

Mordant

Written by Rachel Pollock
Thursday, 09 April 2009 08:26 -

When it gets too ripe, the gray water smells like mushrooms and feet.

I'm supposed to dump it every a.m., but sometimes I forget. Sometimes I just don't feel like lifting the five-gallon buckets before I've had my coffee.

It's not hard to come by, coffee. A local fair-trade outfit's one of our biggest sponsors, so there's always free coffee everywhere, four stations on my floor of the building alone. Still, sometimes I walk right by like a zombie and don't even notice 'til that gray water odor hits me and I've got no joe for a nosegay.

I shouldn't gripe; if I'm honest, the gray water was my idea. My fault. It's this goddamned drought. (Lower-case goddamned, note. I don't allow myself to think it comes down to North Cack from the big-G.) The ponds are empty, the creeks are gone, the Haw's run nigh-dry. The lakes are down to sludge and piddle-puddles. No water to speak of, just a bunch of naked, cracked bottomland and some rowboat skeletons, looking kind of ashamed to be seen in daylight.

I'm dry, too. My patience has all but evaporated, and my give-a-dang is down to a trickle.

But I was talking about that gray water, and why we collect it, and I guess that does tie in to my give-a-dang after all.

The goddamned drought's been going on ... I don't know, a year maybe? A long time, and things are getting drastic, and I'm close up to stuffing it all and walking off the job, because the guilt's about to break me in two.

At first, it was just another thread in the fabric of casual conversation:

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“Sure is hot today.”

“Yep, sure is.”

“How-bout this drought, huh?”

“It’s something! The stream out by me’s just up and gone.”

Then, maybe six months in, the news people started going at it and the governor piled on.

The city of Durham only has ninety-eight more days of water left!

Falls Lake Reservoir is at 60 percent capacity and dropping!

And, my favorite: *If something doesn’t change soon, we’re going to be sucking sediment!*

Panic-mongering, I thought. Brilliant strategy. Soon people’d be punching each other at the Food Lion over jugs of Poland Spring.

For all that the language in the press is dire as Revelations, the law sure hasn’t done much about the problem. “Voluntary water reduction,” is what they were advocating at first, Governor Easley, and the Orange County Water and Sewer Authority. No rations or restrictions, just asking people to be good neighbors or conscientious citizens or whatever. Put a two-liter in your toilet tank, run full wash loads. Stop watering your lawn and hide the dang Slip ’n Slide from your sweaty, whiny kids. Everybody pitch in! Conserve!

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Lord, lord, but the next person I hear saying, “If it’s brown, flush it down” is getting smacked. Twice. Teach your children that rhyme at home, fine, but it’s just flat nasty, grown adults in public talking about their deuces. You’d think nobody’s Mama’d heard tell of manners.

Anyways. Don’t wash your car. Skip showers. Cut the faucet off while you brush your teeth.

Didn’t take long ’til all the tree huggers in Carrboro were gnashing around in a conservation lather, while the stubborn county folk turned back coverlets to find strange bedfellows in the nouveau-riche transplants, as if water and the right to waste it were some entitlement of birthright.

Do we even call them carpetbaggers anymore, these Coach-toting immigrants to Cackalack’s sprawling subdivisions? That word sounds like a relic of the vanquished South, as outdated and uncomfortable-looking on the page as “bushwhackers” and “colored folks.” But I digress.

I was talking about how We, as Citizens, could Help Alleviate the Drought.

Check for leaky spigots. Install a low-flow showerhead. Get a rain barrel.

That’s the thing that surprises me most: the rain. Because it still rains, fairly regular. Just, I guess, not enough; never enough. I realize I’ve always thought about severe drought in Grapes of Wrath terms, parched terrain cracked and flaking, that soon we’d all be dusty Joads slapping clouds from the thighs of our overalls and loading our trucks for California. But that’s not how it is at all.

You want to know how it is?

It’s bailing the bathtub into a kitty litter bucket to gravity-feed your commode.

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It's folks sneaking out at 2:00 a.m. to water the blasted heaths of their lawns, weird suburban greed for that proverbial Other Side of the Fence.

It's fistfights at the car wash because some tool spent twenty minutes running the sprayer all over his Escalade, and "they say we're in a drought so how-come it rained all dang weekend and this is well water anyway, fool, so shut your mouth or I'll put this dang hose down—running—and shut it for you, fool."

You think? Why don't you come over here and try.

I just don't know how much longer I can walk around with this guilt. Water-guilt bonded to me like hydrogen bonded to oxygen. I do it all, all those voluntary measures, and still I'm like the reservoir, always running below capacity, hemorrhaging water because the demand is just too great. I can't save enough to balance it out. To absolve myself, I'd have to quit my job, throw my career in the toilet, and—using my bailed bathwater, of course—flush it down.

