

THE BOOK
OF
ALCHEMY

A CREATIVE PRACTICE
FOR AN INSPIRED LIFE

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DUTCH TULIPS & A DODO BIRD

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I've never actually seen much of what I've seen. I've never seen row upon row of flowering Dutch tulips—but I've seen them on Instagram. I've never seen the surface of Mars—but I've seen it through high-definition photographs. I've never seen the long-extinct dodo bird—but I've seen it through illustrations. I've been fascinated by what we'll never see since the artist David Brooks told me the story of William Beebe, an eccentric scientist of the early twentieth century who hired artists—including Ruth Rose, who went on to write the screenplay for the 1933 movie *King Kong*—to illustrate the wonders of the natural world. Beebe often descended into the deep ocean in a small submarine that was connected to a boat on the ocean's surface. From thousands of feet below the sea, Beebe described the fantastic creatures he saw to the artists via a wired telephone. The artists then drew the creatures—animals that they would never see—based on Beebe's descriptions. The resulting illustrations include strange and lovely squids and viperfish.

A friend of mine who died a few years ago once told me that if you look at a tree, really look at it, you do not get tired of looking at it. There is plenty of tree to take in, from the mountainous bark to the fingering leaves to the branches that themselves branch out into yet more branches, and more. And then, my friend noted, there is the tree you can't see—the vast root system below, branches branching out wider than the tree's canopy, a kind of invisible symmetry. You know the root system is there, but you cannot see it. My friend told me: Think of these roots, and think of the tree, overwhelming in its complexity and wonder and per-

sistence. And then consider: There are more trees. There are billions more. Despite our best efforts, there are more trees than people by a very wide margin, and we are utterly and entirely dependent upon them. We live in their shade, breathing their oxygen, and yet while they live, we can never see the vast root structures that hold them aloft.

For almost all of human history, we also could not see the inside of a living body. I often think about this eighteenth-century German doctor, described in Barbara Duden's brilliant book *The Woman Beneath the Skin*. This doctor, Johann Storch, had no way of seeing inside his patients. He could not use X-rays or MRI or CT scans or colonoscopies, of course, but he also couldn't listen to the body through a stethoscope (they weren't invented until 1816) or even glimpse the workings of the throat using a laryngoscope (they weren't invented until the 1850s). And so the inner body was an absolute mystery to him—something he could see illustrated in medical journals but could never see himself in a living patient. But then again, it occurs to me that I've also never seen most of the interior of my own human body. I can tell you approximately what my heart looks like, but I haven't seen it—and frankly hope I never will.

THIS IS YOUR PROMPT:

Think of something you've never seen but nonetheless know something about. Maybe you've read descriptions, or seen pictures, or imagined what it must be like. Write about what you've never seen until you feel like you can, at least in some way, see it.