Steeping in the Hollow

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The thought of sustained corporeal immersion has occupied me from the age of seven when my uncle, the captain of a ship, went missing at sea after his ship met with an accident between Indonesia and Malaysia. I often think of the sea as a container for his immersed body. Not as a grave, but as a fertile estuary with him, a mangrove, both aquatic and terrestrial, thriving in it. I imagine him surviving inundation in the rising tide, as mangroves do, by sealing his pores shut.

Containers with organic matter suspended in liquid elicit both primal and clinical associations: new life, the fetal suspension in the womb's amniotic fluid, and arrested death, wet specimen jars with preserved organs, embryos, and animals. It is also the potential of a microcosm suffused with the life it contains, like an aquarium.

Recently, I have been thinking about what constitutes a book. I am not interested in a fixed definition but rather in reflecting on a transient, fleeting meaning that is fickle, changing based on the project, context, and time. At this moment, a book for me is something that reveals information to the reader in sections, which are often encountered as pages, and are experienced temporally. Its ability to contain allows it to both reveal information upon expansion and to conceal it upon contraction.

A garment I make of fine, translucent off-white muslin is held together at the nape of the neck by a knot. The sleeves run long, spilling onto the palm. Washing one's hands moistens the sleeves along with the tea sewn into its seams at the wrists, gradually changing the color of the garment and turning the wearer into a teabag. If seams are sections and the hue trapped within them is information, moisture becomes an act of reading that extracts and alters it.

Alongside garments, I have been preparing infused beverages by macerating various botanical substances in alcohol to create amaros, bitters, and tinctures. With the passage of time, ranging from days to years,

alcohol, a solvent, extracts the flavor, scent, and restorative properties of the ingredients. Some of these infusions are a culmination of a hundred plants, working together to encode meaning like language does, each a modifier that shifts the whole. The more layered the concoction, the more it implores slower consumption, calling for sipping over chugging. The pace of drinking is choreographed by intricacy. If consumed in the presence of others it may facilitate prolonged companionship.

Once strained, bottles offer amaros containment and a place for rested aging, eventually dispensed into liqueur glasses. Each whiff and sip is a section which reveals information, occasionally modulated by ice. Reading becomes a multi-sensory act involving taste and smell. This book mellows with rest and time, which round jagged textures and incongruent flavors into a cohesive text for smooth reading. I serve them within spatial publications that readers step into for an immersive reading experience. Infusion within infusion, book within book, creates *mise en abyme*.

Toward the creation of beverages, the steeped ingredients impart attributes to the liquid that contains them. In the process of natural dyeing fabric to create garments as part of my imprint RUGA, the inverse occurs; the soaked fabric acquires qualities of the pigmented matter saturating the dye bath: the red hue and anti-inflammatory properties of Indian madder, the deep blue of indigo, and the yellow of turmeric, which is antimicrobial against the skin.

In milk-washing, a technique used in cocktail making, infusion results in separation of elements rather than their cohesion to produce clarity. Milk is added to a cocktail, infused with a curdling agent such as citric acid, and kept still until it splits. The strained beverage is visually clarified and develops a velvety texture, with the harshness of alcohol softened.

In my work *Tinctura*, garments become stand-ins for the bodies of family members as I macerate their altered clothes and other belongings in jars of alcohol to create tinctures that capture their essence. The work suggests that garments are imbued with the qualities of those who wear them, that alcohol can release and conserve those qualities, that imbibing this tincture, the cannibalistic act of ingesting a distillate of our loved ones, is an antidote to the loss experienced in their absence. Alcohol simultaneously extracts, corrodes, and preserves aspects of the submerged material, modifying both solvent and substance. In *Wave*, a book composed of printed pages infused in drinking alcohol and sealed in a glass jar, the alcohol gradually lifts the blue ink from the pages over the course of the exhibition, slowly rendering the text illegible. The alcohol draws meaning out of the text, diffusing it into the liquid as it turns blue, transforming the act of reading a book into the act of drinking it, a solution that aids my reading disability.

Throughout the Interdisciplinary Art & Theory Program, largely a time of dispersed focus on reading, I hoped that learning would occur through a process of osmosis, facilitated by simply gathering with others who were able to access and grasp the readings better than I was, and I believe it did. After all, we gathered in favorable conditions, walking into the recesses of CANADA gallery, descending into a step well that held, in Bachelard's terms, the poetics of the cellar — the below as the site of the unprocessed, the not yet understood. This subterranean bowl of a space allowed us to macerate together in Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, where meaning emerged through the mutual transformation of the text and us as its readers.