

A utopian fancy, with notes and exercises

You, turn on the white noise machine in your room, tonight not just rain, something else, another sound, something else. Waves? Breaking waves? Waves on a shore? The lapping of a river against its bank? The lapping of a river, lapping, lapping. In front of your eyes is a river bank, muddy, mostly muddy, a little lonely, you and the bank, as the Little Calumet flows by, the 130th St bridge at the edge of what you can see, big and shabby and rattling under a train, the Ford plant rumbling behind you, you could see it too if you turned your head to look over your right shoulder. Somehow you got the idea that this is where the St. Lawrence ends, here at 130th St., here at this bridge, here at the Hegewisch marsh, here where you are coldly crouching, lapping, lapping

Hey! Weary traveler! Welcome to utopia!

[You, the weary traveler are surrounded! Surrounded by persons unknown, unknown and kind of, ill-assorted? but smiling, laughing, gesturing. Your face feels weird, stiff maybe like you'd been out in the cold, as you try to smile back. What did that person just say?]

What's that you say? You don't like that name? You don't want to be told what's good? What's a utopia for me may not be for thee?* Ay, that's ok! The name's a joke, remember? You might have learned it in those institutions you call schools? It's a joke because utopia is exactly that, it's no place, and no place is good!***

[You, the weary traveler find yourself, you find yourself on a bank that edges a marsh and a little slowly moving river, on the far shore more marsh, grasses, reeds, whatever you call marsh plants, and what look like garden beds or little hills, and figures in small groups bent toward each other, talking? Or working? But you can hardly process what's in view, because this person, smiling broadly and talking to you about jokes? is running on and on as if you had asked a question –]

Aw, your face! Are you thinking of the legendary smugness of utopians? Look, I'll try to be clear, but we should still have some fun along the way, right? And I guess I should say, traveler, our guest, happy you are here! that maybe you feel ill at ease not because of something here, but because of everything there, all around you in that empirical valley you take to be all that's possible, that version of spacetime where the world is a bunch of resources & you are a hierarchy of needs you exchange your wages to meet. What? I'm running on? Running off at the mouth you say? You're right! Let's take a look around. Come with me, let's dip our toes into this river over here. We call this the warm stream of utopia, haha! and you never step in the same part of it twice!

[You, the weary traveler, try to control your alarm. You are now definitely in the river, standing in it, on stepping stones or something, hard to tell because you're still trying to figure out how you even got here, to this river, into this river, which it's true is quite warm! And as it rushes around your shoes, it's iridescent too, somehow, some trick of the light maybe. But when and why did you wade into this river with your shoes on? And who's that watching over

on the far bank? Children? A bunch of children? Their eyes glow like cats' eyes do in the dark***]

Everything is different here, but you recognize it anyway, don't you? You've seen it before? Or maybe not seen. Glimpsed? Caught a glimpse? See with your eyes, catch with your hands!

[Your host is still talking, keeping up quite a flow of talk as they guide you along. A large, blunt shape is passing by in the river, moving through its deeper central channel. A whale? A whale? That tail is a whale for sure! You catch yourself thinking in the childish rhyme-y word play your weirdo host likes so much, apparently it's contagious, being delighted with things? You open your mouth to ask about the creature, who has paused in their course, and like the children, is fixing you with an eye you sense more than see]

One of the whales who hold up the world! I guess no one works all the time, am I right!

[Whales??**** At this point you are thoroughly soaked and the water has a slightly salty quality, which, as you climb up onto the far shore, turns to a notable stickiness. The shore is hardly a shore, more like a swamp. Or a bog? A marsh? Did you once know that distinction? Did it matter? Your host has started talking about baths? Bathtubs? A community pool? This person is obsessed with water. And apparently also with shorelines, a lot of gesturing and talk about seeping and kinds of muds and floods, you're just awash in their words, but thankfully it doesn't seem like you're expected to respond. Your host has their hand at your elbow, guiding you along a path toward a surprisingly large structure, which, if you're seeing right, is lit by some kind of electric light. You realize that you're finding that strange, but then, there are bonfires in the distance too. The path you're on, and again, when did you get on a path? is surrounded by low, winding hills covered in vegetation. Squash? Beans? Definitely some kind of kale, you're stooping to look. A number of the children are pointing things out to you, and it occurs to you that they're not all children, they just, somehow, feel like children. And their conversation feels like water, like water, steam, aromatic smoke. Your host's face is very kind, their hand on your elbow as gentle as a paw]

*Is the host secretly a little touchy about utopia? Many of us utopians are, perhaps, touchy or overfond of explaining ourselves. How many times have we heard that 'your utopia may be my dystopia'? Utopia is always a dream for the many, even when, as José Muñoz put it, it's a solitary oddball who does that dreaming. The only true slogan for utopia is everything for everyone! (And on behalf of all utopians, thanks to ME O'Brien and Eman Abdelhadi for opening that slogan up to a bigger world. To each according to their needs! That is all.)

**The point here seems to be twofold, and a little less obvious than their jokes suggest. First, that utopia (punning name aside) is not a place and certainly not, of all things! a state, but is rather a relation to the possibility of difference, or, more famously, an orientation toward a horizon, which matters not only for what might lie beyond it (everything for everyone), but also for just the fact that there is a horizon and hence, something beyond, something not yet seen, and a limit to what we do see. That utopia is not a place can be confusing, when utopias, those

stories about differences that make a difference in human and other than human relations, often are concerned with describing or showing their readers just that, a place. But what matters aren't the buildings or the rules (or the conflicts and ambiguities), what matters is what you, the reader, the invisible companion of the utopian traveler, are lead to ask about your world and what must change.

***Many have attested to the childlike quality of utopians, which is perhaps just the way those of us who don't live there all the time choose to diminish those who seem so joyful and vigorously interested in the world, or this is a theory Marge Piercy has suggested to me. William Morris seems to think that this childlike quality stems from absorption, yes, but also from a tendency to distraction, to dream and a willingness to just drift along the river. Utopians aren't good at remembering history and they don't write novels (or most of them don't anyway), but they are always trying to repair old damage, so they know something about the past, or perhaps I should say the present, for sure. It's Joanna Russ (with her gift for the freaky flash) who saw utopian's eyes glowing in the dark. It's good not to approach the future as if you're going to own it, or even as if you know exactly how you'd experience it. A new sensorium may just await!

***Yeah, I don't know about the whales either. I had always heard it was turtles all the way down (or at least for us here on Turtle Island it is), but Darko Suvin mentioned the whales to me, and thinking on it, he could be right, because I'm pretty sure I saw one of them once, when I was staring into the ocean somewhere near Carmel, California. It seemed unlikely, but that whale was right there, just down there with the kelp. Was it one of the four whales? I think probably so.

Six utopian exercises to do with your friends

*Choose a location near you. Repurpose three parts, destroy two. What is that location now?

*What does it mean if a future is not 'ours'? Dream a good dream about this, ask someone to take notes.

*End the divide between the country and the city!

*Plan a festival.

*Rather than build monuments to what's gone, you all decide to keep some bonfires burning. Where do they burn and what was there before?

*Stretch your arms out in front of you. Feel into your hair follicles, your teeth, your tongue, your fingernails and your toenails. Feel just past them. Now you don't end at your skin. Try standing like this outside. Who comes to visit you?