

PETER PAONE

Candle, 2019
Acrylic on panel, 40 x 30 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

W. ROYCE ADAMS

Down Here on the Ground

Contemplating the soul
in the garden at night

Dressed in my terry cloth robe, I stepped through the french doors into the backyard for my nightly hot tub and thought I saw something dash around the corner of the house. I stopped and listened but heard nothing, saw nothing. I felt hesitant about going out if there was something prowling around. But because the harvest moon lit up the yard, it was easy making my way; still, I almost stepped in something, I bent lower and grimaced at the head of an opossum with little left but its skeleton and clumps of hair, or whatever it is that covers an opossum's body. No doubt it was the same one I'd seen the other night outlined across the rooftop. It appeared I wasn't the only critter who'd seen it.

I made a mental note to clean up the mess tomorrow and proceeded to the tub. I removed the cover, hung my robe on the stair rail, and eased into the 105-degree water. The moonlight pierced the water and exposed my nakedness. At least my old body still had flesh on it.

I surrendered to the hot water as it worked on my aching muscles. I stared at the October moon and remembered what a friend of mine, an astrologer of sorts, had said about full moons—each new full moon has some astrological meaning or power. The one I stared at supposedly contained a spiritual energy offering a time to self-reflect on our fundamental nature. But to me a harvest moon has always had a connection with farming, a time when the moon gave off more light for extended periods, giving farmers longer days to work their fields.

Still, perhaps my friend is right. It wouldn't hurt to self-reflect, would it?

My relaxed eyelids closed out the moon.

But something made me open my eyes. Did the moon want something? I sat up and saw a scraggly coyote standing over the dead opossum. The splashing of the water made the coyote turn and look at me. We played possum and stared at each other.

I saw you on my walk two days ago, I said.

Yes, you did.

You stared at me as you are right now.

Yes, I did.

And we both just stood there, fixed, surprised, like now.

Yes.

Then you trotted off.

Yes.

You killed that opossum.
 Obviously.
 You've been killing cats in the neighborhood.
 Why do you say that?
 I've seen posters on telephone poles saying peoples' cats are missing.
 Could be a fox or a bobcat.
 No, not around here.
 Yes, around here. You're not the only ones dealing with a drought.
 But this close to the city?
 I'm not going to argue with you. You can't read my mind.
 Tired of communicating, the coyote grabbed what was left of its prey and dissolved into the shadows.
 The coyote was right. I can't read its mind. But it must have one. What went on in the mind of that coyote the moment it saw me? What did it think of me? How did it perceive me? "Uh-oh. There's a human thing. I'd better be careful." No, more like, "This is my catch and you can't have it."
 How did it perceive the opossum? "I'm hungry. Oh, there's a meal. I'll catch it and eat it." And what was in the mind of the opossum? "Don't move. Maybe it won't see me."
 I see what my mind is doing. Anthropomorphizing. Animals must have a mind, but I've no idea how their minds think and work.
 Many Native Americans believe the coyote is a hero-trickster, both funny and fearsome, and coyote is a major character in many of their mythological stories. Coyote existed before man, in some stories, even responsible for creating different tribes of people. He can change shapes, even becomes a raven in some myths. He outwits his enemies but is often a buffoon and foolish, like the cartoon character Wile E. Coyote. This one did not look like a buffoon.
 I slid back down in the water up to my neck, hoping to regain the ease I had felt earlier. That wanderer moon was still up there. I could see the form of the face of the so-called man in the moon if I looked closely at those gray spots. But no cow jumped over the moon. Not while I was looking and hearing "Moon over Miami." "Racing with the Moon." "Bad Moon Rising." "Moondance." "Moonlight

Becomes You." "Moon River." "How High the Moon." "Fly Me to the Moon." No. You're no paper moon, you old devil.
 It must have been the moon glow, because the dead opossum and coyote image kept invading my mind and causing me to wonder if they had souls. Souls must be important. We certainly refer to the soul enough: soul mates, soul food, soul sister, soul music, sell your soul, bares his soul, rest his soul, lost soul, soul stirring, soul searching, to have soul.
 Some Buddhists believe in anatman, a denial of the existence of a self, or soul, but instead believe in a cycle of death and rebirth based on one's karma. Is there animal karma? Were my coyote and opossum once humans in a previous life, but downgraded this time around because of past bad lives led? And who is to say that rebirth as an animal or a bug is a downgrade? We humans are animals. But can animals like coyotes and opossums lead a life that allows them to self-reflect?
 The Hindus, contrary to the Buddhists, believe every living thing has what's called atman, a true self, one's true essence, a soul. Does that apply to my opossum and coyote? But if they are good Christian animals, they won't reincarnate, they'll be reborn. But as what? And who decides? To confuse me even more, I'm told some Maya believe humans are born with two aspects of a soul. One is in the body and dies upon death. The other can roam around while we are asleep and never die, allowing it to enter a newborn or even an animal.
 Where does this thing called a soul exist, and do I have one? If so, where is it? In my head? That could make it a figment of my imagination. In my heart? No, it can't be in the heart because too much is made of doing something with heart *and* soul. What's its shape? Is it an amorphous shroud that envelops me, my future as a ghost? Is it some chemical in the body? Is that why we talk of body *and* soul? Is it separate from what we call our being? What happens to what we call the soul when one dies? Does it hang out in the Bardo, as George Saunders fictionalizes, waiting for judgment? Judgment by whom? Some believe the soul separates from the body upon death and moves on in search of perfection. Where, then, does that perfection exist? Does it go into a newborn, biding its time until it's capable of self-reflection? Jesus asks, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?" He puts

importance of the soul pretty high up there. But what does he know and what makes him right?
 For Plato, the soul has three parts: reason, spirit, and appetite. So if chicken soup is good for the soul then the soul must be fed. But is soup food enough?
 According to the Smithsonian, during the Great Depression, WPA writers, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Vardis Fisher, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, discovered the "soul of a people." That's a big soul. And if there is such a thing as a soul of a people, does that mean there is a soul of an animal?
 In her poem *Bone*, Mary Oliver says about the soul,

 our eyes have never seen it,
 nor can our hands ever catch it
 I believe I will never quite know.

 She is probably right, but I think there's nothing spiritual about the soul; nothing more than mind play, nothing that disembodies after death. The soul is nothing more than how others see us and what they project on us. When we die, the memories others have of us collectively become what we call the soul. We live on after death, not as some ethereal entity, but through the recollections the living have of us: what we did, what we were to others, what we left that affected those we leave behind, good or bad.
 But what do I know? I'm just some silly old soul who was sitting in a tub of hot water.
 Ah, you old devil moon. It appeared my astrology friend was right. You did your duty. While my body was being eased, my puzzled mind was working overtime wandering among the stars I could not see because you were too bright for me. You caused me to self-reflect beyond my intellect.
 The moon seemed to be cooling the water; it didn't feel as hot anymore. My body and mind were tired. Time to rise from the water, go in, and to bed to dream of coyotes and me howling soulfully at the moon.

W. Royce Adams, emeritus professor of English, has published over a dozen college textbooks, several academic journal articles, and juvenile novels. He won the Haunted Waters Press 2016 Grand Prize Short Story Contest, received honorable mentions from *Glimmer Train* and from *Winning Writers*, and had a piece selected as a notable essay of 2016 by *Best American Essays 2017*. His works have appeared in the *Rockford Review*, *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, *Catamaran*, *From the Depths*, *Coe Review*, the *Chaffey Review*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *bosque*, and others. He lives in Santa Barbara, California.