

# A Digression Upon Angelica

By Jake Adam York

*You feel like you are seeing everything now. Nothing was happening, and now everything is happening. Why does your sight seem now so sharp and clear?*

Craig Arnold, *Volcano Pilgrim*, April 26, 2009

You feel like you are seeing everything now.

He's been missing for two weeks. Not long after he wrote those words, not long after he posted them on his blog, he was gone.

A ferry ride to Kuchino-erabu-shima, a moment at the island's one hotel, and he ascended toward the volcano's summit.

Search parties and search parties returned nothing but traces, *abatures* as trackers call them.

Then they concluded that he was gone.

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His last entry was "A Digression Upon Angelica," a *divertissement* on *ashitaba*, the leaf his last lunch brought him in abundance. *Ashitaba* or *angelica*, a member of the parsley or celery family.

He wrote:

The plant takes its name from the angel who is supposed to have revealed its medicinal properties to a dozing monk. Or from St. Michael the Archangel, around whose feast-day, May 8, it blooms.

It would be too easy to take this last entry as a sign of what was about to happen, perhaps already happening when we'd read these words.

You have felt, over the last two weeks, as lost as he did, only weeks before, at Asama-yama. Out walking, he could not find his way back to the hostel:

Now dark is falling, and you are nowhere near anything you recognize. At times you catch glimpses of Asama-yama through the trees, each time in an unexpected direction. You grow frustrated, you curse the hand-drawn map you made this morning. Anger drops you into sadness, and sadness into that slow sinking that you have never learned to pull yourself out of.

You know this frustration, this anger, and especially that sadness.

You also know how the sudden breaking of something – a moment, a silence, a glass, a piece of wood – brings you back to life, to focus, in a moment of fear in which everything you have, everything you know, everything you are awakens.

You know what he meant:

Danger has a way of cutting through melancholy, the real fear blinding you to the fear dimly imagined. If you could only always just have escaped death, you would never be sad again.

The news, the phone call, the e-mail, the final word.

And then you see more clearly than before.

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Some of the signs are small, so commonplace you can hardly call them signs or treat them as signs. Your imagination might draw them into some story. Your grief might. But that is the way of grief. The way of elegy. Everything is drawn in.

So even the things you've planned already, even the things that are as regular as breathing, these things become significant.

The dish you've planned for weeks to make, suddenly more critical.  
Would he like it? What story could be tell me of each spice, each herb.

The day of rattling behind the 9-horsepower motor of a tiller, tearing up your yard so you can start again. Planned weeks ago, now it seems, in moments, like you're digging *down*, trying to bring something up.

but if I could  
I would unlock for you  
the gates of horn and ivory  
that keep you in the underworld  
for better or worse

This, however, is too easy.

You can dismiss these signs as signs of your own making.

The way a single knock at a door or a window or on a wall seems accidental — the momentary lighting of a bird, the settling of wood as it cools.

But the second knock, and then the third...

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So, you are standing in your kitchen, mixing spices for a sauce. You are thinking again about what you do not have, what you've forgotten to replace, and then you hear, from the hallway, the knock.

Has a broom fallen to the floor?

It sounds like a picture, a frame, the brief slap of glass and wood.

Which it is.

It's not a picture, however. It's a broadside. Of one of his poems. A section from what was then a single long poem entitled "Made Flesh." Lines of what is now "Asunder":

A glass is offered you    Look  
It is on the brink of falling    Take it  
quickly    or it will drop and shatter  
Hold it too gently and it will slip  
out of your fingers    Too firm a grip  
could break it    Even a hand's warmth  
might swell it so abruptly that it pulls  
itself to pieces    Put it down  
if there were any place to put it down  
but not too surely    or you might  
jar and break it    but don't hesitate  
You've held it too long already  
It so finely drawn    and anyway  
there is no place to put it down  
no one to pass it off    no one to share  
the weight of so much lightness    such  
eggshell fragility

                  Look at it there  
It's waiting for the first excuse  
to fall apart    Better just to smash it  
and get it over with    Better now  
than later    Better to be kind

And it was beautiful    and it could hold  
all of your heart's blood without spilling  
It fit the palm of your hand exactluy

Now it lies in pieces    Now it points  
all of its bright knives at you  
Now it is broken    Oh it is all ruined

Now the frame is broken.

