

## Performance Matters

# recurrence (in two parts)

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

This essay explores the author's process of trying to understand how to responsibly forge a relationship with traditional song heritage given conditions of ethnocultural rupture. Weaving together Slovácko folk songs transcribed by the author's great-grandfather, an archival recording of the author's grandfather, audio/video documents of her own embodied performance, dreams, folk tales, and analysis, the piece meditates on the many facets of "living song" (živá píseň). The author explores her process of learning how to approach the life of song, and how songs might be cared for. The performance of practice-based research is posited as a means to confront and dismantle patriarchal white supremacy within one's body and spirit, thereby making possible the recovery of exiled strands of self and the forging of ancestral connections.

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recurrence (in two parts)<sup>1</sup>

Julia Ulehla

## part I: of eagles

I'll begin with a song:

Ej, na tej skale vysokej  
 na tej skale širokej  
 ej, sedm párov orlou  
 Ej, nečakaj ma má milá  
 má frajerka rozmilá  
 ej, nečakaj ma domou

(Ah, on that tall rock  
 on that wide rock  
 ah, seven pairs of eagles  
 Ah, don't wait for me my love  
 my most beloved darling  
 ah, don't wait for me to come home)

Audio example: “Ej, na tej skale vysokej.” Recording courtesy of Songlines Recordings. Recorded by John Raham at Afterlife Studios. [https://soundcloud.com/julia-ulehla/01\\_ej-na-tej-skale-vysokej-seven-pairs-of-eagles](https://soundcloud.com/julia-ulehla/01_ej-na-tej-skale-vysokej-seven-pairs-of-eagles).

Among other things, this recording is a trans-temporal conversation. The first half is a recording of my grandfather Jiří (“Jura”) Ulehla and cimbalom player Antoš Frolka that was made in the 1950s. I found it in a stack of dusty old cassette tapes in my grandparents’ kitchen. Since my *děda* (grandpa) left this world, the recording is a striking remnant of his presence. His voice is a little raspy, hooded, and heroic. I hear his heart bursting open when he sings, with nothing hidden and nothing feigned. Like other South Moravian men, my *děda* became very straight and tall when he sang. His hand often raised to punch the air when approaching a high note mid-phrase, or when signalling the beginning of a song that started at the very top of his range, like “Ej na tej skale vysokej.” I always felt he needed to move his body that way in order to be filled with the note he aimed for. It always seemed that songs made him bigger than he was at other times.

My *děda* was a fairly small man—not much meat on his bones, about 5’7”. He had a large, hooked nose, which I inherited. For years after he died, my grandmother liked to draw near me and gently stroke the hook on my nose, muttering over and over, “Jura, můj Jura” (“Jura, my Jura”). Those moments were a window into the tenderness and longing she felt for him, which were of a different character than the love and affection she usually directed at me. During those moments, I willingly

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became him. Each time, I would stand straight and still, as he was wont to do, giving her time with her lost husband through the portal that was my nose. It's not the only moment my grandfather draws near. "Ej, na tej skale vysokej" is a potent song, one that palpably and visibly endowed my grandfather with power and vitality, and it does something similar to me, affording me the opportunity to draw near him, to bridge a gulf that we couldn't fully overcome while he was alive. A gulf created by my father's decision to leave home. A gulf the song itself elliptically evokes: "ah, don't wait for me my love, don't wait for me to come home."

My practice-based research (PBR) involves a coming to terms with the embodied performance of familial song heritage given conditions of cultural rupture. I was born in the United States to an American mother of European and Indigenous ancestry and a South Moravian father who escaped Soviet-occupied Czechoslovakia in 1968 and entered Canada as a refugee. Although my father sang folk songs at home, and my grandparents sang when we visited, my relationship to the tradition has always felt fractured. But there is more to this family legacy with folk song. My great-grandfather Vladimír Úlehla (1888–1947) was a plant biologist, philosopher, filmmaker, and proto-ethnomusicologist. Among other scientific publications and works of philosophy, his posthumously published magnum opus *Živá píseň* (Living song; [1949] 2008) chronicled the musical traditions of Strážnice—a small town in the region of Slovácko near what is now the border of the Czech Republic and Slovakia.<sup>2</sup> Strážnice was Vladimír's childhood hometown and a place to which he returned throughout his entire life.

For Vladimír, songs were living organisms, intimately related to their ecological conditions and carried through time by family clans. The book contains more than three hundred of his painstakingly detailed song transcriptions, some of which were based on songs sung by his (and thus, my) consanguineal relatives. He wrote a biographical sketch of each of his singer-interlocutors, which in some cases was informed by decades of friendship. Vladimír's transcription practice began in 1906, when he was eighteen years old, and continued until 1947, just months before he died. Much of *Živá píseň* was written during the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, as people and lifeways that he loved were being exterminated. His act of salvage—for it was that, among other things—involved chronicling the cultural practices of his family and community with the hope that they would not be annihilated or forgotten.

Over the last ten years, I have engaged in a process of heritage reanimation within the frame of a performance project I called Dálava; the second half of the recording is a sound document of this PBR. *Dálava* is a Czech word that refers to the disappearing line on the horizon—the hazy frontier between land and sky where it is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. The word implies a great distance. My PBR began in early 2011 as a domestic experiment—domestic insofar as I began singing the songs my great-grandfather transcribed in my home in New York City, and experimental insofar as I had no idea what I might do with them and how they might adapt to life in North America. Some of the questions that concerned me most included: *What is a "living song" from Strážnice? By which practices can I best address and come into contact with a song's life? What happens when I transplant a song from Strážnice to a place like New York City or Vancouver? Will it survive the transplant? How does a song react to different environments? Can a song be more alive or less alive? How do my actions and manner of approach impact a song's life?* At the time, I was a new mother, and I felt that domestic musicking was the most desirable and feasible avenue available to me. Part of me also recognized that the songs were a means to orient one's daily life, and not just for exhibition or entertainment for others to consume. I had no aspirations or long-term goal, other than to see if I could make the songs alive and what that might mean. Over the years, my focus has shifted to ask what it means to

continuously care for songs and help them thrive. In my practice, this means allowing the relationship with the songs to change and transform as need be. I try to remember to keep listening to what a song wants, rather than treating it as a thing to be used.

