

गानगा जि

(Ganga-ji)

The cold water rushing against my stomach makes me suck in my gut and clench my muscles. Breathe. To those whose hearts are rash, the Ganga is a wrathful master. Breathe, relax. I briefly glimpse myself through the eyes of a baba watching me from the ghats. Look at that. I release myself and plunge my body into the river, bowing low to the current washing over my bent back. When I come up, everything returned to what it is. Humbleness is apotheosis, to submit myself to the freezing waters of Gangaji is to become the world as it is. Ganga is all water, she is all life, she is the reason life is and always will be pure. If a body is cast into her waters, dirt is cleansed, internal and external. The crisp pleasure of the water ran over my skin, and a smile spread over my lips. Babaji smiles back. He knows this feeling well. He has lived his life for it. Satisfaction and release. He lights a bidi from my pack, and begins the process of asking me for money. We have all day for that, games of survival by the banks of the Ganga. I got nowhere else to go.

I was in Haridwar, where the Ganges River leaves the mountains behind to give life to the plains. I had come there for the same reason thousands of humans—pilgrims—come there every year, the same reason the city exists. To cleanse myself in the holy waters of the Ganges River, and to begin my pilgrimage up the river to its head, high in the Himalayas. This river was already thickly intertwined with my identity, the center of my thoughts. She meant my addictions, my loves, my food and excrement, my birth and death. It's been a long way to this point, halfway through my short journey.

Which started two months before in the immortal city of Varanasi, where I found myself after dreaming of a fanciful, far off India for years. Part of me was surprised to find it was a real place, but after a while the reality (in the form of giardia) sunk in to my gut. The stone beneath my feet was solid, dirty, and old. I was living here. I wasn't traveling, I was living. And I felt alive. I felt my feet beneath me and my body churning.

In the golden age of myth, Varanasi was Kashi, a city founded by the union of Shiva and his wife, Parvati. Shiva, god of dissolution, of entropy and destruction, and Parvati, an aspect of the

eternal mother: the Void. Kashi is the land of liberation, and by dying in Kashi, you don't have to be reborn into another life of suffering. So Varanasi is the oldest place in all existence. It has accumulated hundreds of names, many of them lost in thousands of years of redeath. It was Kashi. Then it was Varanasi to the Aryan rulers. Then the British renamed it Banaras or Benaras or Banares, because they couldn't pronounce Varanasi.

Crowds of people rise and fall here like the passing ages, invaders, conquerors, and colonials come and destroy the city from time to time, and it just continues. Unperturbed. Or rather, very perturbed, fermented, over and over again, until it just blends into a constant state of upheaval and chaos. This is why the great influx of tourists into the city hasn't really ruined the city as it did some of the other places I went; they're just another invading force, simply absorbed into the dust and color of the city.

Varanasi was the rawest place I have seen. The city was a buzzing chaos, a seething mass of faith and greed and wrath, an aspect of Shiva; he pervades everywhere, but makes his home in Varanasi. It was a strong place, unrivaled in beauty, but it has its dark side, or rather, it is its dark side. It is the city of death, so there were constantly burning pyres, roasting human flesh along the river, and bodies being carried through the streets by men possessed with the spirit of the dead. The city streets are coated in shit; it's one of the dirtiest places in the world, with the worst sanitation. The streets act as stable for the wandering cows, eating off the trash piles near the gutter. Shiva meditates in the eyes of the cows outside of time. Thousands of men work the street to support their families, some selling silk to tourists at inflated prices, others selling straight-razor shaves, any imaginable way to make a few rupees, including all methods dishonest. Hot scams flow in the streets, above the sewage. And all of this energy is cooled by the tolerant female presence of Gangaji, who uncomplainingly takes up all the ash and shit that the city generates. And on the other side of the river, nothing. Salt flats, a flood plane. Nothing. On the north side of the river, chaos, on the south, simply void. The dueling energies of Shiva and his wife.

I am a student of Hinduism, and in Varanasi, I was saturated by it. I became enamored with the symbolic system of the religion: each devotee can worship a face of god that they create for themselves out of a rich mythological canon. The face of god can be anything, an icon of an elephant-headed boy, or the text of a story, or a guru. Or a river.

I spent hours face-to-face with the river. I'd sit at my favorite chai stand overlooking the river drinking oversweet chai from disposable clay cups that I'd roll down the ghat to rejoin the silt.

