the operations room at the Honolulu airport at 5.47 a.m. on the morning of 26 March 1975? Even you with your knack for being invisible, for seeming so slight and unthreatening that no one ever bothered to notice you were there, hanging back, observing. No: Jack Lovett and 'Get her in out of the goddamn rain' had to be authorial prerogative. In fiction, you can make it up. Something else I learnt from you.

Joan, I miss you.

'This is a hard story to tell.'

Anyone can do weather, you wrote. That was the second thing I learnt from you. Rule 1: Make it up. Rule 2: Anyone can do weather, by which you meant anytime you find yourself short on colour, in need of descriptive infill, B-roll, something to make it real, to make the reader feel like they were there with you, there's always weather. '*Colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air.*'

What did we know about weather? Nineteen seventy-five, we still thought we made the weather. Nineteen seventy-five, we still thought the weather was whatever we said it was. We still thought the weather was about us. Maybe it was. All those H-bomb tests Jack Lovett sat in on, out on the atolls after they cleared the Marshall Islanders off, living on boiled lobster, playing poker, waiting for the weather people to give the go. You had to wait for the weather people to give the go, and then you did the test and created more weather so people like you and I could come along and write about the weather: rain falling in sheets, rain misting on the back of your neck where the skin met the collar of the poplin shirt you'd put on in London or Tokyo, somewhere back in a different lifetime, remember, Joan? Remember what flying was like, touching down at 5 a.m. wearing the clothes you'd put on somewhere on the far side of the world in what felt like a different lifetime? You were so good on flying. When I think of you now, when I pick up *Democracy*, the book you wrote about my mother, or *The Last Thing He Wanted*, your next novel, your last novel—same book really, same structure, same motifs, you've got the protagonist, a woman who marries into power and finds herself alienated, her crazy father, the fixer she falls for, the daughter she doesn't know how to handle, plus the kind of casual state-sponsored adventurism that seems like something from a dream now—when I go back and read you, I see now how it was all about flying. 'We are here on this island in the middle of the Pacific in lieu of filing for divorce.' You wrote that about yourself. Same island as the one where Jack Lovett said 'Get her in out of the goddamn rain.'

Do you remember how easy it used to be: flying? This is what got you interested in me, do you remember? No, of course you don't remember. You're dead; you've been dead twenty-four years, can you believe that? You've been dead longer than I had been alive when we met. When you walked into my life—or maybe I walked into yours. You had me in Seattle, talking my 'way onto a C-5A transport that landed seventeen-and-one-half hours later (refuelling twice in flight) at Tan Son Nhut, Saigon.' You were always brilliant at the technical details: C-5A, refueling twice in flight. Anyone can do weather, but not anyone can do 'the AM-2 aluminum matting for the runway,' the 'plastic membrane seal' it was or was not laid over. 'Tactical erdlators,' you wrote, 'have been my mountain and forest lines.' It was a different version of you who wrote that, a different Joan Didion to the one who wrote me talking my way onto a C-5A transport from Seattle to Saigon, Easter Sunday night, 1975. But not so different.

Actually, you made it sound easier than it was. It's true, I did it without a passport, but I didn't just talk my way on; I slept with the pilot.

Of course I did. You knew that.

I never told you, but you had to know. Why you didn't put it in is anyone's guess. Maybe your editor, Henry Robbins, stayed your hand: *Come on, Didion, you can't have an eighteen-year-old senator's daughter walk out of heroin rehab still smelling of the crab cups at the cheap crab restaurant in Pike Place Market where she worked, walk out on the tarmac at Boeing Field, solicit the Air Force pilot of a C-5A bound for Saigon…*

I never knew you to shy away from the story just because some people would say it was over the top. But I can see why you'd hesitate with this one. It feels exploitative. It feels broad. Of course, none of us knew, back then, 'how broad a story could get.'

(I can see myself untying my apron, folding it neatly, walking out the back of King Crab, the alley with that sour food-waste smell, hailing a taxi to Boeing Field. Easter Sunday 1975, the air with that light you get in Seattle in the spring after all the darkness and rain of the winter, a light that says 'Hold on'—and the scent of hydrangeas. A lifetime ago.)

