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Section: Academic articles
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Consider the midden

David Ritchie[1]

Abstract

Those who read the essay may be reminded of A.R. Ammon's poem, "Garbage" which a correspondant recently called to my attention. The overlap is coincidental; at time of writing, I was ignorant of that work. This essay investigates meanings of an old term: middens. In keeping with the aims of this journal the essay touches on art, philosophy and Freudian psycho-analysis.

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When I told a guy at tennis I was thinking about middens, he raised his hands and an eyebrow. No, not Bernie Sanders' gloves… middens. The word midden is mysterious to many and it sounds obsolete. Yet, like a dinosaur hidden within a chicken, the midden is still with us.

Imagine if you had a rubbish tip right outside your front door. "There was but one door; and a few yards, or it might be a few feet only, in front of it lay the midden."[2] Would you see it? Yes, of course you would if you were visiting from afar, or dropped by a time machine into the nineteenth century. But would you see it when you passed every day? Perception is partly about noticing what is new or unusual – this I think is our evolutionary edge over predators; we are not particularly fleet or strong, just good at pattern recognition – but perception is also about choice. The Japanese language, my tennis friend says, has an expression something like, "See but don't notice." If you hear you neighbors arguing on the other side of a thin wall, or if you catch a glimpse of a private act, when you meet people on the stairs, you pretend you did not notice. This is a version of the English "turning a blind eye," Lord Nelson holding his telescope to the eye that couldn't see. The midden is there but it is not unusual, so would we see it, and in the company of whom?

Should we think of the midden as a *memento mori?* If you couldn't afford a Dutch still life painting you at least had in your life a constant reminder of decay and death. We live in a world in which garbage and our abluted waste disappear; they get whisked away or washed into a tube. A fisherman I saw in Trinidad finished his beer and then threw the bottle into the sea. Where did he imagine it was going?

Losing our understanding of middens coincided with a change of mind about death and about what we keep or throw away. When people moved from the countryside into cities they put money in the bank and learned which day the garbage goes out. Some places have rules about how long a garbage container can be in view. Like Dick Whittington, we aspire to become king of the midden, but most of us once were rewarded with squalor and grime; now there are homeowner committees that set rules about how long grass can be and how much

[1] A tenured professor, David Ritchie was first hired by the Pacific Northwest College of Art in 1987.
[2] https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/midden.

wildness is allowed.

Some cities were bombed into rubble. And then came the post-war accumulation of goods, growth of landfills, clutter. Now we have Marie Kondo and junk rooms and downsizing. We send our old clothing to Africa in bundles. We have a floating gyre in the Pacific, but no Yeats to make it poetry. Instead we have artists who kinda like the word middens.

The guy who throws the bottle out of the plane at the beginning of, "The Gods Must Be Crazy," another who throws a bottle from the back of a rioting crowd, the fisherman I saw in Trinidad, the off-duty garbage man who tosses a whiskey bottle in *The Good Brother,* before he shoots someone… all perform slightly different acts.[3] To figure out the meaning of tossing would be one essay.

Another could be about slagheaps.

Having mentioned memento mori I could – third alternative – explore how like memory a midden was.

Or forgetting. Forgetting maybe holds all those subjects together because forgetting used to mean "letting go." To forget was the opposite of getting, which is what we've all been doing since the explosion of goods and stuff that began with the industrial revolution.

I once tried to write a history of forgetting. My hypothesis was that a surfeit of goods has somehow made us nervous about forgetting. The chapters I drafted are somewhere in the midden of a computer's memory, possibly in a program that my current Mac has forgotten how to read.

All those subjects are a tangle for another time.

Here I'm trying a discursive journey, writing somewhat in the manner Montaigne and Rousseau to see and to notice lots. But there will be no lobsters.[4]

You may accuse me of *making* a midden as a consequence of considering the midden. E.M Forster wrote, "only connect," but I'm sure he didn't mean all to all. The pre-modern notion that the universe must be understood as one whole connected space gave way to the idea that writing should only be about one thing at a time, and the scientific notion that you understand the whole by breaking it into bits then testing to see if what happens in those small pieces can be extrapolated. In our times a piece with too much information in it is liable to be called "wordy," or an "information dump."

My aim is resonant reflection, and maybe a smile or two.

Imagine if the midden were a subject area. There could be studies on colonial smugness about parade ground whitewashing and what David Cannadine described as the theatre of Imperialism.[5] People could investigate the history of stereotypes regarding the tidiness of queer people.

There is a Professor Midden. A 2014 article describes, with an element of hyperbole, his initiative to turn "liquid manure into solid gold."[6]

The Shah of Iran kept his jewels in an underground vault that you could visit. The display almost killed me. Hung on the entry doors, which were intimidating and thick, was a small notice, which read, "Danger, keep clear." And then a second instruction, "Do not stand in front

[3]Chris Offutt, *The Good Brother*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997) 75.

