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# Trauma and the Motif of Fragmentation in David Vann's Aquarium

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**Résumé**

À travers une étude du roman *Aquarium* de David Vann, cet article cherche à mettre en lumière la place que peut prendre le concept de fragmentation dans une conceptualisation du trauma qui englobe le procédé de reconstruction autant que celui de destruction initiale. Il cherche à démontrer que le fragment peut supporter toute l'ambivalence traumatique, étant à la fois le résultat de l'éclatement traumatique et contenant en lui-même le germe créateur d'un nouveau souffle de vie.

*Mots-clés : trauma, fragmentation, Aquarium, David Vann*

**Abstract**

Through a study of the novel *Aquarium* by David Vann, this article seeks to shed light on the role that the concept of fragmentation can play in a conceptualization of trauma that encompasses both the process of reconstruction and the initial process of destruction. It aims to demonstrate that the fragment can bear the entire ambivalence of trauma, being both the result of traumatic shattering and containing within itself the creative germ of a new breath of life.

*Keywords: trauma, fragmentation, Aquarium, David Vann*

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* Freud defined trauma as an "extensive breach made in the protective shield [against stimuli]" (1920, 23). Lacan later talked about the phenomenon of the "trou-matisme". Together, these definitions have led to approaches of trauma studies that emphasize brokenness and its crippling effects. Trauma is indeed, in its very etymology, connected to the wound. It is where life has been gashed, cut open (Chassaing 2011, 5). But let's not forget that the wound is also the place where life takes over and skin regrows. Trauma in itself carries all of the ambivalence between death and survival, between destruction and reconstruction. Studying traumatic literature, one wonders at how much life and beauty can be found in the darkest accounts.

Because they consider memory and the self as fixed entities that have been shattered by the traumatic shock and need to achieve a newfound wholeness through the retrieval of the traumatic memory, the Freudian and Lacanian perspectives prescribe the talking cure as a form of abreaction. "Abreaction—derived from the German Abreagieren—refers to the reliving of an experience in order to purge it of its emotional excesses. The therapeutic efficacy of this has been likened to 'lancing a boil.' Piercing the wound releases the 'poison' and allows the wound to heal" (Levine 2015, 116). This psychoanalytical perception of trauma has been prolonged by the first wave of Literary Trauma Studies (Caruth, Whitehead, Tal…), which base their textual analyses on an understanding of trauma as a pathological fragmentation of the self, characterized by the powerlessness of the traumatized individual, helpless in the throes of an unsurmountable ontological and epistemological void. Corresponding to this vision of trauma, proponents of this method have identified a traumatic writing style structured around the concept of unrepresentability, punctuated with holes and chronological ruptures that are said to imitate or stem from psychic fragmentation. This approach is commonly known as the abreactive model.

But this perspective, which obliterates the most vital and creative aspects of trauma as well as the dynamic processes of reformulation of the self that can be observed in traumatic literature, has since then been rejected as "rigid, partial and exclusionary" (Gibbs 2014, 2) and denounced as a "trauma paradigm" (Luckhurst 2013, 1) that fails to account for the variety of traumatic reactions. In "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory", Michelle Balaev points to what she calls "the shattering trope" as responsible for the rigidity of the first wave of literary trauma theory:

> The literary trauma theory articulated by Kali Tal, and critics such as Cathy Caruth, considers the responses to traumatic experience, including cognitive chaos and the possible division of consciousness, as an inherent characteristic of traumatic experience and memory. The idea that traumatic experience pathologically divides identity is employed by the literary scholar as a metaphor to describe the degree of damage done to the individual's coherent sense of self and the change of consciousness caused by the experience. For this reason, I refer to the employment of the abreactive model in literary criticism as the shattering trope (2008, 150).

She therefore calls for a definition of trauma that replaces the emphasis on fragmentation by an emphasis on the "reformulation of the self". While Balaev's embracing of the creative nature of trauma and the possibility of agency for the traumatized individual seems essential in the aim of broadening our understanding of the traumatic phenomenon, I believe that her reduction of the concept of fragmentation to a shattering trope belonging only to the abreactive model is a dismissal of an important part of trauma. The most recent theories constructed around neurobiological and nervous system-based approaches to trauma prolong the vision of the traumatic phenomenon as a fragmentation of the individual by explaining it as a disconnect between different parts of the brain/body system, which also corresponds to a disconnect between inner and outer world. But they also go beyond the shattering trope by moving away from the

abreactive paradigm and pointing to the possibility of integration (i.e. "linkage of differentiated parts") as the path to healing, rather than the reconstitution of the missing event. The National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine broadcasts the insights of many American researchers and therapists who combine neurobiological and holistic approaches to trauma, and I will build a big part of the psychological and medical aspect of this article on what I have learned through their Treating Trauma Master Series (Siegel 2023, Module 1.13).

