WORD PROCESSOR: HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE COLLECTION

The Shocking Truth About Water: The Universal Fluid of Death
Mairead Case

The Shocking Truth About Water is a slim little text, back-pocket-sized and electric blue, slapped with a font you could see marching across a movie screen – like the shocking truth about water is that it has fangs! and is out for blood and will come succubus you in your sleep. There are interlocking circles vibrating out, a drop of water drawn like it's holding sky.

The authors are Paul and Patricia Bragg, father and adopted daughter, lords and rulers of the Bragg "self-health" empire. If you grew up somewhere west, you know their apple cider vinegar with its red-and-mustard label, its secure no-nonsense text. You've seen their liquid aminos next to the dressings and chopped garlic, the parsley on chi-chi salad bars. You've ogled their rainbow of other products, some sounding yoinked from a hippie Willy Wonka: Sea Kelp Delight, Organic Sprinkle, their eco-friendly spray bottles that look like sinus passage medicine.

The Braggs preach simple, natural food simply prepared, fasts and movement. They live together on Maui, all lush and tan and smiles. (Or at least they did – Paul died in 1976 but Patricia marches on, gardening roses for God, writing health newsletters, and training Miss Americas.) (Patricia's name is everywhere here, but not really her writing – was she editor? snack-bringer? idea-bouncer-offer?) Their two signatures, featured side-by-side in the book's prologue, loop eerily similarly, strong and clean like good teeth.

Paul's a star in his author photo, cut and jaunty with caterpillar eyebrows and Chiclet-white pants, hair a small sculpture of sun and flair. His claims to fame? Launching Jack LaLanne's fitness career (LaLanne, who trumpeted exercise even before Jane Fonda and Richard Simmons did), advocating Gardenburgers earliest on, and opening Los Angeles' first health food store (for starters). Paul calls himself a crusader, a voice in the wilderness. He's selling a lifestyle first – "you are what you eat, drink, breathe, say, and do" – books and bottles second.

So what's the shocking truth about water? Well! From the tap, it's chock full of chemicals – flaked full of inorganic materials, and nobody on the planet really knows what that could do, might do, is doing to your system. "It's like making a mixture of colors," writes Paul. "One drop could change the complete color." See your body going from health to mud, to muck and no light. Worse, if your diet's high in salt and cholesterol, your joints and your body and even your brain will turn to STONE, says Paul – stone! Stone, like the Luray Limestone Caverns.

It's not a metaphor, and the process isn't reversible. In the prologue Paul writes about Bessie Louise, a woman he knew as a boy, a woman who drank hard water her whole life long. In the end, Paul says, MISERY settled into Bessie's joints – her spine and femur, hands and feet and ribs – and she suffered unto a cementy death. He suffered too, watching the dear woman die. "We live in a sick, sick world," Paul writes in the "We Live In a Sick, Sick World" chapter. "And it is getting sicker every day."

And of course it's not simply a question of drinking pure, of breathing pure, eating X not Y. There are national habits to deal with, corporate overlords to death-eyeball. Salt and hard water are the worst culprits – Paul calls them Black Death – but there're also waffles, white rice, mashed and fried potatoes, overcooked meats and doughnuts: the institutional diet. Like LaLanne sort of said, would *you* wake your dog up with coffee and a doughnut? With a cigarette?

Chemicals are bad, for example the fluorine in drinking water, which Paul claims does not actually strengthen teeth. Actually, it's a pay line for the aluminum companies. "The gangster of the chemical underworld," fluorine can snap-kill rats and roaches. It can gunk up your arteries. (So many drawings of crud in this book: crud lining pipes, crud coating lungs, crud chunked between toes.) According to Paul, the weasely stuff all but leeches in through your skin.