You said troubled capitals were my weakness. Yours too. I sensed it the first time we met: a crackle in your expression, the way you inhaled the smoke that drifted over from the burning garbage like it was incense. Another thing you had a weakness for was a certain type of dangerous man. The Jack Lovetts, the Treat Morrisons. The arms dealers, the State Department fixers, the crisis junkies, the guys who were in it for the adrenaline rush. Not many of them left now, Joan. Funny thing, they were never my weakness. Or, let's say, I had a weakness for a different kind of crisis junkie. The foreign correspondents. The Médicins Sans Frontières types. The mirror image of the Jack Lovett type, you could say. Actually, Jack Lovett and I got along pretty well, those weeks in Saigon, April 1975, when he was looking for a flight to send me out on and I was looking for a way to stay on past whatever was about to happen. He made it sound like I was a pain in the ass, and I was, but he saw something kindred in me. One of 'the world's great survivors,' he called me. We never slept together—the pull was there, but we both knew it would destroy my mother if it ever came out, and you could never rule out the possibility that it would. So, we kept it on a friendly basis, Jack Lovett and I, and I can see the appeal, looking back, I get it, I understand why you kept inventing these guys, kept wanting the protagonist to end up with them. 'Anyway we were together,' my mother said to you of Jack Lovett, December 1975 or January 1976, when you went down to Kuala Lumpur to see her. 'We were together all our lives. If you count thinking about it.' 'I want those two to have been together all their lives,' you wrote of Elena McMahon and Treat Morrison at the end of *The Last Thing He Wanted*.

I get it. I wanted it too. That's what we all wanted, right? The survivor and the crisis junkie come together in unpropitious circumstances. Filicide, daughter gone off-radar in a war zone, arms deal gone bad. But you look in ten years on, twenty, they're still together, a little slower now, hair gone wiry, tendons of the neck visible below the jaw when she lifts her head to concentrate on a fragment of conversation coming from the far end of the laneway. The ala of the nose gone soft. He swims in the morning, at a beach accessible from a neighbouring lane if you don't mind ducking under the razor wire, and when he comes in, stooped and dripping, still in good shape, still an attractive man at seventy and change, we're sitting in the front room, on seagrass cushions on the concrete floor, and she says, 'Look who dropped by.' Dropped by, like I was in the neighbourhood. He pauses, looks up, cocks one eyebrow. A look of recognition passes across his face, then the old lupine smirk. 'Just happened to be in this part of the world?' he says, and I say yes, last-minute, and I remembered the two of you used to keep a place here. 'Still keeping a hand in?' he asks, and I nod and say yes, keeping a hand in. He nods in turn and resumes his slow progress from entrance to bedroom. A little slower, a little less mobile, circumstances not quite as expansive as they once were. Enough to live on, even with inflation, if you grow your own vegetables and stay on good terms with the young men who breed brittle stars in the tide pools an hour's walk up the coast. The coffee is the kind they make from mushrooms, or whatever they make it from, but these days no one can get real coffee. Anyway, by the time you get to their age, you can no longer taste the difference. The floor is concrete, swept and mopped, the walls those snap-together polyhydroxy-whatever panels we used to joke about, back when they were only being used for emergency housing. The roof is rolled aluminum. Not the Royal Hawaiian by a long stretch, but it stays cool in the heat and dry in the wet, and it's sturdy enough to see the two of them out. *Anyway we were together. I want those two to have been together all their lives*.

One of the world's great survivors. What did we know about survival in 1975? You flew to Honolulu in lieu of getting a divorce; I flew to Saigon in lieu of taking methadone and filling crab cups at King Crab. What we knew about survival was to fly into the dawn, wind back the clock, buckle in, nod out, wake up in a new lifetime wearing the poplin shirt purchased on impulse off the clearance rack at Bergdorf Goodman in New York in a sweltering August back when we thought we knew what sweltering was. What we knew about survival was tactical: food, shelter, a clean shirt, a cool drink. *Colors, moisture, heat*. Something else you wrote around the time you and I started corresponding: 'We tell ourselves stories in order to live.' For a long time I thought, *Yes, that's it exactly*. It's one of those lines you tuck away and carry around with you, wishing you wrote it yourself. But now I know different. Now I know that we tell ourselves stories not in order to live but in order not to be alone. Which is sometimes the same thing.