Although the project began in New York with a cohort of experimental musicians from the avant-garde downtown scene—including my partner and guitarist Aram Bajakian, bassist and gimbri-player Shanir Blumenkranz, and violinists Skye Steele and Tom Swafford—Dálava began in earnest in 2014, one year after I began graduate school in ethnomusicology at the University of British Columbia. Aram and I began collaborating with friends of friends from New York, who were some of the first people we met upon arriving in Vancouver: cellist Peggy Lee, drummer Dylan van der Schyff, bassist Colin Cowan, and pianist/accordionist/keyboardist Tyson Naylor. The collaboration grew out of burgeoning friendships and interpersonal chemistry—an extension of the domestic realm in which the songs had been brewing. At this point, Dálava had not yet emerged into a public, mediated domain. Even though Aram and I had made the first record in New York in January of 2013, moving to Vancouver and having a second baby delayed its release. Our first public performance was a record release concert at the China Cloud on October 17, 2014, with Peggy, Dylan, Colin, and Tyson, even though they weren't the musicians on the record. We enjoyed the concert and decided to keep playing together. Several significant opportunities came our way shortly thereafter. Because of initial opportunities like these and the encouragement of individuals in the creative and experimental music community in Vancouver and beyond, Dálava slowly made its way out into the world. On research trips to the Czech Republic, I entered the field as ethnomusicologist, kinswoman, friend, song carrier, great-granddaughter of Vladimír Úlehla (for his renown is still evident), and experimental artist working with traditional materials who had been hired to give concerts. My own performances, and the subsequent song-bartering they afforded, were an integral part of my ethnographic methodology.

A tension exists between immanently co-created works such as Dálava and single-authored forms like this article. Although Aram and I act as bandleaders and our collaborative work is based on my song heritage, my PBR owes its existence to the countless hours Peggy, Dylan, Aram, Colin, Tyson, and I have spent musicking together, not to mention the countless hours I have spent in conversation and music with colleagues, friends, and family in the Czech Republic. Then there are the songs, which I also perceive as active, agential collaborators. In 2016, after two years of regularly playing together, Aram and I realized that as a sextet Dálava had become something very different from its beginnings in New York. We decided to record the work that had been emerging. I was awarded a research grant to fund a new album from the Public Scholars Initiative, an initiative coming out of the public humanities at UBC that is looking to rethink and expand the scope of doctoral education, especially its relation to a wider community. *The Book of Transfigurations* (Dálava 2017) was the record that resulted. “Ej na tej skale vysokej” is the first song on the album.

I am still in the process of understanding how to responsibly forge a relationship with the songs from Slovácko. I was not interested in pretending that the ruptures weren't there, and thus my intention was never to imitate Slovácko tradition bearers. Because oral transmission, linguistic continuity, and connection to the place from which the songs came were for the most part absent, and because I did not want to erase or ignore the complexities that marked my relationship to heritage, I had to look for other ways to forge a connection with the songs. This is where the body itself became a terrain for inquiry, something Kuna Rappahannock theatre practitioner Monique Mojica describes as “blood memory”:<sup>3</sup> “Our bodies are our libraries—fully referenced in memory, an endless resource, a giant database of stories. Some we lived, some were passed on, some dreamt,

some forgotten, some we are unaware of, dormant, awaiting the key that will release them” (2011, 97).

For many South Moravians, songs are a means to connect with the lives of their ancestors; I have heard several Slovácko singers and musicians express sentiments that echo Mojica’s. In a 2016 interview, renowned *primáš* (lead violinist and singer) Martin Hrbáč remarked: “In music and songs there are a myriad of moods and truths that our ancestors have already experienced, and I only follow the beautiful ones that they left us in those songs and music.”<sup>4</sup> Song texts often contain conversations between living humans and their deceased relations, which tells me that people know how to talk to their deceased ancestors and have been doing so for a long time. Hrbáč’s comment suggests that within the performance of folklore, there is a trans-temporal collective frame, invoking the past and (re)enacting it in the present. The process involves some measure of personal choice or intuition (what one chooses to follow or continue). The temporal breadth gives clarity to the present. For me, the songs my great-grandfather Vladimír collected are such keys for releasing emotions, stories, associations, memories, bodily sensations, and experiences.<sup>5</sup> The body’s pathways are subversive, disrupting and erupting through the narratives of belonging and longing that shape one’s reality. Following the affectual trajectories of the singing body reveals realities that my conscious mind is not able to access.

In our co-creative process, I began by working with a song from Vladimír Ulehla’s book, or a song I learned from my father or grandparents. I would experiment with the song until I felt that I could *follow* it—that it was leading me, rather than the other way around. When a song began to make itself known to me—and by this, I mean several things (I began to sense it moving proprioceptively in my body; it began to appear affectively in my body, at times pleasantly and other times unpleasantly; I began to have certain associations or visions, or it would change the way that I perceived my surroundings; I would experience changes in my body temperature, or begin sweating, or feeling butterflies in my stomach)—I perceived this moment as a gesturing toward the human by the song, which felt and continues to feel like the beginning of a consensual, genuine relation between a person and a song. In other words, this critical moment of bi-directional affinity marks the beginning of reciprocal relation between a person and a song. I found that to keep going forward in the relation between a person and a song, there was much to be done, much to be curious about and explore, much to take care of and attend to. As time goes on, my awareness of responsibility only grows. Just as relations between people are in a constant state of flux, the relationship between a song and a person can wither from neglect, and even mistreatment. I have found that an entire ethics of relation opens between humans and songs. Songs are pedagogues, ethicists, catalysts, hosts, shit disturbers, and occupiers if you know how to let them. Sometimes it can go too far. And sometimes the relation doesn’t happen. I didn’t manage to begin relationships with every song.