In their wake, I will therefore consider fragmentation as one core but surmountable aspect of trauma. I will also add that David Vann's writing of trauma in *Aquarium* portrays fragmentation as an ambivalent phenomenon that underlies both the pain and the liberative creativity that can stem from trauma.

My entry into traumatic writing is through the work of the American contemporary writer David Vann who, after his father's suicide and the daily trauma of a dysfunctional family (gun culture, several suicides and one murder in just a few generations), has published seven novels, one short stories collection and two non-fiction works, which are all more or less direct representations of his trauma. Fragmentation, in its many forms, is so recurrent in his texts that I remain deeply convinced of its close relation to trauma. However, the caruthian conclusion of an unsurmountable brokenness did not find any satisfying echo in David Vann's writings. On the contrary, his writing testifies of incredible sparks of resilience and creativity. In an interview, the author explains:

> [My father's] suicide first *separated* me from the world, it was like the world was *broken* and had no meaning, now all the reasons for which my life has most meaning, and that I feel most *attached* to a very good life and to the world come *through* my father and his experience and matching my own life against his and thinking about what his suicide meant (New China Tv 2014, 5:20. Italics mine).

Here, while the traumatic event is shown to provoke an initial fragmentation ("separated", "broken"), it is also recognized as the catalyst for a deeper connection to life and the world ("attached", "through"). This portrayal of trauma as a twofold movement of destruction and reconstruction is also portrayed through the metaphor of welding at the beginning of his autobiographic novel, *A mile down, story of a disastrous career at sea*:

> THERE'S MORE ART in this world than we think. The art of welding, for instance. […]. At the melting point, the surfaces of the two aluminum plates form a molten crescent moon. […]. It's as beautiful as writing or love or anything else in this world, and it surprises me.
> I had imagined welding to be a brute task and nothing more.
> The afterlife of ruin had seemed brutish, also. Sleepless nights, a general aching, and disbelief. But there were no recriminations from my wife or her family, and they gave me the room and support to recover, until new dreams arose and opportunities presented themselves. I've come to realize that a life can be like a work of art, constantly melted away and reshaped. This story is of that melting away (Vann 2014, 3).

As it depicts a dynamic process, this perspective definitely turns away from the "essentialist notions of identity, experience, and remembering found within the traditional model", and places my analysis under the scope of the pluralistic approach (Balaev 2012, xiv). It is also strikingly reminiscent of the concept of integration emphasized in the new research brought forward by the neurobiological and holistic approaches to psychotherapy. The process of integration, which is the foundation of "Post-Traumatic-Growth", implies the remelting of one's relationship with the broken pieces of one's self and life (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1995, 124). Although David Vann's work is fraught with examples to analyze, I will focus my attention on the novel *Aquarium* for the sake of concision and

clarity. *Aquarium* tells the story of Caitlin, twelve years old, and the last link of an intergenerational trauma. Caitlin lives in Seattle with her single mother. They struggle to make ends meet and know no other family, so Caitlin finds solace in the observation of the fishes of the big aquarium. There she makes friends with an old man who turns out to be her grandfather, who wishes to reconnect with her mom whom he had abandoned at fourteen and left with her dying mother. Later in the novel, Caitlin's mother finds out that she is in love with her friend Shalini, and rejects her for being a lesbian. In the end, the grandfather stands up for his granddaughter and becomes the reconciliating force that brings the family back together under the same roof. This novel tells us about the struggle to forgive, as the characters find healing in the reunification of the family. It is therefore the pieces of the family that have to be put together, as well as the world, which has to be rebuilt as a safe and coherent place. All throughout the novel, the depiction of Caitlin's growth and the evolution of her relationships are interwoven with her observation of her surroundings as so many shards of life to reconcile with. At times, those fragments are depicted as the tatters of her life, leaving her helpless in the face of a loss of meaning of the world, while in other instances they are regarded as slivers of the cosmos, pregnant with life, offering her an opportunity to reconnect with the world at large.

