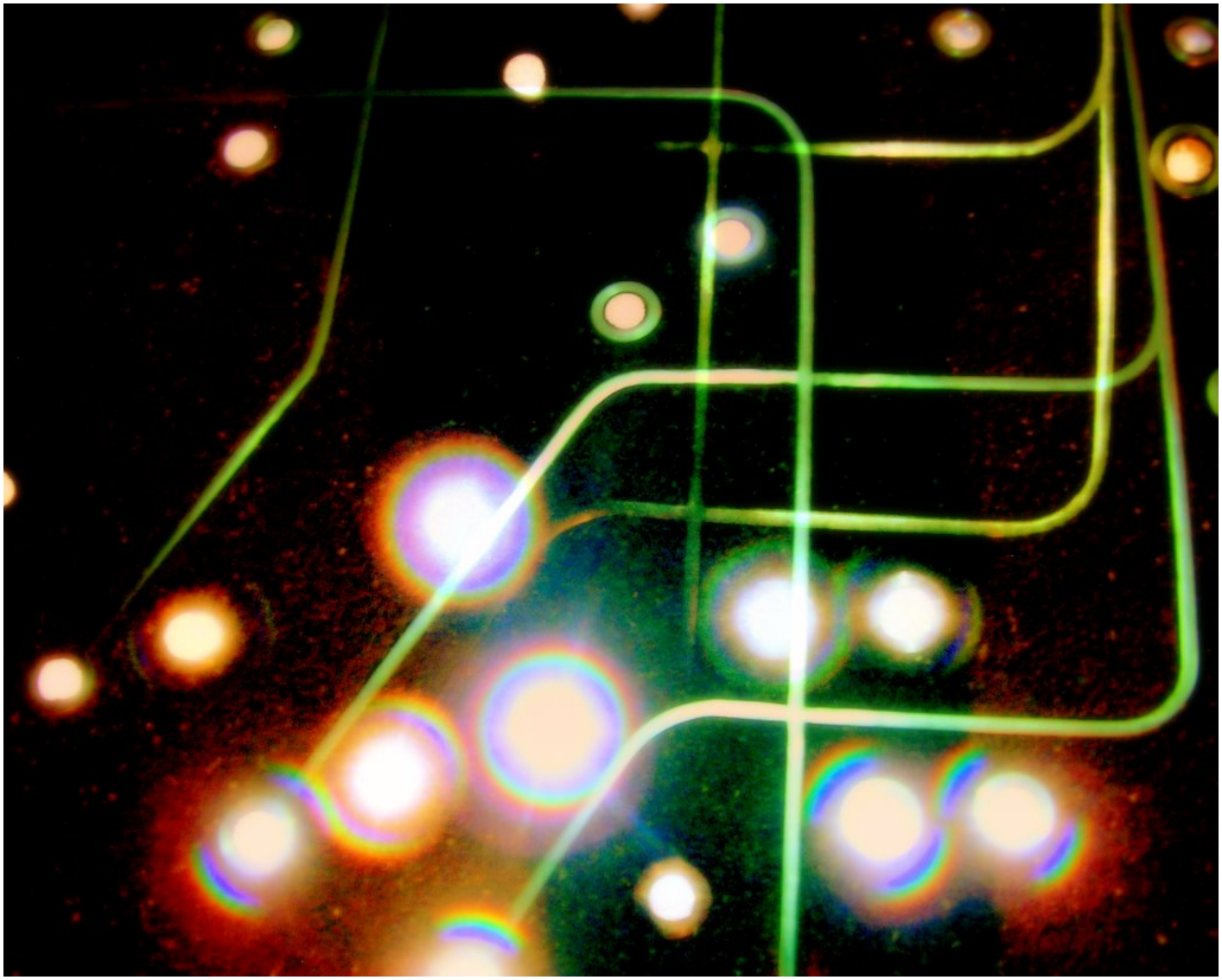
Closed System [1]

May 25, 2015 Flash Nonfiction [2]
Nature [3]

Flash Nonfiction by Autumn Stephens



i.

The problem with ancestors is how they manifest negativity. You might get a blue curse for inattentive grave maintenance, itchy crotch for choosing the wrong bride. At the Met, a docent explained the Oceanic monolith, a vertical log with a mouth. “For making music,” the docent said, but that was more of a concept and wouldn’t you risk splinters. This mouth-log wasn’t just a symbol of ancestors, he said, it was really *them*. I don’t believe in what I can’t taste, but probably happiness has to be practiced a little bit every day, or can’t you even manage that.

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ii.

A desperate man will carve a crutch from his own femur. Fathom that, and you begin to understand religion. At 83, the grandfather was bent double on his stick but ascended with the group; he longed to see the cliff dwellings again or maybe it was just pride. “Well, he wanted to,” I (a girl) said, as though volition trumped August heat or oxygen tanks. Where was the grandmother that day? Wandering among the snapdragons, ankles spilling into her oxfords, shedding weight before the journey. It’s always 9/11 somewhere.

iii.

Interest centers on the point of union. To disable a mammal, target the joint. Aim for knee, not heart. Take back the night one limb at a time. How terrible is the anger? Think “dynamic tension.” When destabilized in struggle, the best defense is luck.

iv.

Some mourners crack jokes and some follow the prayers on their iPhones. The mood smells integrated but shouldn’t there be party favors. I want what everyone wants, a Disney alchemy. The sleeping ones would wake, offer a cup of punch, pass around an updated syllabus.

v.

At the end the lights go down, but against the back wall the ancestors keep re-looping the crisis, sucking their own tails, falling into fresh skins. What might, finally, reside in my breathless mouth: A great thirst. A splintered tongue. That tuneless song my mother used to croon into the sea, her back turned as we children, practicing, buried each other in the sand.

Art information

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Autumn Stephens is the author of the *Wild Women* series of women's history and

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