I should tell you something about where I am and why I have come here. See, I've done this backward. You would have opened by setting the scene. You would have given the reader something they could picture: the writer sitting '*at her writing table in her own room in her house on Welbeck Street.*' I guess that's me now. You wrote me into being, and I imagined you were immortal, but you've been dead a long time, and now it's my turn. *Let the reader be introduced to Jessie Victor, upon whose character much will depend, etc.* I am in fact sitting at a writing table of sorts, a copy of Kenkō's *Essays in Idleness* at my elbow. In two months, I will turn ninety. I would say we're in the rainy season, but of course the whole year is the rainy season now. The fire season too.

I wish you were to tell this story.

One of the benefits of age is detachment, but even at eighty-nine I find I lack the detachment to tell this story as well as you would. When I find myself stuck, when I look up and realise that what has caught my attention is the sudden drop in pressure that precedes the arrival of the afternoon rain, when the air is suddenly cool and I find myself glad of an excuse to rise and fetch the quilted nylon jacket that has been my constant companion these last thirty years, settling back in at the low table just as the first drops hit the roof, when the rain gets so loud you cannot think for the noise, I find it instructive to open up *Essays in Idleness* at random. Consider, for example, the following passage, which appears early on, before we have really got to know the author, before we understand what kind of man he is.

'A man who meets with misfortune and sorrow should not shave his head and become a monk on impulse; he does better to quietly shut his gate and seclude himself unobtrusively, expecting nothing of each passing day.'

It has been a long time since I expected anything of the passing day, and still I lack the clinical detachment that made you such a singular observer of this world.

We've been trading letters a long time now. When I was selling my first novel—not the one I was working on when you wrote me in Mexico City to get my perspective on the events of March and April 1975 but the one I wrote after I set that one aside—you counselled me to yield to the days when I could do nothing but lie on my back on the floor of a darkened room, a damp cloth folded across my eyes. At the time, you were not yet speaking publicly about this sort of thing, but I gathered you spoke from experience. This is advice I have tried to follow, through relapses and relationship blowouts, insurrection, the rising tide of tribalism, rage, dispossession, reproductive coercion, detachment from reality, rivers of dead fish, fungal infections of the skin and airways, the end of publishing as you knew it. We did not yet know how broad a story could get, but I confess, I never saw the good outcome, the cottage at the end of a laneway on some desolate foreshore, he swimming in the morning, she on her hands and knees in the garden with the trowel and snips. When you wrote about bushfire in Malibu, about the orchid greenhouse destroyed, the years of careful effort and millions of dollars of breeding stock lost, did you see what was coming?

Even back then we were having trouble imagining a future, or maybe it was just me. I never found a Jack Lovett of my own—maybe they can only live in fiction. Maybe the same was true of you.

In solidarity,
Jessie

on page 24
u.s. navy personnel aboard the uss blue ridge push a helicopter into the sea
ap photo

Departures from Vertical

By Josh Berson

Grunewald, Berlin

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1

I am clumsy: I drop things, spill things, misjudge distances. Doorways knock glasses from my hand as I pass. I have difficulty keeping track of where my body is; my head attracts cabinet doors and the corners of exhaust hoods. I have sprained a toe climbing the stairs to the train—coming from acupuncture, no less, when you'd think I'd be more… What is the phrase I'm looking for? More *present* to my body. I have broken a toe colliding with a bench in the kitchen in the night, two nights before I had to travel. Fortunately it was a fifth toe. I taped it to its neighbour and carried on. I have broken a metatarsal twice: the first time a blunt trauma fracture, falling on my outstep when I'd stood up quickly, not realising my foot was asleep; the second a stress fracture from running uphill on a treadmill all winter. I have broken bowls rinsing them, not to say simply picking them up to eat from them.
In high-traffic spaces, I have learnt to remove myself from the flow of bodies, to find a wall or a pillar so as not to stand there in the centre like a brick—but I must remind myself every time. In others' homes and my own, I live in terror of dropping something and gouging the plank floors or the sealed ceramic cooktop. Getting out of bathtubs demands care.
Perhaps none of this would seem remarkable if I did not share my life with a trained dancer.

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2

Conversation with the then editor of my forthcoming *Waking Paralysis* in the comments on what was to be the final pre-copyedit draft, he suggests I consider cutting a line that describes roadside sellers of grilled maize as squatting: '[I]f the corn is grilled near the ground, perhaps it's accurate'—even so, he suggested, it might strike some readers as pejorative.
I try to make life easy for editors. But in this instance—perhaps it was the end of a long day—my response was a bit combative.