[4]Mention of the lobster is a nod to David Foster Wallace, from whose well-known essay on that subject, I took the shape of the title.

[5]David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[6]https://www.bgsu.edu/news/2014/04/liquid-manure-to-solid-gold.html.

of this notice." As I was reading the second line an alarm sounded and the doors began to close very quickly indeed. A guard shoved me out of the way as the doors clanged shut. It would have been a messy and stupid way to die. My visit was off to a traumatic start.

The shah displayed his jewels behind thick glass – as you would expect – in wee buckets that gave the appearance of having accidentally disgorged their contents. I'd seen the British Crown Jewels, arranged carefully in a manner redolent of power. These were middens of precious stones, poured into hillocks.

We find pleasing that which has structure, arranged in such a way that we can relax into the tension, knowing that it is an interesting tension and not a dangerous one. If we are going to stare into a midden we want forms to resolve into interesting arrangements. A Sam Francis or a Helen Frankenthaler painting can look swirly and drippy, but when we throw an imaginary grid onto the canvas we are pleased when we see absence of accident, intention, a sense that the universe is not random and unjust. Abstraction and muddle are O.K. in small doses, but large-scale Void intimidates.

Children who grew up as I did sang, "I'm the king of the castle, you're the dirty rascal." Some versions of the children's game were called, "King of the Hill." Schools now ban it so there's probably a generation that doesn't know the reference, but a recently published book of rhymes suggests the game is alive and well in Scotland. Part of the Itchy Coo initiative to encourage use of Scots among children, *King O the Midden: Manky Mingin Rhymes in Scots*, is not an easy volume to find outside Scotland, but the midden is right there on the cover, with a king on top. Shah of all the jewels.

The midden is alive elsewhere too. In the last decade two overlapping but generally quite different groups of people have taken an interest in the word. Among those who play fantasy games on the web the midden suggests mystery and spells. Type "midden" into a search engine and you'll likely land in that world.[7] But you may also come across artists and writers who are concerned about the environment and particularly plastic. There's a memorable installation, two years' of household plastic, collected and washed by twin sisters and hung up for display in a net.[8] And Buster Simpson mashed together Native American structures from the Southwest of America and midden shell mounds.[9]

One wonders why the artist twins didn't call the piece "nets full of rubbish" or "washed trash" or "twists from the garbage gyre in the Pacific." Maybe it's because of the way the word sounds – midden is somehow fun to say, particularly with a Scottish accent – but it's also that the artists want us to see what is out of sight and out of mind, want us to revert, at least briefly, to noticing. Which returns us to the question of who noticed middens when they were still present in people's lives.

During a three year stay beginning in 1877 and dedicated to an investigation of coastal brachiopods, Edwin S. Morse, then of Harvard, became Japan's foremost expert on shell middens. He is described as "discovering" the Omori shell mound while looking out of the window of a train between Yokohama and Tokyo. I imagine a more complex process, less colonial. (There's discussion of how to de-colonize paleontology so I imagine similar talk is happening

[7] https://www.imperial-library.info/content/midden-incident-repot.

[8] https://www.ideabooks.nl/9789527222065-the-midden; https://www.margaretwertheim.com/the-midden.

[9] https://www.getcreativesanantonio.com/Public-Art/Public-Artworks-Map/Public-Artworks-List/Public-Artwork/Article/498/Midden-Mound-Wickiups.

in archeology.)[10]

E.M. "See that mound; it's got shells in."
Local people, "We know. How could we not?"
E.M. "And if you dig down you'll find some of what your ancestors discarded."
Local people, "We know."
E.M. "And those discards can tell you who they were and how they lived."
Local people, "Really?"

What Morse brought to Japan, in addition his artist's eye and a trained scientific mind, was understanding that a very old pile of shells or detritus creates a particular shape. He had seen American middens excavated.

When opened, the Omori shell mound revealed much about early Japan. In the world of archeologists that's what middens do – reveal by demonstrating what people threw away or buried. There are interesting questions to be asked of them. How, for example, did some come to contain human bones? Are the bones indicative of burial practices or cannibalism? (There's a Ph.D. thesis on this very subject.[11])

Morse went on to write about many subjects including… toilets.

Among the many things in decline today you may count Scottish proverbs distorted by English usage. "Many a mickle maks a muckle" is the sort of thing caricatures of Scotsmen used to say on stage and screen when I was young. The words made little sense even when you looked them up: mickle and muckle both meant "a large amount," so many a large amount makes a large amount? But the original Scots was "Many a pickle or puckle maks a mickle or muckle," which children building sand piles on the beach will tell you is true – small amounts pile up.

