

KIM GOLDBERG / Dear Jack

Dear Jack,

I am delighted to learn that I am being considered for your Poetry As Magic workshop. Regarding your request that I elaborate on my answer to Question 2 in the “Personal” section of your questionnaire, it is not so much my outward physical appearance that resembles *Aneides vagrans* (Wandering Salamander). Although I suppose there are enough similarities—head, torso, four limbs, tail (or vestige of same in form of coccyx). But the resemblance I was referring to is epistemological in nature. For we are each stranded, *A. vagrans* and I, at the centre of an unanswerable riddle surrounding origins. I do not claim to singularly inhabit this mystery in relation to my own species and fellow prospective classmates. However, you did not ask us “Which animal do you *alone* most resemble?” but simply “Which animal do you most resemble?” We are probably all adrift in the same mystery. Or rather, each in our private version of the mystery, since how can any of us really know whether anything exists beyond the outer topography of our own skin? Or for that matter, anything beneath the topography? What if liver, spleen, kidneys are simply conceptual scaffolding erected by our Western notion of the body? The Chinese believe wind is rushing through drafty corridors, doors blowing open and slamming shut, a cold infant wailing somewhere in a back room. Perhaps my innards are made of shoelaces. Or crab nebulae. Or piano chords. Or nothing. Skin itself though has a certain veracity about it, don’t you think?

But the real mystery, the one that I (and probably you too, Jack) share with *A. vagrans*, is one of origins and current position. *A. vagrans* has a disjoint range. That is to say, the species occurs over two separate ranges, but not on the land mass in between. It is found in coastal forests of Northern California and across Vancouver Island in Canada, but not the intervening terrain of Oregon, Washington or British Columbia’s mainland. Herpetologists have sneered, spat and even launched fists (after a few martinis) over their competing theories on the *A. vagrans* enigma. At present, the favored scenario is that *A. vagrans*, partial to living under tree bark, became an unwitting hitch-hiker when large bundles of tanoak bark were shipped

from Northern California to Vancouver Island in the 1800s to serve the Island's growing leather tanning industry. Yet this theory (or any countervailing theory) will never be more than a "best guess," for there is no independent means of confirming it. Even if *A. vagrans* could speak to us, and with conscious possession of transgenerational memory (all of which I believe is possible), we still would learn nothing. For *A. vagrans* knows nothing. It's a matter of scale, Jack. The felling of trees, the shockwaves through brain and bone, the stripping and piling, the safe refuge between tannic hides, the tight bundle, the lurch and drag along rutted corduroy roads by slathering horses, the ceaseless rattling midnight of cargo hold, the dark swelter and hum, the off-loading in Victoria. These forces are so many orders of magnitude greater than the universe of *A. vagrans* as to be not just incomprehensible to our lowly subject, but nonexistent. In much the same way that our own... Well, you see my point, don't you?

And so I rest my case. Although I had not noticed until this moment that I was making one. I had naively thought I was answering a question. I would like to learn how to answer a question without making a case. How to answer a question by chewing its ears off and swallowing them whole. By winding it up in shoelaces and piano chords then spinning it free and watching it wobble down shrieking corridors and logging roads like a crab walks, like a tree rolls. I would like to learn how to answer a question by filling its lungs with helium so I can lose it among the clouds. Or by splitting it. Splitting it wide. Splitting it into two wide lips, fat and juicy as ripe salamanders, and kissing them. Hard.

Love,
Kim