> I've given this thought, and I'd like to keep "squatted." To change it would be to whitewash the scene. In much of the world, squatting remains the modal posture of static wakefulness. When I was teaching in Shanghai in 2018, one day I had my students working in small groups, and I was circulating among them. At one point, I squatted down next to one of the groups. One of my students expressed surprise that I could hold a squatted posture. She associated whiteness with an inability to squat. This was an educated, urban, twenty-year-old. Anyone who takes offense at the suggestion that people squat needs to ask themselves why they consider it derogatory.

Forms of the verb "squat," I see, appear 22 times in that 79,000-word text.

Standing, squatting, sitting, lying down: consider how gravity shapes your days. I can only speak from the experience of this one limited body with its vestibular asymmetry and its inability to localise sound, but I sense that learning to manage gravity is among the key dimensions of becoming present to the world. (An earlier draft of this had ‘becoming a self’ instead.) Think of learning to wear clothes, the discomfort of the weight of them—not the compressive force of clothes that hug the body but simply the added mass that clothing represents, the added load. This is the kind of thing we forget, not just the sensation but the fact that we have experienced it, but you can recover it, a bit, by learning to wear an unfamiliar type of garment later on. Skirts, say, which, especially if you lack hips, pull on the waist, the weight of the thing making itself felt in a way that is not the case—at least for me, at this point—with trousers.

Part of what I am groping for is an ecology of huts—*mutatis mutandi* workbenches or the circle of earth where you sit, mending a tear, sharpening a blade—an account of how we are shaped by spaces where everything is within reach, you simply have to stretch and twist, deforming your body to meet the space now in one direction, now in another, perhaps learning, at length, to experience the surround as a kind of everted extension of the body—you learn to know where something is by the posturokinematic sensation evoked by the act of retrieving it or by the memory of that sensation; the motor rehearsal is the knowing.

south vietnamese soldiers discarding their uniforms
by yves billy saigon, april 30, 1975
courtesy of ap

Note the variety of postures Yves Billy captures in the image above: standing with the weight on one hip or both, squatting, kneeling, sitting with one knee up, spine aligned with the pelvis to facilitate control of peripersonal space (while organising clothes or brushing one’s teeth) or rotated to observe the North Vietnamese soldiers moving past on the tank.

One place to start, if you are looking to formulate an ecology of huts, is with film. I think of the films of Hirokazu Kore-eda, *Still Walking* (2008) and *Shoplifters* (2018) in particular. *Still Walking* consists mainly of scenes of a family hanging out at Obon, making corn fritters, chatting, enduring the damp heat of the Kantō coast in late summer, grieving the memory of an elder son who, some ten or fifteen years ago at this time of year, drowned saving a child caught in the rip. All along, of course, they are rehearsing old grievances and devising new ones. The dead son’s mother, Toshiko Yokoyama (played by Kirin Kiki), for example, loses no opportunity to let her second son’s partner, Yukari, know she regards the younger woman as used goods by virtue of having a child from a previous marriage.

Shoplifters depicts an improvised family of Tokyo outcasts, held together by Nobuyo and Osamu (played by Sakura Andō and Lily Franky). Years ago, they had a bar, but this life ended when Osamu killed Nobuyo’s abusive husband and they were obliged to drop off the map. They occupy an old machiya—or townhouse, a compact post and beam structure—in a neighbourhood otherwise rebuilt in concrete apartment blocks, having come to an arrangement with the elderly owner, Hatsue (again played by the marvellous Kirin Kiki). Hatsue has taken in Aki, the granddaughter by an extramarital relationship of her deceased husband; the young woman, perhaps eighteen, is estranged from her parents. Nobuyo and Osamu are raising an abandoned boy, Shota, now eleven or twelve, as their own. When the film opens, a girl of four or five, Yuri, abused and neglected by her mother, follows Osamu and Shota home from one of their shoplifting forays.

What is improvised here is not just the relationships and the ways of getting a living—Hatsue extorts support from Aki’s parents, Osamu deliberately injures himself on a job site for the cash payment he knows the contractor will provide, Aki works as a booth girl—but the postural habits that come with sharing cramped quarters with people on different schedules and at different stages of life.

