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REBEKAH BLOYD

## REAL DEEP SURPRISES

### Abstract

Czech immunologist and poet Miroslav Holub and American writer Rebekah Bloyd travel to Los Angeles theaters and Death Valley, among other places, during an April week in Southern California, 1985. Central to the essay is this idea: what is invisible or is (as yet) undetected is as important as what is known. Holub's method of poetry writing, his teaching at Oberlin College in Ohio and at Pitzer College in California, his ideas on and practices of translation, and his scientific method and discoveries as an immunologist are interwoven with travel and conversation; related moments from years before and years to come expand on these elements, including Holub's role in the discovery that the lymphocyte is the key cell of the entire immune system. Holub's poems "Crush Syndrome," "The Soul," "Creative Writing," "Behind the House," "The Earliest Angels," and "Hemophilia / Los Angeles" are discussed, as are his essays "Science and the Corrosion of the Soul," "On Growing Up: Comments from a Poet-Scientist," "Translation as Literary Lapse," "Whatever the Circumstances," and "The Discovery: An Autopsy" and his monograph *The Immunology of Nude Mice*. Motifs of angels, the soul, performance, and discovery appear throughout, and writers Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Ted Hughes, and performance artist Laurie Anderson are mentioned. Two performances some 20 years apart by Marta Becket in her Death Valley Junction Amargosa Opera House book end the account.

### Key words

*Miroslav Holub; immunology; lymphocyte; nude mice; Death Valley; verga; translation; Oberlin College; Pitzer College; angel; soul; discovery; Marta Becket; Amargosa Opera House; Laurie Anderson; Gabriel Garcia Marquez; theater; performance; Los Angeles; Black Box Image Theater; Laterna Magika; science; poetry; Socialism; Communism*

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Easter Sunday, 1985: The white dunes of Death Valley glowed in the new day, the air was redolent with the resinous scent of damp creosote bush. Miroslav

Holub and I navigated the dunes, he in his grey leather, single-tie shoes and I in battered Nike Lava Domes, searching for the best way to move sideways across the shifting sands. Did I miss being in church? he inquired, perhaps recalling my late father, who'd been a minister and whom he'd met briefly. No, I replied, waving my arms toward the dunes, this beats it. On we climbed. But our duneside progress slowed in the warming day, until eventually our up-the-down-escalator steps made it easy to land at the bottom. As if to mock our clumsiness, a zebra-tailed lizard sped by, tail curved forward, its slender, clawed toes just skimming the sand.

The previous evening, we'd relished the cool environment of the Amargosa Opera House in Death Valley Junction, population: 3. We'd seen a sign promising an evening performance, and, so just before 8 p.m., Holub and I along with dozens of tourists filed into the mural-filled theater to see Marta Becket, a former ballerina and pantomime from New York City who'd made the desert her performance space for nearly two decades. She was 61 and going strong. Miroslav shook his head slightly, in disbelief, as we took our seats.

As we waited, I mentioned a literature course I was teaching. My students had recently read Gabriel Garcia Marquez' "A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings"; Holub knew the tale: a decrepit angel inadvertently improves the lot of a desperate family. I recalled the curious villagers who didn't know what to make of a fallen angel and recounted our class discussions. Again, Holub shook his head,

"But what questions can you ask of such a story?" It's all there, Holub implied. And then some.

"We asked ourselves about angels," I replied. "What do they look like? What do we expect them to do?"

A tall, elderly man appeared onstage, a sizeable red bow tie flapping at his neck as he outlined the history of Marta Becket and her theater, leading up to that season's production of *Second Mortgage*, based on Becket's real-life struggle to finance her desert endeavors. The flame-colored curtains parted and Miroslav and I sat up to witness this desert phenomenon. The marvelous moments of daily life appealed to Holub: the aging dancer who suddenly enlivened the stage, the pinfeathered, stinky angel who graced a town.