In my research with Slovácko song, once a relationship had begun with a particular song, I brought it to Aram. I explained my intuitions about its life, its densities and trajectories, and what was at stake when one sang it. Through this intuitive, somatic process, we began to find sound worlds that perpetuated that life. It was very clear to me when a musical element harmed its vitality or was artificially imposed. The song would fall flat—bland and empty—as if it did not want to work with us. My body would feel relatively cold and stiff, my mind blocked and empty. Once we had a living germ, we brought the song to the rest of the band. The songs’ vivid texts are richly evocative, recalling scenarios of, for example, silent crystalline ice worlds or the unrestrained intensity that erupts where death and eros meet. I would translate the text, describe what I felt was the song’s experiential terrain, and offer a few associations. Aram and I suggested small structural elements for

each song—a certain mode, a seven-beat meter, or a particular harmonic progression—but for the most part, we invited each person to intuit their way in. They are all experienced improvisers and wildly creative people, and it wasn't hard to drop immediately into the song. Part of the joy of performing with Dálava is an open-ended sense of play, of “worlding” a song into being.<sup>6</sup> I never know how the songs will materialize on a given night. Such an approach asks for vulnerability, and for those involved to, in some sense, detach from what has happened in the past in order to fully respond to what is occurring in the moment. Part of our work as a collective has been the honing of our capacity to listen to one another, enabling us to do what sometimes feels to me like jumping off a cliff into the unknown.

A video of a Dálava performance of “Ej na tej skale vysokej” evinces the search for body memory and collective cliff jumping named above. In 2015–16, the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI) invited me to give a series of workshops around my PBR. I called the series *Encountering Life in Song*. The video captures a moment in the final workshop, *Affect, Vibration, and the Architecture of Sound*, in which my colleagues in Dálava and I gave a short work demonstration. When creating “Ej, na tej skale vysokej,” it was important to me to conjure a sense of looming rupture, and a thickly hovering, foreboding quality. The song's protagonist augurs his own fate. The image of seven pairs of eagles upon the mountain—a harbinger of his imminent departure—carries tremendous gravity. In the performance on video, a new quality unexpectedly emerged in our collective performance, one that felt to me like the breakneck, uncontrolled gallop of a spooked horse. I hear it in the rough slap of Colin's playing, in Aram's staccato ostinato, in Peggy's scratchy textures, in the expanse of Tyson's timbres, in Dylan's restless shuffle. As I watch the video and remember the performance now, years after the fact, I see in myself an acceptance of rupture, and a receptivity to living in its consequences.

For me, there is also something that surpasses the human in this song. Bird-human relations are common in Slovácko folk songs. The antecedents could be any number of Slavic pre-Christian deities who were bird-human hybrids or beings who could transfigure from human to bird form, such as the goddesses Alkonost and Gamayun (both of whom appeared as birds with a human woman's head), and the god Perun, when manifesting in his eagle attribute. In an even older cultural stratum, archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1974) discovered a large number of bird goddess figurines that she linked to an ancient civilization (circa 6500–3500 BCE) in the Middle Danube Basin, which includes the area that is now Moravia. In the folk songs of Slovácko, women are often associated with doves and swallows, while men are associated with falcons, hawks, and eagles. In the context of “Ej, na tej skale vysokej,” the seven pairs of eagles may symbolically refer to an accumulation of male power, such as an army. The relationship between humans and birds isn't always symbolic, however. People believed, and still believe, that souls can move between physical forms: “In Slavic belief the soul is a being quite distinct from the body, which it is free to leave even during life, so there are many stories of human souls coming forth from the bodies of sleeping persons and either dwelling in trees or, in the shape of white birds, fluttering about in the world and finally returning to their normal habitations” (Máchal 1964, 227).

According to belief, birds and other animals were often inhabited by itinerant souls after death: “The Slavs universally believe that the soul can leave the body in the form of a bird (a dove, a duck, a nightingale, a swallow, a cuckoo, an eagle, a raven) or else as a butterfly, a fly, a snake, a white mouse, a hare, a small flame, etc. For this reason, whenever a man dies, the window or the door is left open, thus freely enabling the soul to come and go so long as the corpse remains in the house” (Máchal 1964, 229). This belief existed when my father's grandmother died in 1982. For several days

after her death, his parents left the window open so her soul could come and go. Both of his parents were scientists and atheists, but they observed a private, mundane spirituality, maintained by careful attention to and knowledge of their local environment. My perception of my grandparents and their friends was that they knew their local environment as one knows an old friend, acutely aware of predictable cyclic changes, and celebratory of its notable attributes, like sacred water sources or beloved river swimming spots. It's hard for me to say if their knowledge and predilections were unusual, or if such an orientation is inherent to Czech culture in general. Scholars of folklore and Czech art music composers are quick to draw links between Czechness, music, and nature (Johnston 2010; Beckerman 1994). Many aspects of Czech culture reveal an intimacy with the physical world; the names of the months are a telling example: January is *leden* (from *led*, ice); February is *únor* (from *nořiti*, to sink, as when ice breaks and sinks under water); March is *březen* (from *březí*, pregnant [referring to the season of animal pregnancy] or from *bříza*, birch tree, which was tapped in March)<sup>7</sup>; April is *duben* (from *dub*, oak tree); May is *květen* (from *květ*, flower, the month plants begin to bloom); June is *červen* (from either *červ*, worm [worms eating fruit], or *červená*, red [the colour of ripe fruit]); July is *červenec* (from *červená*, red, the colour of ripened fruit); August is *srpen* (from either the Lithuanian *sirpstis*, to ripen, or *srp*, sickle, as in the month of the harvest); September is *září* (from *za říje*, in the rutting season); October is *říjen* (from *říje*, to rut); November is *listopad* (from *list*, leaf and *padat*, to fall, as in the month of falling leaves); and December is *prosinec* (most likely derived from *simj*, pale, grey).<sup>8</sup>

As a child, because I stood in between English and Czech, and because Czech was not my dominant language, Czech words could sometimes imbue the world with newfound significance. The month names, for example, opened new modes of perception for understanding human life in a different configuration from what I knew as a girl growing up in North America. *Říjen* was dedicated to the sexual activity of deer—from the violence of male battles for procreative rights to the new life being created. I encountered a world in which the events in the deer world became a way of organizing and understanding human life; I loved to play with the shed antlers that graced the shelves in my grandmother's cabinet, eat their meat in *svíčková*, my grandmother's best dish, and wear antler jewelry made by a forester friend. *Únor*, whose thaws meant that ice would break and sink down underneath the surface of the water, provided an analogue in the natural world for the overwhelming sense of submergence and sadness that came over me at that time of year. Similarly, in the song poetics like those of “Ej, na tej skale vysokej” and many others, I encountered a world in which a song would allow me to take flight, to become a bird, in a manner of speaking.

