

# Cell

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*The crowd enters. This text is handed out to the assembly. Everyone finds a spot to stand in. There are some step ladders. A few people will climb up them to see over the cubicle wall. The bath cubicle door is open, some people come inside. One person climbs up on the wooden bench to see better. Sounds are coming from inside the bath. The crowd holds this text in their hands.*

*When the crowd is ready, this will be read out loud by an assistant:*

*This reading will last about 20 minutes. There are some chairs for those unable to stand for long periods. Whilst you are standing, imagine your feet are anchored into the ground. Where you might be in contact or close to other bodies, imagine you are fixed together in place. There will be pauses at certain points in the reading. During these pauses please move to a new vantage point. Re-anchor yourself in that space.*

You sit in the bath. *I climb into the bath.* You turn the brass lever, it is stiff and resists your grip but with an effort it turns, squeaking as the helical threads rotate in the interior, until a cavity opens. Instead of clear water, it splutters and spurts a dull coloured liquid containing flecks of dark matter. The tap chugs noisily, expelling ancient air trapped in the pipes, the viscous liquid spewing out. You do not move, it continues to pour a steadily thickening grey mixture into the moulded bath cavity and down around your toes and butt cheeks. It splutters and spurts. It is wet concrete. It streams in around you. It is warm. It slides into the gaps between your fingers and toes. You think of workmen pouring liquid concrete into steel foundation grids, the concrete slopping through metal funnels onto the frame splattering their boots. The aggregate pours out, piling into concentric circles, small lumpen pieces clinging inside the mix. The wet concrete is filling the bath, filling all the gaps around you, moulding to your shape. Already, the mingling warmth of the concrete and your perspiring body is causing the water vapour to escape. As it reaches the rim it begins to slop heavily onto the floor. The spluttering tap ceases. The aggregate is beginning to harden and dry.

*The crowd moves, perhaps awkwardly. There will not be much space for manoeuvre. Each person will find a new spot to stand in. The crowd, aware of those bodies close to them, imagine being fixed in place, and become still. I climb up onto the far side of the bath on the wooden ledge and begin to read.*

12<sup>th</sup> June 2010

I have travelled in a cable car up the side of a mountain, and now I am almost at the top, on a flat paved area near an abbey. The mountain is part of a craggy range, its carapace serrated and pink tinged. These serrations are points on weathered protruberances resembling vast fleshy stalagmites. Surrounding the flattened outcrop is a low wall, to prevent falling. A

woman is sitting on this wall, posing for a photograph. Behind her is a 4,000 foot drop to the valley below, a vast empty space forms the background. I see her but have to turn away, anxiety has caused my head to spin.

***The crowd moves again, each looking for a new place to stand, and a new vantage point to see from. They fix in place and stand still. I climb back into the bath, and continue to read.***

Concrete is almost always used in the creation of a building's foundations. It is reinforced with steel to provide tensile strength and enduring stability. The concrete that holds you is seemingly inert, but as minutes leech into hours, small exchanges take place between the concrete and your body. Where it has hardened near your skin, it has absorbed sweat. In turn, micro-particles of aggregate have been absorbed in through your dermal layers and into the blood and lymphatic systems. The water vapour has risen in the cubicle and clings to the corners of the room where a mould begins to spread.

***The crowd moves, new spaces are found. The crowd re-roots in the new configuration. I stand up in the bath, facing those inside the cubicle.***

17<sup>th</sup> October 1993

I am seventeen years old. I am standing waist high in a large container full of warm water. I have chosen to be baptized. 200 people sit watching, expectantly. The pastor and an assistant stand in the water alongside me. I am asked a series of questions, asked to make a commitment to a new life and to the church. I read the answers from a sheet. I cross my arms over my chest as though laid out for burial, and am pushed forcefully down into the water. The water rushes noisily into my ears and nose and over my white baptismal gown billowing into a cloud. I am pulled back to a standing position in a moment of spatial and temporal confusion, transition at high speed, moving from one moment to another and I am made new. Water runs in rivulets down my face and the gown clings to my body. I am elated, my place secure.

***The crowd moves again. New positions are found. New fixings between bodies are formed. I lie down inside the bath.***

15<sup>th</sup> August 2014.