A pathologist by training, an immunologist in practice, poet and essayist, Holub studied his subjects carefully – whether it was the travel of lymphocytes in the body or the behavior of a dowdy Russian hobbyist trying to trade his bright Lenin badges in an unsympathetic Prague crowd. With the exception of the 1970s when his creative writings were banned in Czechoslovakia, Holub published the results of his studies at home and abroad: he authored some two dozen literary collections and 170 scientific papers; his work has been translated into 38 languages and dialects. And, although he carried out his research within Socialist conditions most of his life, he remained open to revision of what he knew or thought he knew, to what might yet be discovered in our animate world.

## Arresting poetry

One of my early conversations with Holub was centered on teaching. Even now, I'm surprised by the audacity I had as a junior at Oberlin College to offer him advice. Engaged in 1982 to teach Creative Writing for a semester (and with immunological research underway in nearby Cleveland), Holub announced in our first session that he wasn't sure that writing could be taught; he would try. Erudite, witty, he often used examples from Ted Hughes' *Crow* to dare us to create arresting poetry. Still, regarding student work, he was hesitant to comment at length in case he'd misunderstood the English. In fact, he was understanding our poems just fine – and where they failed. After a couple of sessions, I'd gone to Holub, sharing with him how workshops were sometimes structured and trying to impress upon him that we expected no-nonsense critiques. Receptive, over time he varied activities in our course; his observations grew firmer, his critiques more pointed: Imprecise word choice. Too *nice*. He disdained onomatopoeia, to his mind a waste of space for intelligent expression. Poems that moved beyond a contained moment he found engaging. And, in response to the invitation he offered all of the writing students – to see a Malle, Fellini, or Forman film, to go out for coffee or into Cleveland for the day – our conversations continued; a friendship began, developing into a working partnership that lasted for the next 16 years.

Sunday afternoon in Death Valley, after a stop at the Furnace Creek Visitor Center to pose a few questions about the locals – Holub's deadpan reference to the lizard population – we drove out of the Valley. Driving through the dry vastness, the vault of blue above, Garcia Marquez' flapping sea-bent angel returned.

“What do you think about angels, Miroslav?” I asked. “Do you believe in some kind of spiritual creature?”

I imagined, in lieu of the multitudinous crabs in the story, the plentiful side-blotched lizards listening in.

“Angels, they are present in the poems. But,” he said, “they are *not* required to save anyone.”

“And the ‘so-called’ soul?” I asked, as I'd heard him phrase it. Though the two entities existed hand-in-glove in my upbringing, I could hear in Miroslav's pause that we'd made a distinct turn of subject. Yes, the soul, too, was present, at times connected to painful situations.

In his essay “Science and the Corrosion of the Soul,” Holub refutes the charge that findings gained through organized science are ultimately damaging to the natural world, including human life and human spirit within it. Rather, he asserts, science is “as integral a part of modern humanity as art. [...] a part of our spiritual climate” (1997: 157). Within one area of his multi-pronged exposition, Holub weighs the notion of a “human essence,” possibly a constant core, possibly a “changing quality” (155–156). He speaks also of an inner world:

The dark world of the Self, located within reach of our knowledge, know-hows, and decision making in the same way as the secretions of glucocorticoids and the reserve of stem cells in the bone marrow are. That is, it is located within reach, but we are not very good at reaching it. (160)

After a litany of examples drawn from his own inner world, including “tumors in satin lung tissue,” as well as the “first eight lines of the *Iliad*,” Holub posits that while his inner self cannot be compared with the larger, archetypal soul, each of us possesses one that fits just right (160–161).