The video of “Ej, na tej skale vysokej” participated in various “afterlives” that profoundly influenced my research methods and creative process/output.<sup>9</sup> The video's reception reveals missteps that occurred—missteps that are an inherent part of intercultural research that deals with rupture. I share them to emphasize that the research process is emergently enacted by a process of trial and error in which incomprehension and disagreement are part of the terrain. The process is not teleological—a straight line toward a goal—but full of stops and starts, and lateral movements along the way. At the workshop, I wore a *rubáč*, part of my great-grandmother Marta's *keroj*, the traditional dress or “folk costume,” from the Hornácko microregion of Slovácko. The *rubáč* is the underdress of the costume, a garment made by hand from hemp, modestly adorned with ancient fertility symbols. Other than dust mites, mine was the first living body that had been inside that dress for eighty years. My grandmother later saw the video because it appeared in an article in the Czech Republic, and she told me, “I don't mind that you wore the *rubáč*, but someone might mind.”<sup>10</sup> I was so naïve at that point that I hadn't even considered that someone in the Czech Republic might ever see the video, and that it might be inappropriate to wear the underdress of the folk costume in public. My

grandmother's reaction made me realize that in Slovácko no one would ever think to wear only the underdress because it is akin to wearing underwear (even though by modern North American and Czech standards it looks like a modest sundress). The video later inspired all kinds of reactions, some glowingly positive, others vitriolic and misogynistic. Once again, rupture caused unforeseen blunders.

On the other hand, continuity—that my grandmother stewarded her mother-in-law's *keroj* for decades and gifted it to me—offered an opportunity for relation. Putting myself inside my great-grandmother's dress, which carried musty-sweet human smells and sweat stains within its weave, I was reminded of my own iterative materiality. Like nested dolls, or rings of growth in a tree, I imagined concentric iterations of female relations diachronically housed in the ornamented hemp of the rubáč. Although it is still too big for them, my daughters also love to don their great-great-grandmother's dress. Hemp (*konopa* in Czech)—the rubáč's material—has magical, protective significance. In several Strážnicians songs, a young woman directly appeals to *konopa* for protection from unwanted or harmful suitors (Ulehla [1949] 2008, 544–45). According to Petr Bogatyrev's *The Functions of Folk Costume in Moravian Slovakia* (1971), the hempen rubáč was believed to be a magical garment, capable of healing animals and humans when applied to an injury. Its magical properties were further derived from its proximity to the female body, which was itself believed to be magical because of its ability to create new life. In Slovácko folk belief, as in pre-Christian Slavic belief in general, a strong relationship exists between the life cycles of humans and plants, love, divinity, fertility, generation, and iteration. Bogatyrev also mentions an “emotional element” expressed in folk costume in Slovácko:

“Observation of the life of primitive people shows that, among them, costume and wearer are closely, intimately connected” [here Bogatyrev cites L. Lévy-Bruhl, *L'âme primitive* (Paris, 1927, 137–41)]. We find something similar in a whole group of magical acts among the people of Europe. In order to exert a magical effect on someone, the magical act is performed on his hair, feet, and on his clothing. Thus, we find, among the peoples of Europe, cases where clothing is considered almost organically connected with its wearer. And besides this closeness to one's personal costume, there is also the relationship of the whole community to “our costume.” “Our costume” is close to the individual member of the community, just as the community is close to him. (1971, 96–97)

The statement accounts for both the negative reactions my grandmother was anticipating (a violation of the manner in which “our costume” should be worn), and perhaps also the extra-rational possibilities afforded by wearing my great-grandmother's underdress. This particular rubáč opens a door to my great-grandmother Marta. Its single strap and dense fabric affords a certain kind of movement and a particular, partial degree of concealment. I imagine the way Marta's body moved inside it ninety years ago, and I invite her to coexist with me. For the tradition bearer of Hornácko, the rubáč has a proper way and occasion in which it must be worn. I am still curious about wearing it despite its possible transgressions, for its connection to Marta and the affordances and possibilities it gives to my body. My father jokes that I can wear it as long as no one from the Czech Republic sees it. I haven't worn it in public since the night of the performance; it's hibernating in the closet.

As it turned out, there was a typhoon on the night of the performance. Meteorologists predicted the storm would last three days. All the ferries were cancelled. Fallen branches and trees littered the streets. People were advised to stay indoors. Tens of thousands of people in the Vancouver area lost



power. Although the wind and rain were severe, we decided to proceed with the event. This work demonstration was the second time I had ever laid an offering for my ancestors in connection with singing their songs. I gave them *merunice* (apricot brandy) made from fruit that my family and I had picked together a few months earlier in my grandmother's orchard. When we left the venue after the performance, I expected a raging storm. But the night was eerily calm, windless, and dry. No one was on the streets. My ancestors had propitiatory practices to alter the weather. It's not impossible that something we did had an effect on the typhoon. I'll never know. What matters is that it felt like a reply.

Video Example: Live performance of "Ej, na tej skale vysokej." Video courtesy of the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation, Prof. Kevin McNeilly, UBC site coordinator. Filmed by Carbon Media. <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/822135759/privacy>.



the dividing line (circa March 2020)

*if the dividing line had a color, it would black.  
if it had an edge, it would be blurry.  
if it had a weight, it would be heavy.  
if it had a texture, it would be soft, like velvet, with some unexpected knots of barbed wire, tangles  
of filigree hairs, and a polished black stone.  
if it had a sound, it would be what you hear when you are submerged in a fast-flowing river.  
if it had a direction, it would be in,  
and then back,  
and then down.  
if it was a catalyst, it would bring disintegration.  
if it was an element, it would be water,  
then dark black soil,  
particulate and warm.*

*i have learned that i like very much to lie there.*



## part II: of speckled mockingbirds

Let's begin again with a song:

Vydala máti vydala céru daleko od sebe  
Přikázala jí nakázala jí nechod' cero ke mně  
Já sa urobím ftáčkem jarabým a já k vám doletím  
a sednu si já na bílú leluju a svůj žal vám povím  
Ej akši akši ftáčku jarabý odlet' s tej leluje  
lebo ju zlomíš a nedolomíš ona mi uvadne  
Ej nedošla sem mamičko milá leluje lámati  
lež sem já došla mamičko milá žal vám žalovati (Ulehla [1949] 2008, 636)