By considering the various occurrences of the fragment in their relationship to destruction and reconstruction, this paper will aim to articulate a conceptualization of fragmentation that encapsulates the ambivalence of trauma, and illustrates the author's assertion that the melting away of meaning and identity can be the opportunity for reshaping one's relationship to one's life and self. In the first part, I will consider the fragment in relation to the motifs of rupture, emptiness and pain. Then, I will approach the fragments as pieces that can be integrated and rearranged in new ways. In the last section, I will focus on how the recurrent motif of rebirth urges us to believe that from fragmentation itself, life can emerge, and that emptiness can be the locus of creation.

## The collected slivers of a shattered world and self

Fragmentation is very much present in *Aquarium* both as a motif and in the structure of the text, although not always in the form that has been canonized by the first wave of literary trauma studies. Theories that approach trauma as an essentially pathological phenomenon have "outlined a range of literary devices which characterize the emerging genre of trauma fiction" (Whitehead 2004, 4). Based on a Freudian and abreactive model of trauma, they emphasize the shock, the haunting, the sense of void, the unspeakability and the intrusive memories associated with the traumatic experience. All these make for a fragmentary writing style with gaps in the text, repetitions, ruptures of the linear narrative, a broken syntax, and silences. These formal features are said to mimic the assaults of memorial fragments, or flashbacks, on the traumatized mind, and together they paint the picture of what the psychiatrist Bessel Van Der Kolk calls "the mosaics of the damaged mind" (2015, 195). In the neurobiological perspective, the foundation of his research, this psychological fragmentation can be explained by the shutting down of the thalamus in times of high alert:

> The thalamus stirs all the input from our perceptions into a fully blended autobiographical soup, an integrated, coherent experience of "this is what is happening to me." […] However, processing by the thalamus can break down. Sight, sounds, smells, and touch are encoded as isolated, dissociated fragments, and normal memory processing disintegrates. Time freezes, so that the present danger feels like it will last forever (Kolk 2015, 60).

In the case of PTSD, which has been typified as the epitome of trauma, unintegrated memorial fragments,

which repeatedly assault the traumatized individuals, therefore keep them trapped in an unresolved past, stuck and unable to move on. *Aquarium*'s narrative is quite linear and, as it doesn't revolve around one punctual trauma, it is not structured around the repetition of one memory. David Vann's novel therefore doesn't follow the canonized traumatic writing style that would illustrate PTSD. The fracturing of identity and reality, along with motifs of helplessness, aporia, paralysis and fragmentary processing of reality are however very much present in other forms. The characters are shown to collapse emotionally and physically:

> My mother then. It was very strange, something I'd never seen before. She broke completely, curling onto the carpet beside me, her arms around me, sobbing. Her entire body convulsing. The police came near, tried to speak with her, but she didn't stop, and she wouldn't let go of me. I was drowning in her, my arm trapped against her face and slick with tears. Her breath shaking, as if she were being crushed. All sound pinched and frightened (Vann 2015, 91).

The emphasis on fragmentation is also present explicitly through the motif of incompletion. In the following passage, Caitlin and his grandfather are observing the mackerel at the aquarium and musing on their shapes in a way that reflects Caitlin's feelings of absence, incompletion, and confusion:

> I found him at the largest tank just as a school of mackerel came at us with their mouths hung open, straining for plankton.
> Look, my grandfather said. You can see right through their mouths to the water behind. Their mouths go nowhere.
> I had never noticed that before. The food would never reach their stomachs. They'd be forever hungry, always eating and finding nothing.
> That's wrong, I said.
> I don't understand it, he said. Where does it connect?
> What I saw was every part of a fish wandering the oceans on its own. One of these gaping mouths straining through endless water with no body attached, a tail like a boomerang flinging itself through blue empty space, an eye floating alone.
> What if everything was unfinished? What if everything was made incomplete?
> They're alive, my grandfather said. And they're fast swimmers, so obviously it all works out somehow, but I don't see how. And what are plankton, really? They seem made up, like fairy tale. Some huge whale skimming through nothing with an open mouth and ending up fed.
> I think it's not finished, I said. I think none of it is finished.
> What do you mean?
> […]
> That we're not put together yet. Parts are missing.
> […]
> The mackerel were far away now, at the other end of the tank, pale shadows gathering, tricks of light, no more than dust motes in air. The sea a great blindness, too thick, shapes coming into view only up close. No warning (*Ibid*., 129).