In the poem “Crush Syndrome,” the soul is connected to the body but is not of the body. After the speaker’s hand is crushed, he recognizes that he indeed has a soul, that it’s “soft, with red stripes, / and it want[s] to be wrapped in gauze” (1996: 174). The soul is attended to at the clinic, grasping with its “mandibles” and then appearing as a being of “whitish crystal” with a “grasshopper’s head.” By poem’s end, the soul rests as a “scar, scarcely visible.” Here, as in other of his poems and essays written over four decades, the soul has its own desires and abilities. Similarly, in “The Soul,” the deflating soul-balloon “with its molecular trace of helium” searches for a child’s hand (1982: 25). At the close of “Creative Writing,” composed in Holub’s last year, the aging woman who aspires to permanence possesses a “fluid soul” (2008: 18). In Holub’s cosmic verse, the individual soul is a changeable entity, unpredictable and as vulnerable to experience as its host.

For our trip to Death Valley, I’d flown into Ontario, California, the closest airport to where Holub was a writer in residence for a semester at Pitzer College. But when I arrived, he wasn’t there at the gate to greet me. So I waited. Nearly two hours later, he rushed in.

“Why are you still here?” he half demanded, half apologized.

I told him I’d decided to wait, in case something had happened. If he didn’t show, I’d take a taxi to his house.

He nodded in approval; then his mouth grew tight. “My *Gott*. I messed it up. Sorry.” The “my” was elongated, “sorry” was clipped. “Messed” received the greatest emphasis. For one who caused a mistake, including himself, Holub had little patience. He had gone to the wrong airport. We walked to the rental car and drove to the home Holub shared with a bespeckled, slightly balding sociologist, also a visiting professor; he and Miroslav enjoyed the occasional game of tennis, both of them fit and energetic. The permanent member of the household was an older, caramel-colored hound with the bad habit of passing gas. Silent, wicked gas. Holub would catch a whiff as we sat in the living room. The conversation would pause, Holub’s brow would knit as he turned toward the culprit. For his part of the tiny performance, the dog would don a look of guilt. The ritual thus completed, the conversation would continue.

As we strolled the Claremont Botanical Gardens one afternoon, Holub remarked on our freedom to wander at will, to step off the sidewalk into the grass.

This would not be so easily permitted at home, he explained, where the paths for Czechs – walking and otherwise – were clearly set out.

Miroslav said that he'd done something quite consciously with his children when they were small: tossed them into the air. And from person to person. He wanted to encourage them to be fearless, even in a physical way, to climb, to fall when they skied, to ride horseback without worry, to be confident. He didn't consider childhood to be a preliminary stage of life; rather, it was one of the main high points. "Never again," he said, "will we better understand laughter, or be so involved in play. In other periods of life, in our important moments of love, of sex, we express in the language of a child" (Question 1988). Holub offers in his poetry the questions and observations of children, and anecdotes from his own childhood increased as he grew older. In part, he'd point out, this shift in his work had a physiological basis, as millions of brain cells die every day and, in fact, the old memories are better preserved than the recent ones.

As we ambled through the Rain Forest, he related the story of the St. Nicholas–Angel–Devil trio who roam Czech cities and villages on December 5, the eve of St. Nicholas Day (Mikuláš in Czech). The Devil asks each boy or girl he encounters to recite a poem or sing a song. If the child doesn't comply, he or she will be stuffed into the burlap bag the Devil carries. Neither St. Nicholas nor the Angel intervenes. If the child succeeds, he or she is presented with a small gift. When the Devil popped up outside a Holub household window a few years before, little Denise screamed with fright. And, while Miroslav enjoyed the spectacle, he agreed along with Denise that it was too much, the Devil finding her very house. Maybe next year, St. Nicholas or the Angel could stop by. Concluding his story to me, Miroslav quipped, "Who knows what they might do?"

Ready to roar into new life via spontaneous combustion, angels are among the cast-offs in a shed in the poem "Behind the House" (1996: 198). In "The Earliest Angels," the title creatures resemble a more substantial version of the Wicked Witch of the West's winged monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz*. "Trustworthy," they are responsible for

Transubstantiations. Metamorphoses  
of mud into mudfish.  
A rocking horse  
inflated to heavenly size,  
atomic fusion at room temperature,  
holding the mirror up to the spectator,  
stirrings of consciousness,  
creating the majesty of death. (1996: 199)

After performing these mostly suspect miracles and a handful of additional activities, "they waited." The angels are not summoned for any metaphysical undertakings or even a simple day job. Who will recognize their potential? In the seventh line of the litany comes the clincher: "They waited in vain" (199).

