

PETER SCHAIBLE

Pilgrim Monument little planet, 2012

Multiple photographic images blended
and stitched together, 12 x 12 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

URSULA K. LE GUIN

Calx

You wouldn't think it looking at me now, but I was alive once. In fact I have been alive countless times and died repeatedly, though for the first time each time. It is a peculiarity of individuality that life and death are always for the first time. You may wonder why I use the pronoun *I*, and all I can say is that, in my context, it is a convenient fiction, which it's best to accept so that we can go on without having to discuss what selfhood is, let alone what being is, or what it is to be. I am foraminiferous, so once upon a time, that is, countless times, but all quite long ago, I was alive and floated about in a mild not-very-salty sea in my tiny shell or test, which I shaped and pierced and ornamented in many delicate and imaginative ways, and died, having reproduced more of myself, or us, my kind—you see the pronoun problem?—before dying.

For uncounted time uncounted numbers of me floated about, drifted, hurried by currents and slowed in calm bays, lifted up and let down by the tides, which were somewhat more frequent then, and whenever I died, part of me, my shell or my test, drifted down, as all dead or unliving things try to do, toward the center of the Earth. In this we (not just my kind, all of us) obey the same kind of pull as causes the upping and downing of the tides, but the tides are caused merely by the moon trying to be the center, with nothing like such conviction as the center of the Earth, which has the last word, locally at least, on what down is.

So I would drift down when I was dead until I came softly to rest, often in shallow water, sometimes far deeper than the last dim blue reach of light, on an ooze or mud or bed made up mostly of my own dead self, though of course other people ended up there too. And there many of me lay dead while the rest of me floated about alive, inventing and constructing pretty little shells and tests, reproducing and eating and getting eaten, up in the warm waters in the sunlight and moonlight and starlight, till I died. It was a pleasant existence, and still is. After all, I haven't gone all to limestone.

The center of the world kept pulling all my recently dead self down onto the earlier ooze of old dead self, so my weight increased very much as the revolutions went on and more and more of me lived and died. I became a burden to myself. I made myself more comfortable by breaking my shells down into smaller particles and arranging them

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more and more compactly, even approaching the ultimate economy of crystalline symmetries. And at times, when the movement of tectonic plates increases the pressure upon me, I have yielded to that pressure and accepted metamorphosis, becoming my daughter, marble. But as limestone, my general intention is modest: simply to settle down.

And I did so. I ceased to be ooze and took form. There was of course no hurry about it and I really have no idea how long it took, since I was under deep water or other more recent deposits that weighed on me, compressed me, obliged me to solidify, and kept me in the dark. All the time I was becoming limestone I never saw the moon.

I confess that the moon draws me with something more than gravity. Perhaps it is its lightness, its levity? I don't know. My sister oolitic limestone is made entirely of ooids, tiny moons that she forms around sand grains. And my shells and tests are modeled on the moon, being spherical or rounded, and mostly white. I like the shining white of the moon at night and its translucent, dead, dull white in daytime. I have an affinity for whiteness and the moon. That is of course more visible when I have been transformed into marble, but you can see it in me, too, if you look. So I was in my quiet way happy when a change of seabeds or the labors of orogeny lifted me up from under water or under ground and I could again reply to the moon's whiteness with my own.

It is interesting to be quarried, with all the little flesh beings scurrying about in and on me. Some of them have begun to make shells, as I did, only theirs are metal. I feel sisterly toward them. After all, I have been little flesh beings, too. I have scurried, or anyhow drifted.

And to be cut into blocks and built with reminds me somewhat of my own decision to cease oozing and take shape. Some of the forms I have been cut and fitted into are quite as imaginative and various as my foraminifera.

The quarrying and building all began quite recently, two or three thousand revolutions ago I think, and probably will be over with before we know it, while I intend to go on with making and being limestone for a while longer. I cannot think of anything that will stop me but the extinction of the sun or my extinction by the little flesh beings, whose inventions are filling the ocean and the air with acids. I do not get along with acids, they dissolve me, and I go all to carbon dioxide. Gas is too restless. I would much rather be little flesh beings and shells and stone. But of course such matters are not entirely up to me.

Ursula Kroeber Le Guin was born in 1929 in Berkeley, California, and lives in Portland, Oregon. She has published twenty-one novels, eleven volumes of short stories, four collections of essays, twelve books for children, and six volumes of poetry and four of translation. She was voted into the Academy of Arts and Letters in 2017, and won the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2014. She has received many honors and awards including the Hugo, the Nebula, the National Book Award, and the PEN/Malamud. Her most recent publications are *Words Are My Matter*, 2017; *No Time to Spare*, 2017; *Finding My Elegy (New and Selected Poems, 1960–2010)*, 2012; and *The Unreal and the Real (Selected Short Stories)*, 2012.

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Scargo Tower Sunrise little planet, 2011
99 photographic images blended
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