At first, I could not look at Gangaji without seeing only her filth and death. The very first time I walked along the river, I saw a dead baby floating face-up around the whirlpool created by the city's water intake. Its body was swollen with water, and its mouth gaped open, as if it had been half way through a last breath when the water rushed in. That was not what had happened; this was not unnatural. Corpses are constantly burned and given to the river. The fire is to cleanse their spirits before the next life. But babies who die before a certain age are already pure—there is no need to purify them with fire, so they are just given whole to the river. And then it was just the decision of Gangaji to show it to me, that first day.

The Ganges in Varanasi is dirty—the water next to the city is septic, meaning that there is no oxygen at all in the water. The levels of fecal coliform (a pollutant that comes from feces) are four hundred times the Indian government's very lax standard for a clean body of water. Most of the raw sewage from the city flows directly into the river. Not to mention the corpses—lepers, saints, babies and cows are not burned before they are given to the river. They are considered already pure. Also, the men who work the burning ghats are notorious for being cheap with their firewood, and often they do not give their fires enough fuel to consume the whole body.

I was really bothered by all this—I had come hoping to see the river that had given birth to so much human civilization, and found an open sewer stewed in death.

So I went to my guru, Shukla-ji, and asked him how he could bathe in the river and consider himself cleansed. He is a scholar, not a religious leader, an old man with an impressive expanse of faith and knowledge, all of which seem to come from the span of his omnipresent smile. “The Ganga is always pure, always cleans itself. If you take a bottle of Ganga water, even from the banks just here, and keep it for a few years, you will surely find that it has cleaned itself. It is the only aspect of creation that flows simultaneously from all three gods: it was created by Brahma when he re-created the universe, but it flows from the toes of Vishnu. It constantly flows from Shiva's locks. Let me tell you why.”

He proceeded to tell me the story of the Ganga, which is itself an epic. It took two lessons to tell. I cannot justly tell it all here, but I can make a pass at some aspects of it.

The nothingness that was Brahma's night, that preceded this cycle of creation, was Ganga: all was water, and all came from water. When Brahma awoke to create, he had to drain all this godly water out of material existence, and so Ganga rejoined the waters of Vaikunth, which is Vishnu's watery abode. For all the primordial golden age of Man, Ganga remained on the celestial plain, for man's purity and honesty was unshakeable and did not need to be redeemed. But during Vedic times, after there had arisen kingdoms and princely states, a King had sent his brothers out into the world. The brothers, in fulfilling their obligation to their King, had disturbed a Rishi (a holy man) deep in meditation. In his wrath at being woken from his tapas, the Rishi reduced them all to piles of ash with his spiritual power. The King, who was a wise man, knew that his brothers would only be reborn into another life of suffering unless he could cleanse their souls. And so he prayed to Vishnu to let Ganga come on earth to wash away the ashes of his brothers. He failed, and spent his whole life in penance to Vishnu. His son failed as well. Finally, his grandson ascended to the throne, and his penance was so pure that Vishnu appeared to him and granted his wish: that Ganga would come on earth. But this King had not counted on the immense power of the Ganga, which threatened to drown all of creation. Shiva recognized this, and rushed to dam the waters by absorbing them in the locks of his hair. Scholars will note a significant inversion here: usually, it is Shiva who threatens to destroy creation, and Vishnu who seeks to preserve it. And so, Shiva had saved creation from flood by containing the entire mass of water within his dreadlocks, but the souls of the King's ancestors had not yet been purified. So the King now prayed to Shiva. It is much easier to get a boon from Shiva than from Vishnu, and so Shiva assented to let a single stream of the Ganga down from his locks if the King would control its flow on earth. So the King mounted his chariot and began to ride, down from the mountains, over the spot where the piles of ash lay, through Northern India, and out into the Bay of Bengal, and where his chariot went, the waters of the Ganga crashed behind his wheels. And so, ever since then, Shiva's energy has been part of the energy of the river; the river and the god contain each other, Ganga cools Shiva's wrath and Shiva keeps the Ganga within her banks.