You ask some people, I waste water for a living. Wasting water is what keeps the lights on (and that's a-whole-nother issue, electric power, but this right here isn't about coal vs. wind or carbon sequestration or what-the-heck-ever, so never-you-mind).

See, my job is to run the dye facility in the costume shop of one of the better-known professional theatres in the Carolina Piedmont. All day long, I'm chucking fabric in giant vats of steaming chemical baths, rinsing and rinsing 'til the water runs clear, so some folks can stitch it up into costumes and other folks can traipse around declaiming Shakespeare in properly colored doublets. Here's OWASA telling us all to "cut out all nonessential water use," and can you fathom anything more nonessential than that?

I used to carry a lot of pride in my career, making a living making art—relevant art, popular art, collaborative, vibrant, engaging art that was a vital part of the community. I used to get fierce about it, having done my time living on ramen with fifty-seven roommates, having soldiered on and made it, while so many of my drama-department college buddies had sold out to the cushy lives of law degrees and tech start-ups, or having, as my mamaw would say, "married well."

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Or so I sometimes thought secretly to myself—that younger, angrier self.

These days, as I run fifteen-yard lengths of fabrics through two-hundred-gallon, three-hue dye processes so the “color palette of the stage picture can be carefully controlled,” while dead fish rot in the thickening mud of our former waterways ... well, my older, humbler self mostly feels like a dupe and a chump. Is it so important, really, the properly colored doublet? It sure doesn't feel like it. It feels like hubris, like Lear lapping at the transparent flattery of Regan and Goneril, Macbeth ignoring loopholes in prophecy, committing regicide. It feels like empty, worthless hubris, and so does that pride I carried so dear in younger years.

Hence, the gray water buckets.

Hence, the fetid, feety smell lurking under the triple sink on the mornings I don't get my coffee. That goddamned coffee, I can't have it in the dyeshop—Food and Drink Prohibited—so when I do get a tall cup, it sits on a shelf just outside the door. The fair-trade folks, they sponsor us in return for the coffee monopoly on our concession stand—nothing but their products sold at intermissions, for whatever they choose to charge, local businesses supporting each other symbiotically. They've even made up exclusive blends with funky theatrical names: the Director's Blend, the Actor's Blend, even the Stage Manager's Blend (that one's extra strong).

It just keeps bobbing back to the surface: how do I reconcile this water wastage pouring out of my studio like a slashed jugular? I can conserve all I want to, dump bucket upon bucket of cloudy shroom-water into the speckled enamel drum of my washing machine, but the dye requests just keep coming.

When I get handed a job, it's not my part to counsel moderation; “Do you really want it 120-gallons-bad?”

When I get handed a job, my next line is this: “How fast do you need it?”

Period. The end.

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Hautboys. Exeunt.

But I'm dropping the curtain before I've even started the play, so let's take it from the top: laundry comes first, the initial step of every job. Nothing goes into the vat that hasn't been laundered. Sizing, starch, fancy factory finishes—all those things can prevent the dye from taking right, so into the wash it all goes, a vigorous scour with a double rinse. A double rinse.

My big dye vat holds sixty gallons. I've heard tell it's the biggest theatre-facility dye vat in the state, and that's something I used to be proud of, before the drought. It's a steam-jacketed kettle, which means the heat comes from ... really hot water, filling the chamber surrounding the vat. It's so big, my big vat, that when it's full it takes a full hour to heat all the way up, even with the dial cut up to ten.

I add my chemicals, my dye concentrate and my uptake auxiliaries. I don my thermoprene gauntlets like I'm Macduff, about to draw my sword and hack off a head. I fling the damp fabric in, the goddamned fabric, and paddle it down into the bath. For the next twenty minutes, I stand there over the boil, deafened by the industrial vents sucking the vapors off the top of the liquid, my splash-proof goggles obscuring my peripheral vision, tunnel-blinding me. I feel witchy beside my bubbling cauldron, and every time I fill it, it seems that Birnam Wood steps nearer Dunsinane.

When the fabric has finally turned its proper doublet-color, I hoist it out of the vat into a bucket, haul it to the washing machine and throw it in. One, two, three buckets of gray water into the drum and the rest fills from the plumbing. I open the stopcock to drain the vat and the bloody-looking liquid gushes out. I can't stand staring at a flow I've no means to stanch, so I turn back to the washing machine, set the dial for the extra rinse, head down the hall for a cup of Stage Manager's Blend.

There is no Dyer's Blend. Not many people even know I'm here in this lab at the end of a hallway, turning water into bright dyebaths like a trick Jesus or a conjure-woman, mumbling portents, signifying nothing. How can our plan be business as usual and prayers for rain? Maybe I'm just another fool yelling into the storm.

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I've never been what they call "churchy," but I can't help but wonder: if this goddamned, God-damned drought doesn't end soon, how can anybody get baptized? How can anybody get saved?