Alternatively, we might interpret the poem as a description of evolution, ending with a society replete with the ability to blow itself up by accident and ready to ritualize its own death. It's a typical Holub situation, one which asks us to ask ourselves: Humans, what are we up to?

During that April week Holub and I logged 2,000 miles: From Venice Beach with its roving hucksters and roller-bladers in short-shorts to Joshua Tree National Forest and its yucca, its fire-topped ocotillo, and views of the San Andreas Fault. In the Visitor's Center, I bought a detailed poster of Desert Flora for my medical school significant other.

Back in the Los Angeles area, we attended two plays. Beyond the mystery of the moment, The New Mayfair Theatre's *Sherlock's Last Case* reminded me that in the film versions of Sherlock Holmes starring Basil Rathbone there was something of Holub's dry wit and often elegant attire. Another evening, we joined a raucous audience at The Odyssey Theatre for Garry Trudeau's *Rap Master Ronnie*, which lambasted then-president Ronald Reagan, equipped with BINGO boards to increase our collaboration in the event. Later, I would come to understand that from a Czech point of view there was something to be said for Reagan: He called Totalitarianism for what it was – an Evil Empire.

Driving with Holub to these engagements demanded steady nerves, and at times I suspected him of trying to instill in me the same fearlessness he wanted for his kids. If he were in the driver's seat, he had the habit of throwing his arm nearly across my face, index finger stiff, triumphant, "There! See those windmills! That's what I was reading about." I'd whip my face around to meet the massive array of spinning blades. If I were driving and he were in the passenger seat, he didn't hesitate to do the same, thrusting his arm in front of me to point with enthusiasm. More than once we tried to circumvent Los Angeles on the way to somewhere else and instead haplessly looped one cloverleaf after another. Regaining a straightaway, within seconds Holub would smack the map with the back of his hand and shout as we blew past an exit, "There, there. That's the one we need!"

Midweek, Holub taught his poetry seminar and I sat in, jotting down many of his pithy observations: "The adjective is not key; it's simply an ornament." And, "A metaphor provides freedom to comment on any situation." With this remark, I recalled further what he'd said about his own method.

In contrast to the draft-centered process many writers use, Holub would type out the poem only once or twice. "To a high degree," he explained, "I control the poem before I write it. I decide on the metaphors and so on. The poem fully relays what is in my mind." A poem often coupled dramatic action – homage to his early education in the Greek and Roman epics – with well-chosen images that allowed contemporary commentary on human triumphs, foibles, even stupidity, under Communism and in the years post-89. In his collections, like *Interferon, or On Theater*, most of which was written in the States in the 1980s and which entwines



twin metaphors of science and of theater, his beliefs on order stand clear: “A poetry book is not a bag containing poems, just like the body is not a bag containing bones. The book has a structure. You must be aware of it” (Question 1988).

Two afternoons during that sunny week in Southern California, we sat in the garden and continued what we’d begun in Oberlin in 1982, translation from a rough first draft in English into a more satisfying second draft. This time, the poem was “Hemophilia” (later titled “Hemophilia/Los Angeles”). Here Holub takes us into the nuanced existence of the blood molecules traveling in the body of a hemophiliac. In his insightful essay “Lives of a Cell,” Tom Andrews sets out Holub’s use of metaphor “not as a comment on the patient but as a means of articulating the disease itself, its idiosyncrasies, its strangely autonomous life [...] from the cellular and vascular level, giv[ing] the poem a remarkable imaginative freedom” (1993: 33). Moving from an emphasis on the internal to the external, we also put our heads together over a good-natured account of Holub’s rainy afternoon at Disneyland, when the inclement weather allowed him to hop on the nearly empty, undersized open-air steam train and travel round and round “between the Grand Canyon and Jurassic reptiles” (Unpublished manuscript 1985).