5

Consider Hiroshi Teshigahara's 1964 adaptation of Kōbō Abe's *The Woman in the Dunes*. The bulk of the film plays out at the foot of a sand pit whose occupants, played by Kyōko Kishida and Eiji Okada, are obliged to spend their nights shovelling the sand that threatens to bury their home. Gravity is practically a character in the film. Okada's vacationing schoolteacher, initially delighted at the prospect of spending a night in what he takes for a traditional fisherman's home, everything low and within arm's reach, soon learns that he has been entrapped by the village headman and is not free to leave. The village's sole source of income is the sale of the sand excavated by its lower-status householders in their night-time labours to a criminal syndicate active in the building trade. That syndicate realises a profit by mixing the sand into concrete for the multistorey structures that form the fabric of an urbanising Japan—the same structures that have crowded out the old machiya in the back lanes of *Shoplifters*. The buildings built with adulterated concrete are prone to collapse; thus does gravity recoup its loss.

kyōko kishida and eiji okada in hiroshi teshigahara's the woman in the dunes (1964)
courtesy of toho / pathé / teshigahara production / imdb

6

The films of Tsai Ming-liang are good for thinking about posture too, particularly his late work: *Stray Dogs* (2013), *Days* (2020), and *Afternoon* (2015). The last of these consists of four extended takes, filmed from a single camera set-up, with Tsai and his longtime partner and lead, Lee Kang-sheng, sitting in salvaged lounge chairs, mid-century modern, positioned in an unrenovated corner of the old apartment block they'd bought in the mountains outside Taipei. The floor is covered in sand, plaster, and leaf litter from the trees growing in through the unglazed windows. What visual interest the film holds derives from the subtle changes in light as the afternoon unfolds and from the way Lee and Tsai hold and shift their bodies: crossing their legs at the knee, flexing their toes, now resting an arm on the back of the chair, now slouching a bit, allowing the chairs to do the work of managing gravity for them.

tsai ming-liang and lee kang-sheng in *afternoon* (2015)
courtesy of grasshopper film

7

Perhaps no recent filmmaker has explored the postural ecology of small spaces more thoughtfully than Kelly Reichardt, particularly in *First Cow* (2019), which was influenced by Teshigahara and by Kenji Mizoguchi's 1953 *Ugetsu* with its scenes of Azuchi–Momoyama-era (1568–1600) pottery life: seated at the wheel, crouching to enter the kiln, squatting in the market with your wares spread before you. Reichardt's use of an Academy (4:3) frame, as opposed to the anamorphic formats typical of Westerns, represents part of a broader choice to depict colonisation as a domestic phenomenon, one dominated by activities that mobilise the lower back and hips: fetching water, splitting wood, lighting the stove, catching fish with a net, checking a line of squirrel traps, scaling trees, milking a cow. Her protagonists, played by Orion Lee and John Magaro, spend much of their time holed up in their lean-to in recumbent postures: Cookie (Magaro) reclining in a chair at the table, whisking a bowl of oily cake batter; King Lu (Lee) propped in a corner, struggling to see a path from their trading fort confectionary operation to a hotel in San Francisco. The clothes they wear—Henleys, camp-collared vests, trousers loose in the upper block—embody a trade-off between the need to layer against the oceanic climate of the Oregon coast and the need to be mobile in the trunk and limbs. Clothes that restrict rotation of the hips, waist, thoracic cage, shoulders, and neck—breeches, greatcoats, cravats, vests that fasten across the sternum—are the province of the Chief Factor and his rival, the Admiralty captain, men who have other bodies at their disposal to do their chores for them. The clothes of the Coast Salish combine tunics and skirts of plaited cedar bark with the knitted woollens and woven cotton garments of the dismally numerous newcomers.

It strikes me now how *First Cow* thematises the trade-offs that come with going clothed. When we first meet King Lu, his mobility has been compromised by the loss of his clothing. Pursued by a party of trappers after killing one of their number in self-defence, he has been obliged to flee without first pausing to dress. His nakedness makes it unsafe for him to be discovered in the forest, and when he encounters Cookie, out foraging on behalf a different party of trappers, he asks the other man to feed and hide him. Shortly thereafter, King Lu's nakedness proves an advantage when he is able to swim to safety, thus eluding the party of trappers out to kill him without drawing the attention of the second party of trappers that has, unwittingly, been sheltering him. Later, once more on the run, he is obliged to swim clothed, and the energetic burden this imposes on his body—the thermal conductance of water is twenty times that of air, and we expend a lot of energy generating heat to warm and dry ourselves—contributes to his death, leading him to sleep at a moment when vigilance is called for. When at one point in his second flight, he asks a Coast Salish boatman to ferry him across the Columbia River, the price ends up being the buttons of his coat.