To understand a second, more true Scottish proverb is a shade more difficult, but the struggle leads us on. "There is no breard like a midding breard," seems like something which slipped past a spell-check program. Surely "beard" was intended? No, a breard – which my computer will only grudgingly allow me to type – is, in fact, freshly-germinated growth of vegetation, some sprouts that are beard-like but not hairy. So what's a midding breard? One that grows out of or on top of a midden.[12]

Midden is a word of Scandinavian origin. The root words refer to dung and heap. How much we have forgotten the word midden itself can be demonstrated by typing "Midden Lane" into an American real estate search program. Houses between two and five million dollars come up. Do the same with "Dunghill Lane" and the equivalent number is $29,000. For some people the association of midden with poverty and mire has gone.[13]

What remains? Americans who read texts about archeology will be aware of controversy these past decades about whether or not more can be learned from shell middens, piles of shells left by those who ate the contents. And Australians may know that aboriginal people are said to have left the remains of what they last ate *on top of* middens to indicate to those

[10] https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/22/science/dinosaurs-fossils-colonialism.html.
[11] https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/42605211.pdf.
[12] One way to recognize a midden in Florida is by the fact that it has fertilized the growth of trees.
[13] To get a hit on "Dunghill" you have to change the descriptor of the road, and if you do that with Midden you find some lower house values, but the pattern holds.

who might follow that they might think about harvesting something different. Sustainable hunter/gathering the articles call it.[14] But if you are a Scot today you'll still think of a midden as synonymous with mess and muck and dung, and so understand that the proverb about midden breards means that people who rise from humble background – the phoenix of the midden? – can't escape their origins; we see them for what they are, *les nouveaux riches*.

One might stretch therefore and say that houses on Midden Lane are themselves a kind of midding breard, *structures* trying to leave their past behind them.

Let's stay in Scotland for a moment. There's an old joke. A Scottish minister wanting to steer his flock away from sin, went a step too far, "You are not fit to clean the midden." The parishioners complained to church authorities, who came down hard, so on the following Sunday the minister stood in the guise of a penitent man, "I was wrong," he said. "You are every single one of you fit to clean the midden."[15]

It's the kind of bullying you encounter in novels and films; the boot camp instructor who could shout – if he knew what a midden was – "I want that midden to gleam." That flicker of thought caused me to wonder by what route humanity emerged from warrior halls with smells dogs and straw, with privvies a walk away and lazy men peeing in the fireplace. Somehow we transformed ourselves into people who take instruction from the television on how to de-clutter our apartments and McMansions. I wondered whether there was an imperial or military theme that undergirds that change of ideas about mess. Could our attitude to the midden have some connection to the wildness of a warrior charge being replaced by disciplined infantry formations and then muskets and artillery? And if so, it's odd is it not, that the people commanding the infantry squares and muskets and artillery chose to call where they eat, the mess?

I wrote a Ph.D. thesis about how going mad in wartime became a medical condition, and I have long been interested in what the battlefields of the First World War did to our collective psyches.[16] For one thing, battlefields were enormous. You can see all of Gettysburg from Big Round Top. You can't see more than a fraction of the Somme battlefield from anywhere but a helicopter. One might say that battlefields of yore were like middens, contained, local messes. Today's battlefields are like landfills – out of sight, huge, difficult to comprehend.

I read the patient records of people who were trying to hold themselves together in the manner they'd been told was appropriate for men. When they failed, fell apart, threatened to dissolve into a puddle, people would shout, "Pull yourself together." In the First World War the descendants of Imperial men who had conquered the world by appearing impervious to heat and threat of spear or shot, were blown up and mowed down. They slipped into the mire and drowned.

One might characterize modernism as the result of a whole generation tumbling into Paul Nash's landscape painting, "We are Making a New World." Like a coal tip slipping, the midden metaphorically overflowed its bounds and drowned Nature.

It would be quite natural to shun Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. If you were on your way to a wedding or the office, and Michael Palin's character at the opening of each episode of Monty Python rose up to shout, well you'd react as you do to people flying cardboard signs at a junction, with a mix of care and fear. Deep down you hope the poor man will grasp some

[14] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1040618211001789; https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/land/guide-to-aboriginal-sites-and-places#midden.

[15] Chris Findlater, ed, *Scottish Jokes* (Glasgow: Waverly, 2010) 101.