I was assembling my own poetry collection, and Holub carved out time to comment on my ripening poems: Too much description here, You’ve avoided overstatement at least, What’s your point? Indeed, as poets, our own work was radically different. As Holub characterized our styles in those days: “I want poetry to be a knife; yours is a caress.”

In spite of – or perhaps because of – our differences in age, education, culture, gender, and language, our teamwork was successful. Regarding the translation process, Holub outlined his preferences in his essay prepared for the 1997 Hong Kong International Festival Anthology, “Translation as a Literary Lapse”:

A team translation is, in my experience, the best eventuality. The team, of course, is not simply the author and someone able to conceive the poetic line in the target language. The author must be able to comment on his work and the final translator must be well aware of the author’s way of thinking, feeling and reasoning. There must be something like a human proximity in the team. There must be, also, a certain psychological, emotional and intellectual proximity between the two cultures and languages in question. The distance among Czech, German and English (American) is much smaller than the distance between Hungarian and French and between Russian and any other European Language.

### **The wonder tree**

The winter after our trip to Death Valley, along with a letter to Miroslav, I enclosed a “Wonder Tree,” which grew snow when sprinkled with water. The tree caused my letter to be held up in customs, I later learned. (Was it that I’d neglect-



ed to declare it or that the wonder itself was suspicious?) Weeks later, I received this reply: “Your gifts for the kids are as ingenious as Laurie Anderson on the stage” (Letter 28 July). Holub admired the performance artist enormously – her unpredictable brand of social critique, her multifaceted approach: the weird audio effects, the bold paint, the fabrics, the energized juxtaposition and sequencing of word and image. Anderson had the inventiveness that Holub connected with the early Czech Black Box Image Theater and the *Laterna Magika*. In the first, brilliantly-colored objects and figures assume a magical agency against a pitch-black backdrop; in the second, film and live actors come together in unusual ways. Years later, with Miroslav, his wife Jitka, and Denise and Dominik, I would attend the more tourist-oriented productions in these theaters; Holub hoped I could get a sense of the innovation they’d displayed years before. While that spark existed, from the corner of my eye, I also caught the smiles playing across Denise and Dominik’s faces, now young adults. I thought of the photo Miroslav had sent long ago as a thank you: Dominik’s hand disappeared inside a plush toucan, Denise’s animating her Appaloosa puppet.

The following spring, I received these words typed on pale green onionskin: “In Czech it is said that green is the color of hope and definitely it is the color of Spring which is starting here just now; besides the first day of Easter is called ‘the Green Thursday’ – which was yesterday and I thought it is a good idea to write you at this occasion” (Letter 28 March).

He enclosed the first few pages of the “nude mouse book,” as he phrased it, asking me to review and correct the English where necessary, without disrupting any of the specific language indicating scientific protocol. In the next months, I would lightly edit Chapter Three of the monograph *The Immunology of Nude Mice*, titled “The Thymic Defect.” Among others, results obtained by Holub and his colleagues are referenced in the discussion of that “peculiar nude mouse defect.” When I combine these references with “The Electron Microscope Tesla 242D,” a vivid picture emerges of what might be unseen – but understood – by many readers of Chapter Three. During Communist “normalization” in Czechoslovakia, Holub was for a period relegated to a shed built as a breeding facility for laboratory animals and with a leaky roof to boot. Working together with the extremely reliable microscopist Rossman using the simple but well-built Czech Tesla 242D electron microscope, housed in the bowels of another shed complete with leaks that tended toward streams, the scientists finally found the lymphocytes they were searching for in the thymusless mouse. As Holub sums up the situation, “Most scientific discoveries anywhere in the world [are] typically achieved under immeasurably uncomfortable, neolithic conditions” (1997: 61).