The anthropologist Terence Turner was a student of the Kayapo, a people of the Xingu River basin and adjoining parts of eastern Amazonia. He spent many years recording Kayapo myths, including that of how the Kayapo received fire from the jaguar.

Among the features of the Kayapo worldview on display in the myth of the jaguar's fire, in Turner's reading, is an opposition of two ways of spatialising time, of refiguring processes as configurations. These Turner refers to as the vertical and the concentric. Vertical space is the space of irreversible processes, of time that flows in but one direction, as rain falling from the sky or a tree growing from the earth. Concentric space is that of recurrent and reciprocating processes, those that entail a periodic flow of time, as of the passage of individuals and foraging parties from the social space of the village out into the metasocial space of the forest and back.

In the myth, the jaguar rescues a boy who has been left stranded on a cliffside by his sister's husband. (This in itself signals that the story begins in a time or space that is metasocial; among the Kayapo it is considered improper for a woman's brothers and her partner to socialise, let alone forage together.) Sent up a ladder to retrieve fledgling macaws from a nest on the cliff face, the boy instead tosses down a stone, which breaks his sister's husband's hand. In a rage, the latter pulls down the ladder and departs. Passing by some days later, the jaguar finds the youth, starving. He coaxes him down and takes him home, instructing his wife to care for the boy in his absence. But when the male jaguar has gone out hunting again, the female jaguar menaces the boy. After this has happened twice, the boy is instructed by his adoptive father that should it happen a third time, he must shoot his—the jaguar's—wife in the breast and return to his own people. In this way the boy, now a young man, returns to his village bearing useful arts: domestic fire, cooked food, the use of a bow and arrow, and the cotton string that the female jaguar spins while her partner is away in the forest.

Turner's interpretation of the story of the jaguar's fire runs to many pages, and what I have offered here is less synopsis than caricature. Commenting on the contrast between vertical and concentric ways of spatialising time, Turner observers that:

> plants grow upward, inert matter and meteorological phenomena flow or fall downward, the sun rises and sets. The vertical spatial continuum within which these developments occur is, moreover, essentially homogeneous between its upper and lower extremities. Only human beings and animals have the capacity for horizontal locomotion, which is associated with purposive (social) movement or transitions between spatial points or zones of contrasting qualities.

Within the vertical mode of time, we observe a contrast of aspect between downward and upward processes. The former have a perfected quality to them: once rain hits the ground or once (as in another Kayapo origin story) people have felled the tall trees holding up the sky thereby allowing the sky to touch the earth, there is no continuation; the process has come to an end. Upward processes, by contrast, carry an inceptive aspect, a possibility of continuing activity. These, of course, are the processes we associate with the development of plants and animals: becoming vertical, learning to manage gravity.

For the Kayapo, the contrasting dimension—what Turner calls the concentric—is that of the processes that lead individuals and groups out into the metasocial world of the forest and back to the social world of the village; processes that, as the story of the jaguar's fire suggests, play an essential role in the act of becoming a social being, of reproducing the social order in one's person and learning to be a vehicle of that social order.

Thus a typology of ascent and descent (not to say households: patrilineal, agglomerative, capture, companionate…): the rope ladder leading down into the pit dwelling in *The Woman in the Dunes*, the ladder by which the boy in the Kayapo myth ascends to fetch macaws and descends to found society. Ladders lowered and withdrawn, propped up and kicked away. Every ladder invites a leap, a progression from standing to squatting to flying.

'The jaguar,' Turner writes:

> fetched [the ladder] and leaned it up against the tree again. "Climb down, I'll take you home and find you something to eat!" he cried. The boy climbed part way down, but, overcome by his terror of the jaguar, he went back up the ladder to the nest … The jaguar reassured the boy, "My son, I like you! Don't be afraid! Climb down! Climb down, and I will give you food so you can grow up big and strong and be my hunting companion." The boy, reassured, mastered his fear and climbed down and sat on the jaguar's neck.

And if we did not take that leap, take our chances with gravity, allow ourselves to be clumsy…

fin.