After internalizing this story, I wanted to change my attitude towards the river—the myth itself had reproduced its own spiritual energy within me, and I needed to reconcile this with my own reality. So I took early morning walks along the ghats which line the river, sometimes all the way to the opposite end of the city, Raj Ghat. The first time I did it, I found a postcard-worthy

sunrise over the river. But it was just exactly what it was, a beautiful sunrise. But I was painfully uncomfortable. At the time, I had some diarrhea, which is natural and normal because I was in a cesspool of a city and had giardia in my gut. It was especially bad in the mornings, and there I was, two kilometers from my home bathroom, trying to appreciate a sunrise while keeping my underwear clean. In desperation, I plunged into the city to look for a bathroom. The main part of Varanasi is made of hundreds of kilometers of twisting, narrow alley-ways. I was hurdling myself through them in desperation looking for anywhere to empty my bowel, at six thirty in the morning. Finally I went up to a chai stand and asked where a bathroom was. The reply was simple: "Ganga-ji." There weren't any public bathrooms, no signs telling me where to relive myself—it was India. My previous life of bleached toilet-seats had prevented me from seeing the inevitability of it.

I walked another few minutes to try to find a good spot, a private spot, but privacy is the one thing completely unavailable in India. I settled on a spot as far away as I could get from the women taking their morning dip in the river, and squatted over the water. The relief, pure liquid pouring out. Used life-juice rejoining its source. Pure metabolized energy chewed up and spat out by my overeager giardia. I imagined the microbes themselves, the source of my misery, being washed out to rejoin their original source. Because that's what she is, Ganga-ji, the birth and death of all life, all disease, the vast canal of raw energy that runs through our bodies. She unhesitatingly bears our dirt and our sins out to sea, she rinses Varanasi, and North India. The city would have drowned in its own filth thousands of years ago if Ganga was not there to clean up the mess uncomplainingly, as a good mother cleans up after her child. Remembering that moment, I tried to accept the fact of her filth, and I could appreciate the river as the most gorgeous open sewer I had ever seen.

As I stood up, the early morning city smiled at me, so I gave myself to her alleys to seek the main road and a rickshaw home. I went to my lessons that day feeling accomplished, with liquid insides.

Already, I saw my time in the city dwindling away. It was hard living. I felt my mind grow every day, slowly becoming able to accept the energy of the place. But I was also becoming physically uncomfortable, discontent, and restless. I had only seen this one place in this vast land.

The decision to leave Varanasi was also the decision to leave the only community I had in India. When I left, the immense dark power of the city had begun to overwhelm me. There had

been a tragic terrorist attack on one of the most important and popular temples in Varanasi. It added souls to the City of Death, and for four days after the attacks, the sun did not rise. This was the beginning of the hot season, when there was almost never a cloud in the sky, but the four days after the attack were completely grey. And then the heat hit, the dust. The shit on the street began to bake and rot, and the ubiquitous burning piles of trash made the city seem like the very earth was seething with a disgusting fire, belching out unending bitter smoke. I began to understand the destructive power the city can have on a human soul. As the city began to heat up, the energy of Shiva began to boil over in my chest and in my loins, it scared me. When I had the opportunity to run from it, I did.

I ran out into the gaping plains of India. Each hour was an age, a new photograph. The streets are hungry, they will suck your pocket dry. I was alone, facing a desert. No mighty river ran by my steps to cool the land. I understood what 48 degrees centigrade means in ways that you will never. I was stronger than I could have imagined. Every child was a leech, a beggar, adorable and spirited. And the men always asked “where is your girlfriend?” “Why you are alone?” and I want to shout back, “because I am alone, are I and I not enough?”

I felt the origin of all things under my feet. Where my feet landed thousands of feet had landed before me. One of the oldest civilizations on earth, the womb of culture. Rajasthan, the desert, was a hub of the Silk Road, and the maharajas would get rich from the camel caravans that passed across their lands. It was stonemasons traveling along this route that traveled into Europe to teach them how to build big buildings of stone; their imposing forts wrote the blueprints for cathedrals with their foundations.

And I was there a thousand years after that. And those men were still doing the same thing, surviving off the travelers who wandered across their sands.

I saw the relics of the greatest age of princes, the palaces and forts, paintings. “The palace of Bundi, even in broad daylight, is such a place as men build in uneasy dreams, the work of goblins rather than men.” Kipling’s words rung loud in my ears, my feet landed in his footprints, but I did not have the aid of his servants. Kipling loved India as I loved it, he saw the spirit there. And he supported the unwieldy colonialism of the British—he wouldn’t have lived in India if he didn’t. And maybe I wouldn’t have been there if he hadn’t. His countrymen taught the Indians English so I wouldn’t have to learn much Hindi. He showed me where to go, I read *Kim* to de-

cide what my own route would be, although I couldn't follow it. He led me to Bundi, to Jodhpur, briefly to Jaipur. My camera grazed the surfaces of things like their law-and-order used to. These words follow his words of adoration for the jewel of his empire, Mother India.

