“One Buried Thing for Another”
Transcendence and Madness
In *The Fly Truffler* by Gustaf Sobin

By

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During my family’s Passover Seder we symbolically break in two a piece of unleavened bread, the Matzoh. It never breaks evenly divided. Children hide the larger half to make a game of finding the hidden piece. It must be found, and the children given a prize, or the Seder cannot be concluded. Hiding affirms our awareness that there is more hidden and mysterious in world and mind than what is known. Breaking the Matzoh symbolizes how consciousness and the capacity to love begin with the breaking of the heart. Our ritual commentary says: “The broken heart yearns to come home--home to the beloved, home to freedom, home to peace, allowing one to surrender to the mystery.” (Weber, Langan, Rosenzweig, 2010)

What is this mystery? We humans have access to what our sensory and neurological systems perceive, yet, we attend only to a small portion even of that. There is so much more. We barely understand how what we sense results in a subjective sense of self, or how, more fundamentally, we are alive. Further, though we like to think of ourselves as individuals, none of us can exist without the others: those from whom we were born, those who give us nurturance, and words and reasons. There is all that nature provides that supports our existence, such as air, water, trees, things to eat, and the cosmos that created it all. Our interrelatedness opens up much we can only guess at.

Let’s start with the mystery of two people knowing each other.

The everyday give and take of interpersonal relationships, according to Philip Bromberg, reveal “the mind’s fundamental ability to shift between self-states without
losing self-continuity, so making it possible for someone to use another’s self states as part of their own (Bromberg, 2010, pg. 25). Rupert Sheldrake goes further: “Our minds… are not confined inside our heads but stretched out beyond them through morphic fields.” (Sheldrake 1999, 2003.) We feel soothed by petting our dogs, moved by seeing a play or talking to a friend, elated through falling in love, bemused while watching a spider spin a web. We feel sadness when others cry, pain and outrage when people are bombed, fear when people are sick with Ebola.

Loosening our more rigid self-conscious, ego-driven version of a unitary “self”, we open to love, friendship, empathy, to merger with others, with the natural world and its denizens, with long-gone loved ones, with dreams, with art, the environment, perhaps even with magic. When most open, we experience a heightened awareness, fully present to the wellbeing of the moment, resonant with each other, alert and alive. Revelatory intimacy—even with profound pain—feels vividly alive. Going beyond old habits of being, we can have unbounded experiences, perhaps approaching transcendence. We approach these vivid states atremble, wishing perhaps they may never end, but they do. So, time, language and self/other differentiations can loose their familiar organization.

Mary Tennes, in Beyond Subjectivity (2007), notes that at deeper levels of the “subjective territory, we are encountering realities for which we have neither language nor context”(p. 508). At such times, self-states and thoughts utterly lack cohesion. Language feels woefully inadequate, as does the stricture of chronological time. Some (or sometimes we) might experience this loss of cohesive identifiable self and other as a profound, even mystical freeing, while for others (or at other times) it is a terrifying disintegration.
If our minds go truly “stretched out beyond.” What will happen? What might one find? This can be quite terrifying. We need something to hold onto, we need to feel whole. How does one maintain a cohesive self? Who is the “one” who is finding or knowing? How stay grounded in ungrounding mystery? There is a lot more out there than any of us can handle. When in emotional or physical pain, or afraid it is safer to clutch in subtle and not so subtle ways, to hold-onto the railings of the known.

For a case study, now let us explore the ungrounding perils of grief. The protagonist of Gustaf Sobin’s luminous novel *The Fly Truffler* (1999) journeys into transcendence through love and with a broken grief-stricken heart. What are the joys and dangers of trying to follow one’s broken heart into the hidden and unbounded? As I present the story, ask yourself with me whether he is simply mad.