The two excerpts are fraught with literary devices that translate the pathological aspect of fragmentation. The shattering of the sense of self is emphasized by words such as "broke" or "crushed", in the first one, and embodied by the dislocated mackerel in the second. Caitlin's impression that everything is "unfinished" and "incomplete", as well as the accumulation of words in the lexicon of absence—the mackerel's mouths go "nowhere", their members float in "empty space", and the plankton is even reduced to "nothing[ness]"—can be interpreted as an expression of the "trou-matisme". The sense of aporia, or what Cathy Caruth calls a "crisis of truth" (1995, 8)—part of the shattering trope because it is a falling apart of the world as it is known—is put forward by Caitlin's depiction of her mother's behavior as "strange" and "never seen before", and by the discovery, with the mackerel, of something "never noticed" before, something that seems "wrong", that they "don't understand" and that seems made up, like a "fairy tale". This mention of the fairy tale is significant because it is a recurrent motif throughout the whole novel. I believe it captures both the desire for some comfortable meaning emerging from life and, as it underlines the gap between Caitlin's ideal life and reality, the vertiginous

feeling of aporia. The fairy tale, or dreamlike, ethereal aesthetic is a device much utilized by David Vann. It shapes his beautiful, cinematic writing style, which captures the reader, as much as it contributes to the typical traumatic impression that there is no solid ground to rely on. This can be observed in the depiction of the fish as "shapes" and "shadows", "motes of dust", or even more strikingly unpalpable and unreliable, "tricks of light". These depictions of hypersensitivity relate to two aspects of the traumatic exeprience: firstly, the perception of life's mystery following aporia and secondly, an increased sensitivity to danger which, as highlighted by Kolk's research, manifests neurobiologically through the constant activation of the periaqueductal gray, a brain region associated with detecting (Kolk, cited in Treating Trauma Master Series, 2023, Module 1. 8). The impressions of inescapability, paralysis and helplessness recognized by specialists as the hallmark of trauma are also emphasized by the words "trapped", "drowning" or "floating alone", "endless" and "never" (*Ibid*.). One may also notice David Vann's recurrent use of the hypallage: "All sound pinched and frightened", "the sea a great blindness", a trope which dramatizes the sense of chaos and confusion, which are recognized as a sign of neurobiological fragmentation by Dr. Siegel (Cited in Treating Trauma Master Series 2023, Module 1. 8).

The traditional approach has also interpreted the traces of fragmentation in the canonical traumatic writing style, fraught with chronological ruptures and repetitions, as the expression of a disrupted relationship to time. In *Aquarium*, the traumatic relationship to time and the sense of haunting emerge not as a never-ending throwback to one past event but trough an impressionistic style and a broken syntax. Descriptive, nominal phrases stand alone as so many memorial fragments failing to be integrated to the linear narrative, like Van Der Kolk's "mosaics of the damaged mind". Often, these fragments are sensorial impressions, which interrupt the narrative:

> You will tell me, the woman said.
> Body of an anemone only some white constellation into the background, hidden and appearing and hidden again […]
> Mexico Caitlin, Focus. Look at me. […]
> Close against the glass, my own shadow face, one world hidden within another (Vann 2015, 90).

The absence of punctuation (i.e. quotation marks or dashes), as well as the absence of articles, two common devices in David Vann's writing, reinforce the spectral aspect of the descriptions. It is as though the words were floating in the narrator's mind, forever present, amplifying the sense of a broken relationship to time and reality. Another interesting device is the absence of verbal auxiliaries or even of a verb at all: "body of an anemone only some white constellation", "all sound pinched and frightened", evoking a suspension of time. There is no action anchored into an organized chronological development with a beginning and an end, but only the expression of a fragment of eternity.

In keeping with the model that sustains the shattering trope, *Aquarium* demonstrates a disruption in the relationship to time, a hallmark of trauma as observed by psychiatrists. Contrary to the traditional paradigm, however, there is no sense here that these fragments are the trace of one ever-missing event that needs to be reconstituted and abreacted. The recurrence of motifs of absence, brokenness, incompletion and disruption evinces the morbid aspect of fragmentation. The characters go through moments when they feel disconnected from their environment and from the regular flow of time. Their emotional distress keeps them from processing reality in a truly present and engaged way. The suspension of their normal reactions betrays a numbness that, in neurobiological terms, is equated with a fragmentation of normal neural pathways. But when Caitlin says "we're not put together *yet*" (Vann 2015, 129), indicating that a sense of harmony and continuity is attainable, we can surmise

that healing trauma can be achieved through a newfound sense of wholeness.