[16] R.D. Ritchie, *One History of Shellshock*, UCSD thesis, 1986.

other elbow, jabber in someone else's ear all his thoughts about albatrosses and never having a drop to drink. Characters who come from the sea are wild, associated with sin and the Flood.[17] They sometimes hand out black spots, soiled by sweat from whatever is the opposite of honest toil. We fear such untidiness may be catching, like lice possibly, and that poverty may not just go hand-in-hand with squalor, but be *caused* by it. Certainly when I was in school there was plenty of "cleanliness is next to Godliness" spread around and there was a sense that, while exceptions can be made in the case of genius artists, and religious visionaries doing turns in the desert, normal people should probably stick to washing their cars on the weekend. Erotic images were dirty, as were habits one didn't discuss. Sin and the midden, boys, notice the link. A dirty car and a filthy mind.

The midden has no phoenix. What rises from the sea and the manure pile are monsters, odors, things you'd want to avoid. When at sea, while on the sea, everything had to be kept ship-shape and Bristol fashion, but that was because a ship is a confined space and untidiness could be deadly. Scraps and bodies were thrown overboard, where monsters were.

Are graveyards kinds of middens? It was the military who tidied up their higgelty-piggelty-ness.

Wild places, particularly the sea itself, were middens, or maybe middens were a kind of pet wild place. The domestic version, kept close like a dog you want to tame?

Wild places?

Daniel Defoe's island was an island in a midden sea, where cleanliness was no longer possible and beards grew and one spiraled back towards barbarian halls and bones being thrown. But Casper David Friedrich's guy on top of the crag, he's doing a successful Lear, a thrill-and-shout fest, "Blow winds blow and crack your cheeks nae bother… 'cause I've got a hearth and a bed, a cottage to go home to." (Yes, I know CDF's guy probably didn't have a Scottish accent). "I enjoy wild storms when I have the option of if not comfort, at least shelter." The Romantics were Romantically untidy, and even Burns had a hovel.

At low tide the banks of the Thames in London were, and still are, the provenance of mudlarks, people who seek value in what people have lost, dropped overboard, thrown into the deep. That which is cast away can and does return.[18] Take note, Trinidadian fisherman.

A guy I met once had a retirement dream – to buy a boat with a strong winch, and salvage nineteenth century logs from the bottom of the Columbia river. Maybe someone will eventually want twentieth century fishermen's bottles?

Fear and dreams and trauma return. Surely the Freudian understanding of the mind, with its geological metaphors, unearthing and revealing, should include some references to the midden?

Perhaps the metaphor is better suited to Jung?

Wild places…

In some ways a buttery – a similarly obsolete word – was the opposite of a midden. But not always. A midden is not merely a rubbish tip or trash dump; it's also the word to describe the stores where squirrels keep their treasure. A buttery was where you kept and served food and drink.

Plato imagined mankind living in a cave; he doesn't say how tidy it was. Montaigne sat in his tower wondering what he knew, and writing in a discursive manner, trying, creating

[17] Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea; The Discovery of the Seaside,* 1750-1840 (New York: Penguin, 1995).
[18] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/12/world/europe/london-thames-mudlarks.html.

what we now call the essay (from the French, *essayer*). Rousseau went for walks at the end of his life and wrote as if the thoughts were occurring *as he walked*.[19] For simplicity's sake we'll stipulate that it was not until you get to the gardens of the eighteenth century and the palace of Versailles that people began to think that tidiness occurring outside in Nature and tidiness inside, within domestic walls, was a strong possibility. Somehow it became a virtue. I bet order was there all along in monasteries and places where people were contemplative – it's hard to be contemplative when you trip over dolls and legos – but the spread of the notion that an executive's desk needs to be naked, polished like the car on Sunday, that is odd is it not? I mean, imagine if Henry the Eighth had said, "Cut off her head, and mind you don't get splashes on the carpet."

(Actually, he sent his wives some distance down the Thames to the Tower; they weren't killed at the Royal Palace of Hampton Court.)

Between Henry the Eighth and the Romantics, servants emptied chamber pots every morning and squads of gardeners trained the eye to pass from here to there without noticing weeds or slugs. And cattle knew their place, lowing and poohing beyond the ha-ha. Wealthy people developed manners, and a well-mannered person did not chuck bones to the dogs while dining, but I think they told us on a tour of some royal palace or other that men were slow to give up peeing in the fireplace.

The Marquis de Sade retreated into privacy when things were going to be messy. Hands covered up belches, wigs covered unruly stubble, lawns were kept short with scythes and sheep.

Miasmas of course were a problem, they were wild – which explains connections among Jefferson, the University of Virginia and the Lawn – as were noxious vapors (see below under "hotels"), but one might try to ignore what one could not control. The great unwashed, for example.

The great breakthrough was the sewer, tiled and a marvel of engineering. Also the municipal dump and moving slaughterhouses away from wealthy environs. You'll notice how rich people in cities figured out how to live upwind of the stink. Muck, of course, took a lot of hiding, but it wasn't until the twentieth century that anyone could live as if it didn't exist.

One hears no report of middens in heaven.