I would like to thank Dr. Philip Bromberg for introducing me to this marvelous novel in a keynote paper (Bromberg, 2013). He uses the novel as an example of madness ensuing from unprocessed dissociated grief. The protagonist’s failure to tolerate loss leads to a profound dissociation from the world and those around him and eventually to madness. What I would like to add is some further exploration of motivation, not just as an avoidance of grief, but as a desperate effort towards healing and the vitality engendered by love. Sobin has complex and open-ended ideas about what motivates us to fall in love, how we may heal our broken hearts and about madness. Here is the story.

Sobin’s lonely protagonist, Cabassac, is an isolated man prone to exploring hidden worlds. A professor of the dying language and culture of Provençale, he delves
into the meanings of his disappearing heritage and language, delivering passionate lectures on the subtleties of the Provençale Enlightenment. He is also a keen explorer of age-old customs that ground the people of Provençale in their inter-relationship with the natural world. One of these lifelong customs is fly-truffling. Using the flies to attune himself to the odoriferous buried truffle, Cabassac has walked with absorbed attention, for much of his life, between the oak woods and almond orchard owned by his family for countless generations. He walks tapping the undergrowth of lavender or pink stonecrop, hoping to stir up the flies that reveal the position of the treasure below. The flies, like “tiny, golden keys” (p. 13) reveal the truffle, the hidden treasure below.

Otherwise his life is simple, lonely and quiet. He lives in the dark and ramshackle farmhouse that had in previous generations been home to fifteen or more family members at a time, now with one aunt he rarely sees or talks to.

What motivates these strivings into the deep past and the deeply buried? It is certainly more than a truffle. The novel tells you of his deep sadness from early loss. Cabassac’s mother died of cancer when he was only a three-year-old. There is about Cabassac a monk-like quality—a capacity for absorbed attention, a lack of self-aggrandizement, and a natural capacity to live with “extended mind”, something revealed in his lectures as “luminous, captivating, and memorable” (p.18). He brings the language and life of Provençale alive through his deep research into subtle lingustics and customs—perhaps keeping his mother alive as he does so.

One day a young woman finds her way into his lecture hall. He falls under a spell, drawn immediately to the “sheer radiance—the hivelike intensity—of her concentration…[which] circumscribed a space utterly her own” (pp.35-36). He begins to
direct his lectures to her, noticing that “his words…were entering the inner world of her thoughts, there where reflection, sensibility, lay secreted” (p.36). After coming to class many times, he approaches her, and with few words ends up going home with him. Cabassac is amazed, and, yet it feels right.

Without noticing, that very night they begin to speak to each other in the ancient dialect of Provençale. He invites her into his world with utter openness and gentility. Soon they begin to do their research together, exploring villages and landscapes where the ancient spoken and unspoken language of their lost loved ones remains vital, where the connection between humankind and nature is less dissociated. While doing so they reveal the facts of their painful pasts to each other, revealing things about themselves they have never expressed. Perhaps they are driven by what Emmanuel Ghent (1990) discussed with regard to “surrender”—a powerful motivation to surrender one’s false self, to fall into the boundless, limitless universal acceptance where day-to-day suffering is transcended and one begins to heal, even while the suffering remains. Clearly they both seek to heal their early deeply painful losses that have never found voice. They recognize in each other kindred spirits.

Sobin evokes an interesting dimension of intimacy and intense love when he says that Julieta “always kept some small part of herself in reserve... in a space to which… [Cabassac] had no access whatsoever” (p.22). Cabassac wonders if “maybe it’s not a person we fall in love with so much as a distance, a depth which that particular person happens to embody. Perhaps it’s some inconsolable quality in that person, some unappeasable dimension, that attracts one all the more forcibly” (p. 23).
Cabassac and Julieta live in a world less boundaried, where language connects them to hidden depths beyond the words themselves. They fall freely into an unnamed, unfathomable dimension embodied by the other. On the day they first make love, they have been exploring ancient water mills, each named onomatopoetically, after the particular sounds that their rotating wooden paddles make. An ancient woman tells them that the one they have found is called “Calou ou Cales, Li Voou, li vas” which translates as: “I tumble down, You tumble down, I go under, you go under” (p. 73). That is precisely what happens.