### The "mosaics of the damaged mind" and the reformulation of the self

In spite of its centrality in the text, fragmentation is not portrayed as essential—as the trauma paradigm represents it—, or as a forever crippling trait. In some respects, the disruption of reality and of the sense of self seems to be the means of a creative reformulation. We have seen that the fragmentation of reality into isolated bits, which Bessel Van Der Kolk calls "the mosaics of the damaged mind", depicts the struggle of the traumatized individual to integrate certain fragments of memory in a smooth way. But contrary to what the traditional literary trauma studies model has purported, I believe this struggle does not only refer to an epistemological void. On the contrary, it sometimes corresponds to what Barry Stampfl calls a traumatic "burst of meaning" that takes time to be digested (cited in Balaev 2014, 28). And maybe these are two faces of the same coin: this overload of meaning could cause the breakdown of the mental process of integration. The ethereal, strange quality of the observed objects (often the fishes, but sometimes other details in Caitlin's environment) in *Aquarium* mimics the way in which the mind is confronted to new realities during a traumatic event. It shows that trauma is not merely the shock that disrupts, but the intrusion of new elements into one's unprepared psyche. The traumatic event's metabolization functions on the mode of abductive thinking: a new, surprising element has to be integrated in the psyche. This requires the emergence of a new vision of the world and of the self. In his article "Parsing the Unspeakable in the Context of Trauma", Barry Stamplf argues that the process of traumatization and reconstruction, as a process of abductive thinking, helps to account for "trauma's profound connection to creativity and discovery" (*Ibid*., 32).

The beautiful strangeness of surprising elements weaved into *Aquarium*, though unsettling, shifts the portrayal of fragmentation towards the inspiring end of the spectrum. It shows how absorption of new fragments of reality contributes to the process of traumatic reconstruction. As the grain of sand in the oyster, the intrusive, uncanny elements that characters initially observe with the distance I have evoked earlier eventually make the pearl.

There is also the idea that "the insight begins with the shattering of prior forms", that trauma can make certain elements of one's world stand out in a new way, making more obvious to the traumatized individual which aspects of their life they derive meaning or a sense of identity from (Lifton cited in Caruth 1995, 134). It is as though the pieces of the puzzle that make the fabric of one's life, scattered by the traumatic disruption, were delineated in a clearer way, allowing the person to then piece them together into a new cosmology. For David Vann, writing seems to be an active way of articulating this reconstruction: his overall work is punctuated with recurrent motifs, objects, places that are endowed with significant meaning in his personality. The "pieces of the puzzle" are collected memories that articulate one's identity in a significant way. These pieces can be emotions or thoughts that have become core elements, and they are often contained by a precise event, an object, or a place. Those elements, as so many fragments of identity, take on a symbolic charge and create relief in the texture of the text, as they are endowed with the vertiginous depth that comes with their transcendental and sublime quality. Some of them are the mere sensorial descriptions, unprocessed fragments that have stuck to the character's mind, while others are feared or cherished items that have been associated with one emotion or person. This is the case of Caitlin's vivid memory of the wallpaper patterns in her grandfather's house, as well as for many of the described places that are not "just" places in *Aquarium*. This is what the theory of place—which Balaev advocates for as a lens that "opens new avenues for a discussion of trauma's meaning for the individual"—makes clear (2008, 9). Together with the concept of Nature

Writing, the theory of place can help us understand how places and natural elements in *Aquarium* function as dynamic fragments that promote the production of meaning and as markers of integration rather than collapse. Indeed, they are both doors onto a renewed sense of meaning, belonging and connection. David Vann's novels correspond to Douglas Christie's definition of Nature Writing as the literary description of the natural world that "invite[s] the human observer to become implicated in its mystery" because they raise the question of a "'correspondance' between the inner self and the outer world, between the mind and nature" (1994, 5). This is answered, as Scott Slavic reminds his readers, through the depiction of the "two opposing modes of response to Nature: disjunction and conjunction" (1992, 6).

