

McCowan Spirit Walk with Annie Wong

by Fan Wu



The water beneath us feels like plasticine disturbed subcutaneously.

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Seven of us sit in McCowan's log cabin for Annie Wong's Spirit Walk: Annie herself, Madalen Tojicic who works at the Scarborough Museum, and four participants from the public. The seventh is a volunteer from a local high school who astonishes me with the simultaneity of his placid nature that projects an unsmashable calm, and his extreme terseness when I attempt to make small talk (my fault for making small talk!). Annie explains that the walk is partly inspired by McCowan, the hermit-pioneer. But she stresses that he shares the ground with the Haudenosaunee who walked this land before him; and the current residents of Scarborough, like Devon Muhic,

an employee at the Museum, whose childhood stories of the region inspired the route. A spirit walk must be a palimpsestic proposition, a retracing of steps that themselves have rubbed other footprints out of the dust, though no set of steps is ever fully lost to history. What you're reading now is a diary of my experience of the walk, its attempted accuracy necessarily distorted – embellished – respun by the haze of recall.

I seek the singular as passageway to the universal. That is to say I need the purity of the immediate present that only ever passes away; but I need that present to resound with all the presents that have ever come or are to come still or never will come. When I walk I am the cadence of my own gait, the particularity of my own asymmetry; but also every walker who's ever walked, who's ever hit their stride or failed to but still found something like value or magic in the stumble, the meander, the falling down.



Before we walk, Annie asks us to meditate in McCowan's log cabin. We close our eyes, we take a deep breath in, and when we breathe out, we hum. The fireplace's smoke fills my lungs and I go lightheaded from the combination of ashy air and throatsound. The spirit of the air there shoots through my limbic system, braiding experience with mythology: a lonely pioneer; a self-obliterating closeness to nature; a cold that settles in the bones thru the seasons. When I open my eyes again I am caught in a trance.

I want the trance to free me from language. These days I want any given thing to free me from language, now newly aware of what language has denied me: attunement to touch as much as the pleasures of ordinary gesture. Then I hasten to not want anything from the trance, because Annie tells us to *stay in the present*, and *wanting* harvests present for sake of future.

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Before we walk, the Scarborough Museum staff offer us cloaks to ward off the cold. I choose the flashiest, a red piece fringed in black, as powerful as it is kitsch. With a lantern in one hand and a walking-stick in the other, draped in this flamboyant pioneer garb, my focus slips towards the *theatricality* of it all. When park passersby see us in congregation, what do they think? Do they think cultic ritual, performance art, some ascetic blood magick? This is a wayward pathway of thought that puts my mind in the ambiguity between walking in full earnestness versus *performing* walking as a character, some overdetermined hybrid of John Bunyan and Gandalf. (When it surfaces, self-consciousness turns attunement into stage-play).

Scarborough. The proper name evokes an entity half-violence, half-home. Is it the one who's hurting, or is it the one leaving scars? I tried to repress my Scarborough roots in high school, preferring the cosmopolitan flair of "Torontonion" as self-designation. Now I am astonished by its beauty, toward which I had to turn a blind eye so to better elsewhere *aspire*.



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I discovered my body at age twenty-five through its unravelling. One pain in my lower abdomen turned into a magnified attention to every unusual jolt that ran through my nerves, every irregular hiss of blood and bone. Walking became a hypochondriac's activity, as every sensation swelled against the bounds of normal quiescence, each idle gripe becoming a tripwire against thought. I walk the hypochondriac's walk, ready to engorge each symptom into magnificent proportions.

Every time Annie hits a triangle, we hum. Our humming transforms into a chanting that refuses musicality, insofar as music is the imposition of structure upon sound. Rather, this collective chanting produces a compression of space; my body is no longer able to gauge distances between mine and another's vocalizations. I am thrown into the air; I feel like a ventriloquist's voice bereft of both ventriloquist and dummy.

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We are laid below a power tower. Annie with a touch upon the knee reminds me to uncross my legs before she drops a blanket over my body. It's the first snow of the season; a hesitant snow, it mistakes itself for rain and lands slick against my cheek. Somewhere amidst the calm numb of my face and sounds of water played as music, my eyes begin to seize, trill back and forth, and turn the intricate geometries of the tower into a transcendental object: part UFO, part deity, part doubt.

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The waters we pass have the quality of clay boiled into shape from within.

A house on the hill throws up some shadow-puppet people. The colour of gloam is fuchsia-orange, and the horizon lends the path just enough light to render our lanterns redundant. I can't make out any tree species; the flora streak and snake around my vision as chameleonic forms without individuation, without the burdens of identity. *I need this*, I think to myself in grit-teeth interior monologue, *this spirit walk to heal against the incessant agitations of late capitalism...*



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These days I feel myself vibrating close to Spirit, not least of all because my anchors of meaning (University, poetry, monogamy) have dissolved from excess disillusionment. Halfway through the walk I find a mantra that flowers into some unlanguageable, provisional meaning; I push the melody of this mantra out onto the water running beneath us, water heavy with shadows. We bang wood against the metal of the bridge. I'm convinced that this is what "art," that deprecated category, ought to be: experiments with that irreplaceable and sublimely simple singular-universal experience of being together in the world, in this world.

McCowan Spirit Walk (2019) was produced by Annie Wong as part of her residency at the Scarborough Museum curated by Aisle 4.

Fan Wu is the way bergamot wafts from the emptied closet of an ex-lover. He hosts critical reading / creative writing workshops in conjunction with Toronto galleries, including Art Metropole and Mercer Union, on topics such as grief, translation, and desire. You can read his work online at MICE Magazine, Koffler Digital, and baest journal. Please contact him for amusement or business at fanwu2@gmail.com.

Annie Wong is a writer and multidisciplinary artist working in performance and installation. Conceptually diverse, her practice explores the intersections between the politic and poetic in everyday life. Her current research focuses on the ways in which affective knowledge, particularly intergenerational feminist anger, the melancholy of ancestral amnesia, and hauntologies of diasporic displacement, are embodied in these muddled intersections. Wong's practice is heavily collaborative and often engages diasporic communities to produce a collective form of carework as the basis for artistic production, allyship building, and spiritualism. Wong has presented in solo and group exhibitions extensively across North America and has been awarded residencies with the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Power Plant (Toronto, ON), and Khyber Centre for the Arts (Halifax, NS). Her literary practice in poetry, art writing, and non-fiction can be found in The Shanghai Literary Review, C Magazine, Canadian Art, and MICE Magazine.