

become sentient? Maybe there is something to animism, the ancient idea that there is no significant distinction between the spiritual and the physical. In Shintoism, kami is a kind of spirit or energy that inhabits all things. And not only things. Do places have their own spiritual natures? Gary Snyder suggests as much in *The Practice of the Wild*. You will probably think so too, if you find yourself at the Maya site of Uxmal during the solstice.

If we think this way, do we show respect to our wondrous world, or do we bring ourselves to the brink of fetishism? And do we reach the level of the absurd if we question the autonomy of things themselves—Descartes’s *je*, the rose, the gravel—if we think of all of these as merely transitory, momentary configurations of the constituent parts, if we view the boundaries between things as more fluid than we are accustomed to think? After all, ever since the pioneering work of Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, and others in the early twentieth century there has been a trend in quantum physics to place less emphasis on matter and more on energy (while also seeing the distinction as a false dichotomy). I am reminded of the great seventeenth-century Persian philosopher Mulla Sadra, whom I wrote about in my book *1616*. Mulla Sadra was an existentialist who argued that existence precedes essence. Only God is immutable, he said. Everything reflects divine animation to varying degrees, the rose more than the gravel. So again, according to Mulla Sadra, life and death are not opposite absolutes but points on a continuum. We saw that Nick Lane reached the same conclusion through the route of biology.

Mulla Sadra would argue that everything is alive to some degree (in the sense of animated by divine spirit), but some things possess more vitality than others. (This idea found a twentieth-century echo in the work of French philosophers Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze.) I find this a helpful notion. I’ll keep on talking to my roses. The gravel will have to get by without my input.

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I haven’t satisfied myself regarding the nature of life, what it means to be alive. Maybe instead of science and philosophy and religion I should have looked for answers in narrative. Psychologists tell us we define ourselves through our life stories. Through narrative we access the dimension

of time; without it there is only the present moment. And life, as we have seen, is about process. It is about transformation. As is narrative.

Georges Perec’s *Life: A User’s Manual*, which chronicles a multitude of entertaining failures—like my failure to satisfactorily define life—might have something to offer. It is a puzzle of interconnected stories. Paul Auster reads the book as “a parable (of sorts) about the efforts of the human mind to impose an arbitrary order on the world.”

Umberto Eco said that he had come to believe that “the whole world is an enigma, a harmless enigma that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to interpret it as though it had an underlying truth.” He said that “by reading narrative we escape the anxiety that attacks us when we try to say something true about the world.”

Macbeth called life a “tale,” told by an idiot. Cultural ecologist David Abram, a sometime associate of Lovelock and Margulis, has likewise described life as a kind of narrative. “Along with the other animals, the stones, the trees, and the clouds,” he maintains, “we ourselves are characters within a huge story that is visibly unfolding all around us, participants within the vast imagination, or dreaming, of the world.”

The philosopher Zhuangzi dreamt of himself as a butterfly. Afterward he reflected, “Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man. Between a man and a butterfly there is necessarily a distinction. The transition is called the transformation of material things.”

Maybe life is, after all, but a dream.

Thomas Christensen, a *Catamaran* contributing editor, lives in the East Bay of the San Francisco Bay Area. He can be reached via www.rightreading.com. His recent books include *1616*, *River of Ink*, and *Landscape with Yellow Birds* (translations of poems by José Ángel Valente). His essay “Shakespeare’s Globe,” about globes and globalism in the context of Shakespeare and his company, recently appeared in the journal *Rosebud*. Speaking of roses, his rose survived its transplanting. It seems happy.

ED PENNIMAN

Cowell Beach North, 2017

Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in



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