I felt ashamed to walk in his footsteps. When I was in Varanasi, I was living—implied humanity. Everywhere else I was a tourist. In my liberal ears, that implied consumption with a twist of domination. At first, I loathed myself because of it. But I had to learn to be myself, and present myself as only that. I had to appreciate my role in their economy, in the very existence of the place. Tourism is an act of love, admiration, appreciation. And that's how they saw it, the men I met on the street.

While I was away from Ganga-ji, she gained importance. Only her waters could cool the desert heat. I had no other real destination in the heat and dust.

So I went to Haridwar, where I learned to bathe. I stopped showering, and relied on the river to wash away my filth. And I was cleaner than I ever have been in my life. Because the river there is clean—full of silt, when I was there, but clean, right at the foot of the Himalaya. This was the beginning and the end of my journey up the river to its source, and this was the beginning.

Haridwar is one of the holiest cities in India, it's like the theme park version of Varanasi. The river is fast and clean, and most of the people who fill the streets are pilgrims, Indians on vacation. Cheap fried food, ice cream, fresh cane juice, and thalis loudly hucked by vendors, as crowds of Saddhus wandered dreamy eyed through the crowds looking to pick up some charity, or, failing that, sell some marijuana.

So I sat with the water rushing over my feet, and played games with the Saddhus. These Babas are the Hindu holy men, followers of Shiva. Each one follows a different set of practices and beliefs; there are nagar babas who don't wear clothes, ascetics who don't eat, and so on. They look like Rastafaris—they wear their hair matted and long, have deep beards, smoke ganga, and live close to the earth. They spend all their energy being holy, smoking and praying, they cannot be bothered to work. Even the ones that aren't really Babas, just lazy. So we sat together, me enraptured with his dreadlocks, him amazed by my camera. Sometimes a cow would join us, and we'd all share mango. In the chaos of an Indian city, the cows are the only source of peace and sanity. They stand motionless in the middle of the most busy intersection, getting high (“meditating”) off the exhaust fumes, while the torrent of scooters, thupthups, rickshaws, and bi-

cycles veers around them. They live off of trash piles. In Varanasi, at least, I know that they must do surgery on the cows every couple of years to remove all the plastic from their bellies.

I was taught how to bathe. To release the chain is to be swept downstream, leaving my bag at the mercy of come-who-may. To dunk is to bow, to gain humbleness in the eyes of mother Ganga. To unwrap and rewrap my dhoti. To place a single flower in the stream, and watch it bob and duck its way to the Bay of Bengal. I had to pay for these lessons.

Before, in Varanasi, I had begun to understand the Ganga as the cycle of birth and death, filth and purity. But in Haridwar, where the river is uninhibitedly pure, where I spent hours wallowing in her like a water buffalo, where I felt her waters caressing my body as she flowed past, it became more personal. I built her into a symbolic system. She was the great mysteries of my life, she embodied the enigmas that haunted me, that chased me out of America in the first place. My loneliness and desire. My love of Ganja, the leaf that was born along her banks, and my friend a world away locked in rehab only because of it. My love for my family. Some of this was already part of the religious discourse on the river, but I internalized it and changed it to fit my life. She was large enough to hold all the metaphoric weight I cast into her waters. She was noble enough to become life and death, swift enough to sweep away filth to bring purity, beautiful enough to be sex, strange enough to be drugs. And because she was all this, she was finally only ink: the ink stains this very page. She was representation itself. Her waters flowed over all consciousness. There was no original, no beginning.

And that is why I thought maybe I would find some resolution at her source. I wanted to go upstream, to see where the Ganga was born out of sheer rock. And if she was the infinite signifier, with no beginning and no end, then I wanted to create her beginning. Invent a solution. I conceived of my journey as art in itself, to be appreciated only by myself. It gave me a destination. I was going home soon, and it felt like I would reach a point high in the mountains that would be the ultimate fulfillment of whatever it was that needed fulfilling, and then I would simply turn around, and start walking home. There had to be an apogee.