It is through the combination of these two modes that Nature and Place Writing works towards integration. First of all, by facilitating a clear and obvious delineation of the atomized fragments of the self that they embody, they enable a more conscious topography of the self. This in turn allows the outer landscapes to mirror the inner landscapes of the characters. As David Vann says in the interview « Writing is a second chance » for the Louisiana Channel, these descriptions act as a Rorschach test, a door onto the characters' unconscious (2014, 3:10). In *Aquarium*, descriptions of the fish play this role: "Describing fish throughout the book was such pleasure, and each time I was doing that, I was describing Caitlin's vision or her grandfather's vision, you can see what they think of themselves or other people through what they think of the fish." (Vann, interview for Librairie Mollat 2016, 2:30). In many occurrences, the fish represents the characters, their states of minds or their struggles, and descriptions help to make this metaphor more obvious to themselves and to the reader:

> Wow, the old man said. We've changed so much we no longer recognize ourselves. I looked at him then, the old man. Mottled flesh like the fish, hair hanging over in a part the way this fish's upper fin curled over the eggs. Mouth in a grimace, lips downward. Small eyes buried in puffy lined flesh, camouflage, looking away. He was afraid (Vann 2015, 3).

Caitlin also refers to the walls in her grandfather's house as "a kind of mirror" (*Ibid*., 210). This mirroring plays an important role in the process of integration and helps building a newfound sense of connection. Supported by what Douglas Christie calls the ability to "encounter the transcendent in nature", it can even help "recover a genuine sense of belonging to the living cosmos" (1994, 9). In *Aquarium*, Caitlin's grandfather's assertion that "we need the world to look like us" justifies Nature Writing as a tool for reconnection (Vann 2015, 79). Through the reconstruction of meaning found in nature, a sense of reconnection to the world can be achieved because some form of transcendence can be derived from the perception of unity in the universe. This impression of unity emerges from the correspondence established between various natural elements, as fragments of the world come together in a way that soothes the traumatic sense of chaos and absurdity. For example, one character points out the similar circles that indicate age in seashells and tree trunks. This kind of interconnection helps portray the world as a coherent whole—an image which tends to crumble as a result of trauma. It is therefore as an instrument of conscious reassembling of the world's fragments into some larger cosmic system, including that of the self, that Nature Writing works towards enhancing a feeling of unity in and with the world. Contact with nature pushes one to find presence and connection. The sublime and transcendental emotions that nature stirs in the viewer are a catalyst for post-traumatic growth. As conceptualized by Calhoun and Tedeschi, post-traumatic growth is when someone experiences a traumatic event that challenges their core beliefs, endures psychological struggle, and then ultimately experiences personal growth measured by a renewed appreciation for life, deepened relationships with others, a heightened sense of personal strength and some spiritual changes (Calhoun and Tedeschi 1999, 16). This is

what Caitlin expresses when she describes the solace she finds at the aquarium:

> The only thing that kept me moving along that street each afternoon was the blue at the end, the sea visible because we were on a hill. That blue promised the aquarium. A gauntlet leading to a sanctuary. I could have stayed in an after-school program, but it was my choice to visit the fish. They were emissaries sent from a larger world. They were the same as possibility, a kind of promise (Vann 2015, 25).

The mindfulness found in nature is something encouraged by trauma therapists. By being present with one's emotions, one can learn to regulate their nervous system, meaning that they are enlarging the scope of emotional intensity they can sit with, which is one of trauma therapy's main goals. The beauty, the vastness and the eternal quality embodied by the fishes, the "emissaries from a larger world", help the characters learn to stay with their emotions—in other words, to find integration: the emotional and rational parts of the brain can be linked together again. The characters in *Aquarium* are not endlessly trying to reenact or retrieve one particular traumatic event from their memory. It shows them piecing together parts of themselves into the fabric of the world and recreating a sense of coherence and wholeness. *Aquarium* therefore shows that the shattering trope's disruption cannot be equated to the abreactive model, and that fragmentation can remain central to the definition of trauma—even with a conceptualization that puts the possibility of healing and reformulation at its core.

This parallels the emphasis on working with the present state of emotions put by the therapists of the NICABM Institute, who have turned away from the abreactive model. As Dr. Van Der Kolk says in the module "How to work with traumatic memory that is embedded in the nervous system":

> You look at people's reactions. Everything happens in the present. Trauma treatment is not about telling stories about the past. Trauma treatment is about helping people to be here now, to tolerate what they feel right in the present. As long as you can tolerate what's going on right now, there's no need for any further treatment (Treating Trauma Series 2023).