Reading *The Shocking Truth About Water* is like going to the movies too, to a show in a big box theatre with lots of candy wrappers rustling. There are pages of prologue and testimonial, of previews, advertisements, and credits – then finally the feature, everything looped together by earnest belief, life experience, and a nebulous "biochemistry course" Paul once took in London. The back trumpets sequels, other books like *The Science and Art of Married Love. Super Brain Breathing. Salt-Free Sauerkraut,* and *The South Sea Culture of the Abdomen.* Books about hair, strong feet, Youthfulness. Everything's a mere buck-seventy-five save the cookbook, which is five hundred pages and promises both History and Reasons.

Other highlights: a mise-en-scene of "the little bodies of crippled children," splashing, swimming in the healing mineral pool at Angel View Crippled Children's Hospital. There is a holy note, about how Jesus cried a holy tear when Lazarus died, how that tear is probably in a holy water fountain somewhere, even now. There's a recipe for beet soup, adapted from Paul's trip to "primitive Russia," where apparently folks eat watercress and drink snow water and some live to be 164 years old. There's a sweet sci-fi moment where Paul imagines us all with "transparent fronts." "If we could look inside each morning," he says, we'd see our bubble gum lungs taking in air. And if we were smokers, we'd see those lungs going from "beautiful, pink, healthy" to "sticky, dirty black."

The transparency's just a thought-experiment, but most of the book is a real *Craphound* of non-sequitor illustrations: circulatory systems, mummies and Native Americans, a little grout-monster eating a lightbulby toe. There's a leopard, several joyously-drawn hot dogs, a charcoal-circle man, people moving freely and people not. There's a Sharpie-esque rectangle of crosses on a hill – MILLIONS DIE BEFORE THEIR TIME! – that looks like it should be pinned to the back of a hoodie, not stuck in a book.

Often the captions are sucker-punchiest: a raisin-plump baby rolling in its crib will have a Long Life and enjoy a Painless, Tireless, and Ageless Life if it can live on a 100% health program (like Patricia herself did). To prove this point: a girl with a golden glow and polka dots in her hair, an apple in one hand and a tennis racket in the other. She will never lose her gladness about being alive and healthy. "It starts inside of her" (ew), "it can't help shining out of her face" (ew, ew).

The Shocking Truth About Water's more spectacle than anything else. There's never a point where you actually find yourself worrying about stone joints, or flow-blocking misery, or the little bits of sediment supposedly zipping around your ribs. And ultimately it's all good advice: drink clean water, keep the blood flowing, get your vitamins.

You do find yourself cringing at certain socially-clunky passages (for example, Bessie is also a "dear black woman" who worked on the Bragg family farm) or displaced charm (Patricia keeps waltzing in with quotes about Jesus or flowers, like an awkward new girlfriend at the family holiday). You find yourself promising yourself to drink more orange juice, notebooking favorite chapter titles for imaginary metal bands: Head Noises, Dropsy, Easy on Meat.

You spend a lunch break Google-stalking the Bragg family, who blogs and newspapers alternately revere as gods and reveal as fraud (was Patricia adopted? did Paul lie about his real age?), and as you sleuth you realize more and more how the Braggs actually have colored your life – like when your record-store boss got divorced and did the watermelon flush fast, in the beginning it made him crabby but pretty soon it gave him Lite-Brite dreams. Like Dr. Scholl's foot pads, like health spas, like progressive weight-training, hand juicers, the national availability of seven grain crackers – all of which Paul claims he inspired or brought to America.

Like the afternoon you spent dicing and shredding beets with a newly-vegan girl-crush. You liked her and so you loved that soup, how it made all your hands purple. Afterwards we were still hungry so we wandered down the street and got powdered sugar brownies at the gas station, which aren't really vegan or Bragg-approved, but that's okay because they tasted really good. Thanks, lady. That was a lovely walk.

Mairead Case is a writer, editor, and Volunteer Coordinator for Louder Than a Bomb, the largest youth poetry festival in the world. Her comic about Serge Gainsbourg, drawn by David Lasky, is in Best American Comics 2011, *and this winter she completed her first novel, thanks to a grant from the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and a residency at Ragdale.*
maireadcase.tumblr.com