Sobin tells us that Cabassac was drawn to Julieta’s erotic absence, her unfathomable emptiness. When she finds that she has become pregnant on that day at the water mill, Julieta is thrilled but Cabassac feels lonelier—a secret resentment. He doesn’t notice that she is so happy to be pregnant that she is no longer keeping herself at a distance from him. Perhaps he cannot see it because he is not looking for family but a mirror of his inner emptiness. He wants to continue to bask in the sense that someone else knows about it, feels it! Or is he unconsciously reconnecting with his lost mother—not ready to end that melting?

But Julieta suffers a tragic loss and is devastated. She loses interest in the world and shortly thereafter dies of a broken heart. Cabassac mournfully and robotically returns to his routine, including fly-truffling. After a while he begins to believe that the truffles enhance his capacity to extend his dreams: “One buried thing for the other” (p. 14). The truffle, while not a hallucinogen, “affected one’s awakened body, one’s conscious thoughts. It reassured the sense with its warm, earthy aroma, placed one’s entire being in a raised state of receptivity…it created a *dispousicioun*, [dis-poo-si-see-ohn]….in which
the dreams might occur” (p.15). In this “state of grace” his dreams of Julieta grow more vivid and protracted, “cradled by a rhythm as telluric as it was corporal” (p.22). His Julieta appeared to him, at first piecemeal but in increasingly organized fashion, “Emerging out of so many vapourous particles, her gaze radiant and her black hair glossy in the sunlight” (p. 14). In these dreams they would bathe naked in waterfalls, or study together, but she always had her back turned to him. Further, although he could see, smell and hear her tanned, perspiring, surrounded by flowers, she seemed to see, smell and hear nothing. But repeatedly she called out for him in the dreams. “Philippe?” Each night’s dream eventually fades.

Soon he finds himself organizing his life around creating circumstances to enter into this transcendent truffle-enhanced dream world in an effort to find her and reach her. He hears her repeatedly ask, “Why?” He assumes “Why?” means “Why was she on one side of that impenetrable curtain and he on the other?”(p. 16). But she never explains. The dreams become more sequential, each starting off right where the previous one finished. In the dreams time seems elastic.

In his final dream of the second year after she died, enhanced by the last truffle of that winter before the earth froze too deeply, his Julieta is viscerally present. But she seems unable to feel, smell and touch Cabassac the way he believes (in this lucid dream) that he can feel, smell and touch her. Julieta says, “Come closer, Philippe…Closer…Can you hear me. Philippe? Can you?… There is something I have to tell you… Something wonderful, perfectly marvelous, if only you’d come a bit closer.” Although Philippe Cabassac whispers back to his beloved Julieta, “Tell me” (p. 30-31), the dream fades with
her calling for him, never hearing his responses, never telling him what was so marvelous.

What is this perfectly marvelous thing he wanted to know about? It is more than just reconnecting to the lost Julieta. It is some knowledge from “the other side”.

Cabassac has to wait another year for the new crop of truffles to allow him to reenter this dream world. Introspectively, he atones for his lack of enthusiasm for Julieta’s baby, and feels that this cruelty caused the miscarriage. In the meantime, he completely loses interest in anything else. He loses his job. All the external realities of his life fall apart, but he is heedless. All he can think about are the truffles and finding out what was so marvelous.

He has transcended normal reality for a transitional world that can be seen as madness. Or could this be some very belated effort to heal his early losses with transitional experiencing? Has this effort begun to go too far? Michael Eigen (1981) suggests that “faith, surrender, the beginning of creativity and symbol formation all intersect in the world of transitional experiencing…when the infant (or person)...lives through a faith that is prior to a clear realization of self and other differences” (p. 19).