But not the glass or the poem within.

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When you were 21 and working at the university chapel, when you  
spent as much time there as anywhere else, where you worked as a  
musician (Tuesday nights, guitar, folk service), a lay Eucharistic

minister, a thurifer, a lector, a cook, when it came time that Holy Week to sit up over Thursday night into Good Friday with the sacrament consecrated and reserved, you took your place in the anteroom between midnight and 2 a.m., keeping the candle lit and watching its quadrupling on the lens of the cruet of holy water, and after a time when the quiet of empty chapel had cooled and hardened, you felt a hand on your chest, or rather as if a hand had grabbed your shirt, twisting it in its fist so it could pull you toward its arm, its body, and push you away again, and it pulled and pushed you, and you corresponded, wrestling, considering perhaps you were imagining this or making this real, conjuring, even supplying your own angel as a meditation upon your name which means, in Hebrew, you are told, *supplanter*, and then *successor*, considering that in your desire to move from one signification to the other you may have created or prayed into force the stranger whose rungs you will climb into that higher order, though if this is the force of imagination, it leaves its marks in the body, in the burn of the broken bursa at the points of the quadriceps where you have answered its force, and it is this mystery, where it has touched you, where it has written its force into you, that moves you from a believer, a man of faith, to a knower, a man of knowledge, that takes you into that even further room, that quiet tabernacle, that *gnosis*. You would continue to feel the angel for days, for weeks, for years.

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There have been times in your life when you have lost the feeling of that touch, and you have wondered what you have done or not done to lose that, but then it comes again, and you know you are in that larger world again.

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So, the frame is broken, the wood, where the poem has fallen, the pins that hold the corners together these rabbits coming out of their holes, a thin seam having opened up along the bottom member.

It is not ruined, exactly, but it is broken, and the sound, and the fact that this is the only thing in the entire house that has fallen, without apparent agent, spooks.

The hand is not upon you, but around you.

You raise up the frame, you begin to shape it back together, enough to hang it on the wall again.

And you stand in an unusually subdued light yours is a house of windows, of skylights, and so, of light and read the poem again.

Take it  
quickly or it will drop and shatter  
Hold it too gentle and it will slip  
out of your fingers Too firm a grip  
could break it

He has come in what seem like chance moments you have had to grasp, and you have known those moments as such, you have recognized the offering, and you have known the calculus of delicacy, how fragile the right balance that will allow both the coming and the going, the quiet in which the angel can arrive.

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And now, angelica, this flower, the last word you have from him, this digression, it reads like annunciation. It gives you the language for a prayer:

Crushed in the hands, the fresh leaves are sweet, slightly musky not quite mint, not quite juniper. It is a clean, windswept smell, the smell of meadow, of England, of green, the smell of a road after rain. It is the smell of a world in which there is nothing rotten or putrid of sulfurous, a world in which all of those things have been rinsed away.

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This morning, the rain has come, and the world smells fresh.

Sparrows, as usual, are everywhere.

A robin bleats high in a locust tree.

And the earth is broken.

And you can smell its readiness.

And he woke up alone in the other world and he was walking down a familiar street and it had been raining all night and the boughs of the trees were black and heavy and the first cars of the morning passed with their tires hissing over the blacktop and under his feet he felt the pavement slither a carpet of petals battered down by the raindrops and each puddle swirled with a slick of green-gold pollen and though he couldn't remember how or when it happened his heart had been spilled and at its quick was planted a wet seed that he'd never known before and it was spring