Dr. Siegel adds:

> And I think it's very useful as a guide for all of us going into this to not think that we're supposed to recover something. This isn't a Freudian archeological dig of 'Let's get back to an interpretation that describes accurately what once happened', because for one thing, we never accurately know what once happened—you know, memory is not like a videotape; and for another thing, it's the psychic reality that matters anyway—it's the experience of what this feels like to us that matters (*Ibid.*).

The emphasis is put on piecing things together in the present moment, on a therapeutic integration of the fragments through a mindful relationship to the world. In *Aquarium*, while the world at certain moments seems to crumble, and the characters to collapse, demonstrating the pathological aspect of fragmentation, some motifs act as fragments of a larger cosmos that can be reconstructed. This ambivalence can also be found in the motif of the crack, connected with that of fragmentation, which the abreactive model had reduced to the vertiginous and insurmountable feeling of aporia. In the next section, we will see that the void can also be a dynamic place of reconstruction.

### A rebirth through the fertile nothingness

In "Anthem", Leonard Cohen sings, "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in". This is what Caitlin expresses when she states that "sometimes the

worst moments can lead to the best" (Vann 2015, 260). It is significant that she follows with a description of her emotions through a metaphor of depth:

> That night was perfect and the beginning. Shalini sleeping on top of me, the warmth and weight of her, the fan of her hair making a cave around my face, rise and fall of her breath and small twitches as she slept. She abandoned herself to sleep, and I was held finally to the bottom of the ocean, as I had always wanted, thousands of feet down and the two of us gliding on great wings (Vann 2015, 260).

Rather than evoking the potentially terrifying aspects of the bottom of the ocean, the motif of the abyss is here related to a newfound sense of freedom. The Sublime, as conceived by Edmund Burke, encapsulates radical ambivalence because it is a form of beauty relying on incomprehensibility and awe. It can help us understand how David Vann's writing triggers in the reader a striking feeling that expresses both the distress and the beauty that can come out of the traumatic mixture of powerlessness and confrontation with the existential kernel of life. While a sense of incomprehensibility and uncertainty is present in the descriptions of the several forms of breaches, cuts, or holes, they are also filled with an existential sense of wonder, as in the following excerpt about the ghost pipefish:

> I found him at the darkest tank, in a corner, alone, peering through what could have been a window to the stars, endless black and cold and only a few points of light. Hung in this void like a small constellation, the ghost pipefish, impossible.
> Like a leaf giving birth to stars, I said, whispering, as if any sound might make the fish vanish.
> […]
> Body of small green leaves, veined, very thin, its fins painted in light cast from elsewhere, but from his eye out his long snout, an eruption of galaxies without foreign source, born in the fish itself. An opening in the small fabric of the world, a place to fall into endlessly (*Ibid*., 27).

As we have seen before, the motifs of infinity and eternity, introduced here by the word "endlessly", are evocative of the helplessness and paralysis that traumatized individuals are confronted with. In his preface to *A Philosophical Enquiry Into The Origin Of Our Ideas Of The Sublime And Beautiful*, Philip Adams explains Burke's emphasis on uncertainty as a crucial element of the sublime. This perspective allows us to view these motifs as integral to the sublime, while also recognizing their association with trauma as an experience of unknowing:

> It is the category for a power or "greatness" that is beyond categorization. It is an experience of intolerable but inescapable skepticism, what Burke calls "terrible uncertainty". "Hardly anything can strike the mind with its greatness", he writes, "which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity: which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds". "Knowing" is implicitly denned as the setting of limits, and the "Sublime" as the impossibility of knowledge. So certain kinds of absence, what Burke calls privation, are Sublime—vacuity, darkness, solitude, silence—all of which contain, so to speak, the unpredictable; the possibility of losing one's way, which is tantamount, Burke implies, to losing one's coherence (Adams' preface to Burke 1958, xvii).

Eliciting a sublime sensation, the expression of "an opening in the small fabric of the world" is very evocative of the wound or the "breach" in the protective shield of the psyche mentioned by Freud. We are not far from the shattering trope, except that the image of a fall has some awe-inspiring quality. The wound is represented in all the wonder it can trigger. While it evokes a cut, it gives birth to stars, and acts as a portal onto all the wonders of the cosmos. Rather than hurting, this cut is a sort of promise. This is made even more explicit in this description of seahorses:

> Living things made of stone. No movement. And a terrifying loss of scale, the world able to expand and contract. That tiny black pinprick of an eye the only way in, opening to some other larger universe (Vann 2015, 15).