The following truffle season, Cabassac completely joins Julieta in his lucid dream world, which is now his only world. There “the most marvelous thing” is revealed. He basks in a delusional sense of wholeness, even as the bulldozers destroy his lands where his truffles grow, and the police arrest him for ignoring the eviction notices. He spends the rest of his life in this dream world, unperturbed by the actual facts of his life. Julieta, her life and the ancient world of Provençale are all alive to him. He does not even see or
hear the ordinary world. He is completely unperturbed by his circumstances. Is this transcendence, madness, or transcendence gone mad?

Sobin’s protagonist Cabassac is much like the mythical Orpheus, whose wife, Eurydice, was killed by the bite of a serpent. Orpheus ventures down to the underworld to bring her back. His songs are so beautiful that Hades finally agrees to allow Eurydice to return to the world of the living. Orpheus must meet one condition: not to look back while conducting Eurydice to the world above. Just before the pair reaches the upper world, Orpheus looks back, and Eurydice slips back into the netherworld once again. So goes the myth.

Unlike Orpheus, Cabassac didn’t look back, but he didn’t try to come back to the world above either. He sought to remain in a transitional world. Sobin seems to want us to think that Cabassac jettisoned the ordinary for a costly extraordinary chance to reach into the imaginary—into the emptiness for his beloved—for the “distance, a depth…some inconsolable quality…some unappeasable dimension, that attracts one more forcibly [than the ordinary world]” (p. 23). In Sobin’s words, Philippe Cabassac unearthed “something far more than he’d ever anticipated: far more than he ever thought existed” (p. 157). Very seductive.

The Kabbalist Batsailet Noor (2002) in Bringing Down Dreams suggests that “Our rational mind is… but a small pupil who explains a [small] bit [of] the light of life contained in the treasury of our rich, holy imagination…which soars above all the straits and dry limitation of poor reality’s conditions…Imagination has qualities that reason lack[s]. Imagination brings the world to life in its spiritual guise, thereby making our
spiritual self more whole. However, as imagination grows stronger, it tends to blur the features of the practical world” (pp. 188-189).

Cabassac was capable of deep absorption in the natural world. Boundaries between himself, others, the waterfalls, the ancient language of Provençale, the truffles and, of course, Julieta, had fallen, as had the boundaries between his real and dream worlds. He was shimmeringly alive, able to be absorbed in the real world via his unboundaried openness.

Unfortunately, there are terrible traumatic effects of devastating grief. There is the sense of being broken, unhinged from a cohesive sense of self, apart from ordinary time and from the real world, frozen in the trauma or simply frozen—alive but dead inside. When Julieta died, Cabassac did not want to give up Julieta, the baby and, perhaps more fundamentally his shimmering vitality, his sense of truly being. So, after a period of feeling dead, he evolved ways to reach for what had been, based on glimmers of feeling her presence. This determination to cling to Julieta broke the unboundedness. It narrowed the field of possibilities and, thereby, broke what was so profoundly transcendent about his absorption. His options were frozen. Only one solution would do and thus, he became frozen in seeking Julieta and even further cut off from the world than he had been in his sadness.

The urgency to be relieved of suffering by shutting down or out, exists alongside an urgency to connect to life, to the vitality the source of which is best found in the deepest of unbounded experience. Falling into the beyond can be a byproduct of trauma, and a potential source of revitalization. But grasping at rigid solutions to our sense of brokenness may condemn one to psychosis, severe dissociation, the frustration of losing
the sense of transcendence, and hopelessness. These are tricky waters we enter at our own peril.

We are most alive and least mad when we are open to the transcendent, and to the real. Madness consists in clinging to any aspect of one or the other. To cling to dreams is truly to be lost; likewise is it to try to pinion reality. Failure for Cabassac, and for each of us, lies in the effort to deny the ever-shifting flux of ordinary and extraordinary.

References:


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