And so I went to Rishikesh, where I had to catch a bus to Gangotri. Rishikesh is a beautiful, comfortable place full of Hari Krishnas and Westerners learning yoga. Somehow I got the impression that the only bus to Gangotri left at three in the morning. The day before, I arranged with an autorickshaw-wallah to pick me up at his stand (across the river from my guest house) at two-fourty five. The next morning, I dragged my whole backpack onto the night streets at three-

fifteen, despairing of getting to Gangotri. I am terrified of the empty night streets of India because the dogs take over the city. The streets become the territory of fierce and feral dogs. And if one bites you, you have to catch it and hold on to it for three days to see whether it dies of rabies: if it does, you're in trouble. Whenever I walked alone at night, I carried with me rocks and bricks to heave at threatening dogs. It was the first time in my life I consciously armed myself. And sure enough, just on the other side of the bridge, they were waiting for me, growling. I suddenly decided to scrap Gangotri and spend my last weeks in Rishikesh talking to Hari Krishnas. The dogs formed a semicircle around me and started barking. I walked forward, hefting my brick. And then, Shiva (or perhaps the barking), woke the rickshaw-wallah who came barreling through the pack with is unmuffled thupthup and swooped me into the backseat, and I was off through the dark streets at a zoom. To the wrong bus station. After much haggling, I ended up on a five-thirty bus to Gangotri. It was a fourteen hour bus ride on twisted mountain roads, with half of my ass hanging off the seat into the face of a guy sitting on the floor.

Gangotri was cold and high in the mountains. The rest of India had been sweltering. I didn't have the clothes for this. I bought a shawl and hoped for the best. I met up with an Israeli, we split a room in an ashram, and discovered that we were planning to make the same trek.

Which we began the next morning, after receiving blessings at the Gangotri temple, full of pilgrims. Their awe inspired my awe, and the humble structure became majestic. It is set right next to the rock on which it is said that Shiva received the Ganga into his hair. Here the river was a churning, freezing, potent mountain force,

The trek upriver was a two-day affair. I left my backpack in Gangotri with most of my stuff. I had been scattering my material possessions along my route every step since Delhi, halving my burden each time. A day upstream would take us to the head of the Gaumukh glacier, the Cow's Mouth, where the mass of the river comes surging out of a cliff of ice. We slept in the Bhujbasa ashram the first night. After I gave him my money, I asked the Baba who ran the ashram what his name was. "God," he said, counting my wrinkled fifty rupee notes. I asked him where he was from, and he said "I am universal." I was skeptical.

But he was so round-faced and kindly that I trusted him when he convinced me that I couldn't sleep in Tapavan, so I should leave my sleeping bag and all my other gear in Bhujbasa.

So the next morning, I walked out of Bhujbasa empty handed, as I came into this world, with five Europeans and a silent guide in flip-flops (chappals). We came quickly to Gaumukh,

deadly dirty wall of silent ice, my first glacier. A surging mass of water came out of nowhere, from somewhere beneath the glacier. This is the source of Ganga's fearsome power, the aspect that could destroy creation. Large floes of ice gurgled past. Our guide didn't let us linger here. According to him, a Swiss woman had been walking too close to the glacier, just this season, and had been killed by a falling chunk of ice.

The cliff of skree and boulder towered to our right. A trickle fell down the slope and disappeared into the glacier. Amar Ganga, the Eternal Ganga, which I have decided is the stream which lends the Ganga the loving and benevolent side of her personality, whereas Gaumukh glacier gives her wrath. Amar Ganga means immortal Ganga, but it sounded to my Anglo ear like love.

The only way up this steep cliff is pretty much the same way that the Ganga takes down it, so we slowly made our way up, immensely hard work, constantly crossing over the waterfall, fearful of being swept away. We reached the top and Tapavan embraced us, paradise. It immediately struck me how well it mirrors the lingum, symbolic phallic form of Shiva. Shivling peak, the phallus of Shiva, towered over us as we lay next to the burbling Ganga, face down in the womb of Pavarati, Tapavan. It is not a case of reality mirroring representation or vice versa; both are expressions of a natural form laden with celestial meaning.

