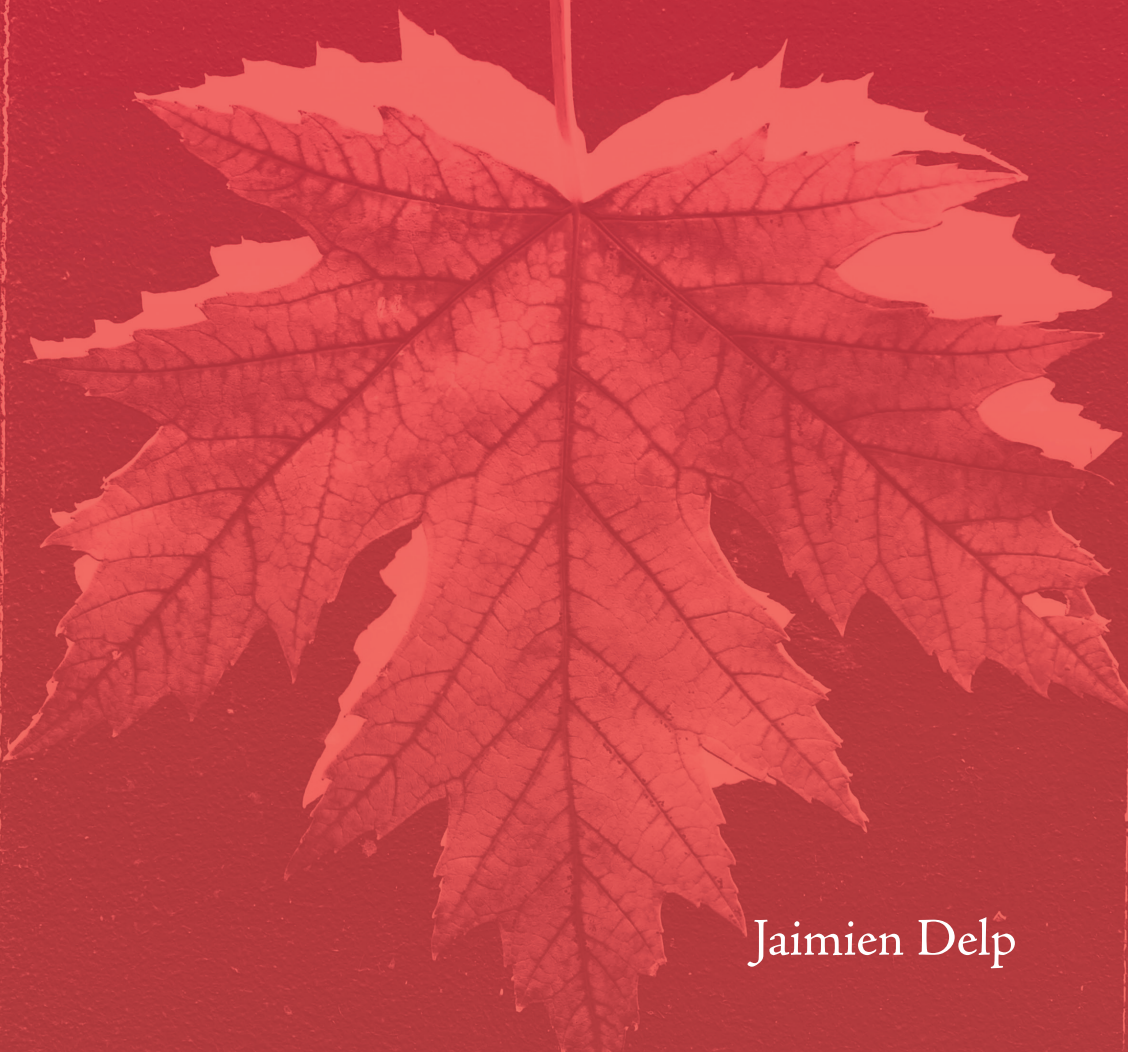


OVERTURE  
OF THE  
LONG MEMORY



Jaimien Delp

*OVERTURE  
OF THE  
LONG MEMORY*

Jaimien Delp

*In memory of Randy Bond.*

How one day  
the elders  
appear all together again,  
as if called  
by the song of some  
rare creature  
clear and fierce  
as migration itself.

Among them are women and men  
who carry the memory  
of everything you do not know:  
decades of protest,  
of bearing one's bones  
soft and strong against brutality,  
the blunt forces of fascism, racism, classism,  
of sexism and capitalism and white supremacy and—

*but please, reader, let me end the litany there, don't have me exhaust the page,  
this otherwise white space that was once  
just a tree moving towards the sky, free  
to whatever it wished;  
silence, even, or stillness,  
think of its joy—*

and war and the monotony of oppression and pollution and greed and guns and—

*no really, stop and think of it:  
how once a living thing breathed  
unbridled here,  
just grew towards light,  
that's it,  
think of it—*

and patriarchy and the indifference of brass knuckles and batons and helmets and—

*or if that doesn't work for you, reader,  
if a tree is too hard to manifest,  
its breath,  
think of something else:  
your own breath,  
that's always easier—*

and nuclear power plants and the trespass of pipelines and oil and the strange,  
unsteady, slow path  
to peace...

*...No really, think of it...*

The elders, I should tell you,  
some of them were  
very old, one woman's fingers  
like knotty pine,  
and their voices sometimes shuffled  
between laughter and tears  
and it was difficult to distinguish  
which was which.

I should also tell you  
that the room where they gathered  
had a fireplace, a dining table,  
sofas and lamps and books  
and peace flags and photographs  
and smelled of wood smoke and spices  
and the autumn air blown in  
from the lakeshore.