Before I could understand much Czech, when I’d report a piece of news or relay a day’s event, Miroslav would sometimes say “So?” Though it sounded more like “Tso.” Back then, I thought he was asking me to complete the cause and effect, to delve into the relevance of my offering. Only later did I realize it was, perhaps, “Co?” in Czech, which translates into English as “What?” Now, I won-

der: Was he simply asking me to repeat myself because he hadn't heard me? In any case, the end result was that I explained myself frequently, clearly, and with a secondary set of examples. Through the good fortune of extended time with the person as well as with the work, I was beginning to understand something of how Holub's mind operated, and how those operations could be revealed in American English in poetry or the literary essay, how they must be cleanly rendered in scientific prose. I'd also assisted with final edits of a brief essay – "On Growing Up: Comments from a Poet-Scientist" published in *SIPIScope*, the Scientists' Institute for Public Information, based in New York City. I had my tryouts, and I had his trust.

New Year's Eve, 2005: I once again sat in the Amargosa Opera House, waiting to see *Masquerade*, showcasing Marta Becket in no less than 15 roles according to the program. Instead of the poet, next to me sat my little boy on his father's lap. This time, the murals painted by Becket – a Renaissance theater audience and court, complete with King and Queen and two new world Indians – engaged me in a way they hadn't before. Not so much the artistry, evident but uneven. Rather the grand vision made real through sheer labor. The whole enterprise: buying the abandoned theater; researching, designing, and painting the murals; scraping together funds to repair the rain-damaged roof and buy new seats; surviving when her husband-manager left for good; creating and choreographing the show anew each season; sewing the costumes; painting the sets; writing the scripts; making a place for the man with the red bow tie in her pantomimes. And dancing for 40 years, at times with only the fixed expressions in an empty hall to watch. What nerve.

We were on a family camping trip, and from our site across the desert we'd tried the Opera House phone number a few times without success. We decided to take our chances. In the chilly, already-dark early evening, we donned our least dusty clothes, climbed into the 20-year-old faded yellow Land Cruiser, and drove the hour to Death Valley Junction.

The performance was sold out. But part of a larger group hadn't shown, and then extra tickets were suddenly available. When the show was about to begin, we handed over our cash and scrambled into seats. We cautioned our four year-old that for tonight, he must be five (the required age for child attendees). That he could not speak during the performance, but that he could applaud as hard and as loudly as he liked at scene's end. Before the curtains opened, he solemnly zipped his mouth closed, a gesture he'd learned just moments before.

From a hidden loudspeaker, a sweet, crackly voice outlined the history of Becket and her Opera House and also reported the death of Mr. Thomas J. Willett, the man with the red bow tie. Then the aging ballerina appeared, slight and astonishing as ever. I was amazed to find her well and performing (albeit once a week compared to four) from November to May, as she had since 1968. At 81, she could still move sur les pointes. I relished her cheeky pantomime, far more prominent in the show. Afterwards, she received guests as she relaxed on stage in

her velvet gown and worn toe shoes. I told her I'd seen her 20 years before, and that a Czech poet had written about her in one of his essays. She nodded regally, thanked us for coming, hoped to see me again, and added, as she autographed the program for our son, "Now don't close that yet; the ink is still wet." Holub would have appreciated that remark. Practicality in the face of admiration.

In a news article in the *Santa Barbara Independent*, an arts director comments on the Marta Becket effect, "five or 10 years later [people] come back [...] to tell her what they have accomplished because of her. When you see that repeatedly, you realize that it's not just about dance; it's not even just about art." The holiday had changed, the man with the red bow tie was gone, Becket was physically more fragile, an Emmy-winning documentary and a book had been created about her. The T-shirts, mugs, and postcards for sale in the dusty reception hall still cost too much. Though most of the circumstances had shifted, that strong Becket will-power remained.