I am floating, spread eaged, in a salt heavy sea. My ears are filled with water, muffling the sounds of the crashing waves and people calling. I look up at the sky as my body is buffeted. I see flocks of birds. Fish swim beneath me through near transparent water. Eddies swirl the sand upwards in dirty spirals. I feel a rare sense of calm and I stay until I am called.

Later we hunt the rock pools overlaid with glistening green weed. I spy a group of men gathered around a strange stony outcrop formed of helicoid shapes. The men have cut a section away, revealing a deep red interior fleshy inside the rock spirals. It is a bisected *Pyura Chilensis*, a 'blood rock', a hermaphroditic sea squirt or tunicate which resembles a mass of organs enclosed by a deceptive rock-like exterior. This sea creature is known for having a high

concentration of the mineral Vanadium. Vanadium is used as a steel alloy, resulting in a significant increase in the strength of steel, often used to reinforce concrete foundation slabs in buildings.

***The crowd moves, and finds a new arrangement. They imagine their feet pushed down inside the ground up to their ankles. I move to sit on the side of the bath with my legs inside.***

4<sup>th</sup> May 2016

The body of a man wearing 'concrete shoes', hands tied behind his back in an obvious homicide, has washed up on Manhattan beach. A Kingsborough College student discovers the corpse wrapped in a plastic bag on the shoreline near Sheepshead Bay.

***I lie down inside the bath.***

It is almost impossible to weigh a body down enough for it to remain on a river or seabed. As the body decays it releases gases into the tissues, inflating and distending the skin. The body becomes lighter than water and rises to the surface. When fully distended, it is almost impossible to sink this body even with counter weights.

Minerals flow through our bodies. Although they are essential for life, they aren't made by the living, they originate in the ground. Concretions of mineral salts form into stones in organs and ducts of bodies. These are named according to their location, stones in the kidney are called renal calculi or nephroliths, in the veins are venous calculi or phleboliths. A gastrolith, also called a stomach stone or gizzard stones, is a rock held inside a gastrointestinal tract, used to grind food in certain species. Particles ranging in size from sand to cobbles have been documented.

***The crowd moves to find new positions. I climb out of bath and stand facing it.***

24<sup>th</sup> August 2017

I am in Knaresborough, West Yorkshire, at the Petrifying Well, the only one of its' kind in England. This ancient well is endlessly filled by a waterfall flowing over a rocky outcrop resembling a giant skull. Villagers once avoided the well, believing it to be magic. The waterfall has a high mineral content turning anything within the flow to stone. Below it hangs a series of objects suspended on a string within the water's trajectory. These objects – teddy bears, teapots, socks, a tennis racket – have become shrouded with a stony coat as the minerals dissolving in the groundwater stop up the pores and cavities of the objects. Beneath the falling water is a smooth façade of rock with vertical undulations and streaks. It has flowed for a century over a Victorian top hat and bonnet, which camber out from the façade, leaving a concave cavity underneath.

This Victorian slipper bath was once a functioning part of the washhouse. A bath towel would be draped across it to preserve the bathers' modesty, the bath resembling a giant slipper.

Destitute elderly men would come to the baths to die, washed and clean shaven, cleansed of the dirt of the earth by the bath, to avoid the indignity of being found wrapped in rags.

*The crowd moves, each looking for a new place from which to listen and to settle their bodies into the ground. I climb back into the bath, and sit, facing outwards.*

Concrete, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is a noun ‘denoting a material object as opposed to an abstract quality, state, or action.’<sup>1</sup> To think in a concrete way is to think materially, or literally. Concrete thinking is a form of literalism, defined as both: ‘the interpretation of words in their literal sense’ and ‘the literal representation in literature or art’<sup>2</sup>, suggesting an immovability, an adherence to truth and reality. This stable ground of concrete thinking, this understanding of the world *as it really is*, orients us. It fixes us in place.

As Sara Ahmed points out in *Orientations Matter*, to be oriented towards something is to turn to it, to have bodies directed to it<sup>3</sup>. I will flesh this thought out: being entranced, or enchanted by a thing is to become particularly fixed within that orientation. Similarly, disenchantment may be viewed as a particular form of disorientation, where that which once enchanted loses its power, and the unhooking from it causes a dizzying turn away. Without a grounding orientation, the wild freedom of disorientation rapidly disenchanters.

