

The Hundreds

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Wapentake

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by

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being.

Bloody and screaming the hundreds
cry "I am". A coil of life strung
between. The hundreds are held
aloft to a marching timpani
heartbeat.

They add one more to the cot.

PART TWO

*"We are so pleased.
With the flag.
With the flag of sets.
Sets of color."*

Gertrude Stein, *Work Again* (1918)

The hundreds tell stories

The hundreds are words spoken. Eyes black and flashing, they are a way of thinking about things and selves. They are encrusted in fantasy, in long ago, in never togetherness.

They are not everybody. They are not anybody. They are the shadows of proclamations. The mothers of a problematic we. They bury the dead.

They discover themselves in development, construction and procreation. They resonate in great spaces of ceremonial gravity. They say to brick. They look for light. They are a surrogate for the sacred, model sized and perfectly positioned. They obediently inhabit their built environment.

The hundreds gather a new beginning.

They wait on the page. They are submerged in water, the half rippled shapes of those who would be there, of those who can, watching the rainfall. They script the future, silent pixels, letters printed, books bound, weightlessness. They think about themselves in the small tales they tell. They are a video game on auto-build. An idea worth trying, a hope in the dark. They are making themselves in their own image. An incomplete utopia, an impossibility, a failure of imagination.

The hundreds dress

The hundreds wear quilted doublets, cuffs buttoned to the elbow and thick twill trousers. Knees worn in working. Neon yellow thread-knot buttons count collarless necks. Discrete pockets at the waist cradle their hands between tasks. A felted overcoat is added in winter for warmth and storage of currency, knives, telephones, food. In summer a white cotton shirt protects the hundreds from the sun.

The elected are marked out in dress with appliqued designs stitched about the shoulders, resembling the ameboid shapes of their flag. These details are added during the swearing-in ceremony held at the mound. A length of calico binds their position at the waist as they each are wrapped in turn, and work boots are exchanged for polish and laces.

The committee

The committee holds between its hands a wooden box, ornate with brass corners and decorative fastenings. It lays its palms upon the wood in earnest as it speaks. It spreads its fingers around the edges to steady its words. It pounds the outer flesh of its loosely formed fists on the lid.

The committee is responsible by law. It is responsible for all the born and the dead and the married and the homeless, for housing and health and schooling and wealth, for before and after, for safety and employment, for rights and bicycles and ballasts and girders, for all together, for all things, the committee is responsible for the hundreds.

Hands gently clasped, prompts
folded in paper, fingers circling

conviction, the committee gestures intention into the air. It points insistence into the wooden case. It speaks aloud the new laws and amendments of the island.

The committee builds a mound

The committee gathers soil and turf from all corners of the island. It sorts stones by size and according to angles. It piles the stones and bonds them with the gathered soil and turf to make stepped grassy tiers. A miniature landscape to exchange values and make pronouncements on all things. This thing place is cradled by the hills at a coming together of route ways. The mound sits at the centre of the island, equally accessible from all corners of the land.

The committee gathers at the mound to shape citizenship, sentiments, symbols and practices. The flag of the hundreds sits high at the crest of the meeting place.

The committee votes

The committee sets out chairs under a canopy above the hill. The hundreds are invited to take their respective places on the mound.

The committee takes up matters brought to it, if written in the correct form. Papers are collected and folded into pockets for scrutiny. Votes are cast in the open air. New laws spoken in two languages. The committee seeks the ability to perform functions fully. It believes in the system.

Gathering is flexibility, ability to bob, come in, to join, cross-cut, advance, outloud, outside, a foul wind passing through a series of statements, arguments one after another.

The lifeblood of the island is crowded and bustling. A frippery, a bauble, decorum and decoration.

The committee makes buildings

The committee draws new shapes. Floor plans and seating arrangements, spaces for silence and sites of support. It imagines political life as palaces propped up on clouds. Formed in the round. A transparency of light cast through well-kept architecture.

It walks in a formation dictated by the long steel cage it carries. In rolled-up sleeves and wide-legged stances, it twitches the structure together with wire at the crossings. The committee is building at the mound.

It notes that under the right circumstances, lava can be a force for creation. It grinds up limestone and heats it in a furnace until it becomes powder. It adds stone, then volcanic sand to warm the colour.

It brings timber to the site from across the island. Each beam is cut from a single tree and slots into place. Wooden pins slide in from one side and the other to hold the whole. It presses wood into concrete to mark out vertical and horizontal lines, doubly scored at the meeting points. The committee leaves one inch gaps to separate concrete from wood, wood from metal. It uses serrated edged walls to give shape to the vastness. It delicately balances the circulation of air, suffocation of plumbing, capping of piers to prevent infestation.

The committee works quickly and without hesitation. It choreographs its responsibilities carefully. It stands back in the satisfaction of good planning and a coordinated effort.

The rock said

Out of basalt came concrete and bricks, tiles and foundations, railway ballasts, waterfalls, fire brigades and moonlight, craters and pavements, missiles and drainage, monuments, pebbledash, pillows and radio waves, oil rigs, electricity, open cast mines, sculptures and stadium seating. It is woven into wind turbines and numbers, earthenware and phone calls, mantle pieces, tablecloths, tapestry, tap water, train travel, tables and weather, markets, regalia, classified documents, bobbins and social services, in pugilism, and dinner plates, shopping bags and work boots and words.

The island is slowly dragging apart and restlessness is visible.

The committee eats sandwiches

The committee enters the cafeteria in a single file. It chooses from pearl barley soup, jerk pork with rice and peas, vegan jackfruit burger with relish, chess pie, thai cod and noodles, bamboo shoots and water chestnuts, half baguette sandwiches, cans and bottles of cold drinks, crisps and tray bakes. After queueing for payment the committee is reconvened at a series of benches and tables. It eats lunch.

It picks up its empty plates and drops them onto the floor. It collects the larger shards in its hands and smashes them again. It repeats the process until the pieces become indistinguishable from the dust that lightly covers the floor from the sandstone walls. It gathers the dust into piles and adds water to make a paste. It makes balls between its clasped hands and pushes deep

holes with its fingers to feel the gritty texture. It spreads the paste on its forearms, necks and faces. It sits in silence as the paste dries and is encrusted.

Gathering

The hundreds are gathering, ceding, coughing up, they are refusal, are refusing, plain in garb, cleft to the stock, gathering engineered is shoring up and holding. Gathering is made of stitches is streams woven together, a gathering made by pulling up-whip lifting is endeavour.

The committee is responsible for the building

The committee conducts a report on the safety of the building and introduces round the clock patrols. It finds that the wiring is so antiquated it can no longer find replacement parts, it cannot identify the purpose of pipes and leaves them running in case they can't be put back on if turned off. It labels and catalogues the positions of books on shelves, itemises protocols, props, costumes and conventions, logs details of potential outcomes and fears.

On the cloistered roof, the sandstone turns to dust in the hands of the committee. Beams fall to powder in the stomachs of the death watch. The building is digested from its heart out by discreet enemies. The ravages of larvae. Degradation seeps beyond the town hall walls.

The committee rehearses leaving the building. It substitutes leather benches with folding wooden chairs and a skeleton staff. It reconstructs sound systems, Hansard records and broadcasting, IT connectivity, office space and security, portraits of women, plinths and egg boxes, cups of tea, power dressing, fermentation, speculation, headaches, headstones, kindling, floor plans and maps.

The committee is wearing gas masks and hand pumping a preparation into the wood to kill the worm.

PART THREE