In "Whatever the Circumstances," Holub's essay relating our long-ago Amargosa evening, he makes the point that, in the sciences, it is repeatability that matters, whereas with humans, it is indomitability that matters. Holub recognized that will to persevere in Becket's opera in the desert. In spite of incongruous, uncooperative, harsh circumstances, humans can make the unlikely happen. Like a revolution without bloodshed, with playwrights and actors as the general ring-leaders.

### **If you would know what the lymphocyte thinks**

I can see Miroslav that Easter Sunday in the Valley – and this fading photograph in my hand helps me to do this – looking pleased and vigorous in his sage-colored, button-down shirt, neatly tucked into permacreeze slacks. Behind him, afternoon shadows cover the scrubby hills partway while clouds gather on the horizon. He'd been many places in the world, and he had revolutions and revisions of the map before him. Earlier that weekend in Death Valley, his interest lay with the algae and invertebrates that inhabited the Badwater pond and had adapted to the extremes of temperature and saline. Surrounded by miles of crusty salt flats, we craned our necks at the SEA LEVEL sign high in the rocky cliffs. For those few moments, as we perspired in the heat and fought the sun's glare, we considered our world from –282 feet.

Did he know of the Death Valley Spadefoot Toads – not true toads, he would have ferreted out – that wait underground in a dehydrated state for months, popping up after sufficient rain and bleating like sheep? The "real deep surprises," he'd offered, "come in the sciences."

In the mid-1960s, as part of a collective project, Holub discovered that the lymphocyte is the key cell of the entire immune system. It was the cell where "immune reactions could be triggered and completed [...] [and] it went against

everything we had read in the books” (1997: 148). Yet the result remained clear when each step was meticulously checked and repeated. And again. And again. The path to that discovery was forged by something in addition to the working hypothesis, exacting methods, and repeatability of the results. It included, as he recounts in “The Discovery: An Autopsy,” a feel for his material – “the lymphocyte, with its ability to transform itself, and with its limitations” (1997: 149). Holub challenges us to understand our animate world with all available capacities, including disciplined scientific inquiry and rich literary imaginings. “If you would know what the lymphocyte thinks, read Kafka. Read Magical Realism,” he advised (Question 1988).

Before leaving Death Valley on New Year’s Day, I thought of Holub in the last years of his life, as travel became increasingly difficult for him because of a degenerative hip condition and unpredictable bleeding from the eye. Receiving awards and giving readings, he pressed on, to Pescara and Wellington and Hong Kong and beyond, his urge to ask, to see: unquenchable. As I stared across a wooden borax wagon at the sweep of the land, the cool wind picked up. A sudden, barely discernible moisture was present in the air. A few people scurried toward their trucks and SUVs. I scanned the sky. There it was, a rose-grey moving mass – verga, the rain that is visible above but never touches the earth.

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REBEKAH BLOYD's poetry, essays, and translations with Czech poet and immunologist Miroslav Holub have appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Harper's*, *Poetry*, *Peace Review*, *Field*, *Rozrazil*, and in the collection *Miroslav Holub: Poems Before & After – New Expanded Edition* (Bloodaxe Books, England, 2006) and elsewhere. She is the author of the poetry collection *Seabook* (Medúza, Czech Republic, 2000) and the recipient of Fulbright Fellowships to Jamaica and to the Czech Republic.

Through Bard College, she leads summer workshops in analytical, narrative, poetic, metacognitive, exploratory and hybrid writing. During the academic year, she teaches writing and literature in the Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program at California College of the Arts.

"Real Deep Surprises" has its genesis in a trip to Death Valley. On that New Year's Eve 2005, Bloyd saw dancer Marta Becket perform in her desert opera house, just as she had with Miroslav Holub years before. Thanks to a Hedgebrook Residency, the essay with its motifs of angels, the soul, and performance was drafted. The following year, she honed its central idea; selections were published by *Poetry* as the brief memoir "A Poet in Death Valley" (2009). An essay on Holub and the concept of home – actual and metaphysical – is forthcoming.

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