*Are you seeing this, reader?  
Can you get there?*

Maybe you'd also like to know  
that Sally Neal once laid herself in front of a truck  
to stop the deploy of the 182<sup>nd</sup> unit,  
that an officer picked her up  
by the neck,  
that she lost the hearing  
in her right ear,  
or that

Randy Bond once risked  
a million dollar fine and ten years  
imprisonment to take medicine  
to dying kids in Baghdad.  
Maybe you'd like to know  
that when he arrived at the children's hospital  
the hallways were dark, the cupboards bare,  
that half a million kids died there.

I should tell you, too, about the fall  
of '74, about Jim Olson and Art Duhamel  
and that day at the Dune's Saloon,  
or about Victor and Pine  
or Warren Studley  
and the threats to his pension  
if he testified truthfully  
to save the Little Crystal River—

*But I know, reader, it was a long time ago, it would take a long time to tell,  
and the world in the present moment keeps you spinning,*

*I know, I know. . .*

*Your mind turns at night like a restless set of wings  
with no place to settle, there's so much to  
do, a simple story is all you want. . .*

*Okay...*

Once upon a time, let's say a man sat in a chair on his porch. Suppose there is a small table next to him with a near-empty coffee mug on it, a stack of books, the remnants of his early evening after a full day on the farm. Maybe his wife has just come in from the garden, is rinsing the dirt and seeds from her hands at the kitchen sink. Maybe the air is easy around them, the sky lit like any other Michigan summer night, nobody aware of what's about to occur, the magnitude of a moment that hasn't happened yet.

Where do you imagine they've been, this couple? Who are they? Would you guess that they'd once taken their pick-up truck and a travel trailer and a total of two thousand dollars and moved to Alaska, the last frontier? Or that she waitressed for a time at the Dog N' Suds Carhop, before Alaska, before becoming the district magistrate and well before this night now back in Michigan? Before the arrests?

*But I am getting ahead of the story,  
aren't I,  
reader...*

Once upon a time, this man, who we've placed on the porch, was reading a magazine. The East West Journal, to be more specific.

What is it on the page that's holding his gaze so distinctly, has the line of his jaw set like a stake in the earth?

It's 1987, and the nuclear arms race is the center of everything. The man, whose name is Randy, is reading the part of the story nobody talks about: the details of what happens inside a nuclear missile, the scripts and strategies, the way two men, stationed inside the warhead, ten stories underground, are to be tested. Each will sit at a desk, each will have a key. When the signal comes, each is to place and turn the key, and if the attack is real, their ears will roar with the sound of the engine.

*Their ears will become the engine.*

*Their ears will become the ears of  
every living thing,  
and roar,  
and the engine will do  
what it was designed  
to do.*

In the event, though, that one of these men does not do what the military has designed him to do, and in the event that the signal is a test, each man has a handgun. There are orders in place.

*You understand, reader, what I'm saying,  
what Randy understood that day—  
the bizarreness of it, the brutality of it,  
the way such a strange reality  
might play in a man's head...*

*Can you get there?  
Your imagination  
was designed to show you places  
beyond the world where you live...  
Did you know that?*

You see, Randy need not have been anything before in his life than what he is now, in this moment, as he sits thinking of those men, deep underground, with their keys and their guns.

*So then...*

Once upon a time this same couple, not long after, are sitting at a picnic table in front of a police station. It is an August afternoon, the weather everything you might expect of pleasant summers in the Midwest in the 80's. Suppose the Maple tree above them appears to his wife, whose name is Kay, like the shade of a brightly colored umbrella. Suppose they are sitting there, together, a woman and a man, a wife and a

husband, a mother and a father, just a couple of completely regular people who have never done anything to disturb the track history was taking...

*What would you do, if it were you?*

*If you heard a story, and knew it was true,  
and it hung in your mind like a tornado, or a strange song  
whose melody didn't align with your steps,  
or the fog of a sad,  
certain brand of anger?*

It's at this table, under this tree, they decide that in the morning they will be on a bus bound for Oscoda, where they will cross the line at the Wurtsmith Airforce Base, where they will criminalize themselves in the name of peace. And it's here Kay says to him, "If we do this, we do it for the rest of our lives."

And so they do. They sleep, and they wake up, and they ride to the base where women are trembling and men in uniform guard a small fence no more than a foot high. Kay approaches, and the officer is so young, chin tucked, reciting from the official military-issued card he holds in his hand like a ticket he cannot, must not lose...

*Is she afraid?*

*Do they know that the moment they cross, there will be zip-lock  
handcuffs, criminal records, a gymnasium  
where they will be taken and separated  
and put in handball courts to await processing,  
that soon there will be  
ban and bar letters,  
jail cells?*

"Officer Jefferies," Kay says, as she moves her life over the line, "You have the most beautiful blue eyes."



*Yes, it happened this way.*

*But she hasn't answered the question yet, has she, about fear.*

*Reader, insist on the details,*

*what kind of tree they sat under, the way the officer*

*held his chin, the name for what was happening*

*below their skin*

*while the facts*

*played themselves out.*

The truth is, in the moments leading up to the one where Kay lifts her foot, she is very much afraid. This woman, whose hair when she is in her 70's will sweep in a clean line across the softness of her eyes like the slope of a snowy cliff, this woman, in those very first steps, is terrified.

*Ask her, though, about what happened next.*

*The feeling of it.*

*Ask her and wait for as long as it takes.*

“When you get arrested for something of conscience, it is entirely liberating,” she will say. “There’s no more fear. The fear is gone. We don’t even know we carry it,” she will say.

And then again, “*We don't even know we carry it.*”

*Think of it.*