(Mother gave away her daughter, far away from herself  
 She admonished her, ordered her, daughter don't come back to me.  
 I will turn myself into a speckled mockingbird and I will fly to you  
 And I will sit on the white lily and tell you my troubles.  
 Eh, shoo, shoo speckled bird, fly away from that lily  
 Or you will break it, but not break it off, and it will wilt.  
 Well I did not come, my dear mother, to break the lily  
 But I came, my dear mother, to lament about my grief)

Part II re-approaches the narrative in part I, but this strophe comes from below. During COVID lockdown and the years that followed, my PBR crossed a threshold from which I haven't returned. Like many families, mine was polarized and fractured by QAnon and the Trump presidency. Members of my family became increasingly radicalized Trump supporters. Relations became extremely fraught. I started a practice of solo improvisation that I can't even say was musically or aesthetically oriented. I'm disintegrating. These past two years have left me wondering if repair from White, patriarchal violence and the colonial project involves—at least in some part—grieving one's way to a reconstitution of flesh and a recovery of spirit.<sup>11</sup> This reconstitution and recovery is different in each person, for each body carries the sum of its experiences, and is marked by dramatically different inheritances of trauma arising from dispossession, displacement, dissociation, numbness, personal/intergenerational/ethnocultural erasure, assault, victimization, and perpetration. The dehumanizing force moves differently, but in all directions, diffracting its way through all it touches.<sup>12</sup> For me, glimpses of my own reconstitution and recovery irrupt in dreams, unruly and uninvited. The glimpses come bearing a message to be deeply felt, to be taken by. The messages arrive as images experienced in and through the entire body, as if the body were one large “eye,” of sorts. If you can manage to crawl inside them, the images begin to slowly do their work. I invite you to close your physical eyes for a minute or two, to activate this bigger eye. Listen for whatever animal or machine might be lingering outside your window. Let logic slip from its throne so that the doorway to the mythic might open up a crack. And then when you are ready, please, begin.



A young boy stood with his father at the edge of a lake.  
 For lunch, each was allotted a boiled egg.  
 “Don't drop it, *mij synečeku.*”<sup>13</sup> Almost as soon as the words had been uttered, the boy dropped the egg.  
 He searched the murky waters, hoping to eat it, even if it was dirty.  
 He didn't find it.  
 The father ate his own egg, sharing none with his son.

The boy grew up.  
 He left home, he left his parents, he left his country, never to return.  
 Would a bite of his father's egg have kept him there?  
 We'll never know.

He settled in a new country, across the sea.

He worked hard. He had no one to depend on, but he didn't expect there to be anyone anyway. That was the lesson his father had taught him years ago. He became a citizen of the place, got married, had children. He grew old there. One day, he realized that he didn't recognize the world around him. Suddenly, he couldn't understand it.

Bitterness filled his heart. Everything looked like poison. For weeks, fire raged through the mountains and hovered uneasily at his door. Trees in his garden dropped their leaves and started to die.

Would it have been different if he had never left his country?  
Would it have been different if his father had shared his egg?

What are eggs?

For some, they are lunch.

For others, they participate in a hard lesson about righteous, self-reliant behavior. Maybe this lesson is particularly manly. Maybe it is particular to the immigrant. Maybe it is particularly characteristic of Whiteness. But maybe not.

For others still, eggs are a potent symbol of fertility. In folktales, they are a talisman of divine love.

Some see the sun in their bright yolks.

In spherical form, they represent the sacred unity of the world.

For geometers, they comprise the great oneness of form.

Genetically, they are miniature capsules of life in its fullest expression.

Among other things, they are potency, potentiality, rebirth, continuation, iteration.

You may have already guessed that I am the boy's daughter.  
He remembers the loss of his egg as a lesson well-learned.  
Through it, he learned that self-reliance was the only way, and those are the lessons he delivered, believing in them completely.  
But the truth is, he is heartbroken.  
Some days I worry that his domain is too lofty.  
Is there still a chance that he can retrieve the egg—even after its disappearance into the turbid water long ago?

Are elders really elders if they don't know how to love with more generosity than the young?  
Is it wrong of me to make such a demand of my elders?  
Should I be the one with love to spare?

Wait—do I still have my egg? Or did I also lose it long ago?

If I have it, am I willing to share it? With whom am I willing to share?  
 If I share with one, can I share with all?  
 In my dealings with my daughters—who once were eggs themselves—have I already unwittingly initiated the next generation of eggless humans?  
 You were an egg too. We all grew inside the shells of our mothers' dark wombs. Did you manage to keep your egg, and did you help others keep theirs?

I wonder what happened to the egg he dropped. That unfortunate egg that led to a hungry belly, and perhaps a far more insidious hungry heart. A longing that he learned to ignore.  
 Did the egg roll to the lake's bottom-most point?  
 Or get stopped by a stick, stuck in the mud?  
 Did it eventually rot on the sandy bottom, contributing to murkiness?  
 Did a fish come along with a wide-open mouth and suck it in whole?  
 The egg sits inside the fish's belly.  
 Perhaps the fish had eggs of her own and she soon set them to the water.  
 But not before the little boy's egg that came to be in the fish's stomach nourished the fish's eggs.

Perhaps.

A week ago, I dream I am the daughter of a snake. I too can turn into a snake. My snake form is enormous, jet black and shiny. I am in a large room with three companions, all of whom are children of different animals—one feathered, one furred, one antlered—and all of whom can shapeshift like me. One now looks like an older White man. He is bossing everyone else around. There is a waterhole in the middle of the floor. I jump in and turn into a snake. Underwater, an entire world exists, even though the hole to get in is small. I attack the man under water. I bite him.

I climb out of the waterhole and decide I don't want to attack anyone anymore.

Did I find my father's egg underwater?

No.

But I came to the decision to stop biting people.

In the dream, there is a kitchen in the corner of the room. Hundreds of crystal glasses have been washed, some not very well. I must bring the glasses to store them on shelves that line the walls. The glasses are glittering, as if lit from behind. They are beautiful. It requires many trips back and forth.