Another vertiginous motif, the absence of chronological borders, instead of referring only to chaos and confusion as the traditional paradigm portrays it, is also a way of linking the characters back to the lineage of life on earth, to the roots of all life, and this is shown to be a source of solace. Perhaps, because it evokes a sense of belonging to something greater and serves as a catalyst for connection, the motif of the far-reaching lineage also offers a reassuring sense of coherence and stability in the world. This is how I interpret the following passage, when Caitlin's grandfather tells her about the catfish, his favorite kind of fish:

> Because they make dinosaurs possible. If you look long enough at a catfish that big, and think of it lying around in a shallow muddy river, you can imagine the huge leg of a dinosaur stepping into that river. You can go back a hundred million or two hundred million years and touch the world before we existed. Those catfish are leftovers (*Ibid*., 29).

Awe could be defined as the mixture of fear and admiration caused by the realization of how small we are in the universe. It is a thrilling emotion and David Vann shows how freeing it can be. *Aquarium* articulates the sort of shattering or humbling that hits the characters when they are awe-struck with the possibility of metamorphosis and growth.

As the central metaphor of the novel, the aquarium, referred to as a "dark" place, "the lowest cave", "like a submarine", is recurrently depicted as the dark locus of gestation. Like the uterus where darkness can give birth, or the cave in the hero's journey, where the individual can descend and reemerge as a new self, it holds a kind of promise. Like Chaos, the great nothingness which gave birth to the world in Greek mythology, the great depths of the ocean made available to Caitlin's eyes have given birth in the miscellaneous shapes of fishes, which are the promise of an access to endless possibilities and secrets of life on earth. Psychologically, depth and darkness are the locus of the unconscious or the shadow-self, the place that an individual must go through to grow. In the depths of the aquarium, Caitlin encounters all kinds of surprising shapes that spark life in her. Like the jellyfish, one of the oldest and most basic forms of life, which hold the promise of resilience, liberty and creativity to Caitlin, because they are a motif of eternity:

> I looked at the jellyfish in their slow and endless pulsing, heartbeat before there was any such thing as a heart, and I felt my life become possible. The old man had said I was amazing, and in that moment, I felt I might become anything (*Ibid*., 52).

Caitlin also "[returns] to nothingness" when she goes underwater. At the end of the novel, after struggling through hardships, she has found a more assured sense of self and is able to assert her love for Shalini (*Ibid*., 259).

New insights from holistic trauma therapists are valuable enhancements to the pluralistic approach, aiding in the integration of the shattering trope as an element of the traumatic process as well as transcending the abreactive model of trauma. They allow for a conceptualization of trauma that conveys its dynamic potential: a process that goes from destruction to reconstruction or, one may even say, allows for a creative way of formulating one's self and relationship to the world through an initial shattering. Extending "past essentialist notions of identity, experience, and remembering found within the traditional model", the holistic perspective prolongs the pluralistic approach (Balaev 2012, xiv). But this new perspective can also be perceived as a third way, since it diverges from the abreactive model's portrayal of identity and memory as storage spaces, conceptualizing trauma as a shock that

provokes irreparable ruptures in the psyche. It also differs from Balaev's "reformulation of the self" approach, which views identity and memory as dynamic processes of creation and interpretation—fluid, flexible, and inherently mutable—and dismisses concerns on the question of fragmentation. Instead, it proposes a conceptualization of trauma in which fragmentation can be both a destructive and a constructive event, and memory and identity are imagined as malleable matter. The suggested image is that of clay, which can ossify and even break temporarily, but can also regain flexibility and a capacity to integrate more matter if fed with the right amount of water. This perspective doesn't deny trauma's destructive impact but views it as the initial step in a potential process of both destruction and reconstruction. Here, the shattered pieces of the self become the foundation for reconnecting with one's life and identity through the process of integration.

Enacting the transformative experience that trauma can be, David Vann's writing strikes the reader with a sublime sense of awe, as the vulnerability of the world is revealed through the many gashes in the text that in turn open a breach onto its wonders. The motif of fragmentation, in all of its aspects, opens the door onto the most delicate and precious aspects of human existence, something that reaches far into the depths of the human condition. The part that is resilient in its vulnerability. It allows the reader to enter through the cracks of the text, into the characters' hearts, linking the intimate with the universal and creating a poignant emotional experience that makes *Aquarium* such a beautiful read.

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