I had come to Tapavan to cast my body into the source of the Ganga. But I had been right, there is no one source of the Ganga. Water descends from countless towering peaks to join the river, I could regard any of them as the source. But I chose this one as the source, my source, the end of the journey. I stood by the banks of the Amar Ganga, the primordial trickle that begins the wide, angry river. I felt as if looking over a perfectly formed woman lying in bed, at just at the moment when words become completely useless. Ma Ganga is many things as she flows through India, she is joined by countless tributaries, some of which are sewers. But up here, she is eternal beauty and benevolence, pure, uncorrupted. I dipped my hand in, watching glistening silt swirl around my fingers. I brought my cupped hand to my mouth, and slurped. The water washed and froze my chest in the same way that alcohol burns. The water was crunchy. Thoughts of the ice flows downriver almost stopped me from going in, and I momentarily turned my back. But that single present. The only now, not to be wasted. So I stripped, shedding skins. Naked as birth and fire. I noticed the wind in new ways. The river was shaped like a bathtub, and I stepped into the middle of it, only up to my thigh. The water was crisp and hard.

I could feel it latch onto my skin and then peel off, taking the burden of human sin with it. I fell to my knees, and the water rushed up my bent back. I bowed my head instantaneously. The moment so fast maybe it didn't exist. It did.

I got myself out quickly, and realized that my Israeli friend had been watching me, thinking apotheosis.

I alive, and I wasn't afraid of dying. My soul was impervious to shit and filth, I would never have to bathe again, inside. I was in love with myself, I needed no other. My mind was still.

But only for that instant. Now I was cold. I was empty. I didn't know what to do with myself next. Nothing mattered. The entire symbolic construct I had built, the art I had made out of my experience, had been leading up to that moment. And it was over. Everything ahead of me was the slow trip home.

So I asked my friend to take a picture of me going into the river. I didn't want it to be over, I wanted my godhood to be immortal. I wanted an artifact.

He framed it up so the mountain would be in the background, and then I cast myself once again into the water. This time it felt colder, and I was trying to move more slowly so he could get a good picture.

In retrospect, that was the inevitable moment when I lost everything, when I had become myself again, a tourist about to leave India. And when people at home look at that picture, the first thing they see is my bare ass, not where my ass is. The moment is gone. But it had always already happened, there was no moment on the trip when I was pure, when I was living in the world as it was instead of making artifacts of it. When I re-entered the waters of the Amar Ganga, just to show the world I had done it, I began to finally package and seal off my India, ready to make it a unit of my personal history, ready to sell it if possible.

The man at Bhujbasa had lied, there was an ashram in Tapavan, three stone dugouts with a jocular baba. His meditation consisted of smoking a lot of Charras (hashish) and occasionally belting out at the top of his voice "Jai Ram! Seeta Ram!" over the glacier below. Sometimes it would come out in belch form. There were other westerners already there, including one kid who had graduated from University of Colorado, and who knew of my father, who is a professor there. We spent the night around a wood stove, laughing at the Western world.

I wasn't ready to begin the descent back into life, so I spent the night in Tapavan, at 4,700 meters on a cold stone floor with no sleeping bag, spooning a crazy Czech named Vlad. I couldn't understand why I was there, so far from home. And I couldn't understand why I hadn't brought my sleeping bag, after carting it through the heat so long. All I had now was Vlad, my heat, who hadn't taken a bath today like I had. I tried to snuggle closer to him. But the shivering wouldn't stop. I was alone again, human.

I walked down the mountain silently. India was behind me, and I was walking back to America.

The trip home was too long. I walked down the mountain silently, reflecting on the downhill slope, isolating myself from the other westerners. But I had about a week left before I went home. I went back to Delhi and got sick again—I added a nice layer of campylobacter to my giardia. I hid from India, I found myself unable to regain her beauty, I saw only her beggars and her filth. In a sense, the entire trip was about the homecoming. The origin of representation, the home of the idea that this trip would have meaning, was America. I was flying back to that great country, but I was going back to a city that was not my home, another holy land, California. The Ganga, with a representative sample of her filth, had become my body. My stomach churned like an old washing machine during the flight, during my twelve hours in Bangkok Int'l Airport (a breathtaking monument to consumption), and for half of the summer that followed. I bleached my insides with round after round of antibiotics, and still she flowed. I flowed over America, West to East, seeing love and death, now hidden beneath plastic, beneath asphalt. I came home, then I came home again, and found my feet under my body and a pen in my hand.