What are these beautiful diamond vessels that I must steward and convey to their spot on the shelf? Some a little dirty, some brilliantly shining, but all arriving to the same place? In their translucence, they refract every color. Kaleidoscopic beams are bouncing in every direction as I carry them. I am careful not to drop or chip them.

I'm not sure what they are. Maybe they are souls. I suspect that not attacking means bringing the dirty ones and the clean ones alike.

In the song "Vydala máti," the daughter turns herself into a speckled mockingbird in order to return to her mother, her origin. This same bird appears in the Slavic folktale "The Snake Husband."<sup>14</sup>

In the tale, a girl is swimming in a lake with her friends. The day is hot, and they are relieved by the cool water. They laugh and splash around. As she climbs out of the water to return to her work, she sees that a snake is coiled on her dress. She tries to push the snake off her dress, but he refuses to move. He tells her he will move only if she agrees to marry him. Eventually, she acquiesces, not believing that her word matters, for how could a human girl marry a snake?

The next morning, she wakes up to the sight of hundreds, thousands of snakes outside her bedroom window. The ground is motile and writhing with their bodies heaped upon one another. At the head of the groom's party is the groom himself, who, you might have guessed, happens to be the Snake King. He takes the girl and escorts her to the lake where they enter into his subterranean, aquatic realm. It is beautiful there, more beautiful than she can believe. A handsome man stands before her, the most handsome she has ever seen. They fall deeply, utterly in love. Soon, children are born—one boy and one girl. Years pass happily and full.

One day the Snake-wife has an urge to see her mother again. The Snake King agrees, with two conditions: she must not stay overnight, and she must not reveal the magic words which allow her to reenter the lake into his realm. She agrees and says goodbye to her little family.

She returns home and her mother is full of mistrust, envious of her daughter's radiance and disapproving of the strangeness of her condition. What appears to be handsome and loving to the daughter appears suspicious and monstrous to the mother. She tricks her daughter into revealing the secret words and then administers a sleeping potion. As soon as her daughter is asleep, the mother goes to the lake and utters the secret words. The Snake King appears, eager to greet his wife. But instead of his beloved, his mother-in-law stands alone on the shore, a knife in hand. She slices off his head. Brutally, callously. He is no relation for her. She does not care if he is dead. In fact, she is glad.

The next morning the Snake-wife wakes up in a panic, her stomach is filled with dread. She rushes to the lake, and there on the shore is her beloved husband. Limp. He is in two pieces. She cries a cry like you have never heard. Or maybe you hear cries like that every time someone sees someone they love lying murdered. She dives into the water to find her children and tells them what has happened.

The Snake-wife's daughter transforms into a speckled mockingbird, the same bird that the daughter in the song "Vydala máti" turns into.

The Snake-wife's son transforms into a nightingale.

I don't remember what the Snake-wife turns into. It is some kind of bird. I could look it up, but I don't. I feel the impulse to turn her into a snake, so that the knowledge of what it is to be human-snake won't be lost now that her husband is dead. I feel the urge to save her and her husband. I would like to have them as my ancestors. But the Snake King is dead. And the Snake-wife doesn't turn into a snake, she turns into a bird. Do I get to have my way and make her a snake if I want to? Do I get to play the valiant role of saviour? Might I long to know them and grieve their demise without fixing things up as I would like them to be?

What is it to be a White woman in North America today? Looking through the glasses of our own stinginess, our stingy fathers and mothers, and grandfathers and grandmothers, and great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers? I feel a tidal wave is looming close by. At least, I notice inside

myself something stirring or becoming dislodged that hasn't until now. Last night, I dreamed that I was walking down carpeted stairs in an old house. Suddenly water starts gushing out of my body, gushing out of my vagina. An old skinny White man stands at the bottom of the stairs, watching me, repulsed and horrified. I rush past him to hide in a small room downstairs. The same thing happens a second time. I am walking down the stairs and water starts gushing out of my vagina, pooling onto the carpet and running in rivulets down the stairs. This time my grandfather, my mother's father, is there to witness this, and he too is horrified and disgusted beyond belief. I rush past him to hide in a small room.

What happens when we long to claim certain ancestors as our own even as we exile or push aside others? What does it ask of us to gather up all the glasses, both those that sparkle and those that to our eye seem unclean? What do I see when I raise the glass of the Snake-wife and her husband to the light? What do I see when I raise the glass of my father? What do I see in the glass of my Southern, Christian grandfather, from whom I feel the need to shamefully conceal the vulgarity of my watery explosion? What might these questions have to do with Whiteness and what it has perpetrated on the world? When all we can see behind us are ancestors we'd prefer not to claim, whose ancestors do we turn to in our hunger for something we might call lineage? What does it look like to claim those exiled ones? Does it involve examining dirty glasses, or not hiding—from those we imagine will disapprove—the birthing waters that are bursting forth from our bodies?

The truth is that I am still learning how to be in relation to my Indigenous ancestry, and the extent to which it should be named in any kind of public-facing manner. I recognize that to discuss claims of Indigenous ancestry is potentially harmful and dangerous, as the growing number of fraudulent Indigenous ancestry claims and “pretendians” attest. Because over the years I have found myself in research and creative co-practice with a number of Indigenous artists and scholars, I have felt a growing need to clarify my position. At this moment in time, it feels important to articulate it as no more and no less than what it is. On my mother's side, I grew up with the information that we are Cherokee, Welsh, French, and Scottish. I have never self-identified as Indigenous in any official capacity or through any funding or application process because these threads never felt substantial enough to me. I am not an enrolled member with tribal affiliation, nor have I lived in community. But I have come to feel that to not name these ancestors also feels irresponsible—a furthering of the colonial project of Indigenous erasure. Although my genealogical research is far from complete, I haven't found specific proof of the Cherokee part. On my ancestors' official documents, their race is sometimes listed as “Native” and sometimes as “White.” My mother had her DNA tested, and her mitochondrial DNA—her matrilineal line—links her to North American Indigenous populations. Through research I have discovered that at least one of my ancestors, Ben Self, was living on the Chickasaw Reservation in Oklahoma, and that his trajectory across the US followed the path of the “Great Removal” or what is also known as the “Trail of Tears,” during which the Woodland tribes of the Cherokee, Muscogee Creek, Seminole, Choctaw, and Chickasaw were forcibly removed from their homelands and relocated to what was known as “Indian Territory.” For a while, I thought I had found my family on the Creek Reservation, but I think the Ben Self in Creek Territory has a different middle initial (although I am still not 100 percent sure about this). My grandmother Dardanella was proud of her Native heritage, but she lived in the consequence of her own ruptures. To my knowledge, she thought she was Cherokee, and didn't know she might be Chickasaw—I only discovered it by researching family members after she died. Her father, Jackson Lister, was orphaned as a small child when his father, Enos Lister, was killed, and his mother, Helen Self, died shortly thereafter from a nervous breakdown. Jackson was brought up by a White foster family from the age of seven. He married my settler great-grandmother, Jenna Ferol Bradley, but soon after my