A narrative forms an orientation from which the fabula arises, fragile at first, emerging falteringly like mist rising off the ground. A fable is the speaking of a story, but it also refers, in old European law, to a contract or covenant. It is both the foundation stone of law and the shifting realm of imagination. The narrative grounds us, the security, stability of this orientation is felt in the gut, carried in the mouth, produces the rhythm of the push of our blood and the sensations in our skin as we speak it. The fabula is the atmosphere in which the extraordinary, the visionary, the fabulous blooms and envelopes. Myth forms a narrative that, in its repetition and reinforcement, orients a community, provides a foundation on which a community is built and a fabulation is conjured.

When we use the word myth, we mistakenly understand it as a fiction, as a widespread, popular belief that is false. Yet for Jean-Luc Nancy, myth has a foundational and operative power that materializes in the real, and it is a mistake to dismiss myth (or fiction) as immaterial. What the ancient Greeks originally called *muthos* was a true story, a story that unveiled the true origin of the world and humankind.

Nancy writes: ‘The phrase ‘myth is a myth’ harbors *simultaneously* and *in the same thought* a disabused irony (“foundation is a fiction”) and an onto-poetico-logical formation (“fiction is a foundation”)<sup>4</sup>. This ironic relation is engendered by the internal disunion, which supplants a

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Concrete’ [Online] <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com>. Available at: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/concrete> [Accessed: 1.10.17]

<sup>2</sup> ‘Literalism’ [Online] <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com> Available at: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/literalism> [Accessed: 1.10.17]

<sup>3</sup> Ahmed, S. (2010) ‘Orientations Matter’ in Coole, D & Frost, S (eds) *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* Duke University Press p. 234

<sup>4</sup> Nancy, J.L. (1991) *The Inoperative Community* University of Minnesota Press p. 55

former union at the heart of myth itself. Concerning the 'myth is the myth' Nancy writes: 'it is not by chance that its modern usage in this phrase that underlies our knowledge of myth – that myth is a myth – produces in a play on words, the structure of the abyss.'<sup>5</sup> The repetition of the *mise en abyme*: a myth is a myth is a myth is a... ad infinitum, figures the dizzying fall which comes as a result of the collapse of founding structures.

Nancy writes that mythic speech is: 'a way of binding the world and attaching oneself to it.'<sup>6</sup> Bodies speak a narrative of narratives into being, bodies that ingest and seep and pulse and in speaking find their footing. The foundation story, made of voices that tell the story in myriad ways, the story of how the community came to be. It produces and underpins the community in which individuals understand their place. Life stories become framed within and reinforced by the mythic narrative. The speaker, the authorizing voice, leads the chorus, enchanting this story, repeating and repeating until it becomes materialized into a stabilizing ground. The *muthos* authors and authorizes, holding communities within the totality of a moralizing and authoritative framework, binding the world and attaching the community to it.

Vertigo slides into fixity, disorientation into a story which is concretised, sacralised. In extreme forms, this story is no longer organic and mutable in the contingent world of matter, but instead is ossified and petrified into an immovable, indestructible foundation, producing a deeply embodied effect of being interred, of being set in stone. It is a literal materialization of a story in the body of the community. But this solidity, this stability, gives rise to an atmosphere, a fabulation, an enchantment felt in the body, in which the believer lives and is entirely immersed.

*I lie back in the bath. The crowd now moves inwards, shuffling together, packing tightly in, drawn towards the source of the sounds. They continue to move inwards, past the usual unspoken codes of personal space until they are uncomfortably tight, bedding in together.*

The water vapour continues to rise as the concrete hardens and sets. Your sweat mingles with the dampness emitting from the concrete, which clings to the walls and meets the stained glass windows where it cools and trickles in branching lines. In the vapour you begin to see tiny flecks, your vision breaks up into dots. In the haze these dots appear as a vast crowd gathered together in a brightly lit auditorium, countless bodies packed in tight, jostling for space, held in place, finding themselves in the upsurge of feeling, the joy of being part of a vast spectacle of one-ness, pieces in the aggregate, flecks in the mix.

*The crowd is free to disperse.*

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<sup>5</sup> Nancy, J.L. (1991) *ibid* p. 52

<sup>6</sup> Nancy, J.L. (1991) *ibid* p. 49