One might hear of war or execution, go visit on your day off… enjoy the spectacle if one wished, but the great thing was to rise above, to not see, to live as if what lurked below could be covered up and forgotten. And then many of us managed that and started lecturing one another on how low class mess is, especially when guests are expected.

Village life, by contrast, had middens in it, but there were also ordinances preventing peat piles from blocking streets.[20] A human midden was never a treasure house, but it became a storehouse of dropped and cast-off things – broken clay pipes and bits of crockery, one step above the detritus shop we now call the Thrift store or charity outlet that temporarily puts life into a street from which commerce has been sucked.

When I lived in Iran there were dumps at the end of streets and people had the right to graze cattle on them.

In some ways the squirrel association seems all wrong – we throw into the midden to rid ourselves of decay and useless things; squirrels insure themselves against a time of great hunger

[19] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reveries_of_the_Solitary_Walker.
[20] https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/midden.

with perfectly-edible acorns. But on reflection you can see that a collection of small things – even of detritus – may one day be valuable to someone, a scientific scavenger or a thrifty farmer in search of ways to renew the soil. Or simply a "collector," someone who doesn't know that Beany Babies have no intrinsic value.

How did tidiness become a moral virtue? I don't know. If there's a line in the Bible, "And thou shalt not pile thine books upon the office floor," I missed it.

As an adolescent I feared and sometimes loved very large waves. With older boys around me, I spent time competing in the young sport of surf kayaking. This was before there were boats specifically designed for the conditions. Those we had were the same ones we used in slalom competitions on the river, twelve or so feet long, with a footrest that became very important when you went vertical. We feared the footrest snapping and our bodies being jammed in.

Surfing is in some ways like fishing. You know when a wave passes and when you've got one "on the hook." No, no, yes! I would be scudding along, look down and see wave to the fore, glance back, see more wave to the rear. I was maybe fifteen years old in a twelve foot kayak and some of the waves had feet on me.

The large wave, perhaps by way of Japanese prints and our fear of the tsunami, is a symbol of power and of what the Japanese seem to abhor – mess. Waves are the opposite of discipline and tidiness, in my mind. They cannot be controlled, only ridden. They will do you great harm if given the chance. In some ways they resemble the unwashed.

Wild mess. That formidable surge which some cultures simply ride. "Of course we live in a messy way; that is our circumstance. Are you a Colonial power come to tell us that we are simple people and wrong? Are you amassing soldiers and their messes for an invasion?"

The military term mess is misleading in this context. It refers to a portion of food, not untidiness.[21] A military mess is where food is both stored and eaten. A military mess nods to squirrels.

Let's stop briefly at a bench here. At Chartwell in Kent, Churchill's house, for the price of admission, we can play king of the midden, lord of what we survey. Let me offer sandwiches with the edges trimmed – are crusts wildness or shelter; how did they become untidy – and a cup of hot tea from a thermos. Fields can seem tidy when compared to the wildness of cities and the yellow rape is pretty.

If you ever knew the name, you'll not have forgotten Noddy Holder who, together with Jim Lea, wrote songs for the British rock band Slade. I doubt anyone would like them today, but the video accompanying "My Oh My" is useful as an illustration of the pathetic fallacy. That's a literary term for when an exterior shot has been chosen to bring out an interior state of mind. The singer is in a dark and lonely interior place; we see the exterior world mirroring and thus revealing his emotions.

It's a well-named fallacy is it not? As a teen accelerating into a rapid in my kayak, what little I could see of the dancing spray below seemed the opposite of my own inner state of mind. It was the deep that was having a party; I was having fits (not literally but figuratively).

Wearing old woolen sweaters and a windbreaker, I spent a good deal of my teens cold and wet, paddling. We surfed our kayaks, shot rapids in them, competed in slaloms, trained for the Olympics. One guy made it to Munich; I did not reach that pinnacle. In view of the terror attack that occurred near the slalom site, not making the team by a considerable margin turned

[21] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mess.

out to be something of a blessing.

Recently, on one of the first sunny days hereabouts, I went for a walk somewhat in the manner of Rousseau, not to clear my head but to evaluate its muddles and puzzles. I was thinking about trauma and relationships between inside and outside. Striding down the street with my dog, I came upon a dead squirrel. Crows perched above on wires were waiting for us to pass so they could get to business. We stopped for a look and a sniff. The dog did the sniffing.

The squirrel must have had a well-stocked midden for there was no sign that winter had been hard on the body. Knowing so little about the natural world, I wondered if mating had made the deceased careless. Or maybe too much time holed up in a tree creates an urge, when the sun comes out, to sprint wildly and carelessly across a street?

As we walked on I compared in my head a human midden, where people discarded what they didn't want to keep, to a squirrel midden, where vital supplies are hidden for the winter. Identical terminology, but one is a place where things are cast out, and the other where the hole walls everything in. What then are human tombs? A bit of both, I suppose.

What had started me thinking in this manner was a conversation with a colleague at work. In her youth she'd been part of one of the construction crews that built Michael Graves' Portland Building. "I kept getting lost," she said, "until the foreman pointed out that the windows I'd seen on the outside didn't match the experience on the inside." In her view this was a flaw, indicative of Graves' failings as an architect.

I wondered why people think the outside of anything must match the inside? I mean artists have given loads of attention to the outside of our bodies, but very little to the inside. And we cherish differences between public and private space. And people think Dr. Who's TARDIS is a cool concept. We applaud stage magic that takes advantage of our assumption that the exterior of a prop indicates how the inside is arranged.

But for the most part though we're O.K. with a false dome and we want a cathedral to be as beautiful on the outside as it is within. We extend this principle to human behavior: we want a villain to be ugly and a hero to be handsome. One of Paul Fussell's most persuasive insights into the origin of modern ironic distance was noticing how often soldiers of the First World War commented on a gap between the pastoral ideal and the misery of the war. In the words of Miss Clavell, "something [was] not right." Yes, the Western Front was muddy and awful when it rained, but the death of the hero of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a soldier killed when he reached toward the beauty of a butterfly, stuck in the craw. Portland photographer Susan Seubert's BFA thesis photos were of where murders took place. They played with our expectation that such sites should look awful. Actually the sites were mundane, undramatic, no places at all. Where horror happened.

My status in that field of horror and trauma is not unlike my status as a kayaker. I have paddled and dabbled but I neither went to Munich nor to war. Any trauma I have suffered was of the order of the Shah's door closing. In the title of the thesis I used the word "shellshock" because using the more normal arrangement "shell-shock" involved taking of sides in a dispute about ownership and medical definition. I argued that exposure to stress was not new in human experience, so it might be reasonable to expect that say someone who accompanied a relative or friend to public execution may have been, in contemporary parlance, traumatized. Where, then, are the shell-shocked in the Bayeux Tapestry, in the Civil War, in the settlement of Oregon? The last is possibly the easiest to answer: something pushed John Day into behavior that Native Americans thought crazy. I doubt he was alone in this reaction. Some survivors of fighting and

hardship of all ethnic backgrounds and age and so on may have been mentally more resilient than some people today, but not all of them.

Since the First World War's determination that shell-shock was an ailment, the percentage of victims of mental distress in all armies has varied and there have been theories proposed about why, but one thing has remained evident; expose humans to great levels of stress and the interior struggle will eventually have exterior manifestation. The inside and the outside will, if not match exactly, bear some notable relation.

I studied a number of cures. Some were ridiculous: having men run around a field, prodded by a sharp implement and singing, "Smile, smile, smile; if we all smile there will be miles of smiles." None was sublime. A few were amusing if you have a sardonic sense of humor. At Lennel House, in the border country between Scotland and England, officers were encouraged to go outdoors and be healed by gentlemanly pursuits in nature. Men walked, played golf, took up invitations to go shooting. When I read this in the archive I thought, "They wanted to cure the effects of warfare by shooting animals?" And then I read that a group of French or Belgian officers had returned with news of a tremendous bag. What quarry had they found? "Wild sheep." There are no wild sheep in the border country between England and Scotland; the officers, accidentally one assumes, prepared for a return to war by killing domestic animals. Apt is it not?

And then I went to work in an art college, was invited by an editor at Cambridge University Press to turn my five hundred pages into a book about shell-shock of about two hundred pages, found that the longer I worked at that task, the longer the volume got. An older, wiser historian advised me not 'to make a nest" of my thesis. For nest, read midden.

I tried to paint what I thought, to see if I could see what the inside of my head had in it. Having been introduced to technique by a colleague, I had found that one way to make what was inside my head come out was by using parts of my brain that were not being exercised in rational analysis. Painting appeared to have power to do this, so I attempted a large canvas. I still like the work that resulted, but no narrative structure for the book emerged.

I moved away from the subject, developed new curiosities. From time to time I'd read a review of work about shell-shock or PTSD and there I was…in the footnotes. I told myself I quite liked being inside in this small way, hidden, like something in a midden.

Occasionally I was asked to state my views in public. Then I would say that people who draw a straight line between shell-shock in the First World War and PTSD are correct in that they are both exterior manifestations of inner turmoil, but they looked and look quite different. It's as if our minds take cues from cinema and acting. First World War symptoms were often quite big, like acting of the era. Second World War ones recorded in films were tics and blinks. And today? Well now we return to wandering like Rousseau, thinking while walking.

The walk with the dog? And the dead squirrel?

Not long ago the college where I work invited an expert to teach us how to adjust our teaching to the present moment. The title of the presentation was "Trauma-informed practices for postsecondary education." "Students," said the handout, "bring their entire lives into the classroom every day, and…on some days, students will be actively responding to trauma." Surely, I thought silently and to myself, this is the end point of that diminution on the journey from shell-shock to PTSD; the outside and the inside now may not match at all. The expert was warning us that someone who seems perfectly normal on the outside may have inside them some volcanic reservoir which, when tapped or triggered, will behave unpredictably. From

Freud's original geological metaphors of emotions and behavior being governed by things far below the surface, we have today arrived at a model more in keeping with the extraction of oil from shale. Reservoirs held very near the surface, ones that are reached obliquely.

Maybe that's to mis-categorize what was being said. Maybe the suggestion was that we don't know where the reservoir of pain lies, close to the surface or deep; we only know that it can be reached swiftly and sometimes – in the view of those who are outside the experience – mysteriously. One moment you're talking about something in history (or any subject) and the next you've triggered a reaction.

The advice we were given seemed to me oddly like treading carefully in the outdoors. "Watch for signs." "Stay calm, move slowly, and be aware of safety." "Practice empathy and give the other [being] space."

In common parlance to say that people are being treated like animals is to say that they are not being treated well. But I think that we were being told to use, indoors, a much older understanding of how to encounter animals outdoors – carefully and with respect.

A few days later, when my dog and I again passed the spot where the squirrel had lain, all that was left in the road was a piece of bushy tail. Something had tidied up *du barb au que* (from the beard to the tail). I walked on, smiling at the idea of coyotes at a barbecue. I heard inside my head words larking about, as they do, like… like… squirrels at the end of winter, uncaring about trauma, enjoying sunshine outdoors; a tail wagging.

Much of what I've thought about middens has been thought by others considering rubbish, trash, garbage. Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish,* says that "what we want to get rid of also makes us who we are." I found that important thought repeated in Beverly Hogue's excellent piece, "Differentiation, Entanglement, and Worth in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*." Hogue concludes,

> Person, wave, same thing: trash, treasure, same thing; worth, worthlessness, same thing. In dramatizing and problematizing the Schrodinger's cat thought experiment, *A Tale for the Time Being* examines the difficulty of differentiating between one state or substance and another, suggesting that the very labels we place on things and people to establish their worth are only fingers pointing toward truth and not truth..[snip]…Late in the novel, Oliver states that words themselves " 'come from the dead. We inherit them. Borrow them. Use them for a time to bring the dead to life' " (346), but in *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki suggests that neglected narratives and the detritus of trashed lives come back from the dead to provide the wave on which personal identity, community, and culture surf.[22]

In the language of contemporary theory a midden might be called a site of something or other. But what, exactly? One person's untidy is another person's relaxing into or hanging loose, and one person's orderliness is another person's bonkers compulsiveness. Which makes me think of Freud and toilets.

Edwin Morse, who we met at the outset, wrote a number of books including one about toilets all around the world, with a focus on Asia, *Latrines of the East*. His point was that there are all around the world ingenious designs and bad ones. Among the best, he thought, were some found in Japanese hotels, toilets which were so good they distract you from "that hotel smell."

[22]Beverly Hogue, *Differentiation, Entanglement, and Worth in Ruth Ozeki's A Tale of the Time Being*, MELUS, The Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, vol 45, no 2, summer 2020, 70–87.

Like the reality of the midden, we have lost "that hotel smell," something once so common Morse thought it did not need description.

But like the squirrel midden some toilets contained value. Farmers fertilized fields with human excrement (which meant that all water had to be boiled – hence, tea drinking). In some circumstances you could pay for accommodation with your excrement. In Hiroshima the rule was that if five or more people made deposits, they could stay for free.[23]

Hiroshima is where the midden met the battlefield, got really big and then disappeared into a heavy cloud, which we cannot forget.

And are allergies, I wonder, caused by the absence of middens, by a surfeit of cleanliness. Would it ever be possible to inoculate people against trauma? Surely that's what boot camp and basic training try? Should children scrape their knees more, fall off things when they're young and near the ground, be allowed to be lightly frightened?

In the Pacific, you'll not forget, our plastics bob.

It's not all bad news – the BBC carried the story of a guy who was saved by a piece of plastic detritus – but the people who say we must notice the ocean are right.[24] It is not left over from the Flood; it is the source of all life.

I am not a midden expert. I am only a curious and solitary walker, delighted by Douglas fir squirrels.

When I visit a new town or city I often go into Thrift stores to see what kinds of things people in that location choose to discard. There are constants, also variation. Thrift stores are an archive of the present and the immediate past.

Finally, while middens generally have become large and dark and distant tips, there is a smaller genetic variation that has found its way inside our houses. When the protagonist of *The Good Brother* moves into a cabin in Montana, he reserves an empty drawer for junk. He does not own enough stuff to have any junk yet, but he figures a house is not a home without junk. In the Second World War the operation that set out to destroy London with V1 flying bombs was called *Rumpelkammer*, the junk room. We still have middens in our midst – drawers and cupboards which P.G. Wodehouse described as a "sort of Sargasso Sea into which drift all the objects that over the ages have outgrown their usefulness and are no longer needed in the daily life of the home."[25]

We close, we walk away.

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[23] https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044070899000&view=1up&seq=2. The reference to the value of excrement in Hiroshima is on page nine.

[24] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56191818.

[25] P.G. Wodehouse, *The Plot that Thickened* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 77–8.

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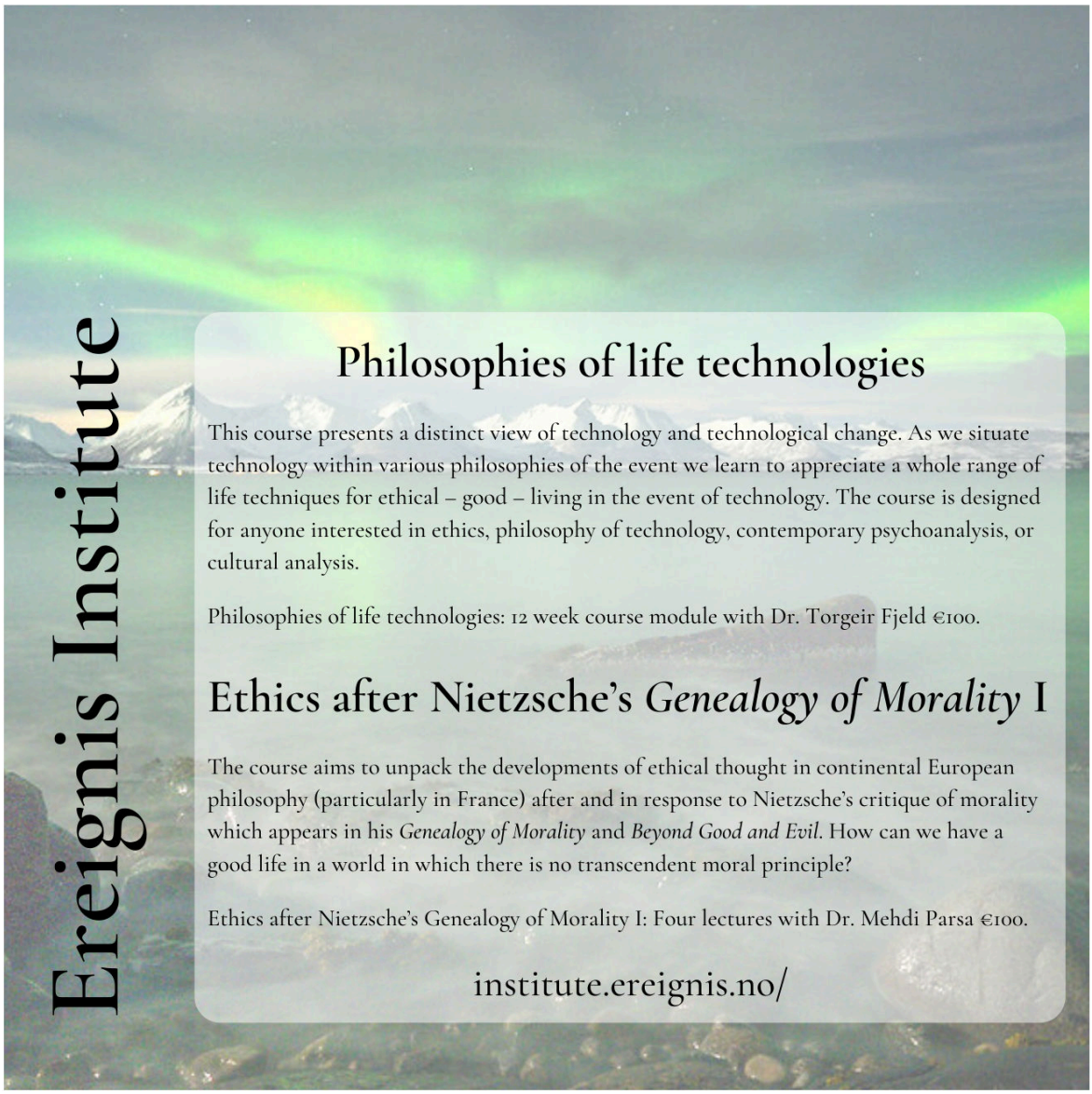

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