grandmother Dardanella was born, Jackson left them. After serving as a nurse in World War II and marrying my Welsh settler grandfather Kent, my grandmother Dardanella bleached her black hair blond and passed into Whiteness, inhabiting the role of suburban Southern housewife. I'm not sure why she thought she was Cherokee and not Chickasaw—my guess would be that the Cherokee were more widely known in public discourse, and her link to that culture disappeared when her father left. Or perhaps when the Great Removal occurred, her family members became dispersed and disconnected from their ethno-cultural origins.

I reckon with the fact that while I have engaged in acts of heritage reclamation on my father's line for the last ten years, I have not yet done similar work with my mother's line. Jackson occupies the same position on my family tree as Vladimír Úlehla—why have I not engaged with him as I have Vladimír? There are reasons—I heard my father and his parents sing folk songs at home and speak Czech, but I never once heard my mother or her mother sing a Cherokee or Chickasaw song or speak Cherokee or Chickasaw. I've continued to visit family in the Czech Republic since I was five years old, but the only relatives I had in Oklahoma or East Texas have died. In my father's line, the rupture was much more recent, and therefore, able to be inhabited. I acknowledge that by neglecting the Cherokee and/or Chickasaw and privileging the European (even if it is a small Slavic nation whose language nearly died out and whose lands were formerly occupied and colonized for hundreds of years by other hegemonic powers), I am furthering the erasure of Indigenous life brought about by settler colonialism, even within my own hybrid body. Which glasses do we celebrate and perpetuate? Which glasses do we forget or neglect? Which glasses are we entitled to claim? The situation is far from straightforward. Tuck and Yang (2012) are critical of “settler moves to innocence” that erase complicity in the violence of the settler colonial project; one such move to innocence is “settler nativism,” the (at times fictitious) belief that one has an Indigenous ancestor. How can I look through my grandmother Dardanella's and great-grandfather Jackson's glasses, not to parade them around to guarantee my innocence, or to speak from a place of consolidated authority, but to care for the ways they walked in the world, and to further refract the wavelengths that we share?

My grandmother's half-brother told my mother about the “Indian ways” of fishing and hunting and being on the land that he learned from his dad. My grandmother didn't grow up with her father around to learn these ways, but for me, she modelled behavior that I perceive as belonging to Indigenous ways of being in the world. From her I learned to take my time, to not rush, to look around and see what is there. She gave so much of her attention to the smallest creatures—tiny birds and insects. She taught me not to overlook the littlest ones and their lifeways. The Cherokee legend of the Origin of the Pleiades and the Pine, which links the Pleiades and the Pine to one another, as well as to the Cherokee people, was one she held close. It taught me to look up and down to know myself and my world. I'm trying to proceed like she did: slowly, carefully, gently, with spirit, with love, with sweetness, with style, by taking my time to look up at the stars, to look down at the pine seedling, and to notice the littlest ones.

But what should we do with the glasses that we *really* don't want to look at? In our own lineages, as in both the song and the story, we might be appalled by the mothers' cruelty. They don't seem to have eggs, if you know what I mean.

Indeed, what do I see in the glass of the cruel mother?

And is she a cruel mother, or does she act cruelly? We might say that cruelty is an attribute of an action specific to a moment in time; cruel is an attribute that is fixed to a person across all time. Might cruelty have some function that is not bound to the one who wields it? What happens when we make mothers cruel, or make fathers bitter, or any of the other ways we might ask behaviours to bind themselves to personhood, including our own? What does that do to the possibilities for change, or repair? What are other relationships that a human might have to attributes like cruelty other than being? For example, wielding, carrying, tending, dancing with, meeting, feeding, clutching—all these could be ways that we approach cruelty, or any other given attribute. Maybe the mothers are here to remind us that we too wield cruelty. What space could open up in recognizing ourselves as enacting different functions in different moments, wielding or dancing with behaviours/patterns/practices/approaches?<sup>15</sup>

Or maybe the mother's cruelty is here to remind us—in those moments when much appears brutal and anaesthetized—that there are other tethers that steady us.

Maybe she is here to remind us that there is work to do underground and underwater, that we are part mother and part daughter, part father and part son, and many linkages and pathways exist in between.

Maybe we will grow weary of attacking people.

Or maybe when we do, we will start to notice and be troubled. Or we will learn to see and name the attacks of those we come from, and we will learn to find the courage to not turn away.

Maybe the mother's cruelty indicates that among all the attributes we might embody—in our cruel acts as in our generative ones—there is a practice to be practised. Maybe we will start the long work of conveying glasses, the glistening and the dirty, and holding them up to the light.

In the Slavic folktale “The Maiden Tsar,” the Maiden Tsar, who is the incarnation of the divine feminine, is wronged by her betrothed. In her pain, she removes her love from her body and hides it inside an egg, which she puts in a duck, which she puts in a hare, which she puts in a little wooden chest, which she places inside a hollow oak tree. Her egg is never to be mentioned or discovered. But the person who wronged her must find this egg. He must go to the underworld and figure out a way to survive. With the help of an old woman, he finds the egg. With the help of an old woman, the Maiden Tsar eats the egg. Her love is restored. Wrongdoing is redressed. Life flourishes again.

I am willing to bet that sometime in her long life, the old woman ate her own egg, or, if for some reason she lost hers, someone else shared with her.

And actually, I don't think the boy's egg is lost. Sometimes it looks that way to me, but then I remember the twinkle in his eye when he plays with his granddaughters. I remember the way they used to fall asleep on his chest when they were babies. I remember that now that they are a little older, he is one of their favourite people to tell their triumphs and heartbreaks to because he is a really good listener. I remember the hundreds if not thousands of hours he has spent wondering about life, spirituality, physics, and folk song with me. I remember that my practice-based research owes its existence to him in many ways, from the ruptures, to the continuities, to the numerous shoots of new growth. I remember how he works tirelessly in the orchard with a secret smile on his face, as sweat pours off of him. I remember his heartfelt appreciation of creativity and hard work.



And I think, maybe his egg has been there all along. I just didn't have eyes to see it. Maybe I mistook stingy acts for a stingy father.

If you've lost your egg, may you find it. May you break it in two and share it with someone who dropped theirs.



The editors of this special issue of *Performance Matters* ask: what is the performative force of practice-based research?<sup>16</sup> From where I stand, it lies in PBR's ability to address the intergenerational trauma caused by White, patriarchal supremacy. PBR affords a chance to linger inside the ruptures caused by colonial histories of domination and feel into the ways that song and spirit move there. Embodied questions and their felt answers open new ways of perceiving a known terrain. These new ways of perceiving are troubling, because we can no longer not ask when and where we cause harm. We can no longer be unconcerned or numb. This has rippling ramifications for family and social relations, our practices of academic scholarship, the means by which we define and delimit what counts as knowledge or research. Our experience of social, material, and spiritual reality can be seen and experienced anew. The force arises in our bodies, in between bodies. This performative, phenomenological force is a chance at recovery, and love.

**Video Example: Solo practice. Video courtesy of Music on Main. Filmed by Collide Entertainment. <https://vimeo.com/822141273?share=copy>.**

## Notes

1. The ideas and practice explored in this article were created on the traditional, ancestral, unceded territory of the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm (Musqueam) people, in what is also known as Vancouver, British Columbia. Some of the ideas explored in this essay were inspired by an invitation—from music theorists Michael Tenzer and John Roeder—to write about musical cycles. Rather than engage in music analysis about aspects of Slovácko songs' cyclic structure, as I believe was their expectation, the invitation inspired me to think about the many other kinds of periodicity and recurrence that inform my relationship with the songs, some of which are detailed here.
2. A little bit of context on geography: in 1993, Czechoslovakia went through the Velvet Divorce, in which the Czech and Slovak Republics were separated. In 2016, the Czech Republic started using the shorter "Czechia." Czechia is divided into several regions, which are also sometimes referred to as the "Czech lands": Moravia, Bohemia, and Silesia. These regions are further divided into subregions and microregions. These sub- and microregions are important demarcations for ethnographers and folklorists. South Moravia is a subregion known for its viticulture and folklore. Slovácko is a smaller subregion within South Moravia. Dolňácko and Horňácko are even smaller microregions within Slovácko. Strážnice is in Dolňácko.
3. The Kuna are an Indigenous people from the territory of what is now the countries of Columbia and Panama. The Rappahannock are an Indigenous people from what is now the state of Virginia in the USA.
4. In the original Czech: "V muzice a v písničkách je nepřeborné množství nálad a pravd, které prožívali už naši předci, a já jenom navazuji na to krásné, co nám v těch písničkách a muzice zanechali" (Vrchovský 2016).
5. Compare also with Ben Spatz's discussion of song as "epistemic object" (2015, 63).
6. See Savage (2009) for more on music's "worlding power."

7. See for example Svanberg, et al. (2012, 348): “The month of March is called in Czech “březen” – “the month of birches.” Tapping sap from birch, maple and beech (*Fagus sylvatica* L.) is described from the Bohemian Forest. The best sap came from the birch, though. In some areas of Bohemia young girls and boys used to gather on 23 March in order to tap birch sap. This was celebrated by eating food and dancing around a birch. The girls consumed the birch sap in order to be healthy and, as grown-up women, fertile.”
8. Taken from Machek (1971).
9. See Benjamin (1968) for more on the afterlives of works of art.
10. The article that appeared on the Czech National Radio was titled “Slyšet to pradědeček, zabil by vás! Radikální verze moravské hudby šokuje tradicionalisty” (If your great-grandfather heard this, he would kill you! The radical version of Moravian music shocks the traditionalists; Moravčík 2017).
11. There is some debate about whether or not to capitalize the word *White*. The Chicago Manual of Style advocates for capitalization of both Black and White: “It is with a spirit of equity and with an eye toward future generations—and with a debt of gratitude owed to those [Black and Brown authors and their allies in publishing and elsewhere] who have led us here—that we embrace the changes. . . . We hope you will embrace them too.” See <http://cmosschoptalk.com/2020/06/22/black-and-white-a-matter-of-capitalization/>. The Associated Press capitalizes *Black* but not *white* because “after a review and period of consultation, we found . . . less support for capitalizing white. White people generally do not share the same history and culture, or the experience of being discriminated against because of skin color. . . . AP is a global news organization and there is considerable disagreement, ambiguity and confusion about whom the term includes in much of the world.” See <https://apnews.com/article/archive-race-and-ethnicity-9105661462>). Although I agree more with the rationale offered by the AP, I use the term White here to trouble the invisible normativity of North American Whiteness that hasn’t stopped to examine its privileges, its ways of enacting harm, its ruptures and specificities.
12. I’m grateful to Reed Jackson for their insight and co-thinking through this passage, especially regarding their emphasis on the vast heterogeneity of experiences and lineages of harm, and the different kinds of repair that are needed.
13. “Don’t drop it, my son.”
14. The story can be found in Kononenko (2007). I read it several years ago, and it has stayed with me. In accordance with the mechanisms of oral folklore, I write here the version that I remember, rather than a perfect replica with a standard citation. I have probably added descriptive details, but the essential components are the same.
15. I’m grateful to Annie Levin for her insight and co-thinking through this passage.
16. In my communities of practice, the word *performative* has two very different meanings. It can either refer to actions or events that occur in the realm of artistic performance, or it can be used pejoratively to refer to an action that is done insincerely, falsely, superficially, or that is primarily intended to fortify one’s image or status. I refer to the first meaning here, in that PBR invokes a realm of artistic performance action, which in my case